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## The crisis of the American Dream in new century independent cinema: Indiewood and the recovery of the ordinary citizen (2002-2015)

### Abstract

During the first decade of the century, a generation of Hollywood independent filmmakers became interested in telling the stories of ordinary citizens, in the wake of the social turmoil caused by 9/11, the Iraq war, natural disasters and the current economic crisis. Directors such as Alexander Payne, Jason Reitman, Tom McCarthy, the actor-directors George Clooney and Robert Redford, or the couple Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris share in their films a common interest in addressing real human conflicts in a society that, according to the research developed by Hanson & White, has reset its keys and chances of reaching the myth of the American Dream. This work deploys the creative traits that unite the aforementioned generation of directors as a group, all of them independent filmmakers who use Hollywood commercial channels – a hybrid production formula also known as *Indiewood*–. These traits result from the analysis of narrative contents applied to the filmographies of this specific group of directors, according to the social tendencies appointed by Hanson and White. Among these creative features is the projection of the domestic problems of the characters on a national crisis scenario; a hopeful optimism in resolving conflicts; the use of narrative common places of the American dream such as travel, frontier and home re-founding; the epic depiction of ordinary citizens; an inspiration in filmic archetypes emerged during the New Deal; the complaint or reference to threatened civil rights; and finally, the importance of generational conscience before the past and the future.

### Keywords

Independent cinema, American dream, Indiewood, narratives of the crisis, social common places

### 1. Introduction. Alexander Payne and the “Declaration of Independents”

In the summer of 2004, the filmmaker Alexander Payne published an article entitled “Declaration of Independents” in *Variety* which asserted the following paradox: "For some 25 years we've had American movies but not movies about Americans" (Payne, 2004). Playing on the play on words in the title, the director of *Sideways* (2004) articulated a deeply-felt artistic manifesto at the heart of Hollywood, to recall a forgotten

tradition of cinema set in and around the lives of ordinary citizens, independent by inspiration and patriotic in its social commitment.

The article echoes the tone of the foundational charter for a restoration movement, a renaissance moment in the Hollywood industry, whose activity at the turn of the twenty-first century was marked by the emergence of such independent divisions as Focus and Fox Searchlight within the major studios. As a result, some major studios began to hand over creative control for their projects to young or unknown directors, who aimed to produce a more humane and intelligent cinema that respected the audience. Payne's attributed this hybrid phenomenon of Hollywood commercial model and indie filmmaking, also known as 'Indiewood', to two reasons. First, Indiewood productions such as *Fahrenheit 9/11* (Michael Moore, 2003) and *Lost in Translation* (Sofia Coppola, 2003) rewarded the major studios with very wide profit margins, generating up to ten times more revenue than their original budget outlay. The second reason related to the viewer's genuine interest in seeing the real problems of ordinary people addressed in cinematic terms: issues traditionally linked to independent cinema but overlooked by more popular, escapist movie genres.

In 2004, just three short years after the September 11 attacks, the social context of Payne's manifesto evinced a national conscience troubled by the second Gulf War, the extraordinary measures enacted in the Patriot Act – where greater security came at the cost of civil liberties – and an economic imbalance that would ultimately tip over into the financial crash of late-2007. Payne (2004) wrote:

The world is going to hell these days. As the saying goes, when small men cast long shadows, the sun is going down. Most likely things are going to get worse before they improve. When confused and troubled, people look to art in general and cinema in particular for context, for clues about who we are and where we've come from and where we might be going [...]. These times ensure increased demand for films with human and political content.

The "Declaration of Independents" points to cinema as a point of stability in an uncertain world. In particular, Payne underscored the role of an independent approach that uses the industrial model of mainstream cinema to communicate stories "about Americans" to a wider audience and, at the same time, to embed such narratives in the cultural consciousness of the nation. In this regard, Ortner sees Indiewood as socially significant insofar as "it tries to make films that have an independent spirit and yet have a shot at some kind of commercial success; without this, there is no chance of impacting the wider American public and in some sense 'changing the culture'" (Ortner, 2013: 266).

In the early years of the twenty-first century, other independent filmmakers such as Jason Reitman, Tom McCarthy, actor-directors George Clooney and Robert Redford, and the creative partnership of Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris shared Alexander Payne's interest in exploring human conflicts at a time of crisis, using the Indiewood model. These seven filmmakers work across a broad spectrum of movie genres, ranging from comedy to political drama to melodrama, but all of them share a common vision of success and failure, ideas that ineluctably connote the American Dream, its fulfilment or frustration at critical moments in time, on the personal, domestic or national stage.

In line with the "Declaration of Independents", the films made by these seven directors depict a particular interest in ordinary people, while also offering an allegorical take on the plight of individual characters against the backdrop of the national scene. Shared subject-matter, industrial model and creative approach in a given set of historical and social circumstances prompts the conclusion that these filmmakers comprise a specific generation, linked in time with the socially-engaged film narratives produced in Hollywood during the New Deal era, likewise centring on the heroism of ordinary people (Ross, 2002: 128). In the 1930s and 1940s, directors such as Ford and Capra, followed later by Wyler,

LeRoy and Vidor, addressed the lives and times of average citizens trapped in the Great Depression, which had destroyed the myths of the American Dream and prosperity.

