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Independent, Mainstream and In Between:
How and Why Indie Films Have Become Their Own Genre

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Précis

The “indie” is a term many film critics and audience members like to use but do most people know what that word is really labeling? In this paper I unravel what the term means and how it is defined. Moreover, from this initial question and after further research I came to the conclusion that not only do indie films have a common definition but also because of certain characteristics and how audiences and marketers react to them, they can be classified into a genre. Before I could make such a statement however, I thought it was important to understand the historical context of how independent cinema fits into the film industry, which led me to believe that how the industry functions today is what makes the indie genre possible.

This question and theory were particularly interesting to me because of my work in the film industry, specifically with independent cinema. I have worked with an independent production company and two film festivals for independent films. This question is important for my discipline, Film and Screen Studies, because the indie genre opposes some of the fundamental film theories that exist about Hollywood film, bringing to light how space for non-mainstream material is being maintained in the film industry.

The methods I chose to address the concept of the indie genre and how the film industry functions today were traditional. First I conducted historical research on American independent cinema and the history of the American film industry. Next I used customary film studies techniques to analyze five indie films, and five model Hollywood films to compare them to. I analyzed how the films were shot and edited and how their narratives were structured. I then further researched theories on film genre, which I found

in articles written by influential American film theorists. These methods were the best for my research and allowed me to answer and argue my thesis to the fullest.

After a detailed analysis of a number of indie films, a more concise comprehension of genre, and a fuller understanding of how the film industry functions today and how it got that way, it was possible to conclude that indie films do make up a genre. However, from all of my research and subsequent conclusions, I did find that questions still remain about the term indie film. I found that the “indie” may not be synonymous with independent cinema, and that today’s film industry makes it hard to understand the true financial distinctions between films. I was however able to conclude that while the industry may not be open to every filmmaker, this new genre, which lends itself to less mainstream content, has widened the span of films people can go to the movies for.

Many authors have written about American independent cinema and the indie, many of whom I have cited in my paper, but I found that my ideas on the issue have broadened theirs. I have taken their concept that independent films have common stylistic traits and gone one step further, arguing that those traits, plus today’s business climate and audience reactions, classify indie films as their own individual group. To continue broadening this idea I would recommend further analysis of independent films and more research on what audiences expect from them. Personally, I would also like to critically think more about the distinction between the term “indie” and the term independent film.

Contents

I. Introduction	5
II. Historical Context	6
<i>a. American Independent Films Early On: The 1890s-1940s</i>	6
<i>b. The Rise of Independence: “An Anti-Hollywood Approach To Filmmaking”</i>	10
<i>c. The Age of Conglomerates: Big Business Takes Over the Film Industry</i>	16
<i>d. Independent’s Saving Grace: A Revival of Spirit and Teaming Up with the “Big Guys”</i>	17
<i>e. Finding Indies: Today’s Film Industry</i>	20
III. The Indie Genre	24
<i>a. What is Genre?</i>	24
<i>b. If Indies Are Stylistically Un-Hollywood, Then What is Hollywood Style?</i>	27
<i>c. Indies With In the Indie Genre</i>	28
IV. What Makes an Indie an Indie?	31
<i>a. Indie Mechanical Style</i>	31
<i>b. Indie Narrative Style</i>	35
<i>c. What Audiences Expect and Why?</i>	41
V. Conclusion	47
Works Cited	49

I. Introduction

The term independent film has been around since the film industry began, but for film analysts and critics it has always been hard to unanimously define. Theorists argue over if the term should be defined by a film's financial situation and its non-studio status or by its aesthetic. The film industry today consists of conglomerate companies, who own major film studios, who then own numerous affiliates, subsidiaries and studio arms that produce and distribute independent filmmaker's films. Although, it was not always like that, today's industry makes it hard to differentiate films made outside or inside of the studio, since everything seems to eventually be under one umbrella company. Due to this, an independent film can technically be made for any amount, which will vary with what production company made it. With this being true, how can one really know if they are seeing an independent film today? The simple answer: because they expect certain things from it. Marketers use the term "indie" to advertise films with certain characteristics, and because audiences now expect those traits from a film labeled "indie," I believe it has become its own genre. Genre can be described with two attributes: it is a group of films with similar characteristics and a group which audiences expect to see those characteristics from. There are certain traits audiences anticipate when a film is marketed as an "indie" and which films made by both studios and non-conglomerate affiliated companies have in common. Those traits include, a distinct mechanical style and narrative form. However, more specifically both of those traits become distinct because of how they differ from the usual classical Hollywood film styles. Therefore, combining

these expected and common traits with the fact that today's independent films cannot be defined by how much they were made for, illustrates that presently independent films are less defined by their finances and rather can be classified by their own emerging genre- "the indie."

I would like to explore independent films of today as a genre to show that today's business climate makes "independence" hard, but filmmakers continue to make "independent" work as they did earlier on. Moreover, while historically the concept of genre has been typically a mainstream device used to guarantee ticket buyers, today's industry marketers have expanded the idea into less mainstream categories in order to bank on audiences who enjoy them more. If indies are characterized by deviations from the mainstream it may be thought of as hard to classify them as a genre, but in fact that is what identifies them as one.

II. Historical Context

a. American Independent Films Early On: The 1890s-1940s

While the indie genre has emerged over the last ten to fifteen years, independent films have always been present in the American film industry, even in its early beginnings. It is important to look at film industry history to fully understand the state the industry is in today and how that affects the indie genre. The first forty to fifty years of the American film industry are marked by rapid change, struggles with control, and even government intervention. A more complete examination of the historical complexities of the early American film industry can be found in Greg Merritt's book, *Celluloid Mavericks: A History of American Independent Film Making*. I however will focus more on the last forty to fifty years (beginning at the end of the 1950s) of the film industry's

history up to the present. These years are more important to focus on because of their relevance to the recognition of independent films and the making of today's industry.

However to understand where the industry was in the 1950s, an overview of the years prior to that is in order. In the United States, the earliest motion pictures for the public were shown in New York on April 23, 1896 (Merritt 3). As the market and interest for this new form of entertainment grew, three companies emerged and were in charge of producing most of the earliest films in America. Those companies were Edison, Biograph and Vitagraph (Merritt 4). Those companies qualify as the first studios in the United States on the basis that they engaged in contracts with talent (actors and performers) and occupied a monopoly on early film equipment. These companies became known as "The Big Three" (Merritt 4) and later once they combined forces, the Trust (Merritt 6). Over the next few years, the industry just kept growing and despite the Trust's efforts to squash independent producers, their challengers continued to make and screen films. Smaller production companies such as Fox, Keystone, Thanhouser, Rex and the Independent Motion Company (IMP) were the Big Three's competition at the time.

At this time in film history, the term "independent" began to take on some of its many different attached labels and definitions. After 1909, as programs like the Independent Film Protective Association (an organization created to shield independents from the Trust) (Alvarez 249) became necessary for filmmakers and distribution companies outside of The Big Three, the term "independent" likewise became an important tool for films to show their independence from monopolies. In fact in 1909, producers like Howard Hughes and Charlie Chaplin differentiated themselves from the Trust by calling themselves independent (Tzioumakis 12).

By 1920, the second half of the silent era had begun and it was, as Merritt calls it, “a period of tremendous creative growth” (24), which included the creation of a new independent power. On February 5, 1919 United Artists (UA) was officially created as an independent “studio” and “over the next seven decades it was one of the most important forces in cinema,” and “Most of its productions were nominally independent” (Merritt 50).

In 1934 the next controlling force took over the film industry, the Big Five, which acted in the same vein as the Big Three, only this group consisted of the studios: Warner Brothers, Paramount, MGM (Loew’s), Twentieth-Century Fox, and RKO (Tzioumakis 19). They continued to run things until around 1946, just before the invention of the Television set (Merritt 61), which roughly outlines what many people call the studio era. “During those dozen years, the Big Five solidified their monopolies over production, distribution, and exhibition” (Merritt 61). Along with the Big Five, the Little Three existed as well, including Columbia, Universal and United Artists. The Little Three were set up like the Big Five, but Columbia and Universal did not own their own theaters (Tzioumakis 19). While United Artists was considered a part of the Little Three by some, it was also considered “the antistudio” (Merritt 62) by others. The best way of combining these two ideas is realizing that producers and directors who had created films outside of the studio system could use UA to help distribute those films when otherwise they would not be able to. In particular,

... during the studio years (mid-1920s-late 1940s) the label independent could be attached to prestige-level pictures made by producers such as Samuel Goldwyn, Walt Disney and David O. Selznick who used United Artists (and later other

companies) to release films they made through their respective production companies (Tzioumakis 10).

