

# The Cinema of Hal Hartley: Place, Cultural Identity and Indie Authorship

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## Abstract

This study considers the films and professional practice of the filmmaker Hal Hartley. Since his earliest features, which in the early 1990s drew substantial praise in the American press, Hartley has been associated with American 'independent' cinema. As the overall visibility and commercial value of independent filmmaking have increased, however, Hartley's own profile has decreased. The primary intent of this thesis is to outline the position occupied by Hartley at various levels and at various points throughout the 1990s and 2000s, within the context of independent cinema. I argue that it is at the closely related levels of place and cultural identity, as much as at the levels of form and genre more frequently discussed in accounts of Hartley and independent cinema, that Hartley's films are marked to various degrees as distinctive. The films are often further marked as distinctive, I suggest, at the level of industrial position, another dimension of Hartley's cinema that has received little attention in past studies.

The first four chapters of this thesis focus on Hartley's feature films, discussed in rough chronological order from *The Unbelievable Truth* to *Fay Grim*, the latter film representing the culmination of what I argue is an important shift in Hartley's filmography: from narratives emphasising family and grounded communities to narratives emphasising global travel and social fragmentation. Chapter 5 discusses the short films, which are seen as an important component of the filmography of a distinctly marginal, but also in some ways professionally 'successful', filmmaker whose significance has often been underestimated. The thesis as a whole thus stands as, firstly, a new account of Hartley and, secondly, a case study of authorship in independent film, the analytical content of which suggests the field of independent cinema to be larger and more variegated than is sometimes implied in current academic debates.

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# Introduction

## The Cinema of Hal Hartley: Place, Cultural Identity and Indie Authorship

This thesis is an account of the films and the career of Hal Hartley, one of the most significant contributors to the American ‘independent’ cinema that flowered in the late 1980s and that now occupies a very important (if contested) place in the American film landscape. Hartley’s films have been recognised as key examples of independent cinema, and also as the works of an American auteur. Of the films discussed here, several, including *Trust* (1990), can be said to enjoy something close to ‘classic’ status within independent film discourse.<sup>1</sup> Others, such as *The Book of Life* (1998), are largely unknown. All can be described as highly distinctive, this quality (however defined) having particular currency, of course, in the world of independent film – although usually only within certain limits.

Hartley’s approach to the business of film production has also been distinctive. At the industrial level, Hartley’s films occupy a diversity of positions: a reflection of both shifts within the industry and, I will argue, a bold effort on the part of the director to retain his authorial independence. Hartley started his career with a very low-budget and well-received feature in 1989 (*The Unbelievable Truth*), and a further two features in the early 1990s: *Trust* and *Simple Men* (1992). His entry into the independent film world was made under the watchful gaze of an industry increasingly cognisant of the potential profitability of low-budget ‘alternative’ films, following the sensational commercial success of *sex, lies, and videotape* (1989) in particular.<sup>2</sup> The distribution companies Miramax and Fine Line Features, later to obtain the label of ‘mini-majors’, exemplified a widespread trend for independents and speciality divisions to invest sizeable marketing budgets into low-budget films such as Hartley’s.<sup>3</sup> With *The Unbelievable Truth*, *Trust* and *Simple Men* – retrospectively grouped as a ‘trilogy’ because of their shared Long Island setting – Hartley

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<sup>1</sup> *Trust* ranked 45<sup>th</sup> in *Filmmaker*’s 1996 list of ‘The Fifty Most Important Independent Films’ (*Filmmaker*, 5:1 (1996), p. 58), for example.

<sup>2</sup> *sex, lies, and videotape* was made on a \$1 million budget and returned over \$24 million at the North American box office (see [www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=sexliesandvideotape.htm](http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=sexliesandvideotape.htm), last accessed 13 April 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Both Miramax and Fine Line Features were involved in the distribution of Hartley’s early features, the former releasing *The Unbelievable Truth* and the latter releasing *Trust* and *Simple Men*.

attracted a combination of high-level institutional backing and critical approbation that has not been a feature of any of the later productions of the director's 22-year-long career (with the possible exception of *Henry Fool*), although Hartley has continued to make feature and short films with regularity, securing funds from a range of independent and overseas companies.

Of the films that comprise the middle and later sections of Hartley's filmography, several can be attributed with an attitude to broad cinematic practices that might be described as 'oppositional', a questioning of convention that at times goes beyond the 'offbeat' and suggests an identification with forms such as art cinema and even the avant-garde. *Flirt* (1995) is an intercontinental romantic drama split into three separate narrative sections, each playing out, with variations, the same basic script. *No Such Thing* (2001) offers a discomfiting account of corporate commodification and social malaise the critical reception of which was mixed, to say the least. *Fay Grim* (2006) is an around-the-world espionage narrative that blends political satire and zany farce. An even greater sense of unconventionality characterises many of Hartley's short films: *Accomplice* (2009), for example, is a three-minute noir story featuring a voiceover from a central character who is never seen; *The Other Also* (1997) is a dialogue-free piece composed of semi-abstract images. These later-period films fit, in many respects, somewhat awkwardly into independent cinema. If Hartley's Long Island features can still be seen to exert an influence (whether direct or indirect) on a large number of independent productions (particularly those profiling familial dysfunction in suburbia), the later films seem to offer something more singular, something closer to the territory of the 'one-off' – although this is not to say that the films do not maintain various continuities with some examples of independent film and with narrative cinema more generally.

Journalistic interest and distributor confidence in many of these later films has been, perhaps unsurprisingly, quite low. Hartley himself has acquired something of a reputation as a 'missing auteur', at least in America, where he has lived and worked only intermittently over the past five or six years.<sup>4</sup> Hartley's status in academic discourses has generally been similarly low, despite his auteur credentials and his relevance to independent cinema, a subject that has in recent years attracted a considerable degree of attention from a range of theorists and

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<sup>4</sup> One 2005 article in the magazine *New York*, for example, asked in its title, 'Whatever Happened to Hal Hartley?' (Logan Hill, *New York*, 21 May 2005). The term 'missing auteur' is taken from an article in *Little White Lies*: Adam Woodward, 'Hal Hartley', 20 July 2009: [www.littlewhitelies.co.uk/interviews/hal-hartley-5873](http://www.littlewhitelies.co.uk/interviews/hal-hartley-5873) (last accessed 13 April 2011).

commentators. The two long English-language studies already published when I began writing this thesis, Geoff Andrew's chapter on Hartley in *Stranger than Paradise: Maverick Film-Makers in Recent American Cinema* and Jason Wood's Pocket Essentials volume, are positioned outside of academia, in the general-reader film-criticism market.<sup>5</sup> Among the limited number of more academic works that offer precise, in-depth analysis drawing on more specialist terminology and theory are Lesley Deer's piece on Hartley in *Fifty Contemporary Filmmakers*, Steven Rawle's article in *Film Criticism*, 'Hal Hartley and the Re-presentation of Repetition', and two recent books, Rawle's *Performance in the Cinema of Hal Hartley* and Mark L. Berrettini's *Hal Hartley*.<sup>6</sup> Each of these works makes some interesting points about a number of the textual features of Hartley's work, relating in particular to performance and dialogue, characterisation, narrative, genre and gender (I return to some of these points later in the thesis). None, on the other hand, has very much to say about the broad socio-political qualities of Hartley's work (relating to political commentary, cultural identity, regionality, and so on), or about the industrial aspects of Hartley's career – two dimensions in which Hartley, I would suggest, is strongly marked as distinctive.<sup>7</sup> The lack of attention paid to these questions may, to an extent, be put down to the space restrictions that govern short- and medium-length studies (Berrettini's book includes only 70 pages of analysis). But space in any writing is itself dependent on the particular values held and assumptions made by writers, funders and publishers, who separately and under a variety of influences decide on the worth and viability of a major book-length study. Hartley's output, despite the appearance of encyclopedia/directory entries on the director and his films even in recent years,<sup>8</sup> has attracted surprisingly little

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<sup>5</sup> Geoff Andrew, 'Hal Hartley', in *Stranger than Paradise: Maverick Film-Makers in Recent American Cinema* (London: Prion, 1998), pp. 279–312; Jason Wood, *Hal Hartley* (Harpندن, Herts: Pocket Essentials, 2003).

<sup>6</sup> Lesley Deer, 'Hal Hartley', in Yvonne Tasker (ed.), *Fifty Contemporary Filmmakers* (London; New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 161–169; Steven Rawle, 'Hal Hartley and the Re-presentation of Difference', *Film Criticism*, 34:1 (2009), pp. 58–75; Mark L. Berrettini, *Hal Hartley* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011); Rawle, *Performance in the Cinema of Hal Hartley* (New York; London: Cambria Press, 2011).

<sup>7</sup> My entry on Hartley in *Fifty Contemporary Film Directors* pays some attention to these dimensions, within the framework of a short, introductory essay. Sebastian Manley, 'Hal Hartley', in Tasker (ed.), *Fifty Contemporary Film Directors*, second edition (Oxford; New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 178–186.

<sup>8</sup> Encyclopedia/directory entries on Hartley include Joseph Milicia, 'Hal Hartley', in Tom Pendergast and Sara Pendergast (eds.), *International Directory of Films and Filmmakers*, fourth edition (Detroit; London: St James Press, 2001), pp. 420–422, and Robert Chilcott and Ian Haydn Smith, 'Hal Hartley', in Yoram Allon, Del Cullen and Hannah Patterson (eds.), *The Wallflower Critical Guide to Contemporary North American Directors* (London: Wallflower Press, 2000),



extended analysis (at least until very recently), particularly in comparison with that of other contemporary American auteur figures such as Jim Jarmusch and David Lynch.<sup>9</sup>

The purpose of this thesis is, in the first instance, to start to redress the lack of scholarship on Hartley, and to propose some new and substantial lines of inquiry that will help install a productive and innovative filmmaker into current discussions of the aesthetics, politics and economics of independent cinema.<sup>10</sup> I will argue that it is at the closely related levels of place and cultural identity, as much as at the levels of form and genre, that Hartley's cinema marks itself as distinctive within American film. A discussion of place and cultural identity in Hartley's work will yield some insights that help to explain Hartley's decreased cultural status. These two dimensions will be discussed alongside a number of other related dimensions, including form, genre and tone, that are more frequently discussed in accounts both of Hartley's cinema and of independent cinema. The thesis will thus provide a new account of Hartley that is nevertheless related clearly to existing scholarship.

The analysis of Hartley's work and career contained in the chapters of this thesis will also contribute to the more general study of independent cinema. It will serve partly as a case study of authorship in independent film, outlining the extent to which the artistic and industrial practices of a particular author can be seen to fit the broader contours of the independent sector in the 1990s and 2000s. My analysis of Hartley at this level draws on existing scholarship on independent cinema, and particularly on the work of Geoff King, whose books

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pp. 199–201; *The Unbelievable Truth* was recently reviewed by Sarah Cronin in John Berra (ed.), *Directory of World Cinema: American Independent* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2010), pp. 290–291.

<sup>9</sup> Book-length studies on John Sayles include Mark Bould, *The Cinema of John Sayles: Lone Star* (London: Wallflower Press, 2008), Diane Carson and Heidi Kenaga (eds.), *Sayles Talk: New Perspectives on Independent Filmmaker John Sayles* (Detroit, Mich.: Wayne State University Press, 2006) and Jack Ryan, *John Sayles, Filmmaker: A Critical Study of the Independent Writer-Director: With a Filmography and Bibliography* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 1999). Books on David Lynch include Kenneth C. Kaleta, *David Lynch* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992), Martha P. Nochimson, *The Passion of David Lynch: Wild at Heart in Hollywood* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997), Michel Chion, *David Lynch* (London: British Film Institute, 2006) and Todd McGowan, *The Impossible David Lynch* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

<sup>10</sup> Hartley's considerable artistic output encompasses not only film, but also theatre and opera: his play, *Soon*, about a community of 'end-time' Christians, was first staged in 1998 (see '*Soon: The Play & Music*': [www.possiblefilms.com/2010/06/soon-the-play-music/](http://www.possiblefilms.com/2010/06/soon-the-play-music/), last accessed 15 April 2011); the opera *La Commedia*, which Hartley scored in collaboration with Louis Andriessen and staged, premiered on 12 June 2008 (see '*La Commedia* Premiere': [www.possiblefilms.com/2008/06/la-commedia/](http://www.possiblefilms.com/2008/06/la-commedia/), last accessed 15 April 2011). Artistic ventures such as these can no doubt be seen as affecting in various ways Hartley's status and position within the independent film world. However, as *Soon* and *La Commedia* lie beyond the main context considered in this thesis, American film, and as I have seen only short filmed passages of both works, I have not included any direct discussion of them in the following chapters.

and articles address a large range of independent films from a number of different perspectives. In King's analysis, independent films are considered in terms of their distance from the conventional mainstream at various interrelated textual and industrial levels. An important feature of independent cinema, King argues, is *balance*, the mixing of more and less familiar elements: 'The characteristic location of that which is designated by the terms "indie" or "independent", in the dominant senses in which they are used, is a space that exists between the more familiar-conventional mainstream and the more radical departures of the avant-garde or the underground.'<sup>11</sup> In any independent film, departures from the Hollywood norm exist in a balance with various 'frameworks that either contain such departures or locate them in other ways as still part of a commercially-viable form of cinema, targeted at particular niche audiences'.<sup>12</sup>

Much of the analysis of this thesis is characterised by a similar weighing up of particular conventional and unconventional qualities. These qualities, as they relate to Hartley's filmmaking practices, are considered at a number of levels (including some not discussed by King). Independent (or indie) cinema, as the prime context in which I am considering Hartley's work, is discussed at a similar range of levels.<sup>13</sup> Like King, and several other scholars of independent film, I offer no hard-and-fast definition of independent film, this category of filmmaking being particularly difficult to define according to any fixed criteria, as Yannis Tzioumakis discusses at length in the introduction to his *American Independent Cinema: An Introduction*.<sup>14</sup> In this discussion, Tzioumakis examines two main possible approaches to defining independent cinema: the industrial approach and the aesthetic approach. At neither level, he argues, is it possible to draw a clear line between an independent and a mainstream cinema, without also producing a definition of 'independent cinema' that is so far from what most people mean by the term as to render it useless. If one defines an independent film as a production made outside of the major conglomerates, Tzioumakis

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<sup>11</sup> Geoff King, *American Independent Cinema* (London; New York: I. B. Tauris, 2005), p. 10.

<sup>12</sup> King, 'Following in the Footsteps: Gus Van Sant's *Gerry* and *Elephant* in the American Independent Field of Cultural Production', *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, 4:2 (2006), p. 75.

<sup>13</sup> I use the terms 'indie' and 'independent' interchangeably in phrases such as 'independent film', partly in the interests of variety and partly because it is useful to employ the term 'indie' in phrases such as 'indie film scholar' and 'indie authorship', where 'independent' used as an adjective is in danger of being taken too literally, or as being seen to refer to some other kind of independence.

<sup>14</sup> Yannis Tzioumakis, *American Independent Cinema: An Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), pp. 1–15.

suggests, one would have to consider films such as *Rush Hour* (1998, produced by New Line Cinema) and *The Phantom Menace* (1999, produced by LucasFilms) as independent films; and if one considers only films with *no* associations with the majors (at the production, funding or distribution level) to be independent, one would have to exclude from independent cinema films such as Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (1989, distributed by Universal) and Wes Anderson's *Rushmore* (1998, distributed by the Disney distribution arm Buena Vista).<sup>15</sup> Similarly, to define as independent those films that offer an alternative to the mainstream at the textual level – broadly, a ‘non-classical’ aesthetic that departs from conventions of classical style and narrative – would be to open up the category of independent cinema to include various mainstream films (particularly action/adventure blockbusters) that sometimes and to various extents also break with classical convention, offering, for example, loose narrative structures and unclear psychological character motivation.<sup>16</sup>

To circumvent these problems of definition, Tzioumakis approaches American independent cinema as a *discourse*, its boundaries dependent on the application of the term ‘independent’ by various ‘socially authorised institutions’ over time.<sup>17</sup> This is an approach to studying independent cinema that is shared by several important investigations in the field, and it is the approach I take in this thesis.<sup>18</sup> According to this approach, any film that has been constructed as independent by particular institutions, including various critics and commentators, can be considered to be part of independent cinema. As Tzioumakis notes, since the 1990s one of the more important groups of contributors to the discourse of independent cinema has been the majors, who succeeded in the early 1990s in appropriating the term ‘independent’ from small-scale distributors using it as a marketing feature.<sup>19</sup> But this discourse has also been shaped by film critics, industry commentators, industry personnel, filmmakers and academics. This thesis, in considering Hartley and his position

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<sup>15</sup> See Tzioumakis, *American Independent Cinema*, pp. 2, 5–6.

<sup>16</sup> See Tzioumakis, *American Independent Cinema*, pp. 7–10.

<sup>17</sup> Tzioumakis, *American Independent Cinema*, p. 11.

<sup>18</sup> King, though he does not use the term ‘discourse’, takes such an approach in *American Independent Cinema*, in which ‘The terms “independent” or “indie” ... are used primarily in the sense in which they became established in the wider culture in this period, rather than according to a fixed or more literal definition’ (p. 3). E. Deidre Pribram, in *Cinema and Culture: Independent Film in the United States, 1980–2001* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2002), treats independent film throughout her study as a ‘discursive formation’, which she defines as ‘a set of cultural practices and institutions that cohere into an identifiable body or domain of knowledge that has been historically constituted within specific discursive and institutional power relations’ (p. xii).

<sup>19</sup> See Tzioumakis, *American Independent Cinema*, p. 13.

within independent cinema, takes into account various materials produced by each of these groups of figures, from the 1980s to the current day.

Approached as a discourse, the category of independent film can be seen to include a wide range of films and practitioners, occupying various industrial and aesthetic positions. Hartley's career, like the careers of many directors associated with independent cinema, has at the industrial level moved between a range of types of production, from films with studio division backing (*The Unbelievable Truth*, *Simple Men*, *Amateur*, *Henry Fool*) to films with primarily overseas backing (*Flirt*, *The Book of Life*) to short films, often made on commission for film or video collections/compilations (*The Other Also*, *NYC 3/94*, *Kimono*). Many of these films were produced, part-produced and/or distributed by Hartley's own companies, True Fiction Pictures, Possible Films and The Possible Films Collection. With the exception of *No Such Thing*, made for \$5 million and distributed by a major studio (MGM/UA), all of Hartley's films have been no-budget or low-budget productions.<sup>20</sup> This last detail has generally been seen by the director as a necessary condition of original filmmaking, and Hartley has apparently on occasion made the rather unorthodox request that his budget be reduced, with the idea that his accountability to the investor should be reduced in kind.<sup>21</sup>

Hartley's commitment to low-budget, auteurist filmmaking is one of the broad distinctive features of his career. In this respect, Hartley can be located at a distance from one of the defining narratives of independent cinema: that of 'crossing over'. In the 1990s, independent film, defined according to a range of criteria, underwent what Justin Wyatt refers to as a 'transformation', shifting in the American marketplace from a position of marginality towards a position of centrality.<sup>22</sup> A new kind of 'mini-major' distributor, owned and supported by the major studios, came to dominate production in the indie market. These companies, prime among them Miramax (acquired by Disney in 1993), were responsible for a series of 'hits', including *The Crying Game* (1992) and *Pulp Fiction* (1994), the success of which can be attributed partly to the adoption by

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<sup>20</sup> I follow Chris Holmlund and Justin Wyatt in using the term 'no-budget' to refer to films costing \$100,000 or less; see Holmlund and Wyatt (eds.), *Contemporary American Independent Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 3. I use the term 'low-budget' to refer to films costing \$2 million or less.

<sup>21</sup> See Justin Wyatt, 'The Particularity and Peculiarity of Hal Hartley', *Film Quarterly*, 52:1 (1998), p. 5.

<sup>22</sup> Justin Wyatt, 'Marketing Marginalized Cultures: *The Wedding Banquet*, Cultural Identities, and Independent Cinema of the 1990s', in Jon Lewis (ed.), *The End of Cinema as We Know It: American Film in the Nineties* (London: Pluto Press, 2002), p. 62.

their distributors of a range of sophisticated and effective marketing techniques. Miramax in particular was known for its highly rationalised acquisition policy – favouring contentious or sensationalistic films amenable to exploitation-type niche marketing<sup>23</sup> – and its broad, studio-style promotion and release strategies. In 1997 the *New York Times Magazine* titled a special issue ‘The Two Hollywoods’, a phrase inspired by the Best Picture category of 1997’s Academy Awards, which included four independent releases, *Shine* (Fine Line), *The English Patient* (Miramax), *Secrets & Lies* (October) and *Fargo* (Gramercy), and just one studio film, *Jerry Maguire* (Columbia TriStar).<sup>24</sup> This publication as much as any, as E. Deidre Pribram argues, signalled the ‘mainstream recognition of independent film as a consequential commodity’, one in direct competition, or perhaps in close harmony, with the Hollywood mainstream.<sup>25</sup>

As Pribram further argues, the movement of independent cinema towards the centre was not a development that resulted in the absolute mainstreaming of those films handled by studio divisions. The success of independent cinema at this level still depended on its remaining ‘recognizably or arguably distinct’.<sup>26</sup> The independent sector at this time therefore offered the opportunity for innovative/alternative directors to gain significant backing and status, if they were willing to make (or were already making) a certain kind of alternative film, one that had the potential to cross over into the mainstream. Hartley, though the subject of considerable studio interest in the early 1990s, did not take advantage of this opportunity.<sup>27</sup> Throughout the 1990s he continued to make low-budget, highly distinctive films with few obviously commercial elements. These films received (at best) modest investment and distribution from the studio divisions and from smaller companies. A similarly low-key kind of production/distribution has also been a feature of most of Hartley’s later (often self-produced or self-distributed) films. In this respect, Hartley’s career may be characterised as bearing only an indirect relationship to the institutional bodies that often seem to dominate the indie landscape. But this does not imply that Hartley and his films have little relevance to the discourse of independent cinema as a whole. Indeed,

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<sup>23</sup> See Alisa Perren, ‘sex, lies and marketing: Miramax and the Development of the Quality Indie Blockbuster’, *Film Quarterly*, 55:2 (2001), pp. 30–39.

<sup>24</sup> ‘The Two Hollywoods’, *New York Times* (magazine), 16 November 1997.

<sup>25</sup> Pribram, *Cinema and Culture*, p. 3.

<sup>26</sup> Pribram, *Cinema and Culture*, p. 3.

<sup>27</sup> Hartley discusses being offered (in the early 1990s) commercial scripts, along with substantial institutional backing, in a recent online interview. See Brandon Harris, ‘A Conversation with Hal Hartley’, *Hammer to Nail*, 21 October 2010: [www.hamertonail.com/interviews/a-conversation-with-hal-hartley/](http://www.hamertonail.com/interviews/a-conversation-with-hal-hartley/) (last accessed 13 April 2011).

as some of the analysis of this thesis will suggest, a study of filmmaking at the 'low' end of the industry can often serve to throw the characteristics of the independent sector into sharp relief.

Such industrial matters will be considered throughout this thesis in relation to various textual features, the particulars of which have contributed (I suggest) in various ways to Hartley's relatively low profile within American indie cinema. The features discussed relate to form, genre and tone, place and cultural identity, and political content/perspective. At each of these levels, Hartley's films can be said in some respects to resemble a large number of successful (and less successful) indie films. For example, Hartley's work often cleaves quite closely to the conventions of what Jeffrey Sconce terms 'smart cinema', a category that encompasses a significant portion of indie cinema. Among those smart-film conventions adopted by many of Hartley's films are the incorporation of certain stylistic features (long shots, static compositions, and so on) that contribute to a sense of 'blankness', de-dramatising often bizarre or disturbing narrative material; and the thematic focus on alienation within contemporary consumer culture.<sup>28</sup> Such features serve simultaneously to differentiate Hartley's films from mass-market cinema and to identify them with a group of films that includes a large number of critically and commercially successful titles.

In other respects, however, Hartley's films can be characterised as distinctive within the context of independent cinema. At the formal level, for example, many of the films are marked by an emphasis on design and artificiality that, I will argue, positions them at a distance from the majority of indie films. One particularly strong mark of distinction, which has remained relatively constant across the director's filmography, is a preference for stylised performances: broadly, actors tend to adopt a 'flattened' style of line delivery, implementing few variations in either tone or facial expression. In many cases, I will argue, the performance style favoured by Hartley cannot be easily read as a 'natural' or logical reflection of the content or themes of the narrative – a detail that distinguishes Hartley's films from many other indie films featuring stylised performances. Also contributing towards a sense of exceptionality is the frequent incorporation of various cinematographic features that, in the majority of independent films, tend to be used sparingly, if at all. Both *The Book of Life* and

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<sup>28</sup> See Jeffrey Sconce, 'Irony, Nihilism, and the New American "Smart" Film', *Screen*, 43:4 (2002), pp. 349–369.

*The Girl from Monday*, for example, make frequent use of blurred and/or overexposed images. In *Fay Grim* the camera is tilted left or right, sometimes to a substantial degree, in nearly every shot.

Such features are mixed with a range of other features that, though more characteristic of indie cinema, serve similarly to undermine convention and mark the films as distinctive. Many of the films, for example, offer a significant twist on particular genre frameworks, adapting or rejecting various generic tropes, structures and character types in a way that often positions them outside the territory of mainstream cinema. Formal innovations, of a kind less dramatic than those mentioned above, contribute, too, to a general sense of the offbeat. These innovations, which take the form of various narrative strategies (the somewhat 'open' endings of *The Unbelievable Truth*, *Henry Fool* and other films) cinematographic devices (the two-shots in which the two conversing characters face the camera in *Amateur*) and musical practices (the melancholy, repetitive scores in the Long Island series and other films), can be seen as challenging the conventions of mainstream realism. I use the term 'realism' in this thesis to refer to the set of conventions characteristic of 'classical' Hollywood cinema, as it has been defined by David Bordwell and other critics.<sup>29</sup> The classical cinema, broadly, is one in which form is subordinate to the narrative, and the narrative proceeds in such a way as to preclude any recognition of its artificiality. The action of the narrative revolves around characters, who are in turn driven by personal goals and desires. A clear cause-and-effect logic characterises both individual scenes and the overall structure of the narrative, which adheres to a three-part model in which a state of order is established, disrupted by a sequence of events, and eventually re-established following the resolution of particular emotional and practical difficulties. Throughout the thesis, this model is used as a useful standard against which to measure various aspects of Hartley's films. This is not to suggest that films outside of independent cinema do not also offer some degree of innovation in relation to style and narrative. Rather, the classical Hollywood style is treated, again in line with King, as a 'relatively stable paradigm characteristic of mainstream Hollywood production' that, nevertheless,

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<sup>29</sup> See David Bordwell, 'The Classical Hollywood Style, 1917–60', in Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (London: Routledge, 1985), pp. 1–84.

allows for ‘variation within and the possibility in some cases of pushing beyond the usual limitations’.<sup>30</sup>

The other main textual aspects of Hartley’s films discussed in this thesis, place, cultural identity and political content/perspective, can to an extent also be considered in terms of conformation to or departure from classical realism. At the level of place, Hartley’s films sometimes offer, for example, a level of regional detail that can seem to shift the focus of the film away from the motivations of the characters and the development of the narrative. This is a feature particularly of the early films, many of which were made and set in Hartley’s home town, Lindenhurst, Long Island – a choice of location that ensured travel costs (for the director and for those crew members, often friends and relatives of Hartley’s, who lived in the region) remained at a minimum. Regional detail can also, however, be seen to ground the films in the familiar. Particular themes, landscapes, references and characterisations can serve to generate a sense of cultural recognition, situating the events of the narrative within particular cultural discourses (literature, cinema, the journalistic media).

Regional details of this kind contribute to what is commonly known as a ‘sense of place’. This is a term used frequently in the field of human or cultural geography, where it refers broadly to the collection of meanings attributed over time to a particular geographical space.<sup>31</sup> Such meanings may be derived from both physical and social/cultural features, and will be shaped to a significant degree by representations in the media. One project of cultural geography in recent decades has been to explore the ways in which the geographies offered by particular films can serve to contribute to theoretical and popular understandings of social life at the levels of class, gender, race, ethnicity, and so on.<sup>32</sup> A related but, as might be expected, distinct approach adopted by some film studies academics has been to explore how place can be seen as a significant element in the cinematic representational system, functioning to offer certain pleasures and meanings and to shape, in part, a film’s reception and cultural profile.<sup>33</sup> It is this latter approach that I adopt in this thesis. The characteristics of the films at the

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<sup>30</sup> Geoff King, *Indiewood, USA: Where Hollywood Meets Independent Cinema* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2009), p. 34.

<sup>31</sup> For a good introduction to place (and associated terms such as sense of place) in human geography, see Tim Cresswell, *Place: A Short Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004).

<sup>32</sup> Gillian Rose, ‘Geography of Film’, in R. J. Johnston, Derek Gregory, Geraldine Pratt and Michael Watts (eds.), *The Dictionary of Human Geography* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p. 268.

<sup>33</sup> See for example Andrew Higson, ‘Space, Place, Spectacle’, *Screen*, 25:4–5 (1984), pp. 2–21, and many of the essays in Murray Pomerance (ed.), *The City That Never Sleeps: New York and the Filmic Imagination* (New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers University Press, 2007).



level of place, or regionality,<sup>34</sup> will be considered in terms of, firstly, the potential for viewer orientation and, secondly, the potential for differentiation, for the generation of a sense of difference or distinction.

A discussion of place will be combined, on occasion, with a discussion of cultural identity in Hartley's films, as it is articulated by characterisations, dialogue, imagery, and so on. 'Cultural identity' is used here in a reasonably narrow sense to refer to the identity of an individual (or a group of individuals) as it consists in various engagements with (and attitudes to) artistic and intellectual discourses.<sup>35</sup> This is a concept that can often be useful when discussing Hartley's work at the level of characterisation, given the centralisation in many of the films of characters who are marked as bohemians, intellectuals or philosophers (or as contrastive figures such as executives and yuppies). Cultural identity, in this respect, is another dimension in which Hartley's films may be seen to either depart from or conform to the familiar, as far as the limits of the familiar can be defined in the contexts of independent and mainstream cinema.

The thesis will also consider, finally, the political dimensions of Hartley's films. A large number of the films incorporate references to particular socio-political issues that widen the scope of the fiction beyond the personal/individual. Such references, like references to particular regional features and meanings, may be seen to provide a note of familiarity, connecting the films to distinct and recognisable cultural discourses in a way that also contributes towards a sense of 'authentic' realism, of capturing the textures of real, everyday life. In some films, such as *Henry Fool* and *The Cartographer's Girlfriend*, references of this kind constitute a fairly minor ingredient, contributing in only a minor way to the films' overall character. In other films, such as *No Such Thing* and *The Girl from Monday*, they are much more a defining feature. A sense is created in these films of the ways in which everyday life is shaped, on various levels, by the logic of 'large' and seemingly irresistible social and political forces. This is a characteristic that serves to distinguish the films within indie cinema, the

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<sup>34</sup> The terms 'place' and 'regionality' are, in this thesis, used roughly synonymously (in a different study, for example one discussing the place of the family home, the terms could not be treated as synonymous). The adjective 'regional' (rather than 'place') is used in the term 'regional identity', which can be used when speaking of film characters (and real people).

<sup>35</sup> This is a definition of cultural identity in distinction to the broader definition used by some writers, who take 'culture' to refer to, as Philip Mosely puts it, 'the whole way of life of a particular society', as far as this depends on any process that works to produce or circulate meaning. *Split Screen: Belgian Cinema and Cultural Identity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), p. 8.

horizons of which tend to be limited to interpersonal drama resulting from individual desires.

Textual qualities relating to the dimensions discussed above – form, genre, place, cultural identity and political content – can reasonably be seen to affect, in a variety of ways, the position occupied by Hartley’s work at the industrial level. Most obviously, the incorporation of certain textual features, or the failure to incorporate others, may serve to influence a distributor considering whether to pick a film up or considering how widely to market and distribute a film once it has been acquired. Production companies may offer investment of a greater or lesser degree depending on the textual characteristics of a director’s previous films, and the potential appeal of a comparable film, given adequate marketing and distribution, to particular audiences. Reactions of this kind of distributors and producers to existing texts do not necessarily determine a film’s industrial position in a predictable way, of course. A director’s professional status, industrial contacts and negotiating skills, as well as more arbitrary factors such as personal tastes and attitudes (on the part of executives), may also often form part of the equation. But the analysis of textual features by industry figures, whether of an intuitive or a more critical variety, remains a significant part of the production–distribution process – perhaps especially so in the context of a highly competitive and rationalised film market<sup>36</sup> – and such features in Hartley’s films will be considered in this thesis as bearing a close relationship to various characteristics at the industrial level.

## **Authorship**

As has already been briefly indicated, my discussion throughout the thesis of the industrial position of Hartley’s films makes reference both to contextual factors – that is, the conditions at particular points of the industry and its markets – and to the individual actions of Hartley himself. I credit Hartley with the conscious adoption of a particular *approach* to filmmaking at the industrial level, one intended to limit authorial accountability and facilitate authorial autonomy. I credit Hartley with the adoption of a similarly considered and more-or-less

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<sup>36</sup> The market since the 1990s being one in which films have often been subject to intense scrutiny at the textual level by distributors trying to calculate the potential for commercial profit – a process that has often involved, in the case of films acquired by Miramax, institutionally imposed re-edits. For a discussion of Miramax and editing-related practices of this kind, see Peter Biskind’s book *Down and Dirty Pictures: Miramax, Sundance, and the Rise of Independent Film* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004).

consistent approach at the textual level. In both respects, the position I adopt in this thesis is underpinned, clearly, by particular conceptions of cinematic authorship. I take the view, broadly, that the person Hal Hartley has agency; that some of his actions contribute in a significant, direct and somewhat predictable way to the creation of particular films; and that, considering this, he may be described as an author of these films. In discussing Hartley in this introduction, and in the use of phrases such as ‘Hartley’s films’ and ‘Hartley’s cinema’, I have implied further that Hartley is the *only* author of particular films, that he is in particular cases a film’s sole creative source. This cannot be accurate. We know that the films directed by Hartley, like all industrial films and most non-industrial ones, have other creative sources, in the form of various cinematographers, actors, editors, and so on (a number of whom I have spoken to over the course of writing this thesis, as discussed below). Although it may be difficult to define the exact criteria for authorship, I would suggest that a film’s cinematographer, say, or lead actor, can be reasonably regarded as one of the authors of that film. He or she will have contributed to the film in a direct way, will have worked on many parts of the film, and will have drawn on specialist skills in carrying out his or her work.

The contributions of various authors (other than Hartley) to the films discussed in this thesis will, at various points, be highlighted and discussed. Figures such as Steve Hamilton and Michael Spiller have made a large number of films with Hartley, and often share with the director a very close working relationship. In an e-mail interview with me, Hamilton describes this relationship as follows:

I became Hal’s ‘editor’ [after working for some years as his assistant editor] on *Simple Men*. He trusted my instincts ... I’d often find myself reacting to the way he’d shift in his chair while watching something ... [that] didn’t seem quite right, and these things spurred me on to make changes based sometimes on comments, sometimes on intuition, sometimes without the benefit of either but informed entirely by my mentorship under him and the fact that I simply ‘understood’ what he was getting at.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Interview with author, May 2010 (see appendix C).

This comment is suggestive of the highly individual and significant nature of Hamilton's contribution to the creation of a film such as *Simple Men*. It is also suggestive of a type of working practice that, though collaborative, is sensitive to the distinct sensibility or 'vision' of the director. Sarah Cawley and Michael Spiller reference a similar dynamic in some of their interview comments.<sup>38</sup> That Hartley exerts a particularly significant influence on the filmmaking process is also suggested by the number of roles he adopts during the production of a film. Hartley has written the scripts for all the films he has directed, has frequently also acted as composer, producer and editor, and has in one film (*Flirt*) had an acting role. These points, I believe, justify a conception of Hartley as the main or most significant author of the films on which he has worked. The phrase 'Hartley's film' (or similar), given this, should be taken throughout this thesis as shorthand for something like 'this film, being a work authored by a number of individuals including, most significantly, Hal Hartley'.

More broadly, in talking about 'the cinema of Hal Hartley', I am taking a stance that supposes the auteurist approach to be a worthwhile approach to adopt. The concept of film authorship has been the subject of much academic debate in recent decades. This debate has revolved around not only the question of how authorship should be approached, but also the question of whether critics should approach it at all. As Catherine Grant suggests, film authorship has often been viewed as a '[less than] wholly legitimate object of contemplation' whose examination involves 'resurrecting essentialist critical concepts and practices that ought to remain dead and buried'.<sup>39</sup> Essentialist concepts in this context include the concept that the author is an 'artist', working (like a painter, say) individually, rather than collaboratively; the concept that meaning is determined solely by the director, rather than by a range of figures, including viewers; and the concept that the author is uninfluenced by his or her industrial and cultural contexts.

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<sup>38</sup> Sarah Cawley, for example, states that 'A secret of our success as a director/DP team is that once Hal explains what he wants to achieve, I begin to execute it ... If Hal says "We are going shoot in slow motion with thousands of feathers falling from the ceiling," then I order the requisite equipment and light the feathers so that they look beautiful ... When he presents his idea, it's already completely thought out. He doesn't want anyone to pick it apart again.' Interview with author, 6 December 2009 (see appendix B). Michael Spiller states that 'We had an innate understanding of each other. Hal would do most of the shot listing on his own ... I would look at this and know how to translate it. I also could pick up a lot just from Hal's body language as he worked with the actors, and knew how to read those cues as well. He would go through their movement as he saw it, and I just knew what he was looking for.' Interview with author, January 2010 (see appendix A).

<sup>39</sup> Catherine Grant, 'www.auteur.com?', *Screen*, 41:1 (2000), p. 101.

Such concepts, perhaps most famously embodied (to various extents) in the writing of Andrew Sarris, are, from a modern academic perspective, obviously flawed.<sup>40</sup> Modern approaches to auteurism have attempted to avoid essentialist pitfalls of this kind partly by shifting the emphasis of authorship studies away from the notion of the auteur as a ‘real’ agent, and towards the notion of the auteur as a construct: a fiction or image produced by viewers, by critics and by institutional processes such as advertising and marketing. Such a conceptualisation of the auteur is at the centre, for example, of what is often called ‘industrial auteurism’. This is the study of the ways in which the concept of auteurism is used by institutions to ‘sell’ individual filmmakers and their films. As developed by writers such as Timothy Corrigan, Justin Wyatt and Yannis Tzioumakis, industrial auteurism addresses a range of extra-textual materials – trailers, interviews, DVD commentaries, posters, web pages, and so on – with the purpose of shedding new light on our understanding of the relationship between audiences, film-specific media and the industrial forces that shape these media.<sup>41</sup> The work of industrial auteurism often thus reveals what Tzioumakis calls a ‘different author’, one defined not by particular individual practices or texts, but rather by particular intertextual features.<sup>42</sup> This is an author who, as Paul Watson puts it, is quite separate from the one who ‘[struggles] against the system in order to express their personal vision’; instead, this author is ‘a function of the system, summoned up by the industrial forces and mobilised according to institutional needs’.<sup>43</sup>

Industrial auteurism is an important development in authorship studies, and I make use of this approach on several occasions in considering the ways in which Hartley’s work has been positioned at the industrial level. However, as already suggested, I also discuss Hartley’s films as texts created by an author (in collaboration with other authors) with agency and particular goals and preferences. In this respect, I favour what Watson calls a ‘pragmatic’ approach to cinematic authorship. This approach recognises, importantly, as I see it, that

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<sup>40</sup> See Andrew Sarris, ‘Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962’, *Film Culture*, 27 (1963), pp. 1–8; *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions, 1929–1968* (New York: Dutton, 1968).

<sup>41</sup> See Timothy Corrigan, ‘The Commerce of Auteurism’, in *A Cinema without Walls: Movies and Culture after Vietnam* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1991), pp. 101–136; Justin Wyatt, ‘Economic Restraints/Economic Opportunities: Robert Altman as Auteur’, *Velvet Light Trap*, 38 (1996), pp. 51–67; Yannis Tzioumakis, ‘Marketing David Mamet: Institutionally Assigned Film Authorship in Contemporary American Cinema’, *Velvet Light Trap*, 57 (2006), pp. 60–75.

<sup>42</sup> Tzioumakis, ‘Marketing David Mamet’, p. 60

<sup>43</sup> Paul Watson, ‘Approaches to Cinematic Authorship’, in Jill Nelmes (ed.), *Introduction to Film Studies*, fourth edition (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 101.

filmmakers understand and practise their crafts in ‘ways that can meaningfully be thought of as art-making’; that the actions of filmmakers have a ‘material reality’ that influences the form of a film and an audience’s experience of it; and that there are nevertheless limits, at the industrial and artistic levels, to the agency of any author.<sup>44</sup> It suggests, given these points, that creativity be thought of as ‘constitutive at every level of cinematic activity’.<sup>45</sup> That is, we can usefully consider authorship to be defined at various different levels (textual, industrial, practical, promotional, and so on) simultaneously. The extent to which we may consider a film to have an ‘author’ at each of these levels will vary from case to case, and will be determined by a consideration of the realities of a film’s production and industrial context.<sup>46</sup>

This is a flexible and useful model for approaching authorship that is capable of drawing links between text, practice and industry that might otherwise be difficult to identify or develop. An approach such as this is of particular value in the consideration of Hartley’s career and output, I would suggest, given Hartley’s frequent movement throughout his career between various artistic roles and various industrial roles. I will argue that Hartley’s agency as an author is expressed both in his artistic activity and in his industrial activity – this latter aspect of his career being far less frequently discussed than the former. A consideration of Hartley’s authorship (and collaboration) at these two levels will be complemented, at points, by an examination of Hartley’s ‘image’, the ‘Hartley’ constructed by various institutional forces, as it is in evidence in texts such as reviews, journalistic features and script notes.

## **Research Materials**

Extra-textual materials of the kinds mentioned above, connected both with Hartley and with his films, are considered in many sections of the thesis. These materials include a range of journalistic and industry-produced written pieces such as those mentioned above, and a number of marketing texts such as trailers and posters. All such texts are considered to be elements of a cultural discourse that functions, to some extent, to ‘frame’ both Hartley and his films for various audiences. The degree to which this framing process determines actual audience

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<sup>44</sup> Watson, ‘Approaches to Cinematic Authorship’, p. 104.

<sup>45</sup> Watson, ‘Approaches to Cinematic Authorship’, p. 104.

<sup>46</sup> Watson, ‘Approaches to Cinematic Authorship’, p. 105.

reception may, of course, often vary, and will depend on a variety of factors, including, as Janet Staiger suggests, viewers' individual psychologies and intertextual knowledges.<sup>47</sup> It should be understood, then, that this thesis does not claim that texts such as reviews and trailers are straightforwardly determinative of viewer responses, but rather that they constitute *one significant way* in which responses may be influenced. To gain an understanding of the precise significance of such texts for viewers would require an ethnographic study of Hartley's fans or audiences. A study of this kind is beyond the scope of this thesis (which already incorporates quite a range of critical approaches), but I would suggest that it would be a worthwhile undertaking for a future project building on the discussions I offer in the following chapters.

As already indicated, my analysis also draws at points on a number of interviews with Hartley and with some of his collaborators. Many of these interviews are drawn from academic or trade journals and websites. Some I have conducted myself, via e-mail. Obtaining original interview material has particular advantages. It allows, for example, the interviewer to ask questions that are particularly relevant to his or her study. It also provides the opportunity to talk to people who perform very important professional roles but have only occasional contact with the media. On the other hand, contacting interviewees and arranging interviews can be a drawn-out and time-consuming process. In some cases my efforts to contact potential interviewees, usually via agents, did not result even in any response. Hartley himself responded to my interview request with a letter wishing me luck with my project and explaining that he did not participate in interviews with authors working on studies of his work, so as to avoid confusing an author's analysis with his own. This is of course an entirely legitimate and understandable response, but it also serves to demonstrate the degree to which the process of securing practitioner interviews can be a complex and unpredictable one.

The practitioners with whom I did conduct interviews, Sarah Cawley, Steve Hamilton and Michael Spiller, were generous with their time and often provided very detailed answers. Each interview was conducted via e-mail, communication of this type being the least difficult, I gathered from a number of comments, to work into often intensely busy schedules. Interviews via e-mail allow interviewees to respond in their own time, and may be thought to elicit (on

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<sup>47</sup> See the introduction to Janet Staiger, *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception* (New York; London: New York University Press, 2000), pp. 1–7.

occasions) answers of a more reflective or thought-through nature than would be possible in an in-person interview. Conversely, they allow no opportunity for interjections or for the development of a spontaneous, conversational discourse – both possible in the in-person interview, depending on time constraints and on the attitude of the interviewee. It is very hard to judge, of course, which of the two methods is likely to yield more valuable responses from an interviewee, the question of value here being, in any case, a highly subjective one. E-mail interviews do, however, offer the measurable advantage of greater accuracy, since they do not require transcription. The responses of the three practitioners I interviewed for this thesis appear in the appendices (following some minor changes in punctuation, capitalisation, spelling, and so on) as they appeared in the e-mails that arrived in my inbox.

Clearly, the interview responses I have obtained are subjective, and should be considered in light of the ‘flaws’ inherent in the interview process and in communication in general. Any interviewee, for example, may well have an agenda (whether conscious or not) of some kind – although this is of course true of all speakers and writers, including academics.<sup>48</sup> We might also take into consideration what John Caldwell calls the ‘inverse credibility law’, whereby ‘the higher one travels up the industrial food chain for insights, the more suspect and spin-driven the personal disclosures tend to become’, owing mainly to the large amounts of money at stake in ‘high-end’ filmmaking.<sup>49</sup> This is a principle that would attribute a relatively high level of honesty, or at least a relatively low level of financially motivated bias, to practitioners such as Hartley and his collaborators, who work at the low-budget and low-profile end of film production. This is not to say, of course, that the interviewee responses I quote may not be inaccurate or imprecise in places. Memory can often be unreliable, and, as Johannes Riis notes, practitioners may not be used to articulating exactly what their work involves.<sup>50</sup> Still, I do not think it is unreasonable, on balance, to

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<sup>48</sup> As Janet Staiger notes, academics, like most people, work within a capitalist economy, and as such may reasonably be attributed motivations other than furthering knowledge and understanding. These motives, which may well affect the kind of work academics undertake, include the desire to make a name for oneself and the desire to secure economic awards. See ‘The Politics of Film Canons’, in Diane Carson, Linda Dittmar and Janice R. Welsch (eds.), *Multiple Voices in Feminist Film Criticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), pp. 203–204.

<sup>49</sup> John Thornton Caldwell, *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2008), p. 3.

<sup>50</sup> Riis writes, ‘reaching practical solutions and reaching descriptive solutions are quite different activities. If one compares Noël Carroll’s work on the horror film with the reflections by best selling author Stephen King, it becomes apparent that Carroll has a better understanding of the essentials of the genre. This only makes sense if we acknowledge that experts cannot fully



regard these responses as containing valuable information and alternative perspectives, and I will make use both of this material and of the material contained in existing interviews to develop points at a number of stages throughout the thesis.<sup>51</sup>

Interview material is used, along with the other research materials discussed above, in service of this study's broad goal of delineating Hartley's position within American film culture, and indie film culture in particular. Hartley's films and artistic/industrial practices are considered in relation to a variety of conventions and dominant frameworks operative in independent cinema, as I have already suggested. As part of such considerations I make various comparisons between Hartley's work and other films and groups of films. I also, finally, make comparisons between Hartley's work and career and the work and careers of other filmmakers. Hartley has been connected over the course of his career with a range of directors, including a large number of renowned art-house figures, among them Jean-Luc Godard, Robert Bresson and Ingmar Bergman.<sup>52</sup> He has also been compared to various American contemporaries, often associated with independent filmmaking, such as Jim Jarmusch, Whit Stillman and David Lynch.<sup>53</sup> It is this second group that contains the figures to which I make most frequent reference in this thesis, Richard Linklater and Kevin Smith. These two directors, like Hartley, have over the last two decades or so been actively (if not exclusively) engaged in the sphere of indie film production. Both made their feature-film debut, as Hartley did, with a low-budget film profiling youthful individuals living in the suburbs (Linklater's *Slacker* is set in Austin, Texas; Smith's *Clerks* is set in New Jersey), before moving on, to different extents, to other milieus and kinds of production. Linklater, having worked on low-budget independent films and modestly budgeted studio films for the first ten years of his career, has since made several

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explain what they are doing. Short-term memory is limited and experts attend to the problem and solution at hand, not the tacit knowledge in between.' 'Towards a Poetics of the Short Film', *P.O.V.*, 5 (1998): pov.imv.au.dk/Issue\_05/section\_4/artc1A.html (last accessed 13 April 2011).

<sup>51</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the process of conducting practitioner interviews, and of the use of interview material in academic work, see Christine Cornea (ed.), 'In Focus: The Practitioner Interview', *Cinema Journal*, 47:2 (2008), pp. 117–153.

<sup>52</sup> See for example Joseph Milicia, 'Hal Hartley', pp. 420–422; Kent Jones, 'Hal Hartley: The Book I Read Was in Your Eyes', *Film Comment*, 32:4 (1996), pp. 68–72; Ellen Pall, 'The Elusive Women Who Inhabit the Quirky Films of Hal Hartley', *New York Times*, 9 April 1995, pp. H15, H22.

<sup>53</sup> See for example Emmanuel Levy, 'Long Island's Poet Laureate: Hal Hartley', in *Cinema of Outsiders: The Rise of American Independent Film* (New York; London: New York University Press, 1999), pp. 191–197; Ben Thompson, 'The Return of the Talkies', *Independent on Sunday*, 22 January 1995, p. 24 (Arts section); Geoff Andrew, 'Hal Hartley', pp. 279–312.

‘high-concept’ studio films (*School of Rock*, 2003, *Bad News Bears*, 2005, both distributed by Paramount Pictures) with large budgets and star performers. Smith, too, has on several occasions taken the opportunity to work on large, mainstream studio productions, the most recent example being *Cop Out* (2010), a ‘buddy’ action film starring Bruce Willis.

Such films often stand in strong contrast to Hartley’s at a variety of textual levels, as might be expected. However, considered as a whole, both Linklater’s and Smith’s output can be said to share a number of significant affinities with Hartley’s work. Many of Linklater’s and Smith’s films, for example, offer narratives that de-emphasise classical conventions (three-part structure, clear and constant sense of cause and effect, and so on) and often assume a rather digressive or reflective character. Smith’s films, though on the whole not as formally experimental as Hartley’s (or Linklater’s), also offer a kind of heightened or denaturalised performance style that is in some ways familiar from Hartley’s films and stands as quite a strong mark of distinction. All three directors have experimented with recycling character types and named characters over successive films; moreover, each has made a sequel to an earlier work (*Clerks II*, *Before Sunset* and *Fay Grim*, sequels to Smith’s *Clerks*, Linklater’s *Before Sunrise* and Hartley’s *Henry Fool*, respectively) – an unusual move in the independent film world, as discussed in chapter 4.

In drawing such comparisons between Hartley and Smith and Linklater, I do not mean to imply that the relationship between Hartley and these particular directors should be regarded as closer or more worthy of discussion than relationships between Hartley and other directors, American or not. I have elected to make consistent reference to Linklater and Smith because each director’s body of work, considered in relation to Hartley’s, offers some interesting points of similarity and points of difference the discussion of which can help to define Hartley’s work at various levels – but other indie directors have, of course, produced bodies of work that offer similar opportunities for comparison.<sup>54</sup> Useful comparisons might also be drawn between Hartley and European auteurs such as those mentioned above. Lesley Deer has written, for example, on Hartley’s adoption of a Godardian model of filmmaking, the features of which include a playful, ironic approach to genre, the centralisation of ‘iconic women’ and the prioritisation of authorial autonomy, features also

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<sup>54</sup> These directors include (in addition to Jarmusch, Stillman and Lynch, mentioned earlier) Gus Van Sant, Todd Solondz and David Mamet.

broadly characteristic of the European art-house cinema in general.<sup>55</sup> This is a valid and enlightening critical approach to adopt, particularly given Hartley's relatively high status in various European countries associated with the art-cinema tradition<sup>56</sup> – a matter that, owing to restrictions of space and the difficulties of discussing critical material written in a language that one cannot speak, I do not consider in this thesis. Still, an approach such as mine that considers Hartley mainly in relation to indie directors and indie cinema can, I think, given Hartley's ongoing association with the discourse of American indie culture, be considered similarly valid. Under this approach, links to directors and films outside independent cinema (art films, Hollywood films, avant-garde films, and so on) are sometimes considered, but are regarded mainly as points of reference that serve to distinguish a particular film within the context of independent film.

The critical approach I have delineated in this introduction, as is probably already clear, incorporates quite a wide range of methods of analysis. In this respect I follow a number of academics in film and media studies whose work can be seen as embodying a move away from research limited, as John Thornton Caldwell puts it, 'to a clean menu of disconnected methods' such as textual analysis, economic/industrial analysis, interviewing, ethnography, and so on.<sup>57</sup> A more multi-dimensional methodology, of the kind used in this thesis and in works on independent cinema by King and Pribram, can be expected to have significant benefits.<sup>58</sup> In particular, it might be thought to come closer (than would a more 'compartmentalised' or focused approach) to capturing the full significance of whatever object is under investigation, and to be less likely to draw conclusions that could be undercut by some other study adopting a different perspective. On the other hand, to adopt such an approach is also to risk producing analysis that is too diffuse, that is not sufficiently 'deep' to offer very much in the way of solid and usable knowledge or understanding. In the hope of avoiding this pitfall I have endeavoured to work into the following chapters a balance between breadth and depth, so that some methods and aspects may be emphasised to a greater degree than others in some sections. In chapter 1, which

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<sup>55</sup> See Lesley Deer, 'Hal Hartley', pp. 162–163.

<sup>56</sup> According to an article in *Filmmaker*, each of Hartley's first three features played daily in some European theatres for a good part of the early 1990s. 'The Fifty Most Important Independent Films', p. 58.

<sup>57</sup> Caldwell, *Production Culture*, p. 3.

<sup>58</sup> See Pribram's *Cinema and Culture* and King's *American Independent Cinema and Indiewood*, as well as *Donnie Darko* (London: Wallflower Press, 2007) and *Lost in Translation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010).

discusses Hartley's first three features, *The Unbelievable Truth*, *Trust* and *Simple Men*, the main focus is on, firstly, the textual dimensions of place and cultural identity and, secondly, Hartley's authorial 'image' as it was constructed by various extra-textual materials (I pick up this thread of analysis in the conclusion). Chapter 2, on *Amateur* and *Flirt*, offers a consideration of a number of additional textual dimensions, including genre, form and political content/perspective, as well as some analysis of the industrial context of Hartley's early work. The same range of textual and industrial aspects is covered in chapter 3, which considers *The Book of Life*, *No Such Thing* and *The Girl from Monday*, three of Hartley's less critically successful and well-known features. Chapter 4 examines *Henry Fool* and Hartley's most recent feature, *Fay Grim*. In doing so it breaks slightly with the broad chronological structure that characterises the thesis up to this point. This is a structure that is conducive to tracing some of the historical (particularly industrial) developments that have affected Hartley's career, as well as developments observable in Hartley's filmography, some of which, I argue, may be seen as being significant factors in the reduction of the status of Hartley and his work. I take the opportunity of departing from this structure in order to compare two films that, though linked by a common cast and set of characters, are strongly dissimilar (within the context of Hartley's work) at a number of levels – the later *Fay Grim* representing, in particular, the culmination of what I argue is an important shift in Hartley's filmography: from narratives emphasising family and grounded communities to narratives emphasising global travel and social fragmentation. The fifth and final chapter of the thesis examines Hartley's short films. These films, among them the most radically unconventional of Hartley's works, date from all sections of Hartley's career, the earliest being *Kid* (1984) and the latest being the five films released on the *Possible Films Volume 2* DVD in 2010, *A/Muse*, *Implied Harmonies*, *The Apologies*, *Adventure* and *Accomplice*. This chapter considers a number of continuities and developments within Hartley's short filmography, positioning the films in relation both to Hartley's feature-length films and to a sample of indie or 'alternative' American short films at the levels of industry, form, place and cultural identity, genre, and political content stressed repeatedly throughout this thesis.

# 1

## The Long Island ‘Trilogy’: *The Unbelievable Truth*, *Trust* and *Simple Men*

Between the years of 1989 and 1992, Hal Hartley made three feature films that cemented his reputation as a singular director and as a figure of influence in the independent cinema scene of the late 1980s and 1990s. These films, *The Unbelievable Truth* (1989), *Trust* (1990) and *Simple Men* (1992), were handled by well-funded distribution companies and received appreciative critical coverage in America.<sup>1</sup> Hartley himself was in this period a minor but well-regarded filmmaker ‘personality’. Commonly centring on his scaled-down working practices, his idiosyncratic tastes in cinema and other arts, and his small-town, working-class origins, press coverage of Hartley appeared both in esteemed newspapers such as the *New York Times* and in glossy ‘lifestyle’ magazines such as *Elle* and *GQ*.<sup>2</sup> Since *The Unbelievable Truth*, *Trust* and *Simple Men* are each set or partly set in Hartley’s Long Island hometown, Lindenhurst, profiles of the director tend to read the fictional world of the films in terms of autobiography, investing in the films a sense of the personal and the particular.

This chapter considers Hartley’s first three feature films and their reception, and Hartley’s status as an independent in this period. Central to my reading is the notion of regionality, as it relates both to Hartley’s critical persona or industrial ‘branding’ and to the textual characteristics of the films. In contrast to Hartley’s later films, which usually feature urban environments and often incorporate a number of international settings, the early features portray a mainly suburban region in which ‘the city’ is a proximate but very different reality. The setting of Long Island offers a secure and distinct regional identity that serves to ground the films in the familiar, connecting the worlds of the films to the ‘real’ world, as it is represented in discourses such as print journalism. The three films,

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<sup>1</sup> The *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* reviews for these three films were almost wholly admiring. See Kevin Thomas, “‘Unbelievable Truth’: Two Loners Challenge Conformity”, *Los Angeles Times*, 17 August 1990, p. 6; Peter Rainer, “‘Trust’: Love among the Disaffected”, *Los Angeles Times*, 16 August 1991, p. 12; Michael Wilmington, “‘Simple Men’: Road Movie with a Twist”, *Los Angeles Times*, 13 November 1992, p. 14; Caryn James, ‘Applying 1950’s Cool to the ’80s: *The Unbelievable Truth*’, *New York Times*, 20 July 1990, p. C11; Caryn James, “‘Trust’: Black Humor and Unlikely Lovers”, *New York Times*, 26 July 1991, p. C16; Vincent Canby, ‘Mismatched Brothers on a Godardian Road’, *New York Times*, 14 October 1992, p. C22.  
<sup>2</sup> See Jed Springan, ‘Hartley’s Edge’, *Elle*, September 1992, and Martin Kihn, ‘The Vision Thing’, *GQ*, October 1992, pp. 166, 168–170.

I will argue, function to emblematised the regional meanings of Long Island, providing an unusual account of class and criminality in small-town American society. The regionalist qualities that characterise these films may, of course, be thought to hold an appeal to only a limited number of viewers. As Charlotte Brunsdon notes (quoting the filmmaker Thom Andersen) in her study of representations of London in cinema, “[regional] particularity and detail can ... “mean a lot” to people who recognise what is being discussed, and “almost nothing to everyone else””.<sup>3</sup> This point should be kept in mind as one of the limitations of some of my analysis. At the same time, we should consider that the New York City region is one of the most significant markets for theatrical indie releases, and that many of the audiences for Hartley’s films will have been New York audiences. It should also be recognised that New York City (together with its suburbs) stands as one of the world’s most visible regions, and that the regional meanings of even the smaller or less populous of its sub-regions may be known to many audiences beyond local ones.

To the extent that critical studies of Hartley make use of the term ‘Long Island trilogy’ or identify the Long Island settings, *The Unbelievable Truth*, *Trust* and *Simple Men* have often been characterised in terms of region. Hartley himself is frequently described as being in some way a ‘Long Island’ director. Emanuel Levy, for example, calls Hartley ‘Long Island’s poet laureate’ in his book on independent film, *Cinema of Outsiders*.<sup>4</sup> This label also serves as the heading for a chapter on Hartley in which Levy makes little mention of the region, beyond characterising the Long Island setting of *Trust* as ‘cruelly impersonal’. Geoff Andrew’s chapter on Hartley in *Stranger than Paradise: Maverick Film-Makers in Recent American Cinema* and Mark L. Berrettini’s chapters on *The Unbelievable Truth*, *Trust* and *Simple Men* in *Hal Hartley* follow a similar pattern, briefly establishing the setting of Long Island but offering no comment on its representation or function.<sup>5</sup> Donald Lyons, who organises his book *Independent Visions: A Critical Introduction to Recent Independent American Film* in terms of region, pays a little more attention to Long Island’s social and geographical characteristics, mentioning the flatness of the landscape

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<sup>3</sup> Charlotte Brunsdon, *London in Cinema: The Cinematic City since 1945* (London: BFI, 2007), p. 10.

<sup>4</sup> Emanuel Levy, ‘Long Island’s Poet Laureate: Hal Hartley’, in *Cinema of Outsiders: The Rise of American Independent Film* (New York; London: New York University Press, 1999), p. 191.

<sup>5</sup> Geoff Andrew, ‘Hal Hartley’, in *Stranger than Paradise: Maverick Film-Makers in Recent American Cinema* (London: Prion, 1998), pp. 279–312; Mark L. Berrettini, *Hal Hartley*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011), pp. 8–34.

and the 'curious love-hate relationship to the big city and its values'.<sup>6</sup> Although Lyons does not develop his observations to connect the Long Island settings to any specific aspects of style or philosophy in Hartley's films, these remain important points, and I return to them over the course of this section.

In this chapter I contend that to discuss the regionality of these films in such cursory ways as those listed above is to overlook an important aspect of Hartley's early work. Hartley's Long Island, which is defined principally in terms of distinctive and often strange landscapes, bizarre tabloid crime and oddly melancholy anger, is both a setting and an entity in and of itself; in human geographer Nicholas Entrikin's terms, it is 'a center of meaning' and the 'external context' of day-to-day existence.<sup>7</sup> Entrikin argues that place and region remain important aspects of social life in the later decades of the twentieth century, despite the increased human ability to manipulate the environment, in terms of minimising the effects of natural variation, overcoming distance and creating new environments.<sup>8</sup> According to Entrikin, we are 'always situated in place and period', and 'the contexts of our actions contribute to our sense of identity'.<sup>9</sup> Place is thus a part of subjective experience, as well as something that may be viewed more objectively as external and separate.

Hartley's films, whether set predominantly in Long Island or in New York City, clearly reflect this dualistic quality of place. On the one hand, place is the context for certain actions and relationships that are universal, or at least widespread; many of Hartley's films, for example, centre the theme of the definition of love, regardless of their settings. On the other hand, place creates its own meaning, and is an integral part of the characters and their actions. Both Long Island and New York City maintain distinct regional identities in *The Unbelievable Truth* (and to a lesser extent in *Simple Men*), for example. Here, Long Island's social meanings are brought into focus through its dissimilarity to New York City. The subplot of the film, in which the protagonist sells out her ideals to pursue a lucrative but unfulfilling modelling career in the city, serves to underline what Long Island is not: that is, executive, contrived and preposterously materialistic.

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<sup>6</sup> Donald Lyons, *Independent Visions: A Critical Introduction to Recent Independent American Film* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994), p. 36.

<sup>7</sup> J. Nicholas Entrikin, *The Betweenness of Place: Towards a Geography of Modernity* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1991), p. 7.

<sup>8</sup> Entrikin, *The Betweenness of Place*, p. 43.

<sup>9</sup> Entrikin, *The Betweenness of Place*, p. 4.

Hartley's vision of this mostly suburban region is satirical and sometimes affectionate, emphasising the limitations of small-town life while celebrating its more idiosyncratic elements. All three films feature young, middle-class characters troubled by familial dysfunction and frustrated ambitions. Here, absurdity and disquiet are part of the everyday: in *The Unbelievable Truth* the male romantic lead is an ex-con mechanic who does not drive; in *Trust* a teenage girl kills her father with a slap in the face; in *Simple Men* a nun wrestles a policeman to the ground for a silver medallion. This view of a suburban region marked by the bizarre is not uncommon in independent cinema. At the time, *The Unbelievable Truth* and *Trust* were linked on a number of occasions to Stacy Cochran's *My New Gun* (1992), another minor-key portrayal of a group of idiosyncratic suburbanites, in this case set in a condominium in New Jersey.<sup>10</sup> *My New Gun* and Hartley's films were both noted for their novel blend of the quotidian and the bizarre, often filmed in long shot with sparse cutting. Such representational practices have since become widespread among independent filmmakers, and the portrayal of suburbia as inherently (if not always superficially) strange and violent now stands as one of the key ways in which independent, authored, 'alternative', or 'quality' film and television differentiates itself from the populist mainstream, as evidenced in texts as diverse as *Happiness* (1998), *American Beauty* (1999) and *Desperate Housewives* (2004–).

