



A Companion to  
**American Indie Film**

Edited by Geoff King

**WILEY** Blackwell

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# Introduction

## What Indie Isn't... Mapping the Indie Field

Geoff King

All things are defined as much by what they are not as by what they are. If this applies widely, to all cultural phenomena, it seems a particularly useful starting point for our understanding of a concept such as indie film that only ever really has an meaning as an essentially *relative* quantity. So, to begin with, what is indie *not*? What is it defined *against*, in the manner in which the term – one that is often contested – will be employed in this volume? This is one way of easing towards a consideration of what it might be.

Indie is not Hollywood, its clearest point of negative reference (as is the case for many other nonmainstream forms of cinema). But neither is it the avant-garde or the experimental, or the most exploitation oriented of non-Hollywood American film. It is not “independent,” either, in the broader use of this important cognate term – not in the usage intended here, although this is likely to be a more contentious statement. This is, clearly, a major issue for any understanding of the definition of indie.

Indie and independent have often been used more or less coterminously, the former serving as shorthand for the latter. However, the two can also have more specific resonances, implying distinctions that – while far from absolute, exact, or unanimously agreed upon – are helpful to a more nuanced charting of this terrain. Indie is sometimes employed in a manner that highlights, or plays upon, its diminutive status, as a contraction: as something of lower status than the perhaps more rigorous sounding “independent.” The different resonances implied here are far from neutral or accidental, but can be situated as part of a hierarchical process of discursive positioning. Indie, in this more negative sense, suggests a falling away from the higher standards and demands implied by independent. If independent is taken to mean something fully separated from the industrial mainstream – usually, in this context, identified simply as Hollywood – indie might suggest something less so, in various ways.

Indie, in this sense, might be taken to mean something that claims some of the virtues of independence while having some attachment to Hollywood institutions or values, or a more general sense of softening, compromising, or “selling out” certain values and principles associated with independence. In some such approaches, indie signifies an overly commercial or commodified version, or imitation, or an attempt artificially to *confect* something that poses as, but never really is, independent. This kind of understanding is associated particularly with certain strains of indie that developed from around the mid-1990s and afterwards, viewed as a watering down or cooptation of the kinds of difference associated with independence.

In this volume, however, indie is used in a more neutral and inclusive sense (although such a term can never escape any such connotations of one kind or another and some differences will be found among the contributors on this point). So, what is indie, according to this definition? It is used here, as in my other recent work on the subject (for example King 2014), to define a particular range of non-Hollywood cinema that came to prominence, crystallized, and achieved a particular form of institutionalization in the period from approximately the mid- to late 1980s into the 1990s, when it grew significantly to the point at which some of the issues of cooptation cited above were raised. I would also argue, contrary to some others, that this variety of indie continued to exist up to the point of the writing of this book in the mid-2010s and can be expected to do so into the future, whatever particular economic difficulties the sector might experience in any specific period, such as the recession that started in the late 2000s.

This understanding of indie includes and largely overlaps with the cinema of what Michael Newman (2011) refers to as the “Sundance–Miramax” era, although I would, again, see this as extending beyond the end of the period in which Miramax played a central role, before and during its heyday as a division of Disney. Indie is used here to define this territory – itself far from singular or one dimensional – as something at least relatively distinct within the broader history of what can be included within the category of independent. Independent is taken here to include the many forms of American cinema that have existed outside the Hollywood mainstream. This is a hugely varied landscape including examples as different as the avant-garde, the underground, a number of ethnically or race-oriented cinemas of the decades before the second world war, low-budget exploitation films, and pornographic cinema.

A key issue here is the basis on which particular understandings of indie or independence are established. For some commentators, independence is a matter purely of industrial factors, principally of separation from the Hollywood studio system in any of its manifestations. For others, among whom I would locate myself, either a specific definition of indie or wider notions of independence also entails the particular *textual* qualities of the works involved, individually or collectively. Independence might also be defined, that is, by the subject matter of films, including how they tackle particular sociocultural issues, and thus how they are implicitly positioned in a political–ideological sense. Independence, or degrees of such, can also be defined at a formal level, in terms of the audiovisual strategies employed and the purposes for which these are used (for a fuller account of these ways of defining indie, see King 2005).

Both the sociocultural and formal dimensions of indie/independence are often also articulated in relation to Hollywood – specifically, as markers of difference and departure, to varying degrees, from Hollywood norms. These are usually matters of relative degrees that can be slippery and hard to pin down, which is one reason why industrial-only grounds of definition can seem attractive: it is more often possible to draw firm lines at this level, in terms of who is involved in the funding, production, or distribution of any particular example. But drawing firm lines is often a way to miss key aspects of the character of such a phenomenon: a gain in terms of clarity comes at the cost of a loss of greater understanding of cultural territory that is not clear-cut, and much of the richness and fascination of which lies in between such lines. How all of these dimensions of indie/independence line up in any individual case is a source of much variety. Films can be clearly independent at an industrial level without necessarily manifesting distinctly indie qualities textually, which is one of the bases on which I would make a distinction between my use of indie – to signify a particular range of films – and the broadest definition of independence as marked purely by separation from Hollywood institutions. Films can be innovative formally without being in any way radical at the sociocultural level, and vice versa. However, the limits that are set on the approaches available to films in sociocultural or formal terms remain in general terms closely related to the industrial dimension. As I have argued elsewhere (King 2005), scope for radical departure is usually closely tied to an industrial position at a distance from the more commercial mainstream, as manifested by either Hollywood or the more commercially oriented parts of the indie sector.