This illustrates a glimpse of what today's film industry is like. This is where independent filmmakers began to use studios or major companies for financial reasons, while studios began to use independent films to boost their profits, and in the late 1930s other companies like "RKO started emulating United Artists' model of distributing independently produced films" (Tzioumakis 83).

In the 1940s the term "independent" continued to change and towards the end of the decade and into the 1950s, the relationship between studios and independent filmmakers grew increasingly interdependent. Affected by the 1948 Paramount Decree, which was a major force in the breakdown of the studio system of production (Tzioumakis 101), and the anti-communist hearings of 1947-1953 (Tzioumakis 109), the new relationship between the independent filmmakers and the now ex-studios was becoming more beneficial for both parties.

That new relationship continued to have its ups and downs for fifty or sixty years afterwards, but is a preview of what today's industry is like. I will cover the next six decades more in depth than I just covered the 1890s-1940s, in order to emphasize the evolution of American independent films, which led them to become a genre in recent years. The films and the industry dynamics I will mention in the next section illustrate how the "indie genre" was able to develop. Later I will fully define the concept of genre, but it will become apparent that the historical events that occurred in the 1950s through today allowed for independent films to become a more solidified group, having shared characteristics and towards the last twenty years a common marketable aesthetic.

b. The Rise of Independence: “An Anti-Hollywood Approach To Filmmaking”

By the late-1950s “independent” shifted to mean something else than what it meant thirty years prior. In 1956, 53 percent of films distributed by ex-studios, “were deemed ‘independent,’” since those major companies had not actually “made the films,” they only distributed them (Tzioumakis 102). By 1959, almost 65 percent of industry-produced features were said have been done so by 165 “full-time independent producers,” (Wasko 107) implying that even with the studio’s help financially, filmmakers who directed and produced their own work were still considered independent. Yannis Tzioumakis, author of *American Independent Cinema: An Introduction*, goes as far to say, “...after 1948 independent film production can be said to have replaced studio production” (102). In her book, *Movies and Money: Financing the American Film Industry*, Janet Wasko gives a definition of the independent producer in the 1950s:

“The independent producer included the single picture company, the ‘small operator’ who made cheap quickies, and the established producer who continuously produced ‘quality’ films at the major studios, or at their own studios” (106).

Clearly, by the mid-1950s, the term independent was much more open than in the 1920s. Tying a feature with a major studio did not directly imply that it was not independent. Tzioumakis says, “...when the credits continued to present films by Paramount, Universal or Warner, the logo did not mean anything specific” (125). The industry had melded.

However, that feeling of symbiosis between the independents and the studios of the 1950s began to wear off at the end of the decade. In the late 1950s and early 1960s “an anti-Hollywood approach to filmmaking,” (Tzioumakis 172) greater than prior non-mainstream approaches emerged. It was called the New American Cinema. Filmmakers of the new movement were said to:

...sought to ‘free themselves from the overprofessionalism and over-technicality that usually handicap the inspiration and spontaneity of the official [Hollywood] cinema, guiding themselves more by institution and improvisation than by discipline’ (Tzioumakis 172).

Many critics say the New American Cinema resembles the French New Wave (Winter, “The Rough Guide” 8) and the French movement “impacted American independent films through such techniques as improvised dialogue, handheld camera-work, and deliberately rough editing...” (Merritt 155). Merritt says the legacy the French New Wave left to American filmmakers “was to put into practice the philosophy of ‘Do your own thing’” (155). This point in history marks where independent films take on two of their modern defining characteristics. By now they have begun taking advantage of independent creation with studio financing and have taken on the un-Hollywood like aesthetic. These two traits define the indie genre of today.

One of the quintessential examples of a New American Cinema film is John Cassavete’s *Shadows* (Winter, “The Rough Guide” 8). *Shadows* screened at Greenwich Village’s Cinema 16, an “influential film club” (Winter, “The Rough Guide” 9) in late 1959, followed by a wider domestic release in 1961 (Merritt 158). As far as being an independent film, Cassavete’s made *Shadows* with out studio financing and was said to

have raised some of the money for production with radio advertising, asking moviegoers to send in \$2 for the film (Winter, "The Rough Guide" 9). The film is a love story of sorts about an interracial couple. Leila, a light skinned black woman and Tony, a white bohemian guy, fall in love, but in the end Tony leaves when he finds out Leila's race (Merritt 158). It was said "*Shadows* captures the bohemian subculture of Manhattan in the late 50s" (Merritt 158). It exemplifies a New American Cinema film because of the techniques used, such as "the shaky handheld camera, mixed with jarring close-ups," which gives it "the feel of a home movie" (Merritt 158). It also characterizes an un-Hollywood ending since the couple does not end up together. Many critics hail this film as influential. Jessica Winter, author of *The Rough Guide to American Independent Film*, believes, "*Shadows* overturned just about every reigning assumption about how a film should be made" ("The Rough Guide" 9). Winter goes on to say, "Cassavetes didn't invent do-it-yourself filmmaking, but for a generation of filmmakers, he transformed a crazy idea into a tantalizing and inspirational possibility..." ("The Rough Guide" 9). Jonas Mekas, a film critic at the time, wrote, "Rightly understood and properly presented, it could influence and change the tone, subject matter, and style of the entire independent American cinema..." (Merritt 158) and perhaps it did.

Cassevets' film opened up a new movement of "do-it-yourself" independent films and while non-studio affiliated independents continued to struggle through the 1960s, the types of films that they were making were changing in a completely different cultural climate compared to ten years earlier. Winter says, "standards of 'decency' in independent fare loosened rapidly during the 1960s, reflecting convulsions in the culture at large" ("The Rough Guide" 10). 1960s independent cinema was exhibited by campy

exploitation films, blood-bath horrors made often for drive-ins, and avant-gardes (Merritt 174-183). One film of the late 1960s, exhibits both the changed material of the times and how filmmakers made films outside of the studio. Shot on 16mm film, with real locals, and supposedly real drugs (Merritt 197), *Easy Rider*, is an example of a hugely successful non-studio independent with non-mainstream characteristics. The film is about a motorcycle road trip to New Orleans by two dope-smoking friends, Wyatt and Billy. On their trip they meet George, a lawyer, who they expose to their lifestyle (Merritt 197). *Easy Rider* opened in the summer of 1969 and as Merritt puts it, “by the end of the year was the most successful nonstudio motion picture since D.W. Griffith wrote history with lightning” (196). Director Dennis Hopper and producer Peter Fonda were rejected from AIP, American International Pictures (a mid-level distribution company created in the 1950s), with their idea for *Easy Rider* so they decided to make it on their own. They recruited Bret Schneider, a TV producer, to provide them with a \$360,000 budget and got to work (Merritt 197). The budget increased to around \$500,000 throughout production and when it was released *Easy Rider* made almost \$20 million (Winter, “The Rough Guide” 13). While the film was made without studio financing, it was finally distributed by Columbia, one of the former Little Three. This illustrates the power of individual drive that independent filmmakers have. It also showed the studios that this new “counterculture” cinema might be something to “get on the bandwagon” for.

