

# THE CINEMA OF HAL HARTLEY

SEBASTIAN MANLEY



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by  
Sebastian Manley

B L O O M S B U R Y  
NEW YORK • LONDON • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

**Bloomsbury Academic**

An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

1385 Broadway  
New York  
NY 10018  
USA

50 Bedford Square  
London  
WC1B 3DP  
UK

**www.bloomsbury.com**

First published 2013

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**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Manley, Sebastian.

The cinema of Hal Hartley / by Sebastian Manley.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-62356-432-2 (hardcover : alk. paper) 1. Hartley, Hal, 1959—Criticism and interpretation. 2. Hartley, Hal, 1959—Interviews. I. Title.

PN1998.3.H3695M38 2013

791.4302'33092—dc23

2013002694

ISBN: HB: 978-1-62356-432-2

e-pdf: 978-1-6235-6880-1

e-pub: 978-1-6235-6865-8

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## Acknowledgements

My thanks, first, to Christine Cornea, who steered the thesis on which this book is based through some choppy waters and who remained insightful, compassionate and inordinately efficient from start to finish. Thanks also to Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, for their generous support. Both offered incisive appraisals of my work, and it was Diane who first encouraged me to think about the shift in Hartley's work at the level of place.

I am grateful to the School of Film and Television Studies at the University of East Anglia, whose support during the writing of my thesis was invaluable, and to Rayna Denison, Melanie Williams, Oliver Gruner, Erin Giannini, Richard Nowell and Geoff King, for their comments on my work and their advice.

For help with research materials, thanks to Jan Langlo, Donald Larsson, Diane Negra, James MacDowell, Mark Gallagher, Tim Vermeulen and Geoff Andrew. I am very grateful to Kyle Gilman, who provided me with some information about the *Possible Films* website and The Possible Films Collection, and to my interviewees, who no doubt had better things to do, but who took the time to respond with great enthusiasm and insight to my questions. Steve Hamilton and Michael Spiller: my sincere thanks.

Finally, thanks to my family, Eve, Chris and Camilla, for support financial and moral; and to Hal Hartley and many other talented people, for the films.



## Introduction

# The Cinema of Hal Hartley: Place, Cultural Identity and Indie Authorship

The pages of this book are dedicated, at various levels, to a consideration of the films and the career of Hal Hartley, one of the most significant contributors to the American ‘independent’ cinema that flowered in the late 1980s and that now occupies a very important (if contested) place in the American film landscape. Hartley’s films have been recognized as key examples of independent cinema and also as the works of an American auteur. Of the films discussed here, several, including *Trust* (1990), can be said to enjoy something close to ‘classic’ status within independent film discourse.<sup>1</sup> Others, such as *The Book of Life* (1998), are largely unknown. All can be described as highly distinctive, this quality (however defined) having particular currency, of course, in the world of independent film – although usually only within certain limits.

Hartley’s approach to the business of film production has also been distinctive. At the industrial level, Hartley’s films occupy a diversity of positions: a reflection of both shifts within the industry and, I will argue, a bold effort on the part of the director to retain his authorial independence. Hartley started his career with a very low-budget and well-received feature in 1989 (*The Unbelievable Truth*), and a further two features in the early 1990s: *Trust* and *Simple Men* (1992). His entry into the independent film world was made under the watchful gaze of an industry increasingly cognizant of the potential profitability of low-budget ‘alternative’ films, following the sensational commercial success of *sex, lies, and videotape* (1989) in particular.<sup>2</sup> The distribution companies Miramax and Fine Line Features, later to obtain the label of ‘mini-majors’, exemplified a widespread trend for independents and speciality divisions to invest sizeable marketing budgets into low-budget films such as Hartley’s.<sup>3</sup> With *The Unbelievable Truth*, *Trust* and *Simple Men* – often retrospectively grouped as a ‘trilogy’ because of their shared Long Island setting – Hartley attracted a combination of high-level institutional backing and critical approbation that has not been a feature of any

of the later productions of the director's 23-year-long career (with the possible exception of *Henry Fool*), although Hartley has continued to make feature and short films with regularity, securing funds from a range of independent and overseas companies.

