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Book review: Filming the decline

Article (Published version)

Original citation:

Cannell, Fenella (2013) Book review: Filming the decline. [Anthropology of this century](#), 6.

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Available in LSE Research Online: January 2013

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FILMING THE DECLINE

FENELLA CANNELL

Not Hollywood: independent film at the twilight of the American dream

BY SHERRY ORTNER

Karl Marx, as Peter Stallbybrass reminds us, was frequently interrupted during the writing of *Capital* by the necessity of pawning his overcoat to buy food, fuel and medicine for his family. While the coat was in the pawnshop, Marx could not enter the Reading Room of the British Library to continue with his analysis, as he was not deemed to be dressed as a gentleman.^[1] It would still be some years before Engels was able to offer Marx and his family more regular subventions from the manufacturing wealth built up by Engels's father.

Charles Ferguson is the director of two of the outstanding critical documentaries of recent years, *No end in sight* (2007), on the failures of George W. Bush's policy after the invasion of Iraq, and *Inside Job* (2010), a magnificent forensic deconstruction of the causes of the 2008 economic crash. Ferguson had no patron and does not pawn his clothing; he accumulated his own substantial wealth by selling his software design company, Vermeer Technologies, to Microsoft, before he could afford to make films laying bare the systematic wrongs of neoliberalism. Spike Lee instead raised money to make his early films by miscellaneous work including selling socks on a market stall – or at least, portrayed himself doing this in footage shown to acclaim at an independent film festival.

Such glimpses into the world of independent American film-making are one of the rewards of this engaging and thought-provoking new book by Sherry Ortner. They also speak to its central theme, which is that a careful attention to social class is urgently necessary for understanding current developments in the economy of the United States, and all the more so because of the well-known tendency of many individual American citizens and some analysts of America to claim that class has little explanatory purchase there.



Sherry Ortner

Ortner makes this claim through a series of chapters which, in different ways, link neoliberalisation to the outlook and ethos of the post-baby-boom generation; those born

after the early 1960s. Ortner uses the label 'Generation X' but argues that one should think of this as an open category rather than a finite cohort, since all those born since that time share the experience, unparalleled since the Great Depression, of realising that whatever efforts they make, collectively they cannot do as well in life as their parents did.

For Ortner, 'Generation X' is the community of American life most affected by what she terms the convulsions of the neoliberal capitalist economy, although not all are affected in the same ways by its turbulence. The majority of middle and working class Americans are dropping further and further down the financial and status scale as income inequalities increase, and 'fear of falling' haunts the contemporary American imagination. Some people in Generation X, however, have continued to 'hold their ground' or even to accumulate considerable personal wealth. This unevenness of outcome is linked, says Ortner, to the thriving of the 'indie' film sector, since all of the developers, most of the producers and much of the audience for these films are recruited from the economically successful 'professional managerial class'. What is different about this situation for Ortner is that a greater proportion of high-value 'PMC' individuals than ever before is adopting liberal or left-leaning positions, and/or taking up an interest in artistic endeavour. In earlier decades, she notes, only PMC also-rans, such as college professors, would typically interest themselves in progressive critique or in art. These developments partly shaped the expansion of independent film-making in the 1990s, and have (to date) enabled it to survive despite the severe retractions of investment in the post-2008 period. Indeed, although the rhetoric, and the motivational and artistic dynamic of independent film-making concern the rejection of Hollywood commercialism as a conscious choice, and an assertion of superior taste, Ortner argues towards the end of the book that one could also see the studios and the indie world as in a kind of classic class relation to each other; the studios all but monopolise the ownership of the means of production and distribution (including most film capital) while the indies must exist and work in a hand-to-mouth, day-job fashion on the margins. The archetypal indie hero remains the director who maxes out his personal credit cards to realise his vision; nevertheless, ideally artistic independence and proper funding would be compatible. Thus for Ortner part of the anger and 'darkness' of independent film could be understood as a tacit class protest.