My use of the specific term indie involves a narrowing down, then, within the much broader field of the history of all American independent film or of all types of independence that might exist in any one particular period, including the recent past or the present. However, it is also wider than the usage of the term made by some other academic commentators. Yannis Tzioumakis (2013), for example, employs “indie” to characterize just one particular phase in the wider history of this kind of cinema, the period from 1989 to about 1996–1997. He distinguishes this from a preceding “independent” era, dating back to the late 1970s or early 1980s. A clear impression is given here of a general process of loss of independence, this version of the indie period being viewed as being succeeded by “Indiewood” (a dimension considered further below). My argument is that much more continuity can be found than is implied by an historical framework of this kind. Some tendencies involving a move closer to the mainstream in many cases can be identified across the periods marked out by Tzioumakis, a development he relates principally to the changing degree of Hollywood involvement in this terrain. But, for me, to translate this into the existence of such different phases, each titled in such a way, is significantly to overstate any such case and to miss the crucial fact that many different threads of indie/independent cinema continued to exist through the decades concerned, including the maintenance of some core aspects of indie practice as I define it here.

Indie is a territory that suggests a particular range of filmmakers, films, and institutions. It is not an exact quantity, the borders of which can be drawn very firmly or definitively, but neither is it an entirely vague and amorphous category. A key aspect

of its development was its institutionalization, particularly from the mid-1980s and into the 1990s, a well-documented process that made it more than just the sum of disparate parts. Its core components are by now familiar, although the terminological location of many of these as either indie or independent remains a matter of continuing dispute. As with many types of film classification, a broad sense of territory is established through the accumulation of names of filmmakers, film titles, and other institutions. Filmmakers whose work helps to define this variety of independence would include, although be far from limited to, the following, in no particular order: Jim Jarmusch, John Sayles, Steven Soderbergh, Richard Linklater, Kevin Smith, Joel and Ethan Coen, Quentin Tarantino, Todd Solondz, Todd Haynes, Spike Lee, Allison Anders, Rose Troche, and Nicole Holofcener. Key films, in establishing the breakthrough and prominence of the sector, would include (in chronological order) *Stranger Than Paradise* (Jarmusch, 1984), *She's Gotta Have It* (Lee, 1986), *sex, lies, and videotape* (Soderbergh, 1989), *Poison* (Haynes, 1991), *Slacker* (Linklater, 1991), *Reservoir Dogs* (Tarantino, 1992), *Clerks* (Smith, 1994), *Go Fish* (1994, Troche), *Pulp Fiction* (Tarantino, 1994), and *The Blair Witch Project* (Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez, 1999), among many others. Major institutions include distributors specializing in such films and festivals, most prominently Sundance, along with organizations such as the Independent Feature Project, one of the branches of which created the "indie Oscars" in the shape of the Independent Spirit Awards. Together, these played a key role in constituting this arena as an established and at least relatively distinct field of cultural production (to use the terms employed by Pierre Bourdieu [1993]) or art world (Becker 1982).

As a relatively distinct field, indie suggests varieties of independent film that make certain claims to a kind of "quality" or "artistic" status, although often mixed with other elements. It can be located, therefore, within a hierarchical sense of cultural valuation founded on long-standing oppositions between the realms of "art" and "popular culture," a framework that dates back at least to the eighteenth century (for more on the historical process involved, see Shiner 2001). It is its location in this territory that helps to explain much of the sensitivity or controversy that often surrounds this field, the constitution and maintenance of which has always entailed acts of boundary policing in which much can be invested by those involved in one way or another (including both practitioners and commentators; for more on the policing of boundaries specifically, see King 2014, "Introduction"). Indie is part of a large ground that lies in between two extremes identified by Bourdieu in relation to fields of cultural production more generally: what he terms the fields governed by the "autonomous" or the "heteronomous" principle.

Work governed by the autonomous principle exists in an arena entirely separate from the commercial realm, in which the only measure of value is artistic prestige in itself. As far as the wider field of independent film is concerned, this would be limited primarily to the domain of avant-garde or experimental production, much of which exists outside, or on the very furthest margins of, any commercial market. Work produced under the dictates of the heteronomous principal is, in this account, subject to the same economic constraints as noncultural commodities produced on the basis of market capitalism. This would be the location associated with most of

the productions of the Hollywood studios, although it is not necessarily the case that all Hollywood film exists entirely in this domain (for analysis of the role of prestige as one motivation for the production of “quality” work within the studios, see King 2016). Indie exists in part of the broader territory that falls between these two locations and can be understood as being subjected to a varying pull between the two different principles. Exactly how they are combined, or which is deemed to have the greater sway, or how much, accounts for much of the debate about the supposed merits of indie film or about what exactly is to be included – or about the relative merits of indie or independent as designators, and to what exactly each refers.