The purpose of this paper is to trace the creative features that shape this generation of independent filmmakers as a coherent group that emerged in the early years of the twenty-first century. To this end, the key aspects of the narrative, social and cultural imagination of the American Dream in the twenty-first century, as outlined in the 2011 study carried out the research team led by Hanson and White, are read as the main points of reference. The eight key aspects reflected by the Indiewood generation encompass the projection of a domestic problems onto a national stage in crisis; a hopeful optimism with respect to the resolution of conflicts; the epic portrayal of ordinary people; the inspiration of cinematic archetypes that first emerged in the New Deal era; the description or critique of civil rights under threat; political interference in the civil liberties of citizens; the use of narrative strategies typical of the American Dream story, including the journey, the frontier and the recovery of home; and finally, the importance of a generational consciousness in relation to both past and future.

## **2. American Dream: “metaphysics”, optimism and the domestic archetype**

According to Kimmage, the myth of the American Dream is twofold, comprising material and spiritual dimensions that relate to building a home and the possibility of providing for it as part of a community:

The material component suggests class mobility or simply the pleasure of economic opportunity, a motive for immigration to America as long as there have been immigrants. The spiritual component, the metaphysics of the American Dream, is a blend of optimism and happiness, alluded to in the Declaration of Independence, in which happiness is a thing to be pursued (Kimmage, 2011: 27).

The American archetype of domesticity establishes home as the bedrock of individual and social rootedness, a figure that shapes the American Dream. The foundation and re-foundation of home is itself rooted in the seventeenth-century founding fathers, and branches out through the expansion led by pioneers and colonials across the continent, as well as the later waves of immigration from Europe, Asia and Latin America.

The stories told by the Indiewood generation are set at a time in which home – both national and domestic – faces serious peril. The 9-11 attacks in 2001, the devastation wreaked by Hurricane Katrina in 2005, and the home repossessions and unemployment caused by the late-2007 financial crash were severe blows to the social conscience of the nation<sup>1</sup>. Kimmage (2011) glossed the situation as follows:

The progressive nature of the American Dream –more homes, more value, more opportunity– ran up against a bitter reality as just the moment Americans were going to the polls. At no time since the Second World War had the physics of the American Dream been so bad (p. 36).

Films such as *Little Miss Sunshine* (Valerie Faris and Jonathan Dayton, 2006), *Win Win* (Tom McCarthy, 2011) and *Up in the Air* (Jason Reitman, 2009) explores the ways in which the crisis has ravaged middle-class families. In *Little Miss Sunshine*, as they teeter on the brink of bankruptcy, the Hoovers drive from New Mexico to California so that young Olive may

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<sup>1</sup>In 2008, the US was in the grip of the worst recession since the 1930s: 7.2 million jobs had been lost, the unemployment rate had climbed above 10%, and 17% of the population were either looking for work or were working in temporary positions.

take part in a beauty contest for little girls. In *Win Win*, the main character is a small-town New Jersey lawyer with a reputation as a local hero who decides to perpetrate a social security fraud so as to cover his mortgage and pay for the keep of his wife and two children. Finally, Reitman's movie depicts Ryan Bingham, an executive from a strange corner of the service industry, who criss-crosses the country firing employees for companies that do not have the nerve to do so themselves.

All three examples show how failure touches the family home and, at the same time, allude to the crisis that has befallen the American Dream on a national scale. The link between domestic and social is very clear in the case of the Hoover family: their surname references the name of the president who was in office during the 1929 crash, as well as the shanty towns, known as 'hoovervilles', which mushroomed around industrial centres as a result of the Great Depression. Bingham, in turn, is depicted as triumphant in the ruins of domestic economies, a kind of avenging angel who spends nine months of the year flying above the rooftops of American homes. Commentators such as Selcer have highlighted the significance of home as the standard of success in the collective social imagination: "During good times in our history, it [home] has been a symbol of everything good in American life. During the bad times, its status has been used as a yardstick for the decline of America" (Selcer, 1990: 55).

The success-failure binary in both domestic and national spaces also comprises a prevalent theme in the work of Alexander Payne. In *Nebraska* (2013), Woody Grant, an old man suffering from senile dementia travels from Montana to Nebraska in the company of his son David, on the unlikely errand of claiming a prize of one million dollars, which seems more likely than not to be an advertising gimmick. The film portrays both father and son as failures, each in his own generation, as they journey across a rural American landscape fallen into decadence. The journey casts a harsh light on the meaningless of a life spent working in remote, small-town America. The main character's final disappointment in relation to the prize takes place in Nebraska, in the heart of the country; but that is also the scene of his victory, brought about by David and the tribute he pays to his father.