In the late 1960s into the mid-1970s, things changed for independents in Hollywood. Between 1967 and 1975 is known as the “Hollywood Renaissance” because during that time “majors allowed filmmakers an unprecedented degree of creative control in the filmmaking process” (Tzioumakis 170). Late 1960s and 1970s independent films

were marked by more non-mainstream subjects. There were more features geared directly to African American audiences, such as the controversial *SuperFly* (1972), and featured more lower class white lives as well, such as *The Honeymoon Killers* (1970) (Merritt 230). Independent voices and perspectives that had not been previously heard and seen were appearing in the 1970s, such as the emergence of films about gay stories and lives (later to become Queer Cinema) (Merritt 231). Horror films stayed on the scene in the 1970s, using low-budgets to their advantage. Shaky cameras, amateur actors and “unpicturesque locations” were perfect for horror films and filmmakers with little finances (Merritt 237). George A. Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) is a great example of a horror success in the late 1960s. The film was first rejected by AIP because it “lacked a romance and had a downbeat conclusion,” but picked up later by Continental Distributing, a smaller company. It was made for \$114,000 and eventually grossed over \$50 million (Merritt 238). Because the studios wanted to join in on the profits that a movie like *Easy Rider* could bring in, the Hollywood Renaissance made it so “American cinema entered a phase characterized by the production of stylistically diverse and narratively challenging films that were much more tuned in to the social and political climate of the era than the films made for the majors by top-rank-independents” (Tzioumakis 170). This meant that the doors to Hollywood’s resources opened for independents who usually only showed in small theaters, and opened for more non-mainstream material. In fact, the new investment studios were making to racier films encouraged Hollywood to adopt the ratings system (King 7). The Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) instituted the ratings system in November 1968 (Merritt 195). Tzioumakis explains that the films of the late 1960s and 1970s “make even the

most liberal films of the late 1950s/early 1960s... look like fake Hollywood constructions with naive ideological messages” (169). This new acceptance of edgier material created a “demographic buzz” in Hollywood. In the immediate post-war decades, Hollywood seemed to leave the youth audiences out. In that time independents filled the void with low-budget horrors and beach-blanket flicks, but in the early 1970s Hollywood was realizing their mistake (King 6). The counterculture cinema of the late 1960s and 1970s was said to be “a cinema geared specifically towards the youth generation and firmly endorsed by it” (Tzioumakis 179.) A survey released in 1968 exposed that ages 16-24 were responsible for 48 percent of all film ticket sales in the U.S. (Tzioumakis 182). Hollywood was soon “...becoming increasingly fixated on attracting the purchase power of the teenage demographic” (Winter, “The Rough Guide” 9). This illustrates how today’s market functions. Niche audiences are important in selling tickets and studios realized they needed to concentrate on certain groups to make more money, as they do with the indie genre today. To do this however, they needed help. They began to invest in new filmmakers “seen to be more in touch with a youth audience affected by the 1960s counterculture” (King 7), and those filmmakers were independents previously not affiliated with the studios. To help them do this studios started “classics units” to look for the “next low-budget hit by a hot young director, ” such as Universal’s youth unit (Winter, “The Rough Guide” 13).

Unfortunately, this did not last as long as the independents would have liked it to. By as early as the end of the 1970s, Tzioumakis explains in his book that counterculture films were not doing as well at the box office, solidifying “top-rank-independents” (or those who made more mainstream films) as the major studios’ preferred type of film to

support (192). Shortly after that the majors finally figured out how to please target audiences like youths, with science fiction and monster films, and could successfully use genre pictures as money making tools, which for now put seemingly independents of both kinds on the back burner. The end of the 1970s and beginning of the 1980s was the dawning of the Hollywood blockbuster “event movie.” In 1975 no film had ever cost more than \$15 million, but by 1980 eleven films were made for over \$30 million, five for \$40 million and one for \$55 million (Merritt 260). Films like *Starwars* (1977) and *Superman* (1980) marked the end of the openly creative independent-Hollywood combination era that exemplified much of the 1960s and 1970s.

c. The Age of Conglomerates: Big Business Takes Over the Film Industry

Huge business changes in the industry began to happen even before Hollywood discovered the blockbuster, but continued to transform the industry into the 1980s. Companies with other interests and capacities beyond the film industry bought out some of the major studios of the 1960s. In 1966 Gulf & Western purchased Paramount, in 1967 Transamerica acquired United Artists, and in 1969 Kinney National Service bought Warner Bros., while Kirk Kerkorian, a hotel and finance mogul purchased MGM. About ten years later, Coca-Cola bought Columbia and Rupert Merdoch’s News Corp. bought 20th Century Fox (Tzioumakis 192). The studios were now conglomerates. Conglomerates did a number of things for the studios, but Tzioumakis points to some specific changes in his book. First the studios could now take bigger financial risks because the conglomerate companies could absorb the blow better. This specifically allowed them to start making only a few huge movies a year and consequently from that fact, film budgets went up, way up. Also, filmmaking in Hollywood became more

“logitistical”, basing production decisions on research reports and data, which made the majors more aware of the importance of further marketing and sales beyond film tickets (196). The conglomeration of the studios naturally affected the independents.

Importantly, it made it easier to label an independent. Since “conglomerate” speedily became synonymous with “mainstream,” those companies not affiliated with them or under their control were undeniably “independent” (Tzioumakis 194). Companies like New World Pictures, Dimension Pictures, New Line Cinema, and Crown International, were separate from the studios at that point in history and were there to distribute non-blockbuster independents. At the end of the 1970s, a clearer separation of sides within the film industry was available. One side was the conglomerate and the other was “everyone else” (197).

d. Independent’s Saving Grace: A Revival of Spirit and Teaming Up with the “Big Guys”

At the end of the 1970s and the 1980s, while Hollywood was dominating the market with blockbusters, new opportunities arose for independent filmmakers. In 1981, Robert Redford created the Sundance Institute, which held independent film workshops in Utah (Tzioumakis 263), and then in 1984 purchased the U.S. Film Festival and renamed it Sundance (Merritt 261). Sundance grew to be one of the most prominent independent film festivals in the world, but in the late 1980s Sundance had been stigmatized an “art film festival” and as Peter Biskind, author of *Down and Dirty Pictures: Miramax, Sundance, and the Rise of Independent Film*, says, in 1987 “the festival had reached a nadir of mediocrity” (29). Luckily, two years later the festival was saved by one historically significant independent film, Steven Soderbergh’s *Sex, Lies,*

and Videotape (1989). When it premiered at Sundance people immediately recognized *Sex, Lies, and Videotape* for a “paradigmatic indie film” (Biskind 40). The film follows four 30-something people with confused sex lives (Merritt 349). People are said to have responded to it because of its true independent style, Soderbergh was an auteur, writing and directing it, and the story was supposedly based on aspects of his personal life (Biskind 40), making it relatable. Biskind says that the film resembled the counterculture film of the 1970s, “taking shots at the predatory, suspender-wearing, Reagan-era yuppie” (41). It is described as the first Gen-X picture (Biskind 41) and also is said to have “proved to be the perfect movie to expand the limited art-house audience of cineastes in a broader base of literate adults” (Tzioumakis 351). All of this praise shows how influential critics view *Sex, Lies, and Videotape* as. They feel it opened a new path for independent filmmakers to follow. Through out film history, independents have been characterized by the filmmaker’s “auteur-like” vision, one usually not in tune with Hollywood’s, but the success of Soderbergh’s film at the end of the 1980s, makes that characteristic of independent films more prominent. *Sex, Lies, and Videotape* grossed \$24.7 million at its initial domestic release and by 2001 had earned over \$100 million (Holmlund, Wyatt 6). Not only was the film successful, but also it launched Soderbergh into a new position. His fee for writing went from \$35,000 to \$250,000 and his new price to direct was \$500,000 (Biskind 42). In his book, *The Sundance Kids: How the Mavericks Took Back Hollywood*, James Mottram, explains what Soderbergh did for the industry:

Soderbergh has become a quasi-godfather for a group of directors who would join him in attempting- though not always succeeding- to reprise the notion of

director-driven studio features... for personal filmmaking inside a system geared towards crushing the life out of such movies (6).

Harking back to the Hollywood Renaissance, Soderbergh's success story, inspired filmmakers to make what they wanted within the studios. They wanted to be able to produce personal, visionary work, and bring in a lot of money for it. Winter believes that Sundance began as an alternative "to the big studio machine," but soon "redefined Hollywood" ("The Rough Guide" 227).

With Sundance revived, more independent films were being viewed and picked up. In 1987 there were 60 dramatic feature submissions to Sundance and in 1997 there were over 800 (Merritt 354). Production/distribution companies like New Line Cinema and Miramax began in the 1980s and tried to keep independents in theaters (Tzioumakis 224). Since Miramax and New Line acted in "studio fashion" they can be deemed what Tzioumakis considers "mini-majors." According to Jim Hiller's definition, "a mini-major was an adequately capitalized independent production and distribution company that operate[d]- or tried to operate- outside the orbit of the majors, but which set itself up as a smaller version of a major" (Tzioumakis 224). Therefore, in the 1980s and into the 1990s, independents emulated the business practices of the major studios, which paid off. Miramax, New Line Cinema and Orion (another mini-major) "were responsible for the production, finance and/or release of a very large percentage of U.S. film during the 1980s and 1990s" (Tzioumakis 224). These companies became part of independent discourse.

