1

Indie Film as Indie Culture

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Like its counterpart, Hollywood, indie has come to mean more things than we can accommodate in a capsule summary. Like Hollywood, indie is a type of movie, a mode of production and distribution, a community of practice, a cultural ideal, and a shorthand for something people too easily celebrate or deride. Actually it is not one type, mode, community, ideal, and shorthand, but several. It is also, like Hollywood, a term with a history, naming a series of iterations of cinematic and cultural formations. The indie cinema of the 1980s and 90s is not exactly the indie cinema of the 2010s. In one sense indie cinema names a historical period, which I have called the Sundance–Miramax era, stretching from the 1980s to around 2010 (Newman 2011). But it also extends earlier and later in variations of independence and indieness (Mann 2008, King 2014). The Sundance–Miramax era, moreover, might not be as coherent as I would like it to seem.

Like Hollywood, indie cinema is also integrally part of something bigger than itself that includes many types of popular media and culture. Hollywood is an emblem of mainstream popular culture, the so-called mass media. It has much in common with other examples such as popular music, broadcast television, large-circulation newspapers and magazines, Broadway shows, and bestseller books that aim to reach broad audiences (Whiteside 1980). Indie film is, by contrast, one key example of a type of culture positioned in relation to mainstream, mass media: alternatives appealing more narrowly that reject the conventions of popular forms, or at least depart from or engage critically with them. Indie culture includes a wide variety of media as well as other forms of expression and experience. In addition to music, which is where its name originates as a diminutive of independent, indie references types of literature (comics, zines, small presses) and bookstores, television, video games, stand-up comedy, fashion, crafts, and even supermarkets (Newman 2009, 2011).

The meanings produced both by mainstream media and its indie alternatives, and the cultural status of each of these types of popular culture, ultimately are premised on a conception of mass culture and mass society that has endured over many years of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Without a broadly shared idea of mass culture and its production and reception, it would hardly make sense to maintain the categories of Hollywood and indie, mainstream and alternative. However symbiotic and overlapping these different kinds are in practice and as taken case by case, they remain conceptually distinct. The mass society critique of the postwar years in cultural theory and analysis, debatable and controversial as it has been from the start, continues to animate broadly shared frames of reference about media and popular culture, including cinema. This cluster of ideas about modern industrialized societies and their culture has gone through many iterations, and through its popularization has undoubtedly lost many of the nuances and historically specific claims that made it compelling and informative in the 1940s, 50s, and 60s. However, as a widely shared way of thinking about media and society, its influence remains with us. This is so even if the critique may be applied more inconsistently or tendentiously in everyday thinking than in learned essays and academic books. Adherents of indie culture might not recognize their rejection of mass media (or if this is too strong, their ambivalence) as a product of formal theorizing that emerged from debates among academics and elite cultural commentators. The mass society critique functions much more often as a lay theory of media, a broadly shared mode of reasoning about the meanings and values of popular film, television, music, games, and so on (Seiter 1999, Newman 2010).

The mass society critique may have no single foundational expression, and it was often articulated negatively, by critics pointing out its shortcomings. Given its status as a widely circulating discourse, it is less important to appreciate any particular exponent's meanings and intentions in formulating a thesis, and more useful to capture a sense of shared cultural meanings about mainstream society, its cultural forms, and their putative functions. A simplified set of common mass society ideas would borrow opportunistically from the Marxist rhetoric of the Frankfurt school, the polemics of cultural critics and scholars such as Dwight Macdonald, Gilbert Seldes, Clement Greenberg, and Edward Shils, and the hip consumerism of the 1960s (Adorno and Horkheimer 1944/2002, Rosenberg and White 1958, Shils 1960, Frank 1997). It would judge mass media for being formulaic and standardized, imposing industrial products on its audience and thereby draining popular culture of its authentically popular nature (in the sense of popular meaning *of the people*). Mass media in this framing is for masses rather than elites, and produces the mass society of eager consumers it is made to serve. But even if the lay theory is fuzzy about mass media producing mass society, it assumes certain articulations between mass culture and identity formations, particularly feminine, lower class, and juvenile identities. Mass culture is easily dismissed as tripe for teenage girls or housewives, as kid's stuff or unsophisticated pablum. It is very often feminized in comparison with modernist high culture (Huyssen 1986). Its appreciation requires no special knowledge or competence. Unlike "true art," mass culture is made as a commercial product in factory-like conditions, and its audience allegedly has none of the discernment required to appreciate "authentic culture." Mass media is thus said to impose mindless conformity and docile compliance on the great audience. Its products are not the unique, inspired

