

Introduction: Discourses on the state of indie film

Times of crisis are times for opportunity. But first you have to admit there is a crisis.

Ira Deutchman¹

The proclamations of Indie Film's demise are grossly exaggerated. How can there be a 'Death of Indie' when Indie – real Indie, True Indie – has yet to even live?

Ted Hope²

The early part of the twenty-first century witnessed a period of potentially radical new openings and opportunities for independent filmmakers. The advent of inexpensive digital video as a production medium and of broadband internet as a channel for distribution, sales and other activities combined to create the possibility of unprecedented freedom from external controls and restraint. At the same time, however, something approaching a crisis was frequently diagnosed in the more-established model of the indie feature business. The power

2 INDIE 2.0

of studio-owned speciality divisions continued to be seen as a threat to small-scale or more innovative indie production, even while some of these subsidiaries faced closure or other difficulties of their own. More profoundly, perhaps, for some commentators, the very notion of an 'authentic' indie alternative to the mainstream was questioned, both generally and in the specific context of a period some two decades or more after its rise to prominence in the latter part of the 1980s.

So, what is the status of the American indie sector after the first decade of the millennium? The main title of this book, *Indie 2.0*, implies that this has been a period of change, a new iteration of the indie model that became institutionalized in a particular form in the last two decades of the previous century. This is true to some extent in certain dimensions, but this book also argues for a strong vein of continuity in indie practice, both industrially and in the textual qualities through which individual features mark their distinctive attributes from those usually associated with the Hollywood mainstream. The term 'iteration' seems appropriate in its suggestion of a particular incarnation or version of a system but one that entails a central dimension of repetition or continuity.³ As has always been the case, differences at the textual level tend to be relative and variable rather than absolute, terms such as indie and independent or Hollywood and mainstream needing to be used with some caution, as broad markers of cinematic territory rather than as signifiers of absolute or necessarily clear-cut difference.

I use the term indie here to denote the particular form of independent feature production that achieved cultural prominence in the period suggested above, a still far from exact quantity but one that can be distinguished in broad terms from wider uses of independent to encompass all varieties of non-Hollywood production in the history of American cinema.⁴ Indie has the merit of suggesting a particular range of textual qualities and bases of audience appeal in a specific cultural formation rather than exclusively privileging industrial grounds of definition, as has sometimes been the case in attempts to pin down the term independent in literal terms. Indie, thus, suggests a particular sensibility or set of sensibilities – a particular cultural realm, or range, a particular kind of film practice, with its own material basis – not just a separation from the production of the major

studios, even if its boundaries might often remain somewhat fuzzy and it might include considerable variety.⁵

As Michael Newman suggests, '*indie* gained salience as a more general term for nonmainstream culture in the 1990s', to some extent as 'simply a synonym for *independent* but with an added connotation of fashionable cool', in film and music and also a wider sphere including booksellers, zines and various other forms of alternative media.⁶ The term can be seen as a mystification of notions of independence in film, as Newman puts it, in its decoupling of the concept from a strict notion of separation from anything connected to the realm of the Hollywood studios, but it also seems usefully to capture a sense of the broader contours of this particular cultural field, as opposed to all possible uses of independent in economic terms.⁷

A key thread running through this book concerns not just indie films themselves, in their various industrial and textual dimensions, but also the discursive structures of this kind within which they are situated. The main focus, with the exception of one chapter, is on lower-budget, smaller-scale indie features, particular examples of which have been celebrated by some commentators as offering a maintenance of, or return to, 'true' indie roots. Such a conception can be grounded in particular factual detail, in textual features or the characteristics of the contexts of production and/or distribution; but it is always also a notion that requires interrogation in its broader implications for our understanding of the processes through which cultural terrain is marked out and given particular associations.

An ongoing process of position-taking can be identified in the manner in which particular variants are situated as more or less 'true' indie or authentic, or in which others are rejected as inauthentic (in some accounts, the division here might be between the use of the term indie, where an emphasis is put on its diminutive connotations, and the more steely implications of 'independent'). The latter applies especially to those seen as in some way invalidated through either proximity to the studio speciality divisions or the use of textual qualities judged by some critics to display evidence of an attempt consciously to confect (or, put more strongly, to fake) an indie impression by playing into already-too-established conventions; often, it seems, a combination of the two.

