

***Positioning Art Cinema: Film and Cultural Value*, by Geoff King.**

I. B. Tauris, 2019, 330 pp.

Fátima Chinita

In Geoff King’s most recent book, *Positioning Art Cinema: Film and Cultural Value*, the author “positions” art cinema not principally in industrial terms, but rather as a field of cultural production according to Pierre Bourdieu’s theories. Thus, he claims that art cinema is the object of a cultural valorisation. From the outset, the book seems to be an exploration of art cinema in that it conjoins the market/industry with the films’ properties and audience reception (7). It thus offers an effective combination of film analysis and industry-oriented reporting.

Defining art cinema is a subjective task, as it transpires. King firmly states that “[t]here is no fixed definition of art cinema, a category that has no singular identity or essence. It cannot be defined in general in terms of any particular form or thematic bases, for example” (2). This is certainly an intriguing start to a 330-page-long book. Here, the author does not attempt the same as in *American Independent Cinema* (2005), in which he managed to explain the concept of indie from both an industrial and an aesthetic perspective (including narrative, form, genre and content); the current book draws, therefore, on an elusive subject. The boundaries of art cinema are never established, clearly or otherwise, and art film is approached only by contrast with Hollywood mainstream and entertainment (of the escapist kind), something which would also hold valid for other categories of cinema, such as experimental film. Following Bourdieu, the author inserts art cinema between the “autonomous principle”, the domain of exclusively artistic prestige, and the “heteronomous principle”, relating to the commercial side of the industry (32). In fact, he claims that in relation to art cinema the two aspects cannot be separated; the formal and conceptual features of the works (the textual properties) need to be taken together with the modalities of funding, exhibition and reception. It is likely, the author points out, that it is the presence of these films in the art cinema circuit that classifies them as such (9). Art cinema is represented as being heterogeneous and described as having different meanings in different periods and places (18). King remarks that this type of cinema may contain realist, modernist, poetic or hybrid works (1). His interest in realism and modernism stems from the tradition and importance of two cinematic art movements in Europe: Italian neorealism and modernism—although it is curious that French New Wave, one of the best-known examples of cinematic modernism, which triggered subsequent New Waves, is not mentioned directly. To my mind, this is a somewhat dated categorisation, especially since it references András Bálint Kovács’ assessment of cinematic modernism in his monograph focusing on European Art Cinema of three specific decades: 1950–1980.

For the purpose of this book, King defines art cinema as essentially European, although he mentions it can also be found in World Cinema at large (especially in Asia and the Middle East) and marginally in an Anglo-Saxon context (for example, the British directors Peter Greenaway, Derek Jarman, Sally Potter).¹ The point for King is that art cinema is not a North

American phenomenon. In the USA and Canada independent cinema, of which art cinema is nevertheless a part, is rather synonymous with indie film, on which the author has written extensively. Geoff King's latest book therefore acts as a follow-up to *American Independent Cinema; Indiewood USA: Where Hollywood Meets Independent Cinema* and *American Independent Cinema: Indie, Indiewood and Beyond*. His search *beyond* indie cinema has led him this time to compare it to its foreign *other*. This comparison is both explicit, in that Chapter Two of the book is entirely devoted to it, and covert, pervading the author's entire rationale.

Both indie film and art cinema are described by the author as "impure fields of film-cultural production and circulation" and so ostensibly non-Hollywood that they are kindred activities (11). He claims that "what is involved in a comparison between the two is often a difference of degree; what we might term, if rather awkwardly, a difference in 'not too different-ness'" (74). Nevertheless, besides other aspects indicated in Chapter Two, indie cinema is a less serious attempt at filmmaking as it is characterised by "a sense of play" (65) and operates within "a more commercial, market-oriented culture" (72). Art cinema, the reader is told, is meant to be heavy, complex and challenging to the film viewers, although to varying degrees (63).