Payne's film foregrounds the metaphysical rather than material dimension of the American Dream, a move that mirrors survey results from 2008 in which respondents suggested that "the Dream for them (for them and their family) was more about spiritual happiness than material goods" (Hanson & Zogby, 2010: 570). In light of the greed that father and son encounter on their journey, *Nebraska* underscores the demeaning social effects of an exclusively material understanding of success. By contrast, Woody and David (2013) embody three of the ideas cited by Gross as key to the traditional domestic archetype in Payne's work, which reflect the metaphysical dimension of the American Dream: American exceptionalism, the celebration of an inspired individual, and a landscape that "summons us and our families to something uniquely heroic and noble" (p. 28).

Another feature common to the movies made by these seven independent directors is that the endings of their films tend to strike a note of hope. Their scripts share an underlying comic sense of optimism that, despite the desolate situations sometimes portrayed, turn their narratives into stories where home is rediscovered or recovered, where failure is overcome or on the verge of being overturned. According to Hanson and White (2011), this positive approach likewise lies at the heart of the myth, comprising "a state of mind –that is, an during optimism given to a people who might be tempted to succumb to the travails of adversity, but who, instead, repeatedly rise from the ashes to continue to build a great nation" (p. 3).

Indeed, all the adult members of the Hoover family who clamber into the battered Volkswagen van in New Mexico are losers, a truth that teenager Dwayne will scream at them bitterly at a later stage in the journey. In *Juno* (Jason Reitman, 2007), the young protagonist wavers in her decision to carry her baby to term when she sees cracks emerge and spread

the marriage of the couple who were due to adopt the child. In *The Station Agent* (Tom McCarthy, 2003), Olivia and Fin seem doomed to a life on the margins of the small town where they live. The behaviour of Miles, the writer in *Sideways* (Alexander Payne, 2004), is sarcastic and depressive because he has not recovered from his recent divorce and his latest novel has been rejected by the publisher. Despite the uncertainty of their lives at the moment in which we first meet them, all of these characters find some kind of way forward in the end, through a strengthening of their family and social bonds. An emblematically dysfunctional family, the Hoovers overcome their individual failures when they act as a united group on their arrival in California and on the stage of the ridiculous beauty contest for young girls. Juno gives birth in response to Vanessa's commitment to raising the baby on her own. And both Miles in *Sideways*, and Olivia and Fin in *The Station Agent*, find the home they did not have at the beginning of their stories.

The undercurrents of hope and optimism in the narrative depths of the Indiewood movies flow in stark contrast to the individualist vision of late-twentieth century postmodern cinema, which focuses on social atomisation and existential uncertainty. As Boggs and Pollard (2003) aver:

Postmodernism reflects and feeds into a generalized mood of pessimism and defeat associated with widespread popular retreat from the public sphere – a trend visible in film as well as society as a whole. In the splintered, discontinuous world of postmodernism, social bonds linked to community and collective action are severely weakened, further undoing the linkage between the personal and public arenas” (p. 246).

### **3. Winners and losers. The epic legacy of Ford and Capra**

The material dimension of the American Dream as described by Kimmage is enacted through the achievement of a tangible economic goal, a form of success that in a time of crisis may render the radical difference between winners and losers even more serious. Nevertheless, the seven filmmakers discussed here make ordinary individuals the protagonists of their movies, who – despite the failure of their financial or professional endeavours – rise to the status of heroes within their respective communities. The epic scope of this dramatic approach discloses their similarity to two archetypal figures in the work of Ford and Capra: Tom Joad in *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940) and George Bailey in *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946). Both characters are local heroes committed to the communities in which they live, losers in terms of the material dimension of the myth of prosperity, but who overcome the difficulties they face by strengthening the bonds of home and society, which had been attenuated by the crisis of their time.

Payne and the other Indiewood directors see the dichotomy between winners and losers as being radically unjust. The screenwriter for *Little Miss Sunshine*, Michael Arndt, based his entire script on an idea articulated by Proust: our happiest years are misspent, while our years of sorrow are those which show us who we truly are. While turning this thought over in his mind, Arndt heard a comment made by Arnold Schwarzenegger, then Governor of California, about two kind of people living in this world: “I wanted to attack the idea that we could only be divided into winners and losers, which inspired the character of Richard, Olive's father” (Goldsmith, 2007: 68).

The story of the Hoover family starts with Olive, a seven-year-old girl who is obsessed with a video of the crowning of Miss America. Immediately thereafter we are shown her father, Richard, giving a speech about his book ("Refuse to Lose"), a nine-step guide to guaranteed success for any business or project. Richard ruins the family finances by investing their savings in a publication project that will never see the light of day. Like Miles in *Sideways*, who also experiences the failure of a cherished publishing project, Richard goes on a journey to California, land of promise and opportunity in the national imagination. The

troubled trip reveals the different (material and spiritual) outlooks of Hoover husband and wife in relation to the true meaning of triumph: Richard views success as necessary victory, whereas his wife, Sheryl, ranks the needs and unity of the family above and beyond any such sense of success.