4 INDIE 2.0

This is typical of the kinds of debates and position-takings established around cultural productions of any kind that make claims to some degree of alternative status, often elitist in social implications, in relation to an established commercial mainstream. The world of indie music offers perhaps the most obvious parallels with that of indie film.⁸ A useful framework within which to understand such realms is Pierre Bourdieu's conception of the 'field of cultural production' as a dynamic space within which various mutual articulations occur between more and less mainstream or commercial forms of production and consumption, including the various gradations often established within the sphere of the indie/alternative itself.⁹ A variety of different kinds of production provide, in turn, grounds for acts of distinction on the part of viewers/consumers through the exercise of differing resources of cultural capital.¹⁰

The bottom line, for this approach, is that acts of cultural consumption and expressions of taste and preference are structured in a manner strongly related to the social position of the consumer, those with greater accumulations of cultural capital (a product of upbringing and education) generally being more equipped not just to consume but to derive pleasure from the consumption of products marked out as distinct from the mainstream; a process through which they mark their own belonging to groups to which particular kinds of cultural cachet are attached.¹¹ The implication of this way of understanding the consumption of non-mainstream products such as indie cinema is that various kinds of socially-rooted investments tend to be made in notions of different kinds and degrees of independence or indie-ness, an issue to which this book returns on a number of occasions.

The notion of an *indie 2.0*, as a particular iteration that might have some of its own grounds of appeal or on which to be questioned, is explored in this book at a number of levels. The most obvious resonance is with the term 'Web 2.0', although this applies in its strongest form in only a small number of cases. Web 2.0, a concept developed in the mid-2000s, signifies a shift of orientation that enables and encourages collective participation and collaboration in the production of online materials. This applied only to a very limited extent at the end of the 2000s to the production of feature-length indie films, the principal subject of this book. Existing uses of the web, still

evolving at the time of writing, focused primarily on dimensions such as promotion, distribution and sales by filmmakers whose production practice remained located in a more traditionally hierarchical context of separation between creative artist and audience. The internet still offered radically new potential in these dimensions, however, sufficient to constitute a new phase of indie development, particularly as a means of evading the control over the market exerted by the studio speciality divisions and some larger indie players. A number of more radical innovations in collaborative web-based funding, production and post-production are considered in Chapter 2, although these remain relatively marginal practices, with the exception of the work of some independent documentary filmmakers.

The term indie 2.0 is also used in a broader sense in this book, to suggest the existence of a second generation of indie films and filmmakers, coming to fruition some 20 or so years after what is now established as the 'classic' indie breakthrough period of the 1980s and early 1990s. The context here is one in which indie exists as an already-established and institutionalized category in which both to work and for work to be placed – positively or negatively – by critics and other commentators. It is in this sense in particular that the notion of an artificially confected or commodified version of indie cinema gains much of its currency, as explored in Chapter 1, both in itself and perhaps more importantly as a negative point of reference against which to assert the greater authenticity of other examples. More narrowly, the term also serves to denote a certain historical period of indie film, from 2000 to the early part of the second decade of the century.

As far as the overall health of the indie sector was concerned in this period, the verdict appeared to be mixed. There was much talk of crisis, as suggested above, either actual or impending. This was partly related to the specific economic difficulties of the late 2000s and after, following the 'credit crunch' of 2008 and the consequent global recession, but also to some more local tendencies in the indie film landscape itself. For some commentators, however, certain of these developments were seen as either heralding a return of indie cinema to something closer to its roots or as offering new opportunities to the sector. In both cases, the diagnosis can be interpreted in the context of the kinds of discursive formations outlined above.

6 INDIE 2.0

The dominant tenor of discourses in the trade press in the late 2000s, both Hollywood-centric publications such as *Variety* and *The Hollywood Reporter* and the indie-specific online *indieWIRE*, tended towards an emphasis on the crisis end of the spectrum. This is unsurprising, given the likely impact of recession on the indie sector, not to mention the fact that crisis tends to make for better short-term headlines. Funding has always been a problem, especially for new filmmakers or smaller operations without ties to the corporate majors, and a tightening of credit was widely assumed to impact on indie production. Downturns and recessions are generally expected to make investors more risk-averse, presenting a real and immediate difficulty to the indie sector.

This, in itself, was nothing new, however, even if the recession from the late 2000s was particularly deep. The sector had faced similar problems in the past, including the aftermath of the 1987 Wall Street crash, the effect of which included the closure of a number of indie distributors in the late 1980s and early 1990s. This came at a time when public sources of funding, an important ingredient in the indie recipe for some filmmakers in that period, were also sharply curtailed for political reasons. Various other financial ups and downs have affected the indie business in the past two decades or so, making it far from easy always to be clear whether particular signs of crisis are related to specific factors – such as a particular economic downturn – or the broader pressures often felt by those operating in the more marginal parts of the industry.

Throughout the 1990s, however, despite various setbacks, indie cinema as a whole continued to thrive in many respects. The numbers of films produced rose consistently during the decade, although many failed to achieve theatrical distribution, a trend that has been more or less constant throughout the recent history of the sector and appeared to be sustained into the second decade of the new century. A measure often used in the trade press is the number of films competing for inclusion in the now always-oversubscribed Sundance festival, a figure that continued to rise in 2009, 2010, 2011 and 2012.¹² If there was nothing to indicate a fall-off in production, the key locus of notions of crisis might be sought in the central arena of theatrical distribution. A common theme of coverage in the trade press in this period was the increasing difficulty faced by indie films in this domain, particularly

for relatively smaller productions. But this, again, is a problem that had been identified in one way or another for at least a decade, without the indie sector being destroyed or grinding to a halt as a result. Fears have been repeatedly expressed since at least the late 1990s of the impact of too many indie films competing among themselves, effectively cannibalizing each other's market.

