

Indiewood, USA

Where Hollywood meets
Independent Cinema

Geoff King

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Introduction

Indiewood in contexts

At one end of the American cinematic spectrum is the globally dominant Hollywood blockbuster. At the other is the low-budget independent or 'indie' feature and, beyond that, various forms of avant-garde, experimental, no-budget or otherwise economically marginal production.¹ In between lie many shades of difference. There are lower-budget Hollywood features, including traditional star vehicles and genre pictures. There are more substantial and/or more commercially oriented independent productions, of various kinds. In the middle, however, is a particular territory that constitutes the focus of this book: the zone that has become known as Indiewood, an area in which Hollywood and the independent sector merge or overlap. Films produced and distributed in this domain have attracted a mixture of praise and controversy. From one perspective, they offer an attractive blend of creativity and commerce, a source of some of the more innovative and interesting work produced in close proximity to the commercial mainstream.² From another, this is an area of duplicity and compromise, in which the 'true' heritage of the independent sector is sold out, betrayed and/or co-opted into an offshoot of Hollywood.

The aim of this book is to offer a more objective examination of the Indiewood sector, as a distinctive region of the recent and contemporary American film landscape. A number of detailed case studies are employed to offer an understanding of Indiewood at several different levels. Indiewood is considered, throughout this book, as an industrial/commercial phenomenon, the product of particular forces within the American film industry from the 1990s and 2000s. This includes close focus on the specifics of the film industry and its situation within the wider context of certain tendencies in contemporary cultural production in late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century capitalism. Indiewood is considered from the perspectives of both production/distribution (the strategies of industry players) and consumption, the latter including an attempt to locate Indiewood cinema in the wider social sphere of cultural-taste preferences and some consideration of viewer responses to the case-study films examined.³

Direct connections are made between these dimensions and the particular textual qualities offered by films produced, distributed and consumed in this part of the cinematic spectrum. A central characteristic of Indiewood cinema, this study argues, is a blend comprised of features associated with dominant, mainstream convention and markers of 'distinction' designed to appeal to more particular, niche-audience constituencies. Close textual analysis is employed to examine the extent to which examples mobilize or depart from formal and other norms associated with the Hollywood mainstream. The dominant Hollywood aesthetic is understood here as providing a point of comparison, as a set of historically and institutionally grounded norms; not a fixed and rigid set of procedures but, as David Bordwell puts it, a repertoire of alternatives that is bounded by particular limitations (for instance, that formal flourishes are usually expected to be given some narrative- or character-based motivation).⁴ Against the Hollywood norm, to varying degrees, can be measured a range of more or less distinctive alternatives that might be understood in some cases as constituting institutionally grounded norms of their own (including those variously described as the norms of 'avant-garde', 'art', 'indie' or 'independent' cinema, none of which have entirely fixed or uncontested definitions). One of the issues addressed by this book, to which I return in the conclusion, is whether a distinct and

identifiable set of norms can be associated with Indiewood as a hybrid location. Textual analysis is accompanied, in this study, by consideration of distribution strategies and extra-textual discourses such as promotional materials, reviews and the manner in which Indiewood production is positioned by practitioners and industry figures. The case-study approach employed here provides scope for detailed and in-depth analysis, chosen in preference to a wider survey of the field. Two chapters focus on the work of individual filmmakers: Steven Soderbergh and the screenwriter Charlie Kaufman. Two focus on Indiewood distribution and/or production companies: Miramax, the single biggest influence in the establishment of Indiewood, and Focus Features, the ‘speciality’ arm of Universal Pictures (speciality – or ‘specialty’ in the American English rendition – being the term often used within the industry to describe a range of less mainstream products that include American independent films, documentaries and overseas imports). Another chapter examines *American Beauty* (DreamWorks, 1999) and *Three Kings* (Warner Bros, 1999) as two indie-influenced films produced not by the speciality divisions but by the main arms of the Hollywood studios. Broadly the same combination of analytical perspectives is employed in each chapter, although some specific dimensions are highlighted to a greater extent in certain cases (for example, viewer responses in relation to *Kill Bill: Volume 1* [2003], one of the Miramax films considered in chapter 2, and analysis of the positioning signified by trailers and posters for the Soderbergh features in chapter 3).

