**CHAPTER 2**

**AN INCREASINGLY GLOBAL PRESENCE: CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN INDEPENDENT CINEMA OUTSIDE THE US**

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**Introduction**

In the early spring of 2011, founder and long-term leader of the Sundance Film Institute, Robert Redford, announced ‘Sundance London.’[[1]](#endnote-1) Taking its name from the best known US festival dedicated to independent film, Sundance London entailed organizing a four day “multi-disciplinary arts festival” in April 2012 that revolved primarily around the screening of American independent films. At the press conference Redford highlighted his main goal: [to] “bring to the UK, the very best in current American independent cinema, to introduce the artists responsible for it, and in essence help build a picture of [the US] that [was] broadly reflective of the diversity of voices not always seen in [its] cultural exports” (Knegt 2011). To that end, Redford and the Sundance Institute facilitated the UK premiere, under the auspices of Sundance London, of 14 of the features originally selected to participate in the 2012 Sundance Film Festival in Park City, Utah (“First-Ever Sundance London” 2012).

With the well-established independent film festival having been recently celebrated as becoming “relevant” again through its showcasing of “an outstanding crop of hard-hitting documentaries and challenging features” following a long period of hype, “flashy budgets and celebrity parties” (Rocchi 2012, 14-16), Sundance London would also stand to benefit from this shift in the festival culture. This is because the majority of American independent features that have reached theatres around the world in recent years were relatively big budget “indiewood” productions, often associated with studio specialty film labels such as Fox Searchlight and Focus Features or diversified stand-alone companies like Lionsgate. In this respect, Sundance London would have the opportunity to be associated with a new dawn of American independent cinema that is in the process of severing many of its ties with the Hollywood majors, specifically after the closure between 2008 and 2010 of specialty divisions such as Warner Independent Pictures, Paramount Vantage, Picturehouse and, perhaps more important, Miramax Films. Indeed, the 14-film program for Sundance London was almost equally divided between dramatic features and documentaries (an eight/six split), with only two dramatic features, *Liberal Arts* (Josh Radnor, 2012) and *2 Days in New York* (Julie Delpy, 2012), representing filmmaking with elements of obvious commercial appeal (well-established stars, popular generic frameworks and easy narrative accessibility).

While for a brief period Sundance relocated American independent cinema to London, another established film festival strongly associated with independent film has been leading a different kind of initiative. In 2009, the Tribeca Film Festival, in association with the Qatar Museums Authority, established the Doha Tribeca Film Festival in the state of Qatar. Showcasing films from around the world, including independent films from the United States, the Doha Tribeca Film Festival has utilized Tribeca Film Festival’s established brand of patronage of independent film and media to encourage comparable support of film (and film culture) in the Arab world. The Doha Tribeca Film Festival celebrated its fourth successful year in 2012, attracting thousands of visitors and securing high profile films from around the world.[[2]](#endnote-2)

If nothing else, these two examples reveal clearly the level of internationalization that characterizes American independent *film*, as a distinct category of filmmaking, and American independent *cinema*, as a well-defined institutional apparatus that supports this category of filmmaking. This level of internationalization exists not only in the realm of film festivals but can also be seen in other areas of the film business, including: theatrical distribution, with various studio specialty film divisions and diversified stand-alone companies distributing primarily a particular brand of “indiewood” film product around the world; online distribution, with several Internet companies making independent films available in a variety of markets; and even box office performance, with a variety of films performing well outside the United States, often surpassing the box office receipts achieved in the domestic market.[[3]](#endnote-3)

This degree of internationalization, however, has not always characterised contemporary American independent cinema, which for most scholars covers the period from the late 1970s/early 1980s to the present.[[4]](#endnote-4) Indeed, for most of the 1980s, American independent film had little exposure and only occasional success outside the US, while the industrial and institutional apparatus supporting it was firmly rooted in organizations, companies and initiatives that were based in the country. It was only in the 1990s, when contemporary American independent cinema arguably moved to different phases in its history—phases that I have labelled elsewhere as “indie” and “indiewood” (Tzioumakis 2012a)—that American independent film started circulating globally and on certain occasions with the level of success that is normally associated with major Hollywood film productions.

The present chapter will chart this journey of American independent film and cinema, paying particular attention to numerous factors that encouraged and facilitated their internationalization at particular historical junctures. I will argue that this internationalization has been driven primarily by the rising convergence of independent film with the major Hollywood studios, which, since the early 1990s, and specifically during the 1995-2005 decade, annexed large factions of independent cinema (Schatz 2012, 121), ultimately re-shaping it in a way that fitted their corporate structures, their business practices and their position in the global entertainment market. The main agents in this process were the second and third wave of the studio specialty film divisions (companies such as Miramax, Focus Features and Paramount Vantage),[[5]](#endnote-5) which became heavily associated with American independent film since the early 1990s and until the late 2000s when some of these divisions were shuttered by their conglomerate parents. In many ways then, the chronicle of the internationalization of American independent film and cinema is intricately linked with several business decisions taken by these studio specialty film divisions in the face of a changing film marketplace, driven by the rise of what Thomas Schatz (2012) has labelled “Conglomerate Hollywood” (121).