So this is another factor that does not appear to offer any clear-cut grounds for identifying a new crisis specific to the late 2000s, even if the period may have been characterized by some particular difficulties, including a general reduction in the advances paid by distributors to those films that did get picked up for theatrical release. Such concern was also qualified by a return to a cautious optimism about the potential sustainability of the established market for theatrical acquisition in the wake of an upturn in sales at the 2010 Toronto and 2011 Sundance festivals (an improvement followed by solid if less spectacular sales at Sundance in 2012), further evidence of the hazards involved in – and rhetorical nature of – much of the reporting of such short-term fluctuations.¹³

The sense of threat posed to more traditional theatrical distribution is closely connected to another key element in these discourses, the development of what became known in the 1990s as Indiewood, the area in which Hollywood and the indie sector seem to merge or overlap, particularly in the form of the speciality divisions owned by the Hollywood studios and seen as having gained or exerted undue control over the sector as a whole, particularly through their ability to dominate access to theatres.¹⁴ The very existence of Indiewood is perhaps viewed as a more profound threat, however, regardless of any of the specific strategies with which it became associated (these include developments such as a move to a more hit-based economy, increased involvement by speciality divisions in production, bigger spending on acquisitions and marketing, and a general shift in broadly more conservative directions). The presence of Indiewood has often been treated as a threat to the very notion of indie as anything that can at all clearly be distinguished from the mainstream. The term Indiewood is often used in a derogatory manner in indie circles, a classic example of the negative reference point against which a discursive concept such as 'true' indie might be defined.

8 INDIE 2.0

Discourses of crisis, frequently subject to rhetorical overstatement in the trade press and elsewhere, are often accompanied, however, by what appears to be their opposite: an emphasis on the existence of more positive opportunities, especially at the lower end of the indie scale. Major contributions to this discourse in the late 2000s revolved around the potential offered by digital production and distribution, as suggested above. A positive spin could also be put on the status of the studio speciality divisions, themselves seen by some as entering a period of crisis at the end of the decade. Commentators were quick to seize upon a number of setbacks faced by the divisions, most prominently the decision by Time Warner to close its indie/speciality division, Warner Independent Pictures, in May 2008 as part of a series of changes that also led to the dismantling of its more mainstream/genre oriented New Line Cinema and New Line's indie-leaning Picturehouse wing. This was followed by other events including the effective closure of Paramount Vantage, the operations of which were folded into those of the main studio. Disney's Miramax division underwent a radical downsizing after the departure of its founders Harvey and Bob Weinstein in 2005, eventually being sold in 2010 to a group of private equity investors including the construction magnate Ron Tudor. The closure by Disney of the Miramax offices in New York was at this point a development of symbolic as much as more substantial significance, given the iconic role played by the company in the growth of the indie scene and the process through which parts of it morphed into Indiewood in the 1990s (the Weinsteins went on to form their own new entity, The Weinstein Company, the fortunes of which were also viewed as questionable in this period).

A general impression was created by many commentators that Hollywood was engaged in a withdrawal from the indie sector. This may have been exaggerated, given the continued prominence of other divisions such as Fox Searchlight and Universal's Focus Features, and of releases from these subsidiaries at both the box office and prestige events such as the Academy Awards (and the fact that this can be a changing territory: Paramount announced a new Insurge division to develop micro-budget films in 2010, for example, after its success with the distribution of *Paranormal Activity* [2007], an initiative greeted with some skepticism in indie circles;¹⁵ The Weinstein Company,

meanwhile, appeared to be thriving following its successes with *The King's Speech* [2010] and *The Artist* [2011]). What was striking about the discourse of withdrawal on the part of the studios, however, was less the question of its veracity than the tone in which it was expressed, which tended to be highly favourable. That is to say, if the studios were pulling out (or, at least, some of them were doing so or reducing the scale of their commitment) it was widely seen as 'good riddance'. A panel at the London Film Festival in October 2008 was titled, somewhat hyperbolically, 'Indiewood is Dead... Long Live the New, True Indies', while a broadly similar sentiment was expressed in a discussion of the contemporary state of the business in *Filmmaker* magazine, published by the Independent Feature Project. Ira Deutchman, a long-term indie stalwart, suggested that 'the market correction that is happening with the majors getting out of this business is the best thing that has ever happened', a view echoed by the prominent indie producer Ted Hope: two substantial voices from inside the indie sector.¹⁶

One person's crisis, according to these responses – in this case, that believed by some to be facing the Indiewood studio divisions – is another's source of potential revival. Further examples can be found in press coverage, both mainstream and trade-oriented. A feature by *The New York Times* critic Manohla Dargis in September 2008 was headlined in similar fashion to the London festival panel: 'The Revolution Is Dead, Long Live the Revolution'.¹⁷ The 'current line' on independent film, Dargis suggests, 'is that it's dead, in crisis or at least in trouble' (quite a variety of verdicts), the 'biggest shock' having been the closures announced by Time Warner. This may be bad news for those who lost their jobs, she writes, 'but I'm not persuaded that it means all that much for true independents, those who have never worked inside the studios, never wanted to and probably couldn't if they tried.'