The odyssey undertaken by the Hoovers mirrors the journey made by another family, the Joads, from Oklahoma to California during the Great Depression. Arndt's script draws on the archetypes deployed by John Ford and his screenwriter Nunnally Johnson in *The Grapes of Wrath*, based on the novel of the same name by John Steinbeck. Like the 'Okies', all three generations of the Hoover family are staring a grim financial future in the face, they travel in a battered vehicle and suffer the same misfortunes on their journey West through three states: the death of the grandfather, conflict with the police, a shortage of food, mechanical breakdown and – worst of all – a hostile and disappointing reception on their arrival in California. The most revelatory of these experience is the final one: the disappointment at the end of the road – an allegory for total failure in terms of the material dimension of the American Dream. In both stories, however, the rebuilding of family in a renewed home effects the truth of the spiritual dimension of the American Dream, as Kimmage averred: hope and optimism in the pursuit of happiness. Both families are rebuilt or renewed through the determination of the two mothers: Ma Joad and Sheryl Hoover.

The spirit of Ford and Steinbeck, their interest in social concerns, may also be traced in such films by Alexander Payne as *Sideways* and *Nebraska*. The plot of the former centres on Miles, a figure of failure depicted in bittersweet comic terms. The twofold disappointment of his love and literary life inflame his short-tempered sense of despair as he wanders California with his friend Jack. The backdrop of vineyards, in which Miles is shown to have a sophisticated wine palate, as well as his sense of indignation and disappointment, allude to the heroic fate of Tom Joad.

The night before his return home, when the end of their adventure appears bleak, the two friends check into a motel to tend to their physical and emotional wounds; and they hear on the television the following words spoken by Tom Joad (played by Henry Fonda in the film):

I'll be everywhere. Wherever you can look, wherever there's a fight, so hungry people can eat, I'll be there. Wherever there's a cop beatin' up a guy, I'll be there. I'll be in the way guys yell when they're mad. I'll be in the way kids laugh when they're hungry and they know supper's ready, and when the people are eatin' the stuff they raise and livin' in the houses they build, I'll be there, too.

Tom Joad speaks these famous words at the end of *The Grapes of Wrath*, the night on which he says farewell to his mother and sets out on his personal journey alone, far from his family. His statement evinces a sense of social commitment that, at first glance, seems absent from the personal drama of Miles's life in *Sideways*. Nevertheless, both characters are driven by the same rage and desire as they travel on the roads of America (the title of the film, *Sideways*, is a play on words): the frustrated desire to fill the emptiness within, to find the meaning of life in a world that has all of a sudden become incomprehensible.

Payne focuses on the frustration of individuals in their homes who, at given moments in their lives, find themselves dissatisfied or disappointed (Warren in *About Schmidt*, 2002, Miles and Woody), or have gone blind to their own happiness (Matt King in *The Descendants*, 2011). Such frustration reflects the failure of their personal endeavours, their particular American dreams. A journey across the American landscape marks a moment of breaking with the past and catharsis. Bruce Dern, who played Woody Grant in *Nebraska*, offered an intriguing insight on this point: "Alexander's prototype for the movie was Henry Fonda from *The Grapes of Wrath*, only as a 75-, 80-year-old man" (Rabin, 2013).

Faris and Dayton, like Payne, portray people facing personal, family and/or professional failure – that is, crises that may stem from individual traumas or social instability. Whatever the case maybe, the overcoming of failure must begin within the metaphysical or spiritual dimension of the American Dream, as described by Kimmage: moving beyond individualism and into an openness to seek and find.

In turn, Reitman, McCarthy and Clooney depict heroes that mirror the archetypal figures found in Capra's work, similarly imbricated in the crises rocking their respective communities. In *Up in the Air*, the apparently successful Ryan Bingham is portrayed as a kind of anti-hero, a reversed image of the loser George Bailey. Ryan is a tireless traveller who has made his home on the road: he is the archetypal rootless adventurer, living on flights from airport to airport. While George provided the poor of Bedford Falls with houses, Ryan criss-crosses the country ruining homes.

Nevertheless, Reitman's main character develops over the course of the film from self-satisfied wandering hero, indifferent to the suffering caused by the social crisis, to individual looking for a place to set down roots, for a home. In other words, Ryan evolves into the Capraesque idea of the hero. Ray (1995) noted the polarity between the individual winner and the loser sacrificed by his community, which connotes the standard threefold binaries in North American narrative: adventure/domesticity, worldly success / ordinary life, and individual / community (p. 186). *Up in the Air* contrasts the real failure of the worldly, individual adventurer with the apparent failure of his victims, doomed to unemployment or homelessness; this contrast evinces a commitment to the social dimension of the American Dream: in spite of everything that has befallen them, they themselves recognize that they have a home that Ryan lacks.