artifacts of genius, but interchangeable commodities. They do not admit interpretation and appreciation, but are ephemeral trash. Where they do seem to be striving for a higher status, as in the middlebrow culture derided by many mass society critics, they do so in an ersatz, contemptible attempt to marry the seriousness and prestige of high art with the accessibility of popular forms, without functioning effectively as either of these.

One kind of evidence for the wide purchase of the mass society thesis is the persistence of "high" and "low" judgments in cultural criticism. For instance, *New York* magazine's weekly "approval matrix" back page feature plots cultural phenomena into four quadrants along X and Y axes. The vertical axis runs from lowbrow to highbrow, while the horizontal axis runs from despicable to brilliant. Thus it is possible for something to be lowbrow–brilliant or highbrow–despicable, and judgment applies in more ways than just high/low. The inclusion of brilliant and despicable challenges the logic of high and low, which is in tension with the newfound legitimacy of popular forms. And yet the use of high and low alongside brilliant and despicable bespeaks the persistence of traditional cultural hierarchy even in a democratized age of flexible standards and critical respect for many kinds of commercial culture. *New York*'s approval matrix is at once a challenge to cultural hierarchy and a force for maintaining it.

Without reducing all culture to one of two or three brow categories and reproducing the same hierarchies that animate the mass society critique, it is still possible to plot media texts on a continuum of legitimacy between high and low in terms of their reputation in popular imagination, which is what *New York* aims to capture. Movies and television might not be high culture in many instances, but they are judged in terms of relative cultural legitimacy. By comparison with traditional high art, indie movies and premium cable television programs may be closer to middlebrow than most high culture. This still marks them in distinction to the less prestigious mainstream film and video texts that make up the majority of moving image media, from romantic comedies to reality TV docusoaps. In this regard, indie cinema is constituted in relation to mass culture just as indie games, indie music, and any other form called indie is similarly dependent on a mainstream–alternative binary. Indie culture acquires its meaning and value in distinction to more commercial and broadly appealing forms of media; the various modes and media of indie culture have this distinction in common.

This chapter assumes that our understanding of indie film will benefit from looking at it as an example of this wider sphere of cultural practice and experience whose identity is defined in relation to mass media. The meaning and value of indie cinema are to some significant extent the meaning and value of a broader culture of media alternatives.

Autonomy and Authenticity

Indie culture in many different media acquires its core identity from a cluster of ideas about creative production and experience. Its most central appeals are autonomy, authenticity, and opposition. These are not very distinct appeals; they overlap and

inform one another. All three must be understood as relational terms. Opposition, moreover, is produced through the other two terms. They are all constituted in comparison with mass media, which for cinema means Hollywood but for other forms of culture means other things. (For indie music, for example, major labels take the place of Hollywood studios, and sometimes these labels and studios are even owned by the same parent conglomerate.) The opposition can be in terms of production or distribution, but it is also typically informed by notions of audience address and reception. Mass media is not merely the products of the culture industries but also the favored diversions of the mass audience, or of segments of it of perceived lesser cultural value than indie audiences. The terms of this distinction shift and twist as culture changes, but the nature of the opposition does not change significantly. It provides a remarkably continuous frame of reference. It has probably existed for as long as mass culture, mass media, and mass society have been terms in common currency.