Much of the coverage of the first Sundance festival to follow the Time Warner announcement and the development of the credit crunch, in January 2009, took a similarly positive line as far as the underlying state of 'true' indie values was concerned. The festival was judged to have been less crowded than usual, as a result of the straightened times. For *Variety*, this prompted a positive overall verdict: 'fewer

10 INDIE 2.0

folks jamming into Park City made for a more pleasant festival this year. For once, with industry and media entourages cut back, more locals and film buffs got into the venues.¹⁸ *indieWIRE* headlined it as ‘A Quieter Sundance’ in a tone that also implied that this made it in some respects a ‘better’ festival, more in tune with its roots. A similar view was taken by Dargis in *The New York Times* – ‘the most pleasant Sundance in memory’ – although accompanied by expressions of caution about future sources of production funding.¹⁹ As with the downsizing of Miramax, the expression of such views about Sundance can be viewed as carrying more weight than the literal meaning, the growth of the festival and its links with the studios having become another major signifier of departure from smaller-scale and supposedly more authentic beginnings.

What, then, should we make of these notions of crisis and their opposite, often linked, in celebrations of the ‘true’ indie that might thrive or have prospects for revival, either alongside or as a more or less direct result of the constraints faced by the Indiewood end of the spectrum? There appears to be more to these discourses than just a series of matter-of-fact reflections on the various ups and downs of different parts of the indie landscape. Diagnoses of crisis or renewal can be understood as parts of the same discursive regime surrounding indie cinema, one in which the two positions are mutually implicated rather than simply opposed. Both could be said always to have been in play. Indie cinema often seems to have been viewed as existing in a state of close-to-permanent crisis of one kind or another – while also seeming always to retain some potential either to continue to thrive, at some level, or to undergo revival at some point in the future. One way of understanding this is to suggest that, within the prevailing discourse, the indie sector almost *needs* to be seen as existing in a permanent state of crisis; that this is, in a sense, part of its definition. To be truly indie, in this view, is not to be too stable and secure but to exist in a manner that is understood as being in some way ‘on the edge’, or at least embattled if located with the arms of a studio division.

One of the problems diagnosed from this perspective is any kind of institutionalization of indie, other than at the smallest scale, something that might be seen as a contradiction in terms. This might include the

very use of a term such as indie itself, in the way it is employed here to signify a particular consolidation of a number of independent traits within a particular period (and particularly for those who might use the term in the diminutive sense, to suggest something more compromised than what might be signified by 'independent'). Institutionalization was clearly an important part of the formation of indie cinema that crystallized in the 1980s and 1990s – a story that is now familiar – through the creation or consolidation of a distinct realm of indie distributors, festivals and other organizations. This can be understood in the terms used in Howard Becker's classic account of the formation of a particular 'art world', the constitution of which also involves the work of critics and receptive audiences, issues to which we return later.²⁰ The problem comes when this kind of process is perceived to have gone too far, through too much institutionalization or consolidation. This immediately raises a number of questions, however, along the lines of: how much is too much?

How big can an indie distributor or an indie-oriented festival become before it is seen as posing a threat to some core notion of independence? Any association with one of the Hollywood studios is an obvious cut-off point for many; hence, the aversion often expressed towards their speciality divisions or the Hollywood presence at events such as Sundance. The Oscar aspirations of some Indiewood films are another source of suspicion. While the indie sector has its own equivalent, the Independent Spirit Awards, these are seen to have let down the barriers by not excluding films produced and distributed by the main divisions of the studios. Guidelines for selections followed by the nominating committee suggest that films made with 'an economy of means' could still be considered independent when fully financed by a studio or a studio speciality division 'if the subject matter is original and provocative.'²¹ The how-much-is-too-much argument is conducted in a particularly open way in relation to the Spirit awards, a specific budget ceiling having been imposed on entrants into the main competition since 2006, a frequent source of debate and controversy in the indie community, the threshold being a substantial \$20 million.