Of the films that comprise the middle and later sections of Hartley's filmography, several can be attributed with an attitude to broad cinematic practices that might be described as 'oppositional', a questioning of convention that at times goes beyond the 'offbeat' and suggests an identification with forms such as art cinema and even the avant-garde. *Flirt* (1995) is an intercontinental romantic drama split into three separate narrative sections, each playing out, with variations, the same basic script. *No Such Thing* (2001) offers a discomfiting account of corporate commodification and social malaise the critical reception of which was mixed, to say the least. *Fay Grim* (2006) is an around-the-world espionage narrative that blends political satire and zany farce. An even greater sense of unconventionality characterizes many of Hartley's short films: *Accomplice* (2009), for example, is a 3-minute noir story featuring a voice-over from a central character who is never seen; *The Other Also* (1997) is a dialogue-free piece composed of semi-abstract images. These later-period films fit, in many respects, somewhat awkwardly into independent cinema. If Hartley's Long Island features can still be seen to exert an influence (whether direct or indirect) on a large number of independent productions (particularly those profiling familial dysfunction in suburbia), the later films seem to offer something more singular, something closer to the territory of the 'one-off' – although this is not to say that the films do not maintain various continuities with some examples of independent film and with narrative cinema more generally.

Journalistic interest and distributor confidence in many of these later films have been, perhaps unsurprisingly, quite low. Hartley himself has acquired something of a reputation as a 'missing auteur', at least in America, where he has lived and worked only intermittently over the past 6 or 7 years.<sup>4</sup> Hartley's status in academic discourses has generally been similarly low, despite his auteur credentials and his relevance to independent cinema, a subject that has in recent years attracted a considerable degree of attention from a range of theorists and commentators. The two long English-language studies already published when I began writing this study, Geoff Andrew's chapter on Hartley in *Stranger than Paradise: Maverick Film-Makers in Recent American Cinema* and Jason Wood's Pocket Essentials volume, are positioned outside of academia, in the general-reader film-criticism market.<sup>5</sup> Among the limited number of more academic

works that offer precise, in-depth analysis drawing on more specialist terminology and theory are Lesley Deer's piece on Hartley in *Fifty Contemporary Filmmakers*, Steven Rawle's article in *Film Criticism*, 'Hal Hartley and the Re-presentation of Repetition' and two fairly recent books, Rawle's *Performance in the Cinema of Hal Hartley* and Mark L. Berrettini's *Hal Hartley*.<sup>6</sup> Each of these works makes some interesting points about a number of the textual features of Hartley's work, relating in particular to performance and dialogue, characterization, narrative, genre and gender (I return to some of these points later in the study). None, on the other hand, has very much to say about the broad sociopolitical qualities of Hartley's work (relating to political commentary, cultural identity, regionality and so on), or about the industrial aspects of Hartley's career – two dimensions in which Hartley, I would suggest, is strongly marked as distinctive.<sup>7</sup> The lack of attention paid to these questions may, to an extent, be put down to the space restrictions that govern short- and medium-length studies (Berrettini's book includes only 70 pages of analysis). But space in any writing is itself dependent on the particular values held and assumptions made by writers, funders and publishers, who separately and under a variety of influences decide on the worth and viability of a major book-length study. Hartley's output, despite the appearance of encyclopedia/directory entries on the director and his films even in recent years,<sup>8</sup> has attracted surprisingly little extended analysis (at least until recently), particularly in comparison with that of other contemporary American auteur figures such as John Sayles and David Lynch.<sup>9</sup>

The purpose of this study is, in the first instance, to start to redress the lack of scholarship on Hartley and to propose some new and substantial lines of inquiry that will help install a productive and innovative film-maker into current discussions of the aesthetics, politics and economics of independent cinema.<sup>10</sup> I will argue that it is at the closely related levels of place and cultural identity, as much as at the levels of form and genre, that Hartley's cinema marks itself as distinctive within American film. A discussion of place and cultural identity in Hartley's work will yield some insights that help to explain Hartley's decreased cultural status. These two dimensions will be discussed alongside a number of other related dimensions, including form, genre and tone, that are more frequently discussed in accounts both of Hartley's cinema and of independent cinema. The study will thus provide a new account of Hartley that is nevertheless related clearly to existing scholarship.

The analysis of Hartley's work and career contained in the chapters of this study will also contribute to the more general study of independent cinema.