**Independent, Indie, Indiewood**

In a number of recent studies,[[6]](#endnote-6) I have argued for the periodization of contemporary American independent cinema into three relatively distinct historical phases, under the labels “independent,” “indie” and “indiewood,” particularly as other scholars have also utilized these labels to account for expressions of independent filmmaking that are arguably distinct from each other.[[7]](#endnote-7) Ranging from the late 1970s to the late 1980s and the runaway success of *sex, lies, and videotape* (Steven Soderbergh) in 1989, the first of these periods—the “independent”—is characterised by a particular type of film that I called “the low-budget, low-key quality film” (Tzioumakis 2012a, 32). Produced and distributed primarily by companies with no ties to the Hollywood majors, the “independent” film benefited from an emerging industrial and institutional apparatus that included a variety of initiatives designed to support it, such as the Sundance Film Institute, the Independent Film Project, PBS and its American Playhouse series and an increasing number of distribution companies. Some of these distributors set up shop in the late 1970s and early 1980s with the explicit intention of supporting this type of film (First Run Features, the Samuel Goldwyn Company, Cinecom and a few others), while existing distributors that specialised in genre and exploitation filmmaking also noticed the significant activity in quality independent film production and decided to branch out or intensified their commitment to that kind of business (Atlantic Releasing Corporation, New Line Cinema, etc.). Independent film also benefited from the introduction of the first wave of the studios and the mini-majors’ “classics” divisions (United Artists Classics, Triumph Films, Universal Classics, Twentieth Century Fox International Classics and Orion Classics) in the early 1980s, though these companies released only a handful of US films as negative pickup deals (films financed and produced by independent companies without having a distribution deal in place) and steered clear from investing in production as more recently established studio specialty divisions did in later years.

With the majority of these quality independent films during this period being financed, produced and distributed outside the Hollywood studios, it is not surprising that by and large these films were permeated by a variety of alternative aesthetics that marked them as distinct from their Hollywood counterparts. Furthermore, and given that a lot of the filmmakers in that period received financial support from institutions with a social impact remit such as the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities or public service broadcasters such as PBS, it is also not surprising that a large number of these films dealt with strong socio-political themes. These included themes such as unionisation, the experience of ethnic, racial and gender minorities, and little known histories about under-represented groups in American society (for instance, the 1980 film *Heartland* (Richard Pearce), which dealt with the history of pioneer women in the frontier, received substantial funding from the NEH’s Hidden Histories programme (Cornwell 1981, 62)). These “uncommercial” subjects were often accompanied by the use of unusual filmmaking techniques (such as the direct camera address in Spike Lee’s *She’s Gotta Have It* (1986) or the exclusive use of long takes in Jim Jarmusch’s *Stranger than Paradise* (1984)), which were in contrast to Hollywood’s firm return to the rules of classical filmmaking after the creative experiments of the Hollywood Renaissance period in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Following the great commercial success of *sex, lies, and videotape* in 1989 and other independent films around that time (*Stand and Deliver*, Ramón Menéndez, 1988; *Do the Right Thing*, Spike Lee, 1989, and *Roger and Me*, Michael Moore, 1990), the early 1990s saw an outburst of activity in the quality independent sector. A major part of this activity took place under the auspices of major studios, which introduced the second wave of specialty film labels, either through the establishment of subsidiaries such as Sony Pictures Classics in 1992 or through the corporate takeover of formerly stand-alone producer-distributors, such as Miramax, which was taken over in 1993 by Disney. While a large number of films continued to be produced and distributed by companies without any ties to the major studios, Miramax, Sony Classics and New Line Cinema’s specialty film division Fine Line Features quickly became the market leaders. Some of these companies also started financing and producing films, which meant that these films were guaranteed distribution. Not surprisingly, these companies started attracting many successful independent filmmakers (Robert Altman, Hal Hartley and Gus Van Sant at Fine Line; Quentin Tarantino and Kevin Smith at Miramax), and in a way helped create a two-tiered independent film sector, one under the aegis of the Hollywood majors, and one outside it. At the same time, however, the sector that had no ties to the studios continued to grow, creating a progressively more congested marketplace for independent film. Given the strong presence of several major studios on the independent film scene, it became untenable for filmmakers, critics, the trade press and the film-going public to continue using the label “independent.” In this respect, the label “indie” became almost immediately popularized. As many “indie” films became more expensive to produce and promote, and increasingly featured commercial elements normally associated with Hollywood studio films (stars, genre, accessible narratives), it could be argued that the time following the success of *sex, lies, and videotape,* and until the mid-1990s, represents a distinct period in the history of contemporary American independent cinema—the “indie” years.

