**Video Script**

**Lecture 32 – Austin**

**Fall 2020**

**Welcome**

In the words of one Professor McConaughey: alright, alright, alright. Welcome to the final installment of our Indie Cultures week of lectures, in which we’ll focus on filmmaking in a specific geographical location (one near and dear to our hearts) that lies outside the U.S.’s traditional media capitals of Hollywood or New York.

**Key Concepts**

We don’t really have any key concepts today. Rather, we’ve got one big idea, or one really one big question. If we’ve looked at how Black independent cinema emerged from both blaxploitation and the L.A. Rebellion, and we looked at how Chicano cinema grew out of an activist movement that encompassed labor, education, and media, today we’re going to ask:

“Why did Austin, beginning in the 1960s and 1970s, emerge as an independent film and media hub?” **[ANIMATION]** For this lecture, I’ve asked you to choose and read one of three chapters from Alison Macor’s book *Chainsaws, Slackers and Spy Kids*. In that book, she includes this quote: “By the late ‘60s and early ‘70s, writes Peter Biskind in his chronicle of the period, if you were young, ambitious and talented, there was no better place on earth to be than Hollywood. Austin offered a pretty good alternative, however…”

It’s this process of becoming an alternative that we’ll look at today. And, as we’ll see, it’s due to a confluence of factors: culture, creators, institutions, money, and perhaps some luck, too.

**Kinetoscope**

But we are going to start *way* back at the beginning. Citizens of Austin were interested in film from very early on in the medium’s history. **[ANIMATION]** Austin got a kinetoscope parlor just seven months after the first one opened in New York City, for example. **[ANIMATION]** But Austin’s first film company was thanks to these two, the Tilley Brothers from San Antonio, who got their start in a very unusual way…

**Whale**

…when a whale beached itself in Port Arthur, Texas in 1910. This became a huge attraction in Port Arthur, perhaps because seeing an enormous whale close up was a pretty rare and fascinating thing, or perhaps there wasn’t much to do around Port Arthur in 1910. Historians may never know. This is a real photo of the Port Arthur whale that I found—I particularly love that someone has taken pains to caption it “On a whale.” So helpful.

So, as one does, the Tilleys looked at this big rotting dead whale carcass and saw dollar signs. They borrowed their grandfather’s film equipment and ran to Port Arthur to shoot a bunch of footage of the dead whale, which they then tried to sell as a newsreel to Pathe, the film company. Pathe, upon seeing the breathtaking majesty of the Tilley’s dead whale film, was like no, absolutely not, we have zero interest in this, get out of our office.

**News**

The Tilleys, however, were undeterred. They moved to Austin and hooked up here with an investor named Charles Pyle and, along with a few others, formed the Satex production company in 1913. That’s a weird name, but if you’re good at Scrabble you’ll realize it’s just the letters of Texas scrambled up.

Pyle’s wife was an actor, and together they recruited a troupe of fifteen more performers from New York City and brought them out to Austin, where they began churning out films. These films were distributed through Warner Brothers and they shot some longer ones—some silent three-reels, for example—in the early teens. It was helpful that they had some interesting locations to shoot in around the hill country that made their films look different from what the New York or early California filmmakers were doing.

Unfortunately, Satex Productions went as belly-up as the Port Arthur whale after about a year, and sadly, none of their films survive.

**TAMI**

However! The Texas Archive of the Moving Image, which was founded by and is run by Dr. Caroline Frick, an RTF professor, has recovered a trove of their *home* movies, some of which date back to the 1910s. I’ll include a link to this archive in the module.

So, after Satex went kaput, filmmaking in Austin was very sporadic from the late teens until the 1960s-1970s. Production in Texas during that span mostly happened in Dallas, if it happened at all, or around San Antonio where there were great locations like the Alamo to shoot in.

**Downtown Austin**

That said, Austin was always a good city for movie*goers*. During the golden age of Hollywood there were three theaters downtown on Congress. The Paramount was the flagship, a big movie palace, and it was the first in Austin to be wired for sound. If you’re ever there for an event, look around—that’s what a movie palace felt like.