It will serve partly as a case study of authorship in independent film, outlining the extent to which the artistic and industrial practices of a particular author can be seen to fit the broader contours of the independent sector in the 1990s and 2000s. My analysis of Hartley at this level draws on existing scholarship on independent cinema, and particularly on the work of Geoff King, whose books and articles address a large range of independent films from a number of different perspectives. In King's analysis, independent films are considered in terms of their distance from the conventional mainstream at various interrelated textual and industrial levels. An important feature of independent cinema, King argues, is *balance*, the mixing of more and less familiar elements: 'The characteristic location of that which is designated by the terms "indie" or "independent", in the dominant senses in which they are used, is a space that exists between the more familiar-conventional mainstream and the more radical departures of the avant-garde or the underground.'<sup>11</sup> In any independent film, departures from the Hollywood norm exist in a balance with various 'frameworks that either contain such departures or locate them in other ways as still part of a commercially-viable form of cinema, targeted at particular niche audiences.'<sup>12</sup>

Much of the analysis of this study is characterized by a similar weighing up of particular conventional and unconventional qualities. These qualities, as they relate to Hartley's film-making practices, are considered at a number of levels (including some not discussed by King). Independent (or indie) cinema, as the prime context in which I am considering Hartley's work, is discussed at a similar range of levels.<sup>13</sup> Like King, and several other scholars of independent film, I offer no hard-and-fast definition of independent film, this category of film-making being particularly difficult to define according to any fixed criteria, as Yannis Tzioumakis discusses at length in the introduction to his *American Independent Cinema: An Introduction*.<sup>14</sup> In this discussion, Tzioumakis examines two main possible approaches to defining independent cinema: the industrial approach and the aesthetic approach. At neither level, he argues, is it possible to draw a clear line between an independent and a mainstream cinema, without also producing a definition of 'independent cinema' that is so far from what most people mean by the term as to render it useless. If one defines an independent film as a production made outside of the major conglomerates, Tzioumakis suggests, one would have to consider films such as *Rush Hour* (1998, produced by New Line Cinema) and *The Phantom Menace* (1999, produced by LucasFilms) as independent films; and if one considers only films with *no* associations with the majors (at the production, funding or distribution level) to be independent, one

would have to exclude from independent cinema films such as Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (1989, distributed by Universal) and Wes Anderson's *Rushmore* (1998, distributed by the Disney distribution arm Buena Vista).<sup>15</sup> Similarly, to define as independent those films that offer an alternative to the mainstream at the textual level – broadly, a 'non-classical' aesthetic that departs from conventions of classical style and narrative – would be to open up the category of independent cinema to include various mainstream films (particularly action/adventure blockbusters) that sometimes and to various extents also break with classical convention, offering, for example, loose narrative structures and unclear psychological character motivation.<sup>16</sup>

To circumvent these problems of definition, Tzioumakis approaches American independent cinema as a *discourse*, its boundaries dependent on the application of the term 'independent' by various 'socially authorised institutions' over time.<sup>17</sup> This is an approach to studying independent cinema that is shared by several important investigations in the field, and it is the approach I take in this book.<sup>18</sup> According to this approach, any film that has been constructed as independent by particular institutions, including various critics and commentators, can be considered to be part of independent cinema. As Tzioumakis notes, since the 1990s, one of the more important groups of contributors to the discourse of independent cinema has been the majors, who succeeded in the early 1990s in appropriating the term 'independent' from small-scale distributors using it as a marketing feature.<sup>19</sup> But this discourse has also been shaped by film critics, industry commentators, industry personnel, film-makers and academics. This study, in considering Hartley and his position within independent cinema, takes into account various materials produced by each of these groups of figures, from the 1980s to the current day.

Approached as a discourse, the category of independent film can be seen to include a wide range of films and practitioners, occupying various industrial and aesthetic positions. Hartley's career, like the careers of many directors associated with independent cinema, has at the industrial level moved between a range of types of production, from films with studio division backing (*The Unbelievable Truth*, *Simple Men*, *Amateur*, *Henry Fool*) to films with primarily overseas backing (*Flirt*, *The Book of Life*) to short films, often made on commission for film or video collections/compilations (*The Other Also*, *NYC 3/94*, *Kimono*). Many of these films were produced, part-produced and/or distributed by Hartley's own companies, True Fiction Pictures, Possible Films and The Possible Films Collection. With the exception of *No Such Thing*, made for \$5 million

and distributed by a major studio (MGM/UA), all of Hartley's films have been no-budget or low-budget productions.<sup>20</sup> This last detail has generally been seen by the director as a necessary condition of original film-making, and Hartley has apparently on occasion made the rather unorthodox request that his budget be reduced, with the idea that his accountability to the investor should be reduced in kind.<sup>21</sup>