The above changes had a clear impact on the aesthetics of the films. On the one hand, the increasing proximity between some factions of independent filmmaking and Hollywood cinema as was facilitated by the second wave of the studios’ specialty film divisions came part and parcel with an increasing use of conventions that were hitherto associated with Hollywood cinema. These included: the presence of stars (Angelica Huston in *The Grifters* (Stephen Frears, 1990), River Phoenix in *My Own Private Idaho* (Gus Van Sant, 1992), Harvey Keitel in *Reservoir Dogs* (Quentin Tarantino, 1992), etc.) and the use of clear cut generic frameworks (such as the heist movie in *Reservoir Dogs* or the con artist film in *The Grifters*). Adherence to Hollywood conventions prompted the construction of increasingly accessible narratives, despite the playful execution of these narratives in terms of the use of visual style. On the other hand, however, the indie films that continued to be made and distributed away from the Hollywood studios arguably retained stronger links than their studio endorsed counterparts with the low-budget, low-key quality films of the 1980s and their often esoteric, challenging and politically significant subject matter. These included, for instance, the New Queer films of the early 1990s such as *Poison* (Todd Haynes, 1991) and *Swoon* (Tom Kalin, 1992), which were far removed narratively and stylistically from the more mainstream “indie” titles mentioned above, including Van Sant’s *Idaho*, which was also part of the New Queer film cycle. In this respect, and as I argued elsewhere (Tzioumakis 2012a, 35), this second phase of contemporary American independent cinema included a heterogeneity of voices, narratives, styles, ideas and budgets that were loosely grouped under the catch all label indie cinema.

While a large number of indie films did manage to retain their links to the challenging material that characterised many of the films of the earlier “independent” phase, beginning in the late 1990s, American independent film arguably moved to yet another phase, which has been characterised by even greater commercial success than the indie period, but reveals considerably less overlap with the films of the independent period. Led by Miramax’s increasing emphasis on big-budget, star-driven and narratively accessible films, and the introduction of a third wave of specialty film divisions that saw Fox, Paramount, Universal and Warner Bros. establish companies that would trade in the indie film market, contemporary American independent cinema rapidly moved toward the “indiewood” era, which was characterized by an intensified convergence with the Hollywood major studios and their films.[[8]](#endnote-8) The establishment of Fox Searchlight, Focus Features, Paramount Classics (later Paramount Vantage) and Warner Independent came with a mandate from their parent companies for a renewed emphasis on film production, with an even greater dependence on elements with commercial appeal (primarily Hollywood stars and popular film genres) that pushed production and marketing costs to new heights. Despite the blockbuster success of several titles (among others, *Good Will Hunting*, Gus Van Sant, 1997; *Traffic*, Steven Soderbergh, 2000; and *No Country for Old Men*, Joel and Ethan Coen, 2007), many indiewood films failed to find an audience, while even the commercial success of many films was often mitigated, especially as by 2007 the average negative and marketing costs of films from the studio specialty film divisions had reached an astounding $74.9 million (Miller 2008, 53-54).

Following the closure of Warner Independent, Paramount Vantage, Picturehouse and Miramax in the 2008-2010 period, American independent cinema underwent a major transformation. While the indiewood model continues to define the sector, the consolidation that followed the closure of studio divisions, in tandem with an escalating success of low-budget films via online delivery platforms, points to a newly emerging era, the parameters of which have yet to be fully defined.

The advent of the indiewood model in the contemporary independent cinema sector brought more far-reaching changes in the aesthetic organisation of American independent films. With the studios’ third wave of specialty film divisions concentrating primarily on production, often accompanied by substantial financial investment, it is not surprising that more care was taken for the commercial elements of indiewood films to shine through. Stardom became even more central in terms of narrative construction than in the earlier period, with major Hollywood stars such as Tom Cruise (*Magnolia*, P.T. Anderson, 1999), Michael Douglas (*Traffic*, Steven Soderbergh, 2000) and Jim Carrey (*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, Michel Gondry, 2004) appearing in high profile indiewood productions. Equally, genre became a cornerstone of most indiewood films, with a number of generic categories that were formerly almost exclusively associated with Hollywood studio filmmaking becoming co-opted by indiewood (such as the musical (*Chicago*; Rob Marshall, 2002); the western (*Brokeback Mountain*; Ang Lee, 2005); the revenge film (*Kill Bill* Vol. 1 and 2, Quentin Tarantino, 2003-04) and the teenpic (*Juno*, Jason Reitman, 2007)). Although many of these films also dealt with political subject matter (the futility of the fight against drug trafficking in *Traffic*) or offered hard hitting critiques of particular issues (celebrity culture and homophobia in *Chicago* and *Brokeback Mountain*, respectively) as audiences have come to expect of American independent cinema, these efforts were often buried under the films’ slick production values, strong stardom, genre expectations and very high quality entertainment. This prompted Geoff King (2009) to argue that although indiewood combines “some qualities associated with the independent sector, [these tended to be] understood as softened and watered-down, with other qualities and industrial practices more characteristic of the output of the major studios” (3).

