

A Profit Worth the Pain?

A Query into the Economic Viability of Independent Film

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The economic success of a film is often measured by it's box office success, but for independent films that usually have low ticket sales, play in second run theaters, or don't make it to theaters at all, success must be measured differently. Therefore, for our purposes we will define a film as economically successful when it's income equals the cost of production (including salary for cast and crew) as well as provides enough excess funds to begin finding financial backing for future projects.

Though it is possible to sell films on-line or distribute them on a small scale to a localized market, being picked up for national distribution is by far the easiest and most profitable way for an independent film to make money. The magnitude of the distribution deal acquired seems to correlate directly to the number of awards received at film festivals. Presently, a film that is well received at an A-rate festival is almost guaranteed to get a distribution deal. The success of films such as *Clerks*, *Napoleon Dynamite*, and *American Splendor* are testament to this. In fact, the marketability of winning films is such that if there is a lot of buzz around a film a deal may be cut before the film actually wins a single award. *Smoke Signals*, for example, was picked up by Miramax before it won the Audience as well as Director's award at the Sundance Film Festival (imbd.com).

This is something every independent filmmaker strives for, a fact acknowledged by the Slamdance Film Festival. Although created as a reaction to the changing definition

of independent film to include the big budget films that were being screened and winning at Sundance, Slamdance still sells itself on their website by declaring that “Slamdance films have been picked up for distribution, invited to festivals around the world, won Independent Spirit Awards, the Palme d'Or and an Academy Award, among many other accolades.” The site goes on to boast it’s list of “Slamdance Film Festival alumni” which include “ ‘Memento’ director Christopher Nolan (festival award winner ‘Following’), the Emmy Award winning Russo Brothers (‘Pieces’), and ‘Finding Neverland’ and ‘Monster's Ball’ director Marc Forster (festival audience award winner ‘Loungers’). The 2005 Slamdance opening night film ‘Mad Hot Ballroom’ was acquired by Paramount Classics” (www.slamdance.com). That’s a lot of big names and big movie titles to throw around for an independent film festival.

However, many independent filmmakers have decided to bypass the general reliance on festivals and take matters into their own hands. With internet technology being what it is today anyone with a camcorder and a will can make an independent film and post it on-line. The website ‘You-Tube’ hosts countless video clips, allowing the material to forgo screeners and distributors directly to the audience. The idea is that if they like what they see they will ask for more, and if the public is asking for something chances are that a distributor will want to make a profit off of that. A recent example of a You-Tube success is David Hewlett’s *A Dog’s Breakfast* which through it’s on-line popularity scored a deal with both MGM Studios and a spin-off pilot development deal with NBC/Universal (dig.com). According to adogsbreakfastmovie.com a clip of the film posted on You-tube had over 20,000 viewings in a matter of hours. They also had a personal website which had thousands of members, promotional and merchandising

campaigns and over 2,000 screening requests. Hewlett prides himself in his success, proclaiming that “MGM and NBC/Universal couldn't help but hear that kind of buzz”.

He's right, which is why another way for independent films to get a distribution deal is to work off of the already existent buzz of popular culture to gain popularity (Mast). Joe Nussbaum who dropped the name of arguably the most financially successful independent filmmaker of all time in his short film *George Lucas in Love* was able to use the success of that film to land a deal directing, among other things, the blockbuster *American Pie 5: The Naked Mile*. Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles is also a good example of an independent film using the recognition of a popular comic book to leverage the film into success. The success of the first TMNT movie was such that two sequels were made from it, grossing millions at the box office (wikipedia.com).

The major distribution companies fund many of the films they circulate. Independent filmmakers have to go up against these distribution companies as well as they “usually can't induce major companies to invest in their projects, so they try to presell the distribution rights in various territories to use the funds to finance their production” (Bordwell).

Obviously, the success of an independent film is greatly affected by the names associated with it, which is why, many argue, it is unfair that independent films with budgets large enough to support name actors should be allowed to dominate film festivals while overshadowing true grassroots filmmakers. The strength of star power can be seen in the enormous success of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* which was entirely independently financed and produced for \$25 mil, but made over \$300 mil in box office and DVD sales. Yet, this again questions the term independent, because the powers stars

have to have creative freedom is the power that Hollywood gave them. Leonardo DiCaprio, for example is now in the production of his independent documentary, *The 11th Hour*, which warns against the dangers of global warming. Yet, this is the same DiCaprio who starred in *Titanic*, to this day the largest grossing film of all time.

For those filmmakers not fortunate enough to have a well-recognized name and money at their disposal it is much harder to make money with their independent film, if they can even afford to make it. The recent film *Iraq for sale: The War Profiteers*, has made taken independent filmmaking a step further by relying on audience support to finance it. Calling itself a “people powered film”, it raised \$267,892 in 10 days through an internet campaign (bravenewfilms.com). Of course, one of the reasons that campaign could work was because it was a documentary film being made on a subject that many feel passionately about. Independent narrative or “art” films that may not have the leverage of a controversial topic, would not be likely to benefit from such a campaign. Of course, there is always the option of selling a well-received film that just doesn’t have the name actors to make it big as a concept idea to a larger studio to be remade as Greg Gliena did with his film 1992 film *Meet the Parents* which he sold to Universal for the \$200,000 dollars just so he could pay back his cast and crew (www.associatedcontent.com).

So, the question remains: can independent film be economically viable? Can an independent filmmaker in, let’s say, Ithaca NY, make it on a small scale? The answer is that it depends. There’s no reason why a super-small budget film can’t make it’s production cost back by being screened or distributed locally or to a specialized audience. It is also undeniable that the pay off of an independent film that makes it big is so great

that one could argue it makes up for a lot of independent films that don't. but the fact is that there are so many independent films that never see a penny- not even a screening at a film festival, and their financial success is so unpredictable, that one cannot say that independent film is economically viable. Until independent films can compete openly with big budget Hollywood movies the cost of making the countless independent films out there will be greater than the profit of the one that makes it.