Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Indie Films, Part 1: What Killed Them?

Adam Leipzig · Wednesday, January 19th, 2011

This is Part I of a 3-part series on the state of independent films that will appear here in the next 10 days. ***Subscribe*** *to the Newsletter (on the right side of this page, above) to get an email when each new post appears.*

Sundance begins tomorrow with four opening night indie films, but there's no reason to celebrate the health of independent movies. In fact, they have pretty much died, and to understand why, you have to understand how they were born. I'm not talking about history; I'm talking about the creative process.

From an artist's point-of-view, the reason to make indie films is not to make money. Sure, you want to make some money – enough to let your investors recoup and pay your rent this month. And, if you really hit the jackpot, enough to finance your next film. But that's about it, as far as money expectations go. The reason artists make indie films is to make the movie they want to make, to express something that needs telling. It has never been primarily about getting rich. It has never been about financial greed.

But greed eats its own. Desire is insatiable: Goya painted it, Abraham Lincoln warned against it and Karl Marx inscribed it. The tale of American independent films in the past thirty years is a story about artists' aspirations being grounded by greed. About movie companies consuming themselves, wanting something so much that they devour it, and then, by owning, destroy it. It's a tale that sets your teeth on edge – for all the movies you didn't see, movies that would have represented the singular vision of a small band of committed collaborators; for all the bloated, meaningless movies you ended up seeing instead; and, if you're a filmmaker, for all the movies you didn't get to make.

That's good. The discomfort, the teeth on edge – these are the core of what causes independent movies to exist in the first place, the reason most artists don't go to sleep at night. Independent movies are filmmakers' natural reaction to being force-fed mainstream movies that don't address audiences' or filmmakers' concerns. In today's media ecology, audiences are like geese whose livers are being turned into foie gras; we're fed a steady diet of entertainment-product that only serves to make us delectable to the media and social networking companies that take money from our wallets. It's healthy to gag.

Maybe to revive independent films, we have to explain, again, what they are and why they have

vanished.

An independent film is one made outside the studio system. That's the business definition. Creatively, it is a film made outside and against the system, any system: the studio system, the political system, the system of society or class or ethics or whatever else the filmmaker wants to set right. That's why an independent film more authentically represents its creator's vision – even more important than the fact that there are no suits on the set, no executives from the Black Tower giving notes. The director and his or her crew make their movie, as they wanted to, and you like it or you don't.

You say those movies are being made?

If a tree falls in the forest, does it make a sound? For every *The Kids Are All Right,* there are hundreds that don't get seen.

The crisis of independent filmmaking is really a crisis of viable independent film distribution.

The creative impulse can't be stopped. There are plenty of independent movies being made, especially now, when digital cameras and desktop editing software are so cheap. This year, 3,812 films were submitted to Sundance – that's 3,812 full-length, finished features. One hundred eighteen of those will be screened at Sundance, and if history is any guide fewer than a dozen will be picked up by distributors for nationwide theatrical release. Another 10 or 20 will be taken by tiny distributors and you'll probably never hear of them again. As for almost all the others – for the remaining 3,780 films or so – you won't get to see them, not even on Netflix. In America, only about 500 movies are released each year, including all the big studios movies, and studio movies play on 95% of the 39,233 screens in America. The real problem is distribution.

Let's scroll back three decades. The Sundance Film festival started in 1978 and Miramax started in 1979. In the 1980s, Miramax paved the way for independent American films – they released great movies and turned a modest profit. In 1989, Miramax hit a new high with Steven Soderbergh's first feature *sex, lies and videotape,* which had played to audience acclaim at Sundance, and for a few years it seemed as though independent American filmmakers would have a solid path to their audiences.

In 1993, Miramax started Dimension, its genre arm. Over the next few years, Miramax over-reached and allowed success to go to its head instead of its heart; it over-expanded its budgets and operational size. Harvey Weinstein, who ran Miramax, hungered to make bigger and bigger movies – more films like Anthony Minghella's $80 million Cold Mountain. Bob Weinstein, Harvey's brother, ran Dimension Films, and made movies like Scream and Scary Movie; eventually Dimension would out-earn its more serious-minded sibling's fare and would cash-flow the whole company.

At the same time, the major studios were being swept up in a wave of corporate mergers and transactions. Sony bought Columbia in 1989. The same year, Time, Inc. merged with Warner Communications. Matsushita bought Universal in 1990; Viacom bought Paramount in 1993; and in 1995, Seagram bought Universal from Matsushita and Disney acquired Cap Cities/ABC. With the wave of mergers begun and with more on the horizon, the studios exerted greater and greater control of what movies would play on America's movie screens. When it became apparent that even Miramax could no longer hold their screens against the bigger studio movies, they sold to Disney in 1993. Greed was also a factor here – the Weinsteins pocketed $70 million, and believed

they would be able to finance larger-budget films. If they had kept to their original intention, and the original impetus of independent movies, the Weinsteins would still be running Miramax.

Coming next: Part II brings the history to date, and Part III reveals the way forward.

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