Hybrid Cinematics:

Rethinking the role of filmmakers of color in American Cinema

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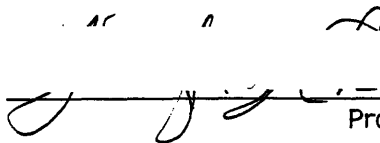
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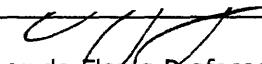
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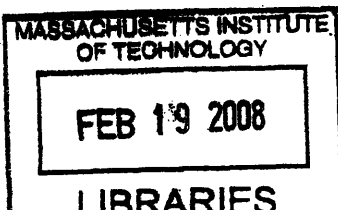11 January 2008

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Abstract

This thesis explores the practices of filmmakers of color in the United States who employ strategies to circumvent industrial, financial and cultural barriers to production and distribution. To overcome these barriers, many filmmakers of color in the United States operate as independents, which can allow them to route around Hollywood or forge a new space within. For most contemporary independent minority filmmakers, such as those from Latin, Asian, Pacific, Native and African American communities, an amalgam of political, industrial, economic and technological shifts have both facilitated and hindered access to crucial funding and distribution opportunities, which in turn impacts their ability to control and shape their imagery and identity. The result of these impediments inspires a mix of endeavors by those who seek mainstream access and success, those who seek independent status, and the hybrid practices of those who increasingly negotiate between the two. Hybrid Cinematics describes practices of those who negotiate such strategies to not only overcome persistent barriers, but also to strengthen their presence and authority within the American motion picture industry.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Introduction

In the early 1990's I had the opportunity to work on a variety of film and television projects in the midst of a thriving independent film community in New York City. The success of Spike Lee's first feature *She's Gotta Have It* (1986) became a torchlight for filmmakers of color seeking to engage in an industry that typically offered limited opportunity. Lee's 'by any means necessary' approach encouraged filmmaking regardless of social, economic or political barriers, and made the possibilities for previously marginalized talent seem real. I found myself working on a variety of projects including student productions from NYU's film school; music videos spawning from the growth of the MTV generation; and the grassroots productions of emerging directors seeking to make their mark. The pay wasn't always great, but the experience was invaluable and offered me hands-on access to the realities of grassroots, independent production. My background in a variety of roles, from production assistant to associate producer, exposed me to techniques filmmakers optimized to route around production obstacles; primarily small budgets and limited access to equipment, locations and other resources. For example, working on student films for friends forced me to wear several hats including casting, location scouting, set dressing and assistant directing, while optimizing the frantic seat-of-your-pants energy of no frills production to get the job done. In another instance, working as a prop assistant for director and digital video artist Ayoka Chenzira's groundbreaking film *Alma's Rainbow* (1994)[1], we used the brownstone of a crewmember for the main set, and I often used personal items for props to fill in when resources were scarce. As a set dresser for award winning

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[1] Ayoka Chinzera is credited as one of the first African American woman to write, produce and direct a 35 mm film.

playwright and director George Wolfe's *The Colored Museum* (1991) for PBS *Great Performances*, I witnessed the possibilities of cross platform strategy through the adaptation of a theatrical play for television, and Wolfe himself eventually transitioned from theater to film directing, utilizing his access to A-list talent and resources to optimize the opportunity. On some films, I was plucked from the sidelines to play a (very minor) role in a scene. Not because I had ambitions towards acting, but because it was part of the 'any means necessary' culture. If you fit the bill, or the dress, you were used for whatever was needed in the shot; prompting my forgettable stints as best friend, girlfriend, hooker, thug and even a cadaver. Working as an intern for the art department on Warner Bros. Pictures *New Jack City (1991)*, I experienced the difference between grassroots and major studio productions, as well as the advantages of working with big budgets. Aside from the prominent African American talent—from the producers and director to the actors and key crew members—sets were actually designed and built, wardrobes were made from scratch, lights were powered by generators and food was always available. When sent to scout a much-needed prop for an important scene, I was left to use the only available vehicle, a white stretch limousine.

My experiences taught me more than the skills required for putting together a film, or the luxuries of big-budget filmmaking. They also exposed me to the obstacles minorities continually face at all stages of the filmmaking process, as well as the complexities of their relationship with Hollywood's mainstream arbiters. For example, in 1991 at least 10 feature films with African American directors were released, accounting for more than in the preceding two decades.[2] Four of the ten,

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[2]Geoff King. *American Independent Cinema*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005. p. 216.

John Singleton's *Boyz N the Hood*, Mario Van Peebles *New Jack City*, Spike Lee's

Jungle Fever and Ernest Dickerson's *Juice*, were amongst the top four domestic box

office winners for their opening weekend, with a combined intake of over $150

million.[3] The influx paralleled the rising popularity of black urban culture,

particularly rap music and hip hop culture, which permeated mainstream audiences

and caught the attention of Hollywood's studio executives. However, in spite of the

increased output of films, many limitations for minorities remained. In a 1994

article for *Cineaste* magazine, Dennis Greene suggests, "The relationship players

have convinced themselves that black films can do only a limited domestic business

under any circumstance and have virtually no foreign box office potential. They

assume that the only dependable African-American audience is teenagers. They

also assume that films that exploit black urban violence are all the black teenage

audience and the limited crossover audiences want to see about black life. Any

significant increases in production and marketing costs are projected as a wasted

expense that cannot greatly increase the audience for African American films."[4]

Writer and cultural critic Lynn Johnson adds, "Although black films increasingly

perform well at the box office, distribution deals and budgets for the films continue

to remain low."[5] As an example, in 2000 *budgets for some mainstream studio films*

have reached the $100 million mark, with the average film costing around $50

million, while movies targeted at blacks usually have budgets averaging in the $13

million range.[6] A recent Hollywood Writers Report further shows that *in spite of*

[3] Boxofficemojo.com
[4] Dennis Greene. *Tragically Hip: Hollywood and African-American Cinema*. Race in Contemporary Cinema, Part 2. Cineaste v20, n4, (October, 1994): p. 28.
[5] Lynn Johnson. *The Distribution of Black Films*. Bright Lights Film Journal. April 2002. Issue 36. < http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/36/distribution1.html>, retrieved May 2007.
[6] George Alexander. *Fade to Black*. Black Enterprise, (December 2000): p.110.

non-whites making up 30% of the population, they currently account for less than 10% of employed television writers.[7] And while the number of minority film writers did increase some during the 1990's, it has been stuck at only 6% for the past several years.[8] Women directors reflect a mere 7% of the Directors Guild[9], and an even smaller portion of that figure accounts for women of color.

While these figures point to an apparent lack of inclusion, they more directly reflect persistent practices derived from the economic and regulatory influences that established the motion picture industry's modes of production with the advent of Industrialization. A closer look at the evolution of Hollywood's systematic production modes, discussed further in chapter 1, reveals the complexities of an omnipresent mechanism that not only dominates the images contributing towards the world's popular culture, but also laid the foundation for the current attitudes and practices of today's media conglomerates.[10] What these figures may not reveal are the large number of minorities that continually contribute to the craft of movie making in spite of evident barriers. Working in film production throughout the 1990's (as a non-union worker) exposed me to a thriving minority film community, made up of those who may have been shut out of the mainstream at the time, but whose histories and cinematic storytelling also shape, define and contribute to the progress of American cinema.

To overcome industrial, financial and cultural barriers, many filmmakers of color in the United States operate as independents, which can allow them to route around Hollywood or forge a new space within. Over the past two decades, the rising success and

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[7] Hunt, Darnell M. *Whose Stories Are We Telling?* The 2007 Hollywood Writers Report. Writers Guild of America West, 2007.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Lauzen, Martha M. *The Celluloid Ceiling, Behind-the-Scenes Employment of Women in the Top 250 Films of 2005.* School of Communication, San Diego State University, San Diego, CA, 2006, p. 1.
[10] Edward Jay Epstein. *The Big Picture.* New York: Random House, 2005. p. 23.

popularity of independent cinema shed light on the value of underserved markets and increased demand for alternative content. For most contemporary independent minority filmmakers, such as those from Latin, Asian, Pacific, Native and African American communities, an amalgam of political, industrial, economic and technological shifts have both facilitated and hindered access to crucial funding and distribution opportunities, which in turn impacts their ability to control and shape their imagery and identity. The result of these impediments inspires a mix of endeavors by those who seek mainstream access and success, those who seek independent status, and the hybrid practices of those who increasingly negotiate between the two.

Hybrid Cinematics is the term I employ to describe practices of those who negotiate the latter with strategies such as Lee's 'any means necessary' approach, to not only overcome persistent barriers, but also continually strengthen their presence and authority within the American motion picture industry. By looking across modes of production, I seek to realign the perception of filmmakers of color from a marginal perspective, offering instead a context that suggests similar practices amongst minorities establishes a film style that borrows from both the more formal structures of mainstream cinema and the departure of strategies found in independent cinema, and is informed by their individual experience. At the core is self-determination, at the periphery are the mechanisms to address tensions and obstacles that may cause disruption to the production practice, be it barriers to access, or the tensions of assimilation. I use the term 'Hybrid' as a moniker so as not to define or distinguish, but which can apply to any duality one may engage; for example whether practically (main-indie), in terms of identity (Asian American), or both, and however those experiences inform your negotiations in the motion picture

industry.

I further offer a context that reconsiders the historical framework in which minorities are included (or excluded) by looking across contributions by several ethnic communities, from pioneers of early cinema to today's global innovators, to challenge "postcolonial" and "postmodern" discourse locating them primarily in opposition to the dominant industry. Industrial shifts over the past several decades brought about a number of mergers and acquisitions, creating an integration amongst the mainstream and independent sectors, creating opportunities for filmmakers to better negotiate production and distribution strategies, while maintaining creative autonomy. Hybrid Cinematics can potentially serve as a model for understanding and analyzing other marginalized groups within the motion picture industry, in the new global economy.

Rethinking Minority Cinema

One consequence of scholarly research concerning minority cinema is that it is frequently observed from this limited perspective. A growing body of research considers new modes of exploration that look beyond comparison to mainstream dominance, and instead takes an interdisciplinary approach that looks across various media such as film, television theater and news publications. As an example, a recent report from the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center calls for a new paradigm for the examination of minority cinema based on two key observations about current analysis. The first is that racial groups tend to be looked at either in isolation or on the basis of a one-to-one relationship with the dominant culture. And the second notes that Hollywood often serves as the

predominant framework.[11] Researchers reviewed independent and commercial print

discourse to develop a comparative look at coverage of African American, Asian

American, Latino/Chicano and Native American cinema as a means to broaden the

understanding of minority independent film and video production in relation to one

another, and not solely in relation to the dominant industry (Hollywood). The focus

of their observations includes alternative media works such as avant-garde film,

experimental film, video art and documentaries, in an effort to expand limited

available research on minorities in these areas, as well as the need to document

diminishing historical artifacts. Results of the study showed coverage of minority

cinema varies significantly between institutional trade periodicals and commercial

and journalistic publications. For example, key policy issues concerning racial

diversity in independent media is virtually absent from commercial publications and

more present in trade periodicals that function as a public sphere where filmmakers

debate issues such as the politics of representation. Publications such as *Cineaste*

emphasized commercially successful directors whereas trade publications such as

The Independent focused on directors with less commercial success.[12] The report

highlights this point stating, "What is distinctive about trade periodicals output on

African American media is their avoidance of the Spike Lee phenomenon, which

drastically changed African American film's relationship to mainstream

Hollywood...[they] focused [instead] on minority directors with less commercial

success (albeit more critical accolades) such as Marlon Riggs, Charles Burnett, Julie

Dash and Cauleen Smith. Although *Cineaste* discussed these more obscure

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[11] Minority Filmmakers, Media Institutions, and Press Discourse: A Comparative Analysis. Hye Seung Chung, Jun Okada, and Maja Manojlovic. CSRC Research Report. No. 5, January 2005. p. 2.
[12] The report defined trade publications included in the study, such as *The Independent and Release Print*, as regional industry publications offering production focused reviews and resources. Commercial publications such as *Cineaste* and *CineAction* offered more scholarly reviews of films and filmmakers, and available to the general public via bookstores and newsstands. UCLA CSRC Report, p.3.

directors, their emphasis was black filmmakers with crossover appeal such as Spike

Lee, Mario Van Peebles, John Singleton, the Hudlin brothers, and Darnell Martin."[13]

Ultimately, *Cineaste* shifted their focus for a piece in Ed Guerrero's book *Framing*

Blackness: The African-American Image in Film, which surveyed the collective

tendencies of minority filmmaking, looking beyond the works of individual

filmmakers, and further leading to the ongoing series *Race in Contemporary*

American Cinema which broadened the spectrum of coverage to other minority

groups.[14] Coverage of minority cinema in these publications, or in some cases the

lack thereof, can be seen to reflect similar inconsistencies in representation of

minorities in the mainstream film industry, both in front of and behind the camera.