The Capra archetype of local hero also surfaces in Clooney's *Good Night, and Good Luck* and McCarthy's *Win Win*. These films are explored in further detail below, in relation to the defence of civil rights and the importance of a generational consciousness, respectively.

#### **4. The journey and the frontier**

The journey and the frontier are familiar tropes in the narrative imagination of the American Dream, as places in which home may be founded and, at the same time, as frames for national identity in both individual and collective terms. The social memory of North America is scored by the movement of colonials, pioneers and later immigrants throughout the continent, to settle in hostile territory or to begin a new life in a land of promise and opportunity. Journey is linked both to the idea of social progress and domestic rootedness in the American Dream, a view first articulated by Turner in 1893 in his theory of the frontier, which was revised and updated later by Faragher (1999). In his analysis of the myth of success in cinema, Levinson (2012) explains that:

The restless American soul requires perpetual motion and continuous betterment. Contentment is complacency. Lack of ambition for something better is downright unpatriotic in the myth's estimation. So we must perpetually uproot ourselves in the name of progress and be literally restless if we are to succeed (p. 34).

In literature as on film, narratives of crisis have paid special attention to the journey as both external action and interior exploration (the example of road movies is relevant in this regard): these two features surface again and again in the movies made by the Indiewood generation.

The fate of the Joads on their wandering route towards California set up a filmic narrative model in the 1940s for family and social reconstruction in modern times, marked by the drama of rootlessness. As noted above, in *Little Miss Sunshine*, Faris and Dayton set out to reframe the common-places first established by Ford, a modern exodus of pioneers

journeying through disaster in search of a restored sense of family. The interpretation of journey as catharsis, progress and new identity is likewise a theme of the films made by Payne, McCarthy and Reitman.

Indeed, all of Alexander Payne's protagonists feel the need to make a journey at a time of existential crisis. As Echart has explained, "in his films [the director] explores the lives of quiet desperation lived by ordinary people, characters who search for meaning and value in their existence from beneath the shadow of failure" (2013: 170). Such interior conflict is present in Schmidt, Miles, Matt, Woody and David in *About Schmidt*, *Sideways*, *The Descendants* and *Nebraska*, all of whom live in homes that have been destabilised in different ways: widowhood, divorce, loneliness, retirement or immaturity.

The failure of some personal endeavour or a negative charge in the twilight years of their lives prompts them to set out on the road across the country, and thus the story of their lives is projected onto the history and people of the United States. Schmidt drives from Nebraska to Colorado in his campervan, stopping along the way to visit the Pioneer Village museum; in the company of his friend Jack, Miles travels around the vineyards of California, where thousands of migrants had laboured during the Great Depression; Matt, a descendant to the kings of Hawaii, flies over the islands with his daughters; Woody and David drive from Montana to Nebraska and visit Woody's childhood home, their journey shot against a black-and-white cinema aesthetic that sets their story in the visual imagination of New Deal farms.

Payne, like Faris and Dayton, work with the conventions of the road movie, an emblematically American film genre associated with progress, self-realisation and renewal, often involving characters who are presented as misfits or outcasts in real or allegorical ways. Reitman and McCarthy also shape their narratives around journeys, although their films tend not to fulfil all the generic expectations of the road movie as such. Such is the case of *Up in the Air*, where Ryan Bingham travels endlessly over and around the map of the nation.

McCarthy, too, presents wandering characters in both *The Station Agent* and *The Visitor*. In the former, an electric train fanatic, Finbar McBride, goes to live in a disused railway station near a small New Jersey town. He is haunted by a sense of irremediable failure: as a dwarf, he experiences social rejection or disdain on a daily basis. As the agent in an abandoned train station, McBride can hold out no hope of a train stopping in his own life: the absence of any future project and his reclusion to a remote place, which resembles a hermit's retreat more than anything else, are the antithesis of the American Dream. Nonetheless, this individualist adventurer succeeds in building a real home when he opens himself up to his new community.

Walter, the Yale professor at the heart of *The Visitor* evinces a solitude and loneliness similar to Finbar McBride's. McCarthy expands the personal stage of his main character from the local community (*The Station Agent*) to the national stage (*The Visitor*): the transformation of the university professor is enacted in the world of foreign immigrants in New York in the long wake of the 9-11 attacks. In this instance, the traveller is a foreigner, Tarek, a young Syrian musician surviving on the margins as an illegal immigrant, to whom Walter offers shelter in his apartment. Following Tarek's arrest, Walter undertakes a legal battle to have him freed, a battle that discloses the restrictions imposed on movement into the US due to the measures set out in the Patriot Act. Tarek's story also expands the domestic sphere into the national scene, enabling reflection on the opportunities immigrants may avail of to live the American Dream in the new circumstances of the twenty-first century – and in particular, immigrants coming from Arab countries.