The autonomy of indie culture is a function of artistic expressivity unconstrained by commercial or institutional pressures and demands. The exemplar of autonomy in cinema is the director as *auteur*, though autonomous cultural production can extend to other creative personnel, such as producers and writers. Christine Vachon, for instance, is an indie film producer who has cultivated her own modest celebrity status and brand identity as an edgy, disruptive force in filmmaking (Vachon and Bunn, 2006). Writers such as Diablo Cody can establish distinctly indie identities, asserting a force of authorship. However, the indie *auteur* is most commonly a director or writer–director, and the freedom from constraint represented in discourses of indie cinema acts as a guarantee of autonomy as a central value. In the postwar *politique des auteurs* of the French film critics who became the New Wave and in the authorship criticism influenced by them, the Hollywood studio director's authorship was understood to function in tension with the constraints of a commercial studio system, and the force of strong directors' authorship was taken to be a virtue worthy of high-art appreciation (Sarris 1968). In *auteur* cinemas (art cinemas, young cinemas and new waves, the New American Cinema) that followed this critical movement, the autonomy of the director, more than the force of his originality and individuality in the face of commercial constraint, became a token and criterion of quality. In this tradition, directors who are also writers or producers, or whose output reveals a strong character of coherence as an *oeuvre*, are most obviously representative of the autonomous indie artist. In these examples, autonomy is a creative value, and its distinction is in relation to the industrial production of culture to meet demands of mercenary studio executives and the shareholders of publicly traded companies. The imagined relations between creative and managerial personnel in Hollywood informing ideals of indie film autonomy include such things as script notes from executives, focus-group test-screening feedback, and approval of post-production work by studio bosses. The realities of production in Hollywood or outside of it are not the issue here; what is more significant is how autonomy and its alternatives are imagined.

Ultimately, the autonomy ascribed to indie cinema is not only a way of identifying art amidst a wider field of cultural detritus and mediocrity. It is more importantly a productive discourse, giving rise to a certain kind of expressive creative work and a

mode of appreciating it. It is also a way of reassuring the indie film community of the value of its culture. Autonomy insulates indie cinema from demands that commercial culture turn a substantial profit, that it exploit its audience, that it serve the interests of corporations first of all. Autonomy also represents indie culture as spatially and conceptually separate from other endeavors. The autonomous artist, the autonomous production, and the autonomous institution are self-determining and follow no one else's direction. The Romantic, expressive individualism inherent in these notions might in reality be belied by the cooperative nature of any large-scale commercial enterprise such as feature filmmaking, distribution, and exhibition, and by the many ways in which systems of indie cinema industry and culture are integrated into the wider media industry ecology. But again, the essence of this discussion is how indie culture imagines and describes itself as a thing apart.

We see this not only in the rhetoric of *auteurs* as mavericks, but also of indie film institutions such as festivals, arthouse theaters or cinematheques, awards, schools and educational programs, publications, cable television channels, and websites. The ideas animating all of these nodes in the indie film network are of a piece with the wider indie culture and its most central values and meanings. By orienting themselves in relation to Hollywood or mainstream movies (and television), the indie film institutions through which audiences access indie films as texts and experiences produce and reproduce indieness both conceptually and materially. The documents and expressions circulating through these sites speak of indie cinema as a separate world, parallel to mass media but also opposed to its underlying commercial functions and its mainstream aesthetics.

This sense of autonomous film culture distinct from mainstream movies can be activated as much in negative as in positive values. The condemnation of minimajors and specialty divisions of the Hollywood studies, of Fox Searchlight releases such as *Garden State* (2004), *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006), and *Juno* (2007) that aim to commercialize an indie sensibility, is as much an affirmation of autonomy as are more positive judgments of movies that exemplify separation from the Hollywood studios and the mass audience. Fox Searchlight, Miramax, and other distributors under the umbrella of a media conglomerate are insufficiently autonomous by this logic. By drawing a boundary between one instance of indie and another, a community of critics, filmmakers, gatekeepers, and audiences reinforces and reaffirms its most fundamental values.

Such judgment of where boundaries lie, and whether a particular instance of a film or artist or company is deserving of being considered indie, can be a matter of impassioned negotiation and debate. As indie since the 1990s has become more and more a branding strategy, there has been some reluctance to use the term to describe films being marketed aggressively, films in which Hollywood stars appear, films appearing to have been crafted for their indie appeal. Some critics distinguish between degrees or types of indieness, between 'true indies' and indie as a savvy marketing pitch or a cynical release strategy.