However, I would like to make a distinction between Hartley's films and the majority of suburb films. If, as Robert Beuka argues, the 'prevailing cultural vision' of suburbia has remained fairly static since the post-war years, and is typified by *American Beauty* and that film's caricature of suburban life as irredeemably superficial and individualist, then Hartley's films constitute an exception to this trend.<sup>11</sup> In contrast to popular films such as *The Truman Show* (1998) and *American Beauty*, and less well-known films such as *Spanking the Monkey* (1994), *The Chumscrubber* (2005) and *Little Children* (2006), which portray suburbia as a contrived, middle-class space, home to buried resentment and pathology, *The Unbelievable Truth*, *Trust* and *Simple Men* offer a variegated and particularised collective portrait of suburbia. Hartley's films employ minimalist detail in excavating some of the complexities of suburban life. In this respect, Hartley's films distinguish themselves at the level of what I will

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<sup>10</sup> See for example Richard Porton, 'American Dreams, Suburban Nightmares', *Cineaste*, 20:1 (1993), p. 14.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Beuka, *SuburbiaNation: Reading Suburban Landscape in Twentieth-Century Fiction and Film* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 21.



throughout this thesis term ‘generic place’. Generic place is place of a particular *genre* or *type*, such as suburbia, the countryside or the city. Places of this generic variety have their own set of characteristics and meanings, attributed to them over time at various discursive levels. Filmic representations of generic place may centralise a small or large number of these characteristics and meanings, or may modify or subvert them to various extents. The concept of generic place can be compared with the concept of what I term ‘geographical place’. A geographical place is a *particular* place identified by a name and a unique location, such as Long Island or Philadelphia, that is similarly associated with a particular set of characteristics/meanings. A reading of a film, of course, may recognise a representation of place as both generic *and* geographic in character. Hartley’s Long Island features can be viewed, as I have indicated, as suburb films that mark themselves as distinctive by departing from some suburb-film conventions. They can also be viewed as representations of a particular geographical region, Long Island, that mark themselves as distinctive by offering a ‘regionalised’ representation of everyday life and youthful relationships. In this respect, as I discuss later, Hartley can be identified with a small number of established regionalists such as Kevin Smith and Richard Linklater, both of whom began their careers with suburb films set in particular regions (New Jersey in the case of Smith’s *Clerks*, Austin, Texas, in the case of Linklater’s *Slacker*).

The analysis that follows is divided between a textual examination of Hartley’s Long Island films (the first and larger part of the chapter) and an examination of the press coverage surrounding Hartley at this time. In the sections based on textual analysis, I explore the themes of domesticity, class and criminality that run through the films, and connect these themes to the regional identity of Long Island. The final section of the chapter looks at Hartley’s characterisation as an auteur in reviews, feature articles and marketing materials such as press notes and trailers. Here I argue that Hartley’s authorial identity or persona was crucially tied to his regional identification. I further suggest that cultural identity is an important dimension of this discourse, as it often is in the film texts themselves.

### **The Long Island Trilogy: Work and Domesticity**

The setting of the first two films and of part of *Simple Men* is Hartley’s hometown, Lindenhurst – a small, middle-class and mostly white town on the

southern shore of Suffolk County. Railway stations (connecting to the Long Island Railroad) feature repeatedly in the films, signifying the everyday need for travel and border-crossing in the commuter-class community. Work, in small garages, bars, cafés and factories, is portrayed as unglamorous but occasionally rewarding. In general, ‘hands-on’, blue-collar labour is celebrated in ways that white-collar, ‘metropolitan’ work is not: Josh in *The Unbelievable Truth* and Matthew in *Trust* draw respect and admiration for their mechanical expertise (in engine maintenance and electronics repair, respectively), while the executive commuters who alight at the station in *Trust* are figures of banal conformity, dressed nearly identically in brown suits. Professional life and domestic life alike are often defined in terms of drudgery and frustrated ambition – a detail emphasised in Hartley’s plangent, repetitive scores.<sup>12</sup>

The tone of melancholy and discontent that characterises the Long Island features echoes certain social anxieties about the region’s economy and image in the late 1980s and early 1990s, as suggested by reports in the local and national press. With the national recession extending to the New York region and much of the Northeast, Long Island started to record a falling real-estate market, a drop in consumer spending, and a rise in unemployment – developments virtually unknown to the local economy of the 1980s, in which house prices soared and job creation exceeded that in New York City.<sup>13</sup> Long-term regional problems relating to the strained transport infrastructure and to waste disposal were cited as factors accelerating the slump.<sup>14</sup> The Island’s biggest employer during the 1980s, the aircraft manufacturer Grumman Corp, was finally bought out in 1994, having made a series of dramatic layoffs in the preceding seven years.<sup>15</sup>

An emphasis on such economic concerns is one of the salient features of Hartley’s early films. *Trust* in particular makes frequent allusions to unemployment and poverty, offering an image of Long Island far removed from its popular characterisation as the prosperous post-war ‘suburban mecca’ with a history of ‘old money’ and stately living of the kind portrayed in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925). The film introduces the theme of

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<sup>12</sup> The scores for these films (and for all of Hartley’s other films before *Henry Fool*) were written under the director’s pseudonym, Ned Rifle.

<sup>13</sup> See Philip S. Gutis, ‘After a Decade of Expansion, L.I. Economic Bubble Bursts’, *New York Times*, 24 August 1989, p. B2.

<sup>14</sup> Gutis, ‘After a Decade of Expansion’, p. A1.

<sup>15</sup> In 1987, Grumman announced its plans to cut 1,500 employees from its Long Island workforce; barely one year later another 2,300 jobs were lost. See Philip S. Gutis, ‘Grumman to End 1,500 Jobs on L.I.’, *New York Times*, 17 January 1987, p. 33; Gutis, ‘Grumman Says It Will Reduce Jobs by 2,300’, *New York Times*, 10 March 1988, p. B3.

subsistence through a song that plays over the opening credits and features the lyrics, 'We've been workin', we've been swinging these hammers a long time ... And all I've got to show at the end of the day is achin' bones.' The film's two protagonists, Maria (Adrienne Shelly), a teenager who has dropped out of high school, and Matthew (Martin Donovan), an educated and quixotic young man who lives with his father, lead lives of hardship, sacrifice and disappointment. Having left behind a stereotypically 'teenage' world of high school, malls, chewing gum and gaudy clothing, Maria gets a low-paid job at an industrial workshop. Matthew, working at a computer factory, expresses his disapproval of the managerial policy to cut costs at the expense of quality through acts of aggression: punching boxes, breaking equipment and putting his boss's head in a vice. In broad terms, Matthew embodies the Marxist concept of the alienated worker, labouring with no control over the future use of the product he makes, and reduced to performing a repetitive task in a production-line system that shuts down the human capacity for creativity and ingenuity. When Matthew does exercise his specialist knowledge and forethought to bring to the attention of his boss the factory's ongoing manufacture of a faulty circuit board, he is calmly told that 'highly qualified people' have made the decision to continue manufacture of the piece and that he must trust in their judgement. Matthew's subjugation by 'alien' forces (one of the defining tenets of capitalism, according to Marx) leads to frustration, anger and violence.<sup>16</sup>

Although Matthew articulates a highly individualistic attitude towards mass production and, by extension, to mass culture, he is not unaffected by society and its conventions. For instance, Matthew's intolerance of television, which he considers to be 'the opium of the masses' (a variant on Marx's notorious remark that 'religion is the opium of the people'<sup>17</sup>), is gradually eroded as he attempts to become a 'respectable member of society', taking a job he hates in order to prepare for a life with Maria. At his lowest ebb, Matthew explains that television 'deadens the inner core of my being' – by which he means that it makes life more bearable (see figure 1). Here television is seen to effect what Roger Silverstone calls 'an anti-politics of withdrawal from the public sphere'.<sup>18</sup> This association of television with conformist domesticity and intellectual and

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<sup>16</sup> For an introduction to Marx's writings on alienation, see David McLellan, *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, second edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). This book lists several sections pertaining to Marx's theories of alienation in the contents.

<sup>17</sup> Karl Marx, 'Towards a Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*: Introduction', in David McLellan, *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, p. 72.

<sup>18</sup> Roger Silverstone, *Television and Everyday Life* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 69.

moral anaesthesia is not uncommon in suburb films.<sup>19</sup> However, in *Trust* it is significant that the character who embodies that association (if only for a short period) is the intellectual male. The gendering of passive domestic consumption as male is a distinctive detail in Hartley's film.

Maria, though she too holds down a tedious day job, does not experience the ennui and resignation that unexpectedly affects Matthew. While Matthew is quick-tempered, cynical and defensive, carrying a hand grenade at all times in case of some ill-defined emergency, Maria is thoughtful and observant. It is Maria who moves beyond the familiar reality of her domestic life to investigate the case of a kidnapped baby, assuming the conventionally 'male' role of detective and following a series of clues to track down the criminal and effect the safe return of the baby to its mother (see figure 2). Similarly, Audry in *The Unbelievable Truth*, who is also played by Hartley regular Adrienne Shelly, leaves her suburban family behind when she embarks upon a modelling career. If, as David Morley argues, in conventional critiques of suburbia only men dream of adventure and escape from the daily routine, while women embody social constriction, then *Trust*, along with *The Unbelievable Truth*, offers an alternative vision of suburban community.<sup>20</sup> In both films, the female protagonists pursue romantic and professional ends that position them outside the norms of behaviour dictated by their families and society in general. In this respect, Hartley's films oppose a large number of more popular examples of the suburb film such as *The Truman Show* and *American Beauty*, in which mobility is chiefly gendered male.

In contrast to *The Unbelievable Truth* and *Trust*, *Simple Men* centres on



**Figure 1**  
Matthew succumbs to the passive pleasures of television in *Trust* © Channel Four Films

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, *The Truman Show* and *SubUrbia*. In the latter film, we see in an early scene a character's mother watching a shopping channel alone in her bedroom; the programme is advertising a 'spiral relaxation lamp'.

<sup>20</sup> David Morley, *Home Territories: Media, Mobility and Identity* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 130.

the quest-like journey of two men, travelling from New York City to Long Island. As they search for their father, a radical political activist who has recently escaped from jail, brothers Bill (Robert John Burke) and Dennis (Bill Sage) move through the strangely depopulated spaces of suburban and rural Long Island: an empty café in Lindenhurst; a series of bars, garages and wide, even roads in eastern Suffolk County; and a harbour in the village of Sagaponack in the Hamptons. In its foregrounding of a journey narrative in which the physical journey through space serves to reflect the psychological journeys of the (male) protagonists, *Simple Men* identifies itself with the road movie. Both Bill and Dennis change and grow as a result of their journey into Long Island. While Bill is cured of his bitter misogyny, his faith in love and women restored by local restaurant owner Kate (Karen Sillas), Dennis undergoes a transition from earnest philosophy student to agent of seduction, as he attempts to win over Elina (Elina Löwensohn). But if Hartley makes use of some of the conventions of the road movie, his approach is far from typical.<sup>21</sup> Most significantly, the film rejects the tropes of distance and mobility so central to the genre. Indeed, the actual business of travel – via the Long Island Railroad and on motorbike – is largely elided in the editing process; as Jonathan Romney argues, *Simple Men* is ‘an analysis of the premises of the road romance’ in which there is ‘precious little road’.<sup>22</sup> While road movies such as *Easy Rider* (1969), *Vanishing Point* (1971) and *Thelma and Louise* (1991) make frequent use of travelling shots that emphasise the freedom of the individual away from society, *Simple Men* favours static or near-static compositions and infrequent editing. The soundtrack too



**Figure 2**  
Moving beyond the domestic: Maria assumes the role of detective in *Trust* © Channel Four Films

<sup>21</sup> For a discussion of the road movie and its different contexts and incarnations, see Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark (eds.), *The Road Movie Book* (London: Routledge, 1997) and David Laderman, *Driving Visions: Exploring the Road Movie* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002). For a detailed discussion of *Simple Men* and its relationship to the road movie, see Lesley Deer’s PhD thesis, ‘The Repetition of Difference: Marginality and the Films of Hal Hartley’ (University of Newcastle upon Tyne, 2000), pp. 195–211.

<sup>22</sup> Jonathan Romney, ‘Right Road, Wrong Track’, *New Statesman and Society*, 6 November 1992.

inverts the generic norm, featuring a simple repeated guitar motif rather than the ‘vigorous music soundtrack’ that David Laderman identifies as a central component in many road movies.<sup>23</sup> The narrative focus is on the gradual assimilation of Bill and Dennis into the bucolic community headed by Kate, whose house the brothers stay in. The small community is troubled by familial discontent: Kate is scared of the return of her ‘psychotic’ ex-husband, and the town sheriff (Damian Young) discusses with anyone who will listen his painful problems ‘at home’. As in *The Unbelievable Truth* and *Trust*, the main characters finally come to find a measure of peace and hope *within* the small-town community, despite its frustrations.

### **Class and Criminality**

One of the most distinctive, and marketable, features of Hartley’s Long Island films is the centralisation of strange criminal activity.<sup>24</sup> Crime is a constant in all three films, often serving to move the narrative forward and create unusual emotional tensions. A sense of absurdity and dysfunction attends nearly every crime and criminal, from Maria’s accidental killing of her father by way of an angry slap in *Trust*, to the escape from prison of a baseball shortstop turned radical activist in *Simple Men*, to Josh in *The Unbelievable Truth*, imprisoned for a murder that, it emerges, he did not commit. More readily associated with the American city, tabloid crime of this nature exists as an everyday part of suburban living in Hartley’s films, with little attempt being made to separate criminality from integrity – indeed, the two often coincide.

Hartley’s films come at exactly the time when Long Island was capturing headlines in the national press for a series of unusual murders and other violent crimes. In 1992 Long Island teenager Amy Fisher was convicted for shooting the wife of her lover Joey Buttafuoco, a case that attracted lurid speculation from both the local and national media about Fisher’s private life and emotional stability. Three television movies telling the story of the ‘Long Island Lolita’ were rushed into production in late 1992, resulting in a high-profile ratings war

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<sup>23</sup> David Laderman, *Driving Visions*, p. 16.

<sup>24</sup> References to (or suggestions of) criminal activity feature in all three trailers, and particularly frequently in the trailers for *The Unbelievable Truth* (which includes the scene where several characters discuss rumours about Josh’s criminal past, and ends with the dialogue exchange in which Pearl tells Audry that she thinks Josh ‘seems like a nice man’ and Audry replies, ‘Think so? I mean, after he’s killed your sister and your father?’) and *Simple Men* (which includes several shots of police officers, police cars and the sheriff, as well as dialogue that references the criminal past of Bill and Dennis’s father).

between ABC, CBS and NBC, whose films were broadcast within the space of a few days.<sup>25</sup> Other, earlier and less famous, cases include those of 17-year-old Martin Tankleff, who murdered his adoptive parents apparently in protest of household rules about the use of a family car; 23-year-old Matthew Solomon, who murdered his wife on Christmas Eve; and Cheryl Pierson, a 17-year-old high school student who hired a classmate to kill her father.<sup>26</sup> Such stories solidified a popular perception of Long Island as an extension of New York City and provoked a good deal of soul-searching among public figures and the local press. For some commentators, violent crime could be attributed to factors such as the economic downturn or the suburban appetite for television programming. For others, the media coverage itself was symptomatic of a consumer-capitalist society dependent on exploitation and the distortion of reality.<sup>27</sup> In this latter analysis it is New York City, as home to the major networks, magazines and newspapers, that comes to embody the most troubling aspects of modern society – a perception encapsulated by an article in the Long Island section of the *New York Times* entitled ‘1987: A Year of “City” problems on L.I.’<sup>28</sup>

In this article the writer itemises the problems that faced Long Island in 1987. In addition to crime of a particularly sensational nature (including the cases of Cheryl Pierson and Richard J. Angelo, a nurse suspected of injecting several of his patients with muscle-paralysing drugs), these included the lack of affordable housing, the downturn in the manufacturing industry and the resultant loss of jobs, congestion of the Island’s transportation systems, and an unmanageable amount of garbage. The writer characterises such problems as ‘longstanding problems of the city’, describing 1987 as ‘the year the city came crashing down onto suburbia’.<sup>29</sup> This remark in particular makes the writer’s

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<sup>25</sup> See Bill Carter, ‘Amy Fisher Story a Surprise Smash in 3 TV Movies’, *New York Times*, 5 January 1993, p. C11.

<sup>26</sup> Among many pieces about these crimes, see ‘Son Accused of Killing over His Parents’ Rules’, *New York Times*, 24 April 1990, p. B4; Vicki Metz, ‘Newlywed Murder Strikes a Chord’, *New York Times*, 17 January 1988, pp. LI1, LI8; Clifford D. May, ‘Father’s Slaying Perplexes L.I. Town’, *New York Times*, 25 February 1986, p. B2.

<sup>27</sup> See Thomas J. Lueck, ‘Island of Lost Souls? No, but the Talk of the Mall’, *New York Times*, 23 January 1993, p. 23. In this article, one local Long Islander suggests that ‘We are dealing with the fact that we are no longer on the same economic plane as in the past, and maybe that has contributed to a sense of personal development that can push people over the edge.’ A retired professor at the State University of New York links violence to television: ‘People in the suburbs watch a lot of television ... They get an exaggerated sense of violence, and they lose proportion.’ Another resident sees the media coverage of the Amy Fisher case as emblematic of ‘checkbook journalism, and the ability of movie and television producers to turn real tragedy into Hollywood fiction’.

<sup>28</sup> Philip S. Gutis, ‘1987: A Year of “City” Problems on L.I.’, *New York Times*, 27 December 1987, pp. LI1, LI4.

<sup>29</sup> Gutis, ‘1987: A Year of “City” Problems’, p. LI1.

position clear: if Long Island has problems, they are attributable to the urban centre and its influence.

Antipathy of this kind between New York City and its suburbs is reflected in a range of other writings and cultural products, and Hartley's films can certainly be read in these terms. *The Unbelievable Truth* is unmistakably wary of the city; New York is presented here as a place of pretence, oppression and unchecked materialism. For the teenage protagonist Audry, a period spent in the city brings home the exploitative and unfulfilling nature of her new career as a model. Living in a chic, sparsely furnished apartment in Manhattan, Audry wearily fights off the advances of Whitbread (David Healy), her landlord and agent – a man whose inflated capitalist rhetoric extends both to sleazy comments about Audry's impressive 'assets' and to boasts about owning 'two Andy Warhol prints'. Whitbread's characterisation as a yuppie-as-pimp, prospering only through the legitimised exploitation of others, is in dramatic contrast to the characterisation of Josh, with whom Audry begins a relationship at the film's romantic conclusion. While Whitbread is glib, ostentatious and aspirational, Josh is calm, austere and blue-collar. Whitbread is associated with art and design: his minimalist apartment is replete with antique-style furniture, paintings and vases – one of which is shattered when Josh, believing Audry to be in a relationship with Whitbread, throws a book on George Washington through the apartment window. Josh, by contrast, is associated with hands-on work (he is an auto mechanic) and the natural landscape of Long Island (his house is next to the beach). Costuming choices further confirm the essential difference between Josh and Audry on the one hand and Whitbread on the other: while Whitbread wears a leather jacket and blue-denim jeans, Josh and Audry adhere to an all-black dress code, 'essentially the default bohemian uniform of the 1980s', according to Jeffrey Sconce, and suggestive of a particular cultural identity, one characterised by an aversion to the triviality and commerciality of mainstream fashion.<sup>30</sup>

In these ways, *The Unbelievable Truth* presents the city as embodying consumer capitalism in its most unfulfilling and pernicious form. The distinction between the city and the suburbs is expressed predominantly in terms of class: New York is the place of capitalist striving and yuppie superficiality (evident not only in Whitbread's equating of art with capital, but also in his ownership of works by Warhol, an artist often criticised for being overly invested in market

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<sup>30</sup> Jeffrey Sconce, 'Irony, Nihilism, and the New American "Smart" Film', *Screen*, 43:4 (2002), pp. 355–356.



culture and the business of celebrity<sup>31</sup>); Long Island is the place of blue-collar work and authentic sentiment. Although Audry's father, Vic (Chris Cooke), is obsessed with money and deal-making, at one point responding to Audry's fear of a nuclear apocalypse by saying 'the world's not gonna end when there are so many people out there making so much money', he is a very different kind of capitalist from Whitbread. Vic is a highly skilled auto mechanic working in a small garage. Unlike Whitbread, he is utterly unconcerned with the accumulation of symbolic capital; he simply wants to make money and ensure his daughter can do the same. His deals with Audry concerning her going to college (he wants her to study communications, which he considers to be a good grounding for a successful career) express a paternal desire to look after his daughter's interests. So, although the film does not portray Long Island as untouched by the 'American Dream' of economic opportunity and upward mobility – promoted particularly aggressively by the Reagan administration of the 1980s – it does make a distinction between a suburban existence of meaningful (if sometimes imperfect) interpersonal relationships and an urban existence of individualistic enterprise.

*Simple Men*, the other film in the trilogy to include characters from New York City as well as characters from Long Island, makes a similar but less dramatic distinction between the two regions and their cultural values or meanings. The two brothers begin the film in New York City: Dennis, having left school, is staying at home with his mother; Bill is in the same neighbourhood 'working' – that is, orchestrating the robbery of a consignment of high-tech computer equipment. The physical journey that Bill (whom the film frames as the central protagonist) undertakes, from the city to Long Island, is simultaneously a psychological journey, as mentioned earlier in relation to the film's use/subversion of road movie conventions. Moreover, Bill's change in character is mapped in terms of class. In a featurette included on the Image Entertainment DVD release of *Simple Men*, Robert John Burke describes his character as a 'two-bit criminal' who 'fancies himself white-collar'. Emanuel Levy, in his review of the film, is more culturally specific: '[Bill is] an amalgam

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<sup>31</sup> For example, Warhol's 1980 exhibition at the Jewish Museum in New York, 'Jewish Geniuses', was criticised for exploiting the saleability of its famous subjects without coming to terms with their cultural significance. For a brief summary of the critical reception of this exhibition and of the commentary surrounding the re-staging of the exhibition in 2008, see Michal Lando, 'Reexamining Warhol's Jews', *The Jerusalem Post*, 8 April 2008: [www.jpost.com/ArtsAndCulture/Arts/Article.aspx?id=97483](http://www.jpost.com/ArtsAndCulture/Arts/Article.aspx?id=97483) (last accessed 10 April 2011).

between an 1980s Reaganomics overachiever and a thug'.<sup>32</sup> While his characterisation as a criminal means Bill is distanced from the conventional image of the white-collar businessman, he does embody characteristics associated with the executive classes that prospered in the Reagan era. For example, Bill says that, as part of his preparations for the robbery, he posed as 'an independent contractor selling computer software designs'. Here the character is identified with the computer industry, one of the fastest-growing industries of the 1980s and largely responsible (along with other information technology industries such as cable television) for the overall growth of the economy.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, Bill attempts to legitimise his criminal activity by offering a definition of 'the law' expressed in business terms rather than moral ones:

Listen, Dennis, let me tell you something about the law. The law is just a contract. A contract between the rich people who own everything and the poor people who want to take it away from them. The contract says: if you break the law and you get away with it, fine. But if you break the law and get caught you gotta play by the rules and pay the price. It's no big moral thing.

This small speech, delivered near the beginning of the film, seems to establish Bill as representative of a city culture that discounts old-fashioned ideas of morality and cedes all to the primacy of enterprise. However, Bill's smooth, arrogant 'city capitalist' persona is complicated by his association with a traditionally blue-collar activity: like Josh in *The Unbelievable Truth*, he is skilled in auto repair. It is this characteristic, I would argue, that suggests a genuine connection (rather than just a feigned connection relating to Bill's bitter plan to make a woman fall in love with him before 'throw[ing] her away') is possible between Bill and Kate, another character associated with hands-on work. Kate plants and transplants trees as a hobby; she is also knowledgeable about the crops grown in the farmland surrounding her small-town community. As the film progresses, Bill is drawn to Kate and the values of manual labour,

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<sup>32</sup> Emanuel Levy, 'Simple Men', date not given:

[www.emanuellevy.com/search/details.cfm?id=2393](http://www.emanuellevy.com/search/details.cfm?id=2393) (last accessed 10 April 2011).

<sup>33</sup> For a concise overview of the development of the computer industry in 1980s America, see Wyatt Wells, *American Capitalism, 1945–2000: Continuity and Change from Mass Production to the Information Society* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2003), pp. 126–128.

nature and honesty (she says she does not tell lies) she embodies. Bill eventually resolves to give up crime and stay with Kate on Long Island, with the intention of helping her establish and run a tree nursery.

Long Island in *Simple Men* is a place of ‘honest’ work and emotional connection, providing an antidote to the urban woes (personified in Bill) of materialism and deception. Here, as in *The Unbelievable Truth* and *Trust*, landscape plays an important part in communicating the particular regional identity of Long Island and creating a sense of geographical place. Below I look at the ways in which Hartley uses landscape to reflect and reinforce the themes of familial discontent and personal identity discussed in the previous two sections.

## Landscape

In geographical studies, ‘landscape’ refers to the material form of a particular part of land. As the geographer Tim Cresswell suggests, landscape is not lived in but viewed: ‘Landscape is an intensely visual idea. In most definitions of landscape the viewer is outside of it. This is the primary way in which it differs from place. Places are very much things to be inside of.’<sup>34</sup> To a certain extent, the filmed image of a piece of land or other topography (a city street, for example) is always a landscape, because the camera (and spectator) is positioned outside of it. But film can also invest topography with a sense of place, by evoking emotional/social realities and drawing the spectator ‘inside’ the film world by way of particular conventions of ‘realist’ editing, performance, and so on. Like many other films, Hartley’s films function to evoke a sense of place while also adopting a more distanced view of the local topography as a series of landscapes. Typically, landscapes in the Long Island films are suggestive of strangeness and/or desolation.

Nearly every location in the three films is characterised by a flatness of landscape, often emphasised in static or slowly moving long shot. For *Simple Men*, Hartley used a Texas location as a proxy for Long Island; in an interview with Graham Fuller, he describes the two regions as similarly ‘flat and nondescript’.<sup>35</sup> The public places visualised in Hartley’s films are often eerily depopulated: the garages in *The Unbelievable Truth* and *Simple Men*, for

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<sup>34</sup> Tim Cresswell, *Place: A Short Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 10–11.

<sup>35</sup> Hal Hartley, ‘Finding the Essential: Hal Hartley in Conversation with Graham Fuller’, in *Collected Screenplays 1: The Unbelievable Truth, Trust, Simple Men* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), p. xxvi.

example, attract hardly any customers; several scenes in *Simple Men* are set in an empty café that Dennis wrongly assumes to be closed (figure 3). In *Trust* exterior shots are often both geographically flat and noticeably grey in tone. Such images constitute an austere and unfamiliar landscape, one described by Peter Rainer in his review in the *Los Angeles Times* as having a ‘dead zone quality’.<sup>36</sup> This comment captures the faintly fantastical feeling of many of Hartley’s landscapes. The more visually dramatic beach vistas that feature repeatedly in *The Unbelievable Truth* are also unusual and unsettling spaces. At the film’s conclusion, Audry stands by an empty beach with Josh, with whom she plans to start a new life. As they embrace, Audry apparently hears the sounds of nuclear bombs in the distance. The soundtrack, however, features only the sounds of seabirds and the surf, and the final image of the film is of the empty beach and blue sky. Here individual self-doubt and anxiety are linked to the landscape itself, and in particular to the coastline that marks the geographical limits of Long Island (figure 4).

A similar link between topography and emotional identity is made in *Simple Men*. This is the only film of the three Long Island features to address the geographical character of the region in an overt, self-conscious way, as Hartley himself has suggested (although I would disagree with his suggestion in the same interview that the settings for *The Unbelievable Truth* and *Trust* function as wholly representative American suburbs).<sup>37</sup> Long Island’s geographical form is significant at the level of the narrative: Bill is running from the law into an island that ends in two headlands; at the end of the film, his only chance of escape is his father’s boat in the harbour in Sagaponack. Furthermore, two passages of



**Figure 3**  
Depopulated public space  
in *Simple Men* ©  
American Playhouse/Fine  
Line Features

<sup>36</sup> Peter Rainer, ‘Trust’, p. 12.

<sup>37</sup> Hartley suggests that ‘The whole country is covered with suburbs like [those portrayed in *The Unbelievable Truth* and *Trust*]. Lindenhurst was incidental. *Simple Men* ... is the only film I’ve made with Long Island being integral. *Simple Men* actually takes the topography of Long Island into question.’ ‘Finding the Essential’, p. xxvi.

dialogue make explicit reference to the social and physical limitations of the region. Early on in the film, Bill and Dennis debate whether the twenty dollars they have between them will cover the cost of travel to the suburbs:

DENNIS: Well, that oughta get us to Long Island, don't you think?

BILL: How should I know?

DENNIS: I've never been to Long Island.

BILL: Yes, you have.

DENNIS: I have?

BILL: Yeah, you've been to Queens. Queens is Long Island.

DENNIS: Queens is part of New York City. I don't think it's really considered Long Island.

BILL: It's part of New York City, but it's *on* Long Island.

DENNIS: Queens is a borough.

BILL: A borough *on* Long Island.

DENNIS: A borough of New York City.

BILL: Right.

DENNIS: Long Island's a terminal moraine.

BILL: What?

DENNIS: Terminal moraine. It's the earth deposited by a receding glacier.<sup>38</sup>

Bill later repeats Dennis's bit of geographical trivia (with minor variations) to Kate, in an attempt to complement her discussion of various local details such as the area's agricultural history and the name of the Long Island hockey team. 'Long Island's a terminal moraine', say Bill. 'It's the dirt dumped by a glacier when it melts.' The exchange between Bill and Dennis serves to establish their



**Figure 4**  
A note of desolation? The Long Island coastline in the final shot of *The Unbelievable Truth* © Action Features

<sup>38</sup> Hartley, *Collected Screenplays 1*, pp. 283–284.

argumentative fraternal relationship, while also offering a comical reflection on the peculiar social and material geography of Long Island. The regional landscape is thus evoked verbally, rather than visualised, with the term ‘terminal moraine’ carrying a suggestion of limitation similar to the image of the beach at the end of *The Unbelievable Truth*.

### **Hartley, Smith and Linklater: Some Parallels and Distinctions**

Like many of the films made by the low-budget independents who emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Hartley’s Long Island series embodies particular practical and financial determinants. The decision to set the first two films in Lindenhurst was made out of necessity, according to Hartley: ‘I started to make films in Long Island because that was the only place I *could* make films ... Why write a scene that takes place in Sweden when you know you’re going to have to shoot it in Lindenhurst?’<sup>39</sup> Certainly there are many cost benefits to working close to home, including reduced travel and location scouting costs, and access to an informal network of talent (actors, crew members, producers) in the form of friends and family. Many of Hartley’s stylistic choices also (in part) serve the imperatives of low-budget filmmaking. For example, the films tend to advance the narrative through dialogue rather than expensive action sequences; also, editing and complicated shot sequences are kept to a minimum (recall the lack of travelling shots in *Simple Men*). These and other characteristics contribute to a rather minimalist form of cinema that nevertheless offers its own particular kind of spectacle in the form of various authorial ‘trademarks’: stylistic motifs, themes and characterisations that are incorporated repeatedly within and across the features (the Long Island films and the later films). Among these trademarks, some of which I discuss more fully at later points in the thesis, are self-consciously ‘written’, absurdist dialogue; dialogue that is repeated, either within or across films;<sup>40</sup> a ‘flattened’ performance style; bohemian/philosophical characters; simple, repetitive scores; scenes that seem to begin very abruptly,

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<sup>39</sup> Hartley, *Collected Screenplays 1*, p. xxvi.

<sup>40</sup> The line ‘The world is a dangerous and uncertain place. A few odd moments of respect and affection here and there are about as good as life gets’, for example, is used in both *Ambition* and *No Such Thing*. In *Flirt*, as discussed in chapter 2, dialogue from the film’s first segment is repeated in both of the following two segments. For a fuller discussion of repetition of dialogue (and of other repetitions) in Hartley’s films, see Steven Rawle, ‘Hal Hartley and the Representation of Repetition’, *Film Criticism*, 34:1 (2009), pp. 58–75.

often with no establishing shot;<sup>41</sup> a stylised, dance-like form of choreography; and somewhat ‘open’ or tonally complex endings.

In both their minimalist but strongly authored style and their ‘hometown’ settings, Hartley’s Long Island features may be connected in particular to the independent features *Clerks* (1994) and *Slacker* (1991), whose directors, Kevin Smith and Richard Linklater, were beginning their careers just as Hartley was attracting critical attention for his recognised ‘brand’ of authorial filmmaking. Both Linklater’s and Smith’s debut films are low-budget studies of boredom, frustration and youthful relationships in suburbia. Linklater’s *Slacker* follows over 100 different characters as they drift, rant, drink, shoot film and socialise on the streets of Austin, Texas. By contrast, Smith’s *Clerks*, which includes in the end credits an expression of thanks to Linklater, Hartley, Spike Lee and Jim Jarmusch ‘for leading the way’, is set in a single location: a ‘Quick Stop Groceries’ store in New Jersey. Smith’s suburbia is characterised by tedious, menial labour and dysfunction. Linklater’s suburbia is more bohemian. It is a place of art, politics and amateur philosophy. As Lesley Speed notes, *Slacker*’s Austin setting, with its leafy, sun-dappled lanes and arty cafés and bars, serves as a ‘source of spatial coherence’ that ‘compensates’ for the radical nonlinear narrative.<sup>42</sup>

Both films rely heavily on dialogue, and both employ an unusual and highly ‘visible’ structuring device: *Clerks* divides its scenes using conceptual intertitles such as ‘Vilification’, ‘Purgation’ and ‘Malaise’, which relate tonally to the filmed action; *Slacker* has no overarching narrative, moving instead in a seemingly random fashion from one character to another in succession. Elements of performance style constitute a further mark of distinction. The performances in Linklater’s film are naturalistic in tone, with the texture of the dialogue – which includes pauses, repetitions and digressions – contributing towards an impression of verisimilitude. *Clerks* features more stylised performances: the actors deliver their lines in a somewhat affected or stilted manner that underlines the ‘scripted’ nature of the fiction. A similarly denaturalised style is favoured by Hartley, whose work apparently served as the template for dialogue delivery in

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<sup>41</sup> Most of Hartley’s films begin with such a scene, as Berrettini discusses in his study on Hartley. Berrettini describes the scenes that open films such as *Trust* and *Simple Men* as constituting ‘an extreme in-medias-res element’ in Hartley’s work that is likely to have a rather disorienting effect on the viewer: ‘The contradictory feeling of such scenes is that we have missed *something* – having arrived at the theatre too late? – while we also recognize that the opening credits are a supposed guarantor of having not missed *anything*.’ *Hal Hartley*, p. 3.

<sup>42</sup> Lesley Speed, ‘The Possibilities of Roads Not Taken: Intellect and Utopia in the Films of Richard Linklater’, *Journal of Popular Film & Television*, 35:3 (2007), pp. 104–105.

Smith's film.<sup>43</sup> At the level of performance in American narrative cinema, *Clerks* and the Long Island series function at a remove from mainstream film, which typically aims to naturalise performances and 'hide' the means of their production.<sup>44</sup> In both Hartley's and Smith's work, performances are more evidently constructed – although the two directors emphasise this constructedness to different degrees. Smith's cast offers a mix of stylised/affected performances (the largely non-speaking, pantomime-like part of Silent Bob) and more realist/conventional performances (Brian O'Halloran's portrayal of Dante), with all actors delivering naturalistic (if often frankly sexual) dialogue. Hartley's casts offer performances that are reflective of a more radical approach to performance style: nearly every actor adopts a flattened or unmodulated pattern of speech, wherein all content ranging from the trivial to the sensational receives a similar tonal articulation. The dialogue itself is often similarly stylised. For example, in one exchange in *The Unbelievable Truth*, Josh speaks with Jane (Edie Falco), a waitress, about his relationship with Audry. The conversation progresses in an absurd, circular fashion, as Jane repeats her points ('That girl's crazy', 'She's leaving town') and Josh repeats his answers ('I know, but I like her', 'I heard'). A strong degree of stylisation, moreover, is sometimes characteristic of the movement of the actors, which clearly adheres to a precise choreography in some episodes, including those in *The Unbelievable Truth* and *Simple Men* in which a number of characters move around a house in a faintly dance-like hide-and-seek sequence, and the dance scene in *Simple Men*, in which several characters perform a choreographed dance in a bar in which they have been drinking (I discuss the stylised choreography often employed by Hartley in chapter 3 and the dance sequence in *Simple Men* in chapter 5). Performances characterised by overt stylisation at such levels are more usually associated with European theatre and 'Brechtian' art-film directors such as Godard than with independent filmmakers, and they are an important mark of distinction of Hartley's cinema, as discussed more fully in the following chapter.

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<sup>43</sup> Ben Thompson relates this story in a feature on Hartley, Linklater and Whit Stillman: '[Smith] adopted a unique approach to dialogue coaching: he lent his male lead a copy of *Trust* and told him, "Just do the lines like in this movie."' 'The Return of the Talkies', *Independent on Sunday*, 22 January 1995, p. 24.

<sup>44</sup> As Richard Maltby argues, 'Although acting performance can draw attention to itself and function as a separate spectacle, it more routinely aspires to transparency, in the same way as codes of editing and camerawork seek to render themselves invisible. This "invisible" style of acting imitates the expressions and the emotions of the everyday world, with the aim of creating a sense of character for the audience without making them consciously aware of how that sense is created.' *Hollywood Cinema*, second edition (Malden, Massachusetts; Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), p. 378.



As with Hartley's Long Island films, critical coverage of *Slacker* and *Clerks* is far more attentive to formal characteristics such as dialogue, performance, narrative and cinematography than it is to notions of place. Yet, regional identity is central to the character of both Smith's and Linklater's films. Like Hartley, Smith and Linklater would develop their concerns with geographical place over successive films. Smith's next two films, *Mallrats* (1995) and *Chasing Amy* (1997), shared with *Clerks* a number of cast members (Kevin Smith, Jason Mewes and Brian O'Halloran appear in all three films, for example) and the New Jersey setting; these films were often labelled as the 'New Jersey trilogy', although many of Smith's later films would be wholly or partly set in New Jersey.<sup>45</sup> In *Chasing Amy*, a romantic comedy with an emphasis on sex and sexuality, New Jersey is defined through its relationship to the city. A series of oppositions is played out between suburbia, where the male protagonists, Holden (Ben Affleck) and Banky (Jason Lee), rent an apartment, and New York City, where Holden's love interest, Alyssa (Joey Lauren Adams), lives and works. New Jersey is mapped in terms of everyday domesticity; New York City, in terms of performance (the early scene in which a black character adopts the persona of a Malcolm X-style orator, Alyssa's sultry turn on stage at a nightclub) and erotic adventure. In a similar way to *The Unbelievable Truth* and *Simple Men*, Smith's film suggests the relationship between the city and suburbia to be a functional, but uneasy, one. In one scene, Hooper (Dwight Ewell), a New York City character, half-jokingly characterises Holden and Banky as 'burb things' who 'hate' the 'big scary city'. Although the tone of delivery in Smith's film is less bitter, these comments recall the moment in *Simple Men* when a local man reacts to Bill and Dennis's announcement of their New York City origins with a cry of 'Big deal!'

*Chasing Amy* also shares with Hartley's films an acute interest in regional detail and character. Alyssa and Holden's first moment of emotional connection is mapped through the geography of New Jersey: upon finding out that they grew up in the same small town of Red Bank (also Smith's birthplace), they list a series of local regions and landmarks, including the Tri-Town area, Sandy Hook Bay, and the neighbourhood mall and Quickstop grocery store, this last reference

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<sup>45</sup> Roger Ebert, for example, describes *Chasing Amy* as the 'third instalment in [Smith's] Jersey trilogy' in his review for the *Chicago Sun-Times*, 18 April 1997: [rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/19970418/REVIEWS/704180302/1023](http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/19970418/REVIEWS/704180302/1023) (last accessed 10 April 2011). The *New York Times* also identifies the film as 'The third in Kevin Smith's "New Jersey Trilogy"' in a section synopsisising new cinema releases: 'Film: Opening This Week', *New York Times*, 23 March 1997, p. H44.

serving as an explicit intertextual link to *Clerks*, as Alyssa recalls her best friend's involvement in an episode played out in full in the earlier film.<sup>46</sup> However, while this regionalisation of the suburban setting is an important part of both Smith's film and Hartley's Long Island series, I would suggest that there are significant differences between the two directors' works, particularly in terms of tone.<sup>47</sup> The scene described above, along with other scenes in the film, including one where Alyssa plays the arcade game skee-ball for the first time ('How did you grow up on the shore and never play skee-ball?' Holden asks), relies upon a nostalgia for local place that is absent in Hartley's films. Here, suburban experience acquires a gloss of sentiment, romanticism and pleasurable familiarity. Smith's later *Jersey Girl* (2004) also adopts a sentimental tone, offering a story of a father, Ollie (Ben Affleck), too invested in his New York City career and the associated material benefits to find time for his young daughter. The film structures its narrative according to the same class distinction present in *The Unbelievable Truth*: between a blue-collar suburbia of meaningful sentiment and a white-collar New York City of materialism. But where Hartley's film is ambivalent about suburbia and the family, Smith's film presents a commitment to a suburban family life as the only 'right' and ultimately fulfilling choice for Ollie. At the film's conclusion, Ollie rushes back from the city to New Jersey, having passed up the chance for a city career (he does not attend the interview for which he is scheduled) in order to attend his daughter's school play – an action that wins over love interest Maya (Liv Tyler) and enables the film's sentimental ending, as Maya, Ollie and his daughter dance to the sounds of swelling romantic rock music.

The emphasis on sentimentality and nostalgia (sometimes undercut by frank humour or sexual language) in these self-consciously 'New Jersey' Kevin Smith films is not a feature of Hartley's series. Rather, the Long Island films figure an emotional mood of melancholy and angst. Characters are often defined in terms of an anxiousness or remorsefulness that seems to exceed any specific narrative predicament. Audry in *The Unbelievable Truth* provides one obvious

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<sup>46</sup> This is the memorable scene in *Clerks* in which Caitlin (Lisa Spoonhauer) accidentally has (off-screen) sex with a dead man in the store bathroom.

<sup>47</sup> I use the term 'tone' here and throughout the thesis to refer to a particular quality resulting from the interplay of various elements of a film's visual/aural character (music, cinematography, editing, costuming, performance style, and so on) and content (narrative, dialogue, and so on). The quality of tone is one that implies the adoption by a film of a certain *attitude* to its dramatic material. This attitude may be identifiable, as suggested in some of the analysis of this thesis, but it is also, as Douglas Pye argues, implicit rather than explicit in nature, and as such is always to some extent subject to competing interpretations. See 'Movies and Tone', in Pye and John Gibbs (eds.), *Close-Up 02* (London: Wallflower Press, 2007), pp. 1–80.

example: despite the freedom and love she wins at the film's conclusion, she is haunted still by the prospect of a nuclear apocalypse. In *Simple Men*, a minor character called Ned (Jeffrey Howard) affects the expression and demeanour of a man undergoing a profound psychological crisis, while attributing his torment to a fairly superficial problem: 'It's the fucking clutch assembly! It won't stay in gear!' (figure 5).<sup>48</sup> Hartley's scores, written under the pseudonym Ned Rifle, also contribute to a general atmosphere of melancholy. Typically, music in *The Unbelievable Truth*, *Trust* and *Simple Men* is simple, repetitive and plangent, irrespective of the content of the corresponding scene. In *Trust*, for example, a small number of similar-sounding musical refrains are used to introduce a note of melancholy to a large variety of scenes, from Anthony (Maria's boyfriend) ranting about his strict exercise regime and glorious potential as a football player, to Matthew's slapstick-style fight with his father, to the moment when Maria risks her life to enter a building that may be about to explode. In a more conventional film, this last scene, which features crowd shots of people waiting nervously outside the building, would have employed music as a way of building tension and excitement; Hartley's music, however, is suggestive more of sorrowful romance.

This tone of melancholy can be seen as related, I would suggest, to popular ideas about Long Island's regional identity as expressed in various kinds of cultural commentary. For example, critical writing on Billy Joel, who grew up in the Long Island town of Hicksville and now owns several homes on the Island, often centres on the theme of remorse or disappointment that runs through his work.<sup>49</sup> Joel himself is frequently characterised (and often characterises himself)



**Figure 5**  
Mysterious angst: Ned wrestles with his motorbike in *Simple Men*  
© American Playhouse/Fine Line Features

<sup>48</sup> In the script for *Simple Men*, Hartley identifies Ned as 'a guy about thirty years old with the words "missed opportunity" written all over his face'. *Collected Screenplays 1*, p. 285.

<sup>49</sup> In a 1977 profile on Joel, for instance, the writer quotes a 'young follower' on Joel's particular appeal: 'His songs are really depressing, and I like that.' Paul Wilner, 'Memoirs of a Piano Man', *New York Times*, 23 January 1977, p. 351.

as an ‘unlikely’ rock star whose sensational success belies his humble origins as a hard-working, discontented Long Island native.<sup>50</sup> In a 2008 *New York Times* article reviewing the final concert at the Shea Stadium in Queens, Dan Barry identifies Joel as the performer best qualified to ‘sing a proper song of farewell’ to the stadium, and ‘convey emotions specific to the place’. These emotions are summarised in a short paragraph:

The romantic idealism and the yeah-right realism. The quickness to mock and to take offense. The need to prove oneself better than any Upper East Side twit and the guilt from having conceived such a hollow ambition.

The restlessness, angst and ache of the striver. The Long Island of it all.<sup>51</sup>

Here, again, is the cultural distinction between city and suburb, with Long Island standing in opposition to the Upper East Side and that region’s associations of high art and material wealth.<sup>52</sup> The sense of ‘angst and ache’ that Barry identifies as characteristic of Long Island is also familiar from Hartley’s films, as I have suggested above. Finally, the kind of internalised anger and resentment described here (‘the quickness to mock and to take offense’) is common to many of Hartley’s male characters, including Matthew in *Trust* and Vic in *The Unbelievable Truth*, who starts a fight with his daughter’s boyfriend. These associations between Hartley’s early work and the regional meanings of Long Island further underline the importance of place in this director’s films. Features such as those described above, though also a part of some of Hartley’s later films,<sup>53</sup> function in *The Unbelievable Truth*, *Trust* and *Simple Men* to situate the narrative within familiar cultural discourses and generate for the viewer a sense of both particularity and orientation.

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<sup>50</sup> After his induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1999, Joel apparently said, ‘I’m from Levittown. This is not supposed to happen to me.’ James Barron with Joe Brescia, ‘Just a Caldor Guy from Levittown’, *New York Times*, 17 March 1999, p. B2. In a 2008 interview, Joel reprised this sentiment, saying, ‘I’m from Long Island ... I want them [audiences] to know how absurd all this [success and recognition] is.’ Dan Barry, ‘Just the Way He Is’, *New York Times*, 13 July 2008, p. AR1.

<sup>51</sup> Dan Barry, ‘Just the Way He Is’, p. AR1.

<sup>52</sup> The Upper East Side features some of the most expensive real estate in the world. It is also home to a large number of famous museums, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.

<sup>53</sup> A melancholic tone characterises *Amateur* and *No Such Thing*, among other Hartley films; the figure of the resentful but angst-ridden male appears in *No Such Thing*, in the form of a monster played by Robert John Burke.

## Hartley's Public Identity: Marketing and Critical Coverage

As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, Hartley's status and influence within the independent film scene increased quite dramatically during these early years of his career. Although the box office returns for *The Unbelievable Truth*, *Trust* and *Simple Men* were modest, with each film making less money than the last, the films and their director attracted a large amount of attention from both specialist and more mainstream presses.<sup>54</sup> Newspaper reviews were generally appreciative and sometimes strongly enthusiastic, with a focus on Hartley's droll, distinctive dialogue, his bold visual style and his unusual characters.<sup>55</sup> A number of reviewers also commented on the success of actors such as Adrienne Shelly, Martin Donovan and Robert John Burke in serving Hartley's highly stylised mode of filmmaking.<sup>56</sup> An emphasis on Hartley's consistency of vision, or 'voice', centred much press coverage. In 1992 a *New York Times* review declared that Hartley could soon join 'The small circle of truly significant American film makers, among them Martin Scorsese and Woody Allen'.<sup>57</sup> This associative assignation of auteur status was formalised in an article by Andrew Sarris, the 'father of American auteurism', in which he outlines Hartley's formal and philosophical consistencies and 'adopts' Hartley as one of American independent cinema's few true auteurs.<sup>58</sup>

Hartley's auteur identity was also central to the promotion of the films by Miramax (who distributed *The Unbelievable Truth*) and Fine Line (who distributed *Trust* and *Simple Men*). In each of the trailers for Hartley's Long Island films, the words 'a film by Hal Hartley' appear in large white capitals against a plain black background. This title appears at the very end of the trailer for *The Unbelievable Truth*, slightly earlier in the *Trust* trailer, and much earlier

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<sup>54</sup> The box office returns were as follows: *The Unbelievable Truth*, \$546,541 (see [www.imdb.com/title/tt0100842/business](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0100842/business), last accessed 10 April 2011); *Trust*, \$356,122 (see [www.imdb.com/title/tt0103130/business](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0103130/business), last accessed 10 April 2011); *Simple Men*, \$141,554 (see [www.imdb.com/title/tt0105411/business](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0105411/business), last accessed 10 April 2011).

<sup>55</sup> See for example Michael Wilmington, 'Simple Men', p. 14; Caryn James, 'Applying 1950's Cool', p. C11; Rita Kempley, "'Unbelievable Truth': Fresh-Faced Farce', *Washington Post*, 4 August 1990, p. G1.

<sup>56</sup> Caryn James, for example, writes, 'Martin Donovan (as Matthew) [in *Trust*] knows how to make Mr. Hartley's pared-down, stylized dialogue express the essence of his character.' 'Trust', p. C16.

<sup>57</sup> John J. O'Connor, 'Some Loners Struggle with Love and Survival', *New York Times*, 22 January 1992, p. C13.

<sup>58</sup> Andrew Sarris, 'The Care and Feeding of Auteurs: Trusting Hal Hartley', *Film Comment*, 29:1 (1993), pp. 66–68.

in the *Simple Men* trailer, where it is preceded only by the Fine Line Features name/logo and a selection of shots from the film's opening robbery scene. *Simple Men*'s status as an auteur film is further underlined by the appearance at the trailer's conclusion of a title that reads, 'from the director of "The Unbelievable Truth" and "Trust"'. The production notes for the three films are similarly invested in notions of authorship. While the notes for *Trust* and *Simple Men* put the emphasis on certain formal innovations, such as the stylised photography and distinctive dialogue (also featured strongly in the trailers), as well as the actors and their performances, the notes for *The Unbelievable Truth* underscore the financial and logistical trials of the production process. Stories highlighting the lowness of a film's budget and the cost-saving innovations of a determined director serve as useful marketing devices for distributors of small, off-mainstream films lacking in stars. As Michael Z. Newman notes, the budget figure itself can become, with the right marketing, something of a 'discursive fetish object, a means of concretizing a nebulous aesthetic quality (honesty, truth, vision)'.<sup>59</sup> Production details, including the budget figure, are part of the process by which a filmmaker is individualised and personalised, and made amenable to marketing and media commentary; as Christine Vachon notes, the kind of filmmaker who succeeds in getting his or her debut film made and talked about is often 'Someone who acquired fifty credit cards and ran each of them to the limit. Someone who used film they stole while being a production assistant at the *Today Show*.'<sup>60</sup> Hartley is framed in exactly these terms in the production notes for *The Unbelievable Truth*. The notes start with an account of Hartley's exploitation of an offer on low-interest computer loans, and go on to discuss the investment in the film by Jerome Brownstein, Hartley's boss at the TV company for which he was working; Hartley's petitioning of various family members to make available their homes as shooting locations; and the production itself, which involved shooting scenes in relatives' 'backyards and kitchens and generally [turning] their lives upside down'.<sup>61</sup>

Another important facet of Hartley's authorial identity or persona as it is constructed in the press notes and in press coverage is his regional identification. As with Smith and Linklater, Hartley's status as a 'native' of the region in which

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<sup>59</sup> Michael Z. Newman, 'Indie Culture: In Pursuit of the Authentic Autonomous Alternative', *Cinema Journal*, 48:3 (2009), p. 19.

<sup>60</sup> See Christine Vachon with David Edelstein, *Shooting to Kill: How an Independent Producer Blasts Through the Barriers to Make the Movies That Matter* (New York: Quill, 2002), p. 129.

<sup>61</sup> Hal Hartley in the Miramax production notes for *The Unbelievable Truth*, p. 2.

he sets and shoots his films is emphasised through production stories and various biographical details. The notes for *The Unbelievable Truth*, for example, mention that Hartley struck a personal deal with various family members ‘to let the production use their homes in Lindenhurst, where Hartley was raised’.<sup>62</sup> In the *Trust* production notes, a list of the Long Island locations used (the Lindenhurst train station, Smithtown, Huntington) is featured in conjunction with a story about the searching of the Island for suitable homes in which to shoot the interior scenes.<sup>63</sup> Profiles on Hartley are similarly characterised by an attention to Long Island as a background to and a basis for his work. An article in the *Village Voice* is particularly emphatic in this regard, offering a reflection on Lindenhurst’s local character (a ‘weather-beaten commuter community’ that is ‘geographically and mentally close to Levittown’) and describing Hartley as Lindenhurst’s ‘native son’ and ‘first auteur’.<sup>64</sup> This piece is also illustrative of a further, related, theme running through coverage of the director: that of cultural identity. Common to several profiles is the suggestion that Hartley has in some way ‘overcome’ a blue-collar suburban background in order to become a successful film artist. In the *Village Voice* article, the writer asks how a ‘kid from such an environment [Lindenhurst] find[s] Godard’ when the last foreign film to play there was *Crocodile Dundee*; the author’s answer is, ‘by getting out [to Manhattan]’. A 1992 piece entitled ‘Suburban Guerrilla’ relates a similar shift in cultural identity, in this case drawing on more explicitly class-based terms. Here, the ‘sophisticated’ design of Hartley’s TriBeCa apartment and the director’s associations with Godard and Bresson are set in opposition to a Long Island culture that Hartley has not quite succeeded in leaving behind: ‘when he speaks, his Long Island accent comes through, and it feels like you’re talking to a security guard at a mall’.<sup>65</sup> If, as I have argued earlier in this chapter, anxiety about the city and its particular cultural values is an important element of *The Unbelievable Truth* and *Simple Men*, then press coverage such as this takes the opposite and more culturally familiar stance, presenting the city as a place for the realisation of suburban dreams.

The city features as an important setting in many of Hartley’s later films, and in the early short films *Ambition* and *Theory of Achievement* (both 1991), although it is most often characterised in distinctly ambivalent terms. Hartley’s

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<sup>62</sup> *The Unbelievable Truth* production notes, p. 2.

<sup>63</sup> *Trust* production notes, p. 4.

<sup>64</sup> Alex Patterson, ‘Stranger than *Truth*’, *Village Voice*, February 1990.

<sup>65</sup> Bob Morris, ‘Suburban Guerrilla’, [*Elle?*], October 1992, p. 171.

next two features, the absurdist thriller *Amateur* (1994) and the tripartite romantic drama *Flirt* (1995), use city settings in an effort to evoke the *globalised* reality of modern life. This movement away from suburban Long Island settings, and also from a certain type of ‘local’, familial drama, may be seen as one reason for Hartley’s reduced visibility in the later stages of his career. Certainly the ‘hook’ provided by Hartley’s regional identification became less easy to exploit when the director began working in New York City and other urban locations such as Berlin and Tokyo (although some written pieces still identified the director with Long Island in the late 1990s and 2000s<sup>66</sup>). Thus, while Hartley’s influence on independent filmmakers of the 1990s was observable in a number of low-budget films about youthful suburban life, including *Clerks*, *Spanking the Monkey* (1994), and the Long Island-set *The Brothers McMullen* (1995), his own films of the later 1990s often attracted little critical attention. A consideration of the distinctly marginal, and perhaps surprising, approach adopted by Hartley to the development of his career at both the industrial and textual level forms a central part of my discussion of *Amateur* and *Flirt* in the following chapter.

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<sup>66</sup> See for example Emanuel Levy, ‘Long Island’s Poet Laureate’, pp. 191–197; Choire Sicha, ‘An Illuminated Expat’, *Los Angeles Times*, 13 May 2007, p. E3 (this interview includes a photograph of Hartley with the caption ‘Long Island boy’).



## 2

### New Horizons: *Amateur* (1994) and *Flirt* (1995)

Hartley followed his critically successful Long Island series with *Amateur*, a film judged by many critics and commentators (and apparently the film's theatrical distributor, Sony Pictures Classics) to hold the promise of 'breaking through' to a broader audience and increasing the director's visibility on the American independent scene.<sup>1</sup> These judgements were based on the film's presence and positive reception at several high-profile film festivals, including Cannes and the New York Film Festival, and on certain textual qualities, relating in particular to the film's generic identity as an action/gangster thriller.<sup>2</sup> Despite receiving a far greater number of mixed and negative reviews than did any of the Long Island features,<sup>3</sup> *Amateur* did outdo *The Unbelievable Truth*, *Trust* and *Simple Men* at the box office, taking over \$750,000.<sup>4</sup> However, if it is the case that *Amateur* offers certain qualities usually associated with the more commercial end of the independent spectrum, then another important characteristic is the film's novelty, in the contexts both of Hartley's preceding work and of contemporary independent cinema in general. The film will be seen to distinguish itself in particular at the level of place. I characterise *Amateur* in this chapter as marking the beginning of a shift in Hartley's filmography away from themes of localness and family and towards themes of globalisation and social fragmentation. This shift reaches a conclusion in Hartley's most recent feature, *Fay Grim* (discussed

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<sup>1</sup> According to an article in *Variety*, Sony Pictures Classics had 'high hopes' for *Amateur*, which they planned to distribute to regions (such as the Midwest) previously ignored by Hartley's distributors. John Brodie, 'Sony Classics Adds Quartet of Pix to '94-95 Release Sked', *Variety*, 13 June 1994, p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> A feature on *Amateur* in the *Christian Science Monitor* suggested that the showing of the film at the New York Film Festival (in which Hartley had not previously featured) raised the director's reputation 'another notch' and marked the moment when 'Hal Hartley's career turned a corner' (David Sterritt, 'A Filmmaker's Take on the Nature of Identity', *Christian Science Monitor*, 5 April 1995, Arts p. 12). In *Variety*, John Brodie reported that *Amateur* was 'well-received' at its first screening at Cannes 1994, and that a 'battle royal' for the acquisition of the film was taking place between New Line, Samuel Goldwyn and Miramax ('Indie Battle Fierce for a Few', *Variety*, 16 May 1994, p. 1). A reviewer for the *Washington Times* speculated that *Amateur*'s 'whole wild plot, which mocks the action genre incisively at points, seems concocted to draw a new audience into Mr. Hartley's forum', and concluded that Hartley is 'reaching a broader audience than ever before' (Brian Fannin, "'Amateur' Director Gets It Almost Right', *Washington Times*, 23 June 1995, p. C17).

<sup>3</sup> The generally negative reviews of *Amateur* include Peter Rainer, 'Thriller "Amateur" Shoots Mostly Blanks', *Los Angeles Times*, 19 May 1995, p. 8; and Rita Kempley, "'Amateur": An Action Thriller That Lost Its Way', *Washington Post*, 23 June 1995, p. F07.

<sup>4</sup> *Box Office Mojo* lists the domestic total gross as \$757,088: [www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=amateur.htm](http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=amateur.htm) (last accessed 14 April 2011).

in chapter 4). *Flirt*, the other film covered in this chapter, is characterised by a sense of fragmentation at the levels of both setting and narrative, relating a similar story about flirting and infidelity in three separate segments, each with its own setting and characters. Here Hartley offers a distinctly marginal and sometimes quite radical take on the low-budget romantic drama – with the result of a limited theatrical distribution.<sup>5</sup>

Both *Amateur* and *Flirt* feature a kind of dialogue and performance style that is broadly consistent with that featured in the earlier Long Island films (and indeed in all of Hartley's feature films). Actors adopt a non-naturalistic style of movement and facial expression, performing dialogue that is often 'flat' in tone and absurd or repetitive in composition. Other stylistic features by now familiar in Hartley's work include a precise attention to framing and composition within the frame, and the use of non-conventional editing patterns, ranging from the slightly offbeat (the two-shots in *Amateur* that show two characters facing not each other but the camera) to the more radically disorienting (the dramatic jump-cuts in the 'New York' section of *Flirt*). All such effects contribute, to different degrees, to a sense of self-conscious artificiality or design that distinguishes the films from their more mainstream counterparts – although similar formal flourishes may also feature on occasion within Hollywood cinema, especially if 'motivated' in terms of a character's experience or mental state.<sup>6</sup>

At the level of content and theme, *Amateur* and *Flirt* depart in several significant ways from the preceding features, while maintaining a broad emphasis on troubled romance and cultural identity. One important development is the movement from suburban or semi-rural locations to urban locations: *Amateur* is set in lower Manhattan; *Flirt* is set in New York City, Berlin and Tokyo. Related to this shift in setting is the introduction of the theme of globalisation into Hartley's film world. Both films, in their narrative design and in many of their formal features, betray an acute interest in international exchange and mobility. *Amateur* takes the more ambivalent view on globalisation, investing several sympathetic characters as well as New York City itself with a strong sense of 'Europeanness', while also charting the pernicious influence of powerful multinational corporations on society and the individual. Political issues do not feature in *Flirt*, whose examination of cosmopolitan city

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<sup>5</sup> The film played at just seven theatres at the widest point of its release: [www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=flirt.htm](http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=flirt.htm) (last accessed 14 April 2011).

<sup>6</sup> I discuss the concept of motivation more fully later in the chapter.

life is focused more tightly on individual romantic relationships. Globalisation is here in the background of the narrative: each segment is an account of the reaction of a ‘flirt’ to the news that their lover (of a different nationality, in the case of the ‘Berlin’ and ‘Tokyo’ segments) is leaving to work abroad for six months.

Certain conditions associated with globalisation, such as the derestricted flow of labour and capital between nations, are also of central importance to *Flirt*’s production history – a fact emphasised within the diegesis through the brief appearance of Hartley himself, who plays an American director (called Hal) producing a film (called *Flirt*) in Tokyo.<sup>7</sup> Berlin and Tokyo were, according to Hartley, chosen as shooting locations because these were the cities from which funding was most readily available.<sup>8</sup> These segments, completed some time after the original short film called *Flirt* (1993), were funded by Pandora Filmproduktion in Germany, and Nippon Film Development & Finance in Japan, along with money from Hartley’s own production company, True Fiction Pictures. Both of the foreign companies specialised in providing investment to independent or ‘artistic’ projects based in Europe or America.<sup>9</sup> Pandora Filmproduktion, the larger of the two operations, had, before *Flirt*, invested in several other high-profile American auteur-projects, including Jim Jarmusch’s *Night on Earth* (1991) and *Dead Man* (1995).

Overseas investors such as these represented one viable alternative to the traditional domestic system, and many independent filmmakers in the 1990s took the option of pursuing initial, additional or even full production funding from foreign, and especially European, film industries. Overseas companies were often smaller, more financially independent and less risk-averse than their American equivalents, and were likely to invest in a larger number of more unconventional or radical projects (particularly if such projects had ties, in terms of style or personnel, with an apposite national cinema<sup>10</sup>). A number of international co-

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<sup>7</sup> It is likely that Hartley would have been recognisable to many independent film fans by this point in his career, considering the large number of features and interviews published as part of the press coverage of the Long Island films and *Amateur*.

<sup>8</sup> Hartley, ‘Introduction: Actually Responding’, in *Flirt* (screenplay) (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), pp. xii–xiii.

<sup>9</sup> Nippon Film Development & Finance provided finance to *Howards End* and *The Crying Game* (both 1992), among other British and international films. According to its founder, Michiyo Yoshizaki, the company made investment decisions on the basis of the strength of a film’s script, and the commitment and passion of the director. See Joanna Coles, ‘A Yen for Movies’, *The Guardian*, 14 May 1993, p. 4.

<sup>10</sup> Of the five films made by American filmmakers that Pandora Filmproduktion supported in the period 1985–1995, for example, three (*Down by Law*, *Night on Earth* and *Dead Man*) were directed by Jim Jarmusch. Jarmusch’s films, with their slow pacing, minimalist characterisation

production markets, such as CineMart in Rotterdam, functioned to facilitate financing deals between American filmmakers and European parties: in 1995, the year *Flirt* was completed, ten American directors were invited to CineMart, where they enjoyed free accommodation and contact with high-level executives from various European media companies.<sup>11</sup> Further funding, sometimes of a quite substantial order, was available in the form of subsidies. Richard Linklater, for example, was granted about one-sixth of the eventual budget for *Before Sunrise* (1995) by the Vienna Film Financing Fund, in exchange for hiring a mostly Austrian crew and an Austrian co-producer.<sup>12</sup>

Whether the adoption of such overseas funding arrangements was inspired specifically by developments in the home industry is open to question. Certainly the early years of the 1990s had witnessed significant changes in the American independent sector that had implications for filmmakers and production and distribution companies alike. The extraordinary box-office success of a few low-budget films in the late 1980s and early 1990s, such as *sex, lies, and videotape* (1989) and *The Crying Game* (1992),<sup>13</sup> elevated the commercial profile of independent cinema to a point where the Hollywood studios started to take an interest; as a result, independent distributors faced increasing competition from major distributors, who were able to muster far larger acquisition offers. In 1993, when Hartley was making *Amateur*, the independent production–distribution companies Miramax and New Line were incorporated into major conglomerates (Miramax was bought by the Walt Disney Company, New Line by Ted Turner’s Turner Broadcasting System, which merged with the Time–Warner conglomerate in 1996). Corporate ownership meant a large increase in financial resources for such companies, who soon came to dominate the market, in terms of both acquisitions and distribution. The year 1994 saw Miramax’s *Pulp Fiction*, with box-office takings of over \$107 million, become the first ‘independent blockbuster’, a milestone taken by many to

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and narrative obliqueness, exhibit strong ties with European art cinema in general and with the German auteur Wim Wenders in particular, and fit comfortably into a production/distribution slate that includes films by Wenders (*Lisbon Story*), Aki Kaurismäki (*I Hired a Contract Killer*, *Take Care of Your Scarf*, *Tatjana* and others) and Michael Haneke (*Benny’s Video*).