Hartley's commitment to low-budget, auteurist film-making is one of the broad distinctive features of his career. In this respect, Hartley can be located at a distance from one of the defining narratives of independent cinema: that of 'crossing over'. In the 1990s, independent film, defined according to a range of criteria, underwent what Justin Wyatt refers to as a 'transformation', shifting in the American marketplace from a position of marginality towards a position of centrality.<sup>22</sup> A new kind of 'mini-major' distributor, owned and supported by the major studios, came to dominate production in the indie market. These companies, prime among them, Miramax (acquired by Disney in 1993), were responsible for a series of 'hits', including *The Crying Game* (1992) and *Pulp Fiction* (1994), the success of which can be attributed partly to the adoption by their distributors of a range of sophisticated and effective marketing techniques. Miramax in particular was known for its highly rationalized acquisition policy – favouring contentious or sensationalistic films amenable to exploitation-type niche marketing<sup>23</sup> – and its broad, studio-style promotion and release strategies. In 1997, the *New York Times Magazine* titled a special issue 'The Two Hollywoods', a phrase inspired by the Best Picture category of 1997's Academy Awards, which included four independent releases, *Shine* (Fine Line), *The English Patient* (Miramax), *Secrets & Lies* (October) and *Fargo* (Gramercy), and just one studio film, *Jerry Maguire* (Columbia TriStar).<sup>24</sup> This publication as much as any, as E. Deidre Pribram argues, signalled the 'mainstream recognition of independent film as a consequential commodity', one in direct competition, or perhaps in close harmony, with the Hollywood mainstream.<sup>25</sup>

As Pribram further argues, the movement of independent cinema towards the centre was not a development that resulted in the absolute mainstreaming of those films handled by studio divisions. The success of independent cinema at this level still depended on its remaining 'recognizably or arguably distinct'.<sup>26</sup> The independent sector at this time therefore offered the opportunity for innovative/alternative directors to gain significant backing and status, if they were willing to make (or were already making) a certain kind of alternative film, one that

had the potential to cross over into the mainstream. Hartley, though the subject of considerable studio interest in the early 1990s, did not take advantage of this opportunity.<sup>27</sup> Throughout the 1990s, he continued to make low-budget, highly distinctive films with few obviously commercial elements. These films received (at best) modest investment and distribution from the studio divisions and from smaller companies. A similarly low-key kind of production/distribution has also been a feature of most of Hartley's later (often self-produced or self-distributed) films. In this respect, Hartley's career may be characterized as bearing only an indirect relationship to the institutional bodies that often seem to dominate the indie landscape. But this does not imply that Hartley and his films have little relevance to the discourse of independent cinema as a whole. Indeed, as some of the analysis of this study will suggest, a study of film-making at the 'low' end of the industry can often serve to throw the characteristics of the independent sector into sharp relief.

Such industrial matters will be considered throughout this study in relation to various textual features, the particulars of which have contributed (I suggest) in various ways to Hartley's relatively low profile within American indie cinema. The features discussed relate to form, genre and tone, place and cultural identity and political content/perspective. At each of these levels, Hartley's films can be said in some respects to resemble a large number of successful (and less successful) indie films. For example, Hartley's work often cleaves quite closely to the conventions of what Jeffrey Sconce terms 'smart cinema', a category that encompasses a significant portion of indie cinema. Among those smart-film conventions adopted by many of Hartley's films are the incorporation of certain stylistic features (long shots, static compositions and so on) that contribute to a sense of 'blankness', de-dramatizing often bizarre or disturbing narrative material, and the thematic focus on alienation within contemporary consumer culture.<sup>28</sup> Such features serve simultaneously to differentiate Hartley's films from mass-market cinema and to identify them with a group of films that includes a large number of critically and commercially successful titles.

