

reached its peak of influence in the decades after World War II, taught people to trust the evidence of their eyes when viewing a work of art, to see in the lines and colors and shapes and the relationships among them the whole of the work's achievement.

Yet even as Perl concedes the great glory of formalism, he acknowledges its shortcomings: "It failed to account for art's psychological dimensions, for how all kinds of meanings and metaphors become lodged in a work of art." If the primary impulse in making art were formal rather than emotional, and a painting were about no more than how it was made, formalism's rigorous quest for purity would inevitably meet a dead end—as it did, with the exhibition of blank canvases.

Formalism was always a partial response that professed to be the only response needed. Form is surely one of the things that make a painting work, but "what provokes or compels form or makes it convincing is multifaceted, ambiguous."

Perl believes that "for the artist, formal values play a vital part in a richer, far larger, and infinitely more complex equation." He argues that the most complex artistic expressions of our own time are those that acknowledge both "formalism and its discontents"—its shortcomings, its troubles—and seek to encompass the two. Such art will join, for example, an impulse for formal resolution with a narrative or metaphorical impulse. But Perl is dismayed that artists with the skill and imagination to produce art of that sort—among them, R. J. Kitaj and Jean Hélion—demanding a complex response from audiences, often fail to gain wide acceptance. "The hard fact is that the truly liberal

artistic spirit—the artist who embraces the many facets of creation, who seeks some private balance between authority and freedom—is anathema. With the end of the Age of Formalism, there has grown up a generation of curators, dealers, and collectors who, while they may find it unnerving to live without any concept of artistic authority, are unwilling to let an artist ever again lead the way."

## ARTS &amp; LETTERS

## What Price Independence?

**THE SOURCE:** "What Independent Film?" by Andrew Bujalski, in *n+1*, Fall 2005.

HERE'S ANOTHER VERSION OF that old if-a-tree-falls-in-the-forest question: If an independent film is made but no one watches it, does its artistic integrity matter?

The meaning of that epithet "independent"—attached to films as various as *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), Robert Rodriguez's *El Mariachi* (1992), and the oeuvre of John Cassavetes (*Faces* [1968], and *A Woman Under the Influence* [1974])—is difficult to pin down these days, suggests Andrew Bujalski, who has made two independent films himself.

Money seems to be the defining factor. The Independent Feature Project, which bestows the Independent Spirit Awards, has arrived at the vague formula that a film is independent until its budget reaches between \$15 million and \$20 million. After that, the bean counters, whoever they are, presumably have too much artistic control.

To the uninitiated, today's myriad film festivals indicate a golden age for independent film. Not so, says Bujalski. The roving bands of movie industry types who travel from one marquee film festival to the next generally want



It cost independent filmmaker Jonathan Caouette only \$218 to make his acclaimed autobiographical film *Tarnation* (2003). But distribution, along with rights to the film snippets and other material he incorporated, cost hundreds of thousands more. This scene from the film shows him with his mentally ill mother.

## ARTS &amp; LETTERS

## Words at 10 Paces

**THE SOURCE:** “Why Experimental Fiction Threatens to Destroy Publishing, Jonathan Franzen, and Life as We Know It: A Correction” by Ben Marcus, in *Harper’s*, Oct. 2005.

to see premieres, so filmmakers seeking exposure at Cannes, Sundance, and Toronto are often out of luck. And the smaller, regional festivals willing to show a movie already screened elsewhere just don’t draw crowds. “Distribution is a harsh mistress who cares neither about your artistic integrity nor your ingenuity in pinching a production penny,” he notes.

Independent film success stories only prove that rule. Jonathan Caouette reportedly made his autobiographical film *Tarnation* (2003) for \$218, editing it with home computer software. But it took hundreds of thousands of dollars to acquire the legal rights to the music and film clips he employed. And a distribution company had to spend a lot more before *Tarnation* could come to a theater near you.

In this Darwinian environment, “coolness and savviness” are “the new path to indie legendhood.” Independent filmmakers are labeled “successful” when they manage to marry their visions to the market’s desires. Indie darling Gus Van Sant bear-hugged the commercial world with *Good Will Hunting* (1997) and *Finding Forrester* (2000), but has recently put out a trilogy of “idiosyncratic, contemplative” movies: *Gerry* (2002), *Elephant* (2003), and *Last Days* (2005).

“There is nothing wrong with the cinematic art form that the dismantlement of capitalism wouldn’t fix,” concludes Bujalski. “Until that time, miracles will continue to occur; being miracles, they will be defined by their scarcity. Though perhaps they will not all be divinely inspired.” Faust was last seen panhandling outside UCLA’s film school.

EFFORT IS THE LAST THING that’s supposed to be required of a reader of fiction these days, Ben Marcus observes, with considerable dismay: “Language is meant to flow predigested, like liquid down a feeding tube.” So fiction of the sort he writes (he’s the author of the short-story collection *The Age of Wire and String* and the novel *Notable American Women*), work that may appeal to the head before it appeals to the heart, and that tries to extend the boundaries of language and form, runs headlong into the wall of reigning critical orthodoxy: Fiction should be traditional, realistic, entertaining. It should not be a chore for readers, or it will alienate them. And if readers are put off, the market for literary fiction will collapse. Thus, the orthodoxy is a defense against an imagined doomsday scenario.

Marcus has nothing against literary realism, “a mode I relish for its ordered, pictorial approach to consciousness, its vivid choreography of settings and selves.” But he deplores the dogma that makes realism the only approved mode of fiction writing. Fiction, he argues, has to be open to experimentation—to the likes of James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, William Gaddis, and their heirs—or it will atrophy. Marcus believes that “new arrangements are

possible, new styles, new concoctions of language that might set off a series of delicious mental explosions.” But to act on that belief, he says, now gets you marked as “an elitist,” the enemy of “good old-fashioned novels,” someone out to wrinkle readers’ brows.

Marcus takes particular exception to the publicly expressed views of the novelist Jonathan Franzen, “if not the best novelist of his generation, then certainly the most anxious—eager for fame, but hostile to the people who confer it.” Franzen, who went mainstream in

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2001 with his critically acclaimed third novel, *The Corrections*, and suffered the lucrative indignity of great popular success when Oprah Winfrey chose the book for her book club, contends that “unapproachable literature” is being forced upon readers and is putting at risk the commercial prospects of the literary publishing industry. He’s especially harsh on Gaddis, whom he accuses of “writing obtusely just because he can, and secretly hating his own work.”

But Marcus dismisses as absurd the notion that writers who don’t produce realist narratives are actually doing harm, as he does the