During the 1980s and 1990s Orion was one of the most significant mini-majors in the industry. The company was formed in 1978 by the former leaders of United Artists,

who disagreed with the leadership of their new conglomerate parent, Transamerica (Tzioumakis 225). Orion was considered ““a sanctuary for creative filmmakers,’ who could not make the films they wanted with in the conglomerate environment of 1980s Hollywood” (Tzioumakis 225). Orion is significant because shortly after they started they banded with a studio, Warner Brothers. Under Orion Ventures Inc., Warner Bros. and Orion were equal partners, giving Orion complete autonomy in choosing what to produce and how many, while giving Warner Bros. distribution/marketing rights (Tzioumakis 226). In the first years of the 1980s, Orion was not doing as well as they thought they could and decided to become their own distributor. They bought Filmways in July 1982, allowing them a film library and the ability to distribute (Tzioumakis 227-8). In 1983, they set their sights high, wanting to match the output of the majors- they planned to make 14 features for the next year (Tzioumakis 230). In 1987, they formed their own home video apparatus, which permitted them to stop outsourcing that process (Tzioumakis 232). Unfortunately, competing side by side with the studios was difficult, and although Orion had a few last box office hits, like *Dances With Wolves* (1990) and *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), they went out of business in 1991 (Tzioumakis 237). Orion’s failure to compete with majors on an equal level of distribution serves as a lesson to the mini-majors of the late 1990s and of those today. It also solidifies how the film industries of then and today works- either work with in the studios, or you will remain in the background, you cannot be their equal.

e. Finding Indies: Today’s Film Industry

In the mid-late 1980s industry and technological changes continued to push independents to the sidelines. In 1980, UA merged with MGM, finally fully losing its

“antistudio” status and with the advent of home video and pay-cable, independents had to find other ways to make money than with large theatrical debuts (Tzioumakis 223). In the mid-1980s conglomerates began to move away from their other holdings and concentrate more on the entertainment business. They “evolved gradually into fully diversified entertainment corporations” (Tzioumakis 222). This produced a “synergy,” or a horizontal business structure where all of the conglomerates’ divisions were distributors/promoters of selling other versions and formats of the films made by the majors, so they could dominate the market (Tzioumakis 222-3). This new structure privileged the “event films” the majors were falling in love with starting in the late 1970s up to today. Films that had stars in them and special effects were the kinds of films conglomerates felt they could market beyond their theatrical debuts. Tim Burton’s *Batman* is a great example of this. Warner Bros. had an “unprecedented marketing campaign,” with things like Batman Week and “films suddenly became brands” (Mottram 9).

At this point in history marketing and audience expectations became a larger part of the film industry than it ever had before. Hollywood had been using genre pictures to sell tickets for decades, but with conglomerates taking over, being able to market films in the most direct way was crucial and in the 1990s marketing “indie films” seemed appealing. Majors began creating new offices to specialize in independents (Levy 502). In particular the conglomerates launched independent arms to bid on successful films from the Sundance Film Festival. In 1992 Sony made Sony Pictures Classics. 20th Century Fox created Fox Searchlight in 1995 (Merritt 354). Time Warner bought Turner Broadcasting System in 1996, which made Fine Line Features, a previous subsidiary of

Turner, now a subsidiary of Time Warner (Winter, "The Rough Guide" 234-5). Universal purchased the independent company, October Films for that purpose in 1997 and Paramount formed Paramount Classics in 1998 (Merritt 354). Time Warner also has Warner Independent. Warner Independent is said to finance "low-budget personal, taboo-breaking and experimental films" (Tzioumakis 7). In a similar fashion, Fine Line Features is said to produce "low-budget, edgier films that are too specialized for the more 'mainstream' major independent parent company" (Tzioumakis 7). These arms of major companies exemplify what the film industry of the 1990s, the 2000s and today is like. Independent films are a commodity in the industry. They are the films people want to see beyond the studio "event films" and the only way for Hollywood to maintain a monopoly on that is to help produce and market them themselves.

In 2002 a number of mergers occurred producing Focus Features, owned by NBC Universal (Tzioumakis 3) and in 2004 Warner Independent released its first film, *Before Sunset* (Winter, "The Rough Guide" 235). By 2003, the seven major studios were Disney, Warner Brothers, 20th Century Fox, Sony Pictures, UA-MGM, Paramount and Universal, all owned by parent conglomerates and all having independent arms (Holmlund, Wyatt 8). This is now the face of the film industry- large companies making independents, at a superficial distance. Audiences see movies now without registering who actually distributed them. When Focus Features is in the credits they do not immediately connect it to NBC. Because of this, the whole concept of the "independent" has change drastically from years past. This new form of independent has been in the making since 1948, but it wasn't until the late 1990s and the last ten years that it was fully realized. Independents cannot solely be defined by their finances any longer. What can they be defined by then?

Previously, unknown actors were a factor in defining an independent, but today actors weave in and out of Hollywood event films and independents. Emanuel Levy, author of *Cinema of Outsiders: The Rise of American Independent Film*, says “In the past, it was not hip to be in little independent movies; it was a signal that an actor’s career was in trouble” (502), but throughout the 1990s that changed. Take Bruce Willis, he was one of the few Hollywood actors to earn \$20 million on a single mainstream film (*Armageddon*) in the 1990s, but in 1998 he made *Breakfast of Champions* with his own company Rational Packaging (Levy 502-3). Previously, independents were marked by filmmakers with little financial resources and without a spot at a studio, but today many filmmakers have their own companies. George Lucas has LucasFilms, Steven Spielberg has Amblin Entertainment and James Cameron has Lightstorm Entertainment (Tzioumakis 4). A good example of an auteur who moves in out of the Hollywood/independent dichotomy is Wes Anderson. His films *Rushmore* (1998) *The Royal Tenenbaums* (2001) and *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou* (2004) were all produced by his own company, but were co-financed by a Disney affiliate, Buena Vista (Tzioumakis 6). His budgets for those films were under \$25 million (Winter, “The Rough Guide” 237). Winter says about Anderson, he “remains a heartening rarity: a young, idiosyncratic auteur endorsed by the studio system” (237). When considering all of these new factors, how then can independent films be defined today? Tzioumakis gives insight into the matter by articulating that “...the discourse on independent cinema has expanded to such an extent that the vast majority of films produced in the U.S. can be considered independent” (246). This illustrates that “independent” does not mean what it used to mean. So is everything a studio makes independent? Can films like the *Spiderman* series be considered an indie?

Perhaps not, but a film such as Jason Reitman's *Up In The Air* (2009) can be. This poses a problem- how can you tell what is an indie film and what is not? The simple answer, does it fit the profile?

III. The Indie Genre

Independent films of today have similarities, as they have in the past. However, today, the industry has used those similarities as marketing tools and in the process, created a term- "the indie." The term on the surface may just be an abbreviation for the word independent, but today it connotes much more. In particular, it brings to mind certain characteristics in which audiences expect to see from all films labeled "independent." Today, because it is hard to distinguish the finances of a film or by what means it was produced, categorizing independent films is the best way to identify them. Tzioumakis says in reference to the new industry structure, "Even though this means that the label 'independent' becomes virtually meaningless, it nevertheless prescribes a particular type of film regardless of its production/finance/distribution background" (270). If indie films of today represent a 'particular type,' then in effect, they can be labeled a genre.

a. *What is Genre?*

In order to understand how "the indie" has become a new genre used by the film industry and recognized by the public, it is important to understand what exactly a genre is. Different theorists define genre in varied ways, but for the most part, the concept of a genre is that it is a group that contains similar attributes, which after being used over and over become conventions. Geoff King, author of *American Independent Cinema*,

describes genre as "... a type that has attracted audiences with some consistency in the past, or a type that individual viewers have enjoyed (or avoided) and are likely to enjoy (or avoid) again" (166). This explanation breaks down the two fundamental characteristics of a genre. First, films that make up a genre have consistency. They display similar features, possibly not found in other groups. Second, that consistency allows audiences to anticipate what they are going to experience with these types of films. This does not mean that all films that fit into a genre are the same, they can be quite different- having different themes, stories, and even overall styles, and in this case be made for different amounts of money, but will always maintain certain qualities a viewer expects. Steve Neale, in his essay "Questions of Genre," explains that genre systems "offer grounds for further anticipation" (161). He illustrates this point with an example of a well-known genre, the musical. He points out that when characters in a musical burst out into song, it is not disconcerting to the audience because they were expecting it, and not only did they know it was coming, but they anticipate that there will be more signing to follow (Neale 161). For this reason, many times in genres, things are not just expected, but necessary. Once certain attributes become conventions they then start to define the genre (Neale 161). For instance, a musical cannot be a musical without music and signing, and the same can be applied to other genres. One of the best ways of knowing when a genre has reached the point where it can be defined and has taken on those conventions is when it can be parodied (Tudor 6). If someone can target certain aspects of a film and make fun of them, while possibly insulting, it however shows that they exist and are widely recognized. Making a genre however takes time. Andrew Tudor, author of the essay "Genre," believes,

If a culture includes such notions of genre, then over a period of time and in a complicated way certain conventions become established as to what can be expected from an 'art movie' as compared to some other category (9).