<sup>11</sup> See Amy Dawes, ‘Romancing the Coin’, *Variety* (Special Section: American Exhibitor and Screening Guides), 24 February 1995.

<sup>12</sup> See Dawes, ‘Romancing the Coin’.

<sup>13</sup> *sex, lies, and videotape*, made on a \$1 million budget, took over \$24 million at the North American box office ([www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=sexliesandvideotape.htm](http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=sexliesandvideotape.htm), last accessed 14 April 2011); *The Crying Game* took over \$62 million ([www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=cryinggame.htm](http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=cryinggame.htm), last accessed 14 April 2011).

epitomise the commercialisation of an independent cinema once valued for its autonomy.<sup>14</sup>

The development of a more commercial and necessarily more risk-averse kind of independent cinema – sometimes referred to as ‘Indiewood’ – throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s has not necessarily entailed a corresponding narrowing of the space within the industry for more radical independent productions, as Geoff King points out. The opportunities for such films to gain significant investment and distribution were limited even before the entry of the major studios into the sector. Provocative, innovative and disturbing low-budget features continue to be made, in consistently small numbers.<sup>15</sup> However, filmmakers working in the later years of the 1990s, and in the 2000s, have been able to take advantage of particular opportunities (either unavailable or less readily available in earlier years) offered by overseas financing and digital video technology (other opportunities, of course, have become less readily available, one important example being public funding<sup>16</sup>). Hartley has exploited both these opportunities in his efforts to maintain a career as an independent (*The Book of Life* and *The Girl from Monday* were both shot on DV; *Fay Grim* was shot on high definition DV). Hartley’s own comments seem to suggest that the industry became less receptive to his idiosyncratic style of filmmaking in about 1994 or 1995, when ‘Suddenly everything started homogenizing more and more’ and producers and distributors put an increasing emphasis on the need for films to resemble previous box-office successes.<sup>17</sup> However, if the industrial context of

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<sup>14</sup> The producer James Schamus (according to Peter Biskind) states: ‘Suddenly [as Miramax achieved success in the early 1990s] you needed a company that could handle those kinds of releases. You needed enough people to book those movies, to collect the money from the theatres ... and then the morning after, when *Pulp Fiction* is off-screen, be thinking, Now, what’s the next hit? The independent film business became a hit business, just like Hollywood.’ Biskind, *Down and Dirty Pictures: Miramax, Sundance, and the Rise of Independent Film* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004), p. 194.

<sup>15</sup> See Geoff King, *Indiewood, USA: Where Hollywood Meets Independent Cinema* (London; New York: I. B. Tauris, 2009), pp. 273–274.

<sup>16</sup> Funding from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) for the American Film Institute (AFI), for example, came to a stop in 1995. See ‘Sowing Seeds: NEA’s Support for Independent Filmmaking through AFI and Sundance’, *NEA Arts* (newsletter), 1 (2009), p. 13: [www.nea.gov/about/nearts/story.php?id=p13-sowing&issue=2009\\_v1](http://www.nea.gov/about/nearts/story.php?id=p13-sowing&issue=2009_v1) (last accessed 4 April 2011). The producer Ted Hope, citing this cut in funding by the NEA, claimed in an article published in 1995 that ‘Public funding options are all but non-existent’. See ‘Indie Film is Dead’, *Filmmaker*, 4:1 (1995), p. 56.

<sup>17</sup> Justin Wyatt, ‘The Particularity and Peculiarity of Hal Hartley’, *Film Quarterly*, 52:1 (1998), p. 5. In this interview, Hartley contrasts the attitudes of industry executives in the early 1990s with the attitudes of the same figures in 1995: ‘you would get approached by perfectly intelligent producers and distributors who might want to give you money and a couple of years before they told me, “OK, do your thing!” ... Just two years later, it was more like, “Don’t do quite your thing, can you do your thing but make it a little bit more like these movies that did business last year ... [ellipsis in the original] we have the figures right here.”’

Hartley's work began to change at this point, then Hartley's work itself also began to develop in new directions, moving away from many of the tropes that characterised his well-received earlier features. It is this combination of industrial factors and artistic development, I will suggest in this and later chapters, that has resulted in a reduction in visibility for the director.

### **Form and Narrative: *Flirt***

In an interview conducted a few days before the American release of *Amateur*, Hartley made several criticisms of his own film, and identified his sense of dissatisfaction as contributing towards the conception of *Flirt*, for which filming had recently been completed: 'With *Amateur*, I got fat in some ways ... so on *Flirt* I just cut right back.'<sup>18</sup> Other comments in the same interview suggest that Hartley is using the term 'fat' to denote a lack of constraint, particularly in relation to form. *Flirt*, which Hartley has since identified as containing his best work, was apparently devised to redress this deficiency, imposing firm (though not rigid) restrictions on design elements such as dialogue and narrative.<sup>19</sup> Although all of Hartley's previous films feature elements of formal experimentation, *Flirt* takes a more radically unconventional approach to form than do *Amateur* and the Long Island films; to use Hartley's terms again, 'abstract notion[s] of what a "good film" is' seemingly have little relevance to the film's composition.<sup>20</sup> Given that 'abstract notion[s] of what a "good film" is' were becoming increasingly familiar, and standardised, within the independent sector of the industry at this time, it is perhaps unsurprising that *Flirt* received a very limited domestic distribution despite Hartley's authorial reputation, opening on just one screen and eventually taking a little over \$263,000.<sup>21</sup>

Although *Flirt* offers a number of pleasures associated with the more commercial kinds of 1990s independent cinema, such as a familiar genre framework (city romance, in this case) and the centring of attractive, youthful, philosophical/'arty' characters, these conventional elements are frequently put into the shade by the film's more distinctive and subversive features. The most

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<sup>18</sup> Graham Fuller, 'Amateur Auteur', *Village Voice*, 25 April 1995, p. 56.

<sup>19</sup> For example, in an interview with Graham Fuller, Hartley states that 'the Japanese section of *Flirt* is the best work I've done'. Fuller, 'Responding to Nature: Hal Hartley in Conversation with Graham Fuller', in *Henry Fool* (screenplay) (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), p. x.

<sup>20</sup> Hal Hartley, *Flirt* (screenplay), p. xvii.

<sup>21</sup> *Box Office Mojo* lists the domestic total gross as \$263,192: [www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=flirt.htm](http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=flirt.htm) (last accessed 14 April 2011).

obvious of these, providing the most substantial departure from the norms of independent (and mainstream) cinema, is the tripartite narrative structure. *Flirt* comprises three separate narrative segments. The first, set in New York City, follows the efforts of Bill (Bill Sage) to resolve his romantic indecision and commit to a relationship with either Emily, whom he is sleeping with, or Margaret, with whom he 'got romantic' and shared a kiss a few weeks previously. The second is set in Berlin, where the same narrative is played out with a number of variations: the main character is Dwight (Dwight Ewell), a gay man who, like Bill, is prompted to choose between commitment to his lover, in this case a middle-aged man called Johan (Dominik Bender), and a new relationship, in this case with Werner (Jacob Klaffke). A strong sense of continuity between the first two sections is developed by the use of near-identical dialogue and a general correspondence in terms of the structuring of scenes; in the final section, however, these continuities are in many cases severely undermined. In contrast to the opening scenes of the 'New York' and 'Berlin' sections, which feature similar/identical dialogue replete with the kind of rhythmical exchanges and absurdities familiar from Hartley's previous features, the first scene of the 'Tokyo' section is silent, the relationships between the main characters suggested obliquely through the various movements and looks acted out in a dance rehearsal. As the main character in this episode, Miho (Miho Nikaido) also faces a romantic choice: she is in a relationship with Hal (Hartley) but is also close to Mr Ozu (Toshizo Fujiwara), from whom she recently accepted a brief kiss. The visual representation of this kiss constitutes a further departure from the two preceding sections, in which the incident occurs outside of the timeframe of the narrative.<sup>22</sup>

One of the effects of this three-part structure is the creation of a rather distanced or analytical position for the spectator: the beginning of each new episode arrests the narrative and calls attention to the constructed nature of the film. A similar effect is created by the presence, within the 'Berlin' segment, of a chorus-like set of minor characters who comment on Dwight's situation and also, strikingly, on the nature of the film narrative in which they appear:

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<sup>22</sup> There is, however, a visual re-enactment of this kiss in the 'Berlin' episode, when a man asks Dwight to describe his kiss with Werner; in response, Dwight leaps forward and kisses the man on the mouth.

BORIS: If we can believe what he tells us, the film-maker's project here has been to compare the changing dynamics of one situation in different milieus.

MIKE: And you don't think he'll succeed?

BORIS: Well, it's too early to tell, perhaps. But no, I think he will fail.

PETER: Yes, he'll fail. He already has failed. But in this case the failure is interesting.<sup>23</sup>

This pattern of interrupted narrative continuity is cast as the film's major flaw in the review in the *Washington Post*, which opens with the lines: 'Like the rattled romantics of his new film, "Flirt," Hal Hartley can't seem to commit – to his characters or to his audiences. An exercise in filmmaking as opposed to storytelling, this egocentric three-parter may have been good for him – but it isn't for us.'<sup>24</sup> The suggestion here is that Hartley has crossed a line separating traditional, narrative-driven film from image- or design-driven film, and in doing so has disregarded a basic requirement for audience pleasure. Such criticisms centring on the perceived dominance of concerns of form over concerns of narrative have been a mark of much of the critical writing surrounding Hartley's output as a whole, and can be found even in publications traditionally receptive to more stylistically distinctive forms of cinema. In a review in *Sight & Sound* of the Artificial Eye DVD release of *The Girl from Monday*, for example, Kate Stables comments on 'Hartley's regrettable decision to forgo plotting for posing his pretty but forgettable cast in chilly, archly canted shots while they mouth provocative platitudes about consumerism'.<sup>25</sup>

That *Flirt's* emphasis on formal experimentation works against its popular recognition is further underlined in the accompanying trailer, which elides many of the film's most striking and memorable features. As might be expected, examples of Hartley's trademark comic/absurdist dialogue feature prominently: the first clip of the trailer, from a late scene in 'New York', sees Bill explaining his bandaged face with the line, 'Shot by the husband of a woman I thought I might be in love with.' At no point, however, is it suggested that dialogue is replicated across the three narrative segments. Significant, too, is the omission of the 'chorus' sequence in 'Berlin' and also of similar (if less strongly

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<sup>23</sup> Hartley, *Flirt* (screenplay), p. 48–49.

<sup>24</sup> Rita Kempley, 'Menage a Blah; Arty Romance Is Hartley Watchable', *Washington Post*, 18 October 1996, p. D06.

<sup>25</sup> Kate Stables, 'The Hal Hartley Collection', *Sight & Sound*, 9:19 (2009), p. 87.



‘artificial’) sequences in ‘New York’ and ‘Tokyo’.<sup>26</sup> Frequent inter-cutting between the three sub-narratives creates the impression of a complex, multi-stranded narrative that moves fluidly between a host of characters contained within a single timeframe: a structure that, though familiar from more successful independent films such as *Short Cuts* (1993), *Pulp Fiction* (1994), *2 Days in the Valley* (1996) and *Thirteen Conversations about One Thing* (2001), is rejected by *Flirt*.<sup>27</sup>

This playing down of *Flirt*’s more unusual narrative/structural features is unsurprising, given the degree to which they contravene existing narrative conventions of both Hollywood and independent cinema. If, in the most popular forms of cinema, style is generally subordinate to narrative – and, moreover, a certain sort of narrative that involves a linear movement between a clearly marked beginning, middle and end – then *Flirt* clearly exists at the other end of the spectrum of possible narrative film forms.<sup>28</sup> The film’s various departures from the norm, I would suggest, add up to a more radical kind of filmmaking than that exhibited in any of Hartley’s other features, or in the majority of American independent films. A range of unconventional and in some cases quite challenging features is offered; of these, the unusual narrative organisation is particularly important in establishing the distinctive ‘feel’ of the film. *Flirt* encourages its viewers to engage in an unusually high degree of reflection and recollection. Since there are no diegetic connections between the narratives of the three segments, the viewer is asked to identify or consider certain formal connections relating to dialogue, characterisation and the presentation/ordering of events (in addition to following each individual mini-narrative). For example, the operating theatre scene in ‘Berlin’ repeats much of the dialogue used in the corresponding scene in the previous ‘New York’ segment: in both cases the doctor asks if the patient is allergic to Novocaine and provides a commentary on the ongoing procedure (‘Now I’m going to have to inject the Novocaine directly

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<sup>26</sup> The scene in ‘New York’ has Bill ask the advice of three strangers in a public bathroom. Each of the men considers the question, before speaking at some length about both Bill’s predicament and the nature of love and relationships. In ‘Tokyo’, the characters offering advice are a traditionally dressed Japanese woman, a businesswoman and a motorcycle chick. Again, they each reply with an enthusiasm that seems unusual in the context.

<sup>27</sup> For a discussion of multi-strand narratives in independent film, see Geoff King, *American Independent Cinema* (London; New York: I. B. Tauris, 2005), pp. 84–98. For a wider discussion of complex narratives in contemporary cinema, see the 2006 special double issue of *Film Criticism*, 31:1–2 (2006).

<sup>28</sup> This beginning/middle/end structure is sometimes defined as an order/disorder/order or order/enigma/resolution structure. See for example Susan Hayward, *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts*, third edition (Oxford; New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 284.

into the wounds’) while the nurse advises the patient to ‘Keep thinking about something. Something specific.’ However, a number of points of difference are also observable, within the similar patterns of dialogue and direction. These range from the obvious, such as Dwight’s mid-operation fantasy (he says he is thinking about ‘Guys ... Kissing. His tongue in my mouth. My mouth on his chest’, while earlier Bill thought about ‘Girls ... Her thighs squeezing my leg. Kissing. Her tongue in my mouth. My mouth on her breast’), to the more subtle, such as Dwight’s more wavering and panicked tone of voice.

The patterning of repetition and variation contained in this scene and in ‘Berlin’ as a whole, and also (in a modified form) in ‘Tokyo’, serves to call attention to various processes that usually remain ‘invisible’ in narrative film, such as characterisation and narrative. While it is not uncommon for independent films to include reflexive or ‘distancing’ elements, these generally figure quite lowly in a mix that includes many conventional or realist elements. Moreover, as King has argued, such unsettling deviations from mainstream convention are typically *motivated* – that is, they relate in some way to the fictional film-world and its characters.<sup>29</sup> Motivation may come in many different forms, the most common of which being subjective experience. In films such as *Keane* (2004) and *Pi* (1998), for example, many of the more unconventional formal devices on display – disjunctive editing, strange sound effects, fast- and slow-motion, and so on – are readable as expressions of the disturbed consciousness of a main character. This particular kind of motivation features only occasionally within Hartley’s work; one example is the overlapping of lines of dialogue in *The Unbelievable Truth*, a sound effect that functions to express formally Audry’s disinterest in the domestic realities of her familial life; another is the burst of uncharacteristically rapid (for Hartley) editing in the final few seconds of *No Such Thing*, used to signify the Monster’s fading or disjointed consciousness. Another sort of motivation for unusual stylistic devices, thematic motivation, can also be detected in a number of Hartley’s films. The highly unconventional visual scheme of *The Girl from Monday* – which involves the frequent use of blurring effects, split screens, tints and still photography – for example, seems in keeping with a narrative that addresses the uses of media imagery in a near-future world. As King suggests, motivations such as these can function to ‘repair’

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<sup>29</sup> See King, *American Independent Cinema*, chapters 2 and 3.

or ‘contain’ ruptures and instances of overt stylisation that would more normally be associated with art cinema or avant-garde film.<sup>30</sup>

Part of the distinctly experimental character of *Flirt*, and surely one of the reasons for the *Washington Post*’s unenthusiastic review (‘an exercise in filmmaking as opposed to storytelling’), is its use of radical formal devices with no clear motivation. The film’s structure of repetition, for example, has no obvious thematic correlative within the diegesis. The main characters are not themselves engaged in a drama of repetition or redefinition (rather, the drama is structured around a romantic choice faced by each protagonist). Nor is there any impression created that skills of comparative analysis or recollection are of particular importance to the protagonists, as they are to the viewer. It certainly would have been possible to provide such a thematic motivation, perhaps through the centring of a main character who is a writer, re-reading and revising a draft of an intricate novel (artistic activity does feature in the second and third segments, although it is distinctly marginal to the main narrative; in ‘Tokyo’, for instance, the film director played by Hartley makes only a few brief appearances and is never shown working on his film). Motivation might also have been provided in the form of individual subjective experience. This is the strategy adopted by Christopher Nolan’s *Memento* (2000), whose highly unconventional and reflexive narrative structure – comprising a series of segments ordered in reverse chronology, so that the viewer is denied knowledge of what has gone on before – reflects the inner experience of its protagonist, a man with no short-term memory.

Other formal features, apart from the repetitious narrative structure and use of dialogue, also seem to lack the motivation that would usually be present in a more conventional film. In an early scene in ‘New York’, Hartley makes use of a series of jump-cuts, which break up a brief monologue we would expect to be recorded in a single shot: Bill talking wistfully about his illicit kiss with Margaret. As Bill walks slowly away from the camera, he delivers his lines one by one, the edit occurring during the pause between each remark. This is a highly unusual use of an editing device whose conventional function is to signal some form of mental disturbance. The expression of individual feelings of anger or dislocation is the main purpose of the jump-cuts that feature in *Buffalo 66* (1998)

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<sup>30</sup> King, *American Independent Cinema*, p. 106.

and *Lymelife* (2008), for example.<sup>31</sup> A similarly conventional approach is taken by Hartley in a scene in *The Unbelievable Truth* in which Vic finds out his daughter has posed nude for a fashion shoot, jump-cuts being used in this case to communicate Vic's inner turmoil as he rips up photos of his own daughter. The scene in *Flirt*, by contrast, is characterised by Bill Sage's typically quiet demeanour and deadpan delivery. If motivation exists for the striking editing style here, then it is of a fairly unusual and ambiguous sort (the cuts might be held to emphasise Bill's brief detachment from the reality of the present, for example). Indeed, Hartley's use of the jump-cut in *Flirt* is less easily related to the independent film world than it is to the form of art cinema exemplified by Jean-Luc Godard, whose *À bout de souffle* (1960) famously makes frequent use of the device during a low-key dialogue scene between the two main characters.<sup>32</sup>

The particular features discussed above position *Flirt* at some distance from the normal model of narrative film through the unusual emphasis they give to formal experimentation, often without the familiar grounding of motivation. This is not to say, however, that the film is without conventional pleasures, as I briefly suggested earlier. In some ways *Flirt* cleaves quite closely to the classical Hollywood model, particularly at the level of the individual narrative segments. Each segment, for instance, is possessed of a clear and pressing 'deadline' (the main character is given an hour and a half in which to decide whether or not to commit to his or her current partner) that drives the narrative forward. The majority of scenes serve a distinct narrative function, and follow in a logical, comprehensible sequence; 'New York' and 'Tokyo' also offer a high degree of closure, as Bill follows Emily to Paris and Miho shares a sleepy embrace with Hal at the airport (the ending to 'Berlin' is a little more ambiguous, as Dwight does not commit to either of his main love interests and ends the film staring into the distance after a brief flirtation with a stranger). This broadly conventional narrative approach may be contrasted with the approach adopted by another independent omnibus film, Jim Jarmusch's *Night on Earth* (1991). The film is

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<sup>31</sup> In *Lymelife*, jump-cuts are used to express the distress of the main character, Scott (Rory Culkin), as he listens to his parents arguing in the next room, their marriage in meltdown. For a discussion of the use of jump-cuts in *Buffalo 66*, see King, *American Independent Cinema*, p. 124.

<sup>32</sup> For a brief discussion of Godard's use of the jump-cut, see David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (London: Routledge, 1986), pp. 327, 328–329. Even in *À bout de souffle*, as in a number of other European New Wave films, the jump-cut may be considered an expressive device, functioning to convey a general mood of alienation and social dislocation. It would be hard to read such a motivation into the jump-cuts that appear in 'New York', however.

composed of five narrative segments, each set in a different city and each centring on the brief relationships formed during a taxi ride. The narrative drive and sense of progression that characterise the *Flirt* sub-narratives are almost entirely absent here: characters meet under utterly routine circumstances, form fleeting and sometimes distinctly cool relationships based on brief exchanges of dialogue, and part company when the taxi reaches its destination. Quirky observations, odd behaviour and absurd pieces of dialogue define the tone in *Night on Earth*, as they do in many of Jarmusch's features, and, indeed, many of Hartley's.<sup>33</sup> They are much less prominent in *Flirt*, however, which is characterised by more familiar generic material (though with some unusual resonances owing to the changes of urban setting, as I discuss later).

### **Form, Genre and Tone: *Amateur***

If *Flirt*'s distinctive character is a result more of its various formal innovations than of its narrative content – an impression reinforced by Hartley's own comments<sup>34</sup> – then in *Amateur* this balance is quite different. Departures from the norms of narrative organisation and narrative self-consciousness, in particular, are fewer and less dramatic. The approach to genre is also different. *Flirt* follows many of the generic conventions associated with the romantic drama/city romance quite closely. The emphasis on a choice between two possible romantic partners, the centralisation of a dramatic event that changes the protagonist's approach to life and love (the emergency operation), and a final moment of romantic commitment are all features found in a great number of independent and mainstream romantic dramas, for example.<sup>35</sup> If such elements are sometimes given an unconventional twist – 'Berlin', for examples, centres gay male characters – then this gap between the film and its more mainstream generic equivalents is widened considerably in *Amateur*.

The subversion of various action/romantic thriller conventions was cast as one of the film's defining features in the critical commentary surrounding its

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<sup>33</sup> Such elements are to the fore in Jarmusch's *Mystery Train* (1989), for example, another multi-part narrative with an international cast.

<sup>34</sup> According to Hartley, *Flirt* is 'a film that frankly admits that subject matter is not important to me. It's the quality of attention that's important. You just take a form – and a lot of them are *just* forms – but since I am filling it up with sincere interest, hopefully the form will get interesting and lend something to the content, and vice versa.' Graham Fuller, 'Amateur Auteur', p. 56.

<sup>35</sup> The 'foil' plot, in which a protagonist has to choose between two men or women who show a romantic interest in him/her, is one of the four main plots on offer in Hollywood romantic comedy, according to Mark D. Rubinfield. See *Bound to Bond: Gender, Genre, and the Hollywood Romantic Comedy* (Westport, Connecticut; London: Praeger, 2001), pp. 33–61.

release, this broad characterisation being supported by the satirical-seeming tagline ('Accountancy, Murder, Amnesia, Torture, Ecstasy, Understanding, Redemption') and by Hartley's interview comments. In a 1994 interview, for example, Hartley states that 'I wanted to avoid making *Amateur* into an exercise in genre'; he also comments that 'a lot of the situations in this movie strike me as standard TV cop show stuff, but with the information changed. A TV cop show made by someone who doesn't know how to make TV cop shows.'<sup>36</sup> The title of this interview, 'Being an Amateur', is emblematic of a further theme running through the critical material: Hartley's 'amateur' status as a director new to the thriller genre. The *Washington Times* review, for example, describes *Amateur* as 'the appositely titled latest release from writer-director Hal Hartley, who, despite his experience ... has never directed an action film before'.<sup>37</sup> Graham Fuller writes that 'The title of the film, I hazard, refers equally to Hartley the thriller director as it does to Thomas or Isabelle, each of whom is tentatively making his or her way in a new world.'<sup>38</sup>

Generic variation or experimentation was considered one of the film's successes in the enthusiastic *New York Times* review, in which Caryn James asserts that 'Much humor in "Amateur" comes from its mockery of suspense movies'.<sup>39</sup> Much more common, however, was a more critical view in which the film's genre identity is judged to be problematic. The *Washington Post* review, for instance, opens with the lines, "'Amateur", the fourth film by director Hal Hartley, is a knowing, noirish action thriller that is half-baked instead of hard-boiled.'<sup>40</sup> For the *Los Angeles Times*, in an unfavourable notice, 'Hartley turns what might have been a lurid pulp thriller into a freeze-dried art thing.'<sup>41</sup> Jonathan Romney offers a more expanded criticism in his review for *The Guardian*: '[there is] a strange disjunction of tone that doesn't quite add up. You could read *Amateur* either as a wilfully nasty piece of noir or as an absurdist comedy, but try to put the two together and they refuse to gel.'<sup>42</sup>

I agree with Romney's evaluation, which captures something of the film's strange, discomfiting character (although I do not agree with Romney's

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<sup>36</sup> Hartley in Graham Fuller, 'Being an Amateur' (interview with Hal Hartley), in *Amateur* (screenplay) (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), p. xii.

<sup>37</sup> Brian Fannin, "'Amateur" Director Gets It Almost Right', p. C17.

<sup>38</sup> Graham Fuller, 'Introduction', in *Amateur* (screenplay), p. vii.

<sup>39</sup> Caryn James, 'The Nun, the Amnesiac, the Prostitute and the Thugs', *New York Times*, 29 September 1994, p. C16.

<sup>40</sup> Rita Kempley, 'Amateur', p. F07.

<sup>41</sup> Peter Rainer, 'Thriller "Amateur"', p. 8.

<sup>42</sup> Jonathan Romney, 'Hal Hullabaloo', *The Guardian*, 16 May 1994, p. T7.

later suggestion that this tonal incongruity comes at the expense of a political/moral conscience, an issue that I discuss later in this chapter<sup>43</sup>). Clearly, as both the positive and the negative reviews cited above suggest, *Amateur* offers a highly idiosyncratic take on generic material. While the film includes certain elements associated with the thriller and gangster genres, these elements are in many cases deployed in unusual and even disturbing ways. Most obviously, the film's gangster protagonist, Thomas (Martin Donovan), is characterised not by the qualities of energy, violence and excess familiar from more mainstream portrayals of the gangster, but by qualities such as vulnerability and ingenuousness, consistent with his severe amnesia. Moments of violence are typically displaced, or comically exaggerated. The film's tragic conclusion, while conforming to the generic narrative convention whereby the gangster protagonist suffers a violent death, is also marked by a sense of absurdity: Thomas is shot dead only because he is mistaken for Edward (Damian Young), his one-time accountant.<sup>44</sup>

Disjunctions in tone play a key part in the overall effect of the film, as Romney suggests. Comic nuances are often introduced into sequences that would conventionally be coded in terms of horror or tragedy. At one point midway through the film we are introduced to two minor characters, Ted (Dwight Ewell) and Nicola (Parker Posey), who, upon entering an abandoned building in which they intend to stay, discover in a corner of the room the body of a middle-aged man. Both the content and the tone of the ensuing conversation have a comic edge that is unexpected, especially given that the body is that of Edward, a sympathetic and even heroic main character. Nicola's initial expression of concern for Edward ('We should give him some water, don't you think?'), for example, is followed by the incongruous-seeming line, 'I need to take a shower, Ted.' A few moments later, having brought Edward round by giving him sips of whisky, the scene ends as Nicola takes a casual swig of whisky herself and declares, 'This place ain't so bad.' These shifts in focus from the melodramatic to the quotidian are made more absurd by Posey's deadpan style of line reading,

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<sup>43</sup> In the last paragraph of his review, Romney suggests that 'where the notorious torture scene in *Reservoir Dogs* was rigorously thought out as a ploy to make the audience squirm with unease, Hartley seems to have no such strategy. The comedy simply writes off the possibility that anything might really matter in his cool, crazy world.' 'Hal Hullabaloo', p. T7.

<sup>44</sup> Classical gangster films ending with the violent death of the main character include *The Public Enemy* (1931) and *Scarface* (1932), in which Paul Muni's character is killed by a hail of bullets. The protagonist of Brian De Palma's remake of *Scarface* (1983) meets a similar end.

which, in a manner typical of Hartley, downplays emotional significance in favour of an emphasis on stylisation.

A more dramatic mixing of comedy and emotional or ‘difficult’ material occurs in an earlier episode set in the same abandoned building, in which Edward is tortured by two suited gangsters looking for Thomas’s wife, Sofia (Elina Löwensohn). Two different registers define the scene: that of the anguished heroism of Edward as he endures torture by live electrical wire in order to protect Sofia, and that of the comical ineptitude and yuppie-type conduct of the gangsters, Jan (Chuck Montgomery) and Kurt (David Simonds). A number of repeated motifs function to emphasise, alternately, the comic and violent dimensions. Jan is initially frustrated by his inability to get a connection on his mobile phone; in response, Kurt shows off his own model, extolling its supposedly superior technology. Later, after torturing Edward, Jan uses Kurt’s phone, but does no better, as it is low on battery. Such comical frustrations are in stark contrast, tonally, with the business of Edward’s torture, the painful and disturbing nature of which is emphasised in several shots of his violently contorted face and one of his trembling feet.

The unsettling blend of protracted violence and comedy that characterises this scene and a small number of others (including Edward’s killing of Jan, a sequence given a comic edge by its unconventional long-shot framing and Edward’s constant, unnecessary changes of position), while not unique in the independent film world, is certainly one of *Amateur*’s most remarkable features.<sup>45</sup> The strategy is one of disturbance: viewers are denied the pleasures of unproblematic identification and generic convention associated with mainstream cinema. Other features are less radical, though still broadly unconventional. The near-exclusive use of a 50 mm lens, for example, serves to reduce the depth of field (in comparison with the standard 35 mm lens) and create a slightly distorted, ‘flat’ visual style.<sup>46</sup> Another non-naturalistic visual effect was created, again by Hartley’s long-time cinematographer Michael Spiller, through the use of a colouration gel that lends a dramatic blue hue to the night exterior sequences.<sup>47</sup> These slight but noticeable modifications of conventional

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<sup>45</sup> Scenes featuring a similar blend of protracted violence and comedy feature in *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) and *Three Kings* (1999), for example.

<sup>46</sup> Hartley has shown a preference for 50 mm and its distinctive ‘look’ in many of his films. *Simple Men*, for example, was filmed in 50 mm with the exception of just two shots, according to Michael Spiller. Interview with author, January 2010 (see appendix A).

<sup>47</sup> Michael Spiller relates his efforts to ensure that this blue hue would retain its initial impact in his interview with me (January 2010; see appendix A): ‘I found that in order for the stylized



photographic processes are complemented by a number of offbeat editing strategies. One example is found in the scene in which Isabelle (Isabelle Huppert) meets with her editor, George (David Greenspan), with whom she is discussing her latest story. Hartley alternates between shots of George talking by his desk and reaction shots of Isabelle, seated on the other side of the room. However, the penultimate shot of the sequence is followed not by a shot of Isabelle, as the editing pattern has led us to expect, but by one of Isabelle *together with* George; the impression created is that George, who seems to be continuing his conversation with Isabelle with no break in continuity, has shifted instantaneously from one side of the room to the other. Similarly offbeat is the use in several sequences of two-shots in which the actors maintain a conversation without facing each other. In the scene in the roadside diner, for example, Thomas talks about his amnesia while Sofia, also facing the camera, listens and replies over her shoulder. This departure from conventional shot construction – which would have Thomas and Sofia face each other, or else cut between the two characters in single shots – is given a motivation, as this is Sofia’s first conversation with Thomas since her unsuccessful attempt to kill him. The image here thus serves to ‘spatially formaliz[e] the emotional distance between characters’,<sup>48</sup> as Graham Fuller puts it: to express individual subjective experience at the visual level in a way familiar from many indie films, as discussed earlier.

### **Blending the Local and the Global: Place and Cultural Identity**

Formal and generic innovations such as those discussed above are probably the most immediately striking elements of Hartley’s work; they are also among the most talked about, both in journalistic coverage and in more academic work. Much less frequently discussed are questions of place and cultural identity. I would suggest, however, that these are important concerns that often serve to define (or partly define) the broader political or social perspective of Hartley’s films. I discuss the degree to which Hartley’s cinema can be considered a ‘political’ one in the final section of this chapter; in the following section, I look

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colors to work, you needed to keep some white reference in the frame, otherwise your eye and your brain ‘correct’ for the color shift, and you stop seeing it.’ According to Hartley, the gel he and Spiller used ‘was so blue, it scared us in dailes’. Brooke Comer, ‘*Amateur*’s Tenebrous Images’, *American Cinematographer*, 76:8 (1995), p. 73.

<sup>48</sup> Graham Fuller, ‘Being an Amateur’, p. xxv.

at the particular approaches to place that Hartley adopts in *Amateur* and *Flirt* and offer some comparisons between Hartley's work and that of other contemporary filmmakers.

Central to the narrative construction, visual design and tone of both films is an emphasis on globalisation and international exchange. In *Amateur*, the familiar iconography of New York City is blended with a 'European' iconography, a feature reflected in the film's American–European production financing.<sup>49</sup> *Flirt*, whose settings were themselves determined by financing factors, as discussed earlier, makes clear distinctions between the three urban spaces; indeed, one of the film's aims, as emphasised in the chorus sequence in 'Berlin', is to 'compare the changing dynamics of one situation in different milieus'. While the milieus of *Amateur* and of the three segments of *Flirt* each exhibit distinct social and visual characteristics, a number of constants also exist. The most significant of these is a focus on impoverishment and bohemian lifestyles. Like many of the protagonists of *The Unbelievable Truth*, *Trust* and *Simple Men*, the leads of *Amateur* are either lacking money, without a home, or both: Isabelle earns very little and lives in what the film screenplay describes as 'a wretched little east village hovel' (figure 6);<sup>50</sup> Sofia is effectively homeless having fled the apartment in which she used to live with Thomas (in the scene set in the movie theatre, Sofia is moved on by the usher, who complains, 'This is not a hotel. You've been here all day'); and Thomas has no home and no money, but for a few Dutch coins. Poverty is more in the background in *Flirt*, permeating both the down-at-heel Broadway haunts of 'New York' and the crumbling,



**Figure 6**  
Thomas takes a bath in Isabelle's bohemian 'hovel' in *Amateur* © Channel Four Films

<sup>49</sup> Of *Flirt*'s six production companies, two were American (American Playhouse and Hartley's own True Fiction Pictures), two were French (La Sept Cinéma and Union Générale Cinématographique) and two were British (Channel Four Films and Zenith Entertainment).

<sup>50</sup> Hal Hartley, *Amateur* (screenplay), p. 7.

partially boarded-up apartment building in which Greta lives in ‘Berlin’.<sup>51</sup> Both films show an interest in artists and philosophical/‘arty’ figures: cultural identities that feature in almost all of Hartley’s films. In *Amateur*, Isabelle writes pornographic stories, one of which draws the amusing complaint from her editor that ‘it’s quite bad ... It’s not pornographic ... It’s poetry and don’t you try and deny it!’ (Ellipses in the original dialogue.) Two of *Flirt*’s segments feature artists (in ‘Berlin’ Werner is a painter and in ‘Tokyo’ several characters are dancers) and all three feature a brief reading from a poetic/philosophical text; in ‘Tokyo’, for example, Miho reads a passage concerning the ontology of love as she takes refuge from her pursuers in a bookshop.

Both films feature a mixture of everyday realities (relating to money, work and self-expression) and more unusual points of interest, although the latter feature more prominently in *Amateur*, in which the main characters are drawn (back) into a world of gangster-related crime and violence. Here, New York City is imagined to support a pernicious system of manipulation and exploitation that is global in nature, and that bears an uncomfortable resemblance to ‘legitimate’ capitalism, as I discuss later. The theme of international exchange is thus central to the film. Beyond the narrative centring of a large, globalised institution, a sense of cultural or social flow is created through the incorporation of particular visual elements. Ted Hope, *Amateur*’s co-producer (along with Hartley), gives one example in the film’s production notes: ‘Our locations include Grand Central Station, which is said to be based on the Paris Opera House, and the Cloisters, which were moved from Europe by Rockefeller ... You could say that both are a bit of Europe in New York, which is very appropriate to the film.’<sup>52</sup> Similarly ‘European’ in character are the cobblestone backstreets that feature prominently in the film’s early stages<sup>53</sup> and the Catholic iconography that recurs throughout, including a video freeze-frame of Sofia posed to resemble Bernini’s *Ecstasy of St. Teresa* (c. 1650).

If the above design elements function as rather subtle suggestions of ‘Europeanness’, then a more forceful evocation of European identity is provided by the film’s cast. Of the main actors, two are European: Isabelle Huppert, who

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<sup>51</sup> The *Flirt* screenplay describes Greta’s residence as ‘a home of moderate poverty’ (p. 50).

<sup>52</sup> *Amateur* production notes (Sony Pictures Classics): [www.sonypictures.com/classics/amateur/story/productionnotes.html](http://www.sonypictures.com/classics/amateur/story/productionnotes.html) (last accessed 14 April 2011).

<sup>53</sup> The incorporation of shots of cobblestone streets was consistent with Hartley’s original vision of New York City, as reported by Michael Spiller: ‘when we were first discussing “Amateur”, Hal said that he was looking for Rome in the Afternoon in New York’. See *Amateur* production notes.

plays Isabelle, and Elina Löwensohn, who plays Sofia. Huppert, one of the most celebrated stars of the French art-house cinema, entered the cast at an early stage, having suggested to Hartley that they work together on the director's next film project.<sup>54</sup> Löwensohn had acted in two of Hartley's previous films, the short *Theory of Achievement* and *Simple Men*, in which she plays an enigmatic Romanian with epilepsy. Both Huppert's and Löwensohn's characters speak with an accent that codes them immediately as foreign and European, a feature striking enough to be commented upon in at least one of *Amateur*'s reviews.<sup>55</sup> Huppert's star status adds a further layer of associations: unlike Löwensohn, she has a long history of acting in (mostly French) art-house films, often under the direction of famous auteurs.<sup>56</sup> This history is referenced repeatedly in *Amateur*. In one early scene, for example, Isabelle looks slowly over her right shoulder at an approaching figure, thus recreating an image used in several of Huppert's earlier works, including *Violette Nozière* (1978) and *Loulou* (1980). The use of 'Isabelle' as Huppert's character's name is a feature *Amateur* shares with *Sauve qui peut (vie)* (1980) and *Passion* (1982), both directed by Godard. Other intertextual allusions are less subtle and more general. Isabelle's rather critical self-assessment, 'I'm coldly intellectual. Too pale. Altogether too ethereal', for instance, serves immediately to identify the character with the actress and her cerebral/cool persona, as much defined through press interviews<sup>57</sup> as through her various film roles and restrained, 'blank' performance style.<sup>58</sup>

Signifiers of Europeanness coexist with images of New York City that ground the film in the familiar and identify it both with the urban gangster film and with a long-established and highly visible tradition of 'New York' filmmaking. Indeed, New York City stands as one of the prime expressions of

<sup>54</sup> Huppert had apparently become interested in working with Hartley after seeing *Trust*. See Nancy Kapitanoff, 'A Director Who Likes to Play the Angles', *Los Angeles Times*, 18 May 1995, p. 6.

<sup>55</sup> The *New York Times* reviewer remarks that 'Between [Löwensohn's] slight Romanian accent and Ms. Huppert's even slighter French accent, "Amateur" exists in a world that is familiar and foreign all at once.' Caryn James, 'The Nun, the Amnesiac', p. C16.

<sup>56</sup> Among Huppert's credits in the 1980s, for example, are Maurice Pialat's *Loulou* (1980), Godard's *Passion* (1982) and Claude Chabrol's *Une affaire de femmes* (1988).

<sup>57</sup> Huppert is frequently described by interviewers as 'intellectual', or even 'chilly'. Jonathan Romney relates descriptions of the latter variety to Huppert's reluctance to respond to standard lines of questioning: 'I have seen her politely freeze out journalists at a press conference in Cannes, her disappointed impatience that of a primary school teacher towards a class of toddlers still struggling with their ABC when she'd rather move on to Dostoevsky.' 'Mysterious? Moi?', *Independent on Sunday*, 27 February 2005.

<sup>58</sup> 'Perversity', particularly in terms of sexual behaviour, is another signature of the Huppert persona, and one that is evoked (somewhat ironically) in *Amateur* through Isabelle's characterisation as a 'nymphomaniac' who is also a nun and virgin. For a good account of Huppert's presence and persona in French and international cinema, see Ginette Vincendeau, 'Isabelle Huppert: The Big Chill', *Sight & Sound*, 16:12 (2006), pp. 36–39.

American cinema. According to the scholar and journalist Richard A. Blake, the cinematic portrayal of the city was already overdetermined by the early years of 1900s: 'For many audiences, going to a movie theatre meant a vicarious visit to New York, and sights of the busy city streets were what movies were supposed to look like.'<sup>59</sup> By the 1930s, much of the film industry had relocated from the costly and noisy film 'factories' of Manhattan and nearby areas to Los Angeles, whose vast tracts of unused land offered large cost savings and (in the sound era) a solution to the problem of ambient traffic noise. This geographical shift, argues Blake, resulted in a narrowing of the representational possibilities open to filmmakers working on New York-set projects:

This new generation of artists [working in Los Angeles] knew that New York looked different than Chicago or Pittsburgh, other filmmaking cities of the period, but their sense of the difference came not from the personal experience of living there, but from seeing the movies that were made in the original movie capital ... [M]ovie New York verged, if not on the status of a cartoon, then certainly that of a cliché.<sup>60</sup>

Although he cites few individual films as examples, Blake is surely right to say that Hollywood depictions of New York are defined by a limited set of visual, narrative and tonal conventions. The foregrounding of soaring towers and city landmarks such as the Empire State Building and the Statue of Liberty is one such convention, followed by too many films to number but given particular emphasis in *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993), *Spider-Man* (2002), *The Apartment* (1960), *Cloverfield* (2008), *Armageddon* (1998) and *Godzilla* (1998), for example. The broader 'vision' of the city offered by many of those films is similarly familiar. In *Sleepless in Seattle*, as well as in films such as *Manhattan* (1979) and *You've Got Mail* (1998), New York is a place of individualistic opportunity and romance. Here, the romantic feelings of the protagonists are reflected and reinforced by the photogenic streets and parks of the city: an image of prosperity consistent with New York's function as a global finance centre. Another vision of the city is offered by *Godzilla* and *Armageddon*. In these and other disaster films, New York is a centre of spectacular annihilation; the

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<sup>59</sup> Richard A. Blake, *Street Smart: The New York of Lumet, Allen, Scorsese, and Lee* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2005), p. 21.

<sup>60</sup> Blake, *Street Smart*, p. 29.

familiar iconography of the city serves in this case to drive home the immediacy of the threat facing the protagonists (and the rest of the city/country/world).<sup>61</sup>

Such conventions, though manifested to different degrees in different films, form the basis of a mainstream cinematic ‘New York’ (or set of ‘New Yorks’) against which a variety of independent or otherwise ‘alternative’ films assert their originality. In the case of Hartley’s work, and of the work of filmmakers such as Martin Scorsese and Spike Lee, this divergence is characterised by an emphasis on regional detail and character.<sup>62</sup> The regional setting for *Amateur* is TriBeCa, a neighbourhood in lower Manhattan dominated by former industrial buildings converted into lofts and residences in the 1960s and 1970s. Hartley’s film memorably integrates its story with the spaces and cultural meanings of TriBeCa in the early 1990s. A key aspect of *Amateur*’s distinctive visual/tonal identity is architectural. The scene in which Jan and Kurt torture Edward, for example, is set in a spectacularly light and spacious brick building. The streaming sunlight and fine period brickwork carry associations quite inappropriate (according to convention) to the extreme sadism that forms the crux of the scene (a similarly unusual tone is created in the later scene in which Ted and Nicola stumble across the apparently dead body of Edward). Also important to the film’s individual character is a sense of bohemian life and culture – an echo of TriBeCa’s history as a mecca for young artists, attracted by abandoned or inexpensive lofts that could be converted into work spaces. The art scene and its associations of hip non-conformism remain an important part of TriBeCa’s regional identity, despite (or because of) the area’s increased popularity and resultant gentrification in the 1980s and 1990s. Isabelle’s career choice is one expression of this regional characteristic; another is the rock club scene, in which Sofia is offered free entry by a youthful doorman wearing a Sonic Youth T-shirt.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Diane Negra relates such visions of the city to a long-standing perception of New York as a ‘key site for the bizarre, the abject, the violent, and the dysfunctional’, solidified by tabloid scandals such as the police brutalisation of Abner Louima and the ‘Long Island Lolita’ case. ‘“Queen of the Indies”: Parker Posey’s Niche Stardom and the Taste Cultures of Independent Film’, in Chris Holmlund and Justin Wyatt (eds.), *Contemporary American Independent Cinema: From the Margins to the Mainstream* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 80.

<sup>62</sup> On the importance of regional identity in films such as Scorsese’s *Mean Streets* (1973, set in Little Italy) and Lee’s *Do The Right Thing* (1989, set in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn), see Blake, *Street Smart*, pp. 153–206, 209–279.

<sup>63</sup> Sonic Youth have been strongly associated with New York City and the ‘art’ or ‘alternative’ rock scene since their first live appearance, playing at a ‘No Wave’ festival in SoHo’s White Columns gallery in 1981. The band’s hip/experimental credentials remained intact at the time of *Amateur*’s release, despite the mainstream veneration and moderate commercial success of

A similar focus on the textures of downtown New York is adopted in the ‘New York’ segment of *Flirt*, whose protagonist moves through the spaces of Lower Broadway. As suggested earlier, this is a place of moderate poverty, a quality emphasised by Michael Spiller’s lighting and cinematography. In one of the first shots of the film, we see Bill standing by the fridge in Emily’s apartment, his body framed by an expanse of blemished, unfinished paintwork. Images of graffiti-covered bathroom walls and shabby bar décor (figure 7) further contribute to an impression of ‘lived-in’ social space that is consistent with the close, small-town-like network of relationships at the centre of the narrative (this emphasis on everyday poverty functions to sharply distinguish *Flirt* from Hartley’s later New York-set features *No Such Thing* and *The Girl from Monday*, both of which use the city setting to foreground themes of corporatisation and commodification).

In centring the topography of Lower Broadway, *Flirt* offers a vision of New York City not usually found in more mainstream films, which tend to limit their locations to the more instantly recognisable districts of Midtown Manhattan (see for example *Sleepless in Seattle*, *Home Alone 2: Lost in New York* and *Two Weeks Notice*). The fact that *Flirt* devotes (roughly) equal amounts of its running time to depictions of Berlin, Tokyo and New York City further underlines its irregularity. Like ‘New York’, ‘Berlin’ and ‘Tokyo’ demonstrate Hartley’s feeling for a sense of urban place. As Hartley explains in the introduction to the *Flirt* screenplay, the basic narrative scenario of the original, New York-set *Flirt* short is filtered in ‘Berlin’ through the regional identity of Berlin: ‘I discovered two general facts about Berlin: it still has a thriving art scene – particularly



**Figure 7**  
Bill and Michael in a down-at-heel Manhattan bar in *Flirt* © True Fiction Pictures/Pandora Filmproduktion

painting – and it is (and has been for a long time) a popular place for gay men to live. I started from these two generalizations and applied the existing script to them.’<sup>64</sup> The first of these regional characteristics is most clearly embodied in Werner, whose status as an abstract painter connects him with the modern tradition of non-representational art that flourished in West Berlin after World War II.<sup>65</sup> Dwight, by contrast, is a fashion model with no artistic leanings. His disconnection from the history and culture of the city is emphasised by his inability to speak German; accused of being ‘loose’ by one of his German friends, Dwight adopts a puzzled expression and starts searching for ‘schlampe’ in his German–English dictionary. In this respect, Dwight functions, somewhat conventionally, as a figure of identification for viewers unfamiliar with the film’s (sub)cultural setting. He offers a familiarly American point of orientation within a milieu rarely visualised in American cinema. However, while in films such *Before Sunrise* (1995), *Lost In Translation* (2003) and *Babel* (2006) the role of the American abroad is filled by a sympathetic, straight and white protagonist, in ‘Berlin’ we are offered a more unconventional character.<sup>66</sup> Dwight is young, black and gay. He is also presented as an ordinary flawed individual: a ‘complex’ characterisation that rejects simplistic racial and sexual codings and functions as a further expression of the film’s difference or independence, as discussed in the following section. Dwight’s generally sympathetic portrayal as a friendly, confident and charismatic young man is complicated by his reluctance to listen to advice (after asking a group of German labourers for romantic guidance he strides off before they have a chance to respond) and, more dramatically, by the revelation that his romantic dalliances have resulted in the suicidal distress of a woman with a young daughter.<sup>67</sup> American national identity is thus associated with a lack of sensitivity to other cultures – although any sense of cultural or

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<sup>64</sup> ‘Actually Responding’, in *Flirt* (screenplay), p. xiv.

<sup>65</sup> The abstract art movement, led by West Berlin artists such as Werner Heldt and Josef Albers, was a reaction to the ‘official’ tradition of Socialist Realism dictated by the new German socialist state. The rise of this new, independent movement was enabled in part by state-funded commission programmes and artists-in-residence schemes. For a history of these and other developments in post-war Berlin art, see Ronald Taylor, *Berlin and Its Culture: A Historical Portrait* (New Haven, Connecticut; London: Yale University Press, 1997), pp. 351–370.

<sup>66</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly, each of these films achieved considerably higher box-office takings than did *Flirt*: *Before Sunrise* took \$5.5 million ([www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=beforesunrise.htm](http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=beforesunrise.htm), last accessed 14 April 2011), *Lost in Translation* took \$44.6 million ([www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=lostintranslation.htm](http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=lostintranslation.htm), last accessed 14 April 2011) and *Babel* took \$34.3 million ([www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=babel.htm](http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=babel.htm), last accessed 14 April 2011).

<sup>67</sup> Significantly, ‘Berlin’ is the only one of the three sub-sections to feature a daughter figure.



political critique remains secondary to the personal drama of Dwight and his romantic interests.

In 'Tokyo', the only American figure, Hal (Hartley), plays a minor role in a narrative centred on Miho (Nikaido), a young Japanese dancer. 'Exotic' elements, such as the traditional dress and choreography of the Japanese 'butoh' dance/mime ensemble, shown in rehearsal in the film's opening scene, are mixed with a number of more familiar (in the context of American cinema) points of orientation, such as the 'good cop/bad cop' scene in which Mochi (Meiktoh Yamada) and Tomo (Mansaku Ikeuchi) interrogate Miho. Also among the film's more familiar elements are the three Japanese women who offer Miho advice as she waits in a police cell. Each is presented as a caricature, or societal 'type'; the screenplay identifies them as Narumi, a 'traditional Japanese married woman', Shoko, a 'tense businesswoman' and Kazuko, a 'fierce young motorcycle chick'. After listening to Miho outline her predicament (she wants to know whether to commit to a long-term relationship with Hal before he leaves for Los Angeles), the women pause and then all start to speak at once:

KAZUKO: Get rid of that fucker! He's only using you. Who does he think he is? What? He thinks his shit doesn't stink? Tell him to fuck off!

His leaving is the best thing for you. Give me a break! The fuck!

SHOKO: You mustn't let him go. He'll get away. You were wrong ...

Women have to make a choice. You're not young forever. Foreign men are more open-minded. Besides, they like Asian women!

NARUMI: No one's perfect. All of us are incomplete. Those we love have had lives before meeting us. Pathetic. Human.<sup>68</sup>

The centring in this sequence of three overdetermined versions of 'Japaneseness', constructed through a combination of clichés ('No one's perfect', 'You're not young forever', 'He thinks his shit doesn't stink?'), generalisations ('Foreign men are more open-minded') and vague philosophical musings ('All of us are incomplete'), is key to the segment's vision of contemporary Tokyo. Romantic relationships are formed and reformed within a cultural milieu that is

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<sup>68</sup> This is the version of the dialogue provided by the subtitles in the Artificial Eye video release of the film. A number of differences exist between the translated dialogue and the dialogue in the original screenplay, the most significant of which being the omission (in the translation) of a line from Narumi about the different 'histories' each individual brings to a romantic relationship. See Hartley, *Flirt* (screenplay), p. 80.

unusual and often mystifying. The ‘exotic’ quality of the butoh dance ensemble is emphasised by the fact that the instructions given by the choreographer/director, Mr Ozu (Toshizo Fujiwara), are not subtitled.

Both *Flirt* and *Amateur*, in incorporating elements clearly identifiable as ‘European’ or ‘foreign’, can be seen to position themselves within a minor tradition in American cinema that we might term ‘internationalist indie film’. Films belonging to this tradition include Jim Jarmusch’s *Mystery Train* (1989) and *Night on Earth* (1991), Richard Linklater’s *Before Sunrise* (1995) and *Before Sunset* (2004), and Wayne Wang’s *Chan Is Missing* (1984). Each offers a narrative in which a variety of elements (characters, settings, themes) that can be identified as foreign are balanced against a variety of elements that can be identified as American. As discussed more fully in chapter 5, this sense of balance is a defining characteristic of internationalist indie films, a film placing greater emphasis on foreign elements being more likely to be categorised and marketed as an ‘art’ or ‘world cinema’ title than as an indie title. *Amateur* and *Flirt* incorporate into their narratives a significant number of elements describable as foreign, in the form of characters, actors and (in the case of *Flirt*) settings. In centring such elements both films create a strong sense of cosmopolitanism and hip plurality (a characteristic shared with many internationalist indie titles) that might be expected to have some currency in the context of an indie cinema frequently marketed to audiences in urban centres such as New York City. Of the two films, *Flirt* adopts the more unconventional approach, shifting through three successive milieus that are increasingly less ‘American’ in composition, the final segment including only one (minor) American character and no American settings. This is an approach that, as much as the film’s formal character, marks *Flirt* as distinctly marginal within independent cinema.

### **Political Aspects**

The integration of representations of distinctive geographical places into quirky narratives of romance and self-realisation is a distinctive feature of *Amateur* and *Flirt*, and of a large number of Hartley’s other films. As discussed in the previous chapter, in the earlier Long Island series, place is an important constant that grounds the films in the familiar and the local. The ‘regionalisation’ of a suburban setting that characterises *The Unbelievable Truth*, *Trust* and *Simple*

*Men* offers a strong sense of particularity and a clear ‘hook’ for critics writing about the films, with Hartley’s ‘native’ Long Islander status centring much discussion of his particular ‘vision’ as an auteur. In *Flirt* and *Amateur*, a sense of regional particularity – conveyed through setting, characterisation, dialogue and certain isolated images – is combined with a sense of the fragmented, global nature of modern life; here Hartley’s film world becomes less familial and more cosmopolitan in its dimensions. In this final section I discuss some of the implications of this expansion of horizons and assess the extent to which the films may be aligned with a ‘political’ model of narrative cinema.

Questions of a socio-political order, relating in particular to corporate exploitation and commodification, feature quite prominently in *Amateur*, whose narrative addresses the fallout that results from the attempted murder of a vicious gangster working for a ‘highly respectable yet ultimately sinister international corporation with political connections’. Sofia, under the impression that she has succeeded in killing Thomas, wants to leave behind her life of exploitation working for the corporation as a pornographic film actress; to this end she contacts the head of the corporation, Mr Jacques, to make a blackmail threat. Problems ensue, and Sofia ends up on the run from Mr Jacques – or rather, from two of his goons, Jan and Kurt. As mentioned earlier, Jan and Kurt are presented as yuppie-type figures, as much interested in their own mobile phones and the trivial conventions of good business practice (when Kurt announces he is going to buy some food, Jan reminds him to get a receipt) as in the acts of violence and torture they are employed to carry out. That theirs is a mentality shaped by the values of business is spelled out in the following exchange, during which Kurt is making preparations to torture Sofia for information:

KURT: Can I ask you a personal question?

SOFIA: Leave me alone.

KURT: Do you resent your position as a woman in the motion picture industry? I’m sorry. I find you very attractive, and I’m interested in commodities.

SOFIA: What are you talking about?

*(He places a pair of pliers on the floor and starts untying her shoe.)*

KURT: A commodity is an article of trade. A product in the purest sense.

SOFIA: What has that got to do with me?

KURT: You're a product.

SOFIA: I am?

KURT: You're a commodity. Thomas tendered your body in exchange for money.

SOFIA: So I'm an article of trade?

KURT: Yes. A useful thing, in terms of classic capitalism. I studied economics. I know what I'm talking about.<sup>69</sup>

Here, Sofia's exploitation is explicitly linked to the systems of capitalism. This is perhaps the clearest indication (along with Isabelle's reference to a 'highly respectable yet ultimately sinister international corporation', quoted above) that the criminal body in pursuit of the protagonists is synonymous with 'official' business – an equation also suggested by the fact that Sofia's call to Mr Jacques is put through by a receptionist who answers (in Dutch) with the words, 'Good afternoon. Bad organisation.' In this alignment of the criminal gangster body with capitalist ideology, *Amateur* bears a striking resemblance to the 'gangster noir' film, as defined by Fran Mason.<sup>70</sup> In this subgenre, represented by early post-war films such as *Force of Evil* (1948), *T-Men* (1947) and *Body and Soul* (1947), the emphasis on the free-willed and charismatic individual gangster that characterised the gangster films of the 1930s is replaced by an emphasis on an alienated gangster, struggling to free himself from the stifling control of the gang. The mob/gang itself is organised around an illegal economy – often counterfeiting or the 'numbers' racket – that pervades society and takes on the characteristics of the 'legitimate' or 'official' capitalist economy.<sup>71</sup> Such films, Mason suggests, thus have a political point to make: 'The institutionalisation of the mob is not simply represented as a way of commenting on the pervasion of criminality ... but to analyse the ruthless logic of capitalist society in its new corporatised mode.'<sup>72</sup> In *Amateur*, a similar strategy is adopted to present a

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<sup>69</sup> Hartley, *Amateur* (screenplay), pp. 49–50.

<sup>70</sup> Fran Mason, 'Outside Society, Outside the Gang: The Alienated *Noir* Gangster', in *American Gangster Cinema: From 'Little Caesar' to 'Pulp Fiction'* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), pp. 72–96.

<sup>71</sup> This form of 'gangster noir' film is actually one of two that Mason identifies in the chapter. In the other, slightly earlier, form, represented by films such as *The Killers* (1946) and *Out of the Past* (also known as *Build My Gallows High*, 1947), the gang is not a systemised entity but rather a loose network that, nevertheless, offers the protagonist no sense of comfort or belonging. *American Gangster Cinema*, pp. 79–87.

<sup>72</sup> Mason, *American Gangster Cinema*, p. 90. The characterisation in this manner of the gang as an oppressive system is not generally a feature of gangster films in the 1990s. In films such as *Goodfellas* (1990), *A Bronx Tale* (1993) and *Pulp Fiction* (1994), the gangster world is presented variously as a place of opportunity, a place of belonging and a network of charismatic, personable

critique on corporate capitalism in its current *global* incarnation. The influence of Mr Jacques's corporation extends around the globe: office locations include Frankfurt, Amsterdam and London. In this respect, the corporation is emblematic of the development in the 1980s and 1990s of a large number of giant, multinational corporations whose success depended on the free (or at least less restricted) exchange of labour, materials and capital across national borders. On the one hand, such corporations contributed significantly to the success of the American economy, as reflected in increases in productivity, real income, market growth and other economic indicators in the 1990s.<sup>73</sup> On the other hand, as Hartley's film and many (particularly documentary) films of the 1990s and 2000s suggest, this economic success was frequently founded on the systematic exploitation of the poor and the marginalised.<sup>74</sup> In the narrative of *Amateur*, it is women who are exploited for profit, as the exchange quoted above so bluntly illustrates. Sofia, having fled from her life as a pornographic film actress in the Netherlands, finds no escape in New York, where Mr Jacques and his agents have just as powerful a presence. Mr Jacques's corporation is the social reality that stands in the way of Sofia's aspiration to achieve independence (to become a 'mover and a shaker', as she puts it); global capitalism thus comes to stand for social and sexual oppression.

The strategy adopted by Hartley is to employ variations on generic material to approach the realities of contemporary society and politics. Many of the more disturbing elements within the narrative – such as the omnipresent corporation – have an obvious relevance to the 'real' world outside the world of the film. This dimension of political commentary or critique is combined with a strongly anti-realist dimension that might also (as discussed later) be seen to have 'political' implications, albeit of a slightly different nature. Hartley's film is

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individuals. Somewhat closer to *Amateur* in its vision of the gang-as-system is *Casino* (1995), in which the gangster protagonist is figured as a brilliant businessman whose rather traditionalist capitalist proficiency ensures far greater profits than those generated by even the most productive of illegal enterprises. The business of the gang is thus equated with the 'official' business of capitalism in a strong and coherent way – although even here violence and tyranny are presented as products less of the capitalist system than of the deranged minds of charismatic individuals such as Joe's Pesci's Nicky Santoro.

<sup>73</sup> According to the historian Wyatt C. Wells, 'Growth in the United States between 1992 and 2000 averaged more than 4 percent a year while unemployment gradually declined to 4 percent, the lowest level since the late 1960s ... productivity began to grow more rapidly, expanding at a 2.6 percent annual rate between 1995 and 2000 and allowing a substantial expansion of real (inflation-adjusted) income.' *American Capitalism, 1945–2000: Continuity and Change from Mass Production to the Information Society* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2003), p. 173.

<sup>74</sup> Tom Zaniello discusses many films that make such a suggestion in *The Cinema of Globalization* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2007). Two examples (both documentaries) are *The Hidden Face of Globalization* (2003) and *Wal-Mart's War on Workers* (2002).

often marked, for example, by devices that undermine various conventions of tone, editing and cinematography, as discussed earlier. Such devices are employed to emphasise the constructedness of narrative, character identity, and so on, and to ‘distance’ the viewer from the fiction: an approach consistent with Bertolt Brecht’s ideas about ‘epic theatre’ and the *verfremdungseffekt* (alienation effect), and familiar from a range of art and independent films concerned with the foregrounding of socioeconomic issues and identity politics.<sup>75</sup> Disjunctions in tone, unusual colour schemes and offbeat editing patterns, featured in various combinations in a variety of independent films besides *Amateur*, play an important part in this strategy of distanciation. Similarly important is the film’s ‘blank’ or flattened performance style.<sup>76</sup> Although it is not too unusual for independent films to feature unconventional styles of performance as part of a general strategy of differentiation, it is unusual for performances to be characterised by anti-realist techniques as arresting as those seen in much of Hartley’s work. The unconventionality of Hartley’s approach in this area is emphasised in comments from his actors. In a *GQ* article, for example, Martin Donovan speaks about Hartley’s preference for deadpanned, inexpressive line readings: ‘I wasn’t used to it, and I hated it ... I almost killed Hal by the end of filming [*Trust*]. I had a lot of doubts. I thought I was going to be boring. I was concerned people would be falling asleep.’<sup>77</sup>

As I discussed in the previous chapter, Hartley’s approach to dialogue delivery is taken up in the films of Kevin Smith, and particularly in *Clerks*. Smith places a similar emphasis on the constructedness of performance, but his approach is less radical, with more stylised/affected performances balanced against a number of realist/conventional performances. Closer to Hartley, in terms of his preference for consistently stylised performances, is David Mamet, another independent director who works with a repertory group of cast members. In films such as *House of Games* (1987), *Oleanna* (1994), *Homicide* (1991) and *The Spanish Prisoner* (1997), Mamet has his actors (among them Joe Mantegna, Ricky Jay and Rebecca Pidgeon) deliver lines in a way that ‘flattens’ the

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<sup>75</sup> In broad terms, Brechtian ‘alienation’ or ‘distanciation’ is a process that functions to distance the spectator from the fiction by underlining the constructedness of the diegetic world. For Brecht, the aim was to create a critical or ‘active’ spectator conscious of the ideological issues usually obfuscated in classical realism. For a good introduction to Brecht’s theory and its influence on film theory and practice, see Robert Stam, *Film Theory: An Introduction* (Malden, Massachusetts; Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 145–150.

<sup>76</sup> Hartley’s stylistic preference in this respect seems strongly similar to Brecht’s preference for a style of performance (in theatre) that Stam describes as ‘Acting as quotation: a distanced style of acting, as if the performer is speaking in the third person or the past tense.’ *Film Theory*, p. 147.

<sup>77</sup> Martin Kihn, ‘The Vision Thing’, *GQ*, October 1992, p. 68.

cadences of normal speech – a mode ‘so markedly different from the average contemporary American film, mainstream or independent’, as Yannis Tzioumakis puts it, ‘that it is impossible for it to go unnoticed’.<sup>78</sup> Mamet’s dialogue, like Hartley’s, calls attention to itself through unusual patterns of intonation, repetitions and unexpected changes of subject. The distinction between the two directors’ models of dialogue performance lies in the relationship of stylisation to narrative content. As Tzioumakis argues of *The Spanish Prisoner*, an ‘artificial’ style of acting (and of narrative) is ‘used to support a story that deals essentially with the themes of illusion and artificiality ... In this respect, the film’s style clearly emanates from the story itself and therefore becomes an integral aspect of the story’s materialisation on the screen.’<sup>79</sup> Tzioumakis is here describing a *motivation*, also present in other Mamet films, for the film’s formal departures. The overt stylisation that defines the performances in *The Spanish Prisoner* is framed, in effect, as a function or ‘symptom’ of the narrative and its themes, a strategy shared by the vast majority of independent films invested in alternative styles of performance, editing, framing, and so on. In *Amateur* and in Hartley’s work as a whole, motivation for departures from the conventions of ‘realist’ film performance is relatively hard to identify. If motivation is suggested, perhaps in the general sense of alienation that afflicts some of Hartley’s protagonists, then it is certainly distinct, in terms of clarity and consistency, from that of Mamet’s work.<sup>80</sup> To a greater degree than is normal, then, even in the independent world, performance style in Hartley’s cinema serves not just as a differentiating formal feature but also as a way to distance the viewer from the drama of the narrative.

The question of the extent to which distanciation of different degrees can be regarded as ‘political’ is a difficult one. It may be helpful in considering this

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<sup>78</sup> Yannis Tzioumakis, *The Spanish Prisoner* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), p. 85.