In this photo, you can also see the State and the Queen, our other two theaters. Now—this is a rabbit hole, but come along with me for a moment. The Queen in this photograph is playing a film called *Shut My Big Mouth*, and I could not pass up the chance to figure out what the hell *that* was…

**Joe E. Brown**

…and it turns out that this was a starring vehicle for Joe E. Brown, a comedian who was famous for having a huge mouth. That’s it! That’s the whole story. Just a man with an enormous mouth. Which goes to show you, I guess, that we make fun of celebrities now for being famous for doing nothing but, that’s a venerable American tradition, as it turns out.

**Guadalupe**

So, there were also three theaters on Guadalupe in the 1970s. There was the Dobie (which is now apartments and the Target). **[ANIMATION]** There was also the Texas, which you see here and which is now the CVS. In the 70s, the Texas showed mostly soft-core pornography and foreign films.

**Varsity**

There was also the Varsity, which up until recently housed the Dunkin Donuts, where they showed studio films and specialty releases. Here’s an ad for the opening of the Varsity in 1936, where it appropriately showed a film called *The Texas Rangers*.

**Varsity 1970s**

And here’s a photo of the Varsity in the early 1980s, by which time it had a deep connection to the film program at UT and was showing arthouse films like *El Norte*. I promise, I didn’t photoshop that, but finding it was a moment of real cosmic synchronicity for me.

**Map**

The theaters of the Drag bring us to the University, a cornerstone institution of Austin’s film culture. The RTF department was established in 1965 with the idea that the program would combine media studies and production classes, which is still what you all do today. **[ANIMATION]** It operated out of the Radio-TV building **[ANIMATION]** which was over near the tower.

In the 1960s, when the program was new and in search of funds, they in fact took advantage of our proximity to state government and partnered with state agencies to make films. One early graduate student in the 1960s made his thesis film for the Texas Aeronautics Commission, for example. They paid for the film to be made and the department used that money to buy more equipment for students.

**Quote**

So, from its inception, RTF had a functional and pragmatic filmmaking and film education culture, which set UT apart from the programs growing at NYU or USC. As department chair Rod Whitaker put it in the 1960s, “If you want to contemplate your navel, go to UCLA. If you want to learn to make films, come to Texas.”

**CinemaTexas**

But UT’s film program and its connection Austin’s wider film culture isn’t just about filmmaking. There’s a history of university film clubs that brought film and filmmakers here for audiences, too. The first one, the University Film Program Committee was founded in 1953 and showed foreign films in an auditorium on campus—but this was restricted only to UT students, faculty and staff.

Things get more interesting with the Cinema40 society, which followed in 1965, and was run by UT film students. Cinema40 brought filmmakers to present their films; they invited Jean-Luc Godard, a luminary of the French New Wave, to speak in 1967, for instance. These awesome programs took place in those theaters on the Drag like the Varsity and the Dobie, and were open to both students *and* the community, bringing film education outside of just the 40 acres.

**[ANIMATION]** Finally, there was CinemaTexas, a nonprofit film program started in 1971 by faculty and run by graduate students. Every Monday and Thursday night they ran a separate two-movie lineup, and students and faculty both wrote long notes for each film. These notes were beloved; it’s rumored that film critic Pauline Kael subscribed to them, and they’ve been collected and published in the book you see here. CinemaTexas helped establish a moviegoing culture in Austin that embraced more than just Hollywood films. This was important to film lovers, and filmmakers affiliated with UT, and also for non-university filmmakers too, as you’ll see in a moment.

**Tobe Hooper**

To round out the lecture, I want to take a look at a couple of Austin’s resident independent filmmakers who are highly associated with the moviemaking culture in our fair city. There are others I could talk about—Terrence Malick, for example—but the three I’m highlighting here are the ones discussed in the chapters you can choose from for today’s reading.