Whereas Ford decried internal borders during the Great Depression in *The Grapes of Wrath*, McCarthy points to the fear of the other and the barricading of external borders that arose during the so-called War on Terror. In *The Visitor*, the idea of frontier is uncoupled



from its links to social progress and domestic rootedness; the frontier becomes a border or a barrier, thus distancing the narrative view from the arguments advanced by Turner and Faragher.

## **5. Civil rights and human emotions**

The spirit of protest among Indiewood filmmakers is also expressed in openly political terms. A number of the independent movies produced by George Clooney and Robert Redford since 2005 have raised awareness of threats to civil rights, abuses of power and corruption in public life, all of which are signs of the crisis in American society: see Clooney's *Good Night, and Good Luck* (2005) and *The Ides of March* (2011), and Redford's *Lions for Lambs* (2007) and *The Conspirator* (2010).

Of the seven filmmakers whose work is discussed here, Clooney and Redford stand out due to the vehemence with which they denounce the undermining of civil rights brought about the implementation of the so-called Patriot Act: a set of exceptional measures approved by the Bush White House in October 2001, intended to prevent another 9–11 attack by rolling back personal liberties so as to strengthen national security. In the wake of its enactment, the American Civil Liberties Union warned that the Act was a threat to the civil rights of both US citizens and foreign nationals: "The legislation includes clauses which could allow the mistreatment of immigrants, the suppression of criticism and investigation, and the surveillance of completely innocent citizens" (ACLU, 2011).

Both directors recreate an historical event and recount a contemporary narrative to point out the threat to American civil liberties. Clooney harks back to the Reds-under-the-beds witch-hunt of the 1950s in *Good Night, and Good Luck*, and then moved to the present day in *The Ides of March*, which follows a Democratic candidate on the campaign trail. Redford offered a three-strand plot against the second Gulf War in *Lions for Lambs*, followed three years later by *The Conspirator*, a film based around the assassination of Abraham Lincoln.

In *Good Night, and Good Luck*, Clooney presents the 1953 struggle between CBS and Senator Joseph McCarthy, the leader of the House Un-American Activities Committee, regarding the aggressive Congressional investigation into the alleged leaking of information to Communists from civil organizations. The firm conviction of the journalist Edward R. Murrow, the presenter of the programme alluded to by the film's title, is underscored in the script, with regard to the indictment of abuses committed during such inquiries, including the denial of the presumption of innocence and political pressures brought to bear on the press. As noted above, the epic dimension of the character recalls the Capraesque archetype of local hero played out in such movies as *Meet John Doe* (1940) and *Mr Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), both of which involve a lone voice concerned about social injustice raised against the political power represented by Washington.

According to Sandhu (2006), *Good Night, and Good Luck* is a bold work because it calls on the media to be more engaged in social issues, to overcome the tame and banal media discourse of the early twenty-first century. Clooney depicts an historical idol of press freedom in his film, a figure from one of darkest moments in the interrelationship between political power and the media, so as to laud and foster the role of investigative journalism in a time of crisis. At the 2005 New York Film Festival, Clooney said that "the real teeth of journalism has been missing", thus underlining the relevance of *Good Night, and Good Luck*: "I thought it was a good time to raise the idea of using fear to stifle political debate" (Brooks, 2005).

Two years later, in 2007, Robert Redford directed *Lions for Lamb*. George W. Bush had by then been handed a second presidential term by voters, and the second Gulf War was proving a costly and ineffective solution in terms of both human resources and lives. Public

opinion had begun to shift towards a negative view of the White House (The Pew Research Center, 2008), and this situation is reflected in the film's threefold plot: the conversation between a university professor in California and his best student; a veteran political correspondent's interview with a senator considering a presidential run; and the mission of two US soldiers in Afghanistan.

Throughout the film, Redford highlights the roles of politicians, journalists and educators in building tomorrow's world, and does not lose sight of the fact that the film's present is conditioned by the fact that the country is at war. Like *Good Night, and Good Luck* before it, *Lions for Lamb* shows the tension between the press and political power, two estates that now overlook the people they claim to serve: the former because it no longer functions as a check on government power, and the latter because its decisions are framed in wholly global terms. As he tells the story of two of his best and brightest alumni, the professor endeavours to make the student aware of his potential and talents: the lives of his two former students are at risk in a war that is waged on the basis of a policy that the politician attempts to explain to the political correspondent, to bait his own interests.

In their films, Clooney and Redford issue an appeal to both press and politicians to honour the ethical commitment they have made to the people, as citizens, viewers, students and soldiers. Both reflect the position set out by Payne in one of the closing paragraphs to his "Declaration of Independents", on the crucial role played by cinema in critiquing the generational and institutional crisis of the time, which also reads politics and human feeling in relation to one another:

To portray real people with real problems, real joys, real tears will serve as a positive political force, a force for comfort and possibly for change. With the inhumanity forced upon us by governments and terrorists and corporations, to make a purely human film is today a political act. To make a film about disenfranchised people is a political act. To make a film about love is a political act (Payne, 2014).