Indiewood origins and background

The term ‘Indiewood’ was coined in the mid-1990s to denote a part of the American film spectrum in which distinctions between Hollywood and the independent sector appeared to have become blurred.⁵ It suggests a kind of cinema that draws on elements of each, combining some qualities associated with the independent sector, although perhaps understood as softened or watered-down, with other qualities and industrial practices more characteristic of the output of the major studios. The term is often used as a disparaging label by those involved in, or supportive of, the independent sector, as a way of

marking off certain types of cinema deemed to be too close to the activities of the studios to be deserving of the label 'independent'.⁶ For those who use the term more positively, it signifies an upsurge of more creative filmmaking that has found space inside, or on the edge of, the Hollywood system, a development interpreted by some (often rather hyperbolically) as a return to something like the situation of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the so-called Hollywood 'Renaissance' period, in which a number of less conventional, sometimes more challenging films were produced or distributed within the confines of the major studios.⁷

The most clear-cut institutional base of Indiewood is constituted by indie/speciality-oriented distributors and/or producers owned by the major studio companies: either studio-created subsidiaries (such as Sony Pictures Classics, Fox Searchlight and Paramount Classics) or formerly independent operations taken over by the studios (Miramax under the ownership of Disney from 1993, or Good Machine, taken over by Universal Pictures in 2002 as part of the basis of its subsidiary, Focus Features). Indiewood is located as a cross-over phenomenon, a product of the success of a number of 'breakout' features that marked the indie sector, especially from the early 1990s, as a source of interest to the big studio players. An earlier and abortive wave of studio involvement in the speciality market at the start of the 1980s (the formation of 'classics' divisions by United Artists, Twentieth Century Fox and Universal) was followed by a more concerted move into independent cinema and some parts of overseas 'art-house' cinema during the 1990s and into the early 2000s, a move spurred by the Hollywood-scale box-office success of films such as *Pulp Fiction* (1994) and *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), and the very healthy profit-to-cost ratio of a number of lower-grossing indie features.

If Indiewood is defined most clearly at this industrial/institutional level, my argument is that an equation can be made between this dimension and the particular qualities offered by many of the films produced and distributed within its orbit. In this conjunction of industrial location and textual definition, Indiewood can also include certain films made or distributed by the major studios themselves, rather than their speciality divisions; films such as *American Beauty* that appear to have been confected consciously to buy into the market

opened up by the independent sector and others that include radical components less often associated with the mainstream, substantially budgeted examples such as *Three Kings* and *Fight Club* (Fox, 1999). It might also embrace some features from institutionally non-studio-affiliated directions that appear designed specifically with potential indie/mainstream cross-over in mind. The indie sector itself, in its commercially distributed forms (that is, not including more abstract, experimental, politically radical or otherwise economically marginal work), often involves hybrid forms that draw on a number of different inheritances, including those associated with notions of 'art' cinema and more mainstream narrative feature traditions.⁸ Indiewood, in this context, would signify a particular region of the hybrid spectrum: that which leans relatively towards the Hollywood end of a wider compass that stretches from the edges of Hollywood to the less commercially viable margins.

The release slates of the speciality divisions tend to contain a mixture of films that might be defined, from their textual characteristics, as indie or Indiewood, along with overseas imports (issues considered in more detail in chapter 5). While some more distinctively indie films might be produced or acquired in the hope of achieving cross-over beyond the restricted confines of the art-house market, the term Indiewood is used at the textual level to distinguish examples in which such an aim or strategy appears to be embodied more fundamentally in the fabric of the production itself. The term can have slightly different implications, then, when used to characterize the qualities of individual texts rather than the institutional realm of the speciality divisions, the latter not being exclusively limited to the distribution of the former (or vice versa, although in this case the correlation is likely to be closer). There is, however, a significant and often causal link between the two, all the more so in cases in which the studio subsidiary has the greater stake that results from being producer as well as distributor.

The use of subsidiary arrangements such as semi-autonomous Indiewood divisions is typical of the operations of the Hollywood studios as part of global entertainment corporations. Specialist entities permit larger operations most effectively to exploit particular sectors of the market, alongside their chief priority of attracting mass-number

audiences to the blockbuster-scale and/or star-led productions around which the fortunes of the studios primarily revolve (a parallel elsewhere would be the designer boutique operated as a niche outlet inside the walls of a larger chain store). Indiewood divisions gain from expert knowledge of the speciality market by recruiting notable figures from the independent sector such as Harvey Weinstein, until the departure of the Weinsteins from the Disney fold, and James Schamus, former joint head of Good Machine, at Focus Features. They are usually given a significant degree of autonomy from their studio/corporate parents, often including the power to green-light production or make acquisitions up to a particular financial ceiling. Their operations remain subject more broadly to the dictates of their owners, however, as evidenced by the most likely underlying reasons for the break-up of the Disney/Weinstein relationship. Particular controversies might have been stirred by individual episodes, such as Disney's much-publicized forcing of Miramax to abandon its stake in Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), the last in a series of Miramax provocations to Disney shareholders before the Weinsteins were bought out and left to create a new operation, The Weinstein Company, in 2005. Much was also made of cultural clashes between the working practices of the subsidiary, which built its reputation on the creation and exploitation of controversy around its early breakthrough hits, and its in some ways unlikely-seeming parent. More significant, however, was the fact that Harvey and Bob Weinstein had ambitions for Miramax (including very large budget production and expansion into other media) unlikely to sit easily within the subordinate role granted to subsidiary divisions; the post-Weinsteins Miramax was designed to be a smaller and less autonomous part of the Disney empire.⁹