However, the idea of framing their observations around practices across various

minority groups, instead of sole in opposition to the dominant mainstream, more

importantly illuminates the formation of a distinct independent minority cinema.[15]

May Joseph's article *Alliances Across the Margins,* which looks at minority

theater groups working on the outskirts of American mainstream theater, provides

another similar proposition to that of Hybrid Cinematics, in that both suggest an

alternative framework to analyze the practices of minorities working around a

dominant industry. The article centers on the debate for cultural sovereignty, which

she defines as *the ability of a group to define its cultural practices and meanings as*

representative expressions of the group.[16] Joseph argues for an alternative

approach towards cultural sovereignty that continuously *accommodates the shifting*

terrains of audiences, generations, and globalizing tendencies, [to allow] politically

[13] UCLA CSRC Report, p.6.
[14] Ibid, p.6
[15] Ibid, p.2
[16] May Joseph. *Alliance Across the Margins*. African American Review, Volume 31, No. 4. Contemporary Theater Issue, (Winter 1997): p. 599.

pertinent, economically viable, and culturally meaningful impact of communities through performance.[17]

Joseph contrasts her position with the public debate between the late Pulitzer winning playwright August Wilson and his long-time nemesis Robert Brustein, founding director of both the Yale and American Repertory Theaters. Wilson blasts the theatrical establishment for cultural imperialism and demands reparation for cultural ownership that affirms African Americans within the mainstream theater community. His position points to a typical dichotomy that privileges the tensions between African Americans and the White establishment, and overlooks the historical inclusion of other minority groups as Joseph observes:

> *Although Wilson's historical references hint at broader coalitions that admit progressive possibilities, the fact that he frames his discussion of American theater in terms of Black and White issues distracts us from the complex, post-Civil Rights history of the American theater, which includes Chicana/os, Asian Americans, Native Americans and other communities such as socialists, feminists, workers, labor unionists, and communists—who have also struggled, often in conversation with each other, for forms of cultural expression in the interest of an egalitarian society.*[18]

Artists offering alternative works that move *across the margins on the peripheries of mainstream support* include writer, director and actor Roger Guenveur Smith; performance artist Dan Kwong; The Raven Theater Group and Cornerstone Company in Los Angeles; playwrights George Emilio Sanchez and Patricia Hoffbauer; and the Urban Bush Women Dance Company.[19] Similar to many of the filmmakers highlighted in this thesis, these artists struggle within a dominant industry, as well as seek *work outside the boundaries of cultural insularity,* as Joseph states:[20]

> *The economics of the theater over the last thirty years has made many younger practitioners less reverent and more pragmatic about their theatrical hopes. Instead of the proscenium*

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[17] Joseph, p. 599
[18] Ibid, p.596.
[19] Ibid, p.599.
[20] Ibid, p.598.

stage revered by Wilson, younger theater practitioners are looking elsewhere, to a rich and vibrant array of options for breaking the boundaries of institutional racisms: the extensive performance traditions of American experimental innovations of the 60's and 70's, the diasporic African traditions of orature, community-specific workshops, the performative poetry of Amiri Baraka and the Last Poets, the improvisational rhythms and innovative forms of Black music, Black dance and the politically pertinent performances of street and guerilla theaters form Latin America, the Caribbean, and West and East Africa.[21]

Joseph also highlights the historical and global significance of African American culture on a global scale, both artistically and politically influencing *ideas of cultural sovereignty and civil rights in African, Asian, Latin American and other regions.*[22] This thesis also seeks to affirm the continued growth and significance of minority cinema across multi-ethnic markets and multiple media platforms through a comparative look at the production and distribution practices of filmmakers of color forging paths in these areas as highlighted throughout this thesis.

The book *Moving the Image: Independent Asian Pacific American Media Arts* (1991) was published on the twentieth anniversary of UCLA's Asian American Study Center and Visual Communications, two pioneer institutions of Asian Pacific American media research and production. The collection of essays addressed the growth of alternative media from these communities over the past two decades, and contemplated the way forward for Asian Pacific American media makers. While many of the observations focused on works created in *opposition to mainstream strategies and structures in the film and television industries*—a common theme amidst the media arts movement—another key concern calls for a reconsideration of the historical framework in which minority cinema is located and provides a useful starting point for rethinking filmmakers of color. States *Moving The Image* editor Russell Leong, "The linear way in which we are taught to accept Eurocentric historical definitions and processes also appears in the linking of our culture and

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[21] Ibid, pp. 598-599.
[22] Ibid, p. 598.

history primarily to the experience of western domination, rather than to any other measure, criterion, or non-western historical framework. In so doing, we adopt a particular view of history and our affinities are linked and limited to the debris that can be salvaged from colonialization and domination."[23] Leong points to a need for scholarship that engages a new language to rewrite the historical context of Asian American cinema and suggests a rethinking of current "postmodern" or "postcolonial" discourse as ascribed to Asian Pacific Americans. He expands his argument to other peoples of color observing, "Cornel West states...that the debate over African American culture seen in terms of postmodernism is based on "historical coordinates" roughly corresponding to European colonization of the globe (1492-1945), the rising of the U.S. (1945-1972) as the global world power, and the current "second decolonization" of Third World peoples in their opposition to the First World (Iraq for example). Further, "every conception of post modern presupposes some idea of the modern—when it began, when it peaked, when it declined, when it ended."[24] West concludes that the term itself, as used by First World critics, does not adequately address the complexities of Third World histories and cultures."[25] As an example Leong offers, "Wen Guangyi, of the People's Republic of China, observes that the history of the Chinese who left China and now live abroad may be cast in more than one way: whether according to local historical periods, to Chinese historical timeframes, to the chronology of emigrant history, or of regional developments in the places of settlement, i.e., the United States or Southeast Asia. In looking at the histories of other immigrant and refugee groups

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[23] Leong, Russell, ed. *Moving the Image: Independent Asian Pacific American Media Arts.* Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Center, Visual Communications, Southern California Asian American Studies Central, Inc., 1991, p. xv.
[24] Cornell West. *Black Culture and Postmodernism* from Kruger, Barbara, Phil Mariani, ed. *Remaking History.* Seattle: Bay Press, 1989.
[25] Leong, p. xv-xvi.

in the U.S.—the Vietnamese, Koreans, Asian Indians, and Filipinos for example—can we merely analyze their histories and demarcate their cultures according to "postmodern" or "postcolonial" as defined by West?"[26] This thesis further asks, in looking at the evolution of American filmmakers of color, can we analyze their progress through different "historical coordinates" such as migration, social and political activism or cultural influence, to begin to rethink the role minorities play within the motion picture industry?

In Renee Tajima's groundbreaking article from *Moving the Image*, entitled the same, the author maps the shifts of Asian American filmmaking—from the social activism of the late 1960's and early 1970's to a focus on *formal and technological improvements* in the 1980's—in the first *attempt to conceptualize a history of independent Asian American filmmaking.*[27] Sandra Liu's reading of Tajima's article in *Countervisions*, a collection of essays concerning Asian American film criticism, points out the authors notion that Asian American filmmakers are achieving crossover success at the expense of their social and political vision, again setting up the familiar dichotomy as challenged by Joseph, Leung et al. States Liu, "...her bifurcated history reflects an understanding of the film industry that separates and judges independently produced films as occupying the political and artistic high ground, and mainstream or studio productions as being co-opted and politically suspect. To highlight her point, Liu offers the contention surrounding Wayne Wang's *The Joy Luck Club* (1993) based on Amy Tan's successful novel. Asian American audiences and critics alike opposed the representation of Chinese Americans as Liu states, "Columns, letters to the editor, and reviews in newspapers

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[26] Ibid, p. xvi
[27] Sandra Liu, Darrell Y. Hamamoto, ed. *Countervisions: Asian American Film Criticism*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000, p. 90.

and magazines expressed a wary mistrust of, or directly denounced, the ways in which Chinese history, Asian and Asian American masculinity and femininity, Chinese American social- and economic-class standing, and mother-daughter relationships were being represented in film. Even positive evaluations of the film supported the dominant perception that studio productions automatically lead to the de-politicization of Asian American films. Liu contends these representational issues should be taken into account, but also points to the burden placed upon filmmakers of color who make mainstream films portraying non-European American cultures, stating, "...the simple conclusion that filmmakers such as Wayne Wang, who directed *The Joy Luck Club*, have abandoned the representational and political aspirations of Asian American cultural activists in their reach for crossover audiences and profitability glosses over the social, economic, and political circumstances that Asian American filmmakers confront...To assess the state of Asian American filmmaking and to shape its future development, as Tajima urged us to do, Asian American cultural critics must take into account a complex of conflicting discourses and desires and continuously changing tactics in response to shifting material exigencies."[28] Liu then traces Wang's filmography—a mix of studio films and his politically motivated 'shadow films', such as *Dim Sum Take Out*, (1989), which portray a darker version of parallel themes from his "mainstreamed" productions, to further challenge the idea that his Hollywood aspirations came at a sacrifice to his politically motivated independent projects. States Liu,

> *Wang's filmmaking career complicates and deconstructs the popular mythology that success is measured by Hollywood—that is, high profitability and a shelf lined with Oscars—is the pinnacle of filmmaking achievement. Thus, the objectives of a politicized Asian American filmmaking practice can be distinguished from a simple correlation with increased numbers of Asian Americans behind the scenes or in front of the camera in studio productions. Though*

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[28] Liu, p. 91.

some Asian American filmmakers have set their sights firmly on Hollywood-style success, market and media forces often collude to steer public attention toward the assumption that this is the goal of all narrative filmmakers. In contrast, I read Wang's filmography as revealing a canny ability to make strategic, self conscious choices to create a balance of projects that support his reputation as a director who can make profitable films as well as movies that give primacy to his artistic and social vision. The combination of these two strategies has allowed Wang to negotiate the demands of a consumer-and profit-oriented system (with all the social inequities that this system also supports), and the desire to enact a socially committed and formally insurgent film practice.[29]

Considering this combination of strategies demarks an interesting point of entry for analyzing the compromises and negotiations many minorities endure in pursuit of their artistic desires. Offers Liu, "...one must take the very structure in which filmmakers work into account, on two levels. First, we understand that the film industry itself has changed and continues to change, simultaneously offering more opportunities, and regulating and limiting them as well. Second, as long as filmmaking occurs primarily within a corporate-capitalist entertainment system (even with so-called public sectors such as public television), filmmakers will be forced to make compromises in order to keep producing films. Some filmmakers continue to subvert, challenge, and resist the status quo in as many ways as they can, but the system itself will continue to be conservative."

Both Tajima and Liu offer a useful framework to consider the complexities surrounding the practices of filmmakers of color in which art and politics are difficult to dissociate. They also point to the necessity for cultural criticism that takes into account the fortuitous nature of the pursuits of filmmakers of color as Liu suggests, "Undeniably, Wang did ambitiously "locate and exploit particular, temporary imperfections in both national and industry-wide political and economic structures: (Rhines, 1996,2) in order to establish himself as a filmmaker. Reading Wang's films as simply charting a path to mainstream appeal, however, elides the changes

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[29] Ibid, pp. 91-92.

that the industry itself was experiencing in the 1980s and 1990s...as independent companies asserted themselves and then were absorbed into the studios and other entertainment conglomerates, blurring the distinction between independent and mainstream production. In this context, cultural critics can no longer divide films simply into two opposing camps: socially, politically, and artistically good independents on the one hand, and bad mainstream movies on the other. My reading of Wang's films highlights their contingent nature, acknowledging how each film might have increased or limited Wang's power to control his filmmaking efforts. Although they do not meet every expectation of progressive Asian American cultural critics, Wang's films offer varying levels of challenge to the mainstream film industry through their representation of Chinese and Asian American experiences and by pushing the boundaries of conventional mainstream narrative form."[30]

I take Liu's argument for alleviating critiques of this typical dichotomy one step further to also consider a non-confrontational or non-interrogational relationship filmmakers of color engage as film practitioners. In doing so, I propose not all endeavors by minorities (or non-minorities) are automatically motivated by the socio-political ideologies of their respective communities, whether intentional or not, but can also consider the challenges presented by the filmmaking craft itself, such as exploring new subject matter or innovative narrative and production techniques to express creative ideas. When asked about his artistic and social aims during an interview for *Moving the Image* Wayne Wang offered, "I want to make interesting films about people, their stories. Spence (Nakasako) and I are working on some things that are eventually going to be non-Asian. We're getting stories

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[30] Ibid, pp. 97-98.

about Asians and dubbing the Asian faces and making them white or Latino or whatever and I think in the end those stories are the same, about people, about the ironies of life."[31] Wang echoes a growing sentiment amongst filmmakers of color to present their visions under the guise of 'universality' without compromise to their ethnicity, or socio-political standing which I discuss further in chapter 3.