The first is Tobe Hooper, director of the low-budget horror classic *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. A native of Austin, Hooper took some classes at UT in the RTF department, but after that he worked as sort of a freelance filmmaker, doing commercials, documentaries, and shorts.

**Eggshells**

In 1969, he makes a weird little psychedelic feature with a collaborator, Kim Henkel. That film is *Eggshells*, which was thought totally lost until a few years ago. It was recovered in 2009, an there’s a full version streaming on YouTube that I’ll include in the additional links page—but I can’t promise it’ll remain up there forever.

**Balloons**

*Eggshells* is a bizarre little slice of hippie Austin, almost certainly the romanticized Weird of those Keep Austin Weird bumper stickers. I’ve watched it—it has some genuinely delightful moments, like when this li’l hippie loner follows a trail of balloons through the trees, collecting different colors behind him like a big peacock tail. It also has lots of endless scenes of hippies chattering in a commune. So: mixed bag, and it’s no surprise that this was not a blockbuster.

**Leather Face**

Hooper and Henkel noticed that independent *horror* seemed to be a surefire genre to get one’s film into a theater; they’d seen similar screenings through Cinema40, like *Night of the Living Dead*. They knew they could make a great film, but they needed to have a really *edgy* script because they had virtually no budget to make it, and no one famous to put in the cast. The horror element had to serve as the film’s selling point.

The movie they made was, of course, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, which was shot in Austin in a house on Quick Hill Road, for next to no money.

**Pearl**

They recruited current UT students to work on the film, including Dorothy Pearl, who was a UT anthropology student at the time. Though she had little experience, she was brought on to do effects makeup. And she was great at it! Pearl in fact went on to become an important Hollywood makeup artist who won awards for her work on *Tootsie*, and did makeup for films like *Miss Congeniality* and *Big Fish.*

**Massacre Posters**

Hooper’s bet on horror was a good one. Despite having just $100,000 (or somewhere in that neighborhood) to make the film, and despite struggling to find distribution for such a violent movie, and despite receiving an R rating instead of the PG one they thought they would get for reducing the amount of guts and blood, the film went on to make $30 million dollars at the box office in 1974—that’s 16.5 million tickets sold.

**Linklater**

Case number two is Richard Linklater, who is *not* a UT grad—in fact, he moved to Austin in the 1980s and was rejected by RTF. Instead, he went to Austin Community College, which also offers filmmaking classes, and went to all the CinemaTexas screenings he could possibly attend. Eventually, he began hosting his own “experimental” film night at the Dobie theater.

**AFS**

Those nights were, in fact, the beginning of the Austin Film Society.

**Slacker**

Linklater also formed Detour Filmproduction in a two-story house just north of campus and made his breakthrough film, *Slacker* in 1990. If you haven’t seen it, *Slacker* is a story told through vignettes of life in Austin, passed from person to person on the street—we follow one character for a while, and then we follow another. It shot in locations *all over* Austin, including the Greyhound bus station, West Campus, a bunch of quiet streets downtown that were shuttered because it was summer, Liberty Lunch (a cool music venue that used to be on West 2nd street, and a café around the corner from Linklater’s apartment where he ate so often the owner let him use it for free.

Like *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, *Slacker* was independently made and had an even smaller budget—just $23,000 in total. But it was well received and went on to be nominated for the Grand Jury Prize at the 1991 Sundance Film Festival.

**Dazed**

The rest is Austin moviemaking history. Linklater went on to make a lot of films, but two Austin-centric examples are 1993’s *Dazed and Confused*, and *Boyhood*, which was released in 2014 and was the result of a 12-year-long shoot.

**Rodriguez.**

Our third and final case is that of Robert Rodriguez, who was actually born and raised in San Antonio, but who came to UT for college. Like Linklater, he too was not (at first) accepted into the RTF department because his GPA wasn’t high enough. But he kept making films anyway.

