

Newman, Michael Z. *Indie: An American Film Culture*. New York: Columbia UP, 2011. 304 pp. Cloth \$79.50. Paper \$26.50.

The deadening, leveling aspects of commerce-driven American mass culture can be disheartening. Yet, time and again, the United States has proven to be large enough, to contain space enough, both literally and metaphorically, for certain individuals and groups to locate a place for themselves in which to do things differently. In some cases, such cultures have succeeded in enriching the larger culture. One thinks of the Transcendentalists, or of the Provincetown Players, or--far more recently--indie.

Indie, shorthand for a status independent of major corporations, became in the latter decades of the twentieth century an important cultural phenomenon of both the music and film worlds. In his book on U.S. independent cinema, Michael Newman serves up a satisfying and valuable study of a film movement that he approaches as a broader artistic, social, economic, cultural, and historical phenomenon. With this emphasis on context, he succeeds in reminding the reader of how artists and viewers, producers and reviewers, and ideas and venues combine in relationship to create a world where both creativity and social formation can take place. For these reasons, anyone interested in U.S. independent films will enjoy *Indie: An American Film Culture* as itself a location to come to and participate in the rewards of a shared culture. Newman provides succinct accounts of the origins and role, in the late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century U.S., of such venues for independent cinema as the Sundance and Telluride film festivals, the Miramax distribution company, magazines such as *Filmmaker*, and the Landmark theater chain. In explaining, for instance, how and where the Landmark concept originated, Newman enhances both the appreciation and the understanding of a devotee of indie and foreign films, especially one who is fortunate enough to be provided the resulting theatrical access to these works while being situated within comfortable stadium seating, a well-appointed concession stand, and the shared etiquette of a like-minded viewing audience.

Newman argues that indie cinema is defined by acts of resistance to the dominant film culture of Hollywood. As an assertion of a superior alternative to standard commercial fare for the masses at the megaplex, sometimes even by a smaller theater or two specially designated at the megaplex, U.S. independent film occupies a space held in the 1950s and 1960s by foreign art films, one shared during the late 1960s and 1970s by New Hollywood. But Newman also pays close attention to the role of indie as a cinema for youthful hipsters and acknowledges its connections to the indie rock of Sonic Youth and Liz Phair. As the relation of those artists to mainstream success might suggest, Newman sees that indie is a relational term, one with positive value as a challenge to conservatism within corporate culture. But beyond this perspective on indie as a matter of production, he also emphasizes the term as a label for a culture of consumption, one possessing a set of viewing strategies. Linking the two are factors of style and audience address, as well as the paratexts of promotion and exhibition, which importantly influence the aesthetics of the works comprising indie cinema.

At the same time, Newman pays attention to the role that certain key works have played in creating indie's idea of itself. In particular, he explores how *Sex, Lies, and Videotape* (1989), *Pulp Fiction* (1994), and *Memento* (2000) are landmarks that influenced subsequent films, while importantly affecting the indie viewers' sense of their tastes and values as a culture. With his emphasis on the last, Newman is particularly interested in showing how familiarity with such films becomes for the indie audience a set of credentials, a way of distinguishing themselves from the larger audience at the megaplex. In addition to this sociological aspect, he suggests that

the status of these films encourages the construction of a spectator who seeks to possess an ideal competence as viewer, one able to wield the interpretive strategies and draw upon the surrounding discourses of an elite, vanguard culture. Newman specifically identifies three aspects of indie films that these viewers appear to look for: characters who can be understood as emblems of their social identities, as exemplified in a film such as *Clerks* (1994); films that are invitations to formal play, as in the parody, pastiche, and allusions found in *The Big Lebowski* (1998); and alternative worlds to Hollywood's emphasis on normative identities, as provided by such offbeat films as *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006).

While Newman devotes a full chapter to the Coen brothers, and other chapters pivot upon such key individual films as *Pulp Fiction* and *Happiness* (1998), Newman's approach comes at some detriment to the role of individual film artists. The emphasis on viewing strategies and shared expectations of the audience seems true enough as one lens through which to view indie films. As with genre-study, the result can be a deadening emphasis on the usual, as opposed to the innovative and unique. Indie, at its most expected, can be characterized as yet another film genre about the relationship and work struggles of women and men in their twenties or thirties, negotiating with underemployment, undependable spouses, competitive siblings, or liberated parents. In other words, they can seem very much like the lives of young, struggling filmmakers and those who know them. That these cinematic equivalents of first novels can allure an audience that has little interest in current Hollywood genre cinema seems likely, and worthy enough, but such an audience is even more likely to discover a brighter spectrum in a strikingly new prism upon such material, as crafted, for instance, by Terence Malick's audacious *The Tree of Life* (2011).

With its sociological and psychological framing, Newman's study adopts the objective stance of the social sciences. Especially in the opening chapters, a somewhat labored repetition of the main ideas betrays a slight tendency toward the dryness of the case study. At times, his work might lead some readers to long for a bold assertion of the value of individual creativity and a celebration of the role of a culture that has refused to be assimilated into the limited sameness of the mainstream. Nevertheless, Newman's informative and thorough study will be valued by anyone interested in U.S. independent film.

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