<sup>79</sup> Tzioumakis, *The Spanish Prisoner*, p. 87.

<sup>80</sup> A measure of the lack of a clear motivation for the performance style in *Amateur* (to take one example of many Hartley films featuring highly artificial performances) is provided by the reviews of the film in the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*. Although references are made in both reviews to the distinctiveness of the film’s performances, neither reviewer identifies a subjective, narrative or thematic motivation for these performances. This is in contrast to the *Los Angeles Times* and *New York Times* reviews of *The Spanish Prisoner*, both of which make explicit links between the artificiality of the dialogue and the theme of artificiality that runs through the film. The *New York Times* reviewer, for example, writes that ‘this film’s characters remain wonderfully inscrutable, speaking in the clipped vernacular of Mametese ... “Who in this world,” ask several of the film’s carefully artificial characters, “is what they seem?”’ See Caryn James, ‘The Nun, the Amnesiac’, *New York Times*; Peter Rainer, ‘Thriller “Amateur”’, *Los Angeles Times*; Kenneth Turan, ‘Life’s a Charade in Mamet’s “Spanish Prisoner” Puzzle’, *Los Angeles Times*, 3 April 1998, p. 10; Janet Maslin, ‘From Mamet. A Con Game. Secrets. Very Complicated’, *New York Times*, 3 April 1998, p. E16.

question to draw on discussions of avant-garde film. Writings on this subject, far too complex and extensive to examine in any detail here, often throw the issue of the politics of form into sharp relief. Far more so than independent cinema, avant-garde film can be seen to contrast with or oppose conventional narrative cinema. As E. Deidre Pribram discusses in her book *Cinema and Culture*, the opposition of the avant-garde to mainstream cinema has often been seen as being expressed at one of two main levels: the aesthetic and the political.<sup>81</sup> The ‘aesthetic’ avant-garde is concerned with the material language of cinema, and rejects ‘realism’ and its aim of producing an impression of ‘reality’; examples of films falling into this category include *Le retour à la raison* and *Emak-Bakia* (Man Ray, 1923, 1927), the works of Michael Snow and the works of Andy Warhol. The ‘political’ avant-garde is concerned with the representation of alternative political/social perspectives or realities, and is, by necessity, at least partly realist or narrative-based; examples falling into this category include the works of Sergei Eisenstein and those of Jean-Luc Godard. Much critical writing (usefully summarised by Pribram) on the film avant-garde has focused on the relative merits of these two broadly defined tendencies. The critique of the aesthetic avant-garde, developed by critics such as Peter Wollen and Sylvia Hardy, has emphasised its incapacity to comment on the world and thus to provide any analysis or critique of social reality. Other writers, however, have seen a political function in a materialist practice that refuses the cinema’s codes of realism. Because (it is argued) these codes serve inescapably to sustain reactionary ideologies such as patriarchy and capitalism, to undermine realist cinema is simultaneously to undermine dominant ideology.<sup>82</sup>

The latter argument is one way in which formal experimentation, present to varying degrees in much independent cinema and certainly in Hartley’s films, can be seen as holding political value. On this reading, the more formally unconventional features of *Flirt* (the repetitive, discontinuous narrative structure, the uncertainly motivated jump-cuts), for example, would be seen to give the film a political edge, despite the film’s lack of substantive political commentary or critique. If this kind of ‘implicit’ political value is to be recognised, however, it should also be recognised that the precise effects of a refusal of various realist codes on the viewer are difficult to assess. We might argue that formal

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<sup>81</sup> E. Deidre Pribram, *Cinema and Culture: Independent Film in the United States, 1980–2001* (New York; Oxford: Peter Lang, 2002), p. 45.

<sup>82</sup> For a summary of the arguments surrounding the aesthetic and political avant-gardes, see Pribram, *Cinema and Culture*, pp. 45–52.



experimentalism is likely to function to reduce the investment of the viewer in dominant ideology, and perhaps thus create a more 'critical' viewer; but we might also argue that experimentalism is likely to result in a viewing attitude characterised by boredom, inattentiveness or apathy. It also cannot be assumed that a critical viewing position is unavailable to viewers of conventional narrative cinema, as many writers who stress the active character of viewer engagement have suggested.<sup>83</sup> Such issues are largely beyond the scope of this thesis. My primary and limited aim in examining the formal qualities of Hartley's films is to outline the extent to which Hartley's work departs from 'realist' convention, at various levels. The remaining chapters offer an analysis of Hartley's films at this level in combination with an analysis of the films at the levels of place/cultural identity and socio-political commentary, with the aim of assessing Hartley's 'position' and significance within the landscape of contemporary American independent cinema.

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<sup>83</sup> See for example Murray Smith, 'The Logic and Legacy of Brechtianism', in David Bordwell and Noël Carroll (eds.), *Post-theory: Reconstructing Film Studies* (Madison; London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), pp. 130–148. Smith, referring to recent developments in narratology, considers the film spectator to be an 'active being' who is able to think beyond the development of the narrative: 'The resolution of narrative conflicts in the narrative cannot be assumed to directly "erase" the social contradictions that the conflicts evoke in the minds of spectators.' (p. 138).

### 3

#### **Imaginative Fictions/Social Realities: *The Book of Life* (1998), *No Such Thing* (2001) and *The Girl from Monday* (2005)**

If *Amateur* can be seen as introducing into Hartley's body of work a degree of 'direct' or explicit social critique of a kind unusual in American independent cinema, then the film series discussed in this chapter, composed of *The Book of Life* (1998), *No Such Thing* (2001) and *The Girl from Monday* (2005), is one that offers a similar and extended departure from the norm, further consolidating Hartley's public status as a resolutely individualistic (if not always celebrated) director and screenwriter. Each film, like *Amateur*, presents itself as a reflection on a broad social 'issue', establishing critical material as a major part of the narrative, rather than as a minor ingredient in the kind of broadly personal/familial/romantic story more typical of independent film (and familiar from the Long Island films and *Flirt*, as well as from *Henry Fool*, discussed in the following chapter). *The Book of Life* offers an alternative, 'imaginative' representation of familiar religious subject matter and the modern institution of Christianity, incorporating a number of elements likely (in a higher-profile film) to cause controversy, as acknowledged by the film's tagline, 'A controversial retelling of the apocalypse'. The territory of both *No Such Thing* and *The Girl from Monday* is more familiar: that of the corporate satire or critique. The bleaker and more discomfiting of the two films, *No Such Thing* merges a critique of media exploitation in the style of *Network* (1976) with a monster/fairy-tale narrative reminiscent of *Beauty and the Beast* (Jean Cocteau, 1946) and the *King Kong* films (Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack, 1933; John Guillermin, 1976; Peter Jackson, 2005), as well as of various literary works, most obviously Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein* (1818). *The Girl from Monday* delivers a large dose of very deliberate criticism of modern corporate culture, felt by some critics to be rather clichéd, while maintaining a balance between moments of poetic-philosophical reflection and moments of sharp or absurd comedy.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The reviewer for the *Village Voice*, for example, suggests that 'the film's anti-capitalist talking points provide mostly pre-digested food for thought; indeed, similar themes have been more interestingly explored by numerous big-budget Hollywood sci-fi pictures'. Ed Halter, 'Blue Monday: Hartley Sci-Fi Lacks F/X and Affect', *Village Voice*, 26 April 2005.

A tension between the familiar and the unorthodox is also evident in two other important dimensions, one much-discussed in commentary on Hartley's features, the other usually receiving far less attention. A strong genre framework serves in the three films, as it does in *Amateur*, to establish a sense of familiarity, but also to provide a point of departure, a recognisable (if loosely defined) norm against which to assert an individual brand of originality. Thus each of the features repeatedly emphasises its own generic form (science fiction, in particular) while at the same time complicating or rejecting many of the characteristics associated with this form. Contributing in a less immediately striking way to the individual 'feel' of each film is an emphasis on particular, recognisable urban identities. Identity is frequently and often self-consciously regionalised: shaded with the regional meanings of New York City, and particularly Manhattan, where all three films are set or part-set. *The Book of Life*, extending the themes of everyday poverty and bohemian living running through all of Hartley's previous features (as well as the short films *Theory of Achievement* and *Surviving Desire*), is a story of the Apocalypse that features among its main characters an atheist-intellectual gambler, a virtuous waitress and a disillusioned, philosophical Jesus Christ. In *The Girl from Monday* and the New York sections of *No Such Thing*, by contrast, white-collar figures and spaces dominate. These are familiar images, sometimes given a distinctive twist by Hartley and his collaborators, that function to connect the films to a variety of representations and discourses present in American culture.

The main focus of this chapter is a consideration of the particular mix of generic, regional/cultural and socio-political qualities offered by *The Book of Life*, *No Such Thing* and *The Girl from Monday*, and of the potential playability of such a mix in the context of indie cinema.<sup>2</sup> Developing on some of the points of industrial analysis made in chapter 2, the first section of the chapter discusses the production and marketing/distribution of the three features as processes contributing in a significant way to each film's cultural position and impact. The industrial system is considered here not only as a cultural determinant but also as a space or mechanism open, in certain circumstances, to a considerable degree of authorial control. The section following this offers a close textual analysis of the

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<sup>2</sup> 'Playability', as I use the term here, refers to a film's appeal to audiences at the textual level (rather than at the levels of marketing and promotion). A film with high playability will be enjoyed or appreciated by a high proportion of audience members, who will be likely to contribute to positive word of mouth.

three films in turn, relating each to Hartley's work as a whole and to a range of other independent and more mainstream films.

### **Production and Distribution**

At the industrial level, the three films discussed in this chapter occupy very different positions: European-financed TV film in the case of *The Book of Life*; low-budget, self-distributed feature in the case of *The Girl from Monday*; and medium-budget, major-studio production in the case of *No Such Thing*. The budget for *No Such Thing*, Hartley's first full-length feature since the very well-received *Henry Fool*, was \$5 million, easily the highest of Hartley's career.<sup>3</sup> This was a figure reached only after the initial stages of financing, however, following an offer made by Francis Ford Coppola to co-finance the film through his production company, American Zoetrope. Coppola's money was added to the \$1 million budget Hartley and his producer, Fridrik Thór Fridriksson, originally raised for the film, made up of money from Hartley's own production company, True Fiction Pictures, and funding from the Icelandic Film Corporation (as well as a 12% tax rebate courtesy of the 'Invest in Iceland' scheme<sup>4</sup>). Coppola intended to produce *No Such Thing* as part of his co-production pact with MGM and its 'speciality' division, United Artists. The two-year deal required Coppola to produce ten films, each budgeted at \$10 million or less, over two years; UA would distribute the completed films in North America. A *Variety* article notes that MGM implemented the Coppola–UA deal as part of its 'new emphasis on co-production deals that feature a co-financing element',<sup>5</sup> such pacts at this time becoming increasingly common as a solution both to escalating production and marketing costs (American Zoetrope benefited from the resources of MGM/UA) and to the 'financial exposure' that film releases had come to entail for the studios (in the case that the American Zoetrope films did not perform well at the box office, MGM/UA stood to lose less money).<sup>6</sup> One obvious effect on independent filmmakers of complicated co-financing deals of this kind is accountability to an increasing number of progressively less 'independent'

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<sup>3</sup> The next highest being \$2 million, for *Simple Men* (see Ellen Pall, 'This Director's Wish List Doesn't Include Hollywood', *New York Times*, 11 October 1992, pp. H11, H20–21).

<sup>4</sup> See 'Europe's Soft Aiding Hard Biz', *Variety*, 22 February 2002, p. A1 (special section).

<sup>5</sup> Carl DiOrio, 'MGM Profits Shaken, Stirred by Bond Video', *Variety*, 27 July 2000, p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of the impact of such co-financing deals on the American film market, see Yannis Tzioumakis, *American Independent Cinema: An Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), pp. 249–253.

institutions. MGM is the largest of the companies with which Hartley has had a direct production/distribution relationship over the course of his career, the director's previous films being handled either by overseas independent companies (*Flirt*, *The Book of Life*) or by speciality divisions (*Trust*, *Simple Men*, *Amateur*, *Henry Fool*). Although it seems that MGM had little involvement with the project at the production stage,<sup>7</sup> the studio did start to take an interest once basic production was complete, particularly after the film's negative reception at Cannes 2001.<sup>8</sup> At this point a re-cut was requested by a nervous MGM. Coppola approached Hartley with MGM's request but Hartley refused to comply, and ultimately, according to the director at least, Coppola agreed to protect the original cut. MGM, in any case, remained unhappy and limited the theatrical release of the film to the contractual minimum of three weeks.<sup>9</sup>

This can all be set against a background of a general movement in the 1990s and 2000s towards greater 'cooperation' between independent production/distribution companies (such as Coppola's American Zoetrope) and the conglomerated majors (such as MGM/UA), as I have briefly discussed already. Co-production pacts are one example of this cooperation. The other main example, mentioned in chapter 2, is the buying out of independent companies by the majors, high-profile cases including Miramax, purchased by Disney in 1993, and New Line, absorbed by Turner Broadcasting, which in 1996 became part of Time Warner. Such arrangements, which effectively granted specialist outfits the resources of a major in exchange for a (not necessarily severe) reduction of autonomy, were complemented by a shift in the management of the major-studio 'classics' divisions – subsidiary companies that in the past had been dedicated to the distribution of foreign films in America. During the 1990s existing classics divisions such as Sony Pictures Classics and Orion Classics were increasingly repositioned as distributors of (more potentially

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<sup>7</sup> Hartley suggests in an interview that MGM, before the film's Cannes premiere at least, was content to leave the management of the production almost entirely to Coppola: 'I don't think [MGM] knew who I was or had seen my films and I don't believe they even read the script ... they were okay with the film, because Francis was okay with the film.' Anthony Kaufman, 'Interview: Monsters, Media and Meaning: Hal Hartley on "No Such Thing"', *indieWIRE*, 26 March 2002: [www.indiewire.com/article/interview\\_monsters\\_media\\_and\\_meaning\\_hal\\_hartley\\_on\\_no\\_such\\_thing/](http://www.indiewire.com/article/interview_monsters_media_and_meaning_hal_hartley_on_no_such_thing/) (last accessed 8 April 2011).

<sup>8</sup> According to David Sterritt, writing in the *Christian Science Monitor*, the majority of the Cannes reviews found *No Such Thing* to be 'as abominable as the monster it's about' ('A Hollywood Monster Movie with International Flair', 29 March 2002, Arts and Leisure p. 15). One prominent review fitting this category is Derek Elley's, for *Variety* ('*No Such Thing*', 21 May 2001, p. 22).

<sup>9</sup> See Anthony Kaufman, 'Interview: Monsters, Media and Meaning'.

lucrative) American independent fare, while several new divisions, such as Fine Line Features, were established expressly for this purpose.<sup>10</sup>

The question of to what extent such commercialisation at the industrial level is determinative of commercialisation at a more artistic or political level is a difficult one. It is safe to say that many films produced and/or distributed by studio-owned companies such as Miramax and Fine Line Features in the 1990s/2000s exhibit particular qualities that distinguish them from the kind of cinema traditionally defined as ‘independent’. This is, of course, the basis for the use by some commentators of terms such as ‘indie’ and ‘Indiewood’, whether employed as terms of abuse or more descriptively, as for example in Geoff King’s book *Indiewood, USA: Where Hollywood Meets Independent Cinema*.<sup>11</sup> Indiewood for King is a distinctive region of the American film landscape that combines elements of both independent and Hollywood cinema and is associated mainly with the studio-owned divisions, but also with particular majors looking to buy into the success and prestige enjoyed by the (semi-)independent hits of the 1990s. While questioning the common assumption that the entry of the majors into the independent sector effectively shut down the production of genuinely innovative/radical films (see previous chapter), King offers a conclusion on Indiewood that emphasises its conservatism, a stance shared by many (though by no means all) prominent critical commentators:<sup>12</sup>

In general, Indiewood producers and/or distributors seek access to audiences at a threshold level that disinclines them to push very far in the offering of challenging material. There is a general tendency to play safe, ultimately, to rely on proven templates and to combine material that might be challenging in some respects with more easily marketable components such as stars, ‘name’ filmmakers and strong, broadly familiar narrative and emotional hooks.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> For a more detailed discussion of this shift in the interests of the classics divisions, see Yannis Tzioumakis, *American Independent Cinema*, pp. 246–247.

<sup>11</sup> Geoff King, *Indiewood, USA: Where Hollywood Meets Independent Cinema* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2009).

<sup>12</sup> Two such commentators are Justin Wyatt and Ted Hope, as discussed below. Sharon Waxman takes an opposing view (that the 1990s saw a new breed of creative ‘rebels’ transform studio-system filmmaking) in *Rebels on the Backlot: Six Maverick Directors and How They Conquered the Hollywood Studio System* (New York; London: HarperPerennial, 2006).

<sup>13</sup> King, *Indiewood*, pp. 269–270.

This emphasis in the Indiewood industrial field on marketability and playability is, according to Ted Hope, the producer for many of Hartley's early films, coupled with a ruthless employment dynamics that further limits creative or political ambition. Development and acquisition executives, Hope explains in a *Filmmaker* article, are liable to lose their jobs if they make one of a number of mistakes.<sup>14</sup> These mistakes include acquiring a film that has previously been passed on and that goes on to flop, and (worse) passing on a film that subsequently goes on to become a hit. In order to avoid such blunders, executives tend to avoid films that do not resemble previous hits, to forcefully deride films on which they have already passed, and to express interest only in films in which others have already expressed an interest; the safest course of action in effect is, in Hope's words, to '[d]o like everyone else because they can't fire you for imitating your colleagues'.<sup>15</sup>

This is a revealing portrait of the acquisition system that may also be fairly characterised as something of a generalisation, its accuracy likely depending on variables not mentioned by Hope, such as the status and mandate of the company in question (companies making more but smaller purchases have less riding on any single film) and the seniority of the individual executive (executives with reliable track-records are, at times, given more latitude to take risks and make mistakes). Questions of the same order, about the implications of such developments for independent/off-mainstream film as a whole, can be raised in relation to many common criticisms directed at the industrial system, including some of those that feature additionally in the *Filmmaker* article referenced above. Taking the position that 'indie film is dead', Hope outlines a large number of lamentable developments in the field, among them the movement of the speciality distributors into production, increasing the amounts of money at stake and thus encouraging conservatism; the demise of platform release strategies that gave companies a chance to make money gradually from a film with few easily marketable hooks but with a good chance of generating positive word of mouth; and the evaporation of many public funding options.<sup>16</sup> Such developments, Hope argues, have contributed to a reality in which 'the logic of the studio film – its range of political and social concerns, its marketing dictates, and even its narrative aesthetic – is slowly colonizing our

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<sup>14</sup> See Ted Hope, 'Indie Film Is Dead', *Filmmaker*, 4:1 (1995), pp. 56–57.

<sup>15</sup> Hope, 'Indie Film Is Dead', p. 57.

<sup>16</sup> Hope, 'Indie Film Is Dead', pp. 18, 55–56.

consciousness'.<sup>17</sup> A strikingly similar conclusion is reached, in an academic context, by Justin Wyatt in an essay published seven years after Hope's article. Wyatt, like Hope, stresses the commercialisation of independent cinema. Taking Ang Lee's *The Wedding Banquet* (1993) as a high-profile example, he argues that the movement of independent film towards commercial, 'high-stakes' filmmaking is simultaneously (and, implicitly, inevitably) a movement towards the 'morals, values and credo of the majors'.<sup>18</sup> By the mid-point of the 1990s, he contends, 'independent cinema was largely an illusion. Even supposedly groundbreaking and iconoclastic "indie films" were firmly located within the safe domain of dominant ideological and commercial practice'.<sup>19</sup> This is a conclusion that, while perhaps consistent with the configuration of cultural identities in *The Wedding Banquet*, is hard to reconcile with off-Hollywood cinema in general (indeed, Wyatt barely mentions another 1990s film during his discussion). Unconventional films, at least as 'iconoclastic' as many produced in the 1980s and early 1990s, continued to emerge in the later 1990s and into the 2000s, even within the studio-financed sector. *No Such Thing*, I would suggest, can be seen as one such production. It would certainly be hard to argue that the involvement of MGM resulted in the smoothing away of the more distinctive aspects of Hartley's directing or writing style (although the studio did of course limit the film's theatrical release), as I discuss in the second half of this chapter. It does seem that some order of 'mainstreaming' might have been implemented had the studio had its way, and that this was prevented by a figure, Coppola, who had some personal interest in Hartley's work and who had enough power and experience to defend the film to the studio.<sup>20</sup> But this does not undermine the suggestion that the industrial system includes a space for the production of innovative films; rather, it is an example of one of the ways in which innovation or 'independence' may be supported.

If *No Such Thing* offers an example of independent/auteurist production at a major-studio level, then *The Girl from Monday* and *The Book of Life* each offers a more readily recognisable model of independent production: self-

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<sup>17</sup> Hope, 'Indie Film Is Dead', p. 18.

<sup>18</sup> Justin Wyatt, 'Marketing Marginalized Cultures: *The Wedding Banquet*, Cultural Identities, and Independent Cinema of the 1990s', in Jon Lewis (ed.), *The End of Cinema as We Know It: American Film in the Nineties* (London: Pluto Press, 2002), p. 69.

<sup>19</sup> Wyatt, 'Marketing Marginalized Cultures', p. 70.

<sup>20</sup> Coppola apparently approached Hartley in about 1996, having recently 'discovered' his films, to arrange an informal meeting. They remained in touch, and in the early stages of financing for *No Such Thing* Hartley rang Coppola for advice on special effects. It was at this point that Coppola made the offer to co-finance the film through American Zoetrope. See Kaufman, 'Interview: Monsters, Media and Meaning'.



financing/self-distribution and independent financing/distribution, respectively. *The Book of Life* was funded by the French companies Haut et Court, an independent production and distribution company, and La Sept Arte (now Arte), a ‘cultural’ television broadcaster and production company. Hartley’s film was one of eight films commissioned by the two companies for a millennium-themed series called ‘2000 Seen By’, other entries including *The Hole* (Ming-liang Tsai), *Midnight* (Walter Salles, Daniela Thomas), *The Wall* (Alain Berliner) and *Life on Earth* (Abderrahmane Sissako).<sup>21</sup> Distribution for the films – likely wider than would have been the case had the series’ subject matter been less strongly topical – included both French television broadcasts and a theatrical tour in America, orchestrated by the independent distributor Fox Lorber. For Hartley and other filmmakers working at this time, a move of this kind towards the independent fringe of the industrial system (or beyond it, to other national film industries) offered the chance of some broad distribution, as well as journalistic coverage, for unconventional works. The scope of such distribution was often limited, however, independent companies, in many cases, being likely to lack the resources to support a film (if not an immediate hit) beyond a run of a few weeks. *The Book of Life* played at theatres for just one week, achieving a total domestic gross of \$9,740.<sup>22</sup>

The development and release of *The Girl from Monday* proceeded at an even greater distance from the conventional studio-based model, financing and distribution both being handled by Hartley’s own company, The Possible Films Collection. Established in 2004 by Hartley and Steve Hamilton, Hartley’s editor since *Simple Men*, The Possible Films Collection was an attempt, according to Hamilton, to capitalise on the ‘long tail’ market, that part of the market made up of a large number of consumers investing in niche products.<sup>23</sup> The first of Hartley’s works to be distributed through the company were the *Possible Music* CD, featuring tracks composed by Hartley for his film and theatre work, and the *Possible Films* DVD, a collection of Hartley’s short films. Both were sold on Hartley’s personal website – a low-cost method of distribution that has the potential, especially over a long period of time, to reach a large number of global

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<sup>21</sup> See James Mottram, ‘A Date with the End of the World’, *The Times*, 6 January 1999.

<sup>22</sup> See [www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=bookoflife.htm](http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=bookoflife.htm) (last accessed 8 April 2011).

<sup>23</sup> Hamilton states, ‘This company was started with the belief that self distribution and “the long tail” method of making a living off of a “body” of work was possible. We thought that producing *The Girl from Monday* ourselves would be a great way of launching this enterprise.’ Correspondence with author, 20 May 2010. The concept of the ‘long tail’ was popularised by Chris Anderson in his 2006 book, *The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business is Selling Less of More* (New York: Hyperion, 2006).

niche audiences. *Possible Music* and *Possible Films* did enough business, according to Hartley,<sup>24</sup> to suggest that self-distribution along these lines could offer a way to recoup the money he planned to invest in his next theatrical feature film, *The Girl from Monday*.

Financed solely through The Possible Films Collection, *The Girl from Monday* was produced for \$300,000 in 2004 and released theatrically, after premiering at Sundance, in 2005, playing at a limited number of major American cities, including Chicago, San Francisco and New York.<sup>25</sup> The theatrical release was followed by a DVD release through Netflix, the online film rental service, which bought the rights to distribute the film exclusively for a period of several months in the second half of the year. The film was promoted on the Netflix members' website through a targeted advertising strategy, whereby advertisements for the film were distributed to the accounts of individual users based on their previous rentals and ratings.<sup>26</sup> Finally, the film was released on Hartley's website, *Possible Films*, in January 2006.

Such a low-key release strategy was, Hartley suggests, a necessity, given the film's 'alternative' or 'art film' qualities, which (in the eyes of distributors) served to severely limit its potential audience: 'I told some distributors what I had in mind. They were honest with me: "We love the film but there's no way we can take it on. Maybe 60,000 people in the U.S. would pay to see it and we'd spend 100 times that just to make prints and publicize the movie."'”<sup>27</sup> Such an attitude is hardly surprising in the American film industry, which, as Geoff King notes, has not made any concerted attempt to exploit a growing number of niche markets in the 2000s and remains primarily 'a hit-based economy at all levels – Hollywood, Indiewood and indie; domestic cinema and overseas imports'.<sup>28</sup> Self-distribution and distribution through small independents are two ways in which independent filmmakers can circumvent the mainstream system and many of the commercial determinants with which it is associated. Both approaches, and self-

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<sup>24</sup> See Hannah Eaves, "'Free to Investigate": Hal Hartley', *GreenCine*, 23 April 2005: [www.greencine.com/central/node/444](http://www.greencine.com/central/node/444) (last accessed 8 April 2011).

<sup>25</sup> The figure of \$300,000 is cited in an interview with Hartley in the online edition of the *San Francisco Chronicle*. See John McMurtrie, 'Sci Fi as Scary as Real Life', *SFGate*, 24 April 2005: [articles.sfgate.com/2005-04-24/entertainment/17367816\\_1\\_hal-hartley-film-hartley-s-simple-men](http://articles.sfgate.com/2005-04-24/entertainment/17367816_1_hal-hartley-film-hartley-s-simple-men) (last accessed 8 April 2011).

<sup>26</sup> See Elina Shatkin, 'Hal Hartley Partners with Netflix to Distribute "Girl from Monday"', *2-Pop*, 13 July 2005: [www.2-pop.com/article/21362](http://www.2-pop.com/article/21362) (last accessed 8 April 2011).

<sup>27</sup> Hal Hartley, in interview with Jason Silverman, 'Hartley Changes Tune at Sundance', *Wired*, 26 January 2005: [www.wired.com/culture/lifestyle/news/2005/01/66396?currentPage=1](http://www.wired.com/culture/lifestyle/news/2005/01/66396?currentPage=1) (last accessed 8 April 2011).

<sup>28</sup> Geoff King, *Indiewood*, p. 11.

distribution in particular, however, require a high degree of industrial acumen on the part of the director and his or her team, who must be able, for example, to identify correctly the types of audiences that should be targeted and the types of companies best suited to target them (if distributing through an independent), and to master the intricacies of the theatrical distribution system (if self-distributing).

In the case of Hartley's films, some aspects of distribution have been handled by individuals working for/with Hartley as part of his immediate production/distribution team. These have included Steve Hamilton, often credited by Hartley for steering the director towards website distribution,<sup>29</sup> and Kyle Gilman, who was the head of distribution for *The Girl from Monday* and now orchestrates Hartley's DVD and download releases on the *Possible Films* website. Other aspects have been handled by Hartley more directly. Several of the trailers for Hartley's films, including one for *Fay Grim* and one for the 2010 re-release of *Surviving Desire*, were edited by Hartley.<sup>30</sup> Hartley also worked (with Kyle Gilman) on the design of the DVD artwork for *Surviving Desire* and the *Possible Films Volume 2* short film collection, released on DVD by the specialist distributor Microcinema International.<sup>31</sup>

A substantial degree of commitment to filmmaking at the more 'independent' end of the cinematic scale is one of the distinguishing features of Hartley's career. By pursuing a number of alternative industrial strategies, Hartley has been able to maintain a high degree of control over his work at a large number of levels, from production to distribution to marketing. This is an approach that is in opposition to the practice of 'crossing over' so strongly associated with independent filmmaking, whereby independent filmmakers move from low-budget, independently produced/distributed productions to big-budget, market-oriented productions handled by the studios or their speciality divisions. It is useful here to compare Hartley's career trajectory with that of Kevin Smith

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<sup>29</sup> In a 2005 interview, for example, Hartley, asked about his discussion of electronic distribution in an interview with Jean-Luc Godard, says, 'I was getting all that from my partner, Steve Hamilton. He's very visionary about the uses of new technology.' (See Eaves, 'Free to Investigate'.) In another interview that year Hartley responds (in part) as follows to a question about the evolution of The Possible Films Collection: 'Steve Hamilton, my editor and partner in Possible Films, said, "I really believe the future will include a more intimate connection between filmmakers and viewers." And he suggested that we pour a bit more money into the website and make a feature film to sell on it.' Silverman, 'Hartley Changes Tune at Sundance'.

<sup>30</sup> Kyle Gilman identified Hartley as the author of the *Surviving Desire* trailer in an e-mail to me, dated 21 May 2010. This trailer features on the *Possible Films* website and the website for Microcinema, the film's DVD distributor. The trailer Hartley edited for *Fay Grim* features on the Magnolia DVD release of the film (where it is listed as 'Hal Hartley's Fay Grim Trailer') and on the *Possible Films* website.

<sup>31</sup> This according to Gilman: 'I designed the DVD artwork for *PF2* and the new release of *Surviving Desire* in collaboration with Hal.' Correspondence with author, 20 May 2010.

and of Richard Linklater. As previously mentioned, the two filmmakers, like Hartley, began their careers with very low-budget, independently produced 'hometown' films (*Clerks* and *Slacker*), before moving on to more substantially budgeted second features (*Mallrats* and *Dazed and Confused*). The filmographies of both have since encompassed projects made on a variety of production scales, including low-budget independent productions (Linklater's *Tape* and Smith's *Chasing Amy*), productions financed through studio subsidiaries (Linklater's *A Scanner Darkly*, Smith's *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back*) and high-concept studio projects (Linklater's *School of Rock*, Smith's *Cop Out*). Movement of this kind between different categories of production is characteristic of the careers of a significant number of established American directors,<sup>32</sup> a reflection, perhaps, of the increased willingness of studios to take on board new or 'alternative' filmmaking figures as part of an effort to refresh their talent pool and, as King suggests, create 'attractive vehicles' for star performers.<sup>33</sup> For filmmakers such as Smith and Linklater, mainstream projects and scripted studio projects can offer an opportunity to raise money for individualistic films unlikely to gain substantial backing through the studios or their subsidiaries. Among the films made by Linklater in the years following the studio projects *School of Rock* (2003) and *Bad News Bears* (2005), for example, is *Inning by Inning: A Portrait of a Coach* (2008), a low-budget documentary funded solely with money from the director's production company, Detour Filmproduction. The development of such a career model remains an important strategy for 'name' directors attempting to maintain a career in an increasingly crowded market sector, ensuring a high degree of visibility within the industry and affording the chance to form relationships with executives receptive to more unconventional projects.

Hartley's career, however, has progressed at a distinct distance from this model. He has not taken on scripted studio projects, despite attracting, apparently, a significant degree of interest from the studios following his rise to prominence in the early 1990s.<sup>34</sup> Even in the early stages of his career, when the 'buzz' surrounding Hartley and his films was at its highest level, Hartley tended to steer clear of studio-division financing: *Trust*, for example, was produced by

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<sup>32</sup> Besides Smith and Linklater, examples include Steven Soderbergh and Gus Van Sant, whose careers have included both studio projects (*Ocean's Eleven* and its sequels, in Soderbergh's case; *Finding Forrester*, in Van Sant's) and unconventional auteurist projects (*The Limey*; *Gerry*), as well as projects falling between the two categories.

<sup>33</sup> King, *Indiewood*, p. 6.

<sup>34</sup> A *New York Times* piece on Hartley, for example, suggests that Hollywood had begun to court him in 1992, the year of the release of *Simple Men*. Ellen Pall, 'This Director's Wish List Doesn't Include Hollywood', 11 October 1992, p. 11 (section 2).

Republic Pictures (at that point operating as a television producer), the British television companies Zenith Entertainment and Channel 4 Films, and Hartley's True Fiction Pictures; *Amateur* was produced by Channel 4 Films, Zenith Entertainment, True Fiction Pictures, the independent American Playhouse and the French production company La Sept Cinema; *Henry Fool* was produced by True Fiction Pictures and the independent production/distribution company the Shooting Gallery. The largest production of Hartley's career, *No Such Thing*, was produced on a very modest (by studio standards) budget through a co-financing deal between a studio (MGM) and an independent company (American Zoetrope) – both factors, no doubt, in Hartley's success in maintaining what would appear to be a high degree of creative control at the levels of production and post-production. Hartley has also experimented in self-financing and self-distribution, strategies adopted during the course of producing *The Girl from Monday* and many of the short films, discussed in chapter 5. Such career moves, I would suggest, are part of a distinctly alternative approach to the industrial dimension of filmmaking, one that indicates as much as textual strategies Hartley's status as an auteur.

### **Genre: Orientation and Innovation**

As briefly suggested earlier, one of the ways in which the films discussed in this chapter distinguish themselves as alternative at the textual level is through the adaptation of genre frameworks. Each of the films mobilises a number of mainstream genre conventions while also moving beyond these conventions towards more 'alternative' territory. In this section I discuss the balance struck by each film between familiarity and irregularity at this level, making reference to a range of different genre categories.

Common to all the films, I would suggest, is a broad engagement with the science fiction genre. For the purposes of this chapter, the science fiction film is defined broadly as a variety of fantasy film (other varieties including the horror film and the musical) that emphasises technology and/or non-human bodies and that functions to arouse not fear (as does the horror film) but, as Vivian Sobchack suggests, interest – a consideration of future possibilities.<sup>35</sup> Each of the three films fits this definition – although *The Book of Life* and *No Such Thing* might

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<sup>35</sup> Vivian Sobchack, *Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film*, second edition (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1998), p. 43.

also be placed in other genre categories, as discussed later. *The Girl from Monday* is set in a future America whose new government, a corporate body called the Multi-Media Monopoly (Triple M), has implemented a ‘dictatorship of the consumer’, a regime of extreme commodification that is fought by a small number of human and alien counterrevolutionaries. *No Such Thing* centres on a humanoid monster who, with the help a young woman, enters the world of human society (New York City) in search of a way to end his own life – provided, finally, by a machine created by a mad scientist called Dr Artaud. In *The Book of Life*, set on the eve of the new Millennium, Jesus is sent to earth (again, New York City) to open the seven seals of the Book of Life and unleash the Apocalypse.

Such fantastical material serves to provide a note of familiarity, mobilising particular tropes associated with mainstream science fiction: aliens, unfamiliar technology, the Apocalypse, monsters, and so on. At the same time, such elements are given a largely low-key or playful treatment that positions the films at a distance from their mainstream counterparts. Moments of large-scale or elaborate spectacle are rare. The futuristic technologies of *The Girl from Monday*, for example, are markedly low-tech, retro and/or familiar: personal barcodes (printed directly on to every citizen’s wrist), virtual-reality headsets, targeted online advertising (see figure 8). The fictional machine that features in *No Such Thing* – Artaud’s ‘Matter Eradicator’ – offers a distinctly offbeat example of futuristic technology, a composite of medieval-style machinery and ‘scientific’ elements (pressure dials, giant levers) familiar, as one journal review of the film points out, from the laboratory scenes of various *Frankenstein* films (see figure 9).<sup>36</sup>



**Figure 8**  
Non-spectacular  
technology: pupils using  
virtual-reality headsets in  
*The Girl from Monday* ©  
Possible Films

<sup>36</sup> Adriana Craciun, ‘*No Such Thing*’, *Gothic Studies*, 5:1 (2003), p. 132.

Similarly non-spectacular/non-conventional in nature are the films' various supernatural characters, readable either as traditional aliens from another planet (*The Girl from Monday*) or as aliens from the ancient past (*The Book of Life, No Such Thing*). Visually, these characters are barely differentiated from human beings: the aliens in *The Girl from Monday* and the biblical characters in *The Book of Life* are exactly human in appearance, and the Monster in *No Such Thing*, despite the horns and bark-like skin, is humanoid in both proportions and dress. They also often display what can be seen as traditionally 'human' characteristics of empathy, affection and introspection, establishing relationships with human characters and reflecting philosophically on their own existence and history. Thus, Hartley's 'alien' characters can be identified with those central to what Sobchack calls the 'marginal' science fiction film, a class of low-budget science fiction that emerged in the mid-1980s as 'a kind of "counter-cultural" response' to blockbusters such as *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977) and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (Steven Spielberg, 1977). In marginal science fiction films, among them *The Brother from Another Planet* (John Sayles, 1984) and *Repo Man* (Alex Cox, 1984), alien Others are 'valued for being un-marked as alien or other' – a kind of representation that works, Sobchack argues, to 'erase alienation by articulating it as a universal condition in which we are aliens and aliens are us'.<sup>37</sup> This is a representation in contrast to that offered by many more mainstream and conservative science fiction films (*Close Encounters, E.T., Starman*), which present aliens who are 'just like us, only identifiably and differentially *more so*'. Broadly, the mainstream science fiction film suggests that aliens *resemble* humans, suggesting humanity to be the 'original' model and thus preserving the 'subordination of "other worlds, other cultures, other



**Figure 9**  
Retro technology:  
*Frankenstein-style*  
machinery in *No Such*  
*Thing* © United Artists  
Films/American Zoetrope

<sup>37</sup> Sobchack, *Screening Space*, p. 294.

species” to the world, culture and “speciality” of white American culture’; the marginal science fiction film, more radically, suggests that aliens are only as slightly different from us as we are from each other and so rejects human being as an original model.<sup>38</sup>

The main point of reference for Hartley’s films is, I would suggest, the marginal science fiction film. ‘Aliens’ in the three films clearly *are* us: they are as human as many of their human equivalents (but not more so) and equally alienated. In *No Such Thing* the Monster and the female protagonist, Beatrice, are characterised in similar terms: both are alone (Beatrice’s fiancé was killed when he disturbed the Monster in his Icelandic lair), both are exploited by the ruthless Fox-style news corporation that functions as the film’s villain. Jesus in *The Book of Life* is portrayed to a large extent as an ‘ordinary’ man, troubled by guilt and trying to do the right thing in a difficult situation. ‘What twisted fairy tale had I allowed myself to be tangled up into?’ he asks in voiceover, haunted by the souls of those killed in the name of God. ‘Why hadn’t I interfered more?’ In *The Girl from Monday* the main alien character, Nobody, exists as one of a small group of sympathetic characters, each characterised in terms of ‘human’ emotions such as compassion and desire (such emotions normally being valued in the society of the film only as means by which to increase one’s credit rating) and of a general resistance to the political status quo.

To dramatise ‘aliens are us’ in this way is not, as Sobchack suggests, necessarily particularly ‘progressive’ in a political/ideological sense. While such a strategy works against the supposition of the primacy of humanity (and, metaphorically, white American culture) as an original model from which Others deviate, it also serves to articulate ‘alienation as “human”’, devoting little energy to the exploration of the cultural causes of the problems at the heart of modern capitalist society.<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless, the adoption of this strategy in Hartley’s films certainly marks them to a significant degree as alternative – this status being further suggested by a number of other elements, as discussed in the sections following this one.

A degree of unconventionality is also evident in the films’ engagement with a number of other genre categories. *The Book of Life*, for example, may be seen as an offbeat take on the ‘Jesus film’, a film that tells a story about the life of Jesus. Even at the level of basic content, Hartley’s film positions itself as

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<sup>38</sup> Sobchack, *Screening Space*, p. 297.

<sup>39</sup> Sobchack, *Screening Space*, pp. 297–298.



unconventional. If it is the case, as Adele Reinhartz suggest, that all Jesus films take some details from ‘history’ (that is, the Gospels) and some from imagination, other traditions and popular culture, then *The Book of Life* offers a mix that leans strongly towards the ‘imaginative’.<sup>40</sup> The film offers not an account of Jesus’s life, but, much more unusually, an account of his return to earth, mixed with details about his past life. As such, it departs in several important ways from the Jesus film form that Reinhartz outlines, which conforms to the narrative template of the biopic. Jesus in Hartley’s film, for example, is not ‘situated within a family and circle of friends to show how the hero’s immediate circle as well as the broader social and political context either influences or responds to [his] growing capabilities and sense of mission’; instead, he is positioned as an outsider figure, returning to earth 2000 years after his death.<sup>41</sup> Hartley’s Jesus does, in line with biopic convention, develop an ‘antagonistic relationship’ with an individual (Satan) that leads to suffering on the part of the hero, although this narrative point is rather downplayed: Jesus’s climactic confrontation with Satan takes the form of a philosophical debate about human nature, conducted over drinks in a dimly lit bar. More generically conventional is the incorporation of ‘an impassioned summation of the hero’s primary message’,<sup>42</sup> this taking the form of a speech (delivered in voiceover) near the end of the film that conventionally emphasises Jesus’s capacity for forgiveness: ‘The innocent ... and the guilty. All equally helpless. All perfectly lost. And, as frightening as it was to admit, all deserving of forgiveness.’

A similar mix of familiarity and innovation is offered by those elements of *No Such Thing* that engage with the traditions of the fairy tale. At a basic level, the film resembles a ‘Beauty and the Beast’ narrative – a detail remarked on by a large number of the film’s reviews.<sup>43</sup> As in the fairy tale, a young woman (Beatrice) embarks on a journey in search of a beast, whom she finds living alone

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<sup>40</sup> Adele Reinhartz, ‘Jesus of Hollywood’, in Paula Fredriksen (ed.), *On the Passion of the Christ: Exploring the Issues Raised by the Controversial Movie* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 2006), p. 175.

<sup>41</sup> Reinhartz, *Jesus of Hollywood* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 5.

<sup>42</sup> Reinhartz, *Jesus of Hollywood*, p. 5.

<sup>43</sup> The review for the *Washington Times*, for example, starts with the sentence, “‘No Such Thing,’ playing at the Cineplex Odeon Dupont Circle, presumes to formulate the last polemical word on the “Beauty and the Beast” myth.” (Gary Arnold, “‘No Such Thing’ a Beastly Mess”, *Washington Times*, 30 March 2002, p. D4.) Other reviews that reference the Beauty and the Beast fairy tale include Kevin Thomas, ‘Hartley’s Fable in Defense of Monsters’, *Los Angeles Times*, 29 March 2002, p. F8; Roger Ebert, ‘*No Such Thing*’, *Chicago Sun-Times* (online), 29 March 2002: [rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20020329/REVIEWS/203290303/1023](http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20020329/REVIEWS/203290303/1023), last accessed 4 March 2011); and Elvis Mitchell, ‘Yes, Someone for Everyone, Even Someone with Fangs’, *New York Times*, 29 March 2002, p. E24.

in an isolated dwelling. As time passes, she becomes fond of the monster and they develop a deep emotional bond. Hartley's film, as might be expected, also offers a number of twists on the Beauty and the Beast scenario (while at the same time referencing a number of other monster narratives, including *King Kong*, with which *No Such Thing* shares a final segment in which the monster enters urban society). The beast character, for example, is not a cursed prince but a foul-mouthed, alcoholic monster, alive since the beginnings of life on earth. His home is an American missile silo – an updating, as Adriana Craciun puts it, of the traditional 'ruined Gothic castle'.<sup>44</sup> A more substantial challenge to the conventions of the fairy tale narrative is made at the level of gender representation. Central to the film's imaginative vision, as Craciun argues, is a female protagonist who moves beyond the stereotype of the princess as an innocent (chaste) beauty. Beatrice is characterised as at once good and 'experienced'. While she maintains throughout the film a saint-like desire to do good and alleviate the suffering of others (she helps the Monster despite the fact that he killed her fiancé), she is also associated with monstrosity and sexuality. Craciun notes, for example, that the bondage dress and makeup Beatrice wears in the later stages of the film 'allud[e] not merely to her newly acquired sexual knowledge, but to the monstrous Bride of Frankenstein' – an association also suggested in an earlier scene in which Beatrice is 're-created' in an elaborate medical operation, the visual details of which are strongly suggestive of the scene in which the female monster is created in *Bride of Frankenstein* (James Whale, 1935).<sup>45</sup> Beatrice exists as a 'unique hybrid heroine', a figure who cannot be easily categorised as an 'innocent beauty' and who moves beyond 'the innocence/experience dichotomy according to which femininity is typically classified'.<sup>46</sup> This is a character articulation that, I would suggest, clearly distinguishes Hartley's film from the majority of mainstream modern fairy-tale films, which, while often centring 'active' or 'strong' female protagonists (in contrast to the passive/compliant characters of the original tales), very rarely suggest their heroines to be in any way sexual or 'unnatural'.<sup>47</sup> The character of Beatrice thus offers both an element of generic familiarity and a

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<sup>44</sup> Craciun, 'No Such Thing', p. 130.

<sup>45</sup> Craciun, 'No Such Thing', p. 130.

<sup>46</sup> Craciun, 'No Such Thing', p. 130.

<sup>47</sup> See for example *Ever After* (Andy Tennant, 1998), *Enchanted* (Kevin Lima, 2007) and *Beauty and the Beast* (Gary Trousdale and Kirk Wise, 1991). For a discussion of the representation of the fairy-tale heroine in *Ever After*, see Jessica Tiffin, *Marvelous Geometry* (Detroit, Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 2009), pp. 203–204.

substantial challenge to enduring traditions – a mix of this kind being common to various features in many of Hartley’s films, as discussed in this and other chapters.

### **Place: Regional Details, Landscapes and Identities**

Like *Amateur* (discussed in chapter 2), *The Book of Life*, *No Such Thing* and *The Girl from Monday* adopt an approach to place that combines a sense of regional particularity with a sense of the globalised nature of modern life. A focus on recognisable regional details and identities functions to ground the films in the familiar and the particular. At the same time, the films depart decisively from the themes of community and family that mark the Long Island films and the similarly well-received (and also modestly profitable) *Henry Fool*. Hartley’s focus shifts (to an extent) here towards the broader themes of society and social ‘issues’, as discussed more fully in the final section of this chapter – although character emotions and relationships, as might be expected, remain central elements of each film.

All three films are characterised by what I have called a sense of geographical place: that is, an investment by the film in a particular set of images and characteristics identified with an actual place, whether named in the diegesis or not. New York City is foregrounded as a setting in each film by a variety of markers, ranging from the subtle to the obvious. In *The Girl from Monday*, for example, shots of a sign for one of New York’s subway stations, Houston Street (figure 10), feature twice in the first ten minutes; a little later, one of the characters makes a reference to Orchard Street – a nearby Lower Manhattan street the name of which is probably recognisable only to people who live or



**Figure 10**  
Markers of place:  
prominent subway  
signage in *The Girl from  
Monday* © Possible Films

work in the city. Subway signs also feature in *No Such Thing*, along with several yellow cabs. References are made by characters to Manhattan, ‘Downtown’ (Lower Manhattan) and New York City Hall. All three films include location shots in which characters walk down bustling New York Streets. Details of this kind serve in part, as Andrew Higson (writing about the British ‘kitchen sink’ film) puts it, to ‘[transform] narrative space into a *real historical place*’, to ‘authenticate’ the narrative and contribute towards a feeling of realism.<sup>48</sup> Such an effect is of course not uncommon in American cinema, mainstream or independent – although different varieties of film may stress different regional details, either as part of a strategy of differentiation (as in *Amateur*, for example, which foregrounds the loft spaces of TriBeCa) or as part of an attempt to achieve universal recognisability (as in disaster films that foreground famous city landmarks).

If some sense of geographical place is characteristic of all three films, then this is a feature that is particularly emphasised in *The Book of Life*, in which small-scale regional details such as yellow cabs and subway signs are mixed with more dramatic examples of the regional topography, including several major landmarks. In a scene set on the rooftop of a hotel in Midtown Manhattan, Jesus is at several points framed within a shot featuring the Empire State Building, which takes up almost half the frame. The last sequence of the film takes place on the Staten Island Ferry, Jesus looking back across the water towards the city and the Twin Towers of the World Trade Centre. The presence of such shots in *The Book of Life* is, according to Steve Hamilton, attributable partly to the low-key, inexpensive nature of the film’s production (very small crew, mini-DV camcorder), which allowed Hartley and his crew to film sections of the New York landscape at a low cost and without the need for extensive preparations.<sup>49</sup> At the same time, however, shots of this kind were intended to serve as points of interest for the viewer, to convey a degree of ‘meaning’:

[So], it boils down somewhat to economics, but even then, if the economics allow the environment to ‘mean’ something then it works. If it’s just getting a shot of the house to salve the audience’s curiosity about ‘what Henry’s house looks like’ then you’re just doing too much work for

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<sup>48</sup> Andrew Higson, ‘Space, Place, Spectacle’, *Screen*, 25:4–5 (1984), p. 8.

<sup>49</sup> See Steve Hamilton, interview with author, May 2010 (see appendix C).

the audience and you're inviting them to sit back and be passive and just let the film roll over them.<sup>50</sup>

Hamilton's comments here give attention to the way place is 'used' in a film: as an element necessary to the conventional functioning of the narrative system (an establishing shot of a house, for example), or as an element significant in and of itself. Indeed, the distinction offered here is similar to the distinction often made in academic work between space and place in film. The geographer Chris Lukinbeal, for example, in an article about cinematic landscapes, suggests that 'As space, landscape provides an area in which the drama of the film can unfold ... Landscape as space is always subordinate to the drama of the narrative.' Landscape as place, meanwhile, 'provides narrative realism by grounding a film to a particular location's regional sense of place and history'.<sup>51</sup> As Higson suggests, place may therefore be seen as something that exceeds the narrative, offering a spectacle of 'realistic', iconographic details. At the same time, Higson further argues, such details and images may be 'used up' by the narrative, positioned so as to form a representation of a character's state of mind or of a theme in the narrative.<sup>52</sup>

In the case of *The Book of Life*, landscape does seem on several occasions to fall into the category of landscape as place. The shot of the Empire State Building serves no strict narrative purpose, the location of the scene having been clearly established via a sequence in which Jesus climbs a series of staircases and emerges on to a windy rooftop. There is, similarly, little narrative information conveyed by the shot of the New York skyline taken from the ferry; certainly it is



**Figure 11**  
Symbolic landscape:  
Jesus gazes up at a  
symbol of humanity in  
*The Book of Life* © Haut  
et Court/La Sept Arte

<sup>50</sup> Hamilton, interview with author.

<sup>51</sup> Chris Lukinbeal, 'Cinematic Landscapes', *Journal of Cultural Geography*, 23:1 (2005), p. 6.

<sup>52</sup> Higson, 'Space, Place, Spectacle', pp. 2–21. See especially p. 8: 'place is used up by the narrative at a metaphorical level, as a "geography of the mind". This metaphorical work then turns back the historical onto the discursive, the psychological, the individual.'

held far longer than would be necessary to simply inform the viewer that Jesus is leaving the city – and in this case we would not expect the image to be the last of the film. Both landscapes can, however, be incorporated into the narrative at a more metaphorical/thematic level. As Jason Wood suggests, for example, the Empire State Building in the former scene forms a ‘striking background that further underlines the magnitude of what is about to be destroyed in the name of Christianity’.<sup>53</sup> I would add that the image serves to underline the weight of responsibility borne by Jesus, suggesting his concern for the fate of humanity as a whole – a reading encouraged by a shot in which Jesus briefly glances up at the building that towers above him (figure 11). The later skyline landscape, I would suggest, serves a similarly expressive function. To an extent, this is an image that presents a real place, that allows the viewer to identify and absorb the details of the New York topography. But it is also an image that describes the frame of mind of the protagonist. The sun is going down as the day reaches its conclusion, and the city appears still, peaceful – Jesus, meanwhile, having reached the conclusion of his visit to earth, has resolved his internal crisis and decided to call off the Apocalypse (he throws the Book of Life, a laptop containing the software to release the seven seals, into the water behind the ferry) (see figure 12).<sup>54</sup> Motivation of this kind for landscape images that seem to exceed the narrative is also provided in *The Unbelievable Truth*, whose final image, a long shot of an empty Long Island beach, can be read as a reflection of Audry’s self-doubt and lingering feelings of isolation, as discussed in chapter 1. Distinctive or



**Figure 12**  
Landscape as a reflection of state of mind: Jesus looks back at a peaceful-seeming New York City in *The Book of Life* © Haut et Court/La Sept Arte

<sup>53</sup> Jason Wood, *Hal Hartley* (Harpenden, Herts: Pocket Essentials, 2003), p. 79.

<sup>54</sup> A similar style of reading, relating the details of a landscape to the state of mind of the protagonist, is offered by Higson in a discussion of a townscape that features in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*: ‘It is a new day, the sun is shining, the urban-industrial image seems peaceful, stable, there are no immediate signs of work: exactly – Arthur Seaton has turned over a new leaf in his life, and the geography, the *mise-en-scène*, is a sign of this change.’ Higson, ‘Space, Place, Spectacle’, p. 8.

‘excessive’ geographical details are here given a rationale and drawn into the narrative in a manner similar to the way in which formal departures may be motivated by a character’s experience or by the themes of the film (see chapter 2).

Other dimensions, besides topography/landscape, in which regional identity figures prominently include characterisation and, more generally, theme. Many of the cultural identities that feature in the three films are recognisable as ‘New York’ cultural identities – that is, identities associated with the city through the discourses of journalism, advertising, literature, film, television, and so on. The main human character in *The Book of Life*, for example, is poor and intellectual (‘The soul is only what we call our awareness of things, but it’s really just a material phenomenon,’ says Dave when Satan asks him if he believes he has a soul), these being qualities associated with the bohemian/intellectual scene of Manhattan, as portrayed by a range of films by Hartley and other filmmakers in the 1990s and earlier decades.<sup>55</sup> A number of characters in both *No Such Thing* and *The Girl from Monday* can be described as white-collar capitalists – a characterisation that reflects New York City’s status as a major centre of finance, driven to a large extent by large corporations. The city, and Manhattan in particular, was (and is) particularly dependent on the financial industry.<sup>56</sup> The financial sector includes organisations such as banks, stock brokerages, investment-fund institutions and insurance companies, and is strongly associated with Wall Street, this Lower Manhattan region having become emblematic of American capitalism and, to an extent, exploitation and materialism.<sup>57</sup> Such details and associations are part of a broad but distinct regional identity that serves to ground certain characterisations in the films. The Helen Mirren character in *No Such Thing*, for example, is a corporate boss whose business instincts override any concern for individual suffering (I discuss the critical

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<sup>55</sup> Among those films focusing on some sort of intellectual, bohemian or café/bar culture in Manhattan are *High Art* (Lisa Cholodenko, 1998), *Smithereens* (Susan Seidelman, 1982), *After Hours* (Martin Scorsese, 1985) *Manhattan* (Woody Allen, 1979) and Hartley’s *Amateur* and *Flirt*.

<sup>56</sup> According to the urban studies scholars David L. Gladstone and Susan S. Fainstein, ‘During the 1990–97 period ... earnings in the city’s finance, insurance, and real estate (FIRE) industries accounted for 57 percent of all earnings growth in Manhattan and nearly half of the city’s total increase in earnings.’ Gladstone and Fainstein, ‘The New York and Los Angeles Economies’, in David Halle (ed.), *New York and Los Angeles: Politics, Society, and Culture: A Comparative View* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 94.

<sup>57</sup> The image of Wall Street as a centre of speculative capitalism and, as Jack Boozer puts it, ‘grossly avaricious values’ was perhaps most famously encapsulated in *Wall Street* (Oliver Stone, 1987). For a discussion of this film and its vision of American capitalism, see Boozer, ‘Movies and the Closing of the Reagan Era’, in Stephen Prince (ed.), *American Cinema of the 1980s: Themes and Variations* (Piscataway, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2007), pp. 176–178.

implications of this characterisation further in the following section). The corporate manager Abercrombie (D. J. Mendel) in *The Girl from Monday* is representative of a whole social system in which human experience is valued only for the credit it generates. The inclusion of such characterisations and themed elements in films clearly set in New York City, rather than, say, New Jersey or Austin, serves an orienting function, contributing towards a sense of familiarity and recognisability. It is an approach that is, I would suggest, broadly conventional, in that it reaffirms a popular facet of regional identity. On the other hand, the films function to consistently draw attention to particular historical/social elements in a manner that distinguishes them from most independent and mainstream American films. It is this characteristic that the following section of this chapter addresses.

### **Political Issues/Political Qualities**

*The Girl from Monday* starts with a three-minute passage that sketches the background to the film's story. An unnamed narrator (later identified as Jack, the main male character) introduces us to the female alien, Nobody, who is pictured swimming naked in a series of underwater shots: 'She had travelled light years to get here. And in the vaporous fields of her home star no one had bodies, or names, or identities ... But here, in the flesh, the revolution had come.' This revolution is the work of the corporate body Triple M, whose new regime Jack describes (as mentioned earlier) as a 'dictatorship of the consumer'. The narration continues, over images of everyday life in the city: 'What most people wanted, most of the time, and were willing to pay for, was good. Whatever defied the logic of the market was bad. Disposable income was the chief revolutionary virtue.' The final 30-second sequence of the passage introduces the theme of political resistance, which, as might be expected, figures prominently in the narrative. Counterrevolutionaries, or terrorists, Jack tells us, resist the 'inevitable logic of the marketplace'. We are shown struggling figures being hauled away by armed troopers. Jack concludes: 'They [counterrevolutionaries] were rounded up and exiled to the moon to work the concessions at the various Triple M theme parks. Terrorists were suspected everywhere.'

This is a fairly long narrated passage, delivering a large amount of narrative information. Background political detail that could have been established gradually throughout the narrative is established immediately, before



the viewer is familiar with any of the characters. The explicitly political aspects of the narrative are in this way emphasised: separated from the character-drama of the narrative and given overt and detailed articulation. Later narrated passages, though more integrated into the narrative, are marked by a similarly high level of descriptive detail. At one point, for example, we are told in voiceover that Triple M's 'major sore spot' was 'the old regime's alleged contact with Star 147X in the constellation Monday, named after the hapless scientist who first discovered it, Dr Vincent Monday. It was assumed the intelligence on that star still contributed unknown resources toward the counterrevolutionary aim.' For Robert Koehler in *Variety*, such 'semi-philosophical narration' is one of the film's flaws, 'describing what should be shown'. In a similar vein, Koehler complains of the 'impossible load of background for this invented – if not entirely unfamiliar – society and its rules and politics'.<sup>58</sup> The suggestion here is that Hartley's film disregards certain 'good' practices of narrative filmmaking (showing rather than telling, limiting social/political background detail) and, in doing so, presents the viewer not with a sense of pleasurable innovation but rather with a laborious interpretive challenge (an 'impossible load').

At the same time, as Koehler suggests in the latter quoted comment and elsewhere in his review, the film offers a fairly familiar dystopia narrative the details of which one might expect to serve as a point of orientation for many viewers. A number of literary influences are cited by reviewers, including George Orwell and Aldous Huxley, whose *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) and *Brave New World* (1932) remain particularly well-known representations of future totalitarian societies.<sup>59</sup> *The Girl from Monday* also fits into a prominent tradition of film dystopias. In particular, the film might be seen to resemble dystopias such as *Blade Runner* and *Outland* – films that Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner identify as examples of 'left-liberal and radical dystopias'. These are films that use a future setting to mount a critique of contemporary society that is 'too extreme for Hollywood realism'. The left-liberal dystopia is a variety of dystopia that 'negatively represents the basic tenets of capitalism'.<sup>60</sup> This is a position that is contrasted by Ryan and Kellner to that of the 'populist

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<sup>58</sup> Robert Koehler, 'The Girl from Monday', *Variety*, 21 February 2005, p. 32.

<sup>59</sup> The *New York Times* review refers to *Brave New World* and describes Triple M as 'Orwellian' (Stephen Holden, 'Party On! It's Civic Duty', *New York Times*, 4 May 2005, p. E5); Koehler describes Hartley's film as an attempt to 'update the futurist dystopian traditions of Orwell, Huxley and William Gibson' (*Variety*, p. 32).

<sup>60</sup> Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner, 'Technophobia/Dystopia', in Sean Redmond (ed.), *Liquid Metal: The Science Fiction Film Reader* (London: Wallflower Press, 2004), p. 54.

dystopia' (examples including *Soylent Green*, 1973, and *Rollerball*, 1975), which functions to critique not capitalism itself but rather large corporations, whose impersonality is seen to conflict with the values of family life.<sup>61</sup> Left-liberal dystopias point out the deficiencies of the wage-labour system as a whole. In these films, capitalist labour is characterised as exploitative, and 'traditional liberal humanist ideals (freedom, charity)' are mobilised as 'critical weapons against that exploitation'.<sup>62</sup>

While, I would suggest, the line between two such groupings can be harder to draw than Ryan and Kellner allow, it is not difficult to see *The Girl from Monday* as falling into the authors' more radical left-liberal category. Triple M may be a corporation, but it is one very firmly inserted in the capitalist system, sustained by very ordinary companies for which ordinary and sometimes sympathetic people work (both Jack and Cecile are employees of the ad agency responsible for keeping Triple M in power). Indeed, as the phrase 'dictatorship of the consumer' suggests, the dystopia depicted by film is one supported by all: consumers are active and willing participants in a system that (Hartley suggests) functions to limit personal expression and emotional connectedness. This point is made both at the level of a reflective, philosophical voiceover and, more conventionally, at the level of narrative. Thus Jack's comments early on in the film about the decline under the new government of individual emotional expression ('Acts of love, charity, eroticism for their own sake were soon seen as perverse self-indulgences') are echoed in the absurdist scene in which Jack and Cecile share a sexual encounter in a meeting room, Jack needing an alibi for a political raid he has organised, and Cecile wanting to accumulate sexual-activity credit points. After an initial embrace, Jack has second thoughts, worried that he is there for the wrong reasons. For Cecile, however, the encounter is a simple matter of economics: 'Let's fuck and increase our buying power,' she says, puzzled by the idea that there could be a 'wrong' motivation to have sex.

Moments of sardonic humour of this kind are common. Other examples include a dialogue exchange in which Jack is advised to push his children's-wear advertising campaign in a more 'sexy' and 'provocative' direction ('Kids are not just children,' says his manager. 'They're *consumers*'), and a piece of narration in which Jack tells us that teaching positions are now assigned only to convicts, owing to the high incidence of hand-gun-related violence in schools. Such

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<sup>61</sup> Ryan and Kellner, 'Technophobia', p. 54.

<sup>62</sup> Ryan and Kellner, 'Technophobia', p. 55.

episodes constitute a thread of socio-political satire that positions *The Girl from Monday* at the more directly critical end of the independent film spectrum. At the same time, however, the film shies away from depicting in any detail the more uncomfortable realities of the dystopian world. An ‘uncomfortable’ quality can, as Geoff King has suggested, be seen as a strong mark of alternativeness in American narrative film, unsettling dominant patterns of identification and dominant representations of social issues.<sup>63</sup> In *The Girl from Monday* several uncomfortable issues – including the state terrorisation of ‘immigrants’ (aliens) and the aforementioned sexualisation of children through advertising – are raised, but through brief passages of dialogue only, rather than through any sustained narrative treatment. The prevailing tone of the film combines satire with a strong measure of philosophical melancholy, an emotional longing for meaning and humanity in a commercialised world. The development of shocking, blunt and uncomfortable elements is avoided in favour of the valorisation of ‘traditional liberal humanist ideals’ (as in the left-liberal dystopia) that inform several narrative developments, such as Cecile’s positively coded transformation from a corporate conformist to an enlightened rebel reading Thoreau’s *Walden*. The film’s closing moments, too, emphasise human endeavour and individuality, as Jack, watching Nobody enter the ocean and start her journey home, offers us his final reflection on humanity: ‘I’ll never know if she made it. But I hope, and I try to resist. Even me, whom no one need pity, even I can see this ... now. What humans do ... try.’ (Ellipses in the original dialogue.) Such elements are strongly suggestive of the innate capacity of individuals to free themselves from the effects of political/social problems: a positive message that, while meaningful at an emotional-philosophical level, certainly positions *The Girl from Monday* at some distance from radical political critique.

A blunter and more discomfiting tone is adopted by *No Such Thing*, this surely being one of the reasons for MGM’s own discomfort with the film. As in *The Girl from Monday*, the protagonists are figures who do not fit into a rampantly capitalistic society: Beatrice is a good soul, concerned with helping

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<sup>63</sup> King talks, for example, about *Happiness* in these terms: ‘[The film encourages] an uncomfortable degree of proximity: a proximity to character that implies the social proximity of paedophilia. The result is likely to be a double sense of discomfort for the viewer: not the full cinematic degree of identification or allegiance we would expect to experience with a more obviously sympathetic character ... and discomfort in raising the difficult issue of the extent to which paedophilia is part of the everyday fabric of our society.’ *American Independent Cinema* (London; New York: I. B. Tauris, 2005), pp. 198–199.

others; the Monster is an authentically anguished philosopher with an aversion to modern media. Dialogue is used, again as in *The Girl from Monday*, to sketch the socio-political background. We are told, for example, that the federal government is on strike, and that the mayor of New York City has sold downtown Manhattan to a 'major Hollywood studio'. Criticism of media-led commodification is more immediately present in the characterisation of the (unnamed) corporate boss, a tough, cynical producer in charge of what is described by the *Washington Post* as 'one of those It-Bleeds-It-Leads shows', a format probably most readily associated in America with the Fox News Channel.<sup>64</sup> As Mirren's character envisions it, the business of news is to supply the public with a constant stream of the most sensationalistic story matter available. 'There's a world of bad news out there, ladies and gentlemen, a *world* of bad news. All we need to do is get our hands on the worst of it, the very *worst* news possible,' she says near the beginning of the film, moments later rejecting a story lead about a recent increase in terrorist activity that has left hundreds dead with the words 'Sad, but not catastrophic.'