While King avoids creating a taxonomy, he identifies "broadly located tendencies" (11), and places them on a continuum, with the "heavyweight modality" (79), that contains the more cognitively challenging and serious material, at one end of the spectrum and the more popular approach, based on the deconstruction or modification of cinematic genres, at the other. The former type, dealt with in Chapters Three and Four, is exemplified by the dysphoric and contemplative *A torinói ló* (*The Turin Horse*, Béla Tarr, 2011), an example of slow cinema, and *Caché* (*Hidden*, Michael Haneke, 2005), a self-reflexive opus evincing Brechtian distancing devices. The latter type, developed in Chapter Seven, is illustrated by Pedro Almodóvar's more mature films, especially *Todo sobre mi madre* (*All About My Mother*, 1999), a reflexive and intertextual representation of a sentimental melodrama but endowed with progressive ideas (217–18); and Johnnie To's Hong Kong crime films, undeniably formalist works yet filled with complex and eccentric characters overpowered by psychological dramas and moral conflicts (237). Somewhere in the middle of the two aforementioned tendencies of art cinema, King places a less complex and ostensive type of film leaning towards realism and presenting moral issues in a non-judgmental fashion, which he terms "serious restrained drama" (179). This tendency is exemplified, in Chapter Six, by the Dardenne brothers' films, permeated with morally questionable protagonists "existing on the margins of society" and afflicted by the loss of working-class jobs (181); they are revealed in a visually shocking style of "harsh realism" in which the events are laid out flatly for the viewers to make up their minds (192). The Danish film *Jagten* (*The Hunt*, Thomas Vinterberg, 2012), a heavy and mature story dealing with a man wrongfully accused of child molestation, is also analysed within this filmic category. An eventual fourth type of art cinema is dealt with at length in Chapter Eight, composed of radical, unconventional and disturbing films evincing explicit sex and extreme violence, which the author never quite places on the art film continuum, possibly because he is still researching the topic (he is working on a book to be titled *The Cinema of Discomfort*).

Positioning Art Cinema is a bold attempt to assess art film in an objective way. King's goal, repeatedly stated in the book, is to analyse art cinema from a non-pecuniary standpoint whilst being scientific and non-biased. As praiseworthy as this is, in my opinion, the author falls prey to the same kind of preconceptions he wishes to unmask. He claims that commentators on art cinema tend to be eulogistic, writing about their topic passionately and making unfounded allegations supported by intellectual theories of a mainly philosophical and/or psychoanalytical nature. He rejects "sweeping" commentaries that assert the uniqueness and importance of a

particular film director (86). Ironically, these commentaries criticised by King are a way of positioning the subject of the comments in the cinematic universe, just as he sets out to do in his book.² Other contradictions of this type occur throughout the book, mainly because cultural positioning is—and cannot cease to be—an ideological construct; any writing on positioning is, in turn, positioning something. This is probably why the book focuses on fictional features alone, making it easier to establish a comparison with the Hollywood commercial product that for many theorists, such as David Bordwell, remains the measure of all things cinematic. Perhaps a more developed approach to Bourdieu's ideas would have better supported the author's argument here.

The bias of *Positioning Art Cinema*—which is not my intention to criticise, only to point out—begins with the very designation of the film category under scrutiny: “art cinema” is used, instead of art-house cinema, a term employed by other commentators (see, for example, Cardullo). Overall, there seems to be a greater inclination for North American commentators to use the expression art cinema, whereas their European counterparts prefer art-house cinema or the French *cinéma d'auteur*. So, a more comprehensive bias is at stake here, revealing just how distant from neutrality the field of cultural production really is. *Positioning Art Cinema* goes further in this respect than usual, in that King criticises the term itself, whilst using it throughout the book: “It implies not just institutional difference but [...] making claims of various kinds to ‘higher’ cultural status, as implied in the usage of the heavily loaded term ‘art’ as the key feature of its designation” (8). Such a sentence can be interpreted to suggest that the author does not appreciate the core subject of his book, which is to some extent presented as a counter-passionate claim about so-called art cinema. Naturally, not all readers will understand it this way, but the fact that some might endangers the author's claim to neutrality.

King posits that art films are elitist because of the type of viewers they engage. On the one hand, he rightly points out that these films are a product of the festival and exhibition circuit they belong to, being relegated to uncommercial platform releases in which only a very limited number of copies reaches US theatres (115, Chapter Five). On the other hand, he considers this to be a polemic choice all along: “[art films] tend to involve an often unavoidable elitist process of distinction marking at the level of who actually gets to view and admire such work” (115). Similarly, the reduced constituency of art films, which in reality is as much a result of the inability to compete with Hollywood studio products for exhibition spaces as the creator's intention, is pointed out recurrently in this book in a manner that can be perceived as entailing a negative positioning on King's part, even if this is unintentional. Indeed, it might be construed that films should target a larger audience, which is a superficial view of the European market, formed by more than fifty countries, for the most part speaking different languages and not having the financial means to dub every single product released. Contrary to what King claims, subtitles are not only a marker of high status, they are an economical imperative as well.