At the heart of much of this discourse is an emphasis on the importance of authenticity as a marker of indie status; or, loss of authenticity

12 INDIE 2.0

as a source of one kind of perceived crisis. This is a recurrent trope, whether expressed directly or more indirectly. Claims to the status of some kind of authenticity are made by many indie films, practitioners or spokespeople, at various levels. These include certain formal qualities, as displayed in many of the films examined in this book, notable examples including the grainy black-and-white photography of key films now established as indie classics or the pixilation of low-budget DV features. Pitches for authenticity are also made, implicitly, through devices such as the absence of certain kinds of plotting or narrative structure. It is notable that what is characteristically involved here is usually understood as a negation of qualities associated with Hollywood, the latter being something of a byword for all that is assumed to be false, fake and contrived. It is easy to over-simplify this picture. Far from all indie production has positioned itself as authentic and Hollywood can also embrace a wider range than is sometimes acknowledged. But over-simplification is precisely the currency of these kinds of discursive regimes.

The notion of authenticity spreads more widely than just being a matter related to specific qualities of indie films. It applies not just to the form and content of texts, but also to all other aspects of the business. This would include areas such as marketing and distribution strategies, key regions of debate around the nature and qualities of whatever makes the indie sector more or less distinctive. 'Authentic' approaches to marketing and distribution would be seen as those that take their cue from individual films themselves, rather than being more formulaic. One of the distinctive markers of indie distribution as it grew from the 1980s was an emphasis on close attention to the particular qualities of the individual text, and the constituencies to which those might appeal. The authentic version of marketing would be 'grass-roots' marketing, in which campaigns are carefully tailored to the particular audience that might be reached by a particular film if it were given a chance. This was the niche occupied by many of the earlier indie distributors, giving that extra care to films that were unlikely to succeed without it.

Opposed to this would be the growing tendency from the later 1990s for indie or Indiewood films sometimes to be treated more like their mainstream equivalents: a formula based on higher spending on

advertising and on wider, quicker theatrical openings. The implication here is treatment more as generic industrial product and less as individual works of art in need of special attention. This is another dimension in which distinctions are often made between the approaches of the smaller indie distributors, remaining true to the original recipe, and studio divisions searching for sources of larger, cross-over success (even here, though, this is an area in which it is easy to over-simplify the distinction; Indiewood features, for example, are often handled in ways that draw on aspects of both the indie and larger-market strategies, while the classic indie recipe could also be considered to have become a generic formula of its own kind, in some respects).

How should we understand the location of this kind of discourse? It is quite possible to see discourses relating to authenticity, or its absence, evolving organically from the actual development of indie film in this era. It did start very small and has grown larger, in a process that might be expected to be a cause of concern to many of those with investments in the distinctive nature of the earlier form. This might be posited without implying the existence of any entirely pure and prelapsarian original; just in a more proximate sense of one kind of entity being to a greater or lesser extent overwhelmed by another. Why, though, so much investment in this? The tenor of much of the debate about the nature of indie cinema at any moment often seems to imply something more than just an immediate literal concern about particular concrete issues, developments or threats. I am drawn back here to a phrase I have used elsewhere in passing, in more or less rhetorical style myself, to characterize those who seek to position themselves as policing the boundaries: 'defenders of the indie faith'. Something of that kind of quality, a quite deep-rooted investment, appears to characterize the terms in which these debates are sometimes conducted.

A useful and in some ways provocative framework in which to understand the nature of this investment is offered by Wendy Fonarow's study of indie music, *Empire of Dirt: British Indie Music, Aesthetics and Rituals*, a work of social anthropology. Fonarow begins with a portrait of indie music that suggests quite substantial similarities to the way indie is usually conceived in the realm of film, which is not surprising,

14 INDIE 2.0

given the extent to which the adoption of the term in relation to film appears to have drawn on discourses associated with music. There is no exact, single definition of indie music, she suggests, in much the same way that I and others would argue about indie film. But, she continues: 'Although indie has no exact definition, the discourses and practices around the multiple descriptions and definitions of indie detail a set of principals that reveal the values and issues at stake for the community.'²²

At the heart of the process of definition, as Fonarow suggests, is one of differentiation, as is the case with all cultural groupings: 'To form a group, members need to create a set of boundaries between what constitutes and excludes membership.'²³ That is quite straightforward cultural anthropology and can clearly be applied to the manner in which discourses function around indie film along the kinds of lines associated with Bourdieu outlined above or Becker's concept of the art world. What, though, exactly is at stake in this process as it operates in the indie arena? What Fonarow finds at work here is, indeed, something related to faith, although in a secularized context. The underlying discourse, she suggests, is one that owes much to Puritanism: 'The core issues of indie and its practices are in essence the arguments of a particular sect of Protestant reformers within the secular forum of music.'²⁴ This seems to apply equally well to the indie film sector, even if religious discourse might at first appear an unusual or uncomfortable place to go in search of understandings of indie music or film.

