

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

7 Reasons Why Indie Movies Matter

Adam Leipzig · Sunday, April 3rd, 2011



It's time to ask the big question: So what?

Indie movies apparently take up such a small portion of the movie marketplace, would it really matter if they didn't get made? I've [written before](#) about how many are made and how few are seen, and the crisis in independent film distribution.

Why should we care if indie movies get made at all?

They're better. If you get rid of indie movies, you'll eliminate half the films nominated for Best Picture. That's why the Academy went to 10 nominations for the top category. When there were only 5 nominations, indie films drove out the studio pictures. With 10 nominees, studio films can at least get mentioned – although studio films don't usually win.

They develop talent. New film artists get their start here. Without indie movies, for example, we would not see the work of Christopher Nolan, Darren Aronofsky, John Singleton, Sofia Coppola, Robert Rodriguez, Gus Van Sant, Debra Granik, Kathryn Bigelow, David Cronenberg, David O. Russell, Kevin Smith, Quentin Tarantino, Michael Moore, Steven Soderbergh, Joel and Ethan Coen, Woody Allen, Paul Thomas Anderson, oh the list goes on...



They're authentic. Indie movies let the voices of artists shine through. They aren't manufactured by teams of executives or shaped by note sessions. Yes, indie movies can be widely inconsistent in their quality, but so are studio pictures. And indie movies aren't part of the *entertainment-industrial complex*.

They represent a unique audience. Without indie films, the specialty audience would stop going to theatres entirely. They wouldn't spend their money, instead, on *Battle: LA*. (Which I enjoyed, by the way. It's a great ride.) The hard-core specialty audience would just stay home. We'd lose all of their ticket sales, which represent at least 10% of the total box office – in excess of \$1 billion a year.

They are thought-leaders. Indie films are made by and for our culture's opinion-makers, the people who drive the national discussion on artistic, social and cultural issues.

They're environmentally sound. No, I don't mean green. I mean biodiversity. Indie films may be only a small percentage of total annual box office dollars, just as the rain forest represents only a small percentage of the surface area of our planet. Yet indie films are also like the rain forest in that they represent more than 80% of all artistic output and creativity. And, like the rain forest, if indie films collapse and become extinct, the whole ecosystem system above them collapses as well. Without indie films, there would be no new breeding ground for talent. No new voices or innovative storytelling approaches (that will later be adopted by studios.) No specialty audience that shepherds the mainstream audience by expanding awareness at the margins, an awareness that works its way inward to the mainstream.



They're money. Now the Business-Person asks, "So what? All that's nice. But it sounds like you want me to distribute indie movies for aesthetic pleasure or the common good, not because they'll make me money."

Don't worry, Business-Person. I wouldn't ask you to do that. In fact, indie movies make money. The problem is that, when you look at all the data, it is confusing.

Here's what I mean. Last year there were 419 movies released by non-MPAA members. These are truly indie movies, distributed by non-studio companies. Most of those companies – over 100 of them by my count – are tiny and poorly capitalized. They barely "release" their films except to put them on one or two screens, are not staffed with savvy executives, and hardly have the person-power to market the movies effectively, much less collect money from theatres at the end of the day. The statistics from all these tiny so-called releases get lumped in with the stats of better-released indie fare and drag those numbers down.

Here's the evidence that better-released indie films do business. In 2010, Sony Pictures Classics grossed \$68 million with 25 movies. Weinstein Company made \$40 million box office gross releasing 8 movies. Weinstein/Dimension achieved another \$40 million with just 2 movies. Music Box Films grossed \$25 million with 9 movies. Apparition did \$12.8 million with 4 movies. National Geographic, my old company, notched \$4.8 million on 5 movies. IFC scored \$9.6 million on 32 movies. Magnolia grossed \$8.7 million with 22 movies. And these numbers do not count home entertainment and video-on-demand revenues which, in the case of IFC, Magnolia and others who have adopted a more open-minded business model, often put these companies' films into profits even before they are released onto theatre screens.

With proper distribution, indie movies make money, get seen, build artists' careers, shape our culture, and deliver authenticity and quality.

That's why indie movies matter.

Images from some of the indie movies that were nominated for Best Picture in 2010: Black Swan, The King's Speech (winner), Winter's Bone.

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