In other respects, however, Hartley's films can be characterized as distinctive within the context of independent cinema. At the formal level, for example, many of the films are marked by an emphasis on design and artificiality that positions them at a distance from the majority of indie films. One particularly strong mark of distinction, which has remained relatively constant across the director's filmography, is a preference for stylized performances: broadly, actors tend to adopt a 'flattened' style of line delivery, implementing few variations in either tone

or facial expression. In many cases, I will argue, the performance style favoured by Hartley cannot be easily read as a 'natural' or logical reflection of the content or themes of the narrative – a detail that distinguishes Hartley's films from many other indie films featuring stylized performances. Also contributing towards a sense of exceptionality is the frequent incorporation of various cinematographic features that, in the majority of independent films, tend to be used sparingly, if at all. Both *The Book of Life* and *The Girl from Monday*, for example, make frequent use of blurred and/or overexposed images. In *Fay Grim*, the camera is tilted left or right, sometimes to a substantial degree, in nearly every shot.

Such features are mixed with a range of other features that, though more characteristic of indie cinema, serve similarly to undermine convention and mark the films as distinctive. Many of the films, for example, offer a significant twist on particular genre frameworks, adapting or rejecting various generic tropes, structures and character types in a way that often positions them outside the territory of mainstream cinema. Formal innovations, of a kind less dramatic than those mentioned above, contribute, too, to a general sense of the offbeat. These innovations, which take the form of various narrative strategies (the somewhat 'open' endings of *The Unbelievable Truth*, *Henry Fool* and other films), cinematographic devices (the two-shots in which the two conversing characters face the camera in *Amateur*) and musical practices (the melancholy, repetitive scores in the Long Island series and other films), can be seen as challenging the conventions of mainstream realism. I use the term 'realism' in this study to refer to the set of conventions characteristic of 'classical' Hollywood cinema, as it has been defined by David Bordwell and other critics.<sup>29</sup> The classical cinema, broadly, is one in which form is subordinate to the narrative, and the narrative proceeds in such a way as to preclude any recognition of its artificiality. The action of the narrative revolves around characters, who are in turn driven by personal goals and desires. A clear cause-and-effect logic characterizes both individual scenes and the overall structure of the narrative, which adheres to a three-part model in which a state of order is established, disrupted by a sequence of events and eventually re-established following the resolution of particular emotional and practical difficulties. Throughout the study, this model is used as a useful standard against which to measure various aspects of Hartley's films. This is not to suggest that films outside of independent cinema do not also offer some degree of innovation in relation to style and narrative. Rather, the classical Hollywood style is treated, again in line with King, as a 'relatively stable paradigm characteristic of mainstream Hollywood production' that, nevertheless, allows

for 'variation within and the possibility in some cases of pushing beyond the usual limitations'.<sup>30</sup>

The other main textual aspects of Hartley's films discussed in this study, place, cultural identity and political content/perspective, can to an extent also be considered in terms of conformation to or departure from classical realism. At the level of place, Hartley's films sometimes offer, for example, a degree of regional detail that can seem to shift the focus of the film away from the motivations of the characters and the development of the narrative. This is a feature particularly of the early films, many of which were made and set in Hartley's home town, Lindenhurst, Long Island – a choice of location that ensured travel costs (for the director and for those crew members, often friends and relatives of Hartley's, who lived in the region) remained at a minimum. Regional detail can also, however, be seen to ground the films in the familiar. Particular themes, landscapes, references and characterizations can serve to generate a sense of cultural recognition, situating the events of the narrative within particular cultural discourses (literature, cinema, the journalistic media).

Regional details of this kind contribute to what is commonly known as a 'sense of place'. This is a term used frequently in the field of human or cultural geography, where it refers broadly to the collection of meanings attributed over time to a particular geographical space.<sup>31</sup> Such meanings may be derived from both physical and social/cultural features and will be shaped to a significant degree by representations in the media. One project of cultural geography in recent decades has been to explore the ways in which the geographies offered by particular films can serve to contribute to theoretical and popular understandings of social life at the levels of class, gender, race, ethnicity and so on.<sup>32</sup> A related but, as might be expected, distinct approach adopted by some film studies academics has been to explore how place can be seen as a significant element in the cinematic representational system, functioning to offer certain pleasures and meanings and to shape, in part, a film's reception and cultural profile.<sup>33</sup> It is this latter approach that I adopt in this study. The characteristics of the films at the level of place, or regionality,<sup>34</sup> will be considered in terms of, first, the potential for viewer orientation and, second, the potential for differentiation, for the generation of a sense of difference or distinction.