If indie is not some parts of what is included within the broader landscape of the independent, and does signify some areas reasonably clearly, there are also regions that *might* be included within the term but are subject to particular debate. A key example of this is what has become known as Indiewood, the area constituted primarily by the operations of the “specialty” divisions owned by some of the studios (“some” at the time of writing, although all of the studios at some point in the past decade or so). Whether or not these are included within the definition of indie or independent, in various uses, has been a subject of particular controversy (Perren [2013] even reserves the term indie itself for the output of the studio divisions; another, although less common, usage of the term that associates it with something like a “fall” from “true” independent status). Attachment to the major studios is, for some, a clear ground for exclusion from any notion of independence. Others, myself included, would argue for a more ambiguous location, one that has always involved a degree of autonomy on the part of such divisions. My own preference is to use the term Indiewood to mark the distinctive nature of this crossover region, although the films handled by such divisions vary. Some seem clearly to mix aspects of studio and indie approaches, sufficiently so to merit the term Indiewood at the textual level, as an identifier of a particular blend of textual qualities (see King 2009), although these operations have also been involved with films that seem more clearly indie/independent in terms of their form and content.

What, then, about a company such as Lionsgate, the largest unattached independent film producer–distributor in the United States at the time of writing, and one that, as Alisa Perren (2013) argues, has followed a deliberate strategy of not investing in notions of quality and cultural cachet, in favor of more commercially oriented strategies? My inclination, on balance, would be not to include Lionsgate in the definition of indie around which this volume is organized, for that reason – because this appears to have been a consciously adopted strategy. But I would see this as a far less than clear-cut matter. As Perren suggests, the company had been through a number of different phases leading up to the adoption of this approach, one that might also be subject to future variation. Accusations of being “excessively” commercial in orientation are regularly repeated markers of the policing of the boundaries of indie/independent. This is a process that involves attempts to draw lines within a field that is generally better understood, fundamentally, as being constituted by qualities such as hybridity and impurity, a field within which such lines are always open to challenge and contestation rather than ever being clearly defined. Qualities of indie films that share certain features in common with art cinema, or notions of the artistic more



generally, are frequently mixed with elements that seem more commercial in orientation and/or which have more in common with mainstream production.

The balance of such qualities, the mix found in any particular example or sub-categories, is highly variable. My definition of indie has a good deal in common, in this way, with that of the wider realm of art cinema offered by Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover, a category they suggest is “defined by its impurity” rather than any essence and that includes “feature-length narrative films at the margins of mainstream cinema, located somewhere between fully experimental films and overtly commercial products” (2010, 7, 6). The realms of art and indie cinema are distinct in some respects, the latter often being oriented more towards the commercial than the former, but also include considerable areas of overlap, an issue I explore elsewhere (King forthcoming). The *exclusion*, or attempted exclusion, of particular types of film – or particular companies or practitioners – from the realms of indie or independent is a key, active part of the *constitution* of the territory, an exercise in which the participants range from those within the sector to critics and academics such as myself and other contributors to this companion.

My understanding of indie, then, is as a particular cultural terrain, one that is shaped by a combination of factors that includes, in addition to the actual production and dissemination of a particular body of films, the creation of various institutional bases and discursive parameters (for a similar general approach, see Newman 2011). It is for this reason that this collection begins with chapters that investigate the field at this level, as a particular cultural landscape, and then proceeds to consider the relationship between indie film and other media, and the critical and marketing discourses through which indie film is positioned. I have chosen deliberately to begin in these dimensions, to build a concerted sense of the terrain in which indie is constituted in such broader terms, rather than, say, with the more specific historical manifestations charted in the following section.

The chapters of this book are divided into eight sections with headings as follows: “Indie Culture,” “Indie and Other Media,” “Criticism, Marketing, and Positioning Indie,” “Movements/Moments,” “Indie as Regional,” “Aesthetics and Politics,” “Kickstarting Indie,” and “Indie Acting and Stardom.” The numbers of chapters in each of these is variable, somewhat unevenly, as I have sought to organize these on the basis of quite closely shared focus, rather than attempting to shoehorn contributions into a more equal distribution among section headings. I have tried quite actively to shape the contours of the book, both in the original commissioning of contributions – all of which were commissioned from the authors – and through a basis of organization that seeks a movement from broad to more specific dimensions of indie film. If the early chapters set out some of the broader parameters of the field, I have tried as far as possible to encourage those who tackle more specific components to situate them within this wider context. One of the aims of this process has been to seek to produce a more coherently assembled body of work than is the norm for edited collections – while also seeking to respect the particular approaches and agendas of each of the contributors. The success of this venture is, of course, dependent on the quality of every one of these.