

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

What I Learned in Tennessee

Adam Leipzig · Thursday, November 15th, 2012

Interstate 40, which connects Nashville and Knoxville, is probably a nice enough drive if you concentrate on the rust-colored trees instead of the chain hotels, but it was pelting rain and the 18-wheelers come up behind you like wanna-be stunt drivers from the movie *Duel*.

Lori and I had been invited to the [Southern Appalachia International Film Festival](#)—Lori would lecture on [fiber art](#), and I would introduce some of my movies and meet with classes at [Pellissippi State](#). Despite the rain, I pretty much floored it in our rented Hyundai, because we had about 3 hours to make the drive before the first event. We promised each other we'd go back on the old road, Highway 70, which snakes single-lane through country hills, where we were sure we'd find respite from the rectilinear conformity of national brands that lines the Interstate.

Our hosts at the festival and the college could not have been more generous or accommodating, and about 50 students showed up for my class. They were slightly older than most college students; the majority was in their early twenties, and they'd enrolled to get some useful technical skills. After we discussed how to get a job making movies, they started to ask some questions I hadn't expected:

Why do the studios keep making sequels?

Studios are big machines, and they have a business model that relies on “pre-aware” titles, I said. If you've heard of the story before, they don't need to spend so much marketing it, and they can better satisfy their corporate owners.

Do you think anybody would let me make a movie that was incredibly original?

Wow, I said, I certainly hope so. We need more original movies, don't we? Certainly, you may have to make your super-original film at a lower budget, but, really, if you don't want to do something original, why do it at all? If someone else has told the same story you're telling, then it isn't rally your story to tell, is it?

But studio movies are so safe!

Yes, that's the reason we need indie movies.

After the class was over, I reflected that these students—who are avid movie-goers, and had all seen at least one movie in the past month—are hungering for films that are different from what's being offered to them. These students the prime movie-going demographic, and they're not elitist snobs who degrade studio movies for intellectual bragging-rights. They just want good movies, and better choices. They're not being fed.

Here's just one example: At the Regal Pinnacle Stadium 18 in Knoxville, this weekend you can see, that's right, 18 studio movies. And yet 85% of the seats in cinemas nationwide go unsold every week. Might they sell more tickets with some movies that are new and different, especially on weekdays?

As Lori and I drove back to Nashville, exploring Highway 70, we found the same problem echoed

in food choices, where chain fast-food restaurants are like big studio movies, crowding out other, more tasty options. We'd expected country diners. We found DQ, Hardee's and Sonic Burger. We didn't want to repeat the ghastly indifference of the hotel steam table breakfast.



After some disappointing turns into small towns where the options were chain restaurants or no food at all, we stopped at the Back Porch Café in Watertown. Owner Robert Entrekin and his wife Jessica opened the place a few months ago. The café was filling up, and today Robert was the cook, waiter and cashier.

How do you compete with those big fast food chains?

We give people something different, and we do it well, Robert said. People around here like a little Cajun flavor.



If you've been following my analogy, fast-food chains are like studio movies—ubiquitous, crowding out other options, and mostly not very nutritious. The jambalaya Robert brought me was like an indie movie in a bowl. Rich, spicy, handmade; if I lived here, I'd come every day.

As with food, so with film: The movie audience is hungry. They need to be fed.

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