The rest of this chapter will chart the internationalisation of American independent film, with a focus on development in these three periods: the independent, the indie, and indiewood.

**Limited Circulation: The “Independent” Years**

During the first phase of US independent cinema’s history, low-budget, low-key quality films were rarely distributed or shown outside of North America. With the vast majority of these films financed, produced and distributed outside of Hollywood’s influence, their exposure was limited to the festival circuit, and from there and via the services of international sales rep(resentative)s potentially to distribution deals with a handful of regional or local distributors. A small number of films were also represented in film fairs and showcases like *MIFED* in Milan (1980- ) and the *Le Marché du Cinema*, the official film market of the Cannes Film Festival. Overall, though, the number of films from the quality independent film sector that “travelled” outside the US remained low, with only a few titles securing distribution deals in foreign theatrical and ancillary markets, like the home video market, especially in the first half of the 1980s.

The main problem independent film producers faced in their efforts to secure foreign theatrical and ancillary distribution for their films was the absence of visibly commercial elements that would help international distributors determine how to market such films. With most of that period’s films produced by small companies, with investments that ranged from a few thousand to a few hundred thousand dollars and without the presence of Hollywood stars and/or popular genre frameworks, the chances of securing distribution both in the US and in the international markets were limited. In this respect, while obviously focusing primarily on the domestic market, the emerging industrial and institutional infrastructure in the US also strove to create opportunities for independent films in the international markets. Two of the key early initiatives that targeted both fronts were the American Film Market, established in Los Angeles in 1981, and the International Feature Film Market (later relabelled as the International Film Project Market), set up in New York City around the same time.

Established by the American Film Marketing Association (which later changed its name to the Independent Film and Television Alliance), the American Film Market has been a major destination for independent films. This is because the American Film Marketing Association has historically consisted of the key stand-alone US distributors as well as a substantial number of non-US financing, production and distribution companies such the French Canal Plus. In this respect, independent films showcased at the American Film Market had some exposure to international distributors and therefore the potential for a distribution deal in one or more foreign markets. The International Feature Film Market (IFFM), on the other hand, was set up by the Independent Film Project (IFP), an organisation established in 1979 by independent film pioneers (headed by Sandra Schulberg) to support the work of non-commercial filmmakers. The IFFM quickly became a major showcase for films by members of the organization who could use it to screen their work—complete or in progress—for distributors and/or investors. Furthermore, as a member of an international network of partnerships (including: the Berlin International Festival and market and, more recently, the Rotterdam Cinemart, the Cannes Producers’ Network, and several other organizations) the IFP channelled a selection of films made by its members to key international festivals and events, where some of them attracted significant attention and, in some occasions, secured distribution deals with international distributors.[[9]](#endnote-9) For instance, following its participation and success at the Cannes Film Festival in 1984, Jim Jarmusch’s *Stranger than Paradise* secured various distribution deals around the world, including in countries such as West Germany, Sweden, France, Netherlands, Portugal, Finland, Hungary and Australia.[[10]](#endnote-10) Rosen and Hamilton (1990) also demonstrate how *Heartland*, one of the key early titles credited with kick-starting contemporary American independent cinema in the early 1980s, was sold in many European territories following the film’s exposure at festivals prior to its theatrical release, especially its participation at the Berlin International Film Festival where it was awarded the main prize (111, 118).

In the 1980s, festival participation represented by far the most important opportunity for international exposure for American independent films. This was because, as Marijke de Valck (2007) has argued, film festivals such as Cannes, Berlin and Venice “are central sites within a global influential film system that both counters and complements the Hollywood hegemony” (87). In this sense, and while films by the Hollywood majors have always been part of the festival scene (often participating in special out of competition screenings), the emphasis for international and mainly European film festivals has been primarily on non-US titles. As de Valck explains, festivals became popular as they allowed European films to be exhibited “in prestigious international settings without being dependent on intermediate distributors” (93), who were selecting films for distribution on purely commercial criteria and who were often associated with the distribution networks of the major Hollywood studios. This means that the festivals were very receptive to “alternative” forms of filmmaking, with Cannes in particular acquiring a reputation in the late 1970s and early 1980s for promoting a “surge of marginalised and new productions,” including horror, instructional video and pop video (97).