The primary difference between Protestant and Catholic churches at the time of the Reformation, Fonarow suggests, concerned the means of reaching the goal of achieving a true relationship with the divine. Key questions related to how a connection with the divine might be established, where religious authority lay, how the divine was accessed, and so on. 'Within indie', Fonarow argues, 'we find similar arguments regarding the nature of experience, but in this case experiencing the divine is displaced onto the experience of "true" or "authentic" music', for which we can also read film.²⁵

Should music be produced by centralized authority (major labels) or by independent local operations (independent labels)? What form should music take to promote the experience of true music

(the generic characteristics of indie vs. the generic characteristics of other genres)? How should listeners experience music to foster a true encounter with music (live vs. recorded)? How is one's authentic musical experience measured? Indie's arguments replace the experience of the true spirit of the divine with that of the true spirit of music. The common goal set forth for music listeners within indie cosmology is to have a communion with the sacred quintessence of music. Differences in musical practices are interpreted through a moral frame, producing an aesthetic system based on moral values.²⁶

Much of this can be applied to the realm of indie film, if with some exceptions. There may be no exact equivalent to the opposition between live and recorded music, for example, although for some there might be a similarity to the distinction between the theatrical and home-viewing experiences. Numerous parallels can be identified, including the often rather vague manner in which each version of indie is defined against notions of 'the mainstream', the latter often being employed as a loose, negative catch-all term.²⁷ In each case, there is a strong discourse related to notions of authenticity, including a grass-roots do-it-yourself aesthetic at the lower-budget end of the scale, that is contrasted with the corporate domination of the mainstream. In each case, from an industrial perspective, distribution is identified as a key battleground and an arena in which particular indie strategies have been developed.

Distribution is also a key territory in which lines have become blurred. Indie music experienced a very similar trajectory in the late 1980s and 1990s to that undergone in the world of indie film: a growth that included cross-over success into larger markets and higher cultural profile, a process that led to many formerly independent companies being taken over or funded by major music corporations.²⁸ Indie music also shares the indie film emphasis on the importance – and, it is implied, moral superiority – of grass-roots marketing over reliance on saturation advertising campaigns.²⁹ There is also, in both cases, a strong tendency to distrust anything that achieves wider popularity, on the basis of an assumption that this must be the result of 'selling out' or diluting the basic principles of the indie aesthetic in some way, as seen in the cases of breakout films such as *Little Miss*

16 INDIE 2.0

Sunshine (2006) and *Juno* (2007), examples examined in detail in Chapter 1.

The key point for Fonarow is that: 'It is the persistence of these metaphysical cultural narratives that creates such consistency in the indie community's discourse despite the changes in its personnel, the variations in its music, and the crossing of national borders.'³⁰ This, again, seems useful as a framework to apply to discourses that have been employed quite consistently in relation to certain central aspects of indie cinema. *Why* the world of indie film or music should be tied up with broader cultural discourses of this kind is clearly an important question. There seems little doubt that this would not be something happily embraced in these terms by most of those who would situate themselves within the indie community. As Fonarow suggests in relation to music, some latent recognition can be identified in the use of terms such as 'purist' and 'puritanical' with a small 'p'. But the roots of this in religious doctrine are not generally recognized within what is considered to be an entirely secular and culturally alternative sphere. Most of those involved might be expected to be appalled by the suggestion that many of their key values are associated with what is likely to be seen as a conservative and repressive ideology; that, as Fonarow puts it, instead of a form of rebellion, indie discourse involves a recapitulation of dominant cultural ideology and narratives. On the surface, there seems to be a strong disjunction between the two.

How might this be explained? Fonarow's sociologically-based argument is simply that aesthetic discourses tend to follow the same lines as broader religious or metaphysical discourses in all cultures. While this is territory familiar to anthropologists studying other cultures, Fonarow suggests, it is something of a blind-spot in the study of the arts and other secular realms of Western societies. 'It is a Western conceit', she argues, 'to think that only in other societies do religious notions pervade all domains of life. We consider our own secular spheres [to be] free of metaphysical concerns', when that is actually far from the case.³¹ An argument can certainly be made for the deep-rooted presence of many Puritan concepts within American culture. In tracing elements of these discourses across the history of the nation, James Morone concludes that they are one of the 'mainsprings' of American history and culture.³² The history of Puritan currents in

America is one that involves periods of threat or crisis, followed by revivalist outbreaks. As Morone suggests, the content of these discourses changes, from literal religious meanings to secularized versions. But, as he concludes, 'the rhetorical trajectory lives on: lamentations about decline, warnings of doom, and promises of future glory [...]' with which the tenor of ongoing discourses about the state of indie cinema seem to have much in common.³³