**Quote**

And the films were well-received. This is from an interview in *Filmmaker* magazine:

*“after his compilation of three shorts, Austin Stories, won first prize at the Third Coast Film and Video Competition, he confronted the chairman of the film department. "I beat your students. Can I get in the department now?" he asked, and was finally accepted. Rodriguez remembers, "I didn’t have the money to rent equipment. I wanted to be in the film department for the free equipment. I didn’t go there to learn how to tell a story.”*

**El Mariachi**

He did medical tests for the money he needed to make his first RTF film, *Bedhead* (which I’m asking you to watch as part of this module) as well as another film called *El Mariachi*. He did nearly *everything* himself on these two films—writing, directing, editing, cinematography, etc.—which was partly a function of having a miniscule budget, and partly because of his personality. He’s spoken in interviews about how much he likes having full control over his project, sometimes calling himself a one-man crew.

Despite being made on a budget of just a little over $7,000, *El Mariachi* was picked up by Columbia Pictures for distribution. They did some post-production work on it, to be sure—some stuff Rodriguez could not have afforded on his own. But it was successful, and it rocketed him into the stratosphere, and he went on to make big-budget films like *Spy Kids, Machete,* and *From Dusk ‘Til Dawn*, and my beloved teen horror romp*, The Faculty*.

His studios, Troublemaker Studios*,* remain headquartered here in Austin.

**Austin**

There’s obviously so much more I could have talked about, as Austin has only become more of a hub of media industry since 2000, when digitally-focused companies like Rooster Teeth, or Chive Media Group started to pop up here, too. So why Austin? Why not Denton, or El Paso? Why any place?

**[ANIMATION]** Well, I think there are a confluence of factors that appear when you look at Austin’s filmmaking history. First, there are some institutions that bolster the community. There’s UT of course, which has had a commitment to educating filmmakers since the 1960s, but there’s also the Austin Film Society, and yearly festivals like South by Southwest and ATX.

There are also economic incentives like tax breaks, no required permits to shoot in many locations throughout the city, funding for renting equipment from Texas companies, and more. The city has incentivized film production, making it one of its key industries. Further, there’s the factor that drove filmmakers to the west more than a hundred years ago—the weather. With more than 300 days of sunshine here, you can basically shoot year-round, just like in Los Angeles. That’s economically beneficial. And because the film industry has been here for decades at this point, there are seasoned professionals in all aspects of the industry who can work on your stuff—there’s a good labor pool.

In terms of culture, we’ve seen that Austin has protected and nurtured its reputation as a city for artists and those who appreciate the arts—particularly music and film. There is a robust independent theater business here. Moviegoing—up until the pandemic at least—remains part of Austin’s entertainment DNA.

And finally, there’s luck. Had Linklater, Rodriguez, and Hooper’s films flopped, would Austin have seemed like such a filmmakers paradise? It’s hard to say. But success tends to attract more success, and these films *were* successful.

**Final Thoughts**

So, just a couple of final thoughts here.

**[ANIMATION]** The back-to-back success of Linklater & Rodriguez, both of whom crucially chose to keep their careers centered here, helped to put Austin on the map as a creative hub. AFS and Troublemaker studios, in fact, share a huge production space over by the HEB on 51st street.

**[ANIMATION]** But both of them were rejected by RTF! Linklater never participated, and Rodriguez only did so after finding success as a filmmaker outside the program. The question I’d like you to take with you beyond this lecture and into your careers in RTF is: in what ways does RTF facilitate filmmaking? And in what ways might it act as a gatekeeping mechanism? Do you need good grades to make good films? Should you need to be a UT student to have access to equipment rentals? Throughout Austin’s film history, what has the University enabled, and what has it discouraged?

**[ANIMATION]** And finally, filmmakers in and around Austin for decades have seen this as the right place to set their stories. Austin acts as a third place to make media—but so does Atlanta, for example. But does expanding the film industry beyond just LA and New York meaningfully help to expand the idea of film, and who we talk about? As you move through your media day, consider the community from which your media emerges. Does place matter? If so, how?