It is within this context that the low-budget, low-key quality independent film of the 1980s found a fertile ground for exposure outside the US. With their often clear “anti-Hollywood” stance[[11]](#endnote-11) and their numerous points of contact with films associated with the European art-house cinema,[[12]](#endnote-12) American independent films were added to a variety of festivals from the 1980s onwards. This can be seen clearly in the list of US independent films that participated in the Cannes Film Festival (see Table 2.1) between 1980 and 1985.[[13]](#endnote-13) Cannes was an early supporter of American independent film by featuring a selection of now canonical titles. Indeed, in the 1978-1984 period, three American independent films received the prestigious *Camera d’Or* award, which was introduced in 1978 for first feature films: *Alambrista!* (Robert M. Young, 1978), *Northern Lights* (John Hanson and Rob Nilsson, 1979) and *Stranger than Paradise* (1984). This clearly demonstrates that American independent films were of comparable quality to their European and world art-house cinema counterparts.

[Figure 2.1 about here]

The success of these and other films on the European festival scene had a further but less obvious impact on American independent cinema of the time. It led to its increased recognition in the domestic marketplace, which has relied traditionally on profitability as its key criterion for success. This was particularly the case for American cinema in the early 1980s, which privileged increasingly blockbuster and high concept films, while it was still recovering from the indulgence and excess that characterised a number of the Hollywood Renaissance films of the late 1960s and 1970s that culminated with the staggering box office failure of *Heaven’s Gate* (Cimino) in 1980. Given that low-budget, low-key quality American independent films could not live up to the commercial success by the majority of Hollywood studio films, the European festival scene provided the former with an ideal basis to garner attention, occasionally win awards and highlight their (generally limited) potential for profitability. On many occasions, this translated into a distribution deal with a US company—since most of the films were produced with no such deal in place—and the opportunity for a limited theatrical run. Even though large box office successes were extremely rare in the 1980s, festival participation did provide American independent films with credentials that they would otherwise be lacking. This was especially important for the small but loyal art-house film audience for whom Hollywood studio films tended to lack sophistication and challenging subject matter.[[14]](#endnote-14)

Despite exposure on the festival scene, theatrical and non-theatrical distribution outside the US remained a dream for most of these films. On the one hand, theatrical distributors were reluctant to acquire the rights for films with no clear commercial appeal. On the other hand, video and cable distributors were hesitant in releasing them in ancillary markets. This was also because video and cable penetration in Europe and the rest of the world lagged behind the US.[[15]](#endnote-15) As a result, despite a fairly good representation of American independent films in US ancillary markets,[[16]](#endnote-16) their numbers were substantially fewer in comparable international markets. One could argue that American independent film in the 1980s, during the “independent” years, had few opportunities for international circulation and success.

**The Makings of an International Distribution Network: The Indie Period**

For most scholarly accounts of American independent cinema, including this chapter, the critical and commercial success of *sex, lies, and videotape* represents a major turning point in the development of the independent film sector.[[17]](#endnote-17) Steven Soderbergh’s film was selected for the official program of the 1989 Cannes Film Festival, and competed against other US independent film productions such as *Do the Right Thing* and *Mystery Train* (Jim Jarmusch). The film won the *Palme d’Or* that year, amidst great media hype. Following a successful theatrical release by Miramax, *sex, lies, and videotape* recorded an impressive US theatrical box-office gross of approximately $25 million. It also performed particularly well on the international theatrical market, grossing a total of $12 million (The Numbers). Among other countries, the film was released in France, Sweden, Germany, Australia, Japan and the Netherlands (“Release Dates”), which, together with the UK and Spain, made up 85% of American foreign sales, including home video and television, in the early 1990s (Wiese 1992, 94).

The success of *sex, lies, and videotape* in the key international markets for American films helped set in motion numerous developments that would make the circulation of American independent films outside the US much smoother. This became evident when independent films continued to win acclaim at international film festivals such as *Wild At Heart* (David Lynch) and *Barton Fink* (Joel and Ethan Coen), which won the *Palme d’Or* in 1990 and 1991, respectively, underscoring in the most affirmative of ways the endorsement of American independent film by the international film and critic community. These developments included: the proliferation of foreign sales companies willing to represent US independent productions in the international markets; the distribution of independent films by American companies with established distribution networks in key international markets; and the emergence of a multitude of funding sources in the form of terrestrial, cable and satellite television channels and networks, following the deregulation of television in many European markets. Indeed, the European television industries, hungry for programming, became one of the most prominent supporters of American independent cinema in the first half of the 1990s.

Central to all these developments was an increase of commercial elements in many of the films that characterised this phase of contemporary American independent cinema, especially the presence of stars and the use of genre. These elements, in addition to higher budgets and production values, made American independent films more marketable, both inside and outside the US. This prompted foreign film sales companies based in the US to take these films more seriously and to start scouting festivals and commercial showcases such as the AFM for clients. According to Wiese (1992), the 60 or so foreign film sales companies that were operating in major film markets were typically handling the distribution of American independent films outside the US, not just in the theatrical market but also for home video and television (278).