A discussion of place will be combined, on occasion, with a discussion of cultural identity in Hartley's films, as it is articulated by characterizations, dialogue, imagery and so on. 'Cultural identity' is used here in a reasonably narrow sense to refer to the identity of an individual (or a group of individuals) as it

consists in various engagements with (and attitudes to) artistic and intellectual discourses.<sup>35</sup> This is a concept that can often be useful when discussing Hartley's work at the level of characterization, given the centralization in many of the films of characters who are marked as bohemians, intellectuals or philosophers (or as contrastive figures such as executives and yuppies). Cultural identity, in this respect, is another dimension in which Hartley's films may be seen to either depart from or conform to the familiar, as far as the limits of the familiar can be defined in the contexts of independent and mainstream cinema.

The study will also consider, finally, the political dimensions of Hartley's films. A large number of the films incorporate references to particular sociopolitical issues that widen the scope of the fiction beyond the personal/individual. Such references, like references to particular regional features and meanings, may be seen to provide a note of familiarity, connecting the films to distinct and recognizable cultural discourses in a way that also contributes towards a sense of 'authentic' realism, of capturing the textures of real, everyday life. In some films, such as *Henry Fool* and *The Cartographer's Girlfriend*, references of this kind constitute a fairly minor ingredient, contributing in only a minor way to the films' overall character. In other films, such as *No Such Thing* and *The Girl from Monday*, they are much more a defining feature. A sense is created in these films of the ways in which everyday life is shaped, on various levels, by the logic of 'large' and seemingly irresistible social and political forces. This is a characteristic that serves to distinguish the films within indie cinema, the horizons of which tend to be limited to interpersonal drama resulting from individual desires.

Textual qualities relating to the dimensions discussed above – form, genre, place, cultural identity and political content – can reasonably be seen to affect, in a variety of ways, the position occupied by Hartley's work at the industrial level. Most obviously, the incorporation of certain textual features, or the failure to incorporate others, may serve to influence a distributor considering whether to pick a film up or considering how widely to market and distribute a film once it has been acquired. Production companies may offer investment of a greater or lesser degree depending on the textual characteristics of a director's previous films and the potential appeal of a comparable film, given adequate marketing and distribution, to particular audiences. Reactions of this kind of distributors and producers to existing texts do not necessarily determine a film's industrial position in a predictable way, of course. A director's professional status, industrial contacts and negotiating skills, as well as more arbitrary factors such as personal tastes and attitudes (on the part of executives), may also often form part of the

equation. But the analysis of textual features by industry figures, whether of an intuitive or a more critical variety, remains a significant part of the production-distribution process – perhaps especially so in the context of a highly competitive and rationalized film market<sup>36</sup> – and such features in Hartley's films will be considered in this study as bearing a close relationship to various characteristics at the industrial level.

## Authorship

As has already been briefly indicated, my discussion throughout the study of the industrial position of Hartley's films makes reference both to contextual factors – that is, the conditions at particular points of the industry and its markets – and to the individual actions of Hartley himself. I credit Hartley with the conscious adoption of a particular *approach* to film-making at the industrial level, one intended to limit authorial accountability and facilitate authorial autonomy. I credit Hartley with the adoption of a similarly considered and more-or-less consistent approach at the textual level. In both respects, the position I adopt in this study is underpinned, clearly, by particular conceptions of cinematic authorship. I take the view, broadly, that the person Hal Hartley has agency; that some of his actions contribute in a significant, direct and somewhat predictable way to the creation of particular films; and that, considering this, he may be described as an author of these films. In discussing Hartley in this introduction, and in the use of phrases such as 'Hartley's films' and 'Hartley's cinema', I have implied further that Hartley is the *only* author of particular films, that he is in particular cases a film's sole creative source. This cannot be accurate. We know that the films directed by Hartley, like all industrial films and most non-industrial ones, have other creative sources, in the form of various cinematographers, actors, editors and so on (a number of whom I have spoken to over the course of writing this study, as discussed below). Although it may be difficult to define the exact criteria for authorship, I would suggest that a film's cinematographer, say, or lead actor, can be reasonably regarded as one of the authors of that film. He or she will have contributed to the film in a direct way, will have worked on many parts of the film and will have drawn on specialist skills in carrying out his or her work.

The contributions of various authors (other than Hartley) to the films discussed in this study will, at various points, be highlighted and discussed. Figures such