What can be taken from this statement is that genre is not made instantly; a genre forms only after a number of films are repeatedly made with similar attributes and audiences repeatedly recognize those attributes, just as the preceding description of the history of independent films of the last forty or fifty years has shown.

However, once a group of films has attained genre status, like "the indies" of today, other things come with it, in particular, a niche audience. Niche audiences are those who enjoy films that belong to certain groups, and they pay money to see those films because they have assumptions about them. Tudor discusses the "art film" in his essay and sites who he believes their audience to be: "There is a class of films thought of by a relatively highly educated middle-class group of filmgoers as 'art movies'" (8-9). This implies that art movies were labeled by the people who were their main audience; the educated middle-class. This same idea applies to other types of audiences, including the "indie-watcher." Levy believes, "While audiences overlap for some Hollywood and indie fare, the core audience for each type of film is different too" (501). This illustrates how different types of audiences go to see different types of films, but it also points out an important aspect of the indie genre. From this statement, it is important to understand, who watches "indie" films. While of course there is overlap, for the most part, they are movie-goers who want to see the films that do not fall into the Hollywood event and blockbuster category. This further indicates how the indie genre can be loosely defined. In short, indies are distinctly "un-Hollywood." They do share some characteristics and

there is without a doubt a spectrum spanning from very similar to classic Hollywood style to almost experimental when it comes to indie films. However, the fact that they differ from the usual “Big Hollywood” films is a defining characteristic for indies. King explains, “‘Independent cinema’ is itself a term that asserts a distinction from the Hollywood mainstream... and one that has sometimes, if loosely, implied the status of something like a genre- or collection of genres- in its own right” (195). Tzioumakis says, that a “distinct type of film” has been created and “labeled independent primarily because of its difference from mainstream American cinema,” which he describes as “special effects-driven blockbusters and expensive genre/star vehicles” (248). These statements help illustrate the idea that the indie genre differs from Hollywood, but they do not reveal how this happens. Tzioumakis however goes on to clarify,

Unlike mainstream Hollywood cinema, which, for a number of film scholars and critics, has been exemplified historically by the relatively unified classical aesthetic, contemporary independent cinema defies such labels (267).

This begins to explain how films of the indie genre are unlike Hollywood films- they do not follow the classical Hollywood aesthetic.

b. If Indies Are Stylistically Un-Hollywood, Then What is Hollywood Style?

It therefore is important to understand what defines the “Hollywood aesthetic” since the indie genre can be defined by its resistance to it. Classical Hollywood style is a term used in film study discourse, which refers to a certain set of editing and narrative techniques mostly used before the 1960s. However, because of its popularity with audiences, the style seems to have continued beyond that time period and into today. It has been argued that the style of editing used by Hollywood has changed quite a bit

because of technology advances, possibly so much in recent years that it shouldn't be called "classical" anymore (Thompson 18). However, it seems that the main characteristics of the classical Hollywood style have remained. The basic function of classical style is to keep the events in the film clear for the viewer. To do this, classical Hollywood style uses editing and narrative structure in particular ways. Specifically, classical style makes use of continuity editing, which as its name implies, keeps things continuous and understandable for the viewer. Tzioumakis believes, "Continuity editing produces an unobtrusive or 'transparent' film style that is always at the service of the narrative and does not attract attention to itself" (7). Continuity editing makes use of filming techniques such as matching the audience's eye-line in the majority of shots, point-of-view cutting, and using the 180-degree rule (Tzioumakis 7). These make it so the viewer is never disoriented, which is the basic theme of continuity editing. Classical Hollywood style also has distinct narrative traits, some of which include: having a clear beginning, middle and end, "clearly identified, unambiguous" characters with "consistent traits (King 60), a transformation of the main characters by the end of the story, goal-oriented characters, and always narrative closure (Tzioumakis 7). These specific traits, paired with continuity editing make up the classic Hollywood film, and if you take a closer look at some current Hollywood films, this style is what you will find. Moreover, if you then take a closer look at recent indie films, you will find distinctions from those Hollywood style conventions, which in turn help to define those films as a genre.

c. Indies With In the Indie Genre

Before delving directly into an examination of indie films and what expectations audiences have of them, it is essential to recognize one more aspect of genre. Although

genre is generally defined by films with repetitive and similar characteristics, there can be variation. Neale argues, “genres are, nevertheless, best understood as processes. These processes may, for sure, be dominated by repetition, but they are also marked fundamentally by difference, variation, and change” (171). This idea of genre as a process means that with each new film that supposedly fits into a genre, brings new elements or they could even transgress old ones (Neale 171). This concept brings to light how hard it is to lump so many different films into one group. Neale also explains that if genres are processes then they will always be expanding, which makes listing all of their characteristics at one time, difficult, if not impossible, leaving the only option to define a genre in an open fashion (Neale 171), which is exactly what I wish to do with the indie genre. I am not arguing that all indie films are alike. That would be remarkably incorrect. Genres have always had varieties. For instance, there is the well-known genre the Western, but over the years adaptations of the Western have sprung up, such as the Spaghetti Western of the 50s, the location specific, Pennsylvanian Western, or even the Sci-fi Western (Altman 33). Variations of genres continue to exist, just as variations of indies exist. The umbrella term “indie” encompasses indie thrillers, indie romances, indie dramas, indie dark comedies, etc.. Rick Altman, author of “A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre,” believes that the variations of genres that exist should be “analyzed, evaluated, and disseminated separately, in spite of the complementarity implied by their names” (33). Although, I don’t find this action to be necessary, it is apparent that you can still analyze/theorize about different styles or sub-categories of indie films individually. What is most important is the idea that genres are always

growing, which allows one to look at the indie genre, not as a formulaic, static type, but as a developing one.

In a similar way that the indie genre has variations of sub-categories based on film content, it also has variations based on production and distribution. As we have come to understand today's film industry we notice that films which can fit under the indie genre are made for all different types of value and by different levels of production and distribution companies. With both of those ideas in mind, the indie films I have chosen to examine next are of different types, such as indie dark comedies or indie action films, and indies made by both studios and small releasing companies. I have specifically chosen to look at four popular and successful indie films and one less publicized indie. *Juno* (2007), *(500) Days of Summer* (2009), *Lars and the Real Girl* (2007) and *Inglorious Basterds* (2009) were all widely popular and talked about in the public as being "indies." They were all nominated, and some winners, of highly publicized and prestigious film industry awards. *The Cake Eaters* (2007), the less famous indie I will mention in my analysis, also received awards, but in smaller film circles. The more popular films were distributed with a combination of independent production companies and major distributors and *The Cake Eaters* was produced and theatrically distributed by a totally independent company. In taking a closer look at these films it will become apparent that the indie genre differs from usual Hollywood films in two ways. First, indies are characterized by distinct mechanical techniques, ones that combat Hollywood's continuity editing. Indies are also marked by narrative forms that differ from Hollywood's usual narrative structure. These two main differences allow indies to stand apart from the Hollywood event films and summer blockbusters. They make them unique

and, importantly, because they are shared among a number of indies and have been recognized by audiences and industry marketers, they define the indie genre.