Such efforts at distinction are evidence of a discourse of authenticity, a notion that can be hard to appreciate as a countercultural, oppositional value now that it has so thoroughly been integrated into entrepreneurial, consumerist business culture

(Marwick 2013). Rather than see authenticity as a value inherent in some forms of expression or in some cultures and communities, we must recognize its performative nature (Frith 2007, Auslander 2008). Authenticity is a value invested in some texts, authors, formats, genres, and spaces at certain times by certain cultural communities. It is always political in the sense that dynamics of power produced through real social relations constrain and determine whether and how any given cultural form is authentic or not. Authenticity is not inherent in anything, but is the product of cultural work.

Like autonomy and alongside it, indie authenticity functions as a relational term in opposition to mass or mainstream culture. In movies, indie means more authentic than Hollywood. This is a matter of artistic judgment and evaluation. Indie films by this calculus are more honest and personal and less formulaic, focused more on creative expression and less on making a successful commercial product, more realistic and less contrived. In other words, the discourse of indie authenticity recycles the key oppositions that historically have marked the distinction between high and low culture.

As such, indie cinema institutions frame films not only as autonomous products of artistic minds and independent communities of practice, but also as authentic and worthy of appreciation in the contemplative tradition of bourgeois aesthetics (Bourdieu 1984, 28–57). As taste is often first of all distaste, as Bourdieu suggests, the world of indie film defines its authenticity against the Hollywood model of commercial mass culture produced on an industrial scale. Indie film authenticity, like the authenticity of rock music, zines, and countercultural styles of dress and speech, marks insiders off from outsiders (Duncombe 1997, Thornton 1995). It consecrates some forms of culture in distinction to other forms deemed to be, in essence, profane. It affirms art while keeping out trash.

This authenticity binds communities together through their shared values. In many sociological conceptions of the cultural value of media such as music and movies, the way groups maintain distinctions of status through consumption is given as the circulation of a kind of capital (Bourdieu 1984, Thornton 1995). Recognizing authentic and inauthentic forms of culture is a competence shared among members of a community defined by their investment in particular forms of media. The identity of the community and its individual members is produced through the acquisition and circulation of this cultural capital, which is the value of knowledge and skill in judging, understanding, and talking about culture. Alternatively, but in a similar manner, subcultural capital unites members of a group defined in terms not of class distinction but of opposition to mainstream culture (Thornton 1995). Whether knowledge and competence is seen as cultural or subcultural, authentic forms are recognized by those with the requisite capital, possession of which is the only real requirement for membership in the community. Implicit in this scheme is the failure of outsiders, in this case Hollywood movies and their audiences, to qualify. Their cultural competence is inadequate.

As I have drawn the picture of indie cinema's most central values, there is a clear contradiction and tension at the heart of this cultural formation. As an autonomous form of alternative media, indie cinema is to be celebrated for resisting the hegemonic

meanings and effects of commercial mass culture. There is unambiguous positive value in maintaining divergent styles of media expressions that represent diverse viewpoints and formal approaches, that allow for personal creative exploration, that answer to individual needs rather than corporate agendas. At the same time, the aesthetics in question are undoubtedly those of an elite *habitus* (the dispositions characteristic of a particular class or fraction of a class) whose status is reproduced through consumption of indie culture (Bourdieu 1984). Indie cinema and culture is therefore at once resistant and hegemonic. Moreover, to the extent that the culture industries exploit indie styles as niche audience products to sell to affluent consumers, indie cinema is also effectively absorbed into mainstream culture, which drains it of much of its oppositional potential. When Hollywood is also the sponsor of its own alternatives, their status as critique becomes weakened if not vitiated.