Involvement in the Indiewood/indie/speciality sector has a number of potential advantages for the studios, in addition to the ability to share in the windfalls that accrue to occasional large-scale independent hits and to broaden their overall portfolios more generally. It can enable them to bring emerging new filmmaking talent into their orbit, potentially to go on to serve mainstream duty, while also supplying attractive vehicles for existing star performers, enabling the studios to maintain valuable relationships while providing different or more

challenging work than the roles with which stars are usually associated (the presence of Jim Carrey in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* [2004], one of the case studies considered in chapter 1, is a good example). Pressure resulting from the desire of stars to work with a new generation of filmmakers is identified by Sharon Waxman as one of the factors that drew the majors towards the indie sector in the second half of the 1990s, a development that coincided with the rise of a small but significant group of executives committed to creating some space for less conventional approaches within or on the margins of the studio system.¹⁰ Associations with this kind of cinema can be of prestige value to the studios and their corporate owners, an intangible factor – how much is prestige really worth, compared to hard box-office or DVD dollars? – that is, nonetheless, not without significance, both for companies often accused of lowering standards of public taste and faced on occasion with the prospect of tighter regulation and for the self-image of individual executive figures. Films that can be located in the Indiewood zone have been particularly prominent in the achievement of Academy Awards and nominations in recent years, one source of prestige that tends to translate quite readily into cash and good reputation. Prizes of this kind are, as James English suggests, ‘the single best instrument’ for negotiating transactions between cultural



1. Stars in less conventional positions: Jim Carrey gets the treatment in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* © Focus Features

and economic capital; that is to say, in this case, for converting prestige into financial returns.¹¹ There is also value for the studios in creating the impression that they are not just involved in the business of maximizing revenues through the production of globally dominant franchise and star-led operations, but can also claim some involvement in the propagation of more ‘elevated’, challenging or ambitious work. They sought from the 1990s to buy into some of the currency gained by the term ‘independent’ at a time when it had come to signify something of greater cultural worth than what was usually associated with the Hollywood mainstream.¹² This included the creation of speciality divisions in which the identity of the studio parent was clearly advertised in the name of the subsidiary. Where this was not the case (Miramax, say, as opposed to Sony Pictures Classics, Paramount Classics or Fox Searchlight), the existence of a multitude of production and distribution entities could have the advantage, from a different perspective, of making the business appear more plural and open to competition than was really the case.

Indiewood as subsidiary capitalism

The Indiewood divisions of the major studios can be understood as a manifestation of a wider trend in contemporary capitalism towards what Mike Wayne terms ‘subsidiary and subcontractor capitalism’.¹³ The shift of this kind of operation to a position of prominence in the economy is usually associated with a move from Fordist (mass production/mass consumption) to post-Fordist (more flexible and fragmented production/consumption) regimes of accumulation. Although sweeping claims of epochal shifts from one to the other are in many ways problematic, it is widely accepted that Fordism, as a central feature of western economies, ran into difficulties by the 1970s, leading to numerous and far-reaching changes, including increased tendencies in some sectors from the 1980s onwards to target smaller and more exclusive niche markets, of which speciality cinema can be seen as one local example.¹⁴ There is, certainly, an historical coincidence of these broader trends and the period in which the American independent sector came to fruition in its current institutionalized form, even if the latter was also driven by a number

of more specific economic forces such as the demand for product and availability of finance for low-budget productions created by the 1980s video boom.¹⁵ The media and communications sector is seen by Martyn Lee as particularly prone to the tendency to focus on niche audiences, as evidenced by massive investments into a wide diversity of specialist periodicals and journals, and the proliferation of cable, satellite and terrestrial broadcasting (narrowcasting) networks, driven by ‘the imperatives of advertising to address the now divergent and highly segmented tastes, needs and sensibilities of the modern marketplace’.¹⁶

