In recent years American independent cinema has not only become the focus of significant scholarly attention but as a category of film it has shifted from a marginal to a central position within American cinema – a shift that can be also detected in the emergence of the label ‘indie’ cinema as opposed to independent cinema. The popularisation of this ‘indie’ brand of filmmaking began in the 1990s with the commercial success of the Sundance Film Festival and of specialty distributor Miramax Films, as well as the introduction of DVD, which made independent films more readily available as well as profitable for the first time. At the same time, film studies started developing courses that distinguished American independent cinema from mainstream Hollywood, treating it as a separate object of study and a distinct discursive category.

Despite the surge in interest in independent cinema, a surge that involved the publication of at least twenty books and edited collections alongside a much larger number of articles on various aspects of independent cinema, especially about the post-1980 era, the field – as it has developed – still remains greatly under-researched in relation to the changes of the past twenty years that define the shift from independent to ‘indie’ cinema. This is partly because a multifaceted phenomenon such as American independent cinema, the history of which is as long and complex as the history of mainstream Hollywood, has yet to be adequately and satisfactorily documented. In this respect, academic film criticism is still in great need to account for the plethora of shapes, forms and guises that American independent cinema has manifested itself in. This is certainly not an easy task given that independent film has, indeed, taken a wide variety of forms at different historical trajectories and has been influenced by a hugely diverse range of factors.

It is with this problem in mind that ‘American Indies’ was conceived by its editors. While the history of American independent cinema is still
being written, with more studies already set to be published in the forthcoming years, and while journal articles are enhancing our understanding of more focused aspects of independent filmmaking, the American Indies series has been created to provide the necessary space to explore and engage with specific examples of American ‘indie’ films in great depth. Through this format, American Indies aims to encourage an examination of both the ‘indie’ text and its contexts, of understanding how ‘indie’ films operate within a particular filmmaking practice but also how ‘indies’ have been shaping a new formation of American cinema. In this respect, American Indies encourages a detailed examination of industrial, economic and institutional concerns alongside the more usual formal and aesthetic considerations that have historically characterised critical approaches of independent films. American Indies is a series of comprehensive studies of carefully selected examples of recent films that reveal in great detail the many sides of the phenomenon of the recently emerged American ‘indie’ cinema.

As the first book series to explore and define this aspect of American cinema, American Indies has had the extremely difficult task of producing a comprehensive set of criteria that informs its selection of titles. Given the vastness of the field, we have made several editorial decisions in order to produce a coherent definition of this new phase of American independent cinema. The first such choice was to concentrate on recent examples of independent cinema. Although the word ‘recent’ has often been used to include films made in the post-1980 period, as editors we decided that the cut-off point for films to be included in this series would be the year 1996. This was an extremely significant year in the independent film sector, ‘the year of the independents,’ as was triumphantly proclaimed by the Los Angeles Business Journal in February 1997, for a number of reasons. Arguably, the most significant of these was the entrance into the film market of Fox Searchlight, a new type of specialty film division created by 20th Century Fox in 1994 with the explicit intention of claiming a piece of the increasingly large independent film market pie. After a shaky start, Fox Searchlight would eventually achieve this objective through the production and distribution of films that followed many of the conventions of independent film as those were established after the success of sex, lies and videotape in 1989. These conventions had since then started being popularised by a number of films produced and distributed by Miramax Films, an independent company that was taken over by Disney after the phenomenal box-office success of several of its
films at approximately the same time as 20th Century Fox was establishing its specialty division.

The now direct involvement of entertainment conglomerates like Disney and Fox in the independent film sector had far-reaching effects. Arguably, the most important of these was that the label ‘independent’, which for critics and the cinema-going public (wrongly) signified economic independence from major film companies like Disney, Fox, Paramount, Universal, etc., obviously ceased to convey this meaning. Instead, critics and public alike increasingly started using the label ‘indie’, which suggested a particular type of film that adhered to a set of conventions, as well as a transformed independent cinema sector that was now driven by specialty companies, most of them subsidiaries of major entertainment conglomerates. It is this form of ‘independent’ cinema, which has produced some of the most interesting films to come out of American cinema in recent years, that American Indies has set out to explore in great depth and that explains our selection of the label ‘indies’ instead of ‘independents’.

We hope readers will enjoy the series

Gary Needham and Yannis Tzioumakis
American Indies Series Editors