The broader cultural resonance of these discourses might help to account for the appeal of what indie is constructed to stand for in the wider culture, particularly given the relatively narrow social constituency that appears to be the main audience for this kind of material. As Michael Newman suggests, indie is a somewhat contradictory notion 'insofar as it counters and implicitly criticizes hegemonic mass culture, desiring to be an authentic alternative to it, but also serves as a taste culture perpetuating the privilege of a social elite of upscale consumers.'³⁴ Newman cites the deployment of tropes from indie music and film in advertising as instances of the use of such qualities to seek to appeal to a wider audience, a selling of notions of anti-corporate authenticity that might also resonate with the broader secularized Puritan dimension in American culture. (We could add to this its fit with related discourses associated with various mythologies of the 'frontier' as a supposed guarantor of the authenticity of the American experience, a ubiquitous component of literary and popular culture.) Whether or not broader articulations of aspects of indie discourse of the kind cited by Newman have the effect of undermining the distinctive concept of indie, and, as a result, its basis as a marker of particular socio-cultural distinctions, remains open to debate. As Newman suggests, such practices can also function to promote and disseminate the distinctly indie sensibility, an argument similar to that made by David Hesmondhalgh in relation to indie music.³⁵

The aim of Hesmondhalgh is to complicate what he sees as overly simplistic conceptions of the 'selling-out' of indie through developments such as the formation of alliances with corporate distributors or the 'professionalization' of what started out as more amateur-scale operations. Hesmondhalgh's terminology is significant in the context of the preceding argument, identifying as 'purist' the position that sees any such move as one of unacceptable co-optation. As opposed to this

18 INDIE 2.0

stance, he suggests: 'The choice to set up more permanent positions and careers, while despised by many enthusiasts, is often based on a genuinely idealistic commitment to fostering talent, and to providing an alternative,' a point that might apply equally well to many of those involved in operations such as the studio speciality divisions.³⁶

If the negative object in the purist account might be opened up to a more complex reading, the opposite pole is also a mythic notion, in the realms of music, film or any other such forms of cultural production. As Hesmondhalgh puts it in relation to one of his case studies: 'there was no pure, original moment where anarcho-punk was "untainted" by entrepreneurialism.'³⁷ A similar argument is made by Philip Auslander in the context of assertions of authenticity in relation to issues of liveness and recording in rock music more generally. As Auslander puts it, 'the creation of the effect of authenticity in rock is a matter of culturally determined convention, not an expression of essence.'³⁸ The same can be said of notions of the 'true' indie in film, no version of which that has been part of the established discourse is likely to have been void of any forms of institutionalization at some level, or is likely to be in the future.

While a range of different scales of production or other kinds of operation can be identified, from the no- or micro-budget to the margins of the Hollywood studio system and from the subversive to the conservative in form and content, articulations rooted in notions of an original truth or purity remain within the ideological realm of rhetorical distinction-marking. The latter is a process that seems central to many of the kinds of investments made in the consumption and advocacy of the values associated with indie, but one that must be distinguished from the more complex nature of the material reality. However questionable the ground upon which they stand, such discourses have a real and substantial presence of their own within the indie cultural field, as is demonstrated on numerous occasions in this book. As Auslander puts it in the case of rock, 'the fact that the criteria for rock authenticity are imaginary has never prevented them from functioning in a very real way for rock fans.'³⁹

The coining of a notion such as 'true' indie, or variations on the term, immediately suggests an institutionalized discursive conception of some kind in itself. To make such a point is not necessarily to

criticize the use of such terms but merely to recognize the inevitable status of any such constructs from the moment of their entry into prevailing discursive regimes. A hyperbolic example of this kind of discourse is the notion articulated by the producer Ted Hope of what he terms, variously, ‘A Truly Free Film Culture’, ‘New Truly Free Filmmaking’ or ‘True Indie’, posited as a potential successor to ‘The Indie Period’.⁴⁰ The capitalized formulation, largely reliant on an appeal to the use of the internet as a source of more genuine contact with audiences, is almost entirely rhetorical, calling among other things for an abandonment by filmmakers of dreams of distribution through the existing, limited channels.

The point here is not to dismiss the notion that the online world might bring some new freedoms and opportunities, or any of the more specific arguments made by Hope, but the absolute terms in which this is put, as if the online terrain would ever be one entirely free of institutionalized forms and mechanisms of its own. The latter are, in fact, likely to be essential to the effective mobilization of the internet for the kinds of purposes advocated by Hope (including dimensions such as the building of relationships with audiences), as suggested in Chapter 2 of this book. Hope himself seems to recognize this, calling for the building of a new infrastructure, something that seems at odds with the language of the ‘Truly Free’ in which he situates his intervention. The use of such terminology has rhetorical power and resonance, however, in the discursive context outlined above. The implication of Hope’s argument is that ‘Indie’, which he credits with having increased the diversity of films available to the viewer, has become an ossified institution (‘a distortion, growing out of our communal laziness and complacency – our willingness to be marketed blandly and not specifically’), but something equally distorted seems to result from the hypostatization of a reified notion of anything ‘truly’ free or independent in this realm.