While, in many ways, this kind of approach was similar to the way business was conducted in the previous period, new distribution channels started to emerge for independent film outside the US. In 1990, successful stand-alone producer and distributor New Line Cinema established Fine Line Features as a subsidiary with a mandate to focus exclusively on low-budget films in English, and in particular American independent film titles. With such (now) canonical titles like *My Own Private Idaho*, *Trust* (Hal Hartley) and *A Night on Earth* (Jim Jarmusch) in its first line-up in 1991, Fine Line became quickly a major force in the sector. Unlike its competitors, Fine Line could rely on its films being distributed outside the US through New Line International, the foreign sales and distribution arm of its parent company, while also occasionally utilizing foreign sales agents for markets in which New Line did not have direct representation (Carver 1998, 18). This arrangement allowed Fine Line to operate successfully in the 1990s, despite the fact that many of its titles underperformed at the US theatrical box-office.[[18]](#endnote-18)

Fine Line’s successful utilization of foreign film distribution as a cushion that mediated box office disappointments in the domestic market clearly shows the growing importance of the international markets for a film’s profitability. In this respect, it seems that companies with even more established and extensive foreign distribution networks, such as the Hollywood majors, would be in an even more advantageous position than stand-alone companies to push the independent film product, not just in the key markets for American films but also in smaller markets, where companies such as New Line International might not have access. During the indie years, between the late 1980s and mid-1990s, there were two Hollywood studios that were involved with independent film distribution: Sony Pictures and Disney. The former entered the American independent film market through the establishment of a subsidiary, Sony Pictures Classics in 1992, and the latter through the corporate takeover of the stand-alone company, Miramax Films in1993.

While Sony Pictures Classics focused predominantly on the US theatrical market, Disney-backed Miramax gained immediate access to its parent company’s international distribution network, Buena Vista International, and consequently a large number of international markets. With this kind of access, it is not surprising that Miramax moved immediately into production, and reaped the benefits of this approach with its record breaking production *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1994). Distributed by Buena Vista International, the film recorded a staggering international box office gross of $106 million, one sixth of which ($18 million) came from the UK alone (“Box Office/Business”). In this respect, a major studio and its specialty film subsidiary followed Fine Line’s approach: the use of the parent company’s established distribution network in tandem with the sale of a film’s rights to several distributors through the help of foreign sales representative and agents.

By the mid-1990s, however, only a small number of films like *Pulp Fiction* were financed and produced by a studio subsidiary, and had a distribution deal in place right from the beginning. The majority was still funded and produced by independent production companies that had no ties to the major Hollywood studios. Financial sources included limited partnerships, personal loans, private investors and pre-sales (Levy 1999, 496). A major new source of financing came through pre-sales to foreign television networks, which proved to be important backers of American independent film production throughout the 1990s. Following the deregulation of many European countries’ television markets in the late 1980s and the concomitant launch of countless new terrestrial, cable and satellite television channels, the demands for programming became particularly pronounced. With contemporary American independent cinema’s increased emphasis on elements with commercial appeal and with the television rights of these increasingly popular films available for a relatively small amount compared to Hollywood studio films, it was no surprise that they represented an attractive option in terms of programming. As a result, the early and mid-1990s saw European broadcasters investing *en masse* in American independent film production as a cheap and effective way to acquire commercial US product without having to pay the exorbitant prices that the major Hollywood studios were asking for their expensive blockbuster films. According to Levy (1999), overseas sales of American independent films peaked in 1996 at $1.65 billion, aided above all by the still expanding television market. Fifty-six percent of these revenues came from European markets alone (25-26).

This boom came to an end in the late 1990s as a result of factors that included “intensified competition in European countries’ cable and satellite television sectors which forced pay TV rates to plummet” (Molloy 2009, 12), and the inability of a large number of independent films to attract a significant television audience. In addition, the slowdown of the German economy caused a downturn in one of Europe’s biggest markets for American independent films and foreign television pre-sales (King 2005, 37). However, by that time contemporary American independent cinema had already entered into its next phase, the “indiewood” years, which brought with them new models for the circulation of American independent film outside the US.

**Studio Specialty Film Divisions and Digital Delivery Systems: The Indiewood Years**

The global commercial success of *Pulp Fiction* demonstrated—with even greater emphasis than *sex, lies, and videotape*—that niche film production and distribution in general, and American independent film in particular, had the potential for excellent profits when handled properly. In this respect, if Soderbergh’s film became one of the catalysts for the establishment of specialty film divisions by major Hollywood studios such as Sony Pictures and Disney, Tarantino’s film became an even stronger motivator for the rest of the studios to start trade in independent film. Sony and Disney were soon joined by others who focused on the distribution of independently produced films: Fox, with Fox Searchlight, started in late 1995; Paramount, with Paramount Classics, in 1998; Universal, with Focus Features, in 2002; and Warner Bros. with Warner Independent Pictures, in 2004. Additionally, Sony added Screen Gems in 1999 as a specialty division, as did Warner Bros. with Picturehouse in 2005. Furthermore, the early 2000s also witnessed the emergence of a number of ‘mini-majors’—well-capitalised producer-distributors that were either divisions of media conglomerates other than the Hollywood studios (USA Films, which was a division of the USA Network) or stand-alone companies (Artisan, Newmarket and Lions Gate). These companies squeezed out of the market a large number of the smaller, less financially secure, independent companies of the 1990s such as October, IRS Media, and Triton Pictures.