The financing conditions of independent film-makers in fact vary considerably as Ortner is at pains to describe; particularly so since she covers a wide range of work from small, essentially D.I.Y. films to semi-studio products, and includes both documentaries (Ortner's preferred genre) and features. For much of the book she therefore lays out a somewhat looser set of claims about the ethos of independent film as an expression of Generation X *Zeitgeist*. These centre in particular on the tendency towards the deliberate 'darkness' of independent film, and film-makers' assertion of the centrality of 'realism' to the genre, as well as on various social themes which Ortner draws out mainly through a form of content-analysis of film plots, and through a range of very interesting interview material. Thus she highlights the various meanings of moral ambiguity in indie film, raising for example the question of what one is to make of the frequent appearance of paedophile or suspected paedophile characters, and of the common insistence of directors that their job is to demonstrate the complexity of all human characters, rather than to judge them. One point here is to subvert the Hollywood insistence on Manichean plotlines in which the audience is (from the indie point of view) endlessly invited to participate in a false claim that the world divides easily into good and evil, as well as that good will triumph in the end. Another point, for Ortner, is to register an intense generational anxiety about the inability (or sometimes, culpable unwillingness) of parents to protect the future of their children; in the face of this parental absence, all sorts of other figures, often with complex or illegible intentions, may

step into the gap. America, Ortner suggests, is represented as being no more immune to the damage and confusion of inter-generational relations in the current economy, than poorer world nations. Other chapters raise multiple illustrations of the ways in which independent film represents the struggles and humiliations of middle and working-class women, immigrants and non-white U.S. citizens, and relates them to the profound frustrations and chronic insecurities which are diagnostic of most forms of work in neoliberalism. In this sense, Ortner's text suggests, what the 'realism' of indie film actually makes visible is the direction of class shifts in neoliberalism, in which we are (almost all) united in being the losers. This situation is very difficult to construe in the face of the distinctively American tendency, discussed by Richard Sennett^[2] among others, to keep asserting individual personal agency as the means of trying to make sense of a life. Yet film-makers generally shun descriptions of their work as 'political', associating this label with a strident didacticism at odds with their definition of artistry, but also inheriting an ingrained defensiveness dating back to McCarthyism.

Some of the most compelling sections of *Not Hollywood* deal in a directly ethnographic fashion with the engagement of film and class. Chapter Seven, 'Making Films' explores the dynamics of an independent film set, and brings out clearly and convincingly the ways in which indie film-making is constructed in refusal of neoliberal work regimes. Interestingly, this happens both at the register of class divisions – since film crews retain effective unionisation which is respected by director, producer and actors – and at the level of the transcendence of these divisions in the commitment to a joint creative project in which everyone concerned takes pride, and through which they demonstrate their different skills. Here and elsewhere in the book, Ortner comments on the limitations as well as the strengths of Bourdieu's analysis of a field of artistic production as defined by the battle for relative prestige; here she argues that the film set and the film world is something more Durkheimian, more oppositionally collective, than Bourdieu would imply. Chapter Five, 'Making Value' also contests Bourdieu, arguing that although indie film-making, like other fields of artistic endeavour, relies as Bourdieu predicts on the presence of individuals who have quite high levels of accumulated social and symbolic capital (education and the financial cushion or family support which allows one to ride out lean periods), it is not adequate to think of 'taste' as merely the currency of internal status-rivalries. Indie films, Ortner argues, can reasonably claim to produce something of what she calls 'substantive value'.

Bourdieu's view of distinctions of taste as symbolic capital was framed, of course, to discuss the opacity of class in an older stage of capitalism (as well as in France). Ortner's analysis proposes that in the present conditions, 'taste' can be produced in a form which is genuinely resistant to established economic inequalities, even if not usually framed as an explicit political critique. This would, I assume, be one definition of 'substantive value', underlined by Ortner's preference for the most overtly political indie films, which are the documentaries.

Ortner several times explains that she does not intend to offer an account of indie film in the language of film studies. It would probably be an unmanageable task to give an aesthetic reading of all her film examples, especially since the influences on them would be highly miscellaneous; D.I.Y. and 'single-issue' documentaries may be made by directors not trained in film school (nor in TV) while, as Ortner mentions, other directors respond to European art films or other genres and registers (perhaps Italian post-war neo-realism might be one reference which is shared by some directors?).^[3] Nevertheless, anthropologists as well as film-makers like to be able to 'see' what they are thinking about, and there were points in the book when I wished for a bit more simple visual description of some of these films, and what the unfolding stories looked like on the screen, in the manner of the very effective description

Ortner does provide of Ferguson's *No end in sight*. It is easier for this reader to see the force of Ortner's points about a film she discusses several times – Courtney Hunt's *Frozen River* (2008) for instance – having obtained a copy of the film. Ortner draws out the significance of the tense relationship between two poor women, one white, one Mohawk, who take up smuggling people across the Canadian border in the ambiguous legal terrain of the Reservation. Both women live in trailers, as Ortner tells us; both want to make money to care for their kids; both have very few options, but race differentiates their social positions. Courtney Hunt, in the director's interview on DVD, mentions Jane Campion as a key influence (presumably both as woman director and for Campion's attention to showing complex emotions which are not verbally expressed by the characters). The look of *Frozen River*, however, as the title would suggest, is far colder and more northerly than Campion's most famous settings. The dingy interiors of the trailer-homes, with their sad brown blankets, cheap kitchen trim and restlessly burning cigarettes, and the surrounding strip-developments, the second-hand car lots and slushy roads without sidewalks, immediately convey part of what the indie directors mean by 'realism' – that is, the director's eye causes us to see what (much of) America looks like, and what both Hollywood films and ordinary observers usually prefer to bracket out. At the same time, an early scene used also in the film's publicity shots, places the women smugglers' saloon car (no four-by-fours in this family) in the middle distance, framed and surrounded by dully luminous grey-white snow and a few dark trees, as it inches across the river ice. The scene brings to mind the Coen Brothers' *Fargo*, perhaps,^[4] and beyond that, the long tradition of American paintings of pioneers, in which tiny human beings struggle to cross immense, often forbidding, wilderness landscapes. Or so it seemed to me. Others would be more qualified to say. But whatever a good description of this visual language might be, it seems difficult to exclude it so far from analysis, not least because it must surely form part of what 'substantive value' is in films, how film-people construct it, and thus what Ortner can mean by it. As she says (somewhat following Adorno and Horkheimer but without their hostility to the products of popular culture), although 'taste' is not a mysterious gift of the gods, its historical and social formation does not make it unreal or purely concerned with the symbolic assertion of prestige, since it is founded on skills (knowledge of repertoire, practice in making discriminations between similar objects) which themselves enable creative labour.

Not Hollywood is, in some ways, the follow-up book to Ortner's splendid *New Jersey Dreaming*, which was concerned with the constitution of class (including its ethnic and regional dimensions) in the previous, 'baby-boomer' generation (Ortner's own high-school graduating class of '58) whom the economy favoured so they, collectively, did extremely well. Ortner does not skimp on empirical research; for *New Jersey Dreaming* she talked to almost all her 304 classmates; for *Not Hollywood* she has watched, she tells us, about 650 independent movies, and watched or conducted many more interviews. Both these projects were difficult and ambitious undertakings, in which Ortner's willingness to tackle such large-scale and complex domains of American life, yet with the distinctive methods and insights of the anthropologist, is highly admirable. A great strength of *New Jersey Dreaming*, however, is its consistent linking of general class trajectories to stories of specific sub-groups (high-capital Jewish men versus low-capital Jewish men, for instance) and also of particular individual speakers as they tell their stories to the anthropologist, and assess their work success in their own terms. This reader would have welcomed more of this kind of connective tissue in *Not Hollywood*. In the end, Ortner is arguing that voice is being given to a disenfranchised generation by the most successful minority of that generation. This is not implausible – and nor, of course, does independent film exhaust the registers of protest which are being or may be found in contemporary America – but I wanted to know more about how the life experiences of particular film-makers related (or not) to their compulsion

to make films reflecting American poverty. If Charles Ferguson didn't take the path of pawning his overcoat, how many other film-makers have had to do so, and what did this mean to them? One of Ortner's most intriguing findings is that directors, who create the 'vision' and 'passion' of indie film, have highly variable levels of social capital, while producers, who broker finance, protect the director's vision, and advocate for the film with the wider world, are almost universally from high-social-capital backgrounds. What exactly is happening here in the context of the class turbulence Ortner is examining? And why and how does a wealthier fraction of the Professional and Managerial Class come to take a turn towards independent film-making in the first place?

Occasionally, *Not Hollywood* seems to bear the traces of some rather intrusive editing. But this is an accessible, enjoyable and original study which will interest anyone concerned with the relationship between culture and economic forces, and which makes a distinctive contribution to the current anthropology of neoliberalism. Finally, it will awaken your curiosity about the range of American independent film, and encourage you to test your own thoughts and reactions against Ortner's analysis – which is, no doubt, just as its author would wish.

1. Peter Stallybrass (1998), 'Marx's Coat', in P. Spyer (ed), *Border Fetishisms; material objects in unstable spaces*, pp.183-208.
2. For instance, Richard Sennett (1998), *The Corrosion of Character; the personal consequences of work in the new capitalism*.
3. Thanks to documentary-maker Barnaby Snow for a helpful discussion on this point.
4. Joel Coen tried to avoid any bright, sunlit scenes in *Fargo*, and famously described the visual feel on the film as 'Siberia, with family restaurants.'<http://www.startribune.com/entertainment/movies/61943262.html?refer=y>