A more concrete illustration of this phenomenon is provided by the status of an initiative launched in 2006 with the title ‘Truly Indie’, one of a number of novel approaches to distribution/exhibition considered in Chapter 2. For an upfront fee, Truly Indie offered filmmakers a guaranteed run in the Landmark Theaters chain, the largest indie/art-cinema group in the country, along with publicity

20 INDIE 2.0

and advertising support from its allied company, the indie distributor Magnolia Pictures. This was a novel arrangement likely to appeal to relatively smaller projects or less-established filmmakers. But it was also very much a part of the existing institutionalized landscape, both in the use of the Landmark chain and because both companies were part of a larger, vertically-integrated media/entertainment company, 2929 Entertainment, other activities of which included production and the high-definition cable networks HDNet and HDNet Movies. If it merited the Truly Indie title, with all the connotations of such a label, it did so in distinctly relative terms, as is likely to be the case in all such rhetorical usages and formulations.

None of this is to suggest that discriminations cannot meaningfully be made between different levels and kinds of indie practice, or that arguments cannot be made for the greater cultural value of some individual features or parts of the landscape over others. I would be happy, for example, to argue for the greater social worth of the films examined in Chapter 4 (the work of Kelly Reichardt and Ramin Bahrani) than those considered in Chapters 1 and 3 (*Little Miss Sunshine*, *Juno* and the films associated with the term ‘mumblecore’). No such judgements are made from a position of Olympian objectivity, however. All are the product of particular situations and investments, and in pursuit of particular socially-situated agendas, more or less explicit, and also tied up inevitably in further processes of cultural distinction-marking that often run the risk of over-simplification.

The main emphasis of the chapters that follow is on the detailed examination of individual examples of a number of different tendencies in indie film since 2000, although these are located quite firmly within the discursive parameters established above. Although most of the book is focused on lower-budget practice, a field clearly located as indie rather than in any proximity to Indiewood, it begins at least partially within the orbit of the studio speciality divisions with an analysis of *Little Miss Sunshine* and *Juno* as two examples often cited at the negative pole in discourses relating to degrees of supposed indie authenticity. A central theme of this chapter is an examination of notions of quirkiness, particularly as a quality perceived by some to have been confected in what is understood to be an inauthentic manner in work of this kind, as evidenced both textually and in

consideration of a range of responses to the films. What both titles offer to the viewer, I suggest, is a combination of ironic distance and the substantial deployment of markers of sincerity, avowed seriousness and emotional implication in the material on screen, a blend the precise balance of which might be associated with a particular location in the industrial landscape. The second and third chapters focus on dimensions and tendencies more closely specific to the immediately contemporary period.

Chapter 2, 'Industry 2.0: The digital domain and beyond', uses a case study of Susan Buice and Arin Crumley's *Four Eyed Monsters* (2005) as an opening into a wider analysis of the extent to which the internet has been embraced as a major resource by lower-budget indie filmmakers, in dimensions ranging from finance and collaborative production to distribution and sales. A number of recent initiatives are examined, in the broader context of the concept of Web 2.0 and arguments about the democratic potential of the digital realm, although these are shown often to be employed in conjunction with more traditional indie practices. The third chapter focuses on what became the first distinctive tendency to be identified in the indie landscape of the 2000s, the term mumblecore being used to describe a particular variety of very low-budget naturalism often associated both off-screen and on with the same 'digital generation' at the heart of many of the new media practices examined in the preceding chapter. Close textual analysis of the work of filmmakers including Andrew Bujalski, Joe Swanberg and Aaron Katz is combined with consideration of the extent to which their work can be associated with the experiences of particular generational or class-based constituencies and debates about the location of such production within discursive categories such as the authentic or the amateur.

A number of continuities can be traced between the formal qualities of mumblecore and established indie traditions, particularly in their appeal to certain notions of realism, an argument that can also be made in relation to the filmmakers whose work is explored in Chapter 4. While mumblecore has often been criticized for a narrowness of focus, related largely to the white middle-class 'slacker' lifestyles of its protagonists, the films of Kelly Reichardt and Ramin Bahrani are situated in relation to broader social issues, particularly for those living

22 INDIE 2.0

closer to the social margins. As such, they are also understood here – in terms of form, content and industrial practices – in the wider context of international art cinema as constituted through institutional dimensions such as appearances at festivals and positive critical reception, issues key to the circulation of all the films examined in this book.

The final chapter, ‘The desktop aesthetic: First-person expressive in *Tarnation* and *Four Eyed Monsters*’, examines some of the distinctive textures made possible by the use of a range of audio-visual effects available to the contemporary micro-budget digital filmmaker. The two featured examples, an almost no-budget and highly expressive subjective documentary by Jonathan Caouette and the Buice and Crumley production featured in Chapter 2, are situated in a typically indie hybrid territory between more or less mainstream domains, in this case the poles established by music video and the film avant-garde. A brief conclusion then returns to some of the broad issues considered above, including a general verdict on the state of indie film – and the status of ‘indie’ as a discursive term – at the end of the period examined in this book.