IV. What Makes an Indie an Indie?

a. Indie Mechanical Style

Indie films share mechanical and narrative attributes, which differ from Hollywood's, illustrating that they fit the definition of genre. While Hollywood adheres to continuity editing, the films of the indie genre, make use of techniques that conflict the basic purpose of Hollywood editing. Now not every shot in every indie film strays from continuity editing. Films need medium close shots and shot/reverse shots to keep the film together, but indies make use of other types of shots more so than Hollywood does. In general, they will avoid overly familiar devices (King 107). One application of this is to refuse to use establishing shots (King 107). Kristen Thompson, author of *Storytelling in the New Hollywood: Understanding Classical Narrative Technique*, explains that the establishing shot is "crucial for maintaining a clear sense of locale" (19) for Hollywood films, but indies will often disregard that practice. For example, in a popular indie, like *Juno* (2007), filmmakers play with the idea of establishing a setting before the narrative moves forward. For example, in a scene where Juno (Ellen Page) and Leah (Olivia Thirlby) are at the mall, there is no establishing shot. The narrative opens directly into a conversation between Juno and Leah at a new setting the audience has not seen before. A mall is something many audience members can recognize, so they eventually understand where they are, but with no exterior long shot, it takes a few moments. This is the opposite of what continuity editing tries to maintain. Here viewers are unsure and not kept totally clear on what is happening inside the film.

Another technique indie filmmakers will use to avoid devices commonly used in Hollywood shooting is to use inexact or off-center framing (King 107). An example of this can be found in the low-budget indie film *The Cake Eaters*. In a scene where Beagle (Aaron Stanford), one of the main characters, has just seen his father kissing a woman recently after his mother has passed away, off-center framing is used. Beagle leaves the building and goes to stand right outside of the open door. From the doorway, the camera is placed off-center to the right of the doorframe. The audience watches Beagle struggle with what he just saw from a distance, framed by the door, but not centered. The shot is somewhat disorienting and nothing like the medium close torso shots usually used to display character emotion in classical Hollywood films. Similarly, indies make use of unusual angles (King 107) and restricted views (King 108). A good example of using an unusual angle for no apparent reason can be found in *Inglorious Basterds*. This example occurs in the scene in which Private Zoller (Daniel Brühl) is harassing Shosanna (Mélanie Laurent) for the second time. He comes into a café where she is sitting at a table. He stands opposite of her in front of the table and for most of the scene it remains to be shot/reverse shots at normal angles. However, at a point in the conversation while the camera is on Private Zoller, the camera shifts to a low angle. This short, but noticeable change is not in accordance with continuity editing and seems to be placed into the scene for no apparent reason, but to disorient the viewer momentarily. An instance in which a restricted view is used in an indie film can be found once again in *The Cake Eaters*. This scene happens relatively soon after the off-center doorframe shot. In this scene Beagle is feeding his dog raw meat from his father's butcher shop. As he goes to feed the dog the shot is a low shot of only his lower legs and feet placing the bowl

down for the dog. Viewers are restricted from seeing the rest of Beagle's body and his face. After examining Hollywood films, it is clear that showing a character's face is very important to understanding the narrative of the film. Here in this scene, Beagle is still distraught from the scene before, but we are not allowed to see how he is feeling.

Indies can further disorientate viewers by using long shots when the narrative development seems to call for closer shots. In Hollywood films, filmmakers seem to use long shots when they make sense in the narrative more so than indie filmmakers. In the film *Inglorious Basterds*, long shots are used in interior shots when it makes more sense to use medium shots. For example, in the scene where Lt. Hicox (Michael Fassbender) meets General French (Mike Meyers), they have a back and forth conversation, but at an unusually extreme distance apart. When Hicox enters the room we get a sequence of shot/reverse shots, but using long shots rather than medium close shots of each man's face or torso. This gives the feeling that the room is huge and that the gentleman have not reached a closeness yet. Once General French is done testing Hicox, the shots become closer and the men themselves walk towards each other so they can be viewed in one screen shot. King mentions in his book that indies can use long shots to create feelings of alienation, unlike Hollywood films where long shots are mostly used for establishing shots, but the camera moves in closer for conversations (125). This idea seems to be very apparent in a scene of the indie film *Lars and the Real Girl*. In this scene, Lars (Ryan Gosling) is fighting with plastic doll-girlfriend, Bianca in his car. Generally, and most likely in a Hollywood film, the camera would be placed inside of the car so that we could see Lars' expressions and emotions, but in this scene the camera stays outside of the car. The camera actually only provides a long shot of the car, seeming to be placed at least 75

feet away. This distance produces a feeling of alienation for the viewers. Lars is an extremely introverted person and is using Bianca as a tool to get out of his shell. So having us not privy to their conversation makes us feel left out of Lars' thinking and life, keeping us at a remote distance.

Indie filmmakers use other techniques beside the distance of the shot to make their films stand apart from Hollywood's. One unique method is using a mismatch of sound and image (Tzioumakis 179). This is very disorienting for the viewer and can disjoint the narrative. A nice example of this can be found in the recent indie, *(500) Days of Summer* (2009). In a scene in which the two main characters, Summer (Zoëy Deschanel) and Tom (Joseph Gordon-Levitt) are lounging in Summer's apartment, a mismatch of sound and image occurs. The sequence starts out normal and Summer begins to tell Tom about dreams she has, but then as her voice continues to talk, the images on the screen switch from her talking to Tom and Summer kneeling rather than lying down and kissing. Her voice continues to be heard on top of the images of them kissing, but they do not match up. This gives the film a surreal feeling. Viewers are unsure of which is taking place at the moment, her talking or them kissing. Mixing the two has created uncertainty.

One of the other techniques indies use to create unexpected occurrences like the sound mismatch is the use of split screen (Tzioumakis 179). An example of this is also found in the film *(500) Days of Summer*. This scene happens when Tom is invited to a party Summer is having after they have broken up. As Tom is going to the party the screen splits and at the bottom, with text, designates one as the reality of what is happening and the other as his expectations. A full sequence follows for both sides of the

screens with what is actually happening at the party and what Tom wishes would happen. The split screen does not break until the reality of the party makes him run out of the door and down the apartment stairs. Split screen in Hollywood is generally tied to phone calls or separate locations at the same time, but here this indie film uses the split screen to cross time planes or dimensions. Tom and Summer are existing simultaneously in two different places, that are in fact the same place. This is not only a unique and interesting use of split screen, but this usage begins to illustrate how indie narratives are largely different from Hollywood's as well.

b. Indie Narrative Style

Narrative form is the second way indie films differ from Hollywood fare. Specifically, Hollywood films follow the classical style narrative, which includes a number of certain aspects always used, while indie films will often structure their narratives to go against those aspects. One of the most prominent classical narrative aspects is "a clearly marked beginning, middle and end" (King 60). Thompson says, "We might posit that breaking a narrative into parts gives the spectator a sense of direction in which the action will proceed and thus aids comprehension" (22). For Hollywood films this seems to hold true. Breaking the narrative into those distinct parts gives the audience a map to follow on the road to how the film will end. However, indie films do not always provide that map. Indies are structured so individuals exist or things happen on their own and not in a way in which they are expected to follow a linear-machine (King 170). For example, an indie film like *The Cake Eaters* does not have a clear feeling of a beginning, middle and end. The narrative in the film does not follow any particular laid out direction and for the audience an almost "drifting" feeling is produced. The film obviously starts

and ends and viewers understand that, but what happens in the middle is slow and open. King believes, “some independent features are marked by their lack of strong, forward-moving narrative drive, opting instead for more relaxed or de-centered structures...” (59), which it seems *The Cake Eaters* is one of.