The gradual entrance of these companies into the independent sector inevitably changed the rules of the game. Supported by the deep pockets of their parent companies, the studios’ specialty film divisions turned to film production with a greater focus on commercial elements and higher production and marketing costs (Tzioumakis 2012b, 10-12). Although many of these productions were financed by corporate capital provided by the parent company, the specialty divisions progressively also started to exploit opportunities for partnerships and collaborations on a global scale, effectively through co-financing arrangements and co-production. For instance, Fox Searchlight benefited from an agreement with the British company DNA Films, which was partly funded by UK Lottery Funds (Tzioumakis 2012b, 147). The companies co-financed an assortment of commercially appealing films, including *28 Days Later…* (Danny Boyle, 2004) and *The Last King of Scotland* (Kevin Macdonald, 2006), which became great box office successes for Fox Searchlight’s theatrical and home entertainment markets. This trend reached a critical point in the late 2000s when various Hollywood studios closed their US film-focused studio divisions and established new subsidiaries in order to exploit opportunities for the financing, production and distribution of niche filmmaking around the world. For instance, following the closure of Paramount Vantage in 2008, Viacom established the Paramount Worldwide Acquisitions Group in July 2008 as “a centralized acquisitions and local productions arm that [would] feed pics into the pipelines of Paramount Pictures [International] and Paramount Vantage” (quoted in Tzioumakis 2012b, 170). Notwithstanding the closure of its physical distribution facilities, the name ‘Paramount Vantage’ was retained as a marketing brand.

Despite this new emphasis on commercially appealing world cinema films in the 2000s, US indiewood remained important for studio divisions and key stand-alone distributors. Stars, genre, niche marketing, exploitation of authorship, accessible narratives, and the presence of often gratuitous sex and violence became particularly pronounced characteristics of a large number of films from the sector. According to Geoff King (2009), the growing emphasis of these divisions on production led to “an increasing tendency to favour more conservative or star-led properties” that often blurred previously well-established distinctions between the independent and major studio sectors (110).

Not surprisingly, this convergence between independent and Hollywood cinema— eventually known as “indiewood”—had dramatic repercussions on the ways in which American independent film travelled around the world. With the major studios’ specialty film subsidiaries controlling production and worldwide distribution rights, their distribution networks became prominent conduits for the circulation of an increasing number of American indiewood films, which were perceived as products with a distinct marketing identity. With the major Hollywood studios producing a small number of mostly expensive films per year, their global distribution networks were in great need of additional product, which their specialty film divisions started to supply in substantial numbers. In this respect, from the late 1990s onwards, Buena Vista International, 20th Century Fox International and other distribution networks that belonged to major studios with a global reach started to include large numbers of independent titles in their catalogues.

Arguably, more than any other major Hollywood studio, it was Universal that took the steps to maximise its profits from the films produced by its specialty labels. Although Universal had invested in many independent companies in the 1990s (for instance, Gramercy and October Films), it was only in 2002 when it established its wholly owned subsidiary Focus Features, a company that was the product of a large number of complex mergers and takeovers.[[19]](#endnote-19) Despite having merged a number of companies, Universal did not feel it had the complete package needed to be able to compete with established forces such as Miramax and Fox Searchlight. Therefore it acquired the stand-alone company Good Machine together with its successful foreign sales division under the name Good Machine International. Under the new banner of Focus Features International, the division pursued the sale of foreign rights for approximately 15-16 films per year—all Focus Features films, in addition to titles from producers who had established relationship with Good Machine International before its takeover from Universal (“Universal’s Independent Movie Operation” 2003, 10).

At the same time, new types of independent filmmaking emerged, which complemented the global presence of indiewood. Exploiting the presence of constantly improving digital production and delivery systems, low-budget—often DIY—independent filmmaking started growing exponentially. Since then, multi-platform access of content on laptops, mobile phones and tablets, in addition to social media (from YouTube to Facebook and Twitter) has allowed for independent film to become visible and, perhaps more importantly, easily accessible on a global scale. Part of these initiatives involve the teaming up of independent filmmakers with film festival organizers and non-theatrical distributors (such as pay cable and other on-demand services) as well as social media (YouTube in particular) to make available low-budget films that no commercial theatrical distributor would represent (Hernandez 2010). All these developments have created an unpredictable global distribution landscape for American independent film, especially as this landscape continues to feel the aftershock of the closure of over half of the studios’ specialty film divisions between 2008 and 2010.