More disturbingly, news production is represented as a practice that cedes all to the image and to the 'story'. Individuals and individual suffering are significant only as far as they might serve the needs of the market. This is a point made explicitly on several occasions. In an early scene set in Reykjavik, for example, Beatrice, who is in hospital having barely survived an aeroplane crash, is talking to the Boss, who wants to run a story based on Beatrice's ordeal. The Boss asks Beatrice about 'the experience, the sensations, the drama', and about the actions of the children in the moments before the plane crashed. Beatrice is disgusted: 'They were people. They were actual *people*,' she says, still barely able to move herself. Further criticism of the modern media machine comes later in the narrative, when the Monster is introduced into urban society by Beatrice. Despite his humanoid appearance and eloquence, the Monster is immediately cast as a 'freak of nature' by the media – a characterisation that functions to naturalise the systematic cruelty to which he is subjected by government scientists eager to unlock the secret of his indestructible nature. The Boss organises the Monster's release into society, anticipating a tabloid-style fall into abjection. She is right: in a disturbing scene scored to melancholy string music,

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<sup>64</sup> Ann Hornaday, 'The Really Abominable Snowman', *Washington Post*, 29 March 2002, p. C5. Hornaday also makes the connection between the corporation in the film and Fox News, describing the former as a 'Fox-style television station'.

the Monster is attacked on the street by a group of men; he is pushed around, beaten, and finally urinated on. Through a striking edit, the image of the Monster's humiliation becomes a two-dimensional image on a television monitor, as we shift location to a corporate meeting room (figure 13). The suggestion made here at the formal level – that individual suffering becomes, under the logic of corporate capitalism, simply another material element to be packaged and sold – is underlined at the level of dialogue. The reaction of the Boss and her team to the material is one not of horror but of delight: 'It's just the right mix of pathetic and scary,' says one assistant, savouring the potential for another sensational news exclusive.

Sharp social criticisms such as this are mixed with a general social atmosphere of loneliness and instability. Neither Beatrice nor the Monster has any family, or even any close friends. The protagonists move frequently across international borders – an everyday detail of modern, globalised life that also characterises *The Book of Life*, *The Girl from Monday* and, as discussed in the following chapter, *Fay Grim* (Jesus in *The Book of Life* arrives in America at JFK Airport; Nobody in *The Girl from Monday* is an 'immigrant' who enters the country on a beach in New York City). Modern American society in general is defined by a kind of violent desolation: the president, we are told, is rumoured to have committed suicide, domestic terrorism is rife, and civil unrest is commonplace. In one early scene set in an airport lounge, Beatrice is witness to the shooting of two men trying to smuggle radioactive material out of the country. Moments later, she encounters a young woman, seemingly on drugs, who takes Beatrice's bag and wanders off; Beatrice later finds her undergoing violent convulsions by a waiting bench, surrounded by people but suffering



**Figure 13**  
The Monster's suffering becomes a saleable image in *No Such Thing* © United Artists Films/American Zoetrope

alone. Although no explicit link is made between such episodes and the forces of capitalism represented by the Boss and her network, it is not difficult to see a connection, given the film's strong critique (in places) of corporate logic and its devaluation of human life and human connection (certainly the national government, being on strike, cannot be seen to dictate social life in any significant way). In this respect, and in its more explicit social criticisms, *No Such Thing* can be seen as an ambitious attempt to render the 'large' political and social contexts of modern American life. This, I would suggest, is one of the more dramatic differences between the film and Hartley's early films, *The Unbelievable Truth*, *Trust* and *Simple Men*, in which a much tighter focus on small-scale community and family is combined with an emphasis on the particularities of local place, and explicit commentary on society in general is avoided (though of course the opportunity remains for viewers to see the depictions offered by these films as representative, to various degrees, of larger social realities).

*The Book of Life*, too, can be seen to engage critically with a broad social issue, although this dimension is, I would suggest, far less pronounced than is the case in *The Girl from Monday* and *No Such Thing*. The film, like Kevin Smith's highly controversial and widely distributed *Dogma* (1999), adopts a questioning, irreverent and humorous attitude towards its religious subject matter.<sup>65</sup> Christian figures and material are presented in a way that might be described as 'imaginative' and offbeat, albeit with a strong element of familiarity: as already discussed, Jesus, for example, is an angst-ridden outsider figure with (more familiarly) an infinite capacity for forgiveness. More pointedly, the modern institution of Christianity is characterised in terms of unfeeling authority and arbitrary regulation. The main human Christian character in the film is the head of a Christian law firm, an unsympathetic figure obsessed with the (Christian) law and how it might serve him (late in the film he reveals that he cut a deal to be saved come the Apocalypse). Christianity as it currently exists, it is suggested, is a betrayal of the liberalism and compassion of Jesus Christ, the film's sympathetic (and familiarly Hartleyan) protagonist. 'I won't judge the living and the dead. I hate this exclusive closed-door policy,' says Jesus. 'Who do these

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<sup>65</sup> *Dogma* attracted enough criticism from religious groups to force Miramax, under pressure from its parent company, Disney, to sell the film on to another distributor (it eventually went to Lion's Gate). For details of some of the troubles *Dogma* encountered on its way to release (including various hate-mail campaigns), see Peter Biskind, *Down and Dirty Pictures: Miramax, Sundance and the Rise of Independent Film* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004), pp. 345, 366–367.

*Christians* think they are, anyway?’ Material such as this constitutes an aspect of broad, critical commentary that is potentially controversial (although, given the film’s limited release, opportunities for controversy were of course very few). On the other hand, such commentary also tends to be rather fleeting in nature. No attempt is made to depict the social impact of the modern institution of Christianity. Instead, perhaps owing in part to budgetary concerns, the film focuses quite tightly on a small number of characters and their emotional development. This is in contrast to *The Girl from Monday* and *No Such Thing*, in which societal trends (hyper-consumerism, the commercialisation of the media) are often seen to have a palpable effect not just on the protagonists but on social life in general.

An argument for categorising *The Book of Life* as a ‘political’ film might be strengthened, however, if the film is considered in terms of its approach to narrative realism, choices made at this level sometimes being seen as having significant political implications, as discussed in the previous chapter. Although the film adheres to a fairly familiar narrative structure, whereby a protagonist (Jesus) undertakes a journey involving various conflicts that are eventually resolved at the level both of plot (Jesus averts the Apocalypse) and of character emotion (Jesus resolves his internal crisis, asserting his compassion against the will of his father), a number of devices are implemented that function to undermine realist convention to a quite significant degree. Most obviously, the film’s cinematographic design is characterised by a strong degree of visual distortion. Images are often blurred, ‘smudged’ (the result of adjustments made to the shutter speed of the mini-DV camera) or overexposed (see figure 14) – effects that Hartley has described as forming the visual equivalent of the sonic



**Figure 14**  
Visual distortion in *The Book of Life* © Haut et Court/La Sept Arte

distortion that characterises some rock music, a medium more open than film (Hartley suggests) to the use of abstract/distorted forms.<sup>66</sup> A similar approach is adopted in *The Girl from Monday*, which features a large number of eye-catching visual effects – decided on and implemented by Hartley in collaboration with his cinematographer, Sarah Cawley<sup>67</sup> – including blurred images, colour-filter tinting and still photography. Such effects may be seen to be motivated: viewable as a (to some extent) ‘natural’ expression of the themes of the film. Thematic motivation of this kind is stressed by the *New York Times* reviewer, for example, who writes, ‘pastel-hued and filled with feathery digital afterimages, the movie has a floating, ethereal look that oddly matches its lofty subject’.<sup>68</sup> But these unusual visual effects still present, I would suggest, a substantial challenge to realist convention, a contravention of the principles of ‘invisible’ style consistent and strong enough to inevitably draw attention to the constructedness of the image and shift the films (to a degree, at least) towards the territory of the materialist film.

A similar refusal of realist codes characterises *The Book of Life* at the level of performance. Many of the actors speak in flattened tones, while also maintaining a generally inexpressive physiognomy, two features familiar from a large number of the performances in Hartley’s previous films. This performance style, particularly as realised by Martin Donovan and the non-actor PJ Harvey, is commented on by several reviewers, some rather sceptical (‘[*The Book of Life*] relies heavily on [Hartley’s] constricting trademark of flat, freeze-dried dialogue’, writes Dennis Lim in the *Village Voice*) and others more appreciative (‘Donovan and Harvey hit the right note of straight-faced, tongue-in-cheek farce’, writes Deborah Young in *Variety*).<sup>69</sup> *No Such Thing* and *The Girl from Monday* also feature performances of a stylised nature. One such performance is offered by Tatiana Abracos (Nobody), a Brazilian model making her film acting debut in *The Girl from Monday*. In the making-of feature included on the Hart

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<sup>66</sup> Hartley says that he’s ‘apt to be listening to Sonic Youth more as a reference than I am watching movies, because there’s much more freedom in music about using distortion. All that blurriness comes out of that aesthetic.’ Hannah Eaves, ‘Free to Investigate’.

<sup>67</sup> Cawley states that ‘the shutter effect and the color grad filters were both Hal’s ideas. We chose the filter colors together and I think I went to the photo store to buy them myself. Hal said to use them whenever and wherever we wanted, without over-thinking it.’ Interview with author, 6 December 2009 (see appendix B).

<sup>68</sup> Stephen Holden, ‘The Millennium in Fable and Reality’, *New York Times*, 10 October 1998, p. B18.

<sup>69</sup> Dennis Lim, ‘End Games’, *Village Voice*, 16 March 1999: [www.villagevoice.com/1999-03-16/film/end-games/](http://www.villagevoice.com/1999-03-16/film/end-games/) (last accessed 8 April 2011); Deborah Young, ‘*The Book of Life*’, *Variety*, 15 June 1998, p. 102.



Sharp DVD release of the film, we see Abracos read a scene as an audition; in this reading, the actress accentuates certain significant lines of dialogue by widening her eyes and raising her eyebrows. In the final film, however, such emotional signifiers are largely absent, the actress adopting only a limited range of subdued facial expressions – a form of dialogue delivery far closer to the style that was by this point widely recognised as one of Hartley’s authorial trademarks.

Hartley’s choreography in *No Such Thing* and *The Girl from Monday* (and in many of his other films) functions in a similar way to create the impression of a particularly designed or ‘staged’ kind of action. In a number of sequences in both films, the director has his actors move around each other in a rhythmic, dance-like manner. One early scene in *No Such Thing* set in a network office room, for example, features a choreographed sequence in which Beatrice relays to the Boss and two of her subordinates, Fred (Paul Lazar) and Judy (Erica Gimpel), some information about the disappearance of one of the network’s news crews; as the camera tracks horizontally right, Fred walks behind the Boss’s back to take up a position on her left; a moment later Judy walks behind Fred to take up a position on *his* left; finally the Boss walks behind Judy to a position on *her* left (figure 15). Routines of this kind, which were apparently quite unfamiliar to the star actors,<sup>70</sup> are difficult to accomplish, and require a high degree of planning and technical skill on the parts of the actors, camera assistant, cinematographer, dolly grip and boom operator, as Michael Spiller details in his



**Figure 15**  
Helen Mirren performs the final movement of a choreographed sequence in *No Such Thing* © United Artists Films/American Zoetrope

<sup>70</sup> Hartley describes the process of directing Julie Christie and Helen Mirren thus: ‘I said to them, “You keep talking, Julie, then I want Helen to move round you toward the wall, then Julie go in front of her, and Helen, you cross to the right ... [ellipsis in the original]” I remember Helen looking up at me, a cigarette in her mouth, and saying, “You mean that? You actually want me to do that?” I was seeing it all in my head like trigonometry.’ Ryan Gilbey, ‘Reheating Hal Hartley’ (interview), *The Guardian*, 9 March 2007: [www.guardian.co.uk/film/2007/mar/09/2](http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2007/mar/09/2) (last accessed 8 April 2011).

interview with me.<sup>71</sup> The implementation of such routines, particularly in low-key dialogue scenes such as the one referred to above, is a clear illustration of Hartley's commitment to innovation at the level of style and design. In many cases, the strategies of stylisation that feature in *The Book of Life*, *The Girl from Monday* and *No Such Thing* might be considered sufficiently unconventional to represent a convincing challenge to conventional realism and, implicitly, the ideologies that it supports. As I have argued above, all three films also offer a thread of more explicit political/social critique. Together, these features offer a strong mark of alternativeness that, even balanced against the more familiar qualities of the films, relating to genre and the representation of regional identity, works to set apart the films from the majority of commercially and/or critically successful independent cinema. In this respect (but not in others), the three films stand in significant contrast to the preceding *Henry Fool*, which, as discussed in the next chapter, is currently the last of Hartley's films to receive substantial critical praise.

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<sup>71</sup> Spiller told me that 'we all (actors, camera assistant, myself as DP and camera operator, the dolly grip, boom person) had to do quite elaborate dances at times to execute the choreography of the shot. ... The challenge for me is in the camera operation. Often the shots would be one long continuous take that requires me memorizing the scene and being on my toes to participate in the dance with the cast as they cross in and out of shot.' For more details about this process, see the full interview in the appendices.

## 4

### From Old Territory to New: *Henry Fool* (1997) and *Fay Grim* (2006)

As I have argued in previous chapters, Hartley's filmography is characterised by a shift in emphasis from themes of family and small-town community to themes of globalisation and social fragmentation. If *Fay Grim* may be seen as the culmination of this shift, *Henry Fool*, made in 1997, stands as a somewhat anomalous project in Hartley's sequence of features, as it returns (after the city-set features *Amateur* and *Flirt*) to the milieu of the suburban family home familiar from the Long Island films. Like *The Unbelievable Truth*, *Trust* and *Simple Men*, *Henry Fool* offers an offbeat, (darkly) comic portrait of suburban life that is heavily invested in the particularities of the local environment. By contrast, *Fay Grim*, Hartley's seven-years-on sequel to *Henry Fool*, foregrounds a thoroughly international urban topography: among the film's settings are New York City, Paris, Istanbul and (briefly, in a flashback sequence) Afghanistan. A bewilderingly intricate tale of CIA initiatives, double-crosses and geopolitical conflicts, *Fay Grim* positions itself in the tradition of the espionage/noir film while offering an idiosyncratic take on genre conventions that is typical of Hartley's feature-length work. Reviews of *Fay Grim*, while reserving some praise for the film's generic innovations and for the performances of Parker Posey and Jeff Goldblum, were generally mixed or negative<sup>1</sup> – a critical response in great contrast to that of *Henry Fool*, the notices for which featured some of the strongest praise of Hartley's entire career.<sup>2</sup>

*Henry Fool*'s critical success was complemented by a degree of box-office success and a modest profit: the film achieved a total gross of \$1.3 million, slightly surpassing the budget of \$1 million.<sup>3</sup> That the film made a profit at all is

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<sup>1</sup> The *New York Times* review, for example, praises *Fay Grim* for 'deftly working the visual tropes of the spy-thriller genre', but concludes that the film 'gets so carried away with the intricacies of its pot that it gets lost in its own excessive cleverness'. Stephen Holden, 'Battling Evildoers from Worldwide Headquarters in Woodside, Queens', *New York Times*, 18 May 2007, p. E12. In a negative review for the *Washington Post*, Desson Thomson identifies Jeff Goldblum's 'amusing' performance as one of the film's few high points. 'Hartley Does Hartley – Again', *Washington Post*, 18 May 2007, p. WE36.

<sup>2</sup> To cite just the most famous of Hartley's commendations, *Henry Fool* is judged by Janet Maslin to be 'a great American film' that 'will linger where it matters: in the hearts and minds of viewers receptive to its epic vision'. 'Of Faustian Wonders and a Mythic Queens', *New York Times*, 19 June 1998, p. E13.

<sup>3</sup> *Box Office Mojo* lists the domestic total gross as \$1,338,335: [www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=henryfool.htm](http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=henryfool.htm) (last accessed 11 April 2011). The budget

notable in the context of Hartley's previous output, which includes only one profitable film (*The Unbelievable Truth*, which was made for \$75,000 and grossed a little over \$546,000).<sup>4</sup> In an interview with Graham Fuller about *Henry Fool*, Hartley explains that playability to a broad(er) audience was a key issue, even at the production/pre-production stage:

I think of [gross-out, or 'Rabelaisian'] stuff as among the central pleasures of movie-going. I'm someone who's constantly wondering, 'Why are people going to see my movies?' or 'Why are they *not* going to see my movies but are going to others?' and I talk to people about it. And it seems people want to see sex in movies, they want to see violence, they want to see perversion. So, as an entertainer and without being cynical about it, I thought, 'How can I make the kind of movie I want to make and still provide these things?'<sup>5</sup>

The marketable elements that Hartley mentions here – sex, violence and perversion – were key to much independent cinema in the 1990s, owing in large part to the rise of Miramax and the popularisation of that company's highly successful 'exploitation'-style marketing tactics. *sex, lies, and videotape* (1989), *Scandal* (1989), *The Crying Game* (1992) and *Pulp Fiction* (1994) were all sold by Miramax through campaigns that heavily emphasised sexual and violent content, for example, and similar strategies were subsequently adopted by competing studio subsidiaries such as Fox Searchlight Pictures (with *Boys Don't Cry*, 1999) and Fine Line Features (with *Crash*, 1996, and *Dancer in the Dark*, 2000).<sup>6</sup> While *Henry Fool* would seem to be an obvious candidate for such marketing strategies, given its content, the film's more 'extreme' elements – the taboo sex, the vein of gross-out humour – were in fact played down in Sony Pictures Classics' marketing material. The poster, for example, gives no hint at all as to the film's more controversial dimensions. Two large images fill the majority of the space: one of Henry staring into the eyes of Fay, and one of

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figure of \$1 million is the figure Hartley has given in interviews (see for example Justin Wyatt, 'The Particularity and Peculiarity of Hal Hartley', *Film Quarterly*, 52:1 (1998), p. 5).

<sup>4</sup> The gross figure is put at \$546,541 by *IMDB*: [www.imdb.com/title/tt0100842/business](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0100842/business) (last accessed 11 April 2011).

<sup>5</sup> Graham Fuller, 'Responding to Nature: Hal Hartley in Conversation with Graham Fuller', *Henry Fool* (screenplay) (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), p. xxiv.

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of Miramax's rise to prominence and its impact on the American independent scene, see Alisa Perren, 'sex, lies and marketing: Miramax and the Development of the Quality Indie Blockbuster', *Film Quarterly*, 55:2 (2001), pp. 30–39.

Simon with his face pressed flat on the road. A quotation from a *New York Times* piece by Janet Maslin frames the film as an ambitious comedy by an auteur director: ‘Big, audacious! ... This breakthrough film is the most energetic and far reaching work Hartley’s done. A hilarious comedy of art, commerce and friendship.’<sup>7</sup> Sex and gross-out comedy are also missing from the trailer, which focuses on the vaguely supernatural, *Faust*-type tone of the narrative and the characterisation of Henry as a brilliant and humorous scoundrel.

Many of the characteristics of the *Henry Fool* trailer are familiar from the trailers for Hartley’s previous films, all of which emphasise the quirkily comedic qualities of the dialogue while also foregrounding Hartley’s authorship, as discussed in chapter 1 and briefly in chapter 2.<sup>8</sup> The comedic elements of the film, as well as its status as an auteur piece, were given similar emphasis in the reviews. Beyond comedy and various authorial ‘trademarks’ (features of all of Hartley’s full-length films, and of many other independent and low-budget films), *Henry Fool* exhibits two particular features that, I would suggest, contributed to its relatively high status. The first is the suburban setting, which ties the film back to Hartley’s well-received Long Island series and grounds the film in a similar sense of familiarity and particularity. The second is the film’s overall stylistic character. In its approach to performance, editing and cinematography, *Henry Fool* exhibits a greater fidelity to conventional realism than do any of Hartley’s other films. Dialogue sequences, for example, are composed of a familiar selection of shots, ordered so as to clearly establish the spatial relationships of the actors within the scene. A strong note of stylistic familiarity is also provided by Thomas Jay Ryan’s lead performance, the features of which are more readily associated with a respected tradition of ‘virtuoso’ acting than with the flattened style of acting adopted by the principals of Hartley’s earlier films. Such attributes contribute to a film style that is considerably less ‘distancing’ than that typical of Hartley – a characteristic that might be seen to be befitting of an ‘epic’-style story that spans the best part of a decade and that was apparently partly inspired by films such as *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) and *Doctor Zhivago* (1965) and literary works such as *Don*

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<sup>7</sup> This quotation is taken from Janet Maslin’s Cannes International Film Festival review: ‘Critic’s Notebook: The Calm Instead of the Storm at Cannes’, *New York Times*, 21 May 1998.

<sup>8</sup> Hartley’s name appears on an intertitle – ‘a film by Hal Hartley’ – in the trailers for each of his films. In the *Amateur* trailer, his name also appears in a text quotation from a *New York Times* review: ‘The nun, amnesiac and the prostitute. Deliciously droll. Hal Hartley’s most ambitious view of the world yet.’ In the *Flirt* trailer, a voice-over frames the director more explicitly as a successful auteur: ‘Internationally acclaimed filmmaker Hal Hartley, director of *Amateur*, *Trust*, and *Simple Men*, takes a funny and intriguing look at a universal obsession.’

*Quixote* (Cervantes, first volume published in 1605) and *Faust* (Goethe, *Part One* first published in 1808).<sup>9</sup>

In this chapter I consider the ways in which *Henry Fool*, at the levels of form, place and political content/perspective, is both consistent with and different from the earlier features discussed in chapters 1 and 2. In my discussion of *Fay Grim*, Hartley's most recent feature, I examine the film at a number of textual levels before considering its relationship to *Henry Fool*, with which *Fay Grim* shares a number of main characters. As a sequel to Hartley's best-received and highest-profile feature to date, *Fay Grim* might have been expected to reprise something of the tone and/or content of the earlier film; instead, it emphasises themes of mobility, globalisation and social instability familiar from films such as *Amateur*, *No Such Thing* and *The Girl from Monday*. In this way *Fay Grim* distances itself both from its narrative predecessor and from the Long Island features discussed in chapter 1.

### ***Henry Fool*: Style and Narrative**

*Henry Fool* opens on Simon (James Urbaniak), a wiry, etiolated young man who is about 30 years old. A series of medium and long shots show Simon going about his business in the junk yard in which he works, driving a forklift, directing a garbage truck and finally punching his time card in the time clock. A sense of ordinariness and tedium is conveyed through the uniformly dull grey-blue hues of the cinematography and the low-level sounds of industrial machinery on the soundtrack. In the final shot of the sequence, Simon walks slowly away from a static camera and through a large doorway, his body and the whole of the interior setting now rendered dramatically out of focus as the film's first titles appear: 'True Fiction Pictures and The Shooting Gallery Present' ... 'a film by Hal Hartley' (figure 16).

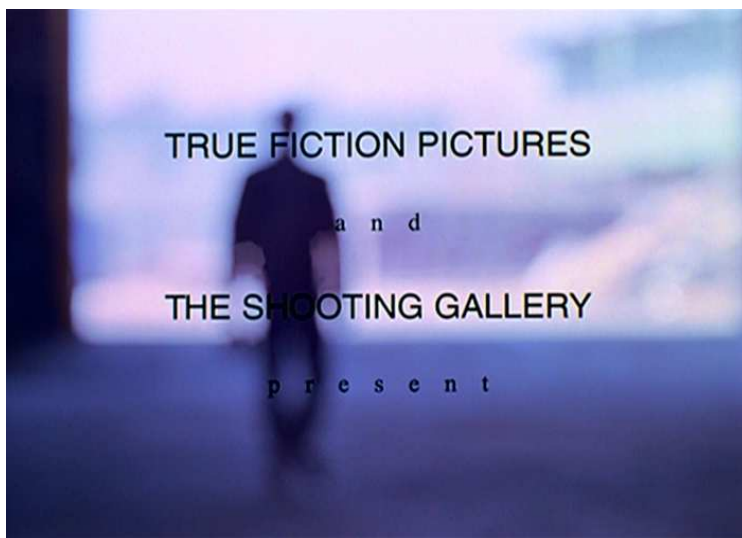
This opening sequence is typical of the film's overall style: a mixture of the conventional and the moderately offbeat, both in terms of the camera's position/movement and of the approach to editing. As in all of Hartley's features, the average shot length (put at 11.2 seconds by David Bordwell<sup>10</sup>) well exceeds

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<sup>9</sup> Hartley cites *Lawrence of Arabia*, *Doctor Zhivago*, *Faust* and *Don Quixote* as influences on *Henry Fool* in his interview with Graham Fuller for the film screenplay, for example. Fuller, 'Responding to Nature', p. xi.

<sup>10</sup> Bordwell contrasts Hartley's average shot length in *Henry Fool*, *Surviving Desire* (10.5 seconds), *Theory of Achievement* (17.9 seconds), *Amateur* (10 seconds) and *Flirt* (18.7 seconds)

that of Hollywood cinema in the 1990s – although a preponderance of long takes characterises much low-budget or ‘alternative’ American cinema of this period, as Jeffrey Sconce has argued.<sup>11</sup> Camera movement is limited, and dialogue and action scenes are shot using a fairly conventional combination of close-ups, medium shots, and shot-reverse shots. The first extended conversation scene of the film, for example, in which Simon hints at his social isolation (‘I am not retarded’ ... ‘People. I mean. They think. You know. Because’) and Henry tells Simon about his books of memoirs, pictures the two characters in medium close-up; after each of Henry’s more enigmatic or dramatic pronouncements, we cut to an answering shot that clearly records Simon’s look of puzzlement or surprise. This pattern of editing may be compared to that adopted in dialogue scenes in a number of Hartley’s previous features, in which off-screen voices and extreme close-ups feature prominently.<sup>12</sup> The effect created by the use of such devices in *Trust*, *Simple Men* and *Flirt* is one of disorientation: the viewer is denied the visual information necessary to form a clear sense of the spatial relationships of the actors within the scene. Effects of this order are absent from *Henry Fool*, in which shot selection and sequencing, while sometimes of an offbeat or unusual



**Figure 16**  
Low-key stylisation:  
opening titles in *Henry Fool* © Shooting  
Gallery/True Fiction  
Pictures

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to the 3–6 second average shot length of 1990s Hollywood cinema. Bordwell, ‘Up Close and Impersonal: Hal Hartley and the Persistence of Tradition’, *16:9*, 3:12 (2005): [www.16-9.dk/2005-06/side11\\_inenglish.htm#\\_edn9](http://www.16-9.dk/2005-06/side11_inenglish.htm#_edn9) (last accessed 12 April 2011).

<sup>11</sup> Jeffrey Sconce, ‘Irony, Nihilism, and the New American “Smart” Film’, *Screen*, 43:4 (2002), p. 360.

<sup>12</sup> Perhaps the most dramatically unconventional of these scenes is that which opens *Trust*. The first shot is a facial view of Maria (Adrienne Shelly) that takes up almost the entire screen. Maria exchanges dialogue with her father, off-screen, and her mother, visible but out of focus in the background. The first cut moves us to a credit screen, and then to the second shot, in which Maria’s mother has moved to the foreground, and Maria and her father continue to speak in the background. This is a radical subversion of continuity editing devices that creates a strange sense of spatial disorientation in the viewer, at the same time as suggesting the strained, distant nature of Maria’s relationship with her parents.

character, generally serve to maintain continuity and spectator orientation.

Hartley's approach to performance is characterised by a similar mix of the unusual and the familiar. Of the two central performances, Urbaniak's is the more recognisably 'Hartleyan', the actor adopting only a limited number of subtly different facial expressions while speaking in a rather flat or deadpan tone. Parker Posey, playing Fay, offers a similarly stylised performance, maintaining an expression identified by one reviewer as a 'sexy scowl' for the majority of the film.<sup>13</sup> Thomas Jay Ryan's performance as Henry is marked by a more familiar style of line delivery. In contrast to the leading men of *The Unbelievable Truth* (Robert John Burke), *Trust* (Martin Donovan), *Simple Men* (Robert John Burke and Bill Sage) and *Amateur* (Martin Donovan again), Ryan does not 'flatten' his dialogue to any great degree; rather, he makes use of a range of vocal registers and cadences in order to convey Henry's pomposity, mysteriousness and wretchedness at various points in the narrative.<sup>14</sup> This kind of performance is recognisable from a large number of mainstream films in which the principal actors, rather than conforming to a broadly conventional inconspicuous performance style and to what James Naremore calls the 'low-level ostensiveness of ordinary conversation', adopt a style of line delivery that serves to foreground a high degree of skill, inventiveness or mastery.<sup>15</sup> In this category of performances/performers, Naremore places Laurence Olivier, John Gielgud and Orson Welles, each of whom is esteemed for the musical power and virtuosity of his vocal performances.<sup>16</sup> As Naremore further suggests, films featuring performances of this kind often make use of long speeches in order to call attention to the skill of the performer – a device that Hartley employs in *Henry Fool* to great effect.<sup>17</sup> In one such speech, captured in medium shot with just one edit, Henry tells Simon a story about how he held off a gang of drunken thugs by

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<sup>13</sup> Richard Williams, 'A Barf on the Shag Pile of Good Taste...; It Must Be Hal Hartley', *The Guardian*, 20 May 1998, Arts p. 13.

<sup>14</sup> According to Hartley, Thomas Jay Ryan was cast precisely because of his signature dramatic acting style: 'Henry needs to be a man who believes he's bigger than life itself. I had seen Tom in plays – particularly Richard Foreman's plays. I knew he had access to the huge. To these complicated but clearly articulated moments of panic or tenderness or perverted curiosity. He's in fact theatrical. And that's what Henry needed to be.' Hal Hartley and Kenneth Kaleta, *True Fiction Pictures & Possible Films: Hal Hartley in Conversation with Kenneth Kaleta* (New York: Soft Skull Press, 2008), p. 100.

<sup>15</sup> James Naremore, *Acting in the Cinema* (Berkeley, California; London: University of California Press, 1988), p. 43.

<sup>16</sup> Naremore, *Acting in the Cinema*, p. 46.

<sup>17</sup> Naremore cites as examples Edward G. Robertson's talk of actuarial statistics in *Double Indemnity* (1944), Marlon Brando's 'I coulda been a contender' soliloquy in *On the Waterfront* (1954) and James Woods's talk on the telephone at the beginning of *Salvador* (1986). *Acting in the Cinema*, p. 47.



threatening to single out one assailant and tear out his eye. Ryan's delivery here is fluent and slightly rhythmical, his speech punctuated by dramatic pauses and emphatic hand gestures. Subtle shifts in volume and the use of dramatic repetition ('one of you ... one of you ... one of you is gunna have his eye torn out') give the impression of an expert storyteller with a flair for the dramatic. These devices serve in part to foreground Ryan's skill as a performer. Crucially, however, the flamboyance of Ryan's delivery is presented as being based in character: Henry's verbal fluency, his dramatic use of hushed tones and his forceful declarations are all entirely appropriate to a character defined by his grand ambitions and large appetites.

In such formal respects, *Henry Fool* comes closer to mainstream convention than perhaps any other Hartley film – although the viewer's attention is still likely to be drawn to the use of certain formal devices, as the comments of several reviewers indicate. The reviewer for the *Washington Post*, for example, complains of 'the mannered way Hartley's characters talk, like actors in a commercial for Calvin Klein's Obsession as scripted by Emily Bronte', before concluding that 'His films have always been suffused with affectation, but some of that, especially in the earlier movies, was merely bad acting. Here, it's deliberate and off-putting.'<sup>18</sup> The particular balance of more and less conventional elements struck in *Henry Fool* was, judging from comments made by Hartley in an interview with Justin Wyatt, the result of a conscious artistic decision made before (or during) the production: 'With *Henry Fool*, I didn't want to be too self-reflexive. It didn't seem appropriate.'<sup>19</sup> The finished film bears out the first part of this comment: there is no element of the script, cinematography, or editing scheme that amounts to such a radical subversion of 'realist' film conventions as the absurd, circling dialogue of *The Unbelievable Truth* (see chapter 1), the clearly choreographed dance sequences in *Simple Men* and *Surviving Desire* (see chapter 5) or the chorus sequence in 'Berlin', in which a group of construction workers discuss the relative merits of the film in which they are cast (see chapter 2). Departures from dominant formal convention are often quite minor, and perhaps subtle enough to go unnoticed by a first-time or casual viewer. Canted shots are used at various points as a visual correlative for the quirkiness of the characters and their situations. A sense of artificiality or

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<sup>18</sup> Michael O'Sullivan, "'Henry" Foolery from Hal Hartley', *Washington Post*, 24 July 1998, p. N37.

<sup>19</sup> Wyatt, 'The Particularity and Peculiarity of Hal Hartley', p. 6.

‘staginess’ is created in some scenes by holding a static shot for some time as various characters move deliberately in and out of frame, as if enacting a slow dance routine. This kind of self-consciously choreographed movement is fairly unusual in the independent world, and it is a distinctive mark of several of Hartley’s films (*The Unbelievable Truth*, *No Such Thing*), although the duration and frequency of its use here are limited.<sup>20</sup>

The film’s visual style was, in the mainstream review material, considered to be worthy of some praise – although more often the subject was (unsurprisingly perhaps) given little or no attention.<sup>21</sup> A more critical view is offered by a piece by Sarah Phillips in the semi-academic Canada-based journal *CineAction*, published very shortly after the film’s release.<sup>22</sup> For Phillips, Hartley’s movement away from the ‘rigid formalism’ and ‘irreverent non-naturalism’ of the earlier films has resulted in a film in which ‘formalism has made way for formula’:

*Henry Fool* suffers from the consequences of a loosening of formal constraints. Without a defamiliarized presentation, cliché becomes little more than cliché. Henry Fool’s megalomaniac insistence on his artistic genius and his subsequent exposure as a fraud ... feels formulaic. Similarly, Simon Grim’s rise to fame ... adheres to an American Dream trajectory that is little differentiated from that of conventional Hollywood narratives.<sup>23</sup>

Phillips’s criticism finds an echo in an article by the academic Murray Smith commissioned for a *Sight & Sound* reader on American independent cinema. In contradiction to the bulk of the press reviews for *Flirt* and *Henry Fool*, Smith praises the former film for its formal innovation and challenging narrative

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<sup>20</sup> In one scene, for example, Henry is shown sitting at a table, talking to Amy (Diana Ruppe). Fay enters the frame and sits down, at which point Amy stands up and leaves the frame. Simon then appears and sits where Amy was sitting previously. The final ‘beat’ of this sequence of movements comes when Henry leaves; a few seconds later, following a brief exchange between Fay and Simon, we finally cut to a new shot.

<sup>21</sup> The *Variety* review, for example, praises the film for its framing (‘Hartley, as always, knows exactly where to place the camera’) and for ‘Mike Spiller’s clean photography’. Derek Elley, ‘*Henry Fool*’, *Variety*, 21 September, 1997, p. 75. Examples of reviews that do not discuss the film’s visual style include Kevin Thomas’s piece for the *Los Angeles Times* (‘Fate, Friendship Intertwine in Darkly Funny “Fool”’, 26 June 1998, p. 10) and Michael Colton’s for the *Washington Post* (‘Giving the Devil His Due: Witty, Intricate “Henry Fool”’, 24 July 1998, p. B01).

<sup>22</sup> Sarah Phillips, ‘A “Breakthrough” Film? Hal Hartley’s *Henry Fool*’, *CineAction*, 47 (1998), pp. 45–47.

<sup>23</sup> Phillips, ‘A “Breakthrough” Film?’, p. 47.

structure and characterises the latter as a ‘dead end’ that ‘seems like a forced attempt to escape the charge of “formalism”, without any real sense of what will take its place’.<sup>24</sup> *Henry Fool* does move away from the more spectacular and disturbing kinds of formal innovations that characterise many of Hartley’s earlier films, as I have suggested above. It is, however, difficult to see the film as coming as close to Hollywood convention as Phillips implies. The film’s commitment to the stereotypical ‘American Dream’ narrative, in which a protagonist acts to improve his (or, less commonly, her) material conditions and class status through a mixture of hard work and inspiration, is complicated by the fact that the film’s final section centres not on Simon, by this point a poet superstar, but on Henry. After the bitter argument between the two characters about Simon’s broken promise to negotiate the publication of Henry’s *Confession*, the film jumps forward seven years; during the ensuing final section Simon appears only as a minor character in an account of Henry’s unhappy domestic life. This passage, like the film as a whole, combines a number of transparently familiar plot elements (Fay’s banning of Henry from the family home on account of his irresponsible parenting) with a similar number of unexpected or provocative elements (the ambiguous ending, which sees Henry running either towards a plane and a life on the run or back towards Simon and his family) of a kind typical of Hartley’s work. The effect is to destabilise mainstream conventions of narrative development and climax that, nevertheless, remain at least partially recognisable.

### **Regional Identity**

Shifts between elements of a more and less familiar nature are also characteristic of the film’s vision of suburban place. Like each of the Long Island features, *Henry Fool* visualises a distinct suburban region that is defined in terms of social/personal discontent, familial dysfunction and tabloid crime. Impressions of everydayness are blended with moments of absurdity and perversity. Static or slowly moving shots of eerily depopulated public spaces (see figures 17 and 18) – the wide deserted road that runs past the Grim household, the waste processing plant, the corridors of the hospital in which Fay gives birth – create a feeling of strangeness and even otherworldliness (again reminiscent of the Long Island

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<sup>24</sup> Murray Smith, ‘Parallel Lines’, in Jim Hillier (ed.), *American Independent Cinema: A Sight and Sound Reader* (London: British Film Institute, 2001), p. 160.

films) that reflects the Faust-like qualities of the narrative and Henry's characterisation as a figure of enigmatic power and uncertain origins.<sup>25</sup>

Other details have a strong ring of familiarity, and even cliché. A sense of generic place is created through an emphasis at various points on the long-standing association of television with conformist domesticity and the anaesthetisation of the individual – a characteristic of many films that depict life in suburbia, as discussed in chapter 1. The same association is emphasised (as previously indicated) in *Trust*, in which Matthew explains that television 'deadens the inner core of my being' and that it thus serves to ease the emotional stress of domestic life. While *Trust* traces the anaesthetising effects of television



**Figure 17**  
Depopulated spaces: the waste processing plant in *Henry Fool* © Shooting Gallery/True Fiction Pictures



**Figure 18**  
Depopulated spaces: the hospital in *Henry Fool* © Shooting Gallery/True Fiction Pictures

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<sup>25</sup> Hartley acknowledges the otherworldly feeling of *Henry Fool's* setting in the interview included in the published screenplay: 'The whole exercise [of making *Flirt*] did what an exercise is supposed to do. It made movie-making mysterious to me again. So I came back and found Woodside, Queens, in New York City, which is where we shot *Henry Fool*, and I kept looking at it like it is: a different planet.' Graham Fuller, 'Responding to Nature', p. x.

on the psyche of the intellectual male, *Henry Fool* cleaves more closely to a broad convention according to which women in suburbia embody social constriction and immobility. In *Henry Fool* it is Fay and, more dramatically, her mother, Mary (Maria Porter), who are most often shown glued to the television screen. In an early scene in the Grim household, for example, we see Fay watching a small portable television while Mary, in another room, watches a different set tuned to a different channel. In a later scene the television screen is shot in close-up, filling the screen with a mass of static that reflects the benumbed state of Mary's character.

A broader sense of familiarity, and a strong sense of geographical place, is generated by the film's presentation of Queens's suburban culture. A range of details of a more or less subtle nature serve to evoke the social and cultural meanings of the region, as expressed in a variety of cultural products and writings. The centring of working-class characters defined by a sense of dissatisfaction and a somewhat distasteful eccentricity, for example, is a feature common to a large range of Queens-set narratives produced in the 1980s and 1990s. In a survey of films and television shows set or partly set in Queens during this period, such as *Dear John* (1988–1992), *Seinfeld* (1990–1998), *Used People* (1992), *Quiz Show* (1994), *It Could Happen to You* (1994) and *This Is My Life* (1992), the *New York Times* writer David Firestone identifies two broad categories into which the majority of characters fall: those who stay in Queens and are 'a bit nutty, a bit gross, a bit pathetic', and those who want to 'get out', often into Manhattan.<sup>26</sup> Here we are returned to the cultural distinction between the city – or, at least, Manhattan as representative of the city – and its suburbs discussed in chapter 1 in relation to *The Unbelievable Truth* and *Simple Men*. A range of both independent productions (including Hartley's films) and more mainstream productions exploit the popular idea of a city/suburb 'divide' in order to map the shifting emotional and intellectual identities of their main characters. *Desperately Seeking Susan* (1985), for example, centres on a bored New Jersey housewife whose longing for romance and adventure is fulfilled when she falls into a world of seedy bars, rock 'n' roll and young bohemians in New York City. *This Is My Life* tells the story of a single mother who moves from a dull and conformist Queens to Manhattan, where she is able to realise her

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<sup>26</sup> David Firestone, 'For Queens, a Place in the Sun', *New York Times*, 18 September 1994, p. 46.

dream to work as a stand-up comic.<sup>27</sup> The city in *The Unbelievable Truth* is, by stark contrast, presented as a place of legitimised exploitation and capitalist striving that is finally inhospitable to the suburban protagonist. A similar association of New York City with executive superficiality characterises *Henry Fool*, although the city is here less emphatically oppressive in character. Certainly, the film's portrayal of executive urban culture is often quite pointedly critical, especially in the first scenes set in the publishing house that Simon visits in order to submit his poem. After a brief scene in which Simon is mistaken firstly for a messenger and secondly for a plumber by the publishing house receptionist, we cut to a shot of a conference room in which three men – Angus (Chuck Montgomery), a senior publisher, and Steve (Paul Boocock) and Barry (David Latham), two young executives – are discussing the 'digital revolution' and its implications for the publishing business. Both this and a slightly later scene involving the same figures are characterised by a strong note of satire. Jargon and hyperbole figure prominently, particularly in the dialogue of Steve and Barry:

ANGUS: I don't think people are going to prefer reading books on television,

Steve.

STEVE: It won't be television!

BARRY: It'll be interactive.

STEVE: Angus, look, we have a number of charts here ...

BARRY: In every home in America the PC will be where the TV used to be.

STEVE: And it'll be a direct connection to all forms of media.

BARRY: An unprecedented transformation of American social life ...

STEVE: We'll all become better informed, more literate, increasingly productive, and ... Well, and, like I said, we have a number of charts ...

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<sup>27</sup> A later shift in the protagonist's character – from good mother to uncommitted mother, and from authentic comedian to famous 'sell-out' – coincides with her movement to Los Angeles, a region often associated in various cultural discourses with materialism and artificiality. An association of this kind is famously made in Woody Allen's *Annie Hall*, which offers a characterisation of Los Angeles as 'dead-brain-ville', as Saverio Giovacchini puts it. "'Hollywood Is a State of Mind": New York Film Culture and the Lure of Los Angeles from 1930 to the Present', in David Halle (ed.), *New York & Los Angeles: Politics, Society, and Culture: A Comparative View* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 443.

The particular mixture of evangelistic bluster ('An unprecedented transformation of American social life') and banal rationalisation ('we have a number of charts') established here serves effectively to identify city culture with a position of self-serving insincerity.<sup>28</sup> This cultural characterisation is slightly complicated, however, by the character of Angus. Rather like Vic in *The Unbelievable Truth*, Angus is an efficient capitalist whose entrepreneurial instincts ('So, anyway,' he asks Barry and Steve, 'how is the digital revolution going to help me sell books?') are complemented by a passion and frankness that connect him to the younger characters who lead the narrative. When, in a later scene, Simon asks Angus why he is interested in publishing the poem given his estimation of its artistic worth (Angus initially dismisses Simon's work as 'profoundly irrelevant' and 'embarrassing'), Angus replies, 'Other people's responses. I don't live in a vacuum, you know. Two months ago I didn't have the proof of your poem's appeal. Now I do.' In another instance that serves to code Angus's character as one grounded in honesty and perceptivity, Angus argues with Simon about his artistic debt to Henry. 'He taught me everything I know', says Simon. 'No!' replies Angus, 'He encouraged all that was expressive in you to become manifest. He inspired you to act. He influenced your perception.' The poetic/philosophical flavour of the language used by Angus here is suggestive more of Henry and his 'authentic intellectual' cultural identity than of the 'executive' cultural identity of Steve and Barry and the upmarket office building in which they work.<sup>29</sup>

The use of Angus as a generally positive point of reference is a notable feature of *Henry Fool*, given the critical characterisations of the figure of the urban professional offered by *The Unbelievable Truth* (the pimp-like model agent Whitbread), *Amateur* (the yuppie-gangsters Jan and Kurt) and the short film *Ambition* (the unsympathetic gallery boss). However, while Angus is a sympathetic character, he is also a lone figure who stands outside the social community to which the other main characters belong. While Simon, Henry, Fay

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<sup>28</sup> It is tempting, too, to see the (repeated) remark made by Steve about having 'a number of charts' as a satirical reference to the language employed by producers and distributors working in the mid- and later 1990s, given some of Hartley's interview comments (in a 1998 interview with Justin Wyatt, for example, Hartley says that '[by about 1995] you would get approached by perfectly intelligent producers and distributors who might want to give you money and a couple of years before they told me, "OK, do your thing!" ... Just two years later, it was more like, "Don't do quite your thing, can you do your thing but make it a little bit more like these movies that did business last year ... [ellipsis in the original] we have the figures right here.'" Justin Wyatt, 'The Particularity and Peculiarity of Hal Hartley', p. 5).

<sup>29</sup> The interiors of the publishing house building have all the familiar hallmarks of an upmarket modern business space: high ceilings, wide stairways, glass doors and tasteful abstract art.

and Mary are positioned within a network of strongly emotional and/or sexual relationships, Angus is positioned as an outsider to this network; his relationships with others (Simon, his receptionist Laura, Steve and Barry) are defined in purely professional terms. In this way, *Henry Fool* sustains a regional distinction similar to that made in *The Unbelievable Truth*, city existence being associated in general with enterprise and individualism, and suburban existence with authentically emotional, if fraught, interpersonal relationships.<sup>30</sup>

As in *The Unbelievable Truth* and the other two films of the Long Island series, personal relationships in *Henry Fool* play out within a milieu of social dysfunction and eccentricity. Everyday life is characterised by a mix of the gritty (down-at-heel and industrial locations feature frequently; many characters are unemployed and/or short of money) and the absurdly gross or taboo (Simon vomiting on a young woman's buttocks, Henry evacuating his bowels after overdosing on espressos) – a combination also characteristic of a number of Smith's films, including *Clerks*, *Clerks II* and *Zack and Miri Make a Porno*. Tabloid crime again figures prominently. In the later part of the film, for example, Henry is approached by a 14-year-old girl (Pearl, played by Christy Romano) who asks him to kill her father in exchange for oral sex – the individual details of this episode resonating with several of the high-profile Long Island criminal cases discussed in Chapter 1.<sup>31</sup> Other textual details serve to express the regional identity of Queens more specifically. The presence of a number of black and Asian characters (absent from the Long Island films) contributes to a sense of the ethnic plurality associated with Queens. A large number of news stories in the 1990s took as their subject the growing immigrant population of the region, particularly in the neighbourhoods along the No. 7 Subway Line that runs down the centre of the borough. Sometimes referred to as the 'immigrant express' or 'international express', this line provides cheap transportation from neighbourhoods such as Flushing, Jackson Heights and Woodside (the setting for *Henry Fool*) to employment centres such as Long Island City and Manhattan. Increases in the immigrant populations of such Queens neighbourhoods were

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<sup>30</sup> Although here again the distinction between city and suburb might be seen to be less sharp than the distinction made in *The Unbelievable Truth*, seeing as Simon's move to the city in the later stages of the film does not lead to the destruction of the character's self-respect and values, as Audry's move does in the earlier film (indeed, it is in the city that Simon finds a romantic partner, Laura, the receptionist at the publishing house).

<sup>31</sup> Murder, sex and a teenage girl were key elements in both the 'Long Island Lolita' case of 1992 and the Cheryl Pierson case of 1986, for example. See (among many newspaper pieces) Josh Barbanel, '17-Year-Old Is Charged in Shooting', *New York Times*, 23 May 1992, p. 28; Clifford D. May, 'Father's Slaying Perplexes L.I. Town', *New York Times*, 25 February 1986, p. B2.



associated with a number of social pressures and problems, relating in particular to housing shortages and, as a 1997 *New York Times* article puts it, ‘tensions between longtime residents who see the character of their community changing, and their newest neighbors, who feel unwelcome and misunderstood’.<sup>32</sup> Such tensions, the article suggests, were at least partly rooted in xenophobia: ‘Longtime residents [of Jackson Heights] have been known to complain about the smell of curry emanating from the Indian restaurants, about the Latin American peddlers clogging the sidewalks with their boxes of fruit, and, now, about the sheer numbers of their newest neighbors, the Mexicans.’<sup>33</sup>

In *Henry Fool*, the issue of friction of this kind between ‘native’ residents and immigrants is emblematised in a brief scene in which Warren (Kevin Corrigan), a young man who has recently taken a job distributing political flyers, tries to convince Simon to vote for a congressman called Owen Feer. Warren offers a précis of Feer’s agenda: ‘to restore America to its position of unmatched wealth, power and opportunity; to revitalise American civilization and lead the human race to even greater levels of freedom, prosperity and security’. Warren then looks up at the owner of the store, a middle-aged Asian man called Mr Deng (James Saito), and snarls the word ‘Immigrant’, before turning to leave. Here regional and interpersonal social problems are linked to political ideology in a rather direct way, although the film stops well short of any sort of direct critique of contemporary political discourse. Rather, the nationalistic political commentary of Warren/Feer, though characterised in negative terms (at one point Fay describes Feer as ‘a Nazi’), is presented as a minor thread running through a story of familial dysfunction, individual creativity and male friendship. In this respect, *Henry Fool* is comparable to the majority of independent films (including *Trust* and *Simple Men*) that include references to issues of an explicitly socio-political nature, the common approach being to present such issues as forming a small part of the texture of everyday life, rather than as defining or shaping social existence in any consistent way (as I have argued in previous chapters, a more radical approach is adopted by Hartley in *Amateur* and the later films *The Girl from Monday* and *No Such Thing*).

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<sup>32</sup> Dan Barry, ‘In a Borough of Immigrants, a Strong Market for Hovels’, *New York Times*, 29 July 1997, p. A1.

<sup>33</sup> Barry, ‘In a Borough of Immigrants’, p. A1.

## Unfamiliar Territory: *Fay Grim*

In *Fay Grim*, political issues are consistently foregrounded as part of the narrative, although the film is far from being a radical critique at the social or political level. Rather, it offers a detailed, satirical and ‘complex’ representation of society and politics at a particular moment in history. The prevailing impression is one of obfuscation and uncertainty, the protagonist (and, by extension, the viewer) frequently being wrong-footed by the double-crosses and shifts in allegiance that define the world of espionage in which she unexpectedly finds herself. An emphasis on politically motivated betrayal is, of course, a familiar element of many films featuring a spy protagonist, although Hartley’s film often introduces a note of absurdity that is far less conventional. In one sequence, for example, a British agent called Juliet (Saffron Burrows) seizes from Fay a package containing volumes of coded information about the secret activities of various world governments (these volumes are in fact part of Henry’s *Confession*, as featured in *Henry Fool*). As Juliet turns to leave, she runs into a young Arab man with a gun (he later describes himself as ‘a soldier of God’) who seizes the package for himself. He, in turn, is immediately confronted by another man with a gun, who attempts to take the package. The absurdly quick succession of the hold-ups, and the rather ‘staged’, even melodramatic nature of the choreography – Fay twice moves, quite unnecessarily, from one side of the stairway to the other – contribute towards a feeling of droll farce that is quite unusual in the espionage film, and especially in such scenes of armed ambush, which are more conventionally characterised by a building sense of tension.<sup>34</sup>

Moments of comedy and farce are balanced against moments of anxiety and loneliness. The unfamiliar world into which Fay is thrust by the CIA agents Fulbright (Jeff Goldblum) and Fogg (Leo Fitzpatrick) is defined by constant mobility, isolation and homelessness. As she sets about the espionage assignment set her by the CIA, leaving behind a world of domesticity and community in Queens, Fay moves through a series of spaces associated with cosmopolitan, globalised life: an airport (where she is supposed to rendezvous with a contact) and various hotel lobbies and hotel rooms (where she encounters various agents

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<sup>34</sup> One obvious example is the scene in *North by Northwest* (1959) in which the head of the gang of spies, Philip Vandamm (James Mason), is threatened with a gun by his close ally, Leonard (Martin Landau).

working for a variety of national governments). In both its foregrounding of such 'in-between' spaces or 'non-spaces' and its centring of characters who cross national borders, the film can be located within a broad tradition of 'transnational' cinema. The category or concept of transnational cinema is mobilised by critics such as Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden to reflect 'the impact of advanced capitalism and new media technologies as components of an increasingly interconnected world-system', in terms both of film production/distribution and of the particulars of filmic representation.<sup>35</sup> Key to the narratives of much transnational cinema is a central figure who is displaced or 'out of place', two important examples being the immigrant and the soldier deployed in a distant country. As Ezra and Rowden suggest, in focusing on deterritorialised subjects from all classes of society, the more radical examples of transnational cinema serve to destabilise the conventional, Hollywood system of representation, which constructs non-Western subjects as 'others' and defines indicators of non-Western cultural identity in terms of the 'exotic'.<sup>36</sup>

In this context, I would argue, *Fay Grim* sits somewhere between mainstream and alternative traditions. On the one hand, the film's narrative is centred not on a displaced or homeless non-Western protagonist but, rather more conventionally/generically, on a white American protagonist on a mission (Fay's movements are motivated, initially, by a desire to secure for her brother an early release from prison, and, later, by the thought of being reunited with Henry). On the other hand, the film's portrayal of the international political landscape departs quite significantly from dominant convention. *Fay Grim* offers a clear alternative, for example, to mainstream films about international conflict such as *The Sum of All Fears* (2002), *Mission: Impossible II* (2000) and *Mission: Impossible III* (2006), in which conflict and terrorism are conceived of as problems that can be 'solved' by outstanding (American) individuals: a process of dramatisation familiar from much mainstream cinema in general, in which social difficulties are emblematised by 'bad' characters who can be stopped, contained, or killed. In *Fay Grim*, by contrast, political unrest and violence are presented as an inescapable part of the texture of modern life. Terrorism is associated with a range of characters, many of whom are coded as at least partly sympathetic. One such character is Bebe (Elina Löwensohn), a woman from

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<sup>35</sup> Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden (eds.), 'General Introduction: What Is Transnational Cinema?', in *Transnational Cinema: The Film Reader* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 1.

<sup>36</sup> Ezra and Rowden, *Transnational Cinema*, p. 11.

Chechnya who is described early on in the narrative as a terrorist who is ‘wanted’ by the Russians, the Israelis, the French and the US. Later, however, Bebe is revealed to be an amateur agent who fears being captured and possibly returned to Chechnya by the CIA. A more recognisable terrorist figure is Jallal (Anatole Taubman), a character described by the *New York Times* writer Stephen Holden as ‘an Osama bin Laden surrogate’.<sup>37</sup> Jallal is the seasoned leader of an anti-Western terrorist organisation and is responsible for the deaths of ‘hundreds’ of American citizens and of many more American soldiers and agents. Jallal’s characterisation is far from entirely critical, however. We are informed via dialogue that in the past he protected Henry from ‘reactionary’ elements within his administration – a detail that suggests that Jallal’s own political position is somewhat distinct from a reactionary position. Jallal is also characterised by a calm, even wistful demeanour, at one point telling Fay she is a ‘good woman’ and contemplating a possible future where they might share a closer relationship (‘Someday when all this is over and we have destroyed Western civilization ...’).

The presentation of Jallal as a somewhat ‘sympathetic’ terrorist figure contributes to a broader sense generated by the film of capturing some of the complexities and ambiguities of a transnational world. An important feature of the film is the time it devotes to conveying background detail of a geopolitical nature, most often through the dialogue of agent Fulbright. This dialogue is typically marked by a rapid pace of delivery and a bureaucratic or banal tone. One example comes early on in the narrative, when Fulbright is explaining to Fay the problems the CIA are facing in securing Henry’s coded books:

The French are in a tight spot. The Germans, the Belgians, the Israelis, China – nobody wants the French to hand over these books to the US. However, there’s a treaty, an older one, and a loophole in that treaty that prevents the French government from impounding an American citizen’s property, under certain narrowly defined conditions, which we’ve recently had broadened due to the current instable international terrorist situation, etc.

The high concentration in this passage of political specifics – many of which seem to serve no obvious expository function – serves to create a general impression of social verisimilitude, of the ‘real’ conditions of life lived in the

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<sup>37</sup> Stephen Holden, ‘Battling Evildoers’, p. E12.

world of espionage. Also contributing to a sense of realism are various details that can be read as expressing a general mood (within the diegesis) of international political distrust: a feature often perceived, of course, to also be characteristic of real-world politics in this post-9/11 era. When Fay, talking with Fulbright about Henry's past encounters with Russian 'advisers', asks Fulbright, 'aren't the Russians our friends now?' Fulbright replies, 'Nobody's our friend, Fay'. Fulbright also makes reference to 'the current instable international terrorist situation', as noted above. For Hartley, such details are illustrative not of a distinct, post-9/11 political reality, but rather of a political reality that has remained consistent for at least the past few decades. This position is consistent with various aspects of the film's narrative, the backstory of which, as Hartley notes, includes references to political instability and distrust that extend back to at least the 1980s.<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, elements of the kind noted above can reasonably be thought to contribute to a representation of the world that (as the comments of various interviewers and critics suggest) is readily recognisable as a post-9/11 world and that thus offers a note of 'authentic' realism or topicality.<sup>39</sup>

A note of political verisimilitude is struck, at a number of points, by dialogue that also seems to serve a more pointedly satirical function. When Fay asks Fulbright about Henry's involvement with the CIA, he tells her that 'Henry was an operative of the CIA in Chile during a time when it became necessary for the United States to help overthrow the government there', further explaining that the Chilean government was 'inappropriate to the needs of the American economy'. This is a kind of political critique: a questioning of the conventional idea that American foreign policy is derived primarily from the demands of morality.<sup>40</sup> Moments of critique of this kind are limited in number and in scope,

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<sup>38</sup> Hartley states: 'I'm one of those people who doesn't think the world has changed any at all since 9/11 ... That's one of the reasons why the backstory of *Fay Grim* goes all the way back into the '80s. I was trying to sketch out the continuity of all this hanky-panky between the security agencies of the world.' Nick Dawson, 'Hal Hartley, "Fay Grim"', 18 May 2007, *Filmmaker* (online): [www.filmmakermagazine.com/news/2007/05/hal-hartley-fay-grim/](http://www.filmmakermagazine.com/news/2007/05/hal-hartley-fay-grim/) (last accessed 11 April 2011).

<sup>39</sup> Among those writers who use the term 'post-9/11' or similar are Stephen Holden, who states that 'beneath its mockery, the movie is a commentary on the rampant paranoia that grips the post-9/11 world' ('Battling Evildoers', p. E12), and Mark Berrettini, who states that the film offers 'a post-September 11 spy-film parody'. *Hal Hartley* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011), p. 49.

<sup>40</sup> A similar kind of brief but pointed piece of commentary is provided by an exchange later in the film between Fay and the British agent Juliet, who has recently made a death threat against Fay's fourteen-year-old son, Ned. 'Don't think I'm inhuman,' says Juliet. 'Some dirty work needs to be done. Civilization ought to thank those of us who are willing to do it.' This piece of noble/righteous rhetoric – a familiar kind of apology for the more questionable aspects of governmental foreign policy – is met with a distinct scepticism by Fay, who replies, 'Why is it when someone starts talking about civilization I hear the sound of machine guns?'

however, providing fleeting notes of reflection rather than contributing to any sustained consideration of the background political context.

One of the ways in which the film presents itself as distinctive, or even ‘difficult’ in the context of much independent cinema (including many of Hartley’s films) is through the blending of broadly political material of the kind discussed above with material of a more zany, emotional or fantastical nature. One plot strand, for instance, centres on the attempts of Simon, Angus and Ned (who remain in Queens) to decode the sixth book of Henry’s *Confession*, the key to which, Simon believes, is a complex system of encryption in which sentences are composed to exhibit a consistent relationship to a pre-existing text. This text turns out to be Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, one of a series of details in the film with strongly fantastical or mythical associations, other examples including the discovery of a birth certificate that puts Henry’s year of birth at 1591, and a meeting between Fay and a blind Turkish shopkeeper who tells her the centuries-old legend of the ‘Harem Fool’, a Westerner who entertained a Sultan tyrant with his never-ending confessions. Such elements stand as marginal points of intrigue, however, rather than providing a defining point of orientation in a manner consistent with most mainstream films.<sup>41</sup> A similarly quirky note is created by the insertion of broadly comic material into a number of stock espionage film scenes. In the scene where Fay waits to rendezvous with a mysterious ‘contact’ in an airport bathroom, for example, the tension created by the non-appearance of the contact is undercut by the fact that Fay has failed to wipe from her mouth a circle of toothpaste foam (see figure 19). More zany humour characterises several scenes in which Fay answers a vibrating mobile phone which she has stored in her underwear, comedy arising from Parker Posey’s exaggerated, slapstick-style physical performance (swooning, staggering, raised eyebrows). In



**Figure 19**  
Blending international espionage and zany humour: Fay looks for her contact in *Fay Grim*  
© HDNet Films/Possible Films

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<sup>41</sup> See for example *The Da Vinci Code* (2006) and *The Devil’s Advocate* (1997).

the later stages of the narrative, broadly comic scenes of this nature are less common, the film settling into a more serious and melancholic tone. The dramatic final stretch of *Fay Grim* features the deaths of several important characters, including Bebe, who is shot just before being reunited with Fay, and Fulbright, who is engulfed in a large explosion triggered by one of Jallal's men. The shooting of Bebe is a particularly emotive moment, given her close relationship with Fay and her characterisation as an innocent lost in the cutthroat world of international espionage. A strong emotional charge also characterises the film's ending, which, in a manner familiar from several other Hartley films (*Simple Men*, *Amateur*), features a mix of the downbeat (Fay fails to reach the dock in time to be reunited with Henry) and the gently uplifting (as Henry appears on the deck of the ferry, Fay, watching from across a growing expanse of water, reacts with a faint smile and a nod of recognition; see figure 20).

The presence and combination of such dimensions in *Fay Grim* is a strong mark of distinction, commented upon in the vast majority of press reviews. A number of pieces praise the film for offering a fresh or strongly authored take on the espionage film. The *Los Angeles Times* review, for example, commends Hartley on creating a James Bond-style film that offers a distinctively Hartleyan low-budget aesthetic.<sup>42</sup> The review in the *New York Times* draws attention to the film's challenge to the conventions of gender representation in the espionage film: '[Fay is] a flouncing, vinegary, thoroughly modern woman who is the antithesis of the damsels in distress and slinky double agents usually found in spy movies'.<sup>43</sup> A larger number of pieces, however, find the mix of



**Figure 20**  
Mixed emotions: Fay catches up with Henry only to see him leave again at the end of *Fay Grim* © HDNet Films/Possible Films

<sup>42</sup> Kevin Krust, "'Fay' Takes Familiar Faces in a Different Direction', *Los Angeles Times*, 18 May 2007, p. E9. Krust states that 'this film feels like Hartley has been handed a Bourne or a Bond movie to direct and maintained his own style and low-budget aesthetic while thoroughly enjoying and deconstructing his new toy'.

<sup>43</sup> Stephen Holden, 'Battling Evildoers', p. E12.

dimensions on offer to be in some way off-putting. The *USA Today* review, for example, suggests that ‘*Fay Grim* is aptly named for its contradictory impulses. Not exactly grim, but not entirely fey, it doesn’t fully have a handle on what it wants to be.’<sup>44</sup> For the *Christian Science Monitor*, *Fay Grim* makes the mistake of ‘ventur[ing] into inflammatory territory that is quite beyond this film’s limited political or comedic scope’.<sup>45</sup> The *Variety* reviewer writes that ‘The purposely overwrought, archly acerbic tone [that characterised *Henry Fool*] has drifted into facetiousness which combines with an ever-more far-fetched plot to the point where the picture seems to disappear around the dark side of the moon.’<sup>46</sup> Roger Ebert, in a generally unfavourable review, criticises Hartley for ‘failing to figure out what he wanted to do instead [of making a conventional thriller], and delivering a film that is tortured in its attempt at cleverness, and plays endlessly’.<sup>47</sup>

Such responses position *Fay Grim* on the wrong side of what we might imagine as a line separating innovation or originality and frustrating oddity – the latter being associated both with ineptitude (as in Ebert’s criticising of Hartley for ‘failing to figure out what he wanted to do’) and conceit (as in *Variety*’s mention of the film’s ‘facetiousness’). The tendency of reviewers to characterise the film as offering a relatively low level of viewer pleasure can be related to the distancing effect that unconventional strategies – whether deliberate or inadvertent – may have on the viewer. The insertion of material of a farcical or fantastical nature into an espionage film in other ways coded as ‘political’ is a strategy that, in its rejection of the conventions associated with the espionage film, seems likely to heighten the viewer’s sense of the film as a ‘constructed’ reality. Indeed, the issue of distancing is explicitly raised by Ebert, who complains that ‘we feel deliberately distanced from the film’.<sup>48</sup>

Various degrees of distance are also created by the use of a variety of unconventional formal devices. Actors sometimes adopt movement patterns that seem unmotivated and distinctly choreographed, a feature *Fay Grim* shares with several of Hartley’s other films, *Henry Fool* included.<sup>49</sup> Words are occasionally

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<sup>44</sup> Claudia Puig, “‘Fay Grim’: It’s More Like ‘Feh’”, *USA Today*, 18 May 2007, p. 4E.