Another specific aspect of classical narrative style is how the characters act and are structured. First, the characters are generally “goal-oriented, psychologically motivated” (Tzioumakis 7). Thompson also puts forth that “Hollywood protagonists tend to be active, to seek out goals and pursue them rather than having goals simply thrust upon them” (14). These characters are however not necessarily present in indie films. On the contrary in a film such as *Lars and the Real Girl*, the main protagonist seeks his goals much less actively. Moreover, in Hollywood films the character’s goals are explained for the viewers directly, the characters talk about them and make them clear, but Lars does not. As viewers, we are unsure of Lars’s real intentions basically throughout the entire film. At the end, when he “kills” Bianca by fabricating that she has an illness, we can infer that he is doing this because he no longer needs her and is ready to be less introverted, however Lars never actually says that out loud. In Hollywood films the protagonists chase goals, but in an indie film like *Lars and the Real Girl* the goals can be uncertain. Characters in classical narratives also are usually “defined by clearly identified, unambiguous and consistent traits” (King 61). In classical Hollywood films there are often obvious villains and obvious protagonists, but in indie films characters are much less defined with those traits. King declares, indie “characters tend to be more complex or ambiguous, defined less in terms of clearly established goals or morality than is usually the case in Hollywood” (74). These types of characters are found in the indies

already mentioned. In *Lars and the Real Girl*, Lars' goals are uncertain and viewers are left to figure him out for themselves. Summer in *(500) Days of Summer* is a surprise to audiences. She has a sweetness about her and we feel somewhat drawn to her because Tom does so much, but in the end viewers are not left with a good feeling about her. She is so brutally honest that it is almost hard to like her. She breaks up with Tom, devastating him, and then shortly after gets married, being the one who all during their relationship preached that "love" was a myth. She is neither good nor evil; she is what viewers choose to make of her. The same thing occurs in *Juno*. Mark (Jason Bateman) is not a bad guy, in fact he seems down to earth compared to Vanessa (Jennifer Garner), however he in the end "he does not do the right thing" as a character in a Hollywood romantic comedy might. King explains how these characters are structured by conceiving that, "The characters just 'are,' essentially; they do what they do and viewers are left to come to their own conclusions" (75).

The next central trait of a classical narrative is the character transformation (Tzioumakis 7). It is a general rule in Hollywood narratives that the main character should transform in some way by the end of the film. Transformations occur in indie films as well, but at much less extreme levels. Juno does not change her quirky dialogue and doesn't grow up instantly and become a mother, instead her biggest change is realizing that she does want to be in a real relationship with Paulie. Likewise, Lars does not fully transform into an extrovert and let people touch him and socialize. At the end of the film he simply tries out the possibility of going on a walk with a real girl. Tom from *(500) Days of Summer* keeps his general mentality and when he meets a new love interest seems to fall for her the same way he did for Summer. In *Inglorious Basterds*, none of the

characters really transform. Hans Landa remains a terrible, conniving person, and Aldo Reins (Brad Pitt) continues to hate Nazis. Indie films seem to rely less on a main character transformation and rather portray ordinary small transformations along the way. In fact, the indie is often a much more downplayed version of Hollywood's narrative. King believes indies have "the impulse to downplay narrative drama, or melodrama in favour of an emphasis on something close to the 'undramatic present'" (69). The films of the indie genre give insight into lives not always shown in Hollywood settings. In films like *Juno*, *The Cake Eaters* and *Lars and the Real Girl*, characters who have distinct issues (teen-pregnancy, life threatening disease and mental illness) that might not be portrayed as much in Hollywood films are given the full spotlight. King says, "... many independent films offer visions of society not usually found in the mainstream..." (10), which is what those films exemplify. Hollywood-style narrative may display a "heightened portrayal of aspects of very particular lives, in very particular circumstances- with most of the dull bits left out," (King 68) but indies often favor the dull bits, and in fact some indie films are built around them. For example, in *The Cake Eaters*, most of the scenes are family meals or ordinary things like getting a haircut, unlike the extreme situations that can be found in Hollywood event films. Rather than have particular circumstances and predictable character transformations, indies use non-mainstream situations and every-day life occurrences as their basis for narrative form.

Another feature often found in classical narratives is repetition or redundancy (King 61). Indies do not seem to be marked with this feature very often, in fact they seem to use completely different styles to develop characters, especially dialogue. Dialogue is important to indies, in that they often rely much heavier on dialogue than Hollywood

films do. Hollywood event films obviously have dialogue, but the main driving force behind the narrative is the action. Levy believes dialogue-driven films are “the missing element from mainstream Hollywood...” (273), and it does seem apparent that there are much less of them compared to how many in the indie genre. *The Cake Eaters* is a dialogue-driven film where the events in the film are not action sequences or fight scenes, but simply people having conversations. Indies also use dialogue to give their films a certain mood or quality. For instance, King believes that the distinct and sometimes seemingly trivial dialogue of films like *Pulp Fiction* give the film a stylistic feel (83). The same can be said for the film *Juno*. The dialogue in *Juno* is not only important to drive the narrative, but it is very specific to a demographic and the current time period. Teenage or young adult slang of recent times was used in this film to create a “stylistic feel.” Phrases like “home skillet” and “he is the cheese to my macaroni” sets this film apart from others.

The last distinct attribute classical narratives always have is narrative closure (Tzioumakis 7). This is almost never missing from a Hollywood film, even if they are leaving it open ended as to what happens in the next installment of adventures. Indie films are not bound to this, they may have closure or they may not. They do however employ a number of devices to delay that closure or delay the natural progression of the narrative, something Hollywood shies away from. First, indies might use multi-strand narratives that disorient the audience from following one single, understandable narrative path. This is used in *(500) Days of Summer*. In this film the narrative is laid out as a time period of 500 days, but those days are not shown in chronological order. It may not be on par with other indie films, like the jumbled story of *Memento* (2000), because of the titles

indicating what day the narrative is on, but it is at times told backwards and out of order. Another popular technique is to block the narrative with intercuts that remove the audience from the diegesis. King posits that:

In general, independent features are more likely to employ devices designed to deny, block, delay or complicate that anticipated development of narrative, to reduce clarity or resolution and in some case to increase narrative self-consciousness (63).

This idea is present in a number of the indie films already discussed. Some films do it without breaking the diegesis. They force the audience to become aware of certain things they might not be in a Hollywood films, which brings forward the idea that this is a structured film scene rather than a natural occurrence the audience just happened to see. The best examples of this can be found in *Inglorious Basterds*. In one scene in particular Tarantino gives so much attention to tiny details that a viewer is forced to look at it and wonder why they are being shown it so intently. It is said that the attention of the camera can drift away from what seems to be central to the narrative in indie films (King 139), and that's exactly what happens in the scene with Shosaana and Landa eating streusel. In this scene Landa (Christoph Waltz) orders them streusel and although it has no real significance to the plot or narrative drive, there is an extreme close up first on the cream for the streusel, then the cream being dolloped on the streusel, and then Landa eating the streusel. This is strange and does not make sense in the narrative, but it does make the viewer aware that there is camera present. The camera forces them to look at the streusel, when alone they may have not. Indies also use techniques that do break the diegesis. In many of the indies already mentioned, intercuts and sequences that do not belong in the

world of the film bring viewers to a self-conscious level of watching. King cites an earlier example of this in the film *Clerks* (1994), where titles such as “Catharsis” and “Denouncement” seem to imply a self-consciousness he thinks are found in indies (82). This is also found in *Inglorious Basterds*. There are numerous examples in this film showing that it’s a reoccurring theme. For example, one of the first instances is when Hugo Stiglitz (Til Schweiger) is introduced. First a large block lettered title of his name comes on the screen, followed by a newspaper reel and then a flashback. This completely takes the audience out of the world of the film. Similar things occur in *(500) Days of Summer*. One example is what the film calls the “Summer Effect.” To describe how Summer has this uncanny effect on males, the film leaves the diegesis and enters a black and white education film-like world where Summer’s past events are reenacted for the audience, such as her job at an ice cream parlor and the double takes she gets on her bus ride. Everyone watching is aware that this is not really happening in the film and is more part of Tom’s imagination, but if a Hollywood film was to try and convey something like this they would probably use more conventional “dream-like” characteristics such as a different film stock or dissolve transition. Hollywood films rarely exit the diegesis and in particular often build elaborate plots in order to explain everything with in the narrative story. Indies are not afraid to make the audience aware that they are watching a film, while Hollywood’s main goal is to keep audiences immersed.

c. What Audiences Expect and Why?

Now that it is apparent that indie films share mechanical and narrative attributes, which differ from Hollywood’s, it shows that these films fit the definition of genre already discussed. They further fit that definition because after those shared attributes

have been seen repeatedly in a number of indie films, they become anticipated by audiences. It is naturally not an easy task to know what audiences think and expect because you are not in their heads, but in certain instances people will voice their opinions. I will use blog sites to understand what people expect from indie films. Blogs are a unique and reliable source because people are voicing their honest opinions on them. Blogs are created specifically for others to read people's beliefs on subjects and hash out discussions in a public space. What also adds to the idea that audiences have certain expectations of indie films and that they assume certain films will fit into the indie category, is how those films are marketed and categorized in the public. These two forms of evidence help make apparent that the indie films of today can be put into a category by audiences.