**Conclusion**

Within the space of approximately 30 years, from the early 1980s to the early 2010s, American independent film outside the US changed dramatically, influenced by its movement through the “independent” years, to the “indie” and “indiewood” phases. In addition to growing commercialization, this evolution brought about the gradual shift of a large part of independent film production from outside of Hollywood into the fold of major film studios. This became especially prominent once the studio specialty film divisions—during the indie and indiewood phases—began to finance and produce independent films, thus creating an independent cinema category as part of their commercial mandates. As producers of independent films, the studio specialty film divisions utilized their parent companies’ established international theatrical and non-theatrical distribution networks. As a result, their titles became available globally, and often achieved great commercial success. These practices, however, were far removed from the ones associated with the “independent” phase of contemporary American independent cinema, during which only a small number of films attracted foreign distribution deals after their successful reception at international film festivals and venues.

These developments have changed the fabric of contemporary American independent cinema. Independent film has been reconfigured—from the outside to the inside—and consequently has come closer to horizontally and vertically integrated corporate Hollywood. However, while clear signs of co-optation by Hollywood can be seen in more commercialized productions and in the designation of indiewood, this does not mark the end of independent cinema and film. Today, more and more American independent films are digitally distributed and consequently migrate across mobile media platforms to be enjoyed by global audiences.

Key Film Titles (in chronological order)

*Northern Lights* (John Hanson and Rob Nilsson, 1978, US)

*Heartland* (Richard Pearce, 1980, US)

*Stranger than Paradise* (Jim Jarmusch, 1984, US)

*She’s Gotta Have It* (Spike Lee, 1986, US)

*sex, lies, and videotape* (Steven Soderbergh, 1989, US)

*The Grifters* (Stephen Frears, 1990, US)

*Poison* (Todd Haynes, 1991, US)

*My Own Private Idaho* (Gus Van Sant, 1992, US)

*Reservoir Dogs* (Quentin Tarantino, 1992, US)

*Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1994, US)

*Magnolia* (Paul Thomas Anderson, 1999, US)

*Traffic* (Steven Soderbergh, 2000, US)

*Lost in Translation* (Sofia Coppola, 2003, US)

*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (Michel Gondry, 2004, US)

*Brokeback Mountain* (Ang Lee, 2005, US)

*Juno* (Jason Reitman, 2007, US)

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**Endnotes**

1. This announcement was made in association with AEG Europe, the company that owns and operates the O2 Arena, one of London’s prime venues for cultural events. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The Doha Tribeca Film Festival ended its run in 2012, as the head of the festival, Amanda Palmer, departed the organization (now known as the Doha Film Institute). The DFI will continue to operate a festival, albeit with leadership firmly planted in the Middle East (Vivarelli 2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. For instance, the film *Lost in Translation* (Coppola, 2003) recorded a US theatrical box office gross of $44.6 million, while its international box office receipts stood at $61.9 million, approximately 30% more than its domestic take (BoxOfficeGuru.com). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. See, for instance, Levy (1999); King (2005) and Newman (2011), who focus either primarily or exclusively on the post-1980s era. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. For more on the distinctions between the different waves of studio specialty divisions, see Tzioumakis (2012b). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. See in particular Tzioumakis (2012a) and Tzioumakis (2012b). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. See, for instance, King (2009), who uses “independent” and “indie” interchangeably and distinguishes them from “indiewood” (268-269). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. I use the term convergence here following the work of Henry Jenkins (2006), who argued that its manifestation can be seen in the media industries in terms of “the concentration of ownership” (in the case of American independent cinema this involves the corporate takeover of several previously independent companies by the conglomerated majors) and the increasing presence of “extensions,” “synergies” and “franchises” (19), which were strictly characteristics of filmmaking under the aegis the majors until recently (see, for instance, the franchising of the “Viewaskew universe” created by well-known independent filmmaker Kevin Smith). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. For more details see IFP’s website (Independent Filmmaker Project). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. The film won the *Camera D’or* at Cannes, and the *Pardo d’oro* at the Locarno International Film Festival. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Peter Biskind (2005) describes the early 1980s quality independent film productions as “anything that Hollywood was not” (19). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. In a scene setting account of independent film production in the early 1980s, Annette Insdorf (1981) identified the “European style” that permeated these films (57-60). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. The information for Table 2.1 was collated from the Cannes Film Festival archives (“Cannes Film Festival Archives”). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. I would like to thank the editors of this volume for pointing this issue out to me. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. In the US, the number of VCR households jumped from 1,850,000 in 1980 to 23,500,000 in 1985 and the number of pay cable subscriptions increased from 8,900,000 in 1980 to 31,700,000 during the same period (“The 1980s” 1991, 86-87). [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. This was because several video companies (such as Vestron), desperate for product, had financed American independent films in exchange for their home video rights. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. See for instance, Levy (1999, 94), Biskind (2005, 40) and King (2005, 261). [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. For more on Fine Line, see Tzioumakis (2012b, 99). [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. On the establishment of Focus Features, see Tzioumakis (2012b, 179-183). [↑](#endnote-ref-19)