<sup>45</sup> Peter Rainer, ‘Pulp, but without the Friction’, *Christian Science Monitor*, 18 May 2007.

<sup>46</sup> Todd McCarthy, ‘*Fay Grim*’, *Variety*, 8 October 2006, p. 124.

<sup>47</sup> Roger Ebert, ‘*Fay Grim*’, *Chicago Sun-Times*, 18 May 2007: [rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20070517/REVIEWS/705170302/1023](http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20070517/REVIEWS/705170302/1023) (last accessed 12 April 2011).

<sup>48</sup> Ebert, ‘*Fay Grim*’.

<sup>49</sup> This kind of pattern of movement is adopted, for example, in a scene in which Andre talks to Fay about the contents of Henry’s *Confession*. Andre appears first, in a medium shot, directing



superimposed over images on the screen to create captions that are highly stylised (the text fills the screen; see figure 21) and sometimes rather comical in content (one reads, ‘HER NEW COAT HAS FAKE POCKETS’).<sup>50</sup> Such formal flourishes foreground in a fleeting manner the ‘authored’ status of the text. A more sustained example of formal unconventionality is the frequent use of canted shots. Although such shots feature in a range of independent films, often contributing to a general sense of the offbeat (as is the case with *Henry Fool*), their usage is usually quite limited. In *Fay Grim*, the camera is tilted either to the right or to the left in nearly every shot.<sup>51</sup> Again, Ebert is critical: ‘tilt shots have traditionally been used to create a heightened sense of danger ... Here they’re used for scenes of stultifying dialogue and seem more like a desperate attempt to add interest to flat material. I like it better when style seems to emerge from a story (as in “The Third Man”) than when it feels trucked in from the outside.’<sup>52</sup> Raised here, once more, is the issue of motivation. Clearly, as Ebert’s comments suggest, it is hard to read the canted shots in *Fay Grim* as an expression of the main character’s subjective experience, as such shots are used in all scenes, regardless of their content. At the same time, a more general thematic motivation is identifiable, the canted angles offering a suggestion of disorientation



**Figure 21**  
Stylised captions in *Fay Grim* © HDNet  
Films/Possible Films

his words to Fay, who is offscreen. Fay walks into the frame, the camera following her as she moves to the left, away from Andre. Andre reappears and walks swiftly across the frame from right to left. A few seconds later he re-enters from the left and moves in a circular path around Fay, before exiting to the right. This general pattern of unnecessary but deliberate movement is maintained over the next few shots.

<sup>50</sup> Such captions are in contrast, of course, to those of most espionage films, which rarely take up much space on the screen and are generally used to indicate specifics of time and/or place only.

<sup>51</sup> The one shot that is not canted owes its existence, according to Hartley’s cinematographer, Sarah Cawley, to an oversight in the shooting process: ‘During prep it became clear that we were going to do a more stylized cinematography [than that of *Henry Fool*], and that we were going to Dutch every shot. In fact there is only one shot that is not canted, and it’s the first shot we did. I forgot to put a Dutch angle on it because it was the first day.’ Interview with author, 6 December 2009 (see appendix B).

<sup>52</sup> Ebert, ‘*Fay Grim*’.

appropriate to a narrative that addresses political intrigue around the globe. It is this type of motivation, rather than motivation based in individual subjective experience, that is most often offered by Hartley's films, as I have argued in previous chapters. Only occasionally do formal departures from convention seem to lack clear motivation in either sense, one important example being the signature performance style of Hartley's films, discussed in chapter 2.

### **Repetition and Variation: *Fay Grim* as Sequel**

As one might expect, given some of the characteristics outlined above and the lukewarm responses of many of the film's reviewers, *Fay Grim* performed weakly at the box office, taking just \$126,714 during the four weeks of its release.<sup>53</sup> This figure compares poorly to the gross takings figure for *Henry Fool* (\$1.3 million), even taking into account the new, 'multiplatform' release approach taken with *Fay Grim* and the associated non-theatrical revenues.<sup>54</sup> From a commercial perspective, *Fay Grim* might even be characterised as something of a 'missed opportunity', considering, in particular, its status as a narrative sequel to Hartley's most commercially successful film. Certainly only modest efforts were made to present the film in such terms in the marketing materials,<sup>55</sup> some of which (including both the Magnolia Pictures trailer and the trailer made by Hartley) make no mention of the earlier film at all.<sup>56</sup> The lack of prominent references to *Henry Fool* is especially surprising given that the film's title does not announce the film as a sequel. This is in contrast to the practice of highlighting a film's status as a sequel through the repetition of original title terms – a characteristic of the vast majority of sequel titles, even at the indie/Indiewood end of the American cinema spectrum (examples including

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<sup>53</sup> See [www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=faygrim.htm](http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=faygrim.htm) (last accessed 11 April 2011).

<sup>54</sup> *Fay Grim* was released simultaneously in theatres, on the premium cable network HDNet, and on DVD. For a discussion of simultaneous-release distribution, at this point a new and hotly debated method of distribution, see Gabriel Snyder and Steven Zeitchik, 'Movie Biz on the "Bubble"', *Variety*, 30 January 2006, p. 1.

<sup>55</sup> While the word 'Henry', spoken by various characters, features several times in both Hartley's trailer and the Magnolia Pictures trailer, the words 'Henry Fool' are conspicuously absent, from both the dialogue excerpts and the intertitles. The original poster makes no mention of the earlier film, although some prints feature a narrow black banner bearing the words 'Featuring the continuing adventures of Henry Fool'. The same phrase (minus the word 'Featuring') appears on the reverse cover of the DVD released by Magnolia as part of their multi-platform release strategy; the front cover, however, features no reference of this kind.

<sup>56</sup> We might speculate that Hartley and/or Magnolia Pictures decided not to include references to *Henry Fool* in some marketing materials as part of an alternative marketing strategy, perhaps aiming to target Hartley fans or dedicated indie film viewers who might be thought likely to respond positively to a campaign that avoids giving the impression of 'spoon-feeding' potential viewers with 'obvious' references or information.

Kevin Smith's *Clerks II*, the 2006 sequel to *Clerks*; Richard Linklater's *Before Sunset*, the 2004 sequel to *Before Sunrise*; and Chris Fisher's *S. Darko* – released straight to DVD with the subtitle *A Donnie Darko Tale* – the 2009 sequel to Richard Kelly's *Donnie Darko*).<sup>57</sup>

Repetition of title terms has a long tradition in postclassical Hollywood, of course, and is characteristic of both the film remake and the film sequel. Such a practice has a clear commercial logic, the sequel/remake title serving, in effect, to market the film to a pre-existing audience. Patterns of repetition also define much of the content of the remake and the sequel. In this sense, such films can be seen as offering a (commercially proven) formula of repetition and variation similar to that offered by genre filmmaking more generally – a point made by Constantine Verevis in relation to the film remake.<sup>58</sup> In the film sequel, as Claire Perkins discusses in a recent article on remakes and sequels, a process of repetition is combined with a process of continuation: as the story is continued, certain elements (characters, actors, plot scenarios, themes, and so on) are also repeated.<sup>59</sup> The sequel thus offers a strong sense of familiarity while also offering the promise of narrative development. The narrative of the sequel may simply serve as an addition or extension to a self-contained narrative in which the main narrative issues are already resolved, in the manner typical of Hollywood film. Or it may serve to resolve issues or enigmas purposely left unresolved by the earlier film (while also, of course, introducing new narrative developments). This is the approach taken by a number of films in the *Star Wars* trilogy (1977–1983) and the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001–2003), for example, the entries in both trilogies contributing to a pre-arranged three-part 'vision' that was marketed, as Perkins puts it, so as to 'build a sense of stature and anticipation' that would be converted into returns for the first and second sequels.<sup>60</sup>

Hartley's approach with *Fay Grim* might, in this context, be seen as quite conventional in nature. A number of key elements are repeated: all three of the top-billed actors/characters in *Henry Fool* – Thomas Jay Ryan as Henry, James Urbaniak as Simon and Parker Posey as Fay – appear again in *Fay Grim*. A

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<sup>57</sup> Claire Perkins, in a survey of all the new films reviewed in *Sight & Sound* in a five-year period in the 2000s, finds only two film sequels whose titles do not acknowledge the preceding film: *Russian Dolls* (Cedric Klapisch, 2005, sequel to *The Spanish Apartment*, 2002) and *The Devil's Rejects* (Rob Zombie, 2005, sequel to *House of 1000 Corpses*, 2003). See Perkins, 'Remaking and the Film Trilogy: Whit Stillman's Authorial Triptych', *Velvet Light Trap*, 61 (2008), p. 24 (n. 1).

<sup>58</sup> Constantine Verevis, *Film Remakes* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), p. 5. Verevis's suggestion is referenced by Claire Perkins in 'Remaking and the Film Trilogy', p. 15.

<sup>59</sup> Perkins, 'Remaking and the Film Trilogy', p. 15.

<sup>60</sup> Perkins, 'Remaking and the Film Trilogy', p. 17.

strong sense of continuity is also generated through a series of references to the narrative of the earlier film. We learn, for example, that Simon was imprisoned for aiding Henry to escape from the law in *Henry Fool*. The film also conclusively resolves the narrative enigma with which *Henry Fool* concluded: Henry did in fact get on the plane, leaving behind his wife and son. Such broadly conventional features are, however, counterbalanced by a number of features that serve to break, or at least bend, the 'rules' of the film sequel. One film-sequel convention from which *Fay Grim* departs, with some conviction, is that of tonal/generic continuity. While some degree of disparity of tone and/or narrative material between sequel and predecessor is not too unusual, such shifts are generally quite minor and are carefully balanced by continuities in the same fields. In *Fay Grim*, by contrast, departures in tone and genre are sustained and substantial. The tone of *Fay Grim* is considerably less 'dark' than that of *Henry Fool*. 'Edgy' psychological material of a kind characteristic of the earlier film is entirely absent from the later film. This variation is part of a wider and more profound shift in emphasis away from family melodrama and youthful angst and towards action-adventure and political intrigue. The approach adopted here is quite unusual, even in the independent world, and may be contrasted to the approach adopted in two other independent film sequels, Richard Linklater's *Before Sunset* (2004) and Kevin Smith's *Clerks II* (2006). Both films approximate quite closely the narrative scenarios staked out by their predecessors. In *Before Sunset*, as in the earlier *Before Sunrise* (1995), the focus is almost exclusively on an extended conversation between the two principals as they wander through the spaces of the city. *Clerks II*, set ten years after *Clerks* (1994), follows Dante and Randal, still working for minimum wage in suburban New Jersey. Both films also share with their predecessors a very particular generic territory: low-key, naturalistic romance in the case of *Before Sunset* and romantic comedy with a 'vulgar' twist in the case of *Clerks II*.

Also offered in *Before Sunset* and *Clerks II* as a point of resemblance, relating sequel to predecessor, is a familiar form of regional landscape. In Linklater's film, this is the landscape of the photogenic, 'romantic' European city. The Paris of *Before Sunset*, like the Vienna of *Before Sunrise*, is presented as a place of eccentric/artistic tradition and beautiful sights ideally suited to romantic encounters. Smith's film takes as its setting a familiar form of blue-collar, humdrum and vaguely dysfunctional New Jersey suburbia, featured previously in *Clerks*, *Mallrats* (1995) and *Chasing Amy* (1997). In the case of

both Linklater's and Smith's films, a sense of place (at the generic and/or geographical level) serves to create a strong sense of familiarity not only within the film but across films: a type of orientation that may be thought to have particular value in establishing a recognisable 'brand' for a film series (and, more generally, for an auteur's cinema). As I have suggested in previous chapters, a sense of regional identity can act more generally as a point of orientation for the viewer, together with, or in place of, other, more widely discussed points of orientation such as genre and star actors. It can provide a sense of familiarity and stability that may, in some cases, serve as 'compensation' for unsettling or unusual formal strategies (Linklater's *Slacker* may be considered in these terms, as suggested in chapter 1). Familiar components may also be mixed with less familiar components that function to differentiate a film on the basis of 'alternativeness' or innovation. In *Henry Fool*, as well as in Hartley's other critically successful films, *The Unbelievable Truth*, *Trust* and *Simple Men*, familiar markers of the generic place of suburbia – familial dysfunction, routine television viewing – are blended with less typical (in cinematic terms) markers of geographical place. Such details, especially if they can be seen to harmonise in some way with the characterisations or themes presented by the narrative, can create their own sense of pleasurable orientation, relating the film text to stable 'real-world' discourses of regional/cultural identity. The approach adopted in *Fay Grim* is quite different. The emphasis on the local that characterises *Henry Fool* is replaced by an emphasis on the global. *Fay Grim* foregrounds the complex and morally ambiguous domain of international political intrigue in a way likely to create in the viewer a sense of disorientation akin to that felt by the protagonist. The use of certain quite radical formal devices, as highlighted by some reviewers, serves further to create a somewhat detached position for the viewer. While in other ways the film remains firmly within the realms of the 'quirky' independent feature, focusing on the emotionally motivated adventures of an eccentric, funny and sympathetic hero, it offers a degree of irregularity at the levels of form and content that remains rare in narrative feature production, the costs of which tend to preclude innovation of too radical a kind. Greater opportunities for the exploration of various unconventional formal and representational approaches are often thought to be offered by the short-film format, a variety of film that nevertheless serves a number of commercial functions and that has its own traditions of convention, as will be discussed in the

following chapter, which looks at Hartley's short films from the mid-1980s to the present day.

## 5

### The Short Films: From *Kid* (1984) to the *PF2* Collection

At the time of writing, the most recent six films of Hartley's filmography have been short works, ranging in length from 2 minutes (*Conspiracy*) to 28 minutes (*Implied Harmonies*). The release of five of these films on DVD by Microcinema brings the total number of available shorts by Hartley to 16 – not including the short film *Flirt* (shot in 1993), a slightly modified version of which forms the 'New York' segment of the full-length film also called *Flirt* (1995). Since his graduation film, *Kid* (1984), Hartley has moved frequently between feature-length productions and short-length productions, the latter often produced on commission for American or European television. These short works encompass a range stretching from broadly conventional, though offbeat and distinctive, narrative films to more radical non-narrative pieces. As in all of the features discussed in previous chapters, unusual and disorienting elements are generally balanced against points of orientation – generic frameworks, familiar actors, particular regional and cultural identities – that are familiar from much indie and mainstream cinema. This balance is sometimes shifted in a quite unconventional direction, however, particularly in *The Other Also*, a one-shot installation piece that features no conventional dialogue or recognisable human faces.

Most of the short films, having aired on television, have been collected in the DVD releases *Possible Films: Short Works by Hal Hartley* (2006) and *Possible Films Volume 2: New Short Films by Hal Hartley* (2010) or the Tartan Video VHS release *Three Shorts by Hal Hartley* (1994) (the same three films also appear on the 2010 Microcinema DVD *Hal Hartley's Surviving Desire*). Public screenings have mostly been limited to shorts programmes in international film festivals,<sup>1</sup> as is the case for most contemporary short films, although a large number of the shorts featured in the 2007 Hartley retrospective at the ERA New Horizons Film Festival in Poland, and also in the retrospective held by the American Museum of the Moving Image in 1995.<sup>2</sup> Recently, Hartley has also

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<sup>1</sup> Among the films that have appeared at festivals are the short version of *Flirt*, which played at the Toronto International Film Festival in September 1993, and *Theory of Achievement*, which played at the New York New Directors and New Films Festival in March 1991.

<sup>2</sup> The American Museum of the Moving Image retrospective, 'True Fiction Pictures: A Hal Hartley Retrospective', ran from 14 January until 29 January 1995, and screened Hartley's first three features along with the shorts *Kid*, *The Cartographer's Girlfriend*, *Dogs*, *Ambition*, *Theory*

made many of the short works available on his website, *Possible Films* (www.possiblefilms.com). Visitors to the site are offered the chance to buy either (or both) of the *Possible Films* collections in the form of a download or a DVD. In addition, a number of short films, including *Accomplice* (2009), one of the films released in the *PF2* collection; *Conspiracy* (2004/2010); and *Iris* (1994), a three-minute piece previously unreleased owing to music rights issues,<sup>3</sup> are available, free of charge, for streaming<sup>4</sup> – a method of distribution particularly suited to short films that can be seen as part of a move by Hartley in recent years towards self-distribution and a position of greater institutional independence.

This chapter considers all of Hartley's short films at a number of levels, both textual and industrial.<sup>5</sup> In making Hartley's short-film work the sole subject of this final chapter, rather than considering the films only in the context of discussions of the feature films, I am taking the standpoint that the shorts form an important part of Hartley's output that needs to be considered in an assessment of Hartley and his position within independent film. As I will discuss, the shorts often occupy a textual and industrial position that differs significantly from that occupied by Hartley's feature films. Detailed consideration of these films may thus lead us to form an overall view of Hartley's work that differs somewhat from a view derived from an investigation that gives the short films only fleeting attention.<sup>6</sup>

Combined with an examination of Hartley's short films is a degree of analysis of the short film format in the context of American independent film – a subject that has received little academic attention. Although the short-form film is often thought of as incidental to the practice of independent filmmaking, or as a rather cynically constructed showpiece, or 'calling card', its functions and

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*of Achievement, Surviving Desire, Flirt* (1993), *Opera No. 1, NYC 3/94* and three music videos directed by Hartley, *Iris, From a Motel 6* and *The Only Living Boy in New York*. The ERA New Horizons retrospective screened all of Hartley's features and most of his short films. For the list of screenings and dates, see

[7ff.eranowehoryzonty.pl/lista.do?tytul=hartley&dzien=&indeksAZ=%E2%80%93&rodzajTytulu=0&idCyklu=0&typ=tyt](http://7ff.eranowehoryzonty.pl/lista.do?tytul=hartley&dzien=&indeksAZ=%E2%80%93&rodzajTytulu=0&idCyklu=0&typ=tyt) (last accessed 14 April 2011).

<sup>3</sup> See Hartley's comments in the notes to the *Possible Films Volume 2 DVD* (Microcinema, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Also available for streaming are a making-of featurette about *No Such Thing*, an unreleased trailer for *Fay Grim* and a trailer for the *PF2* collection.

<sup>5</sup> I do not here consider the music videos that Hartley has directed. Such pieces, though describable as 'short films', belong to a category of film that has its own distinctive history, characteristics and functions (and academic literature); these pieces are thus beyond the scope of this already lengthy chapter. For production credits for the music videos directed by Hartley, see Hartley and Kenneth Kaleta, *True Fiction Pictures: Hal Hartley in Conversation with Kenneth Kaleta* (New York: Soft Skull Press, 2008), pp. 166–167.

<sup>6</sup> An example of a study that discusses the short films only as an aside within discussions of the feature films is Mark L. Berrettini's book *Hal Hartley* (Urbana, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2011).



effects within the independent world and in the careers of individual filmmakers can vary considerably, as the filmographies of Hartley and others suggest. The first part of this chapter outlines some of the issues related to financing and distributing the short film in America, and discusses how Hartley's films fit into this context. Before this, as an initial point of orientation, I offer below a brief characterisation of each of Hartley's short films and their production contexts:

*Kid* (1984, 33 minutes): Hartley's thesis film at State University of New York at Purchase. Long Island-set drama shot very cheaply on 16 mm. Familiar story (young man is frustrated with suburban family life), lightly absurdist in tone, with strongly authorial touches.

*The Cartographer's Girlfriend* (1987, 29 minutes): Self-funded project, again shot on 16 mm but slightly more 'glossy' in style, with crisper colours. Focus on somewhat bizarre romance. Touches self-consciously on issues of sexism and gender relations.

*Dogs* (1988, 20 minutes): The last of Hartley's Long Island-set shorts, shot on Super-8 Colour. *Dogs* remains unavailable on video or DVD, as do *Kid* and *The Cartographer's Girlfriend*, and the three films look likely to stay unreleased, apparently in line with Hartley's wishes. As I have not seen this film, I make no comment on its textual qualities.

*Ambition* (1991, 9 minutes): Oblique, Godardian vignette with a striking colour scheme, set in a SoHo art gallery. Both *Ambition* and *Theory of Achievement* (below) were made for the PBS *Alive from Off Center* arts series.

*Theory of Achievement* (1991, 18 minutes): Comic ensemble piece, composed of a series of dialogue-heavy episodes, about a group of youthful Brooklynite artist-intellectuals struggling to realise their ambitions.

*Surviving Desire* (1991, 57 minutes): Student–teacher romance replete with literary references. Strong generic framework, with expressionistic flourishes. Commissioned for the *American Playhouse* series as a TV

featurette, and released (along with *Ambition* and *Theory of Achievement*) on video (*Three Shorts by Hal Hartley*) and on DVD (*Hal Hartley's Surviving Desire*).

*Flirt* (1993, 23 minutes): Originally commissioned by an American TV network for a series that was never made, this version of *Flirt* has never been released. The script, however, was published in *Projections 3: Film-Makers on Film-Making* in 1994.<sup>7</sup>

*Opera No. 1* (1994, 8 minutes): Lip-synched mini-opera, witty and light-hearted, made in the tradition of the Shakespearian cross-dressing farce. Produced for cable TV.

*NYC 3/94* (1994, 10 minutes): Compilation of vignettes in which three characters navigate a New York City that seems to be under attack, or at war. Commissioned by Arte, the Franco–German TV network, for a small series called *Postcards from America*.

*Iris* (1994, 3 minutes): Boldly colourful, enigmatic video piece, featuring Parker Posey and Sabrina Lloyd and set to music by The Breeders. Made for a VHS compilation produced by the Red Hot Organization.

*The Other Also* (1997, 7 minutes): Gallery installation film, commissioned by the Fondation Cartier in Paris. Semi-abstract imagery; dialogue-free.

*The New Math(s)* (2000, 15 minutes): Collaboration with the Dutch composer Louis Andriessen, partly produced by the BBC for a series of orchestra/film productions staged at the Barbican Centre. Maths-themed kung-fu miniature, with comic and experimental elements.

*Kimono* (2000, 27 minutes): Slow, richly textured piece, produced for the German TV series *Erotic Tales*. Strong fairy-tale/ghost story resonances.

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<sup>7</sup> John Boorman and Walter Donohue (eds.), *Projections 3: Film-Makers on Film-Making* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), pp. 261–280.

*The Sisters of Mercy* (2004, 17 minutes): Non-conventional documentary, composed solely of footage shot for *Iris* (see above). Distributed exclusively on the *Possible Films* DVD.

*Conspiracy* (2004/2010, 2 minutes): Brief, slightly absurdist dialogue between a man and a woman, apparently filmed as ‘a sort of birthday card’ for Louis Andriessen,<sup>8</sup> with whom Hartley worked on the opera *La Commedia* (premiered 2008). Available only on Hartley’s website.

*A/Muse* (2009, 11 minutes): Lightly comic piece focused on a single character, an actress looking for an American expat filmmaker in Berlin. One of five very cheaply produced shorts shot by Hartley on DV and collected on the *PF2* DVD (see also four films below).

*Implied Harmonies* (2009, 28 minutes): Making-of documentary about *La Commedia*, featuring a number of clearly fictional sequences centred on Hartley’s female assistant.

*The Apologies* (2009, 14 minutes): Low-key, single-setting drama with emphasis on non-naturalistic, ‘theatrical’ dialogue.

*Adventure* (2009, 20 minutes): Documentary, poetic and impressionistic in character, in which Hartley and his wife, Miho Nikaido, reflect on their relationship during a trip to Japan.

*Accomplice* (2009, 3 minutes): The last of the *PF2* films to be completed, made as a ‘finale’ to the collection.<sup>9</sup> Idiosyncratic noir story about the theft of some video tapes featuring interview footage of Jean-Luc Godard.

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<sup>8</sup> This is a quote from Hartley’s website: [www.possiblefilms.com/category/streaming/](http://www.possiblefilms.com/category/streaming/) (last accessed 14 April 2011).

<sup>9</sup> Hal Hartley, ‘*Possible Films 2*: Hal Interview by DJ Mendel’, October 2009: [www.possiblefilms.com/2010/03/possible-films-2-hal-interviewed-by-dj-mendel/](http://www.possiblefilms.com/2010/03/possible-films-2-hal-interviewed-by-dj-mendel/) (last accessed 14 April 2011).

## Financing and Distribution

At the level of production context, the shorts in this list may be broadly characterised as falling into one of the following categories: amateur- or self-funded projects (*Kid, The Cartographer's Girlfriend, Dogs, The Sisters of Mercy, Conspiracy, A/Muse, Implied Harmonies, The Apologies, Adventure, Accomplice*), TV films (*Ambition, Theory of Achievement, Surviving Desire, Flirt, Opera No. 1, NYC 3/94, Kimono*) and 'arts' pieces (*The Other Also, The New Math(s)*). *Iris* falls outside of all of these categories, having been commissioned for a video compilation. A similar range of production contexts characterises the wider field of American short-form filmmaking, which has contained few opportunities for theatrical exhibition since the 1950s and the decline of the short 'programme filler'. This was one of a particular variety of short films, including cartoons, travelogues and newsreels, that played in theatres immediately before the feature films – a timeslot now devoted almost exclusively to advertisements and trailers.<sup>10</sup> In recent decades, short films have been associated with two main forms of broad public exhibition, both considered at different points to be contributing towards a revival of the short-film form: television and the internet. A *New York Times* article published in 1981 reported on the use by cable television services of short films in their programming, suggesting that the cable system had in recent years 'rescued the short film – if not from certain death, then at least from obscurity'.<sup>11</sup> Shorts could be expected to find a considerable audience on increasingly popular, commercial-free networks such as HBO, its sister movie network Cinemax and the now-defunct Wometco Home Theater, which bought short films to fill 'continuity time', the gaps between the end of one feature and the start of another. A number of PBS series also programmed shorts, of various styles and running lengths. The *Alive from Off Center* series, first broadcast in 1995, produced and screened a variety of experimental live-action and animated shorts, including the Quay Brothers' *Street of Crocodiles* (1986), *What You Mean We?* (1986) by the performance artist and musician Laurie Anderson, and, in its seventh series in 1991, Hartley's

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<sup>10</sup> Short films do still play in this timeslot, though infrequently. Examples include *Luxo Jr.* (1986), played prior to screenings of *Toy Story 2* (1999); *For the Birds* (2000), played prior to screenings of *Monsters, Inc.* (2001); and several other Pixar-produced short films. Programmes of collected short films are also screened theatrically on occasion, examples including the Academy Award Nominated Shorts programmes, first screened in the mid 2000s (see Kevin Krust, 'Oscar-Nominated Short Films Get to the Point Quickly', *Los Angeles Times*, 16 February 2007, p. E16).

<sup>11</sup> Leslie Garisto, 'Cable TV Is "Rescuing" the Makers of Short Films', *New York Times*, 13 September 1981, p. D45.

*Ambition and Theory of Achievement*. During the early years of the 1990s, *American Playhouse*, a PBS anthology series, broadcast a series of half-hour (or shorter) films originating from a programme sponsored by Columbia Pictures.<sup>12</sup> These films, shot on 35 mm with an experienced crew, were emblematic of a (relatively) high-profile strand of short filmmaking in the 1980s and 1990s, one characterised by high production values and conventional, Hollywood-style content. Shorts films made in this vein had particular value for young directors looking to break into feature directing. As Jonathan Sanger, co-head of the production company Chanticleer Films, puts it: '[short filmmakers] have to show the people who are making the decision to hire a director something as close to what they're used to seeing as possible'.<sup>13</sup>

Clearly, short films produced under this logic, as work samples or 'calling cards' to be shown to studios, are to a significant degree 'commercial' properties, despite the low levels of investment (relative to features) involved, and despite the improbability of substantial and profitable distribution. In the words of the academic Bevin Yeatman, such work is 'future oriented', created by directors to '[add] value, not necessarily to their bank account, but certainly to their prospects'.<sup>14</sup> A rationale of this kind is explicitly articulated by the directors of several American narrative shorts, including one of the sensations of recent decades, *George Lucas in Love* (Joe Nussbaum, 1999, 8 minutes), a spoof of *Star Wars* (1977) and *Shakespeare in Love* (1998). The film was financed by Nussbaum and several crew members, who had recently graduated from the University of Southern California and were trying, in Nussbaum's words, 'to get noticed by development executives and studio executives'. *George Lucas in Love* was conceived and made 'as a calling-card film, which hopefully would open the door for major projects for us. Which it did.'<sup>15</sup> In addition to generating intense interest in the director from both the studios and the media, the film went on to be distributed on video, topping the Amazon.com sales charts on its release and selling well for a significant period thereafter.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> See Jan Benzel, 'Short-Form Films Bolster Long-Range Objectives', *New York Times*, 25 March 1990, p. H33.

<sup>13</sup> Jonathan Sanger, quoted in Benzel, 'Short-Form Films', p. H33.

<sup>14</sup> Bevin Yeatman, 'What Makes a Short Fiction Film Good?', *P.O.V.*, 5 (1998): [pov.imv.au.dk/Issue\\_05/section\\_4/artc2A.html](http://pov.imv.au.dk/Issue_05/section_4/artc2A.html) (last accessed 14 April 2011).

<sup>15</sup> Rick Lyman, 'An Internet Star Is Born', *New York Times*, 12 June 2000, p. C15.

<sup>16</sup> *George Lucas in Love* was released on video on 21 April 2000 and sold exclusively through Amazon.com. According to a *New York Times* article, the film remained in the top ten of the Amazon sales chart 'almost every day' throughout April and May, frequently outselling heavily promoted video releases such as *Star Wars: Episode 1 – The Phantom Menace* (1999). See Rick Lyman, 'An Internet Star Is Born'.

At the textual level, *George Lucas in Love* resembles a high-budget romantic comedy, reflecting the intentions of the director to create something that could pass for ‘eight minutes of a feature film’.<sup>17</sup> The film was shot on 35 mm, the high image quality being matched by a conventionally ‘warm’ and balanced lighting style. An orchestral score, similar in style to that featured at various points in both *Star Wars* and *Shakespeare in Love*, is used throughout. Moments of broad comedy (jokes about cannabis use) are blended with satirical references to *Star Wars* in a narrative that relates the efforts of college student George Lucas (Martin Hynes) to finish a film script in time to meet his deadline and qualify for graduation. George struggles with writer’s block (the joke being that the prototypes for various *Star Wars* characters present themselves at every turn), rejecting an array of starting points and ideas before meeting a Princess Leia-type figure called Marion (Lisa Jakub) who sparks his imagination with a few simple words of wisdom. The introduction of the character of Marion provides a note of youthful romance, as George, obviously smitten, apologises for his awkwardness, although the main emphasis is on comedy – a characteristic *George Lucas in Love* shares with several other particularly high-profile short films, including *Terry Tate: Office Linebacker* (Rawson Marshall Thurber, 2003, 4 minutes),<sup>18</sup> the story of an American Football linebacker who works in an office as a disproportionately violent ‘law enforcer’.<sup>19</sup>

The high visibility of *George Lucas in Love* was in large part attributable to the release of the film on a commercial site for streaming: a fairly new method of distribution at this point, but one that would gather momentum throughout 1999 and into the 2000s and would, like cable TV, be linked at points to a ‘comeback’ for short films.<sup>20</sup> Nussbaum’s film was a hit on Mediatrip.com,<sup>21</sup> one

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<sup>17</sup> This is a quotation from the audio commentary for the film, recorded by Nussbaum and his producer, Joseph Levy, for the DVD shorts collection *Cinema 16: American Short Films* (Pias UK, 2006).

<sup>18</sup> *Terry Tate* was bought by Reebok, who re-commissioned it as a series of shorts. These films played at the 2003 Super Bowl and were a hit on the Reebok website, where the first three episodes were downloaded by more than 7 million visitors. See Michael McCarthy, ‘Office Enforcer Wins Raves’, *USA Today*, 24 March 2003, p. 6B.

<sup>19</sup> Interestingly, on the audio commentary for *Terry Tate* recorded for the *Cinema 16: American Short Films* DVD, Thurber advises filmmakers trying to break into feature production to make a short calling card that is ‘funny’, as it is easier to ‘tell a joke’ in a short format than it is to ‘tell a whole story’. Both *Terry Tate* and *George Lucas in Love* ‘tell a joke’, but the latter, as I have briefly outlined, certainly tells a story as well.

<sup>20</sup> See for example Marion Hart, ‘A Comeback for Short Films Is Linked to the Web’, *New York Times*, 14 January 2001, p. AR11; Greg Miller, ‘Era of Short Film Reborn on the Net’, *Los Angeles Times*, 19 June 2000, p. 1.

<sup>21</sup> The audience figures for the film on Mediatrip.com reached ‘the hundreds of thousands’, according to a *New York Times* piece, with over 600 people posting reviews – enough ‘buzz’ to justify a video release. Rick Lyman, ‘An Internet Star Is Born’.

of several sites launched between 1998 and 2000, including Atomfilms, Nibblebox and Reelshort (later Hypnotic), to offer a catalogue of instantly viewable short films. For independent filmmakers, this mode of distribution offered, and still does offer, access to a broad audience outside of the festival circuit.<sup>22</sup> At the same time, however, such video-streaming sites constitute a commercial system (most sites use advertising to generate revenue) that, like the theatrical distribution system, tends to work in favour of certain types of films but not others. Comic and ‘extreme’ material seemed to stand a particularly good chance of being picked up in the early 2000s – a trend that one *Los Angeles Times* article attributed to the disproportionate representation of adolescents and college students in online audiences.<sup>23</sup> Films falling into this category included the short series *Bikini Bandits*, an exploitation-type comedy that set a new ratings record for Atomfilms in 2000, and *The Rotten Fruit*, a stop-motion animation featuring pieces of fruit taking drugs and having sex (among other things), commissioned by the site Z.com for \$40,000 and later expanded into a series.<sup>24</sup>

For filmmakers working outside these parameters, such as Hartley, the internet has also presented the opportunity to distribute work through a type of outlet with (potentially) no investment at all in commercial structures: the personal website. Such sites can act as a platform to sell DVDs, a function exploited by the experimental director Jon Jost, for example, whose site ([www.jon-jost.com](http://www.jon-jost.com)) allows visitors to purchase directly from the director films that have received little if any theatrical distribution. Filmmakers can also make work available for streaming, as David Lynch has done on his subscription-only website, [www.davidlynch.com](http://www.davidlynch.com). As I briefly indicated earlier, Hartley has adopted both of these strategies in order to distribute his short films, selling the *Possible Films* and *PF2* collections in both DVD and download form on his website and, more recently, offering the short works *Conspiracy*, *Accomplice* and *Iris* for instant (and free) viewing. Supplying films via downloads and streaming has the obvious benefit of reducing costs (there is no distribution company to pay for advertising, packaging design, unit production, and so on). It is also a distribution model that can offer filmmakers a high degree of control over the

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<sup>22</sup> In March 2000 Atomfilms had 472,000 unique visitors, according to a *Los Angeles Times* article (Greg Miller, ‘Era of Short Film Reborn on the Net’). Sundance Film Festival, by comparison, attracted about 20,000 people each year in the early 2000s.

<sup>23</sup> Adolescents and students, the article suggests, ‘form the largest online audience because they tend to have the time, the inclination and the high-speed access’. Greg Miller, ‘Era of Short Film Reborn’.

<sup>24</sup> See Greg Miller, ‘Era of Short Film Reborn’.

‘positioning’ of their work through blurbs, review excerpts, images and clips/trailers – the design of marketing materials being an aspect of filmmaking in which Hartley has shown a significant degree of investment, as indicated in chapter 3. The trailers advertising the *Possible Films* and *PF2* downloads on the *Possible Films* website, for example, were apparently created exclusively by Hartley.<sup>25</sup> The distribution of these two collections (as well as of the new, remastered version of *Surviving Desire*) has also included a DVD release by the specialist art/avant-garde/independent film distributor Microcinema International – although (as mentioned in chapter 3) notably, in the case of *PF2* and *Hal Hartley’s Surviving Desire* the DVD artwork was handled not by the distributor but rather by Kyle Gilman, the head of distribution at The Possible Films Collection, ‘in collaboration with’ Hartley.<sup>26</sup> Both website and specialist DVD distribution, besides affording filmmakers opportunities to control certain elements of the marketing process, offer a practical alternative to theatrical distribution and the festival circuit. To orchestrate a release at these two levels is a relatively low-risk dual-release strategy that, firstly, ensures that even such experimental work has a good chance of reaching an audience of a reasonable size and, secondly, serves to generate press coverage in a way that a download-only website release, generally lacking the ‘event’ quality of a DVD release, would probably not.<sup>27</sup>

Low-key distribution strategies of the kind favoured for *Possible Films* and *PF2* are unlikely, however skilfully executed, to bring in high revenues – although Hartley’s work is likely to sell better than similarly experimental work released by a less established and respected director. On the other hand, revenues need not be very high, given the low levels of investment in production (the *PF2* films were shot personally by Hartley on DV, mostly inside his own apartment in Berlin) and distribution (DVD releases are inexpensive, relative to theatrical releases, and to make films available to download on one’s own website costs almost nothing). The interest Hartley has shown, particularly in the 2000s, in short filmmaking at this very cheap end of the production scale can be

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<sup>25</sup> This according to Kyle Gilman, correspondence with author, 21 May 2010.

<sup>26</sup> Kyle Gilman, correspondence with author, 21 May 2010. Steve Hamilton confirms a division of creative labour along these lines: ‘Hal’s always been extremely interested in this [the design of marketing materials] and the [*PF2*] collection has given him an opportunity to be involved in every aspect of the packaging, creation of trailers, etc.’ Correspondence with author, 20 May 2010.

<sup>27</sup> The *PF2* collection was featured, for instance, in the news section of the *Filmmaker* website. See Jason Guerrasio, ‘*Possible Films, Vol. 2*’, 27 April 2010: [filmmakermagazine.com/news/2010/04/possible-films-vol-2/](http://filmmakermagazine.com/news/2010/04/possible-films-vol-2/) (last accessed 14 April 2011).



considered at two main levels. At the artistic level, such production might be seen as an opportunity to practise or to experiment without (or with fewer of) the constraints that come with a more commercially orientated kind of filmmaking. This is a dimension that Hartley has emphasised and expressed an appreciation for on several occasions. In the booklet included with the *Possible Films* collection, for example, he writes that '[these pieces] are concentrated efforts to study, practice, discover, and mess around ... the short work allows me to experiment – to explore my craft and my ongoing concerns in unusual ways'<sup>28</sup> (I consider the exact degree to which each of the short films can be characterised as 'unusual' within the context of short-film production in the following part of this chapter).

The production of micro-budgeted shorts may also be considered at a more commercial/career-related level, as a practice that can contribute towards the cultural-professional 'profile' of the director. Here we are brought back to some of the points raised earlier on the subject of the 'calling card' film, and in particular to Bevin Yeatman's remarks on the 'future oriented' quality of such work. This term is used in an article that, while specifically addressing short filmmaking in New Zealand, offers a useful starting point for the consideration of the function and 'value' of the short film more generally. Yeatman argues that the short has 'value' (of whatever degree) not only as an aesthetic/ideological text, but also as 'a form of currency in an economy of exchange – an exchange of influence and support, of kudos and opportunity'. Such currency, he goes on to suggest, 'is "spent" by various people in various roles (director, script writer, producer, magazine editor, politician, academic) to "finance" their ongoing survival in their cultural games'.<sup>29</sup> This is a valuable account that, applied to Hartley's short-film output, is suggestive of the ways in which even the production of films as cheap and resolutely non-commercial as, say, *NYC 3/94* or *Conspiracy* may play a part in the determination of the director's commercial status, by creating professional allegiances, attracting interest or commendation, and so on. An important additional point to make here – one that Yeatman's account does not explicitly address – is that the amount and type of 'currency' generated by a short film is likely to vary according to the scale and type of

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<sup>28</sup> Hal Hartley, notes to the *Possible Films* DVD (Possible Films, 2006). Similarly, in a recent interview about the release of the *PF2* collection, Hartley states that 'I always made shorts to learn and to practice.' Kevin Filipiski, 'Hal Hartley Interview', *Times Square*: [timessquare.com/Film/Film\\_Interviews/Hal\\_Hartley\\_Interview/](http://timessquare.com/Film/Film_Interviews/Hal_Hartley_Interview/) (last accessed 14 April 2011).

<sup>29</sup> Yeatman, 'What Makes a Short Fiction Film Good?'

production. A ‘glossy’, genre-based short, for example, may directly establish an inexperienced director as a talent to be reckoned with and a candidate for high-level investment, as was the case with *George Lucas in Love*.<sup>30</sup> ‘Direct’ investment of this kind is considerably less likely to be offered, however, in response to short-film productions at the more experimental end of the scale. It is hard to imagine the *PF2* films, for example, causing any executive in charge of feature financing to rush to set up a meeting with their director. Rather, the production of such films serves to reinforce a director’s public identity as an active, productive artist (in a way that other work, such as teaching or orchestrating a DVD release of an old title, would not), to keep his or her ‘name’ circulating the ‘specialist’ film world and to create opportunities to strike up formal and informal working relationships. This sort of indirect or second-order ‘value’ – very much an aspect of feature film production, of course, but less commonly associated with short filmmaking, especially of an experimental character<sup>31</sup> – is by its nature hard to quantify, even by the filmmakers themselves. But it is a significant feature of the practice of short-film production, particularly in the case of those directors, apparently including Hartley, who aspire to continue to make feature-length films.<sup>32</sup>

This generation of second-order value can be seen as one way in which Hartley’s more experimental and industrially independent short films ‘fit’ into a larger commercial economy. In the case of Hartley’s more conventional short works, of course, this relationship (between the short and the director’s career as a feature filmmaker) is much more direct. The offer of financing for *The Unbelievable Truth*, for example, was made on the basis of the investor’s appreciation of the early, Long-Island-set shorts *The Cartographer’s Girlfriend* and *Dogs*. Jerome Brownstein, the president of the TV company for which Hartley was working, was shown these shorts by Hartley and later agreed to

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<sup>30</sup> Within months of completing *George Lucas in Love*, Joe Nussbaum had signed a deal to direct a film called *Almost Romantic* for Dreamworks Pictures. In the event, however, this and several subsequent studio projects fell apart, and it was 2004 before Nussbaum made his first feature, the ‘tween’ comedy *Sleepover*.

<sup>31</sup> For a discussion of the importance of social networks of various kinds to Hollywood production, see John L. Sullivan, ‘Leo C. Rosten’s Hollywood: Power, Status, and the Primacy of Economic and Social Networks in Cultural Production’, in Vicky Mayer, Miranda J. Banks and John Thornton Caldwell (eds.), *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries* (New York; London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 39–53.

<sup>32</sup> *Meanwhile*, Hartley’s forthcoming feature, is listed as being ‘completed’ by *IMDB*. Stills from this film feature in the photo book *The Heart Is a Muscle* (Stockholm: Libraryman, 2010), named after Hartley’s scripted but unfilmed short work; see Graham Fuller, ‘Being an Amateur’, in *Amateur* (screenplay) (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), pp. xvii–xix.

invest \$50,000 in his first feature.<sup>33</sup> The later shorts *Ambition*, *Theory of Achievement* and *Surviving Desire* were made, according to Hartley's producer, Ted Hope, as part of a conscious effort on Hartley's part to cement his reputation as an admired auteur<sup>34</sup> – and indeed the three films exhibit strong continuities with the well-received Long Island features, as discussed below. A measure of broad, public exhibition for these works was guaranteed at the financing stage: as commissioned projects for the PBS series *Alive from Off Center* (*Ambition* and *Theory of Achievement*) and *American Playhouse* (*Surviving Desire*) the films would be broadcast to (fairly) substantial audiences during primetime slots.<sup>35</sup> Television commissions such as these can serve to expose a filmmaker's 'name' and work to audiences that would not necessarily watch short films at a film festival or buy them on video/DVD. *Opera No. 1*, perhaps the most accessible and narrative-driven of Hartley's *Possible Films*-period shorts, was commissioned by Comedy Central, a cable channel that broadcast a mixture of sitcoms, talk shows, game shows and comedy films, and had successes in the 1990s with *Politically Incorrect*, *Mystery Science Theatre 3000* and the BBC series *Absolutely Fabulous*. The remainder of the *Possible Films* shorts have received exhibition in rather more specialist contexts. *The New Math(s)* was 'performed' (the video was projected as an orchestra played the score) for the first time, to what the *New York Times* described as a 'hip audience', at the Miller Theatre at Columbia University;<sup>36</sup> the film was later screened at a number of other theatres, including the Barbican Hall in London,<sup>37</sup> and aired on the BBC in March 2001.<sup>38</sup> Both *The New Math(s)* and *Kimono* gained a considerable

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<sup>33</sup> See the production notes for *The Unbelievable Truth*. A similar account is offered in Anne Gowen, 'Hal Hartley Takes Quirky Way to Fame', *Washington Times*, 30 October 1992, p. E1. The figure of \$50,000 is cited in the biography of Hartley in *Current Biography*, August 1995, which is currently available on the website for the Ensemble Sospeso, a New York chamber orchestra in which Hartley has featured as a 'guest artist':

[www.sospeso.com/contents/composers\\_artists/hartley.html](http://www.sospeso.com/contents/composers_artists/hartley.html) (last accessed 14 April 2011).

<sup>34</sup> Hope, in the context of a discussion of Hartley's early features and shorts, states that 'Hal was very aware of the need to get more films out quickly, so that ultimately they could be compared only to his own work. ... Now he's a genre unto himself.' Ellen Pall, 'This Director's Wish List Doesn't Include Hollywood', *New York Times*, 11 October 1992, p. 11 (section 2).

<sup>35</sup> The episode of *American Playhouse* featuring *Surviving Desire* was broadcast at 9 p.m. on 22 January 1992. See John J. O'Connor, 'Some Loners Struggle with Love and Survival', *New York Times*, 22 January 1992, p. C13. During the season that included *Ambition* and *Theory of Achievement*, *Alive from Off Center* usually aired between 9 p.m. and 10 p.m. (and was repeated in a later timeslot). See for example Jennifer Dunning, 'In Dance, Enclosure Needn't Be a Limiting Factor', *New York Times*, 2 September 1991, p. 38; and Dunning, 'Evoking Childhood Joy and the Darker Hours', *New York Times*, 16 September 1991, p. C20.

<sup>36</sup> See Anthony Tommasini, 'A Hip Audience Packs the Hall to Hear Hip Works', *New York Times*, 3 October 2000, p. E5.

<sup>37</sup> See Richard Wolfson, 'Hit and Mismatch', *Daily Telegraph*, 5 March 2001, p. 19.

<sup>38</sup> See 'Sound on Film: The New Math(s)', *Sunday Times*, 11 March 2001, features section.

amount of attention by virtue of being associated with series involving famous figures: *The New Math(s)* was shown alongside pieces by co-authors such as Werner Herzog/John Tavenar and Nicolas Roeg/Adrian Utley;<sup>39</sup> *Kimono* was made for the German TV series *Erotic Tales*, a film festival staple that included entries by Ken Russell, Bob Rafelson and, again, Nicolas Roeg.<sup>40</sup> *NYC 3/94* and *The Other Also*, commissioned by the ‘cultural’ Franco–German TV network Arte for a short series called *Postcards from America* and by the Fondation Cartier for an exhibition called ‘Amours’, respectively, received very little English-language coverage – a detail that might be seen to relate to the circumstances of their exhibition (overseas, ‘specialist’), but that might also be seen to say something about the position occupied by the films at a textual level. The particular mix of textual characteristics offered by Hartley’s short films, and the ways in which such qualities serve to distinguish the films in the contexts both of Hartley’s filmography and of short-film production in general, is the subject of the next section.

### **Textual Dimensions**

As is suggested by the list of brief descriptions offered at the start of this chapter, Hartley’s short-film output is characterised by a range of distinctive elements, some very familiar from his feature work, some less so. At the more radical end of the spectrum are films such as *The Other Also* and *Accomplice* that largely reject any form of narrative and/or characterisation – these dimensions, of course, being central to feature-length independent film, Hartley’s work included. A much stronger match with convention is offered by many of the other short works, although even the least adventurous of these are distinguished both by strongly ‘Hartleyan’ touches and by more general examples of innovation.

In this section I discuss Hartley’s short-film work at the levels of a number of related textual dimensions that have been referenced repeatedly throughout this thesis: sense of place and cultural identity, social/political perspective, form and narrative, and genre. The films will be considered in relation not only to Hartley’s feature-length work, but also to a sample of short

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<sup>39</sup> See Paul Griffiths, ‘BBC Pieces Played Live and Filmed’, *New York Times*, 19 March 2002, p. E5.

<sup>40</sup> See Tom Birchenough, “‘Erotic’ Charms Lure Producer”, *Variety*, 29 November 1999, p. 20.

films that I suggest might be seen as representative, to a degree, of a variety of ‘successful’ off-Hollywood short-film production circulating in America culture. This sample is composed of around half of the short films to win awards, in various categories, at the Sundance Film Festival between 1994 (the year in which a short film was first awarded a prize) and 2008. These are films that were awarded the Short Filmmaking Award, the Special Jury Prize (for short filmmaking), or the Online Film Festival Viewers’ Award (short subject),<sup>41</sup> and that remain reasonably easy to obtain today – a condition that one might expect to result in a sample skewed slightly towards the conventional. A sample of this kind is necessary in order to establish some sort of a canon that may be used to help define the particular positions occupied by the shorts in Hartley’s filmography. As the winners of prizes at Sundance, the films selected can reasonably be expected to form part of a strain of short filmmaking that is both broadly familiar/accessible (in distinction to, say, avant-garde filmmaking) and quite offbeat or even challenging in character, such an articulation (in feature films) being an important point of reference in the discussion of Hartley’s work in the previous chapters of this thesis.<sup>42</sup> They can also be judged as ‘successful’, given that two of the most important measures of the success of a short film are prestige and non-theatrical exposure.<sup>43</sup> Drawing the sample films from a period beginning in 1994 has the advantage of producing a sample that corresponds chronologically to the best part of Hartley’s short-film output, and that is broad enough to prevent one or two exceptional films coming to be seen as representative. The main downside to the use of a sample such as this (chronologically broad, but including only up to two films from each year) is that it does not allow for the accurate identification of trends within a particular year or across a period of a few years – a problem that could only be resolved in a study of short-film culture much more focused and/or ambitious than this. The list of characterisations (all my own) that follows, then, is offered as a suggestive sketch of one particular region of the short-film landscape, about which a number

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<sup>41</sup> I have not included films that won the Short Filmmaking Award in the International category, or those that received honourable mentions.

<sup>42</sup> A comparable sample could, of course, have been drawn from a number of other festivals associated with accessible but offbeat and sometimes challenging filmmaking. A sample drawn from Sundance, however, given the festival’s prominence and status as a showcase for new independent work, is likely to be representative of a particularly high-profile kind of ‘artistic’ short film – a useful form against which to measure Hartley’s short-film work.

<sup>43</sup> The ‘success’ of a short film might be assessed on other criteria, including, most obviously, DVD sales. Sales figures for DVDs are, however, often very difficult to obtain, and are rarely released publicly by distributors.

of observations will tentatively be formulated, relating in particular to those textual qualities emphasised over the course of this thesis.

*Family Remains* (Tamara Jenkins, 1994, 29 minutes): Blackly comic familial drama with Southern Gothic touches. Emphasis on the absurd and the disturbing balanced by a number of familiar elements (sarcastic-but-insecure teenager, overbearing mother, broad comedy). Explicit references to Jewish and Italian ethnicity.

*Man about Town* (Kris Isacson, 1997, 21 minutes): Chronicle of a New York college student's final drinking binge, narrated in the first person and featuring no conventional dialogue. Stylish aesthetic, characterised by narrative time-shifting, lively jazz music and black-and-white photography. Sustained comic-melancholic mood.

*More* (Mark Osborne, 1999, 6 minutes): Stop-motion science fiction centred on a single character, an inventor who yearns to transform the grey and desolate world in which he lives. Strong, unified tone, created in part by the use of the melancholic electronic dance song 'Elegia' by New Order, which plays throughout.

*Five Feet High and Rising* (Peter Sollett, 1999, 29 minutes): Vérité-style drama, somewhat episodic in structure, shot on the streets of the Lower East Side in New York City. Largely non-professional cast, at the centre of which is Victor Rasuk as the twelve-year-old Victor, whose romantic pursuit of a girl forms a quite conventional narrative line.

*Gina, an Actress, Age 29* (Paul Harrill, 2001, 22 minutes): Comedy-drama with an absurdist edge. Self-consciously offbeat style, including long takes and stylised compositions. Minor 'twist' ending.

*One* (Stewart Hendler, 2001, 5 minutes): Solemn, atmospheric drama, open to both supernatural and psychological readings. High production values: elaborate, chiaroscuro lighting; orchestral/choral score. No dialogue.

*Gasline* (Dave Silver, 2001, 16 minutes): Story centred on a suburban gas station owner, set during the 1979 oil crisis in America. Degree of social and political detail integrated into low-key personal/emotional drama. Slickly edited; crisp cinematography.

*Terminal Bar* (Stefan Nadelman, 2003, 22 minutes): Documentary about day-to-day life in a notorious Manhattan bar, since shut down. Personal and lightly nostalgic in tone, focused on the reminiscences of one bartender. Eye-catching visual devices mixed with more traditional talking-head sequences.

*Gowanus, Brooklyn* (Ryan Fleck, 2004, 20 minutes): Low-key character-piece shot in vérité-poetic style. Emphasis on the textures of everyday domestic/school life in a poor, mostly black Brooklyn neighbourhood. Loose narrative revolving around a central enigma (the strange actions of an idiosyncratic teacher figure) that is never solved.

*Wet Dreams and False Images* (Jesse Epstein, 2004, 12 minutes): Documentary set in a Brooklyn barber shop, addressing the attitudes of a group of barbers and customers towards popular female body images. Clearly defined 'issue', explored through a mixture of informal discussion and talking heads. Frequent emphasis on comedy.

*Bugcrush* (Carter Smith, 2006, 36 minutes): High school-set horror. Some quite distinctive formal devices. Explicit mixing of horror and sexuality; queer cinema feel.

*The Wraith of Cobble Hill* (Adam Parrish King, 2006, 15 minutes): Black-and-white stop-motion animation following a single main character, Felix, a high school student living in a poor household in Brooklyn. Quiet, observational tone with elements of melodrama. Striking, shadowy lighting style.

*Everything Will Be Ok* (Don Hertzfeldt, 2006, 17 minutes): Funny and sometimes disturbing story about a man whose mundane reality is gradually taken over by strange visions and dreams. Animated stick-

figure line-drawings, mostly black and white, contained within ‘windows’ (cloud-shaped white areas that appear on a black screen). Dialogue-free; narrated in a lightly poetic style in the third-person.

*Freeheld* (Cynthia Wade, 2007, 38 minutes): Strongly emotional-personal documentary with socio-political edge, centring on the efforts of a lesbian couple to change a local law that allows pension benefits to be extended only to one’s husband or wife (and not to one’s partner). Everyday and emotional domestic scenes combined with public board-meeting scenes. Strong and quite conventional narrative structure.

*Sikumi (On the Ice)* (Andrew Okpeaha MacLean, 2008, 15 minutes): Morality play set on the frozen Arctic Ocean. Simple story, told in just two main scenes. Mix of documentary-style elements (handheld camerawork, high-volume ambient sound) and more expressionistic/artistic formal elements (subjective sound, slow-motion).

The fifteen films in this list, as might be expected, occupy a variety of positions at the levels of genre, style, tone and content, and present a variety of marks of distinction. All of the fiction films offer a recognisable form of narrative structure, even if this structure is in some cases quite fragmentary or episodic in nature (*Man about Town*, *Five Feet High and Rising*, *Gowanus*, *Brooklyn*). Of the three documentaries, one, *Freeheld*, conforms quite closely to the conventions of the ‘classical’ narrative model (focus on individual desires and goals, close interlinking of a quest or mission plot line and a personal or emotional plot line, strong sense of closure), and two, *Terminal Bar* and *Wet Dreams and False Images*, adopt a more analytical, less character-centred framework – although both of these films exhibit some form of progressive structure, based on historical chronology in the case of *Terminal Bar* and on a teaching/learning dynamic in the case of *Wet Dreams and False Images*. Specific political or social points are made in two of the documentaries (*Freeheld* and *Wet Dreams and False Images*) but in none of the fiction films, a similar tendency being characteristic of full-length film production in the independent sector.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> For a brief discussion of social-issues-oriented documentary film in the independent sector, see Geoff King, *American Independent Cinema* (London; New York: I. B. Tauris, 2005), pp. 255–258.



Seven films express particular social perspectives that might be considered 'alternative', in relation to mainstream cinema. These include *Bugcrush*, which centres on the relationship between two gay teenagers, *Freeheld*, which centres on a lesbian couple, *Sikumi (On the Ice)*, whose lead character is an Inuit hunter, and *Five Feet High and Rising*, *Gowanus*, *Brooklyn* and *The Wraith of Cobble Hill*, each of which details life near the poverty line in a minority-ethnic neighbourhood in New York City. Explicit references to sexual or ethnic identity, however, are found only in the documentary *Freeheld* and in one fiction film, *Family Remains*. In the latter, dialogue lines serve on a number of occasions to comment on Jewish and Italian identity. At one point, for example, one of the main characters insensitively comments on the 'Jewish nose' of her daughter ('It's a little strange, but it makes you exotic'). Later, the mother, who insists on being called by her Italian maiden name, Costanzo, and not by her (now dead) Jewish husband's name, Rabinowitz, explains that it is her ethnicity that is stopping her looking for a job: 'We're Italian: it's different; we're proud.' Such overt references to ethnicity are neither played for laughs nor deployed as part of any 'problem picture'-style examination of a particular social 'issue'; rather they serve as ingredients contributing to an overall flavour of prickly absurdism, a moderately common feature within the independent sector, if not within mainstream cinema.<sup>45</sup>

A more general sense of orientation is provided in *Family Remains* and in many of the sample films at the level of setting, this dimension being directly foregrounded by the title terms of two films, *Gowanus*, *Brooklyn* and *The Wraith of Cobble Hill*. Both these films, along with *Five Feet High and Rising*, *Terminal Bar* and *Man about Town*, are characterised by a sense of geographical place, created through an emphasis on the social and physical details of a particular region. Many of these regional details are familiar from various Hartley films: slightly run-down New York City apartments and deserted or shabby-looking public spaces (*Gowanus*, *Brooklyn*, *The Wraith of Cobble Hill*, *Five Feet High and Rising*, *Terminal Bar*, *Man about Town*), a sense of everyday economic hardship (*Gowanus*, *Brooklyn*, *The Wraith of Cobble Hill*, *Terminal Bar*), a tension between New York City and the surrounding suburbs (*Man about Town*, in which the main character mocks a man whom he describes as a 'Jersey-type guy'), subway trains and lines (*Gowanus*, *Brooklyn*). A sense of place at a more

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<sup>45</sup> Examples of indie films adopting this tone include *Welcome to the Dollhouse* (1995), *Citizen Ruth* (1996) and *A Serious Man* (2009).

generic level is central to the narratives of *Family Remains*, *More*, *Gasline* and *Bugcrush*, which take as their settings a strangely depopulated suburb/residential region, an alienating grid city, a quiet small town, and a backwoods school and farm, respectively. Genre markers, beyond those of setting, are found in a large proportion of the films. Three, *More*, *One* and *Bugcrush*, identify themselves very clearly with commercial genres: horror and science fiction (though a horror framework in *Bugcrush* is combined with a less commercial gay element). Several others fit less popular or less widely recognised categories, such as the familial drama (*Family Remains*), the morality play (*Sikumi*), the social-issues documentary (*Wet Dreams and False Images*, *Freeheld*), or the gritty urban drama (*Five Feet High and Rising*, *Gowanus*, *Brooklyn*, *The Wraith of Cobble Hill*). Elements of comedy and/or melodrama – two dimensions particularly important to mainstream and much independent film – feature in all of the films, although often in a rather unconventional fashion. In *Family Remains* and *Everything Will Be Ok*, for example, comic moments are mixed with (and sometimes emerge from) moments of pain, anguish and dark absurdity, this approach being in clear contrast to that favoured by the more straightforwardly comic *George Lucas in Love* and *Terry Tate* (films to which none of the sample works bears any real resemblance). Similarly unconventional is the downplaying or de-dramatisation by some films of familiar melodramatic material, including the death of a family member in *Family Remains* and the use of drugs by a teacher in *Gowanus*, *Brooklyn* – although a more conventional treatment of particularly emotional episodes is provided by several films, most notably *Freeheld* and *One*.

Distinction on a more formal basis is present, in one form or another, in a large number of cases. Most obviously, perhaps, two of the films, *One* and *More*, feature no spoken words – the elimination or even the minimisation of dialogue being a rare strategy in feature-length independent production, but one that is sometimes seen by short-film practitioners as a basic element of story design.<sup>46</sup> In both these films, and also in *Man about Town*, music dominates the soundtrack and serves to create a particular, familiar and fairly unvarying tone: haunting/portentous in the case of *One*, melancholic in the case of *More* and

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<sup>46</sup> The academic and short filmmaker Richard Raskin, for example, argues in a long essay about story design in the short film that ‘the best short films (with few notable exceptions) generally keep dialogue to a minimum and rely primarily on visual storytelling’. ‘Five Parameters for Short Story Design in the Short Fiction Film’, *P.O.V.*, 5 (1998): [pov.imv.au.dk/Issue\\_05/section\\_4/artc3A.html](http://pov.imv.au.dk/Issue_05/section_4/artc3A.html) (last accessed 14 April 2011).

comic-melancholic in the case of *Man about Town*. A number of the films, including *Five Feet High and Rising*, *Gowanus*, *Brooklyn*, *Bugcrush*, *The Wraith of Cobble Hill* and *Sikumi*, use non-diegetic music only very sparingly or subtly, as part of a naturalistic or gritty aesthetic that also encompasses handheld camerawork (*Five Feet High and Rising*, *Sikumi*, *Gowanus*, *Brooklyn*); documentary-style sound, including muffled dialogue, high-level ambient sound, and so on (*Sikumi*, *Five Feet High and Rising*); naturalistic dialogue (*Bugcrush*, *Five Feet High and Rising*, *Gowanus*, *Brooklyn*); and, in the animated *The Wraith of Cobble Hill*, a highly detailed and ‘realistic’ *mise en scène*. This, clearly, is an aesthetic that is far removed from that of the highest-profile calling card shorts, though not one that is necessarily devoid of commercial value, especially within an independent cinema whose identity is so often bound up with notions of realism and authenticity.<sup>47</sup> Several films in the sample *do* adopt a quite glossy visual style reminiscent of mainstream cinema, the most obvious example being *One*. Slick visuals – good image quality, conventional editing patterns – are also offered by *Gasline*, along with a number of formal flourishes, such as a long take in which the camera prowls at a low level around a line of cars waiting at a gas station. The latter is a quite strongly stylised device of a kind that is common in this sample: other examples include the tableau framings in *Gina, an Actress*, *Age 29*, the Flash-animated black-and-white photographs in *Terminal Bar* and the synthetic droning noises that feature in *Sikumi*. A particularly strong sense of stylistic distinctiveness is created in *Everything Will Be Ok*, the later dream and fantasy sequences of which are composed of abstract imagery that could quite easily have come from an avant-garde film – although these sequences, like most of the more expressive sequences in the sample films (as well as in feature-length independent film), are clearly motivated, serving to express the fragmenting consciousness of the main character.

The above analysis of the Sundance shorts sample identifies a number of broad tendencies familiar from feature-length independent cinema (strong grounding in narrative, emphasis on ‘alternative’ perspectives, foregrounding of ‘gritty’ settings/filming styles, use of eye-catching formal devices, use and/or adaptation of genre frameworks), along with a rather smaller number of less familiar tendencies (preference, in some films, for a very small number of

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<sup>47</sup> For Geoff King, formal departures that create a sense of verisimilitude or realism constitute one of the two main categories of formal departures in independent film (the other category being departures that create a self-conscious, expressive or ‘showy’ effect). See *American Independent Cinema*, p. 10.

characters, or for a dialogue-free soundtrack). The discussion that follows, split into four subsections, draws on these observations as one important context for the consideration of Hartley's short-film work, another being the analysis of Hartley's feature-length work developed in previous chapters.

### *Narrative*

On the spectrum of narrative possibilities, Hartley's short films range from the broadly conventional (with some peculiarities) to the radical – a point well outside the bounds of the Sundance sample. Occupying the latter position are *Iris* and *The Other Also*. In both, actions proceed without any suggestion of causation: they just happen, in a series of locations in the case of the former and in a single (unidentifiable) location in the case of the latter. Several other films adopt an organisational framework that might be described as semi-narrative in character, presenting material that is in some cases defined by a sense of causal progression and character development and that in other cases is not. In *NYC 3/94*, for example, the action is split between scenes in which three characters try to find cover from the effects of a violent war raging around them, and scenes in which a man calmly speaks into a microphone, as if lecturing, in a separate location. The film opens on the character played by Dwight Ewell, standing on the roof of a building; he hears the sounds of explosions in the distance, and moves his hands to his ears, a pained look on his face. The next scene is set outside a street-level building. Another character, played by Lianna Pai, comes across the Ewell character, who is now unconscious on the ground; the implication is that the man has either fallen or jumped from the rooftop above. After a brief shot framing the trembling hands of another man, we cut to the lecturer character (James Urbaniak), who starts to speak about 'The Massacre of the Innocents', an illumination from a medieval religious text. These early scenes establish a broad pattern, applied throughout the film, in which fictional sequences involving a degree of drama (characters are affected by and react to external events) are interspersed with direct-to-camera 'commentary' sequences, the latter relating to the former on a thematic level but not (beyond sharing an occasional gun-fire soundtrack) a dramatic one.