The critiques articulated by these two actor-directors went beyond the political management of George W. Bush's two-term presidency. Following Obama's election to the Oval Office, Redford and Clooney released two independent productions the tone of whose social commentary was even more strident than the two earlier movies. In 2010, Robert Redford produced *The Conspirator*, a historical recreation of the trial of Mary Surratt, executed for her alleged collaboration in the assassination of Abraham Lincoln. The following year, George Clooney released *The Ides of March*, a fictional take on the primary campaign of a Democratic candidate, Mike Morris, whose speechmaking and style was patently modelled on Barack Obama's.

*The Conspirator* was released in the same week that the president conceded that, despite his earlier announcement to the contrary, five people accused of acts of terrorism were to be tried by a military court rather than before a jury of their peers in New York. Thus Obama broke one of the most widely-known promises of his political career: the closure of the detention centre in Guantanamo and an end to military trials for civil defendants. The plot of the film re-enacts a military trial of civilians – Surratt and four co-conspirators – and reflects on the curbing of civil rights such as the presumption of innocence and the right to a fair trial, while also condemning the indefinite imprisonment of "illegal enemy combatants". In an interview at the time, Redford pointed up the allegorical parallels between the plot of *The Conspirator* and the extraordinary legal measures enacted after 9-11: "The parallels are there, they're obvious, but it's not for me to point them out [...]. How can you not see Guantanamo, how can you not see the Patriot Act, how can you not see habeas corpus being threatened?" (Ebert, 2011).

In *The Ides of March*, George Clooney spins a political fable in which Mike Morris, a Democratic governor seen as the hope of change, disappoints such promise. One of his young campaign managers discovers that Morris was indirectly responsible for the suicide of a campaign worker with whom he had had an affair. Given the cynicism that coloured the script, and the political moment of the movie's production, Clooney elected (in conjunction with the film's screenwriter Grant Heslov) to postpone the shoot: Obama had just beaten John McCain in 2008, and they did not wish to detract from this victory for the Democrats, nor the many hopes that had been placed in it (Horn, 2011). Nevertheless, a more propitious moment was to come just two years later with the mid-term elections to the House of Representatives, at the height of the debate about universal healthcare. The allegorical allusions to Obama's speechmaking and image in *The Ides of March* comprise a stern warning to the political class, which is called on to show greater ethical commitment and involvement in renewing fundamental civil liberties.

## **6. The American Dream and generational consciousness**

Another recurring feature in the work of the Indiewood filmmakers is their concern regarding the kind of cultural, economic and social legacy to be handed down to later generations. Generational consciousness and the idea of inheritance are motifs in crisis narratives; they also figure in the work of film directors from the 1930s and 1940s who articulated their social concern in the movies they made<sup>2</sup>.

Most of the independent directors discussed here belong to what is known as Generation X, which encompasses people born between the 1960s and the early 1980s, in an economic climate shaped by neoliberalism, fated to fall short of their parents in terms of material prosperity. Difficulty in saving money or finding a good job are likewise signs of the times for a generation marked by domestic instability, a high divorce rate and an increasing number of so-called 'latchkey' children<sup>3</sup>. In his account of twenty-first century independent cinema, Ortner holds that, as a result of the situation outlined above, Generation X people "they express themselves—in their writings, their music and their films—as angry and frustrated, damaged and depressed, or, as a defense against all that, ironically removed from, and with a dark sense of humor" (Ortner, 2013: 21).

The frustration cited by Ortner, and likewise articulated by Payne in his article "Declaration of Independents", is a feature of the work of the Indiewood filmmakers. However, the tone of their films tends to be hopeful and constructive in exploring the social role played by the preceding generations, and to underscore the sense of responsibility felt in relation to the future generations to come; see the scripts by Faris and Dayton, Payne, Reitman and McCarthy for *Little Miss Sunshine*, *Juno*, *Win Win*, *Nebraska* and *The Descendants*, to mention just the most emblematic examples. The generational issues framed by these directors mirror the views expressed by middle America in the wake of the financial crisis of 2007–2008. According to a survey carried out in May 2009 by Lake Research among workers throughout the country, 65% of respondents said that the next generation would find it more difficult to live out the American Dream, as compared with 18% who felt it would be equally difficult, and 12% who thought it would be easier (Lake Research Partners, 2009).

In *Little Miss Sunshine*, Faris and Dayton sharply criticize the way in which the education system props up superficial or specious values. This argument is highlighted in

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<sup>2</sup> Ford and Capra amongst them: we can think about the three generations of the Joad family, determined to set down new roots in a strange land, or George Bailey's concern for the future of the families of Bedford Falls, constantly under at risk of home repossession, in *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946).

<sup>3</sup> The sociological definition of *latchkey children* dates back to World War II America: children between the ages of 5 and 13 who were home alone after school.

the ending, when the Hoovers arrive at the hotel where the beauty contest is to take place. The pitiable motivation for the contest is masked by a gaudy patriotism, where young girls from around the country are forced by their parents and by the contest's organisers to act the part of miniature beauty queens. As symbolised by the contest, the struggle for success is limited to the triumph of image and appearance, while people – in this case, young girls – are reduced to objects.