The question, "What is an indie film?" is a popular one on cinema blog sites. People debate the issue throughout the web and try to compare what they expect from an indie to what others expect. Although people have different thoughts on the matter, the idea that they discuss and put forth their assumptions about indies, reveals that indie films can be put into a group, or rather a genre. For example, in a blog, entitled Open Questions: Are Indie Movies Dead? Does It Matter?, located on the NPR website, people expressed what they expect from indie films. One blogger, Rob, said, "Because of the lack of a budget, indie films must rely on great acting, a well-written script, visionary directors, etc..." (Holmes). Another responder, Amanda, wrote:

In my opinion, indie movies tend to be about people and their situation and what they do, and what happens to them. This sort of story-telling is what I would like

from the fiction I read, too. I like to see life through someone else's eyes, to experience things I would never otherwise be exposed to (Holmes).

Both of these statements expose what they think an indie will include. Rob thinks indies will have a well-written script, which can be related to having great dialogue. One of the main attributes of an indie, that especially sets it apart from Hollywood films, is that it is dialogue-driven and in many cases has a specific dialogue style, such as in *Juno*. While no one can pin point exactly what Rob was trying to get at in his statement, but himself, it seems that his opinions meet up with what I have already uncovered about indie narrative form. Similarly, Amanda sites two techniques found in many of the indie films previously examined. First, she implies that she expects indies to have to be about “people and their situation, and what they do.” While we cannot be sure that this is what she means, it seems like she is describing a similar idea to what King explains in his book about characters in indies. As already cited, King believes, “characters just ‘are,’ essentially; they do what they do and viewers are left to come to their own conclusions” (75). When Amanda says, “This sort of story-telling is what I would like from the fiction I read, too,” it helps put her first statement into perspective and relate it to what King thinks about indie characters. In a fiction novel, readers are left to imagine things much more than in a film, the characters are often open for interpretation more so than when shown on a screen. This same concept could be applied to indie films versus Hollywood films. Indie characters are more ambiguous and do not follow strict good and evil dynamics that many Hollywood characters do. Therefore, combining Amanda’s first two statements shows that she expects indie characters to function more like characters in a fiction novel than in a Hollywood blockbuster. The third part of her statement, “I like to

see life through someone else's eyes, to experience things I would never otherwise be exposed to," relates to another aspect found in the indie films previously discussed. King says that many indie films will offer "visions of society not usually found in the mainstream" (10), which we saw with a character like Lars. In Amanda's statement she seems to be saying that she desires these types of characters in the indie films she will go see, characters that she would "never otherwise be exposed to" in a Hollywood film.

In another blog found on the website The Movie Blog.com, entitled "How Do you Define an 'Indie Film'?", bloggers conveyed their assumptions about indie movies. One blogger, Joe Thorn, said, "Indies are more likely to experiment and avoid formulaic story-telling because they can" (Rodney). This idea matches the indie narrative technique that delays classical narrative, with such things as intercuts and a removal from the diegesis. It can be assumed that Thorn is most likely referring to classical Hollywood narrative when he says "formulaic story-telling" and this shows that indies can be expected to differ from that. Similarly, another blogger who goes by the pseudonym, Bond, James Bond, said, "they can never be confused with formula" (Rodney). This same blogger also said, "those films have the honesty of vision to take artistic risks" (Rodney). While this statement may be vague, it can possibly be inferred that by "artistic risks", this respondent is referring to how indie films are edited or is describing their mechanical structure. If this is true, then he may be saying with this statement that "risks" are mechanical techniques not used by the mainstream, which we have uncovered as something indies share. In an article entitled, "The Lost Art of Film Editing," Jessica Winter, discusses recent film editing style in both Hollywood and indie films. Although, her argument puts Hollywood and indie films together, she does make some statements

on how she feels indies are edited. Winter calls it “the dizzying pinball effect of hyperspeed editing,” which I can infer refers to quick editing (“The Lost Art”), with less clarity for the viewer that opposes continuity editing, something Hollywood has always shied away from. She says in her article, “the character-driven, explosion-free films offered as an alternative to the blockbusters,” which I take to be indies, use this technique. This illustrates that indie editing style can be viewed by the public (which this journalist is part of) as non-mainstream and differs from continuity editing.

These blogs and articles help demonstrate what audiences expect from indie films and the fact that they match many of the attributes found in the indie films examined earlier shows indies have genre characteristics. Other sources help demonstrate further how indie films are put into a category and audience expectations are reinforced. One of the ways this happens is through labeling. In cinema theaters and places where people can rent movies, films are put into categories for audiences. For example, on the Fandango Website, an extremely popular movie site for purchasing film tickets and more, there is a page entitled the “Indie Film Guide.” This is a site where people go to read about a film before they buy a ticket and it plays heavily on what people go to see and what they expect from a film. At the top of the site there are tabs and one of those tabs is “Movie Guides” and under that tab is the “Indie Film Guide.” Two things are important here: first it is labeled indie, not independent. The makers of Fandango are playing up the difference between an indie and the historical idea of an independent film. The films they list in this section are not required to be made by a non-studio or for a small budget, instead they must be part of the indie category, basically, they have to fit into the indie genre. Second, labeling these films indies shows how a popular movie-related website

reinforces what audiences should expect from certain films. If audiences have ideas of what indies are, as we saw from the blogs, then when a website like this labels films “indie”, most audience members will have to imagine that those assumptions they have about indies will be present in the films listed. Both, *Lars and the Real Girl* and *Juno* can be found in the “Indie Film Guide” on Fandango. Choosing to label certain films in this way shows that the creators of this site are supporting viewer expectations of the indie genre.

Just like Fandango, another popular movie site, Netflix, also labels films as indie. Netflix is a site where people rent films and are able to browse freely among a huge selection of movies. The site is broken into parts, one of which is where customers can browse the DVD selection by Genre. The genre tab is broken into categories, one of which is “Independent.” Once a customer clicks on that genre another category list comes up with choices such as “Indie Action, Indie Comedies, Indie Dramas, or Indie Romance.” This first of all, champions my theory that indie films are indeed their own genre, as well as produces the same effect that the “Indie Film Guide” does on Fandango. Customers will assume that a film under the “Independent” section, or more specifically under a particular indie sub-category, will exhibit some of the expected behaviors or styles they have for indie films. *(500) Days of Summer* can be found under the Indie Romance and Indie Comedies sections, *Juno* is found in the Indie Comedies and Indie Drama sections, and *The Cake Eaters* can be found in the Indie Drama and Indie Romance sections. This simultaneously shows that the indie films discussed earlier are categorized in public as part of the indie genre as well as illustrates that these films span multiple sub-categories, while still being part of the larger indie picture.

V. Conclusion

After a long history of change, the American film industry has reached a status where conglomerate powers use visionary filmmakers to their advantage and those visionaries use studios to get their films made. Because of this, critics and audiences alike cannot differentiate independent films by their finances. This has allowed indies to become more recognized for their un-Hollywood-like mechanical and narrative forms and since those forms are shared among a large number of them, and because audiences now have predisposed expectations of indie films, they can be called a genre. However, I would not say the industry has become one entity. Independent filmmakers still struggle and getting a major studio to finance an independent film, especially one with radical, non-mainstream characteristics, remains difficult. Not all indie films can have the success *Juno* did, but the indie genre has begun to open doors. Can there ever be a fully integrated film industry, where indie films are on the same level as mainstream ones? The question remains open for the time being, but for now those successful indie films are helping to counteract a flatness that mainstream films have been bringing to audiences for years. The recent popular Hollywood trends of superhero films and sequels have been dominating the box office for almost a decade now and it seems clear that Hollywood has not been giving audiences truly innovative work, but have they ever? The point is, now there is a whole category for just that. Tzioumakis believes, "... independent filmmakers create films that stand against the crass commercialism of mainstream Hollywood while often pushing the envelope in terms of subject matter and its mode of representation" (1). This being true, filmmakers now have greater opportunities and platforms to share those

new representations. While independents are no longer defined by their finances, they are still defined by their original spirit, and forming a genre gives them the space to do it in.

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