Similar to *NYC 3/94* in some ways is *Sisters of Mercy*, which is composed of out-takes from the video piece *Iris*, featuring Parker Posey and Sabrina Lloyd. A clear 'goal' – the completion of shooting – is established through conversations in some sequences between the director (offscreen) and the two

actors, who respond in a logical way to Hartley's suggestions and instructions. Other sequences, however, seem defined far more by an aesthetic logic. These include a passage at the end of the film in which dialogue is replaced on the soundtrack by melancholy piano/ambient music, a strategy that shifts the focus from what the actors are doing to the actors themselves, as elements in a composition. What is offered by the work as a whole is something that is in some ways readable as a 'making-of' feature or an out-take reel, but is in other ways clearly marked (through an emphasis on composition, and through the poetic title) as an 'art' film. Some form of narrative/non-narrative blend is also offered by *Conspiracy*, which centres on a conversation between two characters that follows an absurdist, non-progressive logic; *Accomplice*, which inserts into a three-minute story (sketched in voiceover) about videotape piracy two quite lengthy clips from an interview of Jean-Luc Godard by David Bordwell; and *Kimono*, which follows a female protagonist as she is kicked out of a car on a hot summer's day and wanders through the increasingly dream-like spaces of a dark forest. The approach adopted by Hartley in these films is distinct from that adopted in his feature films, the individual scenes of which are connected to a clear narrative line – even if this narrative line, in the case of *Flirt*, is split into three distinct segments.

A more familiar narrative form, not too different in some cases from that of many of the Sundance sample films, characterises several of the other short films in Hartley's filmography. The most conventional of these, I would suggest, is *Surviving Desire*, followed by a number of films also from the early stages of Hartley's career, including *Kid*, *The Cartographer's Girlfriend* and *Opera No. 1*. A familiar three-part structure – state of order/equilibrium, disruption, resolution – is applied in *Surviving Desire* to similarly familiar romantic material: a man and a woman flirt (albeit in a rather matter-of-fact manner), start a relationship and, eventually, part ways, this kind of downbeat or non-romantic ending being fairly unusual in mainstream romance, but more common in indie productions.<sup>48</sup> *Flirt*, too, offers something quite close to the classical Hollywood model, as suggested (in my discussion of the slightly modified version of the film) in chapter 2. Similarly conventional at the level of narrative structure, but less so at the level of narration, is *Opera No. 1*, whose story of romance and mistaken identities is clearly framed as a kind of opera performance, encompassing audience applause/laughter noises, an 'intermission' (a five-second intertitle) and

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<sup>48</sup> See for example *Chasing Amy* (1997), *Waitress* (2007) and *500 Days of Summer* (2009).

sung (or, rather, clearly lip-synched) dialogue. Strongly self-conscious narration of this kind, forcing the viewer to recognise the narrative as a fiction, is a feature of several of Hartley's full-length films.<sup>49</sup> It is considerably rarer and/or less forceful in the films of the Sundance sample, however, the expressive devices of which tend to hint at, rather than baldly assert, the constructed nature of the narratives in which they appear.

Also offering some unusual narrative qualities, but within a basically linear narrative framework that distinguishes them from the 'semi-narrative' pieces discussed above, are *Kid*, *The Cartographer's Girlfriend*, *Theory of Achievement*, *The New Math(s)*, *A/Muse* and *The Apologies*. *The Cartographer's Girlfriend*, for example, tells the story of the formation and eventual souring of a relationship, and, like *Surviving Desire*, adheres to a familiar three-part romantic trajectory. Several key pieces of narrative information, however, are – quite unconventionally – withheld, including the origins and motivations of the female love interest, the effect of which is to shift the film (to a degree) from the realm of logical, character-centred causality into the realm of the absurd ('I'm not trying to be romantic or poetic or anything, but when I first saw you in the room here, right beside me, I thought I was dreaming,' says the male lead). A similar sense of absurdity characterises *The New Math(s)*, which centres on two maths students and a teacher and takes place, incongruously, in a deserted manufacturing works. In several other films the narrative style adopted by Hartley might be described as loose, digressive or downplayed – qualities found in quite a few of the sample films, as mentioned earlier. *Kid*, for example, establishes in its early stages a narrative goal that the viewer might expect to define the subsequent progression of action: the main character, Ned, wants to leave his suburban home to go in search of his girlfriend in the city. But Ned does not leave home, and we follow him instead through a series of low-key, largely unrelated domestic and romantic episodes. Treading a similar narrative terrain are *Theory of Achievement*, which is composed of a series of intellectual/bohemian conversations linked on occasion by minor subplots; *The Apologies*, which includes long dialogue sequences that do nothing to advance the slight story, about a young actor rehearsing for an audition in a friend's apartment; and the part-documentary *Implied Harmonies*, which splices fictional sequences centred on a single female character with making-of-style material

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<sup>49</sup> Including, most obviously, *Flirt*, the 'Berlin' section of which features (as discussed in chapter 2) a chorus-type set of characters who comment on the film's narrative.

shot during the preparations for *La Commedia*, arranged in rough chronological order and characterised by a moderate sense of progression and culmination.

### *Place and Cultural Identity*

At the level of place Hartley's short-work filmography is characterised by a broad shift familiar from his feature filmography: from narratives that are grounded in regional detail and a sense of community to narratives that emphasise travel and internationalism. Six films, made between 1984 and 1993, belong quite clearly in the first category: *Kid*, *The Cartographer's Girlfriend*, *Ambition*, *Theory of Achievement*, *Surviving Desire* and *Flirt*. Of these, two, *Kid* and *Theory of Achievement*, offer a clear sense of geographical place similar to that which I have argued characterises features such as *The Unbelievable Truth*, *Simple Men*, *Henry Fool* and *The Book of Life*. The setting for *Theory of Achievement* is Williamsburg, Brooklyn – a detail established (via an intertitle) in the first scene, in which a group of young men and women arrive in the town looking for a place to live and work. 'Look, I know the neighbourhood doesn't look like much,' says one of the main characters, Bob (Bob Gosse), to two patently unimpressed fellow artists. 'But ... plenty of people are moving out here to Brooklyn [ellipsis in the original dialogue]. Writers, painters, filmmakers, rock 'n' roll musicians. I mean it's just a matter of time before this neighbourhood becomes the art capital of the world.' The remainder of the film is composed largely of dialogue scenes, set either in a rather shabby apartment or in cafés, revolving around two main concerns: art/creativity and work/money. Bob says, 'you do what you can't avoid; you are whatever you can get away with'; his girlfriend replies, 'You do what you need to survive and then you are what you become'; another character proclaims that love is a form of knowledge; her boyfriend replies that they can't eat poetry; and so on. Material of this kind works against many dominant representations of Brooklyn, as for example a place of crime, oppression and racial tension, or, as the editors of the book *The Brooklyn Film* put it, 'a borough of losers' whose representative character stereotype is the 'tough, poor, dim, but good-hearted lug who brutalizes the English language'.<sup>50</sup> A number of established regional meanings *are* centralised, however. These include a sense of everyday poverty and urban austerity (one landscape shot frames a smoking industrial chimney against a background of

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<sup>50</sup> John B. Manbeck and Robert Singer (eds.), 'Introduction: The Brooklyn Film', in *The Brooklyn Film* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Co., 2003), pp. 7, 14.

concrete buildings), also found in *Gowanus, Brooklyn* and *The Wraith of Cobble Hill*, and a sense of bohemianism, associated with the region since the 1980s, which saw the arrival of artists from Manhattan looking for cheaper working spaces.<sup>51</sup> The regional and cultural identities mobilised here are likely to serve as significant points of orientation for many viewers, particularly those familiar with the everyday social geography of New York City.

Geographical identity is perhaps a little less easily ‘read’ in *Kid*, whose narrative setting, Lindenhurst, Long Island, is named as such only in the film’s last moments. Other regional indicators range from the concrete (references to the aircraft manufacturer Grumman, Long Island’s biggest corporate employer) to the oblique, perhaps readable only on repeat viewings (one character, ostensibly referring to Barbados, says, ‘That’s an *island*. There ain’t nothing happening on an *island*’). A more general, or generic, sense of ‘suburban-ness’ is created in *Kid* and also in *The Cartographer’s Girlfriend* through a thematic emphasis on familial dysfunction and individual alienation or disconnection. These are elements familiar from a long tradition of suburbia-set fictions, although they are here integrated into low-key, variegated portraits of everyday blue-collar suburban life far closer in character to the independent suburb films discussed in chapter 1 (the Long Island films, Linklater’s *Slacker*, Smith’s *Clerks* and *Chasing Amy*) than to the strand of overheated critiques of suburbia associated with mainstream/Indiewood cinema.<sup>52</sup> A similarly low-key, everyday quality characterises *Surviving Desire* (set in a college town) and *Flirt* (set in Lower Manhattan), both of which portray a group of characters formed into a loose community through various routine social interactions. These two films can also be grouped with *Theory of Achievement* and *Ambition* as narratives centring bohemian/intellectual cultural identities, the latter film featuring as its protagonist a philosophical New York artist.

If a strong grounding in a particular regional-cultural milieu is a characteristic that is particularly evident in Hartley’s early short works – and also in the Sundance sample films, of which five, for example, are set in distinctive regions of New York City – then it is much less so in the later-period films. Of

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<sup>51</sup> See Marcus W. Brauchli, ‘Brooklyn Rents Lure Artists’, *New York Times*, 30 October 1983, p. R7; David Dorian, ‘If You’re Thinking of Living in: Williamsburg’, *New York Times*, 15 June 1986, p. R9.

<sup>52</sup> Three such films are *American Beauty* (1999), *The Truman Show* (1998) and *Pleasantville* (1998). For a discussion of these films and their perspective on suburbia, see Robert Beuka, *SuburbiaNation: Reading Suburban Landscape in Twentieth-Century Fiction and Film* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 12–15, 242–243.



the 13 short films made between 1994 and 2010, only two, *NYC 3/94* and *A/Muse*, foreground geographical setting in any clear way. Several other shorts, by contrast, take place in locations characterised by a strongly dreamlike or artificial quality: the eerie forest landscapes of *Kimono*, the industrial interiors of *The New Math(s)*, the stage-like scenery of *Opera No. 1*. ‘Everyday’ themes of family and community are present, rather marginally, only in the documentary *Adventure*, several passages of which feature Miho Nikaido, Hartley’s wife, talking about her past family life in Japan. *Adventure* is one of five films (the five *PF2* works) to feature characters who are away from home, exiled, or otherwise ‘out of place’ – such figures being familiar from several of Hartley’s late-period features, particularly *Fay Grim*, as discussed in the previous chapter. *A/Muse*, for example, centres on a young actress looking for an American director ‘in exile’ (as she puts it) in Berlin. The main male character in *The Apologies*, introduced in voiceover with the words ‘I know well, how men in exile feed on dreams of hope’, is an American playwright forced to leave his residence in Berlin to ‘fix’ his ill-received production back in New York. In *Accomplice* such themes of international exchange and cultural flow are reinforced at the level of setting: the sign above the Berlin restaurant at which the unseen fugitive and his accomplice plan to meet, emphasised in an eight-second shot near the start of the film, reads ‘Les Copains’ (‘the buddies’ in French), ‘Bar Americain’ (figure 22). This is a detail Hartley reflects on in an interview about the *PF2* collection conducted by D. J. Mendel:

I made shots of that place throughout the final year in Berlin ... There was this collision of cultural references all the time I was in Berlin ... [T]here I was; an American living in Berlin, eating at a French Restaurant, with my Turkish-French assistant and her Italian boyfriend making calls each week to my Japanese wife in New York ... [This and following ellipses in the original.] It all tries somehow to relate that atmosphere ... an unaligned creative person almost anywhere in the world ... when they refuse to subscribe to the mainstream status quo.<sup>53</sup>

To what extent might we characterise the internationalist, somewhat ‘unaligned’ quality of Hartley’s late shorts as itself a point of orientation? It is certainly possible to see these films as fitting into the tradition of internationalist American

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<sup>53</sup> Hal Hartley, ‘Possible Films 2: Hal Interview by DJ Mendel’.

indie cinema discussed in chapter 2, a significant characteristic of which is a sense of cosmopolitanism/plurality that seems likely to retain some (semi-)popular appeal, even in an era of reduced theatrical distribution opportunities for foreign-language film.<sup>54</sup> A thematic emphasis on international exchange might also be seen to contribute towards a recognisably indie feeling of verisimilitude, a sense, in this case, of capturing the real-life textures of a modern world increasingly defined by globalisation – even if, as has been argued by a variety of cultural studies scholars, this is a process that entails less the democratisation of long-distance travel (still largely the preserve of a small number of privileged people) than the incursion of global systems and forces into local, everyday life.<sup>55</sup> At the same time, I would suggest, the films locate themselves at a distance from the majority of European- or foreign-themed independent productions, in which themes and elements identifiable as European/international tend to be carefully balanced against (if not subordinate to) elements identifiable as American. This is a characteristic, for example, of *Before Sunrise* and *Before Sunset* (European settings; one American protagonist, one French), *Mystery Train* (some Japanese characters, some American; Memphis setting), *The Visitor* (one American character, one Syrian, one Senegalese; New York City setting), *The Darjeeling Limited* (main characters all American; India setting) and *Amateur* (some European characters; New York City setting). A film much more international in composition than this, and in particular one featuring any great



**Figure 22**  
Symbolic  
internationalism in  
*Accomplice* © Possible  
Films

<sup>54</sup> ‘Classics’ divisions, originally established to distribute foreign-language films in America, shifted their interests during the 1990s towards distribution of independently produced American films, as mentioned in chapter 3. See Yannis Tzioumakis, *American Independent Cinema: An Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), pp. 246–247.

<sup>55</sup> For a good, brief introduction to this argument, made, among others, by John Tomlinson and John Durham Peters, see David Morley, *Home Territories: Media, Mobility and Identity* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 13–15.

quantity of subtitled dialogue, is less likely to be categorised (and therefore sold) as an independent production than as an international/art cinema production, the latter film type generally occupying a more marginal position, in commercial terms, in the American cinematic landscape. As films that frequently feature subtitles and often combine non-American settings with non-American characters, Hartley's *PF2* works are in this context certainly marked as marginal/unconventional. They are also unusual in the context of the Sundance sample, only one film of which (*Sikumi*) features an overseas setting or non-American main characters: a reflection, it might be argued, of a marginalisation of foreign-themed productions in the American short-film scene, or at least in domestic (that is, American-financed) short film.<sup>56</sup>

### ***Political Dimensions***

If, as I have argued in previous chapters, Hartley's feature filmography is quite often marked by a degree of 'direct' or explicit political/social commentary that is unusual in independent film, then distinction at this level in the director's short-work filmography is much less common. Certainly none of the shorts is characterised by a political perspective as distinct as that which features in *Amateur* (critique of global corporate capitalism), *No Such Thing* (commentary on the political power of the media industry) or *The Girl from Monday* (critique of cultural commodification). Material of a socio-political nature does feature in *NYC 3/94*, the direct-to-camera commentary sequences of which offer a reflection on war and violence informed by the work of the philosopher Simone Weil. 'Societies based on rights', says the lecturer character, 'will always fall back upon force, because the insistence of rights itself is an aspect of contention: the asking of the question, Why do they have more than us? rather than the central and relevant question, Why am I being hurt?' This is a sequence that is defined very clearly by a particular social perspective. At the same time, it would be hard to argue that this perspective is endorsed in any straightforward way by the film, given that the direct-to-camera sequences are positioned outside of the war-themed action of the (loose) narrative – a structural arrangement serving to frame the commentary offered by the lecturer as something of an abstract irrelevance, out of touch with the reality of the conflict taking place on the streets below.

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<sup>56</sup> Non-American elements and themes are far more common, of course, in the Sundance entries awarded the Jury Prize in International Short Filmmaking, for example.

A sense of social criticism is created in *The Cartographer's Girlfriend* through a more general foregrounding of the disturbing emotional realities of everyday life. The film opens with a strange romantic encounter: a woman (played by Marissa Chibas) walks into the house of a stranger (Bob, played by Steven Geiger), kisses him, and begs him not to go to work today. A story of youthful romance follows, familiar in some respects (the coupling of a frustrated man and an enigmatic woman) but marked by a distinctly unsentimental tone and an unusually strong emphasis on questions of sexism and gender relations. At one point Bob tells the girl that he gets jealous when he thinks of the people who have known her in the past. 'It's a possessive thing,' he says. 'I want to know your whole history. And then erase it.' Later the girl accuses Bob of having no desire to get to know her better: 'It's what you don't know about me that you love.' Satirical-analytical dialogue such as this is combined with a number of distinctive formal devices, including a flattened style of performance familiar from Hartley's later work, that serve similarly to de-dramatise the events of the narrative. The result is a film romance in which the usual emphasis on emotional drama is (at least partly) displaced by an emphasis on particular social-philosophical issues that cannot be easily resolved.

Social critique at this satirical level (or, indeed, at a more explicit or radical level) is not a feature offered by the remaining examples of Hartley's short-film work, the 'political' value of which is less obviously apparent. We return at this point to some of the issues raised in the discussion in chapter 2 of the political functions served by Hartley's films (and by extension the films of other independent filmmakers), and in particular to the idea of a politics of form. All of Hartley's short films are characterised by representational strategies that serve to modify, question or, in some cases, radically reject the formal conventions of mainstream cinema. Such strategies can be seen as political to the extent that they implicitly critique codes of realism often seen to naturalise capitalist, racist or patriarchal ideologies, as previously discussed. The degree to which individual strategies provide such a critique is related to the degree to which they are recuperable as in some way 'natural': as innovations with thematic/subjective motivation or as innovations of a generally 'offbeat' character in keeping with the broad stylistic sensibility of independent film in general. Hartley's shorts, like his feature films, figure a number of strategies that might be considered to have some political function in this sense, as well as a number of much less radical strategies. Falling into the latter category are the use

of static compositions in films such as *The Cartographer's Girlfriend*, *Theory of Achievement*, *Kimono* and *The Apologies* (a characteristic also of *Gina, an Actress*, *Age 29* and, at points, *Family Remains*); the adoption of a loose or digressive narrative style in films such as *Kid* and *Theory of Achievement* (a characteristic of *Man about Town*, *Five Feet High and Rising* and *Gowanus, Brooklyn*); and the adoption of a spare or minimalist style of score in *Kid* and *The Cartographer's Girlfriend* (a characteristic of *The Wraith of Cobble Hill*, *Gowanus, Brooklyn* and a number of the other sample films, as mentioned earlier). More radical strategies, of a kind far rarer in independent film and in the Sundance sample shorts, include many of those outlined in the *Narrative* section above – the rejection of conventions of causal progression, self-conscious narration, and so on – as well as some that challenge convention at other formal levels. A recognisably Hartleyan style of dialogue delivery, for example, characterises many of the films. This is a departure from formal convention the motivation for which, in some cases (*Theory of Achievement*, *The Apologies*), is suggested only obliquely – a strategy familiar from many of Hartley's features (see chapters 2 and 3) but otherwise rare in the independent world. A substantial departure from usual representational practices is also offered by *The Other Also*, a seven-minute video piece in which footage of two actors (Miho Nikaido and Elina Löwensohn) performing a dance movement is slowed and rendered out of focus, a powerful back-light further contributing to the abstraction of the image (see figure 23). Semi-abstract imagery of this kind is also a feature of *The Book of Life*, as discussed in chapter 3. Its use in the longer film, however, is both motivated (by the supernatural content of the narrative) and limited to a number of short sequences – as is the case in *Everything Will Be Ok*, the only Sundance



**Figure 23**  
Unmotivated abstraction  
in *The Other Also* ©  
Fondation  
Cartier/Possible Films

short to feature such material. In *The Other Also* semi-abstract images are offered as the entire film content: a radical rejection of realist codes, political on an implicit level, that locates the film close to, if not within, the territory of the aesthetic avant-garde.

### ***Genre and Tone***

A dissatisfaction or impatience with mainstream conventions regarding the representation of ‘reality’ is often also implied at the level of genre identity. Several of the short films offer some sort of twist on familiar genre material, introducing unusual qualities or rejecting established conventions. *The Cartographer’s Girlfriend*, as discussed above, locates itself in the romantic drama genre, but departs from convention in an emphasis on the absurd and unsettling aspects of romantic attraction. In *Kimono*, ghost story/horror-type material – a woman walks through a forest landscape occupied by mysterious presences – is rendered in a style that shifts the film towards recognisable art film territory (see figure 24). Slow-motion passages, images of reeds in flowing water, subtly expressive lighting effects (by Hartley’s cinematographer, Sarah Cawley) and disjunctive editing all contribute to a languorous, dreamlike texture, reminiscent, in particular, of the work of Andrei Tarkovsky (cited as an influence by Hartley).<sup>57</sup> Markers of a similarly dreamlike, if faster-paced, style are also characteristic of the only supernatural-themed film in the Sundance sample, *One*, although in this case they are featured mainly in the latter part of the film, the earlier sequences being used to establish a sense of everyday, ‘real world’ existence – a more generically conventional approach that locates the film in territory far closer to the mainstream than that occupied by *Kimono*.



**Figure 24**  
Art film textures: the  
Bride traverses a stream  
in *Kimono* © P-Kino  
Films/Ziegler Film

<sup>57</sup> In the comments on *Kimono* that feature in the notes to the *Possible Films* DVD, Hartley identifies Tarkovsky as one of a number of ‘slow’ filmmakers he admires, the others being Wim Wenders, Hou Hsiao Hsien and Yasujiro Ozu.

A degree of generic revision is also offered by *Surviving Desire*, which introduces into quite familiar romantic comedy terrain a typically Hartleyan note of philosophical intellectualism. A broadly intellectual quality is not too rare in postclassical romance, and is a mark in particular of the films of Woody Allen, the lead characters of which often reflect in philosophical/analytical terms on the nature of their relationships. Hartley's film departs from Allen's romances, however, in its preference for a deadpan tone of delivery and in its incorporation of blocks of articulate, intellectual dialogue that do not conform to the patterns either of conversational dialogue or spontaneous reflection. 'If you never see me again after tonight will you be sad?' asks the female lead, Sophie (Mary B. Ward), a question nominally directed at Jude, the character with whom she is about to spend the night. 'Will you be tortured by the memory of having been with me? Of having caressed me? Will you wonder if I'm with other men? Will you be jealous? Will you become obsessed? Will you carry your disappointment around with you for ever? Will you be maudlin and anti-social? Will you get into fights? Will you expect other women to be somehow more like me?' Dialogue of this kind draws attention to itself, in a manner common in Hartley's films, as constructed, or 'written'; as a form of expression that does not belong to the 'real', everyday world.

A similar note of non-naturalism is struck by a sequence in which Jude, having shared a kiss with Sophie in the preceding scene, performs a choreographed dance with two passers-by on the street – an unexpected shift into the territory of the musical later re-enacted in *Simple Men*. The musical routine is clearly readable as an expression of individual subjective experience: the sequence follows a scene that ends with a close-up shot of Jude's face, the music that accompanied that scene continuing for the first few seconds of the musical routine; it is initiated by Jude (who is joined after a few seconds by the other two figures); and it involves no other known characters. It is in this respect several degrees more conventional in character than the equivalent sequence in *Simple Men*, in which we cut from a shot of Martin, whose yell of 'I can't stand the quiet!' coincides with the opening notes of the accompanying song (Sonic Youth's 'Kool Thing'), to a shot of Elina, who leads a dance number involving two other main characters (Martin and Dennis) – a sequence of action that frustrates any attempt to interpret the dance, a quite dramatic departure from the conventions of realist narrative, as being grounded in the subjectivity of any particular character. A number of expectations are also undermined in the

*Surviving Desire* sequence, however, in a way that shifts the film in a distinctly alternative direction. Music plays a much more minor role than might reasonably be expected in a musical sequence, the simple guitar refrain cutting out about a quarter of the way in. A concluding dance movement in which Jude stands in a crucifixion pose, the two men kneeling by his sides, strikes a similarly unconventional note, given the (initial) framing of the sequence as an expression of Jude's romantic elation. The approach to musical material taken here may be compared with that taken in two other American indie films that include unexpected musical numbers, *Clerks II* (Kevin Smith, 2006) and *500 Days of Summer* (Marc Webb, 2009). In both films, as in *Surviving Desire*, musical sequences serve to express the emotions of a main character: the *Clerks II* routine, performed on the street by a large number of passers-by, starts as the male lead gazes lovingly into the eyes of his love interest; the *500 Days of Summer* routine begins as the protagonist walks down the street, a spring in his step after having slept with the girl of his dreams the night before. Upbeat music ('You Make My Dreams Come True' by Hall & Oates in Webb's film and 'ABC' by the Jackson Five in Smith's film), lively dance moves and, in the case of *500 Days of Summer*, the appearance of a cutesy animated bluebird (figure 25) all contribute to a sustained tone of high exuberance. This is in striking contrast to the *Surviving Desire* sequence, in which elements likely to strongly influence the emotional response of the viewer are consistently played down: music features only briefly, as mentioned earlier; facial expressions are subdued (see figure 26). The result is a somewhat de-emotionalised, complexly textured version of the musical number, rather more unconventional than the equivalent sequences in Webb's and Smith's films (which nevertheless are marked as unusual simply by virtue of appearing in a non-musical context), that is a strong marker of distinction.

Generic variation and the mixing of material associated with different genres or broad modes of film (comedy, emotional drama, and so on) are important differentiating features of Hartley's work as a whole, as I have suggested in previous chapters. In some cases, such as *Amateur* and *The Cartographer's Girlfriend*, innovation at this level can be seen to serve a didactic function, problematising in a self-conscious way particular generic pleasures or conventions: violence in the former film (see my discussion of the blending of protracted violence and comedy in the film in chapter 2); the idealisation/objectification of women in the latter. A non-conventional approach



to genre can also work to assert the authored status of the text, to create a measurable and pleasurable difference from mainstream practices. A sense of difference of this kind is created in many of Hartley's features and short films, either through departures from generic conventions, including those of characterisation and gender representation, or through the mixing of different generic material or registers. Films adopting the first strategy include *Trust*, whose female protagonist is characterised in terms of mobility and investigative agency, contrary to convention in the suburb film; and *Fay Grim*, which features as its spy protagonist a working-class single mother from Queens. *Fay Grim* is also among those Hartley films that combine different types of material (political and zany or fantastical, in this case). This strategy is also adopted by *Amateur* (comedy and painful/'difficult' material) and *Surviving Desire* (romantic comedy and musical material, as discussed above). A mixing of materials of a slightly different form marks the recent short *Implied Harmonies*, the only film in Hartley's filmography to contain both fictional and non-fictional passages. The majority of the film's running time is devoted to an account of the making of *La Commedia*, composed of interviews with artistic personnel (the composer, Louis Andriessen, several of the performers, and Hartley, who acted as director) and



**Figure 25**  
Colourful exuberance: the musical routine in *500 Days of Summer* © Fox Searchlight Pictures



**Figure 26**  
Unconventional minimalism: the musical routine in *Surviving Desire* © American Playhouse/True Fiction Pictures

footage shot during rehearsals and a final performance. Interspersed with such familiar making-of footage are a number of (clearly staged) sequences set in an apartment in which a female assistant reads out letters from her employer. These sequences favour a strongly artificial style of dialogue delivery: the assistant reads in a clear, emphatic style, as if reading to an audience. Canted shots are used frequently, in both the fictional and non-fictional passages. The effect is to foreground the authored status of the film as a whole, shifting it from the usual territory of the making-of documentary towards that of the auteur film.

In other respects *Implied Harmonies* cleaves more closely to convention, particularly in its clear focus on an author figure who overcomes difficulties to complete the production. The majority of the interview sequences in which Hartley appears, for example, serve to emphasise the director's lack of qualifications for the task of staging an opera: Hartley says that he had not liked opera as an art form but agreed to take on the project in order to work with Andriessen; that he had never spent so much time reading music; and that he 'learned a tremendous amount about music' from Andriessen. Such comments invest in the film a personal, slightly confessional quality, a note of 'intimacy', common in making-ofs, that contributes to the viewer's sense of entering the private world of the author.<sup>58</sup> A personal note is also struck by the film's fictional sequences, most of which feature passages read out from letters from an unnamed director-figure identifiable, in the context, as Hal Hartley. In one early sequence, for example, the assistant character reads of Andriessen's startled reaction to the footage shot by Hartley for projection during the performance (he 'almost passed out'). In a later sequence she reads about how Hartley got into a fight with someone in the theatre lobby. Such passages push *Implied Harmonies* towards the realm of autobiography, a telling of the story of the author's life – although it is also possible, given the fictional status of the apartment sequences and the fact that Hartley's name is never mentioned (the assistant, in the last moments of the film, begins to read out the signature on one of the letters, but is cut off by a clap of thunder), to read the film as a kind of parody of the autobiographical form.

A clearer form of autobiography is offered by the documentary *Adventure*, which follows Hartley and his wife, Miho Nikaido, on a trip to Japan.

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<sup>58</sup> For a discussion of the quality of intimacy in DVD commentaries and making-ofs, see Catherine Grant, 'Auteur Machines? Auteurism and the DVD', in James Bennett and Tom Brown (eds.), *Film and Television after DVD* (Hoboken: Taylor & Francis, 2008), p. 110.

The film mixes everyday footage (Miho and Hal have coffee with Miho's parents) and shots of figures in landscapes with passages in which Hal and Miho talk in a frank but philosophical way about their relationship. In one sequence, for example, Hal, speaking to the camera, says, 'I mean if you left me, which you have already ... you know, that, that can be sad ... But I don't think it would kill me.' Later, Miho reflects on why, having left Hal, she came back to him: '[Maybe] my idea of you changed ... being away from you.' (Ellipses here and above in the original dialogue.) The incorporation of such emotional-autobiographical material in *Adventure* is a distinctive feature that immediately sets the film apart from mainstream cinema, in which autobiography is rare. As Kathleen McHugh suggests, it is in the very nature of autobiography to contravene the conventions of Hollywood cinema, particularly at the level of narration. If, as McHugh argues, classical narrative adopts a mode of character individuation that emphasises the abstract and the ideal in an attempt to 'solicit a universalized identification from its audiences', in autobiography 'such identification is foreclosed by the mode of narration – the author/filmmaker, usually explicitly, addresses the reader/viewer as *different* from him/herself, a narrative structure that also marks the protagonist as distinct from the narrative's audience'.<sup>59</sup> Film autobiography has, for this reason, been largely the preserve of independent and experimental directors/artists, including many minority filmmakers (lesbians, gays, feminists, African Americans, and others) who, McHugh suggests, have used the 'inherent disunity' of the form to 'question and nuance the coherence of all identities and identity categories by pointing to the aesthetic, political, cultural, and technological forces from which their subjectivities derive'.<sup>60</sup> Such an approach is adopted, for example, by Cheryl Dunye in her 1996 film *The Watermelon Woman*, the autobiographical status of which – the film tells the story of the quest of a lesbian experimental filmmaker named Cheryl to make a film on black women – serves (McHugh suggests) to force a consideration of the film's own production within a hierarchical, raced/gendered system. *Adventure* cannot be said to offer a critique of so clearly political a variety. But it does, as a function of its unusual generic location, depart from broad conventions operative in both fiction and non-fiction – in particular, the construction for the viewer of a stable and coherent position from

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<sup>59</sup> Kathleen McHugh, 'Where Hollywood Fears to Tread: Autobiography and the Limits of Commercial Cinema', in Jon Lewis (ed.), *The End of Cinema as We Know It: American Film in the Nineties* (London: Pluto Press, 2002), p. 269.

<sup>60</sup> McHugh, 'Where Hollywood Fears to Tread', p. 272.

which he or she can experience the world of the film – in a manner that offers at least an implicit critique of the logic of representation at work in mainstream cinema.

If the incorporation of autobiographical material is a strategy that marks *Adventure* as distinctive at a broad substantive level, then it is also one that marks it more specifically as a Hal Hartley film. Hartley's auteur status is here expressed literally, through his own presence within the film world. An emphasis on Hartley's identity as an author defines several passages. At one point early on in the film, for example, we are presented with a sequence of shots of the streets of Tokyo, introduced with the caption 'he wanders off and makes pictures'. In a later sequence Hal speaks to the camera about what makes him happy: 'Working. Making motion pictures ... you know, actually crafting [ellipsis in the original dialogue].' Two sequences make direct reference to earlier Hartley films: in one, introduced with the caption 'he visits the places he first made pictures of her', we see footage of the 'Tokyo' segment of *Flirt*, which is edited together with 'live' footage of the same locations today; in the other, we see Miho moving through the same rural landscapes that featured in *Kimono*. References of a similar kind to the life and work of the director are also characteristic of the other works included in the *PF2* collection. In *Accomplice* a poster for *Trust* (or *Trust Me* as it is advertised in this case) is featured in several shots (figure 27). *Accomplice*, *A/Muse* and *The Apologies* each feature (or reference) characters who might reasonably be identified as proxies for the director: an American playwright who leaves Berlin to work on a production in New York in *The Apologies*, an American artist-criminal who sends stolen videotapes to his assistant in Berlin in



**Figure 27**  
A note of autobiography:  
an explicit reference to  
Hartley's past work in  
*Accomplice* © Possible  
Films

*Accomplice*, and an (unseen) American director who leaves Berlin for New York in *A/Muse*. Such in-references form a potential point of orientation, investing in the films a strong sense of the personal and the individual – a sense reinforced by interview comments made by Hartley that point up various parallels between the reality depicted in the films and the reality of his own life.<sup>61</sup> Orientation at this level depends, however, on a rather high degree of familiarity with Hartley and his life, something likely to be possessed only by a small proportion of indie film audiences. Orientation at other levels, too, is likely to be limited, at least for the majority of indie film viewers in America, as the discussions in the above four sections have suggested. Familiar narrative structures are largely abandoned in four of the five films (*A/Muse*, which centres on a character on a clear quest – to track down a renowned American director and become his next muse – is the exception). Commercial genre markers are rare, appearing only in *Accomplice*, a highly idiosyncratic take on the noir film featuring a noir-style voice-over but no protagonist. The sense of everyday life, of an existence grounded in a particular regional-cultural milieu, that characterises many of the earlier shorts is here largely absent. Such details serve to position the *PF2* films among the more unconventional of Hartley's short films, within a short-work filmography that extends from broadly commercial territory similar to that occupied by the Sundance sample films (*Kid*, *The Cartographer's Girlfriend*, *Theory of Achievement*, *Surviving Desire*, *Flirt*) to much more uncommercial territory (*NCY 3/94*, *The Other Also*, *The New Math(s)*, *Conspiracy*, *Accomplice*).

The existence of the more experimental examples of Hartley's short work as public films, easily viewed by anyone, is the result of the adoption of a number of industrial strategies that reflect as much as textual strategies Hartley's position as an independent. These include distribution via streaming, distribution via film downloads and 'specialist' DVD distribution (handled either by Microcinema or by Hartley's own Possible Film Collection). Such low-key, low-risk distribution strategies, I have suggested, offer experimental filmmakers a practical alternative to theatrical distribution, as well as to distribution through the commercial short-video-streaming system. The use of these strategies by Hartley can be seen as one aspect of an alternative approach to financing and

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<sup>61</sup> Hartley states, for example, that Jordana Maurer, who plays the assistant in *Implied Harmonies*, did in fact function as his assistant in Berlin. He also says that the apartment-set scenes of many of the films, shot in his own apartment in Berlin, offer a more-or-less accurate representation of the space as it is in real life: 'We moved some things around to perfect the shots. [But] the idea was to let the viewer see that this is where I live. This is how I live.' Hartley, 'Possible Films 2: Hal Interview by DJ Mendel'.

distribution that is further characterised by an enthusiasm for overseas production deals (among the films to make use of overseas funding are *Flirt*, discussed in chapter 2, and several of the short films), a dedication to self-production (through True Fiction Pictures and Possible Films), and a general reluctance to take on studio projects and ‘cross over’ to production on a more commercial scale. The commitment of Hartley to this approach in the middle and late stages of his career is, as my discussions in this and previous chapters suggest, an important aspect of his agency as an auteur, and needs to be taken into account, alongside the textual characteristics of the films, in any account of the director’s contribution to/engagement with independent film culture.

## Conclusion

As I write this conclusion, in early 2011, Hartley's most recently released feature is *Fay Grim*, which grossed a little over \$126,000 during its month-long American distribution in 2007.<sup>1</sup> His most recent 'hit' is *Henry Fool*, which in 1998 grossed over £1.3 million, thereby (according to *Box Office Mojo*) scraping into the list of the 200 highest-grossing films of that year.<sup>2</sup> The commercial significance of Hartley's recent feature-film career as a whole might reasonably be classed as slight – especially when compared with that of Smith's and Linklater's recent careers, which have included, in the last five or six years, a number of big hits (Linklater's *Bad News Bears* grossed over \$32 million in 2005; Smith's *Zack and Miri Make a Porno* grossed over \$31 million in 2008), as well as (in Linklater's case) several films that did more modest, but still significant, trade, such as *A Scanner Darkly*, which took over \$5 million at the domestic box office.<sup>3</sup>

I have taken the position in this thesis that Hartley is a significant filmmaker, despite the limited commercial impact of his films. He has produced a substantial body of work. He remains productive (though the films he produces are often short works). And all of his films, old and recent, are characterised both by strongly auteurist touches and by instances of general innovation. It also seems reasonable to take the position that Hartley is in many ways a successful filmmaker. He still earns a living making films, and all of his recent features have been distributed – distribution being by no means guaranteed for any independent feature, particularly in today's crowded marketplace.<sup>4</sup> This success is partly attributable to Hartley's actions as a skilled, committed and well-connected producer, distributor and marketer. It is also partly attributable to Hartley's reputation, his status as the author of a significant number of critically admired films (particularly *The Unbelievable Truth*, *Trust*, *Simple Men* and *Henry Fool*) and also as something of a defiant individualist, whose films are deemed to be deserving of respect (if not always admiration) for their unconventionality and auteurist hallmarks. This last authorial

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<sup>1</sup> See [www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=faygrim.htm](http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=faygrim.htm) (last accessed 15 April 2011).

<sup>2</sup> See [www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=henryfool.htm](http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=henryfool.htm) (last accessed 15 April 2011).

<sup>3</sup> See [www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=badnewsbears05.htm](http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=badnewsbears05.htm), [www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=zackandmirimakeaporno.htm](http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=zackandmirimakeaporno.htm), [www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=scannerdarkly.htm](http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=scannerdarkly.htm) (last accessed 15 April 2011).

<sup>4</sup> As E. Deidre Pribram notes, only a small percentage of independent films recoup their costs, and an even smaller percentage make a profit (referencing a 1991 *Variety* article, she cites figures of 10% and 1%, respectively). See *Cinema and Culture: Independent Film in the United States, 1980–2001* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2002), p. 18.

characteristic is promoted, I would suggest, by comments in many of the reviews quoted in this thesis, including several reviews that are, on the whole, negative or unenthusiastic. Roger Ebert's review of *No Such Thing*, for example, starts with the sentences, 'Hal Hartley has always marched in the avant garde, but this time he marches alone. Followers will have to be drafted.'<sup>5</sup> The *Village Voice* review of *The Book of Life*, similarly critical in tone, has as its first line, 'A filmmaker who's plowed the same narrow, distinctive furrow all his career, Hal Hartley seems to have dug himself into a hole.'<sup>6</sup> A piece on the *Possible Films Volume 2* DVD that appeared on the *Filmmaker* website states, 'Hartley creates intimate works that are honest and feel like they're done by an artist doing it for the love of the craft, not looking for a quick buck. But would we think anything less from Hartley?'<sup>7</sup> The reviewer here expresses only a mild appreciation of the films themselves (describing them as 'honest') but clearly makes the point that these are works of art, created by an author whose interest is in making art, rather than in making money. Comments such as these contribute to a characterisation of Hartley as a filmmaker with 'integrity', a characteristic that might be thought to have some currency in industrial networks – particularly in the independent world, where many executives have (or at least profess) an investment in the idea of film as art – even if other characteristics, such as a history of commercial success, might be thought to have more currency.

As indicated at various points in this thesis, Hartley (in collaboration with figures such as Steve Hamilton and Kyle Gilman) has embarked on a number of commercial ventures in recent years that exploit both his 'name' and his body of work. These have included the re-release by Possible Films of *Surviving Desire* (along with *Ambition* and *Theory of Achievement*); the release of a number of music CDs, including *Possible Music* (a collection of music composed by Hartley for his film and theatre work) and *No Such Thing (As Monsters)* (the soundtrack to *No Such Thing*); and the release of a 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition DVD of *The Unbelievable Truth*, which received a moderate degree of attention in online film criticism and discussion forums.<sup>8</sup> Hartley also maintains a large and well-designed website (designed by

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<sup>5</sup> Roger Ebert, 'No Such Thing', *Chicago Sun-Times* (online), 29 March 2002: [rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20020329/REVIEWS/203290303/1023](http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20020329/REVIEWS/203290303/1023) (last accessed 4 March 2011).

<sup>6</sup> Dennis Lim, 'End Games', *Village Voice*, 16 March 1999: [www.villagevoice.com/1999-03-16/film/end-games/](http://www.villagevoice.com/1999-03-16/film/end-games/) (last accessed 4 March 2011).

<sup>7</sup> Jason Guerrasio, 'Possible Films, Vol. 2', 27 April 2010: [www.filmmakermagazine.com/news/2010/04/possible-films-vol-2/](http://www.filmmakermagazine.com/news/2010/04/possible-films-vol-2/) (last accessed 4 March 2011).

<sup>8</sup> A fairly lengthy interview about the DVD, for example, appeared on the film criticism/news website *Hammer to Nail*: Brandon Harris, 'A Conversation with Hal Hartley', *Hammer to Nail*, 21 October 2010: [www.hammertonail.com/interviews/a-conversation-with-hal-hartley/](http://www.hammertonail.com/interviews/a-conversation-with-hal-hartley/) (last accessed 7 March 2011). A review of the DVD appeared in the online magazine *Blogcritics*: Dusty Somers, 'The



Gilman), which offers information on various projects, galleries of film stills, trailers, interviews, essays, several free films and a news stream – all linked to the appropriate section of the online store, which sells films and music collections as discs, downloads, or both. The development of a website of this kind, designed to promote a director's profile and generate sales, is not too unusual a strategy in the indie world, of course, although sites vary in size and scope. Both Smith and Linklater, for example, maintain sites covering the activities of their own production companies, View Askew and Detour Filmproduction, that offer many of the same materials that feature on Hartley's site (the Detour Filmproduction site being, however, much smaller and less rich in information than the View Askew and Possible Films sites). Hartley is highly unusual, though, in maintaining a website that sells a selection of short and feature films directly – a strategy Hartley has been able to adopt only because he controls the rights to many of his works.<sup>9</sup> Maintaining ownership or control of particular film rights in this way allows a director to control, to a certain extent, how those films are marketed and sold, this being, as I have discussed, an aspect of the film business in which Hartley has often had an active interest. Any effort on the part of a director to take control of elements of the industrial apparatus that are usually controlled by large industrial bodies, of course, involves considerable personal investment. Time and money spent maintaining an infrastructure that can look after film sales, say, or rights, is time and money that cannot be spent making films, or other art. But such investments can function to increase a director's chances of securing greater budgets and distribution than might otherwise be possible, especially when that director's films are, like Hartley's, unconventional in content and/or character.<sup>10</sup>

As I have discussed throughout this thesis, Hartley's films incorporate a variety of unconventional elements, ranging from the moderately offbeat to the radical – the latter marking the films in which they feature as distinct from the majority of indie titles, and especially from those that have achieved some measure of commercial success. At the same time, in nearly all of the films unconventional features are balanced against a number of more conventional features, the overall

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*Unbelievable Truth*: 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition', *Blogcritics*, 2 November 2010: [blogcritics.org/video/article/dvd-review-the-unbelievable-truth-20th1/page-2/](http://blogcritics.org/video/article/dvd-review-the-unbelievable-truth-20th1/page-2/) (last accessed 7 March 2011).

<sup>9</sup> Hartley describes himself as controlling and part-owning (with a group of other individuals) the rights to some of his films. See Harris, 'A Conversation with Hal Hartley'.

<sup>10</sup> Hartley describes his attitude to working as a 'businessman' as follows: 'I mean, of course, I'd rather be making films and writing or whatever. But ... [t]he business is really the work of looking after the films ... I can't do my art unless I do the business that makes it possible.' *True Fiction Pictures & Possible Films: Hal Hartley in Conversation with Kenneth Kaleta* (New York: Soft Skull Press, 2008), p. 80.

balance struck in each case being determined by the approach adopted in a number of dimensions. Key among these dimensions, I have argued, are genre, form, political content/perspective, and place and cultural identity. I have considered Hartley's films in terms of their proximity in all or some of these dimensions to the conventions of independent cinema (and in the case of the short films, the conventions observable in a sample of Sundance shorts). At the level of genre, much of Hartley's work can be said to offer a pleasurable twist on particular generic elements and material that is itself not uncommon in indie cinema – although a number of the films (*Amateur*, *The Cartographer's Girlfriend*) also subvert generic conventions in a less common way to make a didactic point about the political 'problems' with particular generic features and pleasures. Political/social points are also made through substantial portions of dialogue and through the incorporation of particular narrative developments in a number of films, including *No Such Thing*, *The Girl from Monday*, *Amateur* and, to a lesser degree, *Fay Grim*, *The Book of Life* and *NYC 3/94*. This is a feature that functions to distinguish the films from the majority of independent films, which focus heavily on individual desire and subjectivity and include broader political commentary (if they include it at all) only as a minor ingredient – this being the approach adopted in Hartley's best-received films, *The Unbelievable Truth*, *Trust*, *Simple Men* and *Henry Fool*. These four films are also among Hartley's less formally adventurous features, notwithstanding some offbeat touches and some more striking departures from realist convention (the dance sequence in *Simple Men*, the stylised performances in all four films). A more dramatically anti-realist quality characterises a number of the later films, including *Flirt*, *The Book of Life* and the short films *The Other Also*, *NYC 3/94* and *Sisters of Mercy*, the formal innovations of which often seem to be governed more by an aesthetic logic than by the logic of thematic or character-subjectivity motivation that is a familiar mark of indie cinema (and the Sundance sample of shorts). Hartley's films can also be described as distinctive, finally, at the level of place. In many of the films, a strong sense is generated of what I have termed geographical place – place identified by a name and a unique location – through an emphasis on various regional details. Such details, which include particular forms of landscape and characterisations representative of particular cultural identities, function as a special kind of spectacle, marking the film in which they feature as 'alternative' to various degrees (depending on the familiarity of the region identified) – although their incorporation may also be motivated at either the thematic or individual level, this being the case at points in a number of Hartley's films, including *The Unbelievable*

*Truth* and *The Book of Life*. A sense of regional particularity is combined in many of Hartley's mid-career and later films with a sense of the mobile, globalised character of modern life. In emphasising travel, internationalism and broad social issues, films such as *Amateur*, *No Such Thing*, *Accomplice* and particularly *Fay Grim* position themselves at a distance from Hartley's critically admired Long Island-set features, which frequently emphasise small communities and family drama. They also position themselves at a distance from the majority of European- or foreign-themed indie films, in which identifiably international elements are balanced, or outweighed, by identifiably American elements.

The approach taken in this thesis to examining Hartley's work has involved situating each of the films in relation to the discourse of independent cinema, this being one significant discourse with which Hartley has frequently been associated. Hartley might also be usefully considered in relation to a number of other discourses, including some occupying a territory largely distinct from that of indie cinema, such as art cinema, and some occupying a territory liable to overlap with that of indie cinema. One example of the latter is what James MacDowell calls 'the quirky', to which I briefly turn my attention now in an effort to illustrate the extent to which the broad framework I have used throughout this thesis can be adopted to analyse Hartley's work within other contexts. The quirky film, as MacDowell defines it, is a particular kind of comedy/comedy-drama that has featured in American cinema of the 1990s and 2000s. Among its attributes are a comedic tone that combines a de-melodramatised, deadpan humour with a 'painful humour resulting from a character's emotional distress being situated as simultaneously pathetic *and* poignant';<sup>11</sup> a self-consciously neat or precise visual style; and a thematic emphasis on childhood, whether expressed at the level of dialogue, visuals, music, narrative or characterisation. These features are exhibited in different combinations in films such as *The Royal Tenenbaums* (2001), *Punch-Drunk Love* (2002), *The Science of Sleep* (2006) and *Adaptation* (2002) – all widely distributed and (moderately or highly) commercially successful films that have also been associated with indie cinema.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> James MacDowell, 'Notes on Quirky', *Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism*, 1 (2010), p. 3: [www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/film/movie/contents/notes\\_on\\_quirky.pdf](http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/film/movie/contents/notes_on_quirky.pdf) (last accessed 15 April 2011).

<sup>12</sup> The total domestic gross and 'widest release' figures for the films are as follows: *The Royal Tenenbaums*, \$52.4 million, 999 theatres ([www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=royaltenenbaums.htm](http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=royaltenenbaums.htm)); *Punch-Drunk Love*, \$17.8 million, 1293 theatres ([www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=punchdrunklove.htm](http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=punchdrunklove.htm)); *The Science of Sleep*, \$4.7 million, 243 theatres ([www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=scienceofsleep.htm](http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=scienceofsleep.htm)); *Adaptation*, \$22.5 million, 672 theatres ([www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=adaptation.htm](http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=adaptation.htm)) (pages last accessed 15 April 2011).

In some respects, Hartley's features can be said to fit the contours of the quirky quite closely. Several, for example, feature something close to the shot MacDowell sees as emblematic of the quirky at the visual level, the static medium/long shot framing a carefully centred character or group of characters facing towards the camera (see figures 28 and 29), and all are characterised by some sense of self-consciousness generated by compositions that are obviously staged or designed. The films are also frequently marked by a kind of deadpan comedy, whereby material that we might expect to be emotional or dramatic in tone is downplayed (at the levels of dialogue delivery, music, editing, and so on) 'almost to the point of absurdity'.<sup>13</sup> Adolescent or teenage characters – one of several groups of



**Figure 28**  
Quirky composition in *The Unbelievable Truth* © Action Features



**Figure 29**  
Quirky composition in *Simple Men* © American Playhouse/Fine Line Features

<sup>13</sup> MacDowell, 'Notes on Quirky', p. 3. Two examples (among many) of such absurdly downplayed material are Matthew's expression of extreme frustration with his work in *Trust* ('I had a bad day. I had to subvert my principles and kow-tow to an idiot,' he says, maintaining a blank expression and even tone throughout) and the dialogue exchange in *Amateur* in which Isabelle and Thomas matter-of-factly discuss starting a sexual relationship:

THOMAS: I don't think you're a nymphomaniac.  
 ISABELLE: You don't?  
 THOMAS: No.  
 ISABELLE: So, you'll make love to me?  
 (Thomas cuts himself shaving.)  
 ISABELLE: I did the same thing yesterday. Here.  
 (She points to a cut on her leg.)  
 THOMAS: I think I'm in too much pain to make love tonight.  
 ISABELLE: I can wait. I've waited all my life.

youthful, child-like or childish figures who for MacDowell typify the quirky – feature prominently in several of the early films, including *The Unbelievable Truth*, *Trust* and *Kid*, and also (less prominently) in *Henry Fool* and *Fay Grim*.

In other respects, Hartley's films are positioned at more of a distance from the quirky. For example, the kind of painfully humorous episode that MacDowell identifies as a common feature in quirky films, in which we are asked both to laugh at the absurd awkwardness of a character's situation *and* to genuinely feel his or her embarrassment, is not generally found in Hartley's work.<sup>14</sup> Many of the films also depart from a number of quirky conventions that MacDowell does not discuss in any detail, but which hold across the majority of his examples. Quirky films, for example, tend to avoid explicit political commentary of any kind, and even to avoid making passing reference to political/social issues (certainly this is the case in MacDowell's four main examples, as well as in many of the other films mentioned, including *Napoleon Dynamite*, *Rushmore* and *Lars and the Real Girl*). This is not a common trait among Hartley's features, a number of which (*Amateur*, *No Such Thing*) establish socially critical material as a major part of the narrative, and others of which (*Henry Fool*, *Fay Grim*) incorporate a number of more fleeting pieces of sharp or satirical commentary. As MacDowell briefly indicates, quirky films also tend to favour an urban or suburban milieu, one grounded in the mundane realities of contemporary American life.<sup>15</sup> Some of Hartley's earlier films depict a similar milieu. But many of Hartley's later films, as suggested at various points throughout this thesis, favour a milieu of a very different kind: a dystopian society in *The Girl from Monday*; a violently unstable New York City and an Icelandic wilderness in *No Such Thing*; a series of international spaces in *Fay Grim*. These films, in this respect, clearly fall outside the bounds of the quirky.

The above analysis identifies some degree of resemblance between Hartley's films and those films MacDowell identifies as quirky. I would suggest that this resemblance, though, is weaker in the case of Hartley's recent feature films. If an emphasis on deadpan comedy and a preference for self-consciously designed compositions are characteristics common throughout Hartley's filmography, then another significant quirky convention, a preference for everyday suburban/urban milieus, is barely observable in the 2000s features. The approach to place adopted in

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<sup>14</sup> Several episodes that seem likely to elicit something like this dual amusement/empathy reaction do feature in *Henry Fool*, although the embarrassment factor is, I would suggest, moderate by comparison. One example comes when Simon, on Henry's suggestion, tries to flirt with a number of girls in a public library, his method of flirtation being to stare at a girl until she becomes uncomfortable and then to return to his reading.

<sup>15</sup> MacDowell, 'Notes on Quirky', p. 7.

these features can be said, then, to function to distance the films from one category of alternative American film that features a large number of familiar and often celebrated and commercially successful films (this is not to say that a film falling into this category will inevitably achieve success, of course, just that it possesses some characteristics that currently seem to have some currency in the American film world).

As I have previously argued, the characteristics of Hartley's work at the level of place can be seen to have a similarly significant effect on the position occupied by the films within the context of independent cinema. I have suggested, in particular, that the regional details characteristic of Hartley's first three features – the sense of everyday economic hardship, the bizarre 'tabloid' crimes, the antipathy or tension between Long Island and New York City, the frequent references to railway travel – generate a strong sense of geographical place that serves (for those viewers, possibly quite great in number, familiar with the regional meanings of Long Island) to mark the films as 'special' and personal. I further suggested in the first chapter of this thesis that details at the levels of regional and cultural identity formed a significant part of the marketing and media texts surrounding Hartley and his work in the early stages of his career. Details of this kind, I would suggest, can function just as effectively as details relating to the travails of production – one aspect of what Timothy Corrigan has termed the 'drama of a movie's source'<sup>16</sup> – to construct and sell a director as a personality and as an auteur producing 'personal' films. It is a mark of the attractiveness of geographical place as an individual identifier that newspaper articles on Hartley have continued to label him as a 'Long Island' figure all the way through the 2000s, despite the fact that Hartley has not lived in Long Island since the 1980s and has not set a film there since 1992. A 2002 review of *No Such Thing* in the *Washington Times*, for example, states that 'a trip to the Cannes film festival a few years ago led to an invitation from Icelandic producer-director Fridrik Thor Fridriksson to Long Island independent filmmaker Hal Hartley'.<sup>17</sup> An interview with Hartley in the *Los Angeles Times* in 2007 includes a picture of Hartley with the caption 'Long Island boy'.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Timothy Corrigan, 'The Commerce of Auteurism', in *A Cinema without Walls: Movies and Culture after Vietnam* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1991), p. 118. Catherine Grant picks up Corrigan's phrase in her discussion of auteurism in the age of the DVD, 'Auteur Machines? Auteurism and the DVD', in James Bennett and Tom Brown (eds.), *Film and Television after DVD* (Hoboken: Taylor & Francis, 2008), pp. 101–115.

<sup>17</sup> Gary Arnold, "'No Such Thing" a Beastly Mess', *Washington Times*, 30 March 2002, p. D04.

<sup>18</sup> Chore Sicha, 'An Illuminated Expat', *Los Angeles Times*, 13 May 2007, p. E3.

References of this kind, of course, generally remain isolated within the text, as they cannot be linked by the writer to either Hartley's current life or his current films. As might be expected, in such 2000s texts (and in 2000s promotional texts) more frequent reference is made, in those passages emphasising Hartley's personal experience, to international locations and travel. This is especially the case in the texts surrounding *Fay Grim*, which often give attention to Hartley's relocation to Berlin. The press notes for *Fay Grim*, for example, note that the 'home base' for the film's production was Berlin, 'the city Hartley has called home since 2004'.<sup>19</sup> An interview about the film for the *Filmmaker* website starts with the question, 'I'd like to start off by asking how long you've been living in Berlin, and what the reasons were for you moving there?'<sup>20</sup> A similar first question (or prompting statement) features in the *Los Angeles Times* piece mentioned above: 'It was a couple of years ago that you went to Berlin, and you never really came back.'<sup>21</sup> Such comments, though characterised by an emphasis on personal (rather than purely professional/artistic) experience, contribute towards an authorial persona that is I would suggest *less* personal and, particularly, less 'ordinary' in its dimensions than Hartley's persona in the early 1990s. As various academic writers have suggested, ordinariness (in combination, paradoxically, with 'specialness') is a key aspect of Hollywood stardom,<sup>22</sup> and it can reasonably be thought of as an important aspect of the more 'niche' varieties of auteur stardom associated with the indie world – even if we can also expect the discourses surrounding indie stars, in comparison with Hollywood-star discourses, to put less emphasis on personal disclosure and scandal and more emphasis on individual craft, as Diane Negra argues.<sup>23</sup> A persona that is defined to a significant extent by discourses of international travel and experience is, clearly, less likely to be seen (by most American audiences) as 'ordinary' than is a persona defined by American suburban experience and characteristics. The shift in Hartley's persona away from the ordinary can be understood as one factor

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<sup>19</sup> Production notes for *Fay Grim*, available to download on the Magnolia Pictures website: [www.magpictures.com/presskit.aspx?id=f775cfc8-4d77-4be3-8baf-e6377cd9d096](http://www.magpictures.com/presskit.aspx?id=f775cfc8-4d77-4be3-8baf-e6377cd9d096) (last accessed 18 March 2011).

<sup>20</sup> Nick Dawson, 'Hal Hartley, "Fay Grim"', *Filmmaker* (online), 18 May 2007: [www.filmmakermagazine.com/news/2007/05/hal-hartley-fay-grim/](http://www.filmmakermagazine.com/news/2007/05/hal-hartley-fay-grim/) (last accessed 18 March 2011).

<sup>21</sup> Sicha, 'An Illuminated Expat', p. E3.

<sup>22</sup> See for example Richard Dyer with Paul McDonald, *Stars* (London: BFI Publishing, 1998), p. 43; James Donald, 'The Hollywood Star Machine', in Pam Cook (ed.), *The Cinema Book*, third edition (London: British Film Institute, 2007), p. 112.

<sup>23</sup> Negra, discussing niche stardom in relation to indie actors, argues that 'an emphasis on discourses of craft centers press coverage of "indie" niche stars, helping to differentiate them from Hollywood stars increasingly vulnerable to tabloidization'. "'Queen of the Indies": Parker Posey's Niche Stardom and the Taste Cultures of Independent Film', in Chris Holmlund and Justin Wyatt (eds.), *Contemporary American Independent Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 74.

contributing to the reduction of coverage of Hartley and his films in the general-reader press (another major, related factor being the various shifts observable in Hartley's work at the levels of style, place, and so on).<sup>24</sup>

Place is today an important concept in film studies, and the discussion of generic and geographical place is often now a feature not only of publications and conferences wholly dedicated to these subjects, but also of publications and conferences focusing on different or broader subjects (I have at points referred to discussions that have featured in both kinds of discourse).<sup>25</sup> I have taken the position in this thesis that an understanding of place can contribute significantly to an understanding of Hartley's films and their position within independent cinema. I have also taken the broader position that it is important that, in a study discussing Hartley's work, analysis of the films at one particular level (such as place) be combined with analysis conducted at a number of other significant and related levels, such as cultural identity, genre, form, political perspective and industrial position. The examination of Hartley's work and career at these levels contained in the chapters of this thesis offers a new account of a significant body of work that has previously tended to be discussed only in terms of a particular and limited set of dimensions. It also offers a case study of authorship in independent film, tracing the movement of one author through indie cinema's cultural and industrial spaces. What my thesis illustrates in this respect, I would suggest, is that the field of indie cinema is larger and more variegated than is sometimes implied. While much recent academic work has addressed itself to the development of a commercially successful independent cinema, one that in many respects occupies a more 'central' position within the American film landscape, there remain spaces within independent cinema as a whole that are open to distinctly marginal and uncommercial forms and

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<sup>24</sup> No pieces on Hartley (other than reviews of individual films) have appeared in the *New York Times* since 1996, for example; in the earlier 1990s the newspaper published six pieces on Hartley: Ellen Pall, 'This Director's Wish List Doesn't Include Hollywood', 11 October 1992, pp. H11–13; Caryn James, 'This Director's Characters Have Attitude', 1 November 1992, p. H21; Dan Markowitz, 'Film Director Aids Alma Mater', 15 May 1994, pp. WC10–11; Caryn James, 'A Survey of Films by Hal Hartley', 13 January 1995, p. C27; Ellen Pall, 'The Elusive Women Who Inhabit the Quirky Films of Hal Hartley', 9 April 1995, pp. H15–16; Peter de Jonge, 'The Jean-Luc Godard of Long Island', 4 August 1996, pp. SM18–21.

<sup>25</sup> Among those recently circulated calls for papers requiring or suggesting that authors address place on some level are one for a panel on Gus Van Sant, which included among its suggested topics 'Van Sant and locale: the centrality of Portland as both location and setting; the city and the suburb' (SCMS 2011); one for an edited collection titled *This Is the Sea: Cinema at the Shoreline* (edited by Brady Hammond and Sean Redmond); and one for a conference on British Telefantasy titled 'Alien Nation', which included among its suggested topics 'Place, space and landscape: British telefantasy and regional, urban and rural identities' (Northumbria University, 2011).



practices.<sup>26</sup> If we want to gain a fuller understanding of the discourse of American independent film, we need to complement an investigation of a commercial indie cinema with an investigation of the more marginal spaces of the indie world. The analysis of Hartley in this thesis is one contribution to academic investigation at this latter level.

Like any study, this one has pursued only a selection of many possible lines of enquiry, and it has not considered several significant aspects of Hartley's work and its contexts that might be usefully investigated in future studies. For example, as mentioned in the introduction, I have not undertaken any kind of ethnographic study of Hartley's fans or audiences. I have not offered any analysis specifically addressing the construction by the films of what is sometimes called a 'worldview', or philosophical attitude<sup>27</sup> – this being one significant way in which my study differs from many more traditional/familiar academic auteur studies that concern themselves less with situating a director's body of work in particular contexts and more with delineating internal textual consistencies at the levels of theme and philosophy.<sup>28</sup> What I have offered in this thesis is a wide-ranging analysis that considers a significant number of dimensions both of Hartley's films and of his professional practices, and that draws on a significant number of analytical methods. It is through an integrated textual-industrial analysis of this kind that we can come closest to capturing Hartley's significance, both in the past and today, as a low-budget/low-profile but 'successful' indie filmmaker whose practice is illustrative of some of the less familiar options available to filmmakers at the levels of industry and art.

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<sup>26</sup> Among those studies that focus on a substantially commercial/visible form of independent cinema are the titles in the American Indies book series (edited by Gary Needham and Yannis Tzioumakis), the stated focus of which is 'contemporary American films that have found commercial success but which have not been constrained by the formal and ideological parameters of mainstream Hollywood cinema'. See for example Claire Molloy, *Memento* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010); Gary Needham, *Brokeback Mountain* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010).

<sup>27</sup> I would speculatively suggest that Hartley's films share what we might label a 'sceptical humanist' philosophy. Broadly, the films frequently suggest a scepticism about particular (conventional) conceptions of love, identity and society, as well as conventional conceptions of narrative. But they also frequently suggest that human connection and love are possible and that they provide reality (as it is constructed in the films) with meaning.

<sup>28</sup> Two examples of studies of this kind on directors associated with independent film are Nicole Brenez, *Abel Ferrara* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007) and Martha P. Nochimson, *The Passion of David Lynch: Wild at Heart in Hollywood* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997).

# Appendix A

## Interview with Michael Spiller

This interview was conducted via e-mail. I received messages from Michael Spiller responding to my original list of questions on 4 January 2010, 28 January 2010 and 29 January 2010. I sent two further questions (the seventh and tenth questions in the sequence below) in response to two of his answers and received a response on 18 March 2010.

**The first film on your filmography is *Kid*, which was Hal Hartley's thesis film at SUNY at Purchase. Can you tell me a bit about your time at Purchase, and about your early experiences working as a cinematographer?**

I was always an avid movie viewer, and I began to make my own short films when I was 12, when I bought a super 8 movie camera with money I saved from delivering newspapers. I had always been interested in still photography, and after a trip to Paris as a teenager, I became really excited by putting a frame around things. My time at Purchase was really magical. It felt like there was a special mix of both faculty and students, and it was extremely productive and creative. I gravitated towards cinematography as it seemed the most comfortable and familiar, and other students liked what they saw in my own work, and asked me to shoot their projects. Hal used to say 'Mike makes the same images I do, only different'. Working as a cinematographer in a university setting is great, what you lack in experience, and equipment (and maybe talent), you make up for with passion and enthusiasm. Hal and I learned a language where the budget became the aesthetic. Instead of trying to bite off more than we could chew, we became very specific about what we could show, and how we could show it. Hal would not write things that were overly ambitious, and we would only dress, or paint, or light, as much of the set as we could afford to see. I think it kind of led to a minimalist approach that we both liked and others responded to, and it really suited the types of stories and acting styles that Hal preferred. It was really interesting going to Hal's hometown of Lindenhurst, Long Island, and making *Kid* with his extended family and friends in various capacities. We all crashed in

garages and couches, drank a lot of beer and ate bad food, and made a little film about a guy trying to leave home. 'Where are you going?' 'Away!'....