The presence of three generations from the same family in the battered Volkswagen van ensures that the story zeroes in on the existential fragility of the three adults (the parents, Richard and Sheryl Hoover, and Uncle Frank), threatened by bankruptcy, divorce and suicide, rather than the fates of the teenager and young girl, Dwayne and Olive. However, the tastelessness of the beauty contest prompts the dysfunctional family to realise the fundamental value underlying any inheritance or education: the family support of the elderly for the young as a means of ensuring true success. Faris and Dayton's take in their 2006 film reflects a social trend that prioritises the spiritual over the material dimension of the American Dream, to use the terms used in the Hanson and Zogby study referenced above.

In *Juno*, another film released by Fox Searchlight, Reitman tells the story of a teenage girl who decides to have her baby, trusting in the couple that is to adopt the child. Her trust rests on the apparent preparedness of Vanessa and Mark who, though they cannot have children of their own, enjoy a social status that reassures Juno as to the rightness of her decision. However, her trust is undermined when Mark panics in the face of responsibility and leaves his wife to deal with the situation alone. Diablo Cody's script shows the weakness of the bond between the two generations – in particular, by portraying the adults as adolescents. The younger generation tends to assume that their parents' generation is better prepared to address the human and social problems of the future; but *Juno* highlights the fact that maturity and commitment are not the prerogative of adults, and much less so of Generation X-ers, whose behaviour marks them out as adolescent or even childish. In the character of Mark, Reitman paints and portrait of eternal 'kidulthood', a figure to which he would return in the film *Young Adult* (2011).

Fatherhood and motherhood, the ways in which children are raised and educated in values, likewise surface as themes in McCarthy's *Win Win*, in which he explicitly links the American Dream to the idea of ensuring a safe future for one's children. The plot centres on the worries of Mike Flaherty, lawyer and family man, whose home is beset by the effects of the financial crisis. The movie is a comedy in which the filmmaker addresses the recession in both macroeconomic and domestic terms, and where – as was the case in other of the films discussed here – the strengthening of family bonds as key to overcoming the crisis on a national stage. In relation to the closing scene of *Win Win*, in which Mike's little daughter is playing with her adoptive brother and a friend, McCarthy has observed that:

It felt like the real victory maybe speaks to more of what the real American Dream is—three kids on a lawn, playing croquet and that's it. For a lot of people in the world, that's a victory. Seeing your children hang out, play safely, enjoying their lives and knowing that they have a future—what more is there than that? For me, it's such a quiet moment in the movie and it's such a throwaway, but that is the great victory (Goldsmith, 2011: 19).

For Alexander Payne, generational consciousness extends beyond the parent-child relationship to shape a social heritage that underwrites the American Dream. In *Nebraska*, he revisits the New Deal generation through the eyes of a son observing his senile father. During the first part of their trip towards Nebraska David Grant's interaction with his father is marked by misunderstanding and indignation. However, as they journey across rural America and see the land of their ancestors, his feelings shift to recognition, identification –

in truth, both have failed – and gratitude. David's final tribute to his father may be extrapolated to Woody's generation as a whole, which worked to develop a rural community in spite of the hunger, illness and infant mortality of the 1940s.

In *The Descendants*, Payne focuses on the figure of the father to frame the theme of generational consciousness. The head of the household depicted in the films faces a twofold family and social challenge: a struggle to rebuild his home, plunged into crisis by the coma in which his wife lies, and the fate of his land, a paradisiacal expanse of unspoiled territory in Hawaii, which may be turned into a tourist resort. Matt's decision not to sell the land in the end seems to echo the ancient Native American saying: "We do not inherit the earth from our ancestors, we borrow it from our children", a proverb that is also obliquely referenced in the film title itself, *The Descendants*. The death of his wife prompts him to take seriously his duty as a father, which he had shirked in recent times. Payne draws together the two dimensions of the archetype of home (family and society) in his protagonist's inner conflict: bound to take on his dual commitment as a father and citizen to his nearest descendants – his children – and his more distant heirs – the later generations. The script renders the two dimensions inextricable, in line with the argument set out in Payne's article for *Variety* where stories are to be about "real people with real problems" so as to bring together the positive political forces that bring about social change.

*The Descendants* comes to an end with a scene that summarises what the main character has learned on his journey of discovery. King sits down with his daughters to watch a documentary about the emperor penguin of the Antarctic on television. Legaspi (2012) sums up the sacrifices the adults of the species make to protect their young:

For the species to survive, the fathers must endure extreme hardship to protect the chicks when the mothers are gone. They shield and incubate their young with their bodies for months, standing in the same place and forgoing food and warmth for themselves. By the end of the film, King, the descendant of emperors, has learned the way of the penguin (p. 20).

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