Looking Across Hybrid Cinematics

To explore these ideas further in the realm of Hybrid Cinematics I look to three key components: production, infrastructure, and distribution, as a means to map the collective practices and potential growth of filmmakers of color in the current media moment. My primary focus is on narrative commercial features, which offer a rich tradition that can be traced back to many different points of entry, as Leong et al suggest, and presents a useful study for reconsidering the value of alternative voices and niche markets in the new global economy.

The first section considers the complex notion of 'independent' as applied to the motion picture industry, as well as the implications of independent and mainstream participation for minorities, and the intricate relationship this group shares with both sectors. I also explore Hollywood's modes of production instituted with the advent of moviemaking, as detailed by David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, which not only established standard industry practices but also provides the historic framework in which motion pictures are typically analyzed. Looking at the implications of these early practices for minorities, as well as the rise of filmmakers of color working amidst their use reveals the complexities of the relationship filmmakers of color share with both the mainstream and independent

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[31] Leung, p. 73.

sector and considers the roots of practices established by minorities.

The second section considers how these practices afford filmmakers of color the ability to negotiate between the mainstream and independent sectors. Tactics such as the use of digital equipment, location shooting, guerrilla marketing techniques, and the ability to self-finance are highlighted as examples of means to offset barriers to the filmmaking process. Strategies such as Lee's 'any means necessary', Robert Rodriguez' 'el mariachi style' and Wayne Wang's 'shadow films' offer a look at different ways minorities deconstruct the filmmaking process to not only overcome mainstream barriers, but also to address social and political issues on their own terms.

While much research has been done on the topics of representation in cinema and the atrocities of racial stereotypes, my goal is to contribute to that scholarship by providing an analysis that considers practical application beyond activist cinema, and that considers opportunities in both the dominant and independent sectors. The issues highlighted in each chapter offer possible "historical coordinates" for intervention, as West points out, to rethink the role minorities play with the American motion picture industry. The trajectory of practices and encounters with both the mainstream and independent sectors are present additional starting points not only for ways to rethink the historical framework often imposed on minorities, but also as a means to encourage much needed critical discourse that broadens the analysis and understanding of the practices of filmmakers of color, and their role in American Cinema.

Section 1: What Is Independent?

As a first step towards reconsidering the role of filmmakers of color, I look to the notion of 'independence' by which many filmmakers either locate themselves or are categorized as alternative voices. The term 'independent' has taken on a variety of meanings, depending on which end of the filmmaking spectrum you look, from avant-garde and experimental films to narrative features. By its simplest terms, independent filmmaking suggests an alternative to mainstream Hollywood and the conventions of big-budget studio production. However, a closer examination reveals a complex interconnectedness between the mainstream and independent sectors that has evolved since the early days of cinema, and can make it difficult to separate or implicitly define one or the other. Geoff King offers the following definition in his book *American Independent Cinema (2005) that looks at independent filmmaking from the 1980s through the current millennium:*

> Exactly how 'independence' is defined can vary in both form and degree [based] on the position of individual films, or filmmakers, in terms of (1) their industrial location, (2) the kinds of formal/aesthetic strategies they adopt and (3) their relationship to the broader social, cultural, political or ideological landscape. Strategies vary, at each level. Some films customarily designated as 'independent' operate at a distance from the mainstream in all three respects: they are produced in an ultra-low-budget world a million miles from that of the Hollywood blockbuster; they adopt formal strategies that disrupt or abandon the smoothly flowing conventions associated with the mainstream Hollywood style; and they offer challenging perspectives on social issues, a rarity in Hollywood. Others exist in a closer, sometimes symbiotic relationship with the Hollywood behemoth, offering a distinctive touch within more conventional frameworks. In between are many shades of difference.[32]

King's summation adheres to the primacy of Hollywood, he provides a useful starting point for considering the many ways in which the mainstream and independent sector converge. As an example, Kings highlights the symbiotic relationship Spike Lee engages with both industry sectors, which both inspires and enables his work, stating, "Mov[ing] into the mainstream-indie territory...low-

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[32] Geoff King. *American Independent Cinema*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005, pp. 3-4.

budget 'guerilla' production was a necessity rather than a virtue in the case of *She's Gotta Have It*. The film's success at the box office (a US gross of more than $7 million that demonstrated the existence of a significant audience for black indie features) enabled Lee to achieve his goal of gaining access to studio finance for his next film...and a relationship with Universal that saw the production of [his subsequent films].[33] States Lee, "When I went to film school, I knew I didn't want to have my films shown only during Black History Month in February or at libraries. I wanted them to have wide distribution. And I did not want to spend four or five years trying to piecemeal together the money for my films."[34] King furthers, "Even when backed by major studio finance and distribution, Lee has claimed the status of an independent filmmaker, maintaining creative control over key areas such as script, the hiring of cast and crew, and final cut, although he has often had to struggle to obtain anything more than modest budgets."[35] Lee's engagement in the 'mainstream-indie territory' King points to is a relationship that has existed since the advent of movies, and marks the space I begin my interrogation to locate the practice of Hybrid Cinematics and consider the implications for minorities, and hence attempt a model for other alternative voices.

1.1 Early Mavericks

Hollywood itself is rooted in the exploits of maverick independents that pioneered technology and filmmaking techniques, and consequently built the studio system as it came to be known from the 1920s until its decline in the 1950s. The Lumière brothers, inventors of the Cinématographe, first cornered the market by refusing to sell their camera/projector, and by sending their own operators out to

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[33] Ibid, p.211.
[34] Manthia Diawara, ed. *Black American Cinema*. London: Routledge, 1993, p. 6.
[35] King, p. 211.

shoot and exhibit their films.[36] When the Lumières were unable to keep up with demand, competition soon followed. In the United States, Thomas Edison's New York based Edison Studios held the country's most widely publicized motion picture device, prompting the company to launch frequent patent infringement claims against aspiring competitors. Several of the Edison films were produced by independents through licensing agreements, which allowed independent production, but afforded Edison ownership and copyright privileges. In an effort to better organize the industry, and subsequently control the company's and other member's interests, Edison formed the Association of Edison Licensees. Edison's main rival, Biograph Studios, also formed its own licensee organization. However, when neither organization could successfully curb infringement activities, they subsequently joined forces along with several other dominant players (Vitagraph, Pathe, the Eastman Company, and others) resulting in the formation of the Motion Picture Patents Company (MPPC), also known as "The Trust." With the industry's first oligopoly firmly in place, the MPPC controlled production, distribution and exhibition, *requiring filmmakers to purchase Trust-approved stock and exhibitors to rent only Trust films and projectors.*[37] By 1907, the nickelodeon theaters, initially aimed at urban immigrant audiences and displaying one-reel movies (typically 15-20 minutes in length), contributed to the motion picture industry's success. Growing popularity encouraged rapid expansion resulting in upwards of five thousand 5-cent admission theaters, with average seating capacities just shy of two hundred[38]. An average of two million patrons per day visited US theaters alone,

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[36] Richard Abel, ed. Encyclopedia of Early Cinema London; New York: Routledge, 2005, p. 398.
[37]Ibid.
[38] In order to qualify for the necessary theatrical license for exhibition, seating capacities were required to be less than 200, resulting in a number of theaters limiting seating to 199.

netting substantial profits.[39]

The subsequent demise of the MPPC in 1914 is often attributed to the

struggles with independent competitors and the effects of the anti-trust laws

forbidding monopolies. Jeanne Thomas' essay, "The Decay of the Motion Picture

Patents Company" for *Cinema Journal* questions the decline of the company based

soley on these notions. The author's query implies that the breakdown of the Trust

may have as much to do with internal conflict than the establishment of

independents on the west coast and the result of government penalization. States

Thomas,

> The traditional reasons given for the breakdown of the Patents Company do not seem to be
> conclusive when the complex picture of the film industry in the years between 1908 and 1918
> is closely examined. The distance between the MPPC and the independents was not as wide
> as frequently drawn and the characteristics that distinguish the two camps not as polarized.
> Fluidity and, in some cases, cooperation between the independents and the Patents Company
> point to a more complex explanation for the eventual failure of the MPPC than the triumph of
> free enterprise over monopoly. The onslaughts of the independents and the federal
> government were important, but the dissolution of the Patents Company may have been
> almost as much the doing of the members themselves.[40]

This scenario reflects a much more integrated relationship between the dominant

industry (the MPPC) and the independents, as Thomas suggest,

> Besides directors and cameramen, actors were also lured away [from the Trust] by
> independent companies. Two of them, Gilbert ("Bronco Billy") M. Anderson and Mary Pickford
> eventually set up their own independent companies.[41] Essanay [Studio] had sent Anderson
> ("Bronco Billy") to San Francisco to investigate sites away from Edison lawyers in the East. He
> chose Niles Canyon, near Oakland, as his base and began making weekly pictures. In 1910,
> the American Film Manufacturing Company set up shop in Chicago after luring the majority of
> actors, technicians and executives away from Essanay...Whether or not they left for more
> freedom to experiment or for a higher paying position, members of the Patents Company
> themselves appear to have contributed to the breakdown of the MPPC's effectiveness.[42]

Thomas' findings suggest that an exchange of management, talent and resources

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[39] Ibid.
[40] Jeanne Thomas. *The Decay of the Motion Picture Patents Company*. Cinema Journal, Vol. 10, No. 2 (Spring,
1971), pp. 34-40.
[41] Mary Pickford was a cofounder of United Artists in 1919, a joint venture initially formed with actors Douglas
Fairbanks, Charlie Chaplin, director D.W. Griffith and Pickfords lawyer William Gibbs McAdoo. Gilbert M. Anderson
co-founded Essanay Studios with screenwriter and film pioneer George K. Spoor.
[42] Thomas, pp. 34-40.

occurred between major studio owners and independent start-ups, and provide the beginnings of the struggle between profit and innovation, as well as the shifting balance of power between the two.

The industry's Golden Age, starting in the late 1920s following the end of the silent era, would be characterized by multi-reel feature length films, luxurious movie palaces, glamorous movie stars, new sound and color technology, and the launch of the Academy Awards, all helping to establish Hollywood as one of the fastest growing and most exciting industries in the United States. Studios began producing signature motion pictures, such as MGM's devotion to high-quality productions and big name stars, such as the epic *Gone With the Wind* (1939) starring Clark Gable and Vivien Leigh, and Warner Bros. gritty social dramas and gangster films like *The Public Enemy* (1931) starring James Cagney and Jean Harlow. A new system of production, built on established practices, allowed similar control over distribution and exhibition as that of earlier pioneers. David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson detail the development of these various structures in their book *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, which links economic and stylistic factors to exemplify a fundamental mode of production, stating "…[T] he Hollywood mode of film practice continues an integral system, including persons and groups but also rules, films, machinery, documents, institutions, work processes, and theoretical concepts."[43] Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson break from film criticism that splinters the topic into specific categories contending, "A mode of film practice is not reducible to an oeuvre (the films of Frank Capra), a genre (the Western), or an economic category (RKO films). It is an altogether different

[43] David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson. *The Classical Hollywood Cinema : Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1985, p. xiii..

category, cutting across careers, genres, and studios. It is, most simply, a context. And we cannot arrive at this context simply by adding up all the histories of directors, genres, studios, producers, etc.; this would be, as George Kubler suggests, like trying to determine a country's network of railroads by studying the itinerary of every traveler."[44] They offer a systematic approach to the style, economics and technology of motion pictures as a means to understand the full grasp of the art and industry of cinema.[45] They argue that the practices of film production constitute a 'crucial condition of composition' in which film style and mode of production are mutually influencing.[46] They outline a number of production systems that define the 'classical' mode of Hollywood cinema, and laid the foundation for modes of practice in use today. These systems are grounded in theories of capitalism suggesting, to echo Marx, *in the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces*, are defined in three distinct categories, 1) the labor force, 2) the means of production and 3) the financing of production.[47] The capitalist economy of the Industrial Age introduced systems of standardization in both labor and management practices, influencing an initial organized labor force which Janet Staiger describes as, "..all workers involved directly and indirectly in the production of the films or the production of physical means to make them. In cinema, these workers include cameramen, scriptwriters, stagehands, lens makers,

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[44] Ibid.
[45] Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson assert that their decision to privilege production modes over reception was pragmatic, as it required another entire text to offer a full treatment of reception. Ibid. p. xiv.
[46] Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, p. xiv.
[47] Ibid, p. 89

producers, breakaway-prop-makers, and so on."[48] Over time, as filmmaking

advanced from one-reel to multi-reels, several subdivisions of labor arose which

Staiger describes as:

1) the 'cameraman' system; the dominant system from 1896 to 1907 in

   which the cameraman selects the subject matter, conducts the necessary

   staging based on the available technological or photographic possibilities

   (type of camera, raw stock, and lens, framing and movement of camera,

   etc.), photographs the scene, develops it and edits it.

