

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Independent Films 2020: The Widening Gyre

Adam Leipzig · Wednesday, January 22nd, 2020

“Turning and turning in the widening gyre, the falcon cannot hear the falconer,” wrote Yeats. As we begin a new decade, independent films simultaneously fly aloft, one wing high above the tectonic shifts of the Media Industrial Complex, another wing tethered to the Practical Order of streamers and theatres, pre-buys and vanishing back-ends.

[Sundance](#) and [Slamdance](#) 2020 are timed metaphorically – beginning one week after Comcast announced plans for its late-to-the-party streaming service, Peacock, and ending one week before the fossilized Oscars. Poised in this interval, flurried with snow, Park City this week swells to 125,000 cinema-nomads, pilgrims who come to partake of the annual Sundance and Slamdance rituals. These yearly gatherings give us markers to assess the state of independent films, and 2020 will be a year of transition to a different model. It’s apparent that change is coming; the precise shape of change is, for now, still partly obscured.

Each year we look at indie films through the lens of Sundance and Slamdance. Unlike big studio movies, which have the [MPA](#) to gather data, indie films have no central repository for statistics, nor a collective advocacy group. So we collect data here. The Sundance Film Festival is an excellent bellwether for independent films as a whole, and, with complementary information from Slamdance, we can begin to see an independent film’s bigger picture.

[See Sundance Infographic.](#)

[See Slamdance Infographic.](#)

Last year, the festivals had something of a buying frenzy. Media platforms and distributors spent more than \$120 million in acquisitions, with \$46 million coming from Amazon alone. Perhaps in response to what’s perceived as a hotter marketplace, this year, Sundance had a record number of films submitted: 15,100, including 2,079 dramatic features and 1,774 feature documentaries. **Slamdance had 8,231 submissions — another record.** Based on our cost estimates, collectively these films represent an investment of nearly \$3 billion, and represent the work 400,000 people.

However, most of the money spent on 2019 Sundance acquisitions went unrecouped, so we can expect a more cautious buying week. On top of that, more than 20 of the hottest titles have already been scooped up in pre-buys, and enter the festival with distributors attached. This represents two strategic shifts from prior years: Agents and producers’ reps have screened their films early to try to grab the “bird in the hand;” buyers want to avoid at-festival competition and the potential of overpaying in the heat of battle.

Distribution – the locus of greatest change – is complex and, in most cases, opaque to indie filmmakers. Of the 2019 crop of Sundance titles, 30% had exclusive deals with streaming platforms like Netflix, Amazon Prime, and Hulu. Half are available as part of at least one subscription service, and three-quarters are available to watch online via one platform or another. Only eight got wide theatrical releases (defined as more than 500 screens). Of the 2019 Slamdance films, 36% achieved distribution deals, two are playing on subscription streaming services, and 20% are available in non-exclusive streaming deals.

So yes, more Sundance (and Slamdance) titles are more accessible for audiences than ever before. But what does distribution access mean in terms of financial value to the filmmakers? Far less than may be expected. Netflix continues to hold its viewership numbers secret. Theatrical distribution, which is almost always money-loser, even as it elevates each film, has become harder and harder, as there are fewer and fewer available screens, and indie movies don't play very long – there's no time for word-of-mouth during limited theatrical windows.

In a sign of the more treacherous theatrical geography for indies, Landmark, the largest specialty theatre chain with 251 screens in 27 markets, now under new ownership of Cohen Media Group, has reduced some geographic restrictions; previously a movie shown at the Arclight could not be screened at Landmark West Los Angeles – now it can. While this does open some additional possibilities, it also makes specialty films less, well, special, and it may diminish the significance of Landmark Theatres for independents. It also means that some films will not get screened at all. Too, we hear that cash settlements to specialty distributors have slowed down with new Landmark ownership.

Because theatrical release is so uncertain, and does not represent true financial value of a film, this year we have stopped reporting theatrical box office numbers of Sundance titles. What the indie film world needs, in addition to full streaming platform transparency, is a “total consumption” model, a way to aggregate audience numbers from all available sources. Billboard has started to do this for the music business; the [Billboard 200](#) now includes numbers from YouTube and streaming services.

How will indie filmmakers adjust, in the absence of better information? As we always have. Although filmmakers have now been trained to “own our audiences” and bring them to the table when talking to distributors, if your film is sold to certain platforms, you'll be restricted from doing a lot of the marketing and audience-outreach you had planned, and your movie may get lost in the infinite labyrinth of programming. Pre-sales have gotten harder, which means high-risk equity plays a more important role in film financing. The expanded marketplace means there are more movies being made, which means budgets face downward pressure. Indie distributors that have output deals – guaranteed distribution for their movies on streaming platforms like Hulu – will do well; all others will scrap and scrape.

If past is prologue, consolidations are coming, and with them a tightening and rationalization of the marketplace. Apple's poised to buy something big. 5G will soon change everything. In 2020, the gyre widens, and the bedrock of indie film moves inevitably toward a different center.

See Sundance Infographic.
See Slamdance Infographic.

Image from 'Wendy,' directed by Benh Zeitlin, screening in Sundance's Premieres Section.

MediaU sponsored the research for this article and the Sundance and Slamdance Infographics.

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