**Both *Kid* and *The Cartographer's Girlfriend* were shot on 16 mm. How does working in this format compare to working in 35 mm?**

I love working in 16 mm. The cameras are smaller, and lighter, it is easier to move faster, and 'slip under the radar' when you are working without proper permits or on a low budget. The downside is that the projected image doesn't stand up as well as 35 mm, but for broadcast on TV, it is not so much of an issue. I was very excited to shoot *The Unbelievable Truth* on 35 mm, as it felt like we had really graduated on some level. We did of course shoot 16 mm on many other occasions. You still need to light the scene, and some people would argue that you need more light for 16 mm particularly at night, but with the advances in film stock and lenses that is probably less true now.

**The critic Stanley Kauffmann, in a review of *Simple Men*, says that your camera holds an 'oxymoronic cool-close relationship to people and places', and describes one shot as a 'frieze with a human element'. What was your approach to shooting landscapes in *Simple Men* and in *Kids*, *The Cartographer's Girlfriend*, *The Unbelievable Truth* and *Trust*? Did you and Hartley discuss how to film the particular locations used for the exterior scenes?**

Shooting exteriors and landscapes with Hal has always been exceptional. He is not very interested in showing off a locale. That is not to say he is not interested in 'place' or the setting. It is just that the human face, the character, is generally the most important feature in the frame. I always tended to try and light a shot and build a composition from the face, out. I felt like I was seeing a lot of big Hollywood movies where there would be these fantastically designed sets that were exquisitely lit, and the leading lady (or man) would have all these terrible shadows all over their faces, like they were an afterthought. With and without Hal, the films I was shooting were smaller, character driven pieces, and the people had to look great. We controlled the things we could, chose what to put in the shot, usually made some sort of symmetrical, or pointedly asymmetrical

composition, and in general, fit the location around our characters, rather than trying to fit our characters into the world.

**Could you say something about your working relationship with Hartley in general? What is the nature of your contribution to the films, in terms of preparing for the shoot, making shotlists, designing shots, choreographing actors, and so on? How does working with Hartley compare to working with other indie/‘alternative’ film directors like Nicole Holofcener or Martin Scorsese?**

Working with Hal was a great experience. We literally grew up together (at least artistically) on his sets. I would go off and work with other people, and bring my latest knowledge back to whatever our next project was. After several years we developed almost a telepathic relationship. I knew what Hal wanted and he knew what I would give him. He always had a strong sense of choreography for the camera, and had a great way to move actors around so that we could design a shot that would evolve simply as the actors moved around the set, and would accomplish lots of different bits of coverage without a cut. For most of our time working together we never used a video tap, where the image from the film camera is shown on a monitor, so the director (and others) could see exactly what was being photographed. This was a more traditional approach, and since I also physically operated the camera for most of our projects, it meant that there was a great trust between us. Hal would look to me after each take, and I would tell him if ‘we got it.’ As our aesthetic became more and more refined, and his lens selection more specific, it became even easier to pre-visualize on location scouts and in preproduction, what Hal wanted. People who would work with us for the first time would be amazed at how little we actually had to discuss things on set. We had an innate understanding of each other. Hal would do most of the shot listing on his own, using pencil drawings of the floor plan of the set or location, and arrows and angles and circles to represent the actors, the camera and the movement within the scene. I would look at this and know how to translate it. I also could pick up a lot just from Hal’s body language as he worked with the actors, and knew how to read those cues as well. He would go through their movement as he saw it, and I just knew what he was looking for.

**What about lenses? What kinds of issues do you need to consider when choosing/using different lenses? (Sarah Cawley told me that it's a 'waste of time' trying to talk Hartley out of using 50 mm!)**

The lenses that Hal and I used tended towards the longer side. On *The Unbelievable Truth* we carried a full set of standard Arri Primes, but rarely used the wider lenses. Hal seemed less interested in showing wide slices of the environment (plus it is harder to control from a production standpoint) and he felt the characters could be lost. We liked to be very particular about where we wanted the viewer to look. Where their eye would travel within the frame. By the time we shot *Simple Men*, we joked that we shouldn't even carry any extra lenses as we were determined to shoot the entire film on the 50 mm. And we did with the exception of two shots. One, a 300 mm shot of Bob Burke walking towards camera, and the other where we put up the 35 mm (the 'other 50') on a rigged shot of the brothers riding a motorcycle. When we put the 50 mm on the camera you could not even see the handlebars of the motorcycle so it looked like they were floating along the road! A couple of weeks into that film, I could absolutely 'eyeball' where I wanted the camera to be as I was so familiar with the field of view that the 50 mm lens offered. The 50 mm is considered to be a 'normal' lens. It shows you an image that is approximately the same size and perspective as if you were viewing with the naked eye (without taking into account peripheral vision of course). It is a flattering lens for faces, and when shot close to 'wide open' the background will fall off out of focus and help direct the viewer's attention to that which we want them to see.

**Several of Hartley's films are characterised by a strikingly non-naturalistic colour scheme – I'm thinking in particular of *Amateur*, which often features a dramatic blue hue, and *Trust*, whose images were 'greyed'. What kind of technical/artistic issues does shooting in this style raise?**

I found that in order for the stylized colors to work, you needed to keep some white reference in the frame, otherwise your eye and your brain 'correct' for the color shift, and you stop seeing it. I realized this after a scene in *Simple Men* (where the cast dances to Sonic Youth) and I had added a stylized blue wash to the lighting. When I was doing the final color timing on the film I noticed that after 30 seconds or so the effect seemed to diminish and I knew I had not

changed the lighting within the scene. In *Amateur* I tried to keep some more white light within those scenes that had a blue feel so that the effect would stay constant to the viewer. In *Trust*, we went for a slightly desaturated look for some of the work scenes, but had a fairly full palette in other locations.

**Was there a particular logic behind such choices, in terms of conveying the emotions of the characters, creating a particular ‘mood’, and so on? Or was it more a case of creating visual effects which were striking and pleasurable in and of themselves?**

Hal and I discussed using a stylized blue light for a night look. It was not a realistic effect, but I think he really did like the look and how it complemented the palette of the film. I wanted to make sure that the effect did continue to register with the viewer rather than be ‘corrected’ by the brain. If there was a deeper meaning, we didn’t discuss it, and pretty much left it to the viewer to decide for themselves.

***Henry Fool* is characterised by a fairly ‘drab’ palette – Hartley goes so far as to describe the film as being influenced by cinéma vérité. Is this something you were thinking about during the shoot?**

I never thought of cinéma vérité while shooting *Henry Fool*. I think the palette is pretty rich actually. I used a lot of ‘mixed’ light with fluorescents left uncorrected so they photographed either green or blue, and sodium vapor lights and neon lights adding to the mix. The scenes in the basement with the firelight effect from the little furnace are some of my favorite in the film. The color on the walls adds up to a deep and subtle cave-like texture. There is a rawness to some of the locations that is unglamorized but we chose everything in the frame (or at least removed offending objects!) and the wardrobe is simple and utilitarian by choice.

**What are some of the differences between filming in suburban/rural areas and filming in New York City?**

Shooting in NY is great, but enormously difficult. It is hard to move a film company around, and you get a lot of onlookers when you are trying to film a scene. But there is hardly a bad angle, and everywhere you point the camera you

are seeing New York City. There is always a fresh approach or never before photographed corner available to be discovered, or you can put your camera on the last company's tripod marks and shoot the same angle that everyone else has. The energy of NY is visible in every frame of film you expose there. I grew up there, so it is at once familiar and comfortable. Shooting in suburban and rural areas holds a different set of challenges and fascinations for me. Hal grew up in suburbia, so he knows that world. As a 'foreigner' I am attracted to different things and see them from a stranger's perspective. You tend to find more horizontal architecture of course, and the telephone and power lines that are strung along poles create a web above the heads of our actors, and Hal and I are both drawn to those webs visually and symbolically. From a production standpoint, it is generally easier to shoot in a place that has not been over-exposed to film production. People and locations tend to be more cooperative, and passers-by watch from a polite distance rather than grumbling that you are taking up all their fucking parking spaces, like they do in NYC!

**Could you say a few words about film permits? What kinds of things do you have to consider when trying to obtain one, or when shooting without one? Does this depend on the kind of location you're filming in (suburban, urban, etc.)?**

Depending on the location and what is involved with the local film office, obtaining a permit to get permission to film can be easy or complex, free or very expensive. We have done it both ways, and if you are 'stealing' a shot or a scene, it forces you to work quickly as you run the risk of getting shut down (or worse) at a moment's notice. Sometimes this adds a sense of urgency to the shoot and certainly will force you to be as economical as possible and get the shots you need and get out of there. Typically the more 'over exposed' or popular or populated locations are more difficult to get clearance on. You often have to obtain signatures from a certain percentage of the residents or businesses that you will impact by shooting there, and even then you might not get the seal of approval.

**Does performance style have an influence on cinematography? What kinds of things do you need to discuss with actors as part of your job?**

Every film and every actor is different, but in general in Hal's films, my relationship with the cast was very technical. How to hit their 'mark', where to find the light or the lens, how to move in concert with the camera. We all (actors, camera assistant, myself as DP and camera operator, the dolly grip, boom person) had to do quite elaborate dances at times to execute the choreography of the shot. Sometimes the cast just needed a little reassurance that the stylized movement was part of an overall plan. Taken out of context it might feel very unnatural to a 'method' actor. But we all develop a trust and respect for each other and our part of the process. It helped that Hal used a lot of actors on more than one project, so we all got to know each other. I never gave an actor a performance note. If I had any acting ideas I would discretely say something to Hal and he could take the note or not, or it would morph into something else, and that is pretty much true on any project. If the actor is getting notes from too many sources they can feel adrift and confused.

**A number of shots in Hartley's films feature characters moving deliberately in and out of the frame, almost as if enacting a slow dance routine. Are there particular challenges involved in filming such shots?**

The choreography in these pieces begins with an idea in Hal's head. Then we scout locations and find the right place. Then Hal draws an overhead floor plan with the characters and camera diagrammed on it. Arrows and dashed lines represent the movement. Once we are in the space to shoot it, we block the scene with the cast as Hal and I watch. Then we light the scene as you would normally, and begin to rehearse the scene with the actors and the camera and the crew. The challenge for me is in the camera operation. Often the shots would be one long continuous take that requires me memorizing the scene and being on my toes to participate in the dance with the cast as they cross in and out of shot. Sometimes I had to anticipate when the next actor would cross into frame based on the dialogue, and together with the dolly grip we would move the camera about the space. I always enjoyed shooting these scenes as they are very active and interactive for me. I was an equal partner in the choreography, and as close as I will ever be to becoming a dancer!



**I'd like to know how much the choices you make as a cinematographer are influenced by the characters in front of the camera, and more generally by the themes of the film.**

I like to think that by the time I would be ready to shoot a film, I was so completely immersed in it that my gut would help guide me. If something was wrong, or didn't feel appropriate to the story, I would start to sense it in my gut, and would then step back and make a change. I always found that pretty easy on Hal's films since we spent so much time together as friends and growing together as filmmakers, and I always connected to his type of storytelling. I often found that listening to a certain piece of music would ground me and get me back in the head space to keep the images consistent. For example I shot *Trust* listening to 'I Am Stretched on Your Grave' by Sinead O'Connor every morning at least once. It wasn't something Hal and I discussed, but it helped get me centered emotionally so I could focus on the consistency of the images. On *Amateur* I had received a pre-release copy of Liz Phair's first album *Exile in Guyville*. I turned Hal and Martin Donovan onto that and we listened to it start to finish many times (and over many beers) on several occasions. That album became my touchstone for that film.

**Finally, how would you say working in film compares to working in TV?**

For me the main difference between working in theatrical film versus television has to do with expectations. In Hal's case we made small stories with big themes that were for big and small screens. I think a number of Hal's films work in both formats since even the feature films had a lot of close ups that play well on television. So, technically you have to take your format into account, and even when framing for theatrical, you have to consider how the film will look on TV. If you know the film will only exist in a TV format, then you compose shots accordingly (but you still have to deal with varying formats – 16:9 HD format vs. 4:3 standard Def TV, so one composition always suffers...). Creatively I think both TV and film can be very satisfying. I have focused entirely on television the last 10 years, and I love the fact that a show that is working can reach millions of loyal fans every week. A single episode might be seen by more people than any of the movies I have worked on. The other thing that is different about TV is that if a show keeps going, you can be with the same group of people for years. You

develop a real sense of family (or dysfunctional family depending on the cast and crew!) in a way that is different from the 30 or 40 day shoot of an independent feature film.

## Appendix B

### Interview with Sarah Cawley

This interview was conducted via e-mail. I received Sarah Cawley's responses to my list of questions on 6 December 2009.

**Firstly, I'd like to ask what led you to cinematography, and to work with Hal Hartley. As I understand it, you were at State University of New York at Purchase with Hartley, and you were first assistant cameraperson on *The Unbelievable Truth* and *Trust*. What were your experiences in these early collaborations?**

I met Hal Hartley when we were both attending the State University of New York at Purchase. He was a few years ahead of me. I was friends with Hal and also with Michael Spiller who was Hal's DP in those years.

I was working as a focus puller for Michael Spiller and I was 1st AC on *The Unbelievable Truth*. We shot that film in twelve and a half days, I think. It was a small budget. I was in a hotel room with about five other women who were working on the project, including Tami Reiker who was 2nd AC and Kelly Reichardt, who was working in the wardrobe department, if you can believe that. She also had a small acting role.

I worked as 1st AC on *The Unbelievable Truth*, *Simple Men*, *Surviving Desire*, and a few other collaborations, including a few music videos and commercials that Hal directed. It was very enjoyable. There was a group of us who worked together, including Ted Hope as producer, Judy Chin as make-up, Mike Spiller as DP. It was fun to show up on one of Hal's shoots and see all the familiar faces. It was kind of like going to camp.

I went directly to the position of 1st AC without ever being a 2nd AC on a feature, and there was a lot of pressure. The first time we went to the lab for projected dailies, I was nervous that they would be out of focus. They were fine though.

We all enjoyed working on those jobs. *The Unbelievable Truth* was done for deferred pay, and we were all surprised and happy when we got our paychecks in the mail, months later.

**Are you particularly drawn to independent/alternative films? How do you think the job of a cinematographer varies in different kinds of productions (independent, mainstream, short film, TV, documentary, etc.)?**

Independent films are great, and that's how I began my career as a DP, by shooting indie features, which I very much enjoyed. In a sense, though, I've had my heart broken by independent cinema. I've shot 12 independent features and none of them have done big box office. I never got my chance to shoot a breakout movie like *Little Miss Sunshine* or *Boys Don't Cry*. The movies that I have DP'd have gone to festivals, and been shown on TV, but not too much box office. That's been a disappointment.

In the last few years I have shot no independent features and lots of network television, specifically *Ugly Betty*, *Zip* and *In the Motherhood*. I find it gratifying because it has an audience and people see it. It's also exciting to shoot on a big studio lot in Los Angeles, with such amazing crews and equipment.

On independent features I get more time to prep with the director, including visiting the locations and shot listing there and discussing visuals with the production designer. On episodic TV, there is none of that. I'm shooting all the time, so the only prep happens during a lunch meeting or something. Episodic is more constant: wrap one episode and bring in the next director for the next show and start shooting immediately. There is less opportunity to help the director lay out the coverage. If the director is not strong at visuals, or they don't understand eyelines, it really kills the schedule. They need to come in with a great shotlist. If they don't, the DP is in trouble because it slows down the shoot, which is the kiss of death in television.

I love shooting documentaries. There's no money in it, but I enjoy it a lot. The DP is in a verite situation and has to make quick decisions, which is an enjoyable challenge. I have shot babies being delivered, people hiking out of the Gobi desert in Mongolia, decorative scarring, surgery, you name it. You've really got to think on your feet, which I love.

**Thinking more specifically about *The Girl from Monday* and *Fay Grim*, what kind of working relationship did you have with Hartley? He's known as someone who has an unusually clear sense of the design of the shot and the choreography of the actors within the shot. Are there particular challenges for a cinematographer working in this way?**

Hal has very concise ideas about the blocking and visuals for his films. Our working relationship is very straightforward and calm. When we are making a movie together, the set is very quiet and focused. Neither of us likes extraneous noise, chatter, walkietalkies or cell phones.

Hal also limits the amount of people on set. The production designer dresses the shot. I operate the camera myself. There are no superfluous people around.

He does virtually every shot on a 50 mm lens. I can try and talk him into going wider, but it's a waste of time. I have known him for so many years that I know how he works, and how he blocks his actors so that the 50 mm will work for his coverage. He does not mind if dialogue happens off camera. He will accept input when we have a challenge, such as the eight page scene in Henry's cell in *Fay Grim*, but generally he comes in with a shotlist. Of course he may change his shotlist during the day.

Once Hal has completed his work, it's time to wrap. If he gets all his shots in eight hours, then the day is over. There are many directors who will shoot until a producer forces them to wrap. Hal is not one of them.

**Both *The Girl from Monday* and *Fay Grim* have a very vibrant and quite unusual visual style. What are some of the technical/conceptual issues raised by the frequent use of canted/Dutch angles, colour tints, shutter speed effects, and so on?**

*The Girl from Monday* was a complete success visually. We shot it on a PAL Sony HVX-2000, which is a tiny little camera. We had a very small crew on that movie. The shutter effect and the color grad filters were both Hal's ideas. We chose the filter colors together and I think I went to the photo store to buy them myself. Hal said to use them whenever and wherever we wanted, without overthinking it. It was an intuitive process. I'd put in a filter and sometimes he'd comment, or suggest a change. There were certain filters that we ended up using

more than others. There was a chocolate one and a green one that we especially liked.

The streaky shutter effect really influenced the blocking and camera movement. Hal would watch a rehearsal on the monitor and then make adjustments to the actors' blocking so that the streakiness helped tell the story, and so that the key story points were conveyed.

The canted angles, color filters and streaky shutter were there to be visually pleasing and stimulating. There was not a big intellectual construct about when we would use it or what it meant.

Technically it was not a huge challenge. Hal and I always prep quite thoroughly, so we know what we are doing when we get to set. On *The Girl from Monday* I was doing the camera operating, so I would get the filter from the camera assistant and place it myself. I would also adjust the shutter myself. I actually also pulled focus on that movie by myself, which took a lot of skill.

On *Fay Grim*, I went to Berlin to prep for many weeks. We were shooting with a much larger camera, the Sony F-900. We had a much larger crew. Initially I thought the idea was to make it look more like its precursor *Henry Fool*.

During prep it became clear that we were going to do more stylized cinematography, and that we were going to Dutch every shot. In fact there is only one shot that is not canted, and it's the first shot we did. I forgot to put a Dutch angle on it because it was the first day. Every single other shot is canted. Once again, it was Hal's idea. He likes that way it looks. End of story.

**Do you think the cinematography of a film can be a pleasure in and of itself, or does it always serve in some way to express the emotional lives of the characters or the themes of the film? Does the answer to this depend on the film/director?**

I absolutely feel that cinematography can be a pleasure in and of itself and need not express the emotional lives of the characters.

**Hartley has described *Kimono* as a 'landscape' film, made in the tradition of 'slow' filmmakers such as Tarkovsky, Ozu and Wenders. What was your experience of shooting in this style? Did the landscape have an influence on your working practices?**

*Kimono* was a total pleasure to shoot because everything was in service of the visuals and the mood. We didn't even have a sound recordist on set. We shot it in the country outside of Woodstock, in upstate New York. I was born and raised near there and I love that landscape. We sought to celebrate that landscape and give it a life of its own through the images.

We shot it in 35 mm film, which of course looked beautiful. Miho is so beautiful to photograph. She is so highly trained in dance and movement that it is a joy to watch. We concentrated on creating a visual mood that would engulf the senses. We accomplished this by exquisite production design, cinematography, and wardrobe. It was a very pure experience to shoot *Kimono*. There were very few actors, no sound recordist, and a simple narrative. Virtually all of our efforts went into the visual images and the mood, which of course is a dream come true for a cinematographer.

A secret of our success as a director/DP team is that once Hal explains what he wants to achieve, I begin to execute it. I don't try to put my personal stamp on his idea. If Hal says 'We are going shoot in slow motion with thousands of feathers falling from the ceiling,' then I order the requisite equipment and light the feathers so that they look beautiful.

If Hal says 'We are going to put a Dutch angle on every shot' then I order a tripod head that allows that, and we take it from there. When he presents his idea, it's already completely thought out. He doesn't want anyone to pick it apart again.

Plus we have known each other for decades, which brings a great comfort level and ease of communication.

## Appendix C

### Interview with Steve Hamilton

This interview was conducted via e-mail. I received Steve Hamilton's responses to my list of questions on 11 May 2010. I sent three further questions (the second, tenth and twelfth questions in the sequence below) in response to three of his answers and received a response on 20 May 2010.

#### **Could you tell me a little about the beginnings of your career in film, and about working on *Ambition*, *Surviving Desire* and *Simple Men*?**

Possibly more than you're interested in hearing, but my career in film began as a very specific decision and perceived trajectory abetted by a series of fortunate coincidences. You can say I was lucky, but I also had vision, and I capitalized on the opportunities that were presented to me. In a (rather large) nutshell.

I studied literature and philosophy in university and afterwards, having grown up in 'the silicon valley' of California I happened to get offered a job at a high-tech startup as their very first salesperson. (This plays into the Avid question later as it prepared me to take advantage of the emerging film-related technological revolution that I helped to pioneer.) Perfectly suitable work for an English major with a minor in philosophy who knew nothing about technology. I learned fast though but after three years in 'tech' I yearned for a more creatively meaningful life and so I quit my job and lived off my savings for a year while taking theater and dance classes and volunteering around San Francisco (where I'd been living since graduation) at various theater and dance venues. Through all this exploration I became interested in film as a medium which incorporated all aspects I'd been learning, visual, sound, music, narrative, etc. and so I took a job at the Mill Valley Film Festival as their coordinator of volunteers, hoping to get an entrée into the film business. I never saw the inside of a theater during the entire festival so busy was I coordinating those outside of it but at the wrap party for the crew, when I mentioned to the artistic director of the festival that I hadn't seen a single movie, she pulled a copy of *The Unbelievable Truth* out of her bag and said, 'this one's good, take it home and watch it.' I watched it and rewound it



and watched it again, and having grown up in the suburbs myself (of California not Long Island but basically the same thing) I totally identified with the film and its tone and its perspective and I turned to my girlfriend Jocelyn and said, 'I think I'd like to move to New York City and work with this guy Hal Hartley.' She was all for it having studied at FIT before moving back to San Francisco and a few months later we were driving across the country with our cat and everything we owned to a city that I'd only visited once before.

Before leaving for NYC I got offered an internship at Zoetrope studios through somebody at the festival who had a friend there and after a week of dutiful and uncomplaining paper sorting and filing I was rewarded with the task of helping one of the sound editors (Roy Finch) on a film Roman Coppola was producing record sound fx down in the basement studio there. He needed somebody to hold the mic while he banged some things together, rustled some clothing, and crumpled up paper. I loved doing it and when he found out I had a car and could drive him out to Alameda to record some neighborhood sound fx I jumped at the chance. A couple of days later one of the assistant sound editors on the film got offered some real money to work on a bigger film and Roy suggested they hire me as an apprentice instead of replacing the departing assistant. Interestingly enough the team was editing the sound for this film on a bunch of computer equipment that had been loaned to Francis (who as you probably know was always interested in trying out new technologies in the service of filmmaking) and because I had just spent three years learning all about computers I took home the manuals, learned all about the programs they were using and quickly made myself indispensable. This was 1989 and Francis kept bringing people by and commenting about how we were creating the entire sound track for this feature film without 'cutting any mag' and everybody seemed duly impressed but I didn't even know what 'mag' was. (I later learned it was the term used for the magnetic film stock I would be using on *Theory of Achievement*, *Ambition*, *Surviving Desire* and *Simple Men*.) In a scene worthy of one of Francis' own *Godfather* movies I arrived in New York with a sealed letter of introduction that I guess basically told the production manager of *The Godfather 3* which was shooting at the time in New York that I'd worked hard for them in SF and to give me one of those 'mob style' jobs where I got paid 75 dollars a day to just sit in the office and look for a real job. What I got was a gig assisting (for free) one of the top film assistants in New York who was editing a short 35 mm film for a director named Cort Tramontin and she was able to teach me

everything I needed to know about 'the system' in which film editing rooms were organized and run.

All this was perfect preparation for my 'big break' which commenced only two days after arriving in New York when I went to visit my cousin Page Hamilton founder of the rock band Helmet who was tending bar down in the East Village. Upon arrival at the bar he immediately pulled out a copy of his 'first music video that was shot by that guy Mike Spiller who shot that movie *The Unbelievable Truth*'. Talk about unbelievable, I couldn't believe my luck and Page put me in touch with Michael who met me for breakfast and apparently told Hal that there was a normal and sincere seeming guy who was Page Hamilton's cousin and who'd just arrived in New York and who wanted to become a film editor and who was willing to work for free. Lo and behold two months later I came home to a message on my answering machine that was none other than Hal Hartley himself offering me a job as the assistant editor on his short film *Theory of Achievement* and we hadn't even met yet. He hired me sight unseen! Luckily the aforementioned experience had perfectly prepared me to take charge of Hal's editing room and many years later he told me that the day I walked into his editing room he thought to himself that 'I no longer have to worry about this part of the process'. I speak about the four films a couple of times in later questions, but I was fortunate enough to have entered Hal's life during a remarkably fertile period and the four films you mention all happened one after the other in a two year long succession that basically constituted my 'film schooling' both technically and aesthetically. I remember early on there was a Godard retrospective at Film Forum and Hal and I went and saw a ton of those movies and this was my first exposure to any kind of art film and of course I absorbed Godard through Hal and he became a great inspiration and influence on me as well.

**So it was Godard's work in particular that was an influence? What was it, would you say, that you and Hartley took from Godard in your early projects? Do you think Godard was a fairly unusual point of reference in filmmaking/editing in American film at this time?**

One of the things I really absorbed from Godard, and we didn't always talk about it, but this percolated below the surface all the time, was the relationship of image and sound. The first thing Hal taught his film students each year during his

stint at Harvard was how to sync dailies, on film, with a synchronizer. The materiality of that act and the fact that picture and sound were NOT married to one another per se but could be manipulated independently of one another he felt was one of the most essential tools in a filmmaker's arsenal.

In big Hollywood-style filmmaking, when the sound crew is working, the work is divided up to the point where the person in charge is totally alienated from any kind of cohesive sense of what's being built in terms of the soundtrack. For the sound editors themselves it's even worse. They live in a tiny myopic world that might involve say, cutting in background ambiences for reels 1, 5 and 6. In the early Hartley films I was often building the sound track entirely by myself or with the help of just one or two people at most. Even when I supervised the sound for Ang Lee's *Sense and Sensibility* we only had three or four people working on a film that might normally have had a sound crew of 16 or more people. What this large crew typically means is that everybody throws everything in and the supervisor just sorts it out in the mix.

In the worst case, if they get behind in the mix then stuff might end up in there that's unintended, or that people are even unaware of, or that is just plain bad. In the best case it just turns out bland and bleary. The dialog tracks are first totally anesthetized and only the words are left in. Anything that's remotely unclear or noisy is ADR'd over and you end up with this soundscape that might be dramatic and loud, as in a lot of action movies, but is often inelegant and is usually very generic. I always told any of the people whom I mentored that every sound you put into a film should mean something. (In the case of Hal's movies a lot of those early offscreen tire squeals, crashes, carbies, and door slams meant that there was a bump in the dialog track that needed to be covered over.) But we made these gestures bold and aggressive so as to serve the stylization of the film, perhaps even an 'alienation effect' a la Brecht or a kind of postmodernist breaking of the 4th wall the license for which I believe came from Godard (at least for me it did), but I know Hal was also steeped in Artaud and others via his former teacher Travis Preston.

Anyway, the sound principles in a nutshell were

1. Keep it simple, direct and purposeful.
2. Make bold sonic gestures.
3. Don't be afraid to break the 4th wall with a sound as long as it adds energy or emotion to the scene and subscribes to the principles outlined above.

And if you want a really concrete example look at Godard's *Prenom Carmen* which was basically made with just three or four tracks: the string quartet, the VO, and the production recordings. There was little or nothing added beyond that.

**How would you characterise your working relationship with Hal Hartley?  
What is the balance of creative/technical input between the two of you?**

I started as an assistant editor dealing with the syncing of dailies and the organizing of the editing room on the short film *Theory of Achievement*. I'd had very little experience at that point but I sat right next to Hal all day long and I watched and absorbed and we sometimes talked about what he was doing, but mostly I watched. Then I started sound editing on the next short film (*Ambition*) because he'd liked the sound that I'd done for Danny Leiner's film *Time Expired*. During the editing of *Surviving Desire* my skills at the physical/technical 'craft' of editing (which at the time was cutting and taping actual 'film' together) began to surpass Hal's. This led to Hal beginning to have me cut sequences that he'd 'marked up' with grease pencil while he focused on composing the music and that led eventually to making my own marks and over the course of the first four films we'd worked on together (during an almost uninterrupted period of two years) I became Hal's 'editor' on *Simple Men*. He trusted my instincts and as related in the story above I really identified with his sensibilities, and given that my entire film education came largely by watching movies with Hal or watching films that Hal had recommended or just mentioned in passing, I was able to really 'get inside of his head'.

Given the organic and amorphous transition it became almost impossible to even recognize where my thought ended and Hal's began and I'd often find myself reacting to the way he'd shift in his chair while watching something or this little bubbly thing he'd do with the spit in his mouth when something didn't seem quite right, and these things spurred me on to make changes based sometimes on comments, sometimes on intuition, sometimes without the benefit of either but informed entirely by my mentorship under him and the fact that I simply 'understood' what he was getting at. When we began editing on computers then the lines really began to blur because I could actually work faster than he could think or speak and so the process became much more

visceral and more organic still. I've never sat down to calculate it, and it sounds cliché, but I have to believe that Hal and I have spent thousands of hours together working on his movies and we started out on the same page, so there's a lot of symbiotic thought going on.

That said, I think the films that editorially represent my most 'unfettered' input would be the two DV films *The Book of Life* and *The Girl from Monday*. Interestingly enough I think it was these films that led Hal back towards editing himself and he's developed a new relationship with our assistant from *The Girl from Monday*, Kyle Gilman that's more like the one we had back in the beginning. It wasn't that Hal didn't like the work, but that in a way maybe I'd gotten so good at it that he was losing a sense of connection to it and he wanted to dig his hands 'back into the trim bin' so to speak and reconnect more with the post process. Because I was unable to travel to Berlin and spend a lot of time there (I had my own business to run now and a staff to support back in New York) there was an opportunity for us to 'break up the band' so to speak and for him to depart on this whole new (old) way of working where he's much more involved in every element of post production.

**You founded the post-production facility Spin Cycle Post, one of the pioneers of AVID technology, in 1993. What were some of the benefits of using AVID, and of having your own facility to work in?**

Ted Hope said to me very early on that 'if you could control the means of production, you could control your creativity'. I never forgot that and this led me to convince Hal that editing *Amateur* on an Avid would give us unprecedented control. Creatively cutting on the Avid did in fact help me as I discuss [above] as it allowed me to be much more instinctive about the edits I made and a lot less 'studied' about them. When it takes several minutes to cut and splice two or three pieces of film for each cut you have to really think things through and work very hard to make choices. I later worked on a short project with Atom Egoyan who'd just finished *Krapp's Last Tape* and he told me about how because it was just going to be 13 separate takes strung together he thought he'd edit it himself and that he'd edit it on a steenbeck. Well then the choices were so few that each one became SOOO important that where to cut seemed almost impossible to determine and he cut up the ends and beginnings of each scene so much they could hardly run through the heads on the steenbeck they were so full of tape. So

what the Avid does is it lets you be sort of binary in your decision making. (You become a human computer!) Tap is this better than that? If yes then keep it, if no, then Tap is this better than before? If yes then keep it, if no then, well, you get the picture. It's all feel and a lot less thought this way. At least when it comes to the fine tuning. The big picture is still a lot of thought and screenings and dialog and we still often use 3 by 5 notecards to do paper edits.

That said, when we cut *Amateur* on an Avid the process of editing picture was VERY unwieldy. The images were bad, the storage was super expensive and we couldn't even afford to have all the dailies on line at once. We cut it in order one third of the film at a time! Then we'd get rid of everything we didn't use and load the next third until finally we had a whole cut on the computer but nothing else. Then we'd load a scene at a time to work on them. It was really cumbersome and my head hurt every day because every button I'd press on the computer I'd be visualizing the equivalent activity with my hands, and a splicing block, and a steenbeck.

But when it came to the SOUND editing. Now THAT was a revolution. We could prep our dialog way better, we could listen to all our tracks at once, we could go out and record sounds and load them right into the computer without having to send it through the dubbing room at Sound One. THAT was empowering. And I knew that it was just a matter of time before the picture followed and would be equally as revolutionized. But the sound tracks we started making on the computer were so far beyond what had been available to the low budget feature world that it was truly a revolution. Even to this day, if you're not making a special effects movie, the difference of cutting a film on a steenbeck and on a computer is pretty negligible. Other than that viscerality I referred to above.

**One of the most celebrated sequences in *Simple Men*, the first full-length feature you edited for Hartley, is the 'Kool Thing' dance sequence. This includes a number of quite unexpected cuts (from Martin by his truck to the bar interior, and from the dance sequence to Kate sitting down at a later point), and also a long take where usually we would expect to see some cuts. I'd like to know a bit about your approach to editing more unconventional sequences such as this.**

To this day, on my commercial editing reel I still include the section of *Simple Men* that comes shortly after the scene you're talking about, but the same style applies. It opens with Bill arriving at the gas station in order to try and sell the motorcycle and ends with the sheriff coming in and knocking that ash tray onto the ground. There's such an efficiency and economy to the storytelling and the edits all have an energy throughout. I don't know much what to say about it except that it harkens to mind a statement Walter Murch makes in his book about editing which I've always taken to heart. 'Cut out the bad bits.' Twice in my career I've taken over feature films that had been edited by another editor and weren't working. In each case I cut out about an hour from them and didn't even rework too many scenes (although of course there were some). In each case that's all I did, was look at what was there and 'cut out the bad bits' and in each case the film was 'transformed'. If all that you're left with is the good parts then everything gets better. And if something doesn't flow then you can probably fix it by cutting out even more so that the edit sort of socks you in the face. In the end, it's all just rhythm and finding the beat that's going to either be subtle or slammin' as appropriate. Just try to avoid those that fall away from either extreme. Bland, boring, blech. I edit a lot without even looking at the images, I just listen. The rhythm is in there. It's in the language. You just have to find it. There's rhythm in Martin flipping the pages of the phone book. There's rhythm in the slight catch in Bill's throat as he says 'I just borrowed it'. Then you build the rhythm between him and Vic, 'Us? I mean me. You said us?' etc.

So sometimes the rhythm is in there in the dialog, sometimes it gets built out of the language of the script, sometimes the actors nail it either alone or together, and sometimes it's choreographed into the mise en. You cut when you absolutely have to, and sometimes when you want to, and sometimes not at all! But the most important thing is to listen.

**How much does music influence the work you do as an editor? In an interview about *The Girl from Monday* Hartley recalls how you were concerned to avoid too obvious a 'match' between the cuts and the beats of the music.**

If you're interested there is a podcast available on i-tunes in which I spend an hour discussing the way in which music affects my editing. It's got a lot of good music in it so it's not as boring as it sounds. The podcast series is called *Jazz*

*Inspired* and it was done on NPR by a jazz pianist named Judy Carmichael who's interviewed a lot of people from all walks of life about how music (specifically jazz but I mostly discuss rock and roll and hip hop which was a departure for her show that she said a lot of people were interested in). My episode is number 92. You can find it in the i-tunes store for free.

In a nutshell though, I've always got a song playing in my head. Interestingly enough I don't really like listening to music while I edit, at least while I'm doing the heavy lifting, thinking part of the process. But I always have sound and music in my head informing what I'm doing. The nice thing about having it in my head is that the tempo can change. I'm generally searching for a syncopated rhythm that provides tension and release inherently and throughout rather than falling into some sort of rock and roll 4 by 4 repetitiveness. As I mention in the podcast it all dates back to the first time I heard 'The Ocean' by Led Zeppelin. There's a beat missing in the opening guitar/drum riffs and it just made all my adolescent energy want to explode when I discovered it. I couldn't stop listening to that song and it's informed my work ever since. When you cut to actual music it's easy to fall into that. Especially when listening to songs and not score. Scored music can be a little more free form and less restrictive.

When I am editing to the music (as in *TGFM* which you mention), I often avoid cutting ON the beat but rather let the beat fall on some sort of narrative/choreographic rhythm 'inside' the shot. This dovetails nicely with and is probably greatly informed by Hal's own often stated interest in the choreography and movement within the mise en scene of shots which he'll often prefer to cutting around a scene. The dialog provides a rhythm, the choreography and eyelines provide a rhythm, the sound design provides a rhythm and finally the music gets in there and does its part. Sometimes before, sometimes during, sometimes after a scene is actually cut.

(Sidebar, I'll never forget when Hal made the Negase music video after meeting him on the Japan section of *Flirt*. It was for this crazy Japanese pop song and Hal suggested we actually cut it to a piece of classical music (I'm forgetting which one at the moment) then we just laid the actual song on top of what I'd edited together and it worked too! I have a copy of that original somewhere and we subtitled it the NYSCA (pronounced niss-ka) version because we imagined it was the kind of thing people submitted when trying to get grants from the New York State Council for the Arts.)



Anyway, as Hal began to give me more and more responsibility for the editing of his films I think it was driven largely by his desire to get on with the creation of the music which he really loved doing. He'd sit in the back of the room watching me work and with his headphones and a keyboard and sometimes a guitar he'd work on music and then he'd ask me to play back scenes and he'd play along and when it seemed right we'd lay it off first to the 4 track cassette to get dubbed onto mag and cut in and later onto dat to be loaded into the computer and edited.

**One distinctive feature of a number of Hartley's films (the 'New York' section of *Flirt*, *The Girl from Monday*) is the use of jump-cuts. These cuts are particularly striking because they don't seem to express a character's confusion or agitation in the conventional way.**

The jump cuts were something that Hal would ask for when he was unhappy with what he'd shot and wanted to give it some energy. Clearly they were informed by the early Godard jump cuts in *Breathless*, but we were just playing with ways in which we could drive forward the action and generate tension and energy if something felt flat or safe.

**The editing style in *Henry Fool* seems more understated and perhaps less 'visible' than the style adopted in many of the other films. Did you and Hartley see the film as a departure in that way at all?**

In that interview I did in *Moviemaker* magazine I speak about this a little bit. I felt *Henry Fool* was sort of the culmination of the first phase of Hal's career. He and I have never spoken about this, but it's just sort of my own sense of where things were and where they went. The next piece was *Book of Life* and that film was shot with a small mobile crew with no permits and on DV cameras and everything was very fast and loose. Hal really let go of that restraint that all the films had been leading up to and I think this led to more energy in *Monster (No Such Thing)* although the larger budget and bigger name cast forced some additional restraint. The nice thing about it was it was restraint informed by that energy of *The Book of Life* beneath the surface and it felt really exciting and then in the final scene we really just threw all the cards up in the air!

**Could you say a little about the approach you and Hartley take towards relating a character or group of characters to their surroundings? I'm thinking particularly of the exterior scenes, whether urban or suburban/rural.**

I'm not sure there's a LOT to say about this, but on the other hand there's EVERYTHING to say about it. The surroundings provide the armature upon which a character's choreography is built, and the choreography provides the structural rhythm upon which the dialog is built, and in the end, these two factors feed into whether and when a cut takes place. So that's what I mean by nothing and everything. I guess there's nothing to SAY about it but it means EVERYTHING?

**So it's important but not at the most immediate level? What about those moments when the landscape does seem to assume some metaphorical/symbolic significance, such as the Icelandic 'black desert' landscapes in *No Such Thing*, or the shot of Jesus in which he's framed next to the Empire State Building in *The Book of Life*?**

One of the things that distinguishes Hal's work from a lot of more 'traditional' work, is the lack of establishing shots. My understanding was that Hal felt these were energy robbing and time wasting. The characters in the environments told the stories, and seeing a 'preparatory' shot that indicated some sort of punctuation like 'meanwhile' was a waste of time that could be spent working with the actors. And working with the actors was paramount. There was never enough time to rehearse with the actors before shooting, but the shooting always benefited from whatever time there was. I think Hal always wished he could workshop a film for months before it started but this was never really possible financially.

Nevertheless, I think this decision may have been born initially out of economics. These shots cost money, they're complicated. The wider the shot the more elements you have to bring under your control. And what do they really tell you? I'm not sure if Hal realized it later, or if he always knew, but what initially started out as economic practicality, later became aesthetically imperative. Get on with the action!

In *No Such Thing* (which I haven't watched since we finished it because in the end working with the studio was an energy sucking, life diminishing bore) there were those beautiful landscapes, but they weren't establishing shots. The landscape WAS a character and it was a significant part of the narrative. So I don't think that necessarily Hal was moving beyond his rooted aesthetic, just that he had an opportunity to work with a character, the Icelandic Landscape, that was offered to him, and which in that case, he had the means economically to exploit. (That film's budget was far greater than any before or since of course.) But also the landscape was 'dressed'. It didn't need to be prepared, just captured and contextualized by the camera and the actor.

In *Book of Life*, the landscape of New York City was available for the opposite reason. That film was so down and dirty and cheap, and it was shot on location in New York with no permits and a very small crew, that the city again was able to become a character in the story. This was shot with what basically amounted to a souped up consumer camcorder so it was very easy to do things out in the street that did not attract attention. The crew traveled in a single non-descript passenger van, and if I remember correctly there was a gaffer, a sound person, a PA and the camera person. So again, it boils down somewhat to economics, but even then, if the economics allow the environment to 'mean' something then it works. If it's just getting a shot of the house to salve the audience's curiosity about 'what Henry's house looks like' then you're just doing too much work for the audience and you're inviting them to sit back and be passive and just let the film roll over them. Desirable in Hollywood-style manipulation, but not so much in art film 'engagement'.

**In an article in *Moviemaker* you talk about editing the Iceland sequences of *No Such Thing*, and about the difficulties communicating with Hartley at this time. What was your experience of working in this way, without very much input from the director?**

Well, I knew the input would come, but our career and collaboration together had been such a continuum to that point it was difficult to tell when his thought ended and mine began. On most films previous to that we'd shoot everything and then edit it afterwards. This was an 'efficient' and 'indy' way to do it as I would sometimes come on board a couple weeks into shooting and then be playing catch up with the dailies etc. but that would give me those couple of weeks extra

at the back end to be working with Hal. I was gratified at this point to have sufficiently absorbed Hal's mentoring at that point that he was quite pleased with an edit that was completed only about a week or so after the shooting wrapped. The next several weeks were then spent playing with scenes in relation to music and we weren't all worn out with the nuts and bolts of putting together a good story and edit (I'd had six or eight weeks to do this already). The heavy lifting was done and even though we played with the film for many weeks afterwards it was much more experimental (leading for example to the final 'techno edit' scene).

**Do you think that more experimental aspects of this kind affected the film's commercial potential, at all? Were you aware of any 'pressure' from Coppola/American Zoetrope or MGM during post-production?**

The only thing that 'compromised the commercial viability' of *No Such Thing* was the studio's unwillingness to release it. It became pretty clear when we got the first set of notes from Francis that he probably hadn't ever seen a Hal Hartley film and certainly wasn't expecting one. He was expecting a 'monster movie'. What we delivered was a Hal Hartley film starring a monster. All of his notes related to making the movie more consistent with the perceived genre. He didn't appreciate that Hal's work itself was a genre and that the monster 'genre' was just an armature upon which to build one of his stories. This film was the most fully realized of all of Hal's work and had the best cast by far. If they'd promoted the film aggressively it could have been a hit. It was bold and aggressive but it spoke to the times both socially and politically and I think people would have loved it. The film was buried and relegated to obscurity by the studio and I think Hal was deprived of an audience that would have really appreciated what he was saying and doing with the medium. I mean seriously ... *Juno*?

**How would you characterise the relationship between Hartley's work and independent film in general? Do you think the culture of indie cinema has changed since the early 1990s?**

During the 1990s the work that I did with Hal Hartley and the community that our company Spin Cycle Post and companies like Good Machine helped nurture in New York City around what was at the time often referred to as 'independent

film' was significant and gratifying. To claim any ownership of the title 'independent' would be absurd in view of the kinds of films being made in the 70s that even now I'm still discovering and regularly feeling like they were light years ahead of us in terms of downright edginess and balsiness and existential angst and all that. Nevertheless there was a community of people revolving around Hal who were learning a craft, and exercising their creativity upon it in ways that were earnest and productive and I believe represent a 'fertile' time for film in general that likely will not be repeated.

I'm often proven wrong today when I see films like *Wendy and Lucy*, or *Goodbye Solo*, or any of the films of Hou Hsiao Hsien and Wong Kar Wai. But these films simply reveal what can happen when an incredibly single minded and talented director is able somehow to harness control of the unwieldy apparatus and infrastructure required to actually go out and shoot and edit a movie.

For a brief period during the late 80s and throughout the 90s that apparatus was available to a host of New York based young filmmakers and we owned the apparatus for the most part, particularly in post production, and we were at the center of it and we could make a nice solid middle class living making these unique, auteur driven films. Hal brought the working class mentality of his upbringing to the manufacture of images and stories in the cinematic form and he taught it to me and I grew tremendously from it and played a part in what I think could be identified as an actual 'movement'. I would credit Hal with being at the center of this because so many people got their start and inspiration from him and his work and the infrastructures that were built up around it.

Now that the apparatus is available to everybody, there is unfortunately no distribution network that can allow anyone to make a living and so the idea of being a professional filmmaker without somehow selling out to advertising or to Hollywood is basically impossible. A few folks get it done, but the risks are huge, and the commitment super-human. Hal now makes 'essays' on video and does them largely on his own and is searching for a way to make a living off of that. But he's fortunate to have established enough of a body of work and a reputation that he will likely be able to survive even if he never makes a penny off of these beautiful and fascinating little shorts.

There's a lot of really bad filmmaking out there now. And a lot of it nods towards Hal and the type of work he pioneered. But there's just a whole lot

of people out there who ‘want to be directors’ but they ‘don’t really want to make films.’ It’s hard work and to really care about it and really learn the medium and stretch it and become adept at it is more than most are willing to do these days. Hal always said ‘don’t let it become too precious’. Figure out what you shot and what you were trying to say and if you blew it, learn from that and move on and do it better the next time. This process mentality is difficult to engage in these days where a director really seems to have ‘one chance’ to make it or not and you’re only as good as your last movie.

Nevertheless the process seems to have flipped to the other extreme where everything’s so throw away and nothing seems ‘precious enough’. Or at least nothing seems like it was ‘worked’ for. Hal always wanted to do the work. And he taught me to do the work. And the work was the thing. We *worked* together. A lot.

# Filmography

## Hal Hartley

*Kid* (short), 1984, PBS (TV broadcast)  
*The Cartographer's Girlfriend* (short), 1987, ZDF (German TV broadcast)  
*Dogs* (short), 1988  
*The Unbelievable Truth*, 1989, Miramax Films  
*Trust*, 1990, Fine Line Features  
*Ambition* (short), 1991, Alive from Off Center (TV broadcast)  
*Surviving Desire* (short), 1991, American Playhouse (TV broadcast)  
*Theory of Achievement* (short), 1991, Alive from Off Center (TV broadcast)  
*Simple Men*, 1992, Fine Line Features  
*Flirt* (short), 1993  
*Amateur*, 1994, Sony Pictures Classics  
*Iris* (short), 1994, Polygram Video (video compilation)  
*NYC 3/94* (short), 1994, Arte (TV broadcast, France/Germany)  
*Opera No. 1* (short), 1994, Comedy Central (TV broadcast)  
*Flirt*, 1995, Cinépix Film Properties  
*Henry Fool*, 1997, Sony Pictures Classics  
*The Other Also* (short), 1997, Fondation Cartier (exhibition)  
*The Book of Life*, 1998, Arte (TV broadcast, France/Germany)  
*Kimono* (short), 2000, Ziegler Film (*Erotic Tales* TV series, Germany)  
*The New Math(s)* (short), 2000, BBC (TV broadcast)  
*No Such Thing*, 2001, MGM/UA Distribution Company  
*Conspiracy* (short), 2004/2010  
*The Sisters of Mercy* (short), 2004, Possible Films (DVD)  
*The Girl from Monday*, 2005, Possible Films  
*Fay Grim*, 2006, Magnolia Pictures  
*Accomplice* (short), 2009, Microcinema (DVD)  
*Adventure* (short), 2009, Microcinema (DVD)  
*A/Muse* (short), 2009, Microcinema (DVD)  
*The Apologies* (short), 2009, Microcinema (DVD)  
*Implied Harmonies* (short), 2009, Microcinema (DVD)

## General

*2 Days in the Valley*, John Herzfeld, 1996, MGM  
*500 Days of Summer*, Marc Webb, 2009, Fox Searchlight Pictures  
*À bout de souffle*, Jean-Luc Godard, 1960, Les Films Impéria and Société  
Nouvelle de Cinématographie (France)  
*Absolutely Fabulous* (series), 1992–2005, BBC (UK)  
*Adaptation*, Spike Jonze, 2002, Columbia Pictures  
*Une affaire de femmes*, Claude Chabrol, 1988, MK2 Diffusion (France)  
*After Hours*, Martin Scorsese, 1985, The Geffen Company and Warner Bros.  
Pictures  
*American Beauty*, Sam Mendes, 1999, DreamWorks Distribution

*Annie Hall*, Woody Allen, 1977, United Artists  
*The Apartment*, Billy Wilder, 1960, United Artists  
*Armageddon*, Michael Bay, 1998, Buena Vista Pictures  
*Babel*, Alejandro González Inárritu, 2006, Paramount Vantage  
*Bad News Bears*, Richard Linklater, 2005, Paramount Pictures  
*Beauty and the Beast*, Jean Cocteau, 1946, DisCina (France)  
*Beauty and the Beast*, Gary Trousdale and Kirk Wise, 1991, Buena Vista Pictures  
*Before Sunrise*, Richard Linklater, 1995, Columbia Pictures  
*Before Sunset*, Richard Linklater, 2004, Warner Bros. Pictures and Warner Independent Pictures  
*Benny's Video*, Michael Haneke, 1992, Pandora Filmproduktion (Germany)  
*Bikini Bandits* (series), Steven Grasse, 2000, Atomfilms  
*Blade Runner*, Ridley Scott, 1982, Warner Bros. Pictures  
*Body and Soul*, Robert Rossen, 1947, United Artists  
*Boys Don't Cry*, Kimberly Peirce, 1999, Fox Searchlight Pictures  
*Bride of Frankenstein*, James Whale, 1935, Universal Pictures  
*A Bronx Tale*, Robert De Niro, 1993, Savoy Pictures  
*The Brother from Another Planet*, John Sayles, 1984, Cinecom Pictures  
*The Brothers McMullen*, Edward Burns, 1995, Fox Searchlight Pictures  
*Buffalo 66*, Vincent Gallo, 1998, Lions Gate Films  
*Bugcrush* (short), Carter Smith, 2006  
*Casino*, Martin Scorsese, 1995, MCA/Universal Pictures  
*Chan Is Missing*, Wayne Wang, 1984, New Yorker Films  
*Chasing Amy*, Kevin Smith, 1997, Miramax Films  
*The Chumscrubber*, Arie Posin, 2005, Newmarket Films  
*Citizen Ruth*, Alexander Payne, 1996, Miramax Films  
*Clerks*, Kevin Smith, 1994, Miramax Films  
*Clerks II*, Kevin Smith, 2006, MGM  
*Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, Steven Spielberg, 1977, Columbia Pictures  
*Cloverfield*, Matt Reeves, 2008, Paramount Pictures  
*Cop Out*, Kevin Smith, 2010, Warner Bros. Pictures  
*Crash*, David Cronenberg, 1996, Fine Line Features  
*Crocodile Dundee*, Peter Faiman, 1986, Paramount Pictures  
*The Crying Game*, Neil Jordan, 1992, Miramax Films  
*Dancer in the Dark*, Lars von Trier, 2000, Fine Line Features  
*The Darjeeling Limited*, Wes Anderson, 2007, Fox Searchlight Pictures  
*The Da Vinci Code*, Ron Howard, 2006, Columbia Pictures  
*Dazed and Confused*, Richard Linklater, 1993, Gramercy Pictures  
*Dead Man*, Jim Jarmusch, 1995, Miramax Films  
*Dear John* (series), 1988–1992, NBC  
*Desperate Housewives* (series), 2004–, ABC  
*Desperately Seeking Susan*, Susan Seidelman, 1985, Orion Pictures Corporation  
*The Devil's Advocate*, Taylor Hackford, 1997, Warner Bros. Pictures  
*The Devil's Rejects*, Rob Zombie, 2005, Lions Gate Films  
*Doctor Zhivago*, David Lean, 1965, MGM  
*Dogma*, Kevin Smith, 1999, Lions Gate Films  
*Donnie Darko*, Richard Kelly, 2001, Newmarket Films  
*Do the Right Thing*, Spike Lee, 1989, Universal Pictures  
*Double Indemnity*, Billy Wilder, 1944, Paramount Pictures  
*Down by Law*, Jim Jarmusch, 1986, Island Pictures  
*Easy Rider*, Dennis Hopper, 1969, Columbia Pictures



*Emak-Bakia* (short), Man Ray, 1927  
*Enchanted*, Kevin Lima, 2007, Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures  
*The English Patient*, Anthony Minghella, 1996, Miramax Films  
*E.T.*, Steven Spielberg, 1982, Universal Pictures  
*Ever After*, Andy Tennant, 1998, Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation  
*Everything Will Be Ok* (short), Don Hertzfeldt, 2006, The Animation Show  
*Family Remains* (short), Tamara Jenkins, 1994  
*Finding Forrester*, Gus Van Sant, 2000, Columbia Pictures  
*Five Feet High and Rising* (short), Peter Sollett, 1999, Cinema 16 (DVD)  
*Force of Evil*, Abraham Polonsky, 1948, MGM  
*For the Birds* (short), Ralph Eggleston, 2000, Pixar Animation Studios  
*Freeheld* (short), Cynthia Wade, 2007  
*Gasline* (short), Dave Silver, 2001, Vanguard Cinema (DVD)  
*George Lucas in Love* (short), Joe Nussbaum, 1999, Red Hill (VHS)  
*Gerry*, Gus Van Sant, 2002, ThinkFilm  
*Gina, an Actress, Age 29* (short), Paul Harrill, 2001  
*Godzilla*, Roland Emmerich, 1998, TriStar Pictures  
*Goodfellas*, Martin Scorsese, 1990, Warner Bros. Pictures  
*Gowanus, Brooklyn* (short), Ryan Fleck, 2004  
*Happiness*, Todd Solondz, 1998, Good Machine  
*The Hidden Face of Globalization*, 2003, National Labor Committee  
*High Art*, Lisa Cholodenko, 1998, October Films  
*The Hole*, Ming-liang Tsai, 1998, Fox Lorber  
*Home Alone 2: Lost in New York*, Chris Columbus, 1992, Twentieth Century Fox  
 Film Corporation  
*Homicide*, David Mamet, 1991, Triumph Releasing Corporation  
*House of 1000 Corpses*, Rob Zombie, 2003, Lions Gate Films  
*House of Games*, David Mamet, 1987, Orion Pictures Corporation  
*Howards End*, James Ivory, 1992, Sony Pictures Classics  
*I Hired a Contract Killer*, Aki Kaurismäki, 1990, Pyramide Distribution (France)  
*Inning by Inning: A Portrait of a Coach*, Richard Linklater, 2008, ESPN Original  
 Entertainment (TV broadcast)  
*It Could Happen to You*, Andrew Bergman, 1994, TriStar Pictures  
*Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back*, Kevin Smith, 2001, Dimension Films  
*Jerry Maguire*, Cameron Crowe, 1996, TriStar Pictures  
*Jersey Girl*, Kevin Smith, 2004, Miramax Films  
*Keane*, Lodge Kerrigan, 2004, Magnolia Pictures  
*The Killers*, Robert Siodmak, 1946, Universal Pictures  
*King Kong*, Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack, 1933, RKO Radio  
 Pictures  
*King Kong*, John Guillermin, 1976, Paramount Pictures  
*King Kong*, Peter Jackson, 2005, Universal Pictures  
*Lars and the Real Girl*, Craig Gillespie, 2007, MGM  
*Lawrence of Arabia*, David Lean, 1962, Columbia Pictures  
*Life on Earth*, Abderrahmane Sissako, 1998, Haut et Court (France)  
*The Limey*, Steven Soderbergh, 1999, Artisan  
*Lisbon Story*, Wim Wenders, 1994, Pandora Filmproduktion (Germany)  
*Little Children*, Todd Field, 2006, New Line Cinema  
*The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*, Peter Jackson, 2001, New  
 Line Cinema  
*The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*, Peter Jackson, 2002, New Line Cinema  
*The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*, Peter Jackson, 2003, New Line

## Cinema

*Lost In Translation*, Sofia Coppola, 2003, Focus Features  
*Loulou*, Maurice Pialat, 1980, Gaumont (France)  
*Luxo Jr.* (short), John Lasseter, 1986, Buena Vista Pictures  
*Lymelife*, Derick Martini, 2008, Screen Media Films  
*Mallrats*, Kevin Smith, 1995, Gramercy Pictures  
*Man about Town* (short), Kris Isacsson, 1997, Big Film Shorts (DVD)  
*Manhattan*, Woody Allen, 1979, United Artists  
*Mean Streets*, Martin Scorsese, 1973, Warner Bros Pictures  
*Memento*, Christopher Nolan, 2000, Newmarket Films  
*Midnight*, Walter Salles and Daniela Thomas, 1998, WinStar Cinema  
*Mission: Impossible II*, John Woo, 2000, Paramount Pictures  
*Mission: Impossible III*, J. J. Abrams, 2006, Paramount Pictures  
*Monsters, Inc.*, Pete Docter, David Silverman and Lee Unkrich, 2001, Buena Vista Pictures  
*More* (short), Mark Osborne, 1999, Film Movement (DVD)  
*My New Gun*, Stacy Cochran, 1992, IRS Media  
*Mystery Science Theatre 3000* (series), 1988–1999, Comedy Central  
*Mystery Train*, Jim Jarmusch, 1989, Orion Classics  
*Napoleon Dynamite*, Jared Hess, 2004, Fox Searchlight Pictures  
*Network*, Sidney Lumet, 1976, MGM  
*Night on Earth*, Jim Jarmusch, 1991, Fine Line Features  
*North by Northwest*, Alfred Hitchcock, 1959, MGM  
*Ocean's Eleven*, Steven Soderbergh, 2001, Warner Bros Pictures  
*Oleanna*, David Mamet, 1994, The Samuel Goldwyn Company  
*One* (short), Stewart Hendler, 2001  
*On the Waterfront*, Elia Kazan, 1954, Columbia Pictures  
*Outland*, Peter Hyams, 1981, Warner Bros. Pictures  
*Out of the Past* (also known as *Build My Gallows High*), Jacques Tourneur, 1947, RKO Radio Pictures  
*Passion*, Jean-Luc Godard, 1982, Parafrance Films (France)  
*Pi*, Darren Aronofsky, 1998, Live Film & Mediaworks Inc.  
*Pleasantville*, Gary Ross, 1998, New Line Cinema  
*Politically Incorrect* (series), 1994–2002, Comedy Central  
*The Public Enemy*, William A. Wellman, 1931, Warner Bros. Pictures  
*Pulp Fiction*, Quentin Tarantino, 1994, Miramax Films  
*Punch-Drunk Love*, Paul Thomas Anderson, 2002, Columbia Pictures  
*Quiz Show*, Robert Redford, 1994, Buena Vista Pictures  
*Repo Man*, Alex Cox, 1984, Universal Pictures  
*Reservoir Dogs*, Quentin Tarantino, 1992, Miramax Films  
*Le retour à la raison* (short), Man Ray, 1923  
*Rollerball*, Norman Jewison, 1975, United Artists  
*The Rotten Fruit*, Eli Roth, 2000, Z.com  
*The Royal Tenenbaums*, Wes Anderson, 2001, Buena Vista Pictures  
*Rush Hour*, Brett Ratner, 1998, New Line Cinema  
*Rushmore*, Wes Anderson, 1998, Buena Vista Pictures  
*Russian Dolls*, Cédric Klapisch, 2005, IFC Films  
*Salvador*, Oliver Stone, 1986, Hemdale Film  
*Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, Karel Weisz, 1960, Bryanston Films (UK)  
*Sauve qui peut (vie)*, Jean-Luc Godard, 1980, MK2 Diffusion (France)  
*Scandal*, Michael Carton-Jones, 1989, Miramax Films  
*A Scanner Darkly*, Richard Linklater, 2006, Warner Independent Pictures

*Scarface*, Howard Hawks, 1932, United Artists  
*Scarface*, Brian De Palma, 1983, Universal Pictures  
*School of Rock*, Richard Linklater, 2003, Paramount Pictures  
*The Science of Sleep*, Michel Gondry, 2006, Warner Independent Pictures  
*S. Darko*, Chris Fisher, 2009, Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment  
(DVD)  
*Secrets & Lies*, Mike Leigh, 1996, October Films  
*Seinfeld* (series), 1990–1998, NBC  
*A Serious Man*, Ethan Coen and Joel Coen, 2009, Focus Features  
*sex, lies, and videotape*, Steven Soderbergh, 1989, Miramax Films  
*Shakespeare in Love*, John Madden, 1998, Miramax Films  
*Shine*, Scott Hicks, 1996, Fine Line Features  
*Short Cuts*, Robert Altman, 1993, Fine Line Features  
*Sikumi (On the Ice)* (short), Andrew Okpeaha MacLean, 2008, Cinema 16  
(DVD)  
*Slacker*, Richard Linklater, 1991, Orion Classics  
*Sleepless in Seattle*, Nora Ephron, 1993, TriStar Pictures  
*Sleepover*, Joe Nussbaum, 2004, MGM  
*Smithereens*, Susan Seidelman, 1982, New Line Cinema  
*Soylent Green*, Richard Fleischer, 1973, MGM  
*The Spanish Apartment* (also known as *Pot Luck*), Cédric Klapisch, 2002, Fox  
Searchlight Pictures  
*The Spanish Prisoner*, David Mamet, 1997, Sony Pictures Classics  
*Spanking the Monkey*, David O. Russell, 1994, Fine Line Features  
*Spider-Man*, Sam Raimi, 2002, Columbia Pictures  
*Starman*, John Carpenter, 1984, Columbia Pictures  
*Star Wars: Episode I – The Phantom Menace*, George Lucas, 1999, Twentieth  
Century Fox Film Corporation  
*Star Wars: Episode IV – A New Hope*, George Lucas, 1977, Twentieth Century  
Fox Film Corporation  
*Star Wars: Episode V – The Empire Strikes Back*, George Lucas, 1980,  
Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation  
*Star Wars: Episode VI – The Return of the Jedi*, George Lucas, 1983, Twentieth  
Century Fox Film Corporation  
*Street of Crocodiles* (short), Stephen Quay and Timothy Quay, 1986, British  
Film Institute (UK)  
*SubUrbia*, Richard Linklater, 1996, Sony Pictures Classics  
*The Sum of All Fears*, Phil Alden Robinson, 2002, Paramount Pictures  
*Take Care of Your Scarf, Tatjana*, Aki Kaurismäki, 1994, Ovo Films (Greece)  
*Tape*, Richard Linklater, 2001, Lions Gate Films  
*Terminal Bar* (short), Stefan Nadelman, 2003, Cinema 16 (DVD)  
*Terry Tate: Office Linebacker* (short), Rawson Marshall Thurber, 2003, Hypnotic  
Films  
*Thelma and Louise*, Ridley Scott, 1991, MGM  
*Thirteen Conversations about One Thing*, Jill Sprecher, 2001, Sony Pictures  
Classics  
*This Is My Life*, Nora Ephron, 1992, Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation  
*Three Kings*, David O. Russell, 1999, Warner Bros. Pictures  
*T-Men*, Anthony Mann, 1947, Eagle-Lion Films  
*Toy Story 2*, John Lasseter, Ash Brannon and Lee Unkrich, 1999, Buena Vista  
Pictures  
*The Truman Show*, Peter Weir, 1998, Paramount Pictures

*Two Weeks Notice*, Marc Lawrence, 2002, Warner Bros. Pictures  
*Used People*, Beeban Kidron, 1992, Fox Video (VHS)  
*Vanishing Point*, Richard C. Sarafian, 1971, Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation  
*Violette Nozière*, Claude Chabrol, 1978, Gaumont (France)  
*The Visitor*, Thomas McCarthy, 2007, Overture Films  
*Waitress*, Adrienne Shelly, 2007, Fox Searchlight Pictures  
*The Wall*, Alain Berliner, 1998, Haut et Court (France)  
*Wall Street*, Oliver Stone, 1987, Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation  
*Wal-Mart's War on Workers*, 2002, United Food and Commercial Workers  
*The Watermelon Woman*, Cheryl Dunye, 1996, First Run Features  
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