2) the 'director' system; the dominant system from 1907-1909, in which the

   primary duties of the director were conceptual and execution tasks were

   divided amongst craftsmen such as writers and camera operators.

3) the 'director-unit' system; developed after 1909 to accommodate

   exhibitor demands that required twenty to thirty new films per week.

   Studios expanded the 'director system' by placing units in several

   locations to ensure year-round, uninterrupted shooting that may be

   inhibited by inclement weather or labor shortages. If further allowed the

   ability to spread the product evenly over the week and meet advertised

   release dates.

4) the 'central producer' system; became dominate around 1914 and

   centralized the control of production under the management of a

   producer. It was developed in response to two distinct changes in the

   film industry, to achieve continuity, verisimilitude and narrative

   dominance and clarity (which defines the classical Hollywood film), and

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[48] Ibid.

the lengthening of films from an average of 18 minutes to 25 minutes or more.

5) the 'producer-unit' system; resulted from a major rearrangement in the early 1930's and introduced greater specialization in the upper-management levels in which a group of men supervised six to eight films per year, usually each producer concentrating on a particular type of film.

6) the 'package-unit' system; dominant during post World War II and is distinguished from previous modes of production in that *rather than an individual company containing the source of labor and materials, the entire industry became a pool for these.* Whereas the producer-unit system demanded a commitment to make six to eight films per year with a fairly identifiable staff, the package-unit system was a short-term, film-by-film arrangement, although *the labor hierarchy worked time and again with the same people because of skills and work habits.*[49]

The use of the various modes of production has lead to a historical classification of Hollywood as a mass production industry. However, as Staiger notes, "..that does not explain the disparity between D.W. Griffith at the Biograph Company in 1910 and Dore Schary at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer in 1950. In one sense, both men were managing the mass production of films, but there is a significant difference between producing one one-reel Biograph after another and turning out reels of glossy MGM features. A description of all Hollywood production systems at one broad level of generality cannot account for more specific levels of description, nor can it account for changes over time."[50] For example, other traits of classical Hollywood can also

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[49] Ibid, pp. 316-317.
[50] Ibid, pp. 92-93.

be attributed to *the primacy of the narrative, 'realism,' casual coherence, continuity, spectacle, stars and genres.*[51] While each of these structures is ensconced in the classic form, they have also provided fertile ground for departure and reinvention, as with the alternative ambitions of the independent sector.

The construction of the classical system can also be a source of tension between the mainstream and independent sectors. As a film form it stands as a useful approach to an organized mode of production, and as noted here, it is not a fixed system. States David Bordwell, "Historically these premises sprang mostly out of other media. From popular literature and drama came principles of plotting: psychological causality, planting and payoff, rising action, and recurrent motifs. From theater, painting, photography and the graphic arts came ideas about special vantage points and pictorial composition. Other premises derived from cinema's particular resources, such as the possibility of breaking a scene into closer views or the characters, or joining disparate spaces through alternating editing. Soon after movies became public entertainment, filmmakers tested all these principles in haphazard fashion. By 1917 American filmmakers had synthesized them into a unified style, and it was this style, within the next decade, that is was taken up and developed around the world."[52] For alternative voices in the United States, particularly filmmakers of color, it was not so easy an evolution. When the classical mode is imposed upon by social, political and economic forces, it can appear to be a rigid barrier to access and creative freedom.

1.2 The New Mavericks

As The MPPC began to construct the motion picture industry,

[51] Ibid, p. 94.
[52] David Bordwell. *The Way Hollywood Tells It*. Berkley: University of California Press., 2006. pp. 12-13.

minorities also began to emerge as actors, craftsmen and independents producers

and directors. Marion Wong, whose *The Curse of Quon Gwon: When the Far East*

Mingles with the West (1916-1917) was recently rediscovered, is credited as one of

the earliest female directors as well as one of the first from the Asian American

community.[53] One of Hollywood's first matinee idols, Sessue Hayakawa starred in a

number of multi-ethnic roles for Paramount Pictures, and was one of the highest

paid actors of the era. Ultimately, he formed his own successful production

company, Haworth Pictures, in 1918 and independently produced twenty-five films

including *His Birthright* (1918) and *The Dragon Painter* (1919).[54] Acclaimed

cinematographer James Wong Howe worked as chief cameraman for Famous

Players-Lasky Company during the silent era, and was most noted for his

technological prowess. His mastery of lighting and innovative shooting techniques

spanned a fifty year career, garnered two Academy Awards and made him one of

the most sought after cinematographers in Hollywood history. Reflecting on his

authoritative role on set Howe comments,

> The more artistically involved they were, the less discriminatory they were. But the common everyday that I had to give orders to, electricians 'n' property men and stuff like that, because I had to tell 'm what to do. And that's what they didn't like! To have someone to be the boss. You see. Of being a chief cameraman you have electricians, carpenters, grips, painters. Property men. Nurserymen. I found some of them resented it. Others and I got along fine. They weren't all that way. They was certain elements. On the set, yea! On location. And I would punch 'em in the nose. Or they would punch me. And that was it."[55]

While the these examples reflect exceptions of the time, and not necessarily

the rule, much research can still be done to account for producers, directors,

technicians, labor workers and actors, who remain invisible yet were integral in the

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[53] Discovered by filmmaker Arthur Dong while researching is documentary *Hollywood Chinese (2007)*, Marion Wong is now listed as one of the earliest woman filmmakers and *The Curse of QuonGwon*, although never released, is listed in the National Film Registry by the Library of Congress. See: http://www.loc.gov/today/pr/2006/06-234.html
[54] Jun Xing. *Asian America Through the Lens: History, Representations and Identity.* Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 1998, pp. 18-19.
[55] Leung, p. 156.

progress of American cinema during this era. As an example, Angela Aleiss notes in her essay *Native Americans: The Surprising Silents*, "...Thomas H. Ince, was celebrated for his treatment of Native Americans. In 1911, Ince and a troupe of cowboy riders and gunslingers from Miller Brothers 101 Ranch Real Wild West Show camped along the foothills of the Santa Monica Mountains, just northwest of Los Angeles. This scenic oceanfront site, commonly referred to as "Inceville," was dotted with tipis belonging to the Oglala Sioux Indians from Pine Ridge, South Dakota. Ince was responsible for the Indians' care, and he agreed to provide them with the required hours of schooling each day. "The Indians appeared in many of my two-reel pictures," Ince wrote in his memoirs, "and did some truly remarkably [sic] work."[56] Gaining a clearer understanding of the full participation of minorities in the production process can further broaden our understanding of the role minorities play in the progress of American Cinema, and deepen our understanding of the relationship between filmmakers of colors (independents) and the mainstream sector.

The population shifts of the late eighteenth and nineteenth century from minority groups seeking increased opportunity and improved quality of life, has tremendous impact on both studios and emerging independents. The migration of various ethnic groups between 1890 and 1915 brought fourteen million southern and eastern Europeans, approximately one million Asians (Japanese, Chinese, Koreans, Filipinos, and Indians); despite numerous restrictions, and more than a million Mexicans and Mexican Americans; through the imposition of a border.[57] Over a hundred thousand African Americans fled the segregated rural south, growing to

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[56] Leung, pp. 167-168.
[57] Abel, pp. 432-435.

more than a half a million by 1915. The Indian Removal efforts forced an internal migration of Native Americans, forcing them into remote reservations throughout the country as their land was scoop up by Anglo and European American settlers. The influx of disparate groups posed a challenge to the emerging film industry inspired by the potential for a growing audience. J. Ronald Green offers, "One difficulty of the American industrial revolution was that both labor and consumer markets (pretty much the same groups by the time mass production reached its maturity) were radically fragmented. The factories and urban centers were attracting new ethnic groups all the time, including the Southern Blacks who were in the midst of their greatest migration northward...Hollywood, itself seeking a dependable mass market, began to assimilate the new urban diversity. In order to cover the substantive near-impossibility of such a job, Hollywood developed a style of gloss, illusionism and closure."[58]

Economic factors play a key role here in supporting the expansion of Hollywood's production system and creating the necessary barriers to protect their monopoly. Staiger explains, "Two types of financing and ownership have occurred in the film industry: capitalism and advanced capitalism (also called finance or monopoly capitalism). Advanced capitalism implies the concentration and centralization of capital. It is characterized by a massive vertical and horizontal integration for economy of scale, a shift from identifiable owners to joint-stock firms, and a multinational range in marketing control."[59] Raising capital for production costs and theater purchases were based on the quality of the films and the ability to successfully distribute them, which was supported by the studios

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[58] Diawara, p.40.
[59] Bordwell, Thompson, Staiger, p. 313.

complete control over theatrical releases and box-office profits—otherwise know as

the practice of block-booking, which further served to prevent the works of

independent competitors from broad exhibition. A 'star system' locked in actors

salaries with contractual obligations that additionally allowed them to be rented out

to other studios, and distribution and advertising were minimal costs since first-run

releases were guaranteed and netted critical reviews and word of mouth

advertising. In 1947, while the average cost to make a studio motion picture was

$732,000, distribution costs were only around $60,000 and advertising budgets

averaged less than $30,000 a picture.[60] After deducting these costs, net receipts

for the nearly 500 films released that same year totaled approximately $950

million, with more than 95% of this revenue garnered from ticket sales.[61] States

Bordwell, " What advanced capitalism did to the mode of production was to

intensify the existent mode by reasserting the production hierarchies of

management. This reinforced the control of the management structure, particularly

the power wielded by the tactical experts whose knowledge of the technology and

work process placed product design in their control. Thus, the impact of advanced

capitalism confirmed the production practices, maintaining them as the established

order."[62]

1.3 Race Cinema

In the transition to what Bordwell, Thompson and Staiger have dubbed the

classical Hollywood cinema, African American independents such as The Lincoln

Motion Picture Company (*The Realization of a Negro's Ambition*, 1916) and Oscar

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[60] Epstein, pp. 5-7.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Bordwell, Thompson, Staiger, pp. 317.