There is a further contradiction at play in this set of values, another way in which the resistance idealized by indie culture is uncomfortably accompanied by practices and meanings that serve the dominant social structure. Indie culture is, with some exceptions, a form of entrepreneurial consumerism. The authentic, autonomous artists who produce and disseminate indie culture are nodes in a commercial exchange network in which cultural goods are bought and sold. While resisting the mainstream scale of Hollywood and similar industries, the indie artist defines success not only in aesthetic terms, but also in commercial ones. At the least, this means being able to earn a living from one's cultural production, or from secondary benefits of it such as teaching. The network of indie culture demands compensation for the labor of its workers, which of course is legitimate and ethical. However, it could choose terms of exchange other than commercial media circulation through the same kinds of network of distributors, retailers, and venues or exhibitors as in mainstream or mass media industries. The circulation of indie music or movies could be more along the lines of the gift exchange of zine culture and participatory internet communities. The indie artist as entrepreneur, on the other hand, prefers to make a living, even if this means struggle and hardship, from his or her cultural production. Therefore, again, while the scale often differs from that of mainstream media, the nature of the commercial cultural enterprise in many cases is not very different. Authenticity and autonomy seem to be predicated on freedom from commercial demands and constraints, and the binary of art and commerce implies that real art is valued independently of commercial rationales. However, insofar as indie culture needs a paying audience to perpetuate itself, the opposition of art and commerce can only be an ideal, and more likely an ideological fiction that promotes the Romantic notion of artist as inspired, individual genius while playing down the vision of artist as savvy salesman, along with the collaborative and commercial nature of cultural production. What the indie artist desires is often commercial success, whether modest or extravagant, on an individual's rather than a corporation's terms. This success can be evidence of his or her authenticity and autonomy: the supportive audience at least implicitly recognizes these values. And there is good reason to prize commercial success if, without it, the artist's future work cannot be realized. To see indie culture as commercial culture, however, usefully undermines its own rhetoric to the extent that we regard it being at odds with elements of its own value system.

In film no less than in other forms of contemporary culture, value equations inform the categories and distinctions through which any text or format or genre of texts comes into existence as an object with meaning and purpose. A value equation is a process of judgment, a way of making sense of cultural artifacts that always, in some ways, makes space for them in relation to one another. This need not be a crude or brute process of judgment, and it need not boil anything down to simply "good" or "bad." It can have nuance and ambiguity. But ultimately it functions hierarchically, even when it seems to embrace egalitarian or nonjudgmental aesthetics and cultural politics.

For instance, the trend described by sociologists as cultural omnivorism might appear as a leveling of judgments, making space for genres of previously low culture within the consecrated and approved genres of interest to elites (Peterson 1992, Peterson and Kern 1996). Key examples in the sociology literature involve musical styles such as classical and heavy-metal music, but we can easily extend these insights to dramatic and moving image media forms, such as movies and television (Bryson 1996). If elites are distinguished by an appreciation of movies and television no less than theater, opera, ballet, and performance art, perhaps this shows evidence of a greater egalitarianism in cultural consumption. The stratification within movies and television, however, into art or indie versus commercial Hollywood fare, and into premium cable series versus network and basic cable programs, or dramas versus reality TV, is clear evidence of a reproduction of cultural hierarchy *within* what had been simply the mass media (Newman and Levine 2012, 6–11). More telling yet, the appreciation of differences and markers of distinction even within the previously denigrated popular genres such as rock and roll, Hollywood genre films, and situation comedies reproduces the same patterns of distinction familiar from traditions of elite culture. Pitchfork, the ultimate hipster snob's music review site, consecrates Justin Timberlake (but not some other pop star) as worthy, performing a taste-making function no less stratifying, no less productive of distinction, than similar gestures in high-art circles. Taste, judgment, knowledge, cultural competence, distinction, consumption, and production of cultural goods are all part of the same cycle, informed by the same shared, systematic value equation. Most of all, the sociological omnivore literature shows that elites are distinguished by the very omnivorism that they adopt as a pose of nonjudgmental egalitarianism. Their openmindedness and inclusive aesthetic politics marks them as elite by contrast to the monocultural preferences of those of lesser status in terms of cultural capital. This helps explain the fact that the audience for indie cinema is also the audience for Hollywood cinema; as omnivores, consumers of indie films may appreciate some kinds of mainstream cinema on more or less