Speciality cinema and other such media products also fit into Lee’s suggestion that these transitions have included ‘a marked dematerialization of the commodity-form’, a shift in emphasis from the characteristically durable and material commodities of Fordism (cars, washing machines, etc.) to a greater role for non-durable ‘and in particular, experiential commodities which are either used up during the act of consumption or, alternatively, based upon the consumption of a given period of time as opposed to a material artefact’.¹⁷ Such markets have the advantage, for late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century capitalism, of being less prone to exhaustion and saturation (chronic threats to capitalist stability) than markets for material goods, creating potential for the continued expansion of the consumer economy into new and more finely distinguished realms. The 1980s is described by Lee as a period that saw ‘an enormous increase in the commodification and “capitalization” of cultural events’,¹⁸ another process in which the institutionalization of indie and the development of Indiewood cinema can be seen as component parts; a move, especially as it developed through the 1990s, in which significant portions of an ‘independent’ cinema defined previously as more separate, alternative or in some cases oppositional, became increasingly commodified and brand-marketed, and thereby penetrated by the prevailing forms of contemporary capitalism.

These developments can also be linked to understandings of the audiences targeted by Indiewood, and how these might be attracted by particular kinds of textual material. But first some qualifications are necessary. Whatever moves towards an increased emphasis on niche marketing have been involved in developments in the capitalist

economies of recent decades, larger or 'mass' markets have not been abandoned. The continued dominance of mainstream Hollywood cinema is an obvious example of this, targeting very large global audiences for its blockbuster products (even if the 'mass' audience is often a product of emphasis on particular constituencies, especially of relatively younger viewers). The speciality market is clearly of some interest to the studios but it is very much a secondary part of the business, the strictly commercial motivations for which are less obviously compelling than those found in many other niche media. Specialized television and magazine publishing, for example, are often founded on the economics of advertising revenues, as suggested in one of the above quotations from Lee. The fact that higher rates can be charged by programmes or publications that reach high-spending specialist audience fragments permits them to thrive on the basis of relatively small audiences (or, in a case such as the 'quality' television output of HBO, relatively small numbers of subscribers). The equivalent does not really exist in the case of speciality cinema, which makes its situation potentially more fragile, although niche broadcasters such as the Independent Feature Channel have become involved to a limited extent in production funding and theatrical distribution. Indiewood operations offer some commercial and less tangible benefits, as suggested above, but they are not in a position to gain obvious extra value from the relatively upscale markets they target, because they do not benefit from premium-rate advertising in their most important release windows (theatrical and home video/DVD). Higher prices are not usually charged for viewing and although an affluent 'connoisseur' audience might be more inclined to invest in 'special edition' DVDs, this is also a market heavily exploited in the mainstream. 'Added-value' prices might be set for the 'fancy coffees', mineral waters and cakes typically associated with art-house theatre concession stands, but, again, it seems doubtful that these offer higher margins than those charged for carbonated sugar-waters and popcorn at the multiplex. The screening of full-motion commercials other than trailers – as opposed to static advertising slides – was a new phenomenon in US cinemas of the early to mid-2000s, but seen as of primary benefit in reaching the mainstream 18–35 and young male demographics in the face of the increased fragmentation of television audiences.¹⁹

The American film industry continues, primarily, to revolve around a hit-based economy at all levels – Hollywood, Indiewood and indie; domestic cinema and overseas imports – that has lagged behind some other aspects of cultural production in its ability to take advantage of the growing potential for the exploitation of more extensive niche markets created by the era of broadband internet distribution in the early 2000s. It has invested relatively little to date in the phenomenon known as the ‘Long Tail’, popularized by Chris Anderson, the substantial market that can result from the aggregation of large numbers of much smaller niches.²⁰ The development of studio speciality divisions is consistent with Anderson’s argument that investment in both mainstream and niche markets is important to the future of larger companies operating in this context, in which a relative democratization of access and the existence of new customer feedback mechanisms can make it possible for a diversity of smaller products to gain attention and find their audience. Distribution direct to the internet or DVD offers potential outlets for films beyond the gatekeeping networks of the studios and larger independent operations. The studio speciality divisions remain primarily focused on fewer and larger niches, however, in the theatrical and DVD businesses, their function largely being to cherry-pick limited numbers of films for promotion and release, a process probably more likely to reduce than to increase the total number of non-studio productions that gain commercial distribution. The other important qualification required in any account that draws on notions of post-Fordism or the importance of niche markets, some of which include a utopian vision of decentralized operations, is that there has been no significant fragmentation of ownership and control, in the film business or more generally in niche-market-oriented capitalism, as indicated above in the case of the Indiewood speciality divisions of the studios and their corporate parents.²¹

Niche-market audiences, Indiewood and taste cultures

What, then, of the audiences for Indiewood productions? How might they be conceptualized? Is it possible to suggest particular kinds of

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