The author's devaluation of art cinema, despite his claims to the contrary, is laid out early in the book through some ideologically charged words:

One of the arguments of this book is that art cinema remains primarily an *elitist form*, in practice, to varying degrees, *whatever* oppositional dynamics the films find themselves *might sometimes* contain and that *might* be a key part of their historical or contemporary valorization by *some commentators*. It is *primarily targeted at*, and *likely* to be viewed by, a *minority audience* of a particular type of *social status*. The fact that art cinema occupies such a realm has led it to being treated as an object of *distrust* by *some commentators* [...]. (King 14, emphasis added)³

On the last page of the Introduction, the author even wonders if the desire of art cinema to escape Hollywood's norm is not normative in itself (30), overlooking that he had posited the exact same goal for indie films, making precisely this factor the common denominator between those two types of independent cinema. This goes to prove that a double-edged approach is not necessarily neutral and may, indeed, become contradictory.

In any case, despite its flaws, concerning its argumentative struggle with neutrality and an unflinching sympathy for indie films, the book is a fundamental read for three reasons: it presents a pseudo-typology of art cinema from a much-needed non-European perspective; it engenders reflection on the phenomenon of art cinema and its intricacies; and it develops the indie phenomenon further, this time through comparison. In the end, the controversial nature of *Positioning Art Cinema* (or any type of cinema, for that matter) is much needed food for thought.

Notes

¹ On the other hand, King considers Jim Jarmusch, Todd Solondz, Hal Hartley, Steven Soderbergh, Quentin Tarantino and others as indie directors because they are North Americans.

² See, for example, his remarks on the edited collection *The Cinema of Michael Haneke*, which he rejects for being too serious (80).

³ The assumption is that art film is not democratic and far reaching which, in truth, it does not attempt to be.

References

Bourdieu, Pierre. *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*. Edited and introduced by Randal Johnson. Routledge, 1993.

---. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Translated by Richard Nice, Routledge, 1984.

---. *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action*. Polity, 2001.

Bordwell, David. *Poetics of Cinema*. Routledge, 2008.

Caché [Hidden]. Directed by Michael Haneke, Les Films du Losange, 2005.

Cardullo, Bert. *Required Screening: Fifteen Must-See Films for the Art-House Connoisseur, 1924–1980*. Common Ground Publishing, 2019.

The Cinema of Michael Haneke: Europe Utopia. Edited by Ben McCann and David Sorfa, Wallflower Press, 2011.

- Cheung fo [The Mission]*. Directed by Johnnie To, Milky Way Image Company, 1999.
- L'enfant [The Child]*. Directed by Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne, Les Films du Fleuve, 2005.
- Fong juk [Exiled]*. Directed by Johnnie To, Media Asia Films, 2006.
- Jagten [The Hunt]*. Directed by Thomas Vinterberg, Danmarks Radio, 2012.
- King, Geoff. *Positioning Art Cinema: Film and Cultural Value*. I. B. Tauris, 2019.
- . *Indiewood USA: Where Hollywood Meets Independent Cinema*. I. B. Tauris, 2009.
- . *American Independent Cinema*. I. B. Tauris, 2005.
- King, Geoff, Claire Molloy, and Yannis Tzioumakis, editors. *American Independent Cinema: Indie, Indiewood and Beyond*. I. B. Tauris, 2013.
- Kovács, András Bálint. *Screening Modernism: European Art Cinema, 1950–1980*. Chicago UP, 2007.
- La Promesse [The Promise]*. Directed by Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne, Les Films du Fleuve, 1996.
- A torinói ló [The Turin Horse]*. Directed by Béla Tarr, T. T. Filmműhely, 2011.

Suggested Citation

Chinita, Fátima. “Positioning Art Cinema: Film and Cultural Value, by Geoff King” Book review. *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media*, no. 20, 2020, pp. 265–269, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.20.24>.

Fátima Chinita is the equivalent of an Associate Professor at the Theatre and Film School of the Lisbon Polytechnic Institute, in Portugal, where she lectures on Film Studies, Film Narratives and Independent Film Production. She holds a PhD in Artistic Studies (speciality Cinema), an MA in Communication Sciences (speciality Contemporary Culture and New Technologies) and a BA in Film (branch Editing). She conducted her postdoctoral research in Intermediality at the Linnaeus University in Sweden.