Michaeux (*The Homesteader*, 1918) also began to assert their ambitions, and addressed the needs of growing black audiences. States Donald Bogle, "...all these early figures hoped to make movies of racial uplift and inspiration, tributes to black endurance and ambition. They remain important because they proved that African American cinema could exist."[63] Over five hundred 'race films' were produced from approximately 150 companies (a third of which were black)[64] emerging throughout the country both independently and in cooperation with white producers, including Reol Productions Corporation (New York), the Frederick Douglas Film Company (New Jersey) and the Norman Film Manufacturing Company (Florida), offering a variety of genre such as westerns, horror, mysteries, musicals, comedies and drama.[65] Thomas Cripps offers, "These upstarts were inspired to establish a black aesthetic with a profusion of race films that shard the common goals of producing movies with black investments in the plot-lines, black characterizations with humane dimensions, dramatic conflict based upon the facts of American racial arrangements, and a conscious effort to make the tools of the filmmaker speak to black needs."[66] And, "[W]hile the production of race movies took place completely outside of the parameters of Hollywood, it also involved black and white cooperation."[67]

Innovations such as the advent of sound also created joint opportunities between the two sectors as Hollywood embraced the sounds of black culture, and African Americans optimized the opportunity. Offers Bogle, "...The sound medium

[63] From the introduction to John Kisch, Edward Mapp. *A Separate Cinema: Fifty Years of Black Cast Posters.* New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1992, p.xvi.
[64] Kisch, Mapp, p. xvi.
[65] Ibid.
[66] Ibid, p.70
[67] S. Craig Watkins. *Representing: Hip Hop Culture and the Production of Black Cinema.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998, p.2.

required a new type of star, a new type of energy and style, indeed an entirely new

kind of rhythm. Soon Hollywood turned its eye and ear to New York theater and

nightclubs for performers who not only had faces but voices too. ...[T]he style and

presence of such Negro entertainers as Ethel Waters, Bill "Bojangles" Robinson,

Florence Mills, Duke Ellington, and Josephine Baker, all of whom, quiet as it was

kept, infused American popular culture with a new perspective, a new flash, a new

kind of energy and attitude"[68] For example, while still a Hollywood ingénue, Lena

Horne took a role in the low budget race film *The Duke is Tops* (1938), written and

directed by Ralph Cooper who had secured backing from the white-owned Million

Dollar Pictures. In his autobiography, Cooper recalls,

> ...Lena had been engaged to perform a vocal in an MGM musical that became an enormous hit. There were a total of nine hundred black theaters in the US then, and our film played in about six hundred of them (at least three hundred were owned by competitors). There were at the same time some thirty five thousand movie houses catering to white audiences in the US. Once that huge audience saw Lena in the MGM musical, she became a very hot property. *The Duke is Tops* was reissued with change of title and new billing: "Lena Horne in The Bronze Venus with Ralph Cooper." There were no credits on the poster saying Ralph Cooper wrote and directed the picture."[69]

1.4 Oscar Micheaux's Unconventional Style

Oscar Micheaux's prolific career, *including some thirty to forty films

from1918-1948,*[70] provides another example of the symbiotic Hollywood-

Independent territory. While Micheaux's intentions were clearly rooted in race

conscious aspirations, his film style proved to be as much mainstream showman as

alternative resistor as Bogle suggests, "Micheaux was dedicated to his own concept

of black cinema (a heady mix of subliminal messages and sheer pop

entertainment)."[71] Although he lacked the budgets or resources to match the high

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[68] Kisch, Mapp, p. xviii.
[69] Ibid, p. xxviii.
[70] Ibid, p. xvi.
[71] Ibid.

quality of Hollywood features (a source of contention for his critics as I will later point out), Micheaux still appropriated beneficial modes of production, such as the star system which he deftly used to develop and promote talents such as Paul Robeson, and to create strong character types, often modeled after white stars, such as the "Lorenzo Tucker who became the "black Valentino"; and Bee Freeman the "sepia Mae West."[72] The director was noted for his strong female characters as Bogle adds, "Micheaux gave his actresses vivid and important roles. Several of his films might well be classified as "women's pictures," dramas that focused on the tensions and drives, the restless energies of independent, strong willed-women heroines in conflict with men, with themselves, or with the world in which they lived...Michaeux's wife, actress Alice B. Russell, also worked closely with him behind the scenes on his production, perhaps helping him to inject a female perspective into some of his melodramas."[73]

While Michaeux is touted for his innovations, he is equally chided for the poor quality of his films, again highlighting several key issues surrounding the practices and aspirations of filmmakers of color. In the following passage, Green takes issue with Cripps criticism of Micheaux's unconventional style, again pointing to the struggle for cultural identity and the complexities of how those ideas may or may not be visually expressed. Additionally it sheds light on the complicity of the dominant industry, a notion that is called into question for its validity in this situation:

> Cripps has described the pervasive, typical "mistakes" in Micheaux's style, and has shown that the Micheaux company was aware of them but unable to correct them because of the

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[72] One could also argue Tucker emulated a black Sessue Hayakawa since Hayakawa preceded Valentino in substantiating the type, and subsequently paved the way for Valentino to assume the reigns by turning down the lead character of *The Shiek (1921)* in order to launch his own production company. Ibid, p. xvii.
[73] Ibid, p.xxviii

prohibitive expense of higher shooting ratios, retakes, master shots, and professional editing. The apparatus of Cripp's own critical assessment...is founded in the unresolved contradiction of twoness...This perspicacious identification of what is at stake in race movies, and Micheaux's work, is unresolved by Cripps treatment, however. Micheaux's treatment of racial issues was much more sophisticated than has been generally noticed...Cripps concluded that 'race movies tended to acquiesce segregation, place white cupidity off-limits as a theme, rehash many stereotypes...set black against black, and imitate white movies.[74] I believe these attributes are incorrectly characterized as failures, as regards Micheaux; he explored just those issues among others...but it is nevertheless safe to say that Hollywood could not be expected to be able to deal with these issues, or most other issues Micheaux explored at the level he wanted to explore them. It is equally improbable that Hollywood's style would ever reflect such sensitivity to twoness and contradiction as Micheaux's style does...[M]y case is not that Micheaux intended every aspect of his style, but that the style is appropriate to and worthy of his situation and issues, and that, therefore, his accomplishment was greater than has been recognized...Micheaux's style has served important themes and has provided a complex but worthy answer to the twoness dilemma, [In] *The Girl From Chicago* (1933)[75] Michaeux has represented both the hope for and dangers of assimilation. He has compared the hopes of one amateur singer and the accomplishments of one professional singer, and has incorporated ideas about the production financing and stylistic values of each. The relatively high financing stylistic values are associated with Liza Hartfeld, a virtual prostitute; the lower production values are associated with the hopes of a character with undeveloped talent and personal integrity. Michaeux associates his own undeveloped talent and personal integrity with both of these modes, as a hope and a fear. He would like to be able to assimilate into both aspects of the American culture, but he represents that assimilation as dangerous, as well as attractive, for his group. The idea of a dangerous attraction is one reflection of the struggle with twoness in African American assimilation, a struggle embodied in a style "whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder."[76]

Greens assessment of Micheaux's style highlights several key issues concerning practices and aspiration of filmmakers of color, and the complex role of the dominant industry in the that quest. First, it highlights once again negations and compromises minorities oftentimes endure in pursuit of their craft. Secondly, it shows the effects of the classical mode of production, when imposed upon by social, political and economic forces, creating a tension between access and creative expression as Green contends, "The fact that Micheaux's films seem so rough and amateurish, compared to the standard of Hollywood and Europe probably explains why the negative case against Micheaux as artist has been so poorly constructed.

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[74] Diawara, p.40.
[75] Green's argument concerns the treatment of a minor character in the film, the sister of a middle aged Southern Black woman, Mary Austin, who runs a boarding house in a small Georgia town. Austin sends her sister to the North to pursue a singing career, along with her life's savings earned from the boarding house which she set aside for that sole purpose.
[76] Diawara, p. 40. "whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" is a reference to DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folks*, p. 215.

Micheaux's "inadequacies" seem just obvious to anyone who assumes most of the criteria of classical Hollywood film."[77] I argue it further diminishes the classical elements Micheaux did co-opt and re-imagine, such as the star system, the incorporation of sound and popular music, and perhaps even an artistic style rooted in what Richard Grupenhoff points to as, "conjur[ing]modernist theories of stage acting suggesting, "In *The Girl from Chicago*....one can hear Micheaux's off-camera voice cueing the actors as they gesture on camera for him to be quiet...Micheaux's films are replete with these strange, revealing moments in which we are able to see both the character and the actor behind the character in self-conscious behavior."[78] My point is, as both Green and Grupenhoff suggest, Micheaux can be treated with a broader analysis, and maybe even be viewed, as Bordwell describes of his mainstream counterparts, as an early pioneer that *tested all these principles in haphazard fashion before deciding on a practical unified system.*[79]

Lastly, Green's argument points to issues of representation and

internal community conflict as evidenced previously not only in the films of Wayne Wang and Spike Lee, whose work bears Micheaux's imprint, but in their practice and criticism as well. States Bogle,

> For Micheaux...his greatest contribution is often viewed upon by some contemporary black audiences as his severest shortcoming. That his films frequently reflected the interests and values of the black bourgeoisie has long been held against him. Though his films did not center on the racial misery and decay of the ghetto, few race movies did. Instead, they tended to concentrate on the problems facing black "professional people." Often enough too, his favored leads were close to the white ideal: straight-haired, keen-featured, light-skinned. (The same was true of other race movies.) Micheaux was sometimes criticized by the black press for his color caste system. In an Amsterdam News review of Micheaux's Daughter of the Congo, black critic Theophilus Lewis complained: "The first offence of the new film is its persistent vaunting of interracial color fetishism. The scene is laid in a not so mythical republic in Africa. Half the characters wear European clothes and are supposed to be civilized,

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[77] Diawara, p.39
[78] Pearl Bowser, Jane Gaines, and Charles Musser, ed. *Oscar Micheaux and His Circle: African-American Filmmaking and Race Cinema of the Silent Era*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001, p. 221.
[79] Bordwell, 2006, p. 13.

while the other half wear their birthday suits and some feathers and are supposed to be savages. All the noble characters in the film are high yellows: all the ignoble ones are black...It is based on a false assumption that has no connections with the realities of life."[80]

It is difficult to conclude what Micheaux's intentions were as his unconventional style was often ambiguous. However, an immediate comparison to Spike Lee's pitting of 'jigaboos' (dark-skinned) and 'wannabees' (light-skinned) against one another in the all-black college interrogating *School Dayz* (1988) comes to mind, and certainly begs for comparison. By today's standards such tactics could more easily be perceived as intentionally provoking. It could also be argued that Michaeux's presentation is open to the viewers interpretation, offering a blatant stereotype intending perhaps an underlying 'you get my point.' This would be in stark contrast to Lee's far less obscure message to "Wake Up!" which is screamed at the audience in the closing scene, yet in both instances could potentially drive home the same imperative for self reflection. In Michaeux's defense, protégé Lorenzo Tucker suggests, "Micheaux's goal was to depict the black race in its natural settings, facing everyday problems...He gave all different kinds of roles to different shades. He used different-looking people, not stereotypes. I played bad guys too, and I was light-skinned. He wrote his stories to use all the shades of the black race, because that's the way we are."[81]

Looking back at early cinema I have begun to show that the notion of 'independence' is not necessarily an automatic response of resistance or opposition, rather a variety of practices that can at times draw from modes of production within the dominant industry, but is also embedded in the complexity of histories, experiences and aspirations the continually inform filmmakers of color resulting in

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[80] Kisch, Mapp, pp. xvii-xviii.
[81] Ibid, p. xviii.

what I propose is a hybrid style of practice. As I have shown, for filmmakers of color, production practices can be a complex negotiation as in the case of Micheaux who regularly adapted mainstream modes of production and, informed by his own experiences, re-imagined them. By avoiding oppositional comparisons of minorities to the dominant industry, I instead offer other possible vantage points for which to analyze the style and practices of filmmakers of color, considering their motivations in their own right, without the imposition of the dominant industry. In doing so I highlight a more symbiotic relationship between the mainstream and independent sectors and offer possible entry points to map early practices that may inform Hybrid Cinematics. What is revealed is a more complex reading of the mainstream and independent sectors and suggests that filmmakers of color deserve a broader analysis and understanding that frees them from the sole position of opposition (without abandoning it) and more distinctly links them to their predecessors and descendants. While it is obvious, and well documented, that minorities working in the early days of cinema endured many injustices, it is also evident that their persistence and contributions offer a point of entry for future analysis and can stand in many ways as predecessors for today's hybrid practitioners. I next look at another significant moment when the mainstream and independent sectors merged, offering a continued trajectory towards the practice of Hybrid Cinematics.

1.5 Collapse of the Studio System

By 1948, three major events signaled the subsequent end of the Classic Hollywood studio system. The five west coast majors; MGM, Paramount, Warner

Brothers, RKO and 20th Century Fox had consolidated into a second oligopoly.[82]

However, a mix of government intervention and new technology brought

consequential effects by the end of the 1940's. The first major effect was a post-

war industrial shift which saw a move away from mass produced films by a few

manufacturers and the rise of independents who produced fewer films, with major

studios acting as financiers and distributors, hence the introduction of the package-

unit system.[83] States Staiger, "The reasoning followed ideas of innovation and

authorship: allow certain workers to specialize on selected projects and better films

would result."[84] The second effect resulted from the House Un-American Activities

Committees efforts to uncover Communist subversion, provoking issues of loyalty

and threatening *to tear apart the social fabric of the film community*.[85] And lastly,

an ongoing battle between the major studios and the justice department, via *US v.*

Paramount et al, otherwise know as the Paramount decrees, deemed theater

ownership and exhibition strategies, such as the run-zone-clearance system limiting

(hence monopolizing) a films appearance between its first-run in a particular area

(zone) and its second-run, block booking and blind selling practices that demanded

large blocks (numbers) of A and B-list films be rented sight unseen to major

exhibitors as well as smaller independent theaters, all violated the Sherman anti-

trust Act by constituting an illegal restraint of trade.

New medium arrived appearing to further threaten Hollywood's hold as

America's primary cultural arbiter. Television's introduction in the 1950's heralded

free entertainment and drew audiences away from theaters, although subsequently

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[82] Resulting from the establishment of the studio system and after gaining control of theaters and distributors as described in Chapter 1.
[83] Bordwell, Thompson, Staiger, pg. 330-331; or see p. 28.
[84] Ibid, p. 331.
[85] Epstein, p.11.

it laid the foundation for a lucrative home market. By the late 1960's, however, the studios were in dire financial shape. According to Variety, 1969 marked the beginning of a three-year slump. Attendances, which generated an all-time high of $78.2 million a week in 1946, plunged to a low of $15.8 million a week in 1971.[86] Facing severe loses the beginnings of a series of mergers and acquisitions would soon change the industry landscape altogether. By 1967, both Paramount Pictures and United Artist were bought by corporate giants Gulf + Western and Transamerica Corp. respectively.[87]

The industry quickly rebounded, helped along by a tax scheme allowing multi-million dollar write-offs and, as Bordwell states, "The studios also found ways to integrate their business more firmly with broadcast television, cable, the record industry, and home video."[88] The home movie market, now the industries chief revenue source, provided distributors with revenues reaching $2 billion, outstripping theatrical revenues ($1.6 billion) for the first time.[89] And while they were forced to divest their exhibition outlets, most studios maintained their lucrative distribution arms.[90]

1.6 Sex Drugs and Rock and Roll

As the industry regained it's footing, a new wave of directors emerged to find significant opportunity for both newcomers and independents alike. Martin Scorcese remembers, "When the movie factories were blown apart by television in the '50s, there weren't a bunch of people who said, 'This is where we go now'...People had no idea...the equipment was changing, the equipment was getting smaller and easier

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[86] Peter Biskind. *Easy Riders Raging Bulls*. New York: Touchstone, 1999, p. 20.
[87] Bordwell (1985), p.2.
[88] Ibid.
[89] Jennifer Holt. *In Deregulation We Trust: The Synergy of Politics and Industry in Reagan-Era Hollywood*. Film Quarterly, Vol. 55, No. 2, (Winter, 2001-2002): p. 23.
[90] Bordwell (1985), p.2.

to use. Then the Europeans emerged. Combine all those elements together, and suddenly by the mid-60's you had a major explosion."[91] In the shifting industry tides, studios increasingly relinquished control to directors hoping they could provide an answer. Producer Peter Guber recalls, "If you were young or you came out of film school, or you made a little experimental film up in San Francisco, that was the ticket into the system." Peter Biskind adds:

> It was the Golden Age of postwar European and Japanese cinema, the era of the French New Wave, of Ingmar Bergman, of Akira Kurosawa, of Michelangelo Antonioni and Federico Fellini. Although these films were "foreign," they seemed more immediate, more American: than anything Hollywood was turning out. They hit home with a shock of recognition. In America, real innovation was coming not so much from feature directors as from the practitioners of cinema verité like Richard Leacock, D.A. Pennebaker, and the Maysles bothers, who had developed cheap, lightweitght equipment that enabled a whole generation to take to the streets to capture a reality that was rapidly becoming more fantastical than anything springing from the febrile brow of even the most inventive screenwriters."[92]

In spite of the 'Easy Rider' bravado of Hollywood's new directors, opportunities soon took them in different directions, creating one of the greatest impacts the industry has ever seen, as Bordwell explains:

> Some [new directors] model[ed] their work on the more personal European cinema they admired, produc[ing] Americanized art films like Five Easy Pieces (1970) and Mean Streets (1973). The young directors who found the biggest success, however, were willing to work in established genres for a broad audience...In all, the 1970's lifted the ceiling on what a film could earn, and it remains the decade with the most top-grossers in adjusted dollars. On it's U.S. release, Jaws (1975) reaped about $260 million—the equivalent of $950 million today. Star Wars (1977) took in over $307 million on its initial domestic release (a staggering $990 million in 2005 dollars), and after re-releases it became by far the top-earning film of the modern era. No other films had made money so quickly. The studio's decision makers realized that the market for a movie was much bigger than anyone had suspected, and they settled on a business strategy to exploit the "megapicture," or the blockbuster.

1.7 Power to the People

While inroads for Hollywood's new young directors seemed abundant, opportunities for filmmakers of color remained limited. The call to arms from the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950's and 60's seemed to provide more fertile

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[91] Ibid, p. 22
[92] Biskind, p. 21.

ground for new voices of resistance that inspired a generation of artists, and set the

political tone for many minority groups. As social and political barriers slowly

crumbled, new radical cinemas took shape from local communities to universities

across the country. Filmmakers of color asserted their identity politics and were

determined to define their domain. As an example, the LA School was launched by

a group of African American film students at UCLA and were recognized as:

> ...an avowedly radical grouping fuelled by the currents of the 1960's struggles
> such as the civil rights movement, the Watts uprising, the anti-Vietnam-war campaign and
> support for ways of national liberation in Africa, Asia and Latin America. In it's portrayal of
> black Americans in the 1970's and after...it stood in opposition to Hollywood's wave of
> blaxploitation pictures.[93]

Charles Burnett, a prominent director from the LA School, recalls"... you're either

part of the problem or part of the solution, that was the phrase of the time. So we

knew the issues that we were trying to deal with, and the only way to do it was

through the different forms of expressions, different media, and for some, films

became a possible way to emphasize these things[94]...We were literally arguing

about, 'What is a frame?' 'What is a shot?"[95]   States King, "A key characteristic of

Third World Cinema is its tendency to draw on qualities found in folk art such as

non-linearity and repetition of images."[96]Adds Haile Gerima , "We were so [eager]

not to be influenced by the white film teachers and the dictatorship of white

cinema. We were trying to forge our own culture."[97]

It is important to note here the association of Second and Third Cinema to

my proposition of Hybrid Cinematics. My intention is not to draw a direct

correlation, since groups like the LA School are avowedly anti-mainstream, and I

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[93] Ibid, p.201
[94] Nelson Kim. *Charles Burnett*. Senses of Cinema, March 2003.
<http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/directors/03/burnett.html>,retrieved May 2007
[95] From L.A. Hotbed, Black Filmmakers' Creativity Flowered Ann Hornaday, Sunday, June 3, 2007; N10
[96] King, p. 207.
[97] Kim. Senses of Cinema, March 2003.

propose an engagement with the dominant culture. But linkages can be drawn that are in the spirit of my proposition, and there are instances in which many of these artists have found crossover success, such as Burnett (*To Sleep With Anger*, 1990) and Julie Dash (*Daughter's of the Dust*, 1991), not to mention the crossover appeal of any number of European independents including Truffaut, Buñuel, Godard et al. And American independent cinema in of itself is grounded in 'art cinema'. With Third Cinema the similarities are more general, first in their collective stance as an art form that echews individual expression. In that sense, I have offered Hybrid Cinematics as a collective analysis across multiple ethnic borders, not with the assumption that there is a formal collective aspiration, rather the similarities in practices utilized to achieve individual goals. My intention with this thesis is to collectively relocate filmmakers of color from the margins, both figuratively (in the public conscious) and literally (in the production, marketing and distribution strategies of the dominant industry, as well as the rhetoric and canons of critical analysis). The departure is most evident in distribution strategy as King explains, "The aim of advocates of Third Cinema was to create a cinema removed from the Hollywood model of passively consumed entertainment. Third Cinema, as guerilla cinema that cannot be assimilated by the dominant system, is designed to act as a pretext for politically oriented audience discussion in underground venues, rather than to enter into official channels of distribution."[98] Hybrid Cinematics can also be guerilla in practice, however its ideology can differ amongst individual practitioners. Further, I am not suggesting that operating in the realm of Hybrid Cinematics means automatic entrée to the mainstream industry or its various distribution

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[98] King, p. 209.

channels (a privilege afforded Second Cinema), rather the use of particular strategies to address barriers to access, whether successfully or not, and once met, the ability to try and meet them again.

Another cultural movement resonating in Hybrid Cinematics can be found in Chicano/a cinema, which is rooted in the Chicano Power Movement of the 1960's, and emerged as an alternative film movement to what filmmaker Jesus Salvador Treviño describes as "a long history of abusive portrayals and stereotypical renderings of Chicanos and their life-styles."[99] The Movement sought social, political and cultural change for Mexican Americans, spawning early Chicano cinema as Chicano film for Chicano spectators, and in doing so filmmakers foregrounded "communication with La Raza."[100] As the Chicano Power Movement declined, politics of La Raza *retreated into more localized sites of resistance...and the definition Chicano cinema shifted from by, for and about to films "whose major production decisions are made by Chicanos,"*[101] an aspiration the can found across many minority communities and certainly within Hybrid Cinematics.

Again, I have attempted to map a historical referent for Hybrid Cinematics, albeit a somewhat loose one, but none-the-less one that can potentially inform filmmakers of color that suggests various points of entry for further inquiry. The spirit of these various social movements can be found in many of the filmmakers, such as Spike Lee and Wayne Wang as I've mentioned throughout, who wrestle with any number of concerns such as cultural identity, self determination or communal obligation, when coupled with their individual artistic visions and

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[99] Rosa Linda Fregoso. *The Bronze Screen: Chicana and Chicano Film Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press,1993, p. xiv.
[100] La Raza (The People). Fregoso, p. xvi.
[101] Ibid.

aspirations, and all of which can collide to inform their practice in varying degrees, hence informing their ability to negotiate the mainstream-independent landscape. I now move into more direct correlations with social and industrial shifts that have contributed to the landscape in which Hybrid Cinematics resides.

Section 2: Hybrid Cinematics

Independent pioneer John Cassavetes, credited with the birth of contemporary Independent Cinema, provides a useful starting point for discussing the production tactics of Hybrid Cinematics. While my attention has been focused on filmmakers of color, I have contended it can serve as a model for other alternative voices. In Cassavetes practice and work, one could easily find a hybrid, working as both actor and filmmaker, with and against a dominant industry, formally trained and radically departed. Martin Scorcese reflects, "...here was someone—an actor at that—who had found a way to make a feature film for very little money, telling the kind of story Hollywood films seldom tried to tell in a style that seemed excitingly fresh and new."[102] In the late 1950's, Cassavetes embarked on his first feature film, *Shadows* (1959), which grew out of an improvisational experiment in his acting workshop.[103] Without the support of the infrastructure provided by today's independent sector, he was forced to innovate in order to make his film, adapting some of the strategies I attribute to Hybrid Cinematics, and many of which have become indie standards. Wearing several hats, he was producer, financer, director, editor and distributor. To portray his controversial subject—examining interracial relationship amidst the Beat Generation—he chose a radical improvisational narrative technique, drastically departing from Hollywood's classical narrative style. With a modest $40,000 budget from personal funds, he chose to shoot with a 16mm camera and improvised locations, crew and actors, most of whom he recruited from his acting

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[102] Marshall Fine. *Accidental Genius : How John Cassavetes Invented American Independent Film.* New York :Miramax Books/Hyperion, 2005, p. 88.
[103] Ibid, p. 7.

workshop. Cassavetes self-determining style and innovative strategies to overcome

barriers is common amongst most independent filmmakers. However, his use of

these strategies to negotiate between the dominant industry, of which he was also

a part, and the independent space he seemed to uniquely occupy at the time are

what locate him in the realm of Hybrid Cinematics.

With each of the following case studies, I examine the hybrid production

practices of directors Spike Lee, Robert Rodriguez and Wayne Wang, whose works

bear traces of Cassavete's daring style, ambition and innovation. Each director

developed a mode of practice for negotiating the mainstream and independent

sectors to overcome or route around barriers to making their films. Lee's 'any

means necessary' and Rodriguez' 'el mariachi style' reflect the bare-bone, start up

strategy that inspired a generation of up-and-coming filmmakers in the pre-digital

1980s and 90s. Wang's 'shadow' films pose a slightly different technique that

allows the director to expand on themes from his more mainstreamed endeavors,

while providing greater latitude for creativity with less interference from

mainstream objection.

A synergy between the mainstream and independent sectors evolved as

prolific growth in production, capital and demand starting in the early 1980s

created expansion opportunities for both. During this time, the independent sector

began to build a supportive infrastructure as available capital and a rise in

production and distribution outlets were complemented by an emerging festival

circuit, increased demand from the home video market, the expansion of cable and

satellite television, and emerging art house markets.[104] Increased levels of

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[104] King, pp. 22-24.

production allowed for a broader range of visual styles and alternative visions garnering critical acclaim and increased popularity. Independent production began to carry its own cache and a new crop of auteurs came to be known as much for their stylistic ingenuity as for their mythical saavy for turning modestly budgeted films into box office success. Where mainstream studios turned increasingly to special effects to heighten attraction to the now requisite box office draw, independents had the flexibility to play with narrative styles and structures that appealed to art house audiences, and oftentimes achieved crossover success in the process.

Consequently, as Hollywood shifted its resources to marketing and advertising to support its new hit driven revenue model, major studios acquired their own independent arms in order to capitalize on the success of independently produced films, launching a number of acquisitions and mergers and further integrating the two sectors. States King, "The major studios were unable to match these new demands because of their commitment to strategy in which resources tended to be concentrated on a limited number of expensive films with the potential to earn blockbuster profits." New partnerships, such as Disney's acquisition of Miramax in 1993, 20th Century Fox's creation of Fox Searchlight Pictures in 1994, and Turner Broadcasting System's purchase of New Line Cinema (now a subsidiary of Time Warner) also in 1994, allowed major studios to reap benefits of the growing independent sector. However, while Hollywood's engagement strengthened independent studios with unlimited capital and clout, heavy competition arose amongst them, which drove up film prices for distributors and influenced a more hit-driven mentality. In order to play in the higher-stakes end of the business,

principal independent distributors had to become bigger institutions with more staff

and headquarters, and breakout crossover hits became a requirement rather than a

bonus.[105] The end result was a blurring of the distinction between mainstream and

independent production.

King points to this intersection as a creative space in which modes of

production from both sectors are optimized for creative innovation. He identifies

production tactics utilized in this space as follows:

<u>Mainstream tactics</u>

1. Using auteurist credentials to attract star performers

2. Creating a stylized edge within familiar genre framework

3. 'Classy' mountings of more conventional material, or occasional showy
   touches.

<u>Independent tactics:</u>

1. Mounting of unconventional material

2. Low-budget, no frills productions[106]

King identifies filmmakers who utilize these tactics, such as Steven

Soderbergh, as emblematic of the relationship between Hollywood and the

Independent sector stating,

Soderbergh's career demonstrates the richness of the seam that can be mined in the

area between Hollywood and the indie sector...It is in this area that some of the most

innovative, relatively mainstream filmmaking in America is currently to be found, a situation

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[105] King, p. 40.
[106] Ibid, p.262

in which some independent-spirited filmmakers have found themselves courted by

Hollywood while able to retain much of their own distinctive approach.[107]

Filmmakers of color also effectively mine this space with the strategies I propose, and by incorporating many of the techniques that King lays out. Lee's 'any means necessary' strategy, Rodriguez' 'el mariachi style' and Wayne Wang's 'shadow films' further exemplify the different ways minorities deconstruct the filmmaking process to not only overcome mainstream barriers, but also to assert their artistic vision and address social and political issues on their own terms.

2.1 By Any Means Necessary

Spike Lee's by 'any means necessary' strategy set the tone for emerging independent filmmakers in the late 1980's. At the time, few independents, minority or otherwise, had access to resources to make films that matched the quality of Hollywood's glossy features, nor the necessary marketing and distribution resources required to reach a broad audience. In this pre-digital era, the prohibitive costs of shooting on film stock drove even minimal budgets upwards of $100,000, the bulk of which was spent on renting expensive cameras, lights, sound and other equipment, along with processing and transfer fees to prepare a film for editing and exhibition. Once a film is in the can (when all photography is completed) expensive processing is required, followed by equally expensive transfers to videotape for editing. After editing selections are made, the original film stock then has to be cut and the final negative made into prints to ship to theaters. All combined, the process of filmmaking remained primarily in the domain of major studios with the funds and facilities to accommodate the high costs of production. Guerilla

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[107] Ibid.

filmmaking then became a necessity, which many independents, in particular
minorities, turned into an asset.

To route around these barriers Lee engages his 'any means necessary' tactics
to accomplish his goals. Building on techniques he developed over the years
producing amateur video projects while an undergraduate student at Morehouse
College, and during his formal training at NYU's film school, Lee launched is film
career employing whatever resources he found available to get the job done. This
has included working with shoestring budgets; loyal mainstream A-list actors
including Denzel Washington, Wesley Snipes and John Tuturro; as well as family
members actors Joie and Cinque Lee; photographer David Lee; and his father, jazz
composer and musician Bill Lee. He regularly employs a core crew that he's worked
with since his first feature *She's Gotta Have It*, including director and
cinematographer Ernest Dickerson, production designer Wynn Thomas, editor Barry
Alexander Brown and casting director Robbi Reed. Lee frequently shoots locally in
New York City or his primarily his hometown Brooklyn, employing neighborhood
residents as extras and local organizations, such as the Nation of Islam, which he
recruited for security during shooting for *Do The Right Thing* (1989). When funding
fall short, Lee often relies on family and friends, most notably his devoted late
grandmother who financed his education and regularly contributed to his projects,
as Lee recalls, "It's my grandmother who put me through Morehouse [College],
then NYU Film School, plus she gave me additional funds for films at film
school...She wasn't rich at all—she just saved all her social security checks and gave

it to her struggling first grandson."[108] Lee famously was able to secure support

from the deep pockets of elite African American entertainers including Bill Cosby,

Oprah Winfrey, Tracy Chapman and Magic Johnson, who provided over a million

dollars needed to complete his biopic *Malcolm X* when Warner Bros. cut short his

budget.[109]

Following the success of *She's Gotta Have It*, Lee followed up with a string of

hit films that shed light on an overlooked black middle-class culture, and an

emerging African American youth market which set the pace for the rising

prominence of African American cinema throughout the 1990's. During the

conservative 80's, when the primary media icons in the African American

community where the squeaky clean Huxtables of the *The Cosby Show* and comedic

antics of actor Eddie Murphy, Lee's films broadened the perspective of African

American life with a direct assault of controversial topics such as racial violence in

Do The Right Thing, and inter-racial relationships in *Jungle Fe*ver (1991), Lee

frequently shifts between his traditionalist roots and edgy style to reflect

experiences and concerns within the African American community, and in the

process initiated a new Black Cinema movement. Writer and filmmaker Nelson

George observes,

> Over the years Spike's traditionalism would manifest itself in many ways—his dedication to jazz scores, his willful avoidance of drugs in *Do the Right Thing*, his contempt for blaxploitation flicks, his embrace of television commercials. Yet Spike, from the start, also attached himself to the edgier, hard-to-assimilate attitudes of eighties culture. His affectionate depiction of Mars Blackmon, one of film's first b-boys, is the most obvious example...[as] was his close association with the marketers of militance, [rap group] Public Enemy. He used their "*Fight the Power*" as the Greek chorus in *Do The Right Thing*, and his video of the track was a veritable catalogue of late-eighties in-your-face iconography (Tawana Brawley, Professor Griff, photos of Nelson Mandela).[110]

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[108] Kaleem Aftab. *Spike Lee: That's My Story and I'm Sticking To It.* New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 2005, p. 9.
[109] Ibid, p.165.
[110] Nelson George. *Blackface*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1994, p.83.

By 1991, Lee had successfully produced and directed five feature films, and published accompanying books to elucidate the filmmaking process for aspiring filmmakers, stating at the time,

> It's this perception of movies (which Hollywood promotes) that keeps folks from becoming filmmakers. We've been fed this hocus-pocus BS, so you think you can't do it. Filmmaking is a craft, and it can be learned like anything else; of course, it takes talent, but forget about it being something magical and mystical. There is a reason for that party line: Film is a powerful medium; it can influence how millions of people think, walk, talk, even live , plus you can make enormous sums of money. The idea is to keep the industry confined, let a small group of people have the control and make all the money. This is why one of my goals has been the demystification of film. I like to tell and show people it can be done.[111]

Another strategy Lee engaged played on the sentiments of his production company name, "40 Acres and a Mule" (the mythical promise to freed slaves following the Civil War), making it synonymous not only for his groundbreaking film work, but also in cross platform endeavors in merchandising and production. In the early 1990's he staked his expanded his territory, setting up the local storefront *Spike's Joint*, offering tie-in merchandise such as soundtracks, videos, t-shirts, posters, baseball caps and a number of other items, including Brooklyn memorabilia. Next door, was an ancillary store for kids merchandise of the same variety. Furthering his creative horizons, Lee directed music videos for artists such as Miles Davis, Public Enemy and Michael Jackson. He also brought alter-ego, Mars Blackmon's "Please Baby" antics from *She's Gotta Have It* to the small screen as primary pitchman opposite Michael Jordan in a popular series of Nike commercials. Lee now includes commercial advertising on his production roster through Spike DDB, a full service agency affiliate of BBDO, currently one of the largest ad

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[111] McMillan, Terry ... [et al.] *Five for Five: The Films of Spike Lee.* New York: Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 1991, p. 12.

agencies in the world.

Lee's endeavors reflect the ambition of major studios cross platform strategies, however with the added initiative of a means to uplift the race and broaden the representation African Americans and the understanding of African American culture. Working across media platforms allows Lee greater visibility, the ability to bring alternative content to both the mainstream and independent sectors, and the opportunity to encourage other marginalized filmmakers to follow his lead.

2.2 Mariachi Style

Filmmaker Robert Rodriguez introduced another shoestring approach to filmmaking with his 'Mariachi style', derived from experience of directing his breakout hit *El Mariachi* (1992). Rodriguez also applies a variety of grassroots strategies to route around barriers to his goals and in the process seeks to demystify what he deems a cumbersome process. During a summer break from film school, Rodriguez embarked on his first feature, which he intended to shoot on location in Mexico with the help of lead actor and friend Carlos Gallardo. After a professor told him it was an impossible endeavor to pursue without a crew, Rodriguez became more determined to pursue his dream. With two successful short films to his name, and childhood spent making movies with his siblings using a consumer camera (sans viewer) and VHS setup, he felt more than confident he could make his film with the bare minimum of resources. Like Lee, Rodriguez was willing to do whatever it takes, including a six month stint as a lab rat for medical research to earn a meager $2000 budget for his film, which also allowed him the necessary solitude to craft the script.[112] However, where Lee generally adheres to

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[112] Rodriguez, Robert. *Rebel Without a Crew, or, How a 24-year-old Filmmaker with $7,000 Became a Hollywood Player*. New York: Dutton, 1995, p. 10.

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the classic 'director system,' requiring the more traditional rigors of employing a full crew, Rodriguez utilized strategies to minimize expenses and unnecessary distractions. States Rodriguez, " The advantage of shooting Mariachi-style is that there are never any budget problems because there is no budget! There are no crew mutinies or catering problems because there is no crew and no food to feed them! There's no equipment or light problems because the quantity of equipment and lights are minimal."[113]

Many independent directors are known for their stylized treatment of material. Here again, creativity is key when budgets don't allow for costly production facilities or technology. Independents often are forced to innovate with what they have available. To route around these concerns, Rodriguez employs his Mariachi style by typically wearing several hats on his films including writer; producer; director; cinematographer; editor and s/x (special effects) supervisor, most of which he is credited for on his films. When Rodriguez does encounter production woes he again champions creative ingenuity over quick cash fixes stating, "Money has nothing to do with making a good movie or telling a good story...You have problems on the set when you make a movie all the time. You can solve them one of two ways: real quick, with money, or creatively...a movie...is a creative endeavor. So sometimes you can actually be forced to be creative when you have no money."[114] As an example, Rodriguez tailored his script for *El Mariachi* based on the resources he had available: *a bulldog, a turtle, a school bus and a black motorcycle, two bars and the exterior of a brothel, a ranch, a swimming pool*

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[113] Rodriguez, 202.
[114] Charles Ramírez Berg. *Latino Images in Film : Stereotypes, Subversion, Resistance.* Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002, p.238.

and a freestanding porcelain bathtub.[115]And thus far, he intentionally has not made a feature above $40 million dollars, compared to the studio average of $96 - $100 million, yet has consistently turned profits garnering over $400 million in gross revenues. [116]

While Rodriguez' approach to production appears to fall at the lowest end of indie strategy, his film style often bears the slick gloss of a studio action feature. For example, his affection for special effects in the *Spy Kids* trilogy reveals how the director again grounds his aesthetics in creative ingenuity, using minimal technique (and expense) to achieve maximum effect. In *Spy Kids 2: The Island of Lost Dreams*, several scenes required massive environments, such as the ego-enhancing corporate office, and an island cave housing lost treasures. In both cases Rodriguez uses a green screen effect to replicate the necessary walls and floors needed to expand the space. He matched these with a series of medium and close up shots to eliminate the necessity of returning to his establishing wide shot, hence shooting around walls that weren't actually there. While these scenes appear like Hollywood hi-tech applications, here Rodriguez departs from studio production systems that would likely have him build the sets in full to allow for endless shooting angles, most of which would never be used.

Another strategy of Rodriguez' which can be read as dealing with socio-political issues are the subtle manipulations he engages to play with ethnicity, which stand in stark contrast to Lee's in-your-face brashness. Rodriguez achieves this with narrative techniques and characterizations to subvert his intentions, or as Berg says actor Cheech Marin once put it, "so that they [viewers, but presumably

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[115] Berg, p.239
[116] As of this writing.

producers as well] don't taste it, but they get the effect."[117] The protagonist in *El Mariachi*, provides an example of Rodriguez' manipulations. The Mexican hero, a counter-type from the classic narrative form, is at once heroic and ordinary, displaying no particular powers except his musical ability. Offers Berg, "Since the guitar player is clearly not a man of action, his un-preparedness undercuts one element of the genre—that is, the notion that only a superhero can successfully handle the evil that threatens. Rather, the mariachi skills are art, culture, and morality, and in this film, they are enough to overwhelm Moco [the villain]."[118] A similar effect appears in *Spy Kids* an action/adventure film about a heroic family that happens to be Mexican for which Rodriguez neither explains nor apologizes. While the family is obviously of Latin descent, the symbols that mark Rodriguez' ethnic allegiance are much more subtle. For example, highlighting the significance of young Carmen's full name when required as a password to enter a safe house. She complains, "I don't use my full name it's too long," a frequent complaint of children with non-Anglo names, who often shorten or anglicize them. The locations are another subtle touch, since they are clearly not in the United States and bear resemblance to the signage and architecture of Latin America. These gestures to reverse common stereotypes hint at the oppositional aesthetic of independents, such as the radical style of the LA School or early Chicano Cinema. Rodriguez is certainly not unaware of these subtleties, which he suggests might be completely overlooked on a studio production, as evidenced when a Disney executive asked Rodriguez to re-make his *El Mariachi* character "less ethnic" and an Anglo rock

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[117] Ibid, p. 219
[118] Ibid, p. 235

guitarist for the sequel *Desperado* (1995).[119]

Similar to Spike Lee, Rodriguez also maintains a steady working relationship with top talent, and his A-list reputation has allowed him access to a number of major stars. Most frequently he works with Antonio Banderas who headlined the final two of the *El Mariachi* trilogy, as well as each of the *Spy Kids* trilogy. Rodriguez launched Salma Hayak's American career, featuring her in the *Mariachi* follow-up *Desperado* opposite Banderas. Hayak's allegiance continued in several more films including *From Dusk Till Dawn* (1996), *The Faculty* (1998), *Spy Kids 3* (2003) and *Once Upon a Time in Mexico* (2003). He has also collaborated behind the camera with Quentin Tarantino on a number of projects, most recently the co-written, produced and directed *Grindhouse* (2007). Rodriguez, ever the multi-tasker, also writes and performs music, and famously wrote a score for Tarantino's *Kill Bill Part 2* (2004), for which he was paid one dollar. He has also collaborated with artist Frank Miller, bringing the popular *Sin City* comic series to the screen. The project attracted another all-star cast for Rodriguez, which included Bruce Willis, Benicio Del Torro, Jessica Alba, Clive Owen and Rosario Dawson. In spite of the modest $40 million budget and the demands of a predominately CG shoot (requiring actors to perform mostly in front of a green screen), all were fully committed to the project as well as Rodriguez who has solidified his reputation for ingenuity as well as efficiency. Rodriguez was equally committed to his collaborators, not only staying true to the style of Miller's artistry with the film, but also insisting Miller share directing credit with him and Quentin Tarantino. When the DGA refused on the grounds Miller had no previous directing credit, thereby

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[119] Ibid, p.219

making him ineligible, Rodriguez quit the DGA in order to credit Miller in the film. This type of allegiance has served Rodriguez well, as he continues to have unlimited access to A-list talent both before and behind the camera.

Rodriguez' 'Mariachi style' allows him to address industry challenges, such as creative and ethnic autonomy, on his own terms. His minimalist strategy (with budgets, locations, crew, etc.) helps him easily maneuver the grey space where Hollywood and the independent sector merge, churning out box office hits that often outpace major studio features.

2.3 Shadow Films

Wayne Wang takes a slight turn from the practices of Lee and Rodriguez, in that both directors reconcile their strategies within the project at hand, and for Wang that space is only a beginning, seeking to create an entirely new document, which Liu identifies as a 'shadow' of his original work. Liu explains, "Shadow films, by implication, are indelibly connected to their companion films, which can be conceived of as the shadow films embodied, corporeal, or corporate complements. The shadow-body pair evokes the struggle surrounding the positioning of Asian Americans in the United States' cultural, social, and political spheres...The struggle for embodiment or incorporation takes on a special significance in relation to being included and represented...The corporate films thus represent an extension of Asian American resistance against invisibility and disenfranchisement."[120] Wang's 'shadow' films provide a platform to better articulate those struggles, as well as his own frustrations with major studio productions. States Liu, "Wang was actively responding to the structural limitations that the mainstream film industry placed on

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[120] Liu, pp. 98-99.

him, wresting space for himself in which he could explore aesthetics and themes that would otherwise be suppressed."[121]

To navigate between his mainstream and independent endeavors, Wang employs a mix of strategies to optimize the benefits of both. Following the success of his indie breakout hit *Chan is Missing*, Wang pursued the more mainstream *Slamdance* (1987), an erotic thriller with an Anglo American cast. Liu points to several key reasons for Wang's decision: he sought to gain more credibility within the mainstream sector; he was concerned he would be he would be pigeonholed as Chinese director, only able to work with Chinese themes; he was able to obtain reliable funding at a time when independent distributors had to compete with majors studios who began to dominate production and distribution; and lastly, it provided him an opportunity to learn to navigate the mainstream sector.[122] States Liu, "...Wang has had the cache to make attractive deals with both the premier independent companies and the Hollywood studios. However he has defied conventional expectations about the types of projects an established filmmaker should make."[123] In both his mainstream and independent endeavors Wang consciously chose to direct films that appeal to both his desire to expand his talents, as well as his socio-political beliefs. His resistance to the perception of only being able to tackle Chinese American themes is a key motivator along his path between the mainstream and independent sectors. Following the box-office success of *The Joy Luck Club* Wang chose to direct *Smoke* (1995), *whose cast was made up predominantly of African and European American characters.*[124] Wang

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[121] Liu, p.99.
[122] Ibid, p.94.
[123] Ibid, p.97.
[124] Ibid, p.96.

stated at the time, "I definitely want to step away from the Chinese thing for a while. I'll eventually get back to it—I'm sure I will—But at the same time, I feel I'm just as American as anyone else."[125] Wang did explore the Chinese American experience in such films as *Dim Sum: A Little Bit of Heart* (1985) and *Eat a Bowl of Tea* (1989). However, working with mainstream studios often challenged the directors ability to freely portray his creative vision as Wang recounts, "[Eat a Bowl of Tea] was very traditionally shot and I hated it. There was a certain anger in terms of not being able to make the film I wanted to make—I was under the reigns quite a bit."[126] He encountered other obstacles such as with *Slamdance*, for which Wang states, "...the producer changed my cut, which had been non-linear,"[127] and *Dim Sum* (1985) was rewritten and shot to simplify the storyline.

Each of these instances of studio intervention is not uncommon for directors in either the mainstream or independent sector. However, with Wang, and many other filmmakers of color, there can be an added urgency to address their socio-political views. To overcome these obstacles, Wang produced 'shadow' films to give voice to his frustrations while playing out his creative vision on his own terms. For example, *Life is Cheap...But Toilet Paper is Expensive* (1989) allowed him to explore themes that were suppressed in his previous film *Eat a Bowl of Tea*. Offers Liu, "*Life is Cheap...* critically examined as a central theme the continuing importance among Chinese men of giving or having "face." This theme was sidelined in *Eat a Bowl of Tea* in favor of focusing *on the romantic relationship and sexual tension between newlywed couple Mei Oi and Ben Loy*."[128] The film centers on the events

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[125] Ibid.
[126] Ibid, 99.
[127] Ibid.
[128] Ibid, p. 98.

leading up to Hong Kong's handover from the British and, as Liu states, "...explores

the complex position of Hong Kong as, figuratively, the western most outpost of the

United States and, literally, one of the last remaining vestiges (at the time) of the

British empire. The movie, shot and edited during the events leading up to the

June 4, 1989, massacre of pro-democracy demonstrators in "Beijing's Tiananmen

Square, criticizes the fixation on saving face by Chinese leaders and the blind

materialism and willful political passivity tat Wang saw in a majority of Hong Kong

residents at the time."[129] Following up on his 1995 release *Smoke, Wang* revisits

characters from his previous film in *Blue in the Face* (1995), and takes a different

approach to addressing issues of representation by intentionally subverting Asian

American presence throughout the film. The film explores *the social, cultural,*

economic and historical context of Brooklyn with a mix of narrative techniques that

includes mixing scripted and improvised scenes with non diegetic sequences of

hand-held video footage of *interviews with Brooklyn residents, staged shots of*

people reciting statistics about Brooklyn, and newsreel footage about the former

Brooklyn Dodgers and their old baseball field, Ebbets Field.[130] Explains Liu:

> Both [films] represent contemporary social and political attitudes and conditions in
> Hong Kong and Brooklyn as central elements rather than as convenient backdrops to
> the main action...Asian American are only marginally on screen in *Blue in the Face*.
> Their traces are represented, particularly in the video segments, as part of
> Brooklyn's urban landscape, with signs on stores showing Asian national and ethnic
> origins and people of Asian descent appearing as statisticians, interview subjects,
> and passerby on the street. The appearance of Asian Americans, whether literally or
> iconically, often marks moments of critique of, or departure from, the limited world
> views of the characters in the diegesis, sometimes merely suggesting and sometimes
> forcefully showing the larger context in which the diegesis takes place...Therefore the
> marginalization of Asian Americans on screen can be understood within the larger
> context of [Wang's] shadow films and the goals of politicized Asian American
> filmmaking...These films stand out among Wang's works because they represent
> distinct instances throughout his career (to date) in which his refusal simply to

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[129] Ibid, p. 100.
[130] Ibid, p. 102.

accommodate market demands crystallized."[131]

Creating 'shadow' films has provided Wang a unique means to traverses the mainstream-indie landscape. Similar to Lee and Rodriguez, Hybrid Cinematics allows filmmakers of color to make films, whether profitable or not, that can give primacy to both their artistic and socio-political vision.

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[131] Ibid, p. 102.

Conclusion

I have attempted to show the emergence of filmmakers of color over the course of the life of the motion picture industry to offer a broader understanding of the role that they play. I provided the framework of Hybrid Cinematics to consider the various practices and compromises minorities encounter when negotiating the mainstream and independent sectors. I argue that the roots of their strategies can be traced as far back as early cinema when minority filmmakers such as Oscar Micheaux first began to negotiate the systems and practices of a dominant industry. In doing so, they developed production practices that allowed them to route around industry barriers and find a safe territory for artistic expression.

Filmmakers operating in the realm of Hybrid Cinematics offer a unique opportunity for analysis in providing a broad range of experiences and samples of work for considering their engagement with the industry. While it is clear their practice in the industry is almost always informed by their histories and experiences, many of which I attempted to point out along the way. However, it is also evident that their motivations are not always grounded in their individual experience, and can be guided by their engagement simply with the form itself, as Wayne Wang pointed to when expressing his desire to make films in about different communities and not just his own, a reputation he had come to be known for.

By examining a cross section of minority groups and practices, over a range of key moments of engagement with both the mainstream and independent sectors I offer a variety of points of entry for continued analysis. And finally, I offer a new perspective for which to build upon and continue the necessary scholarship of minority cinema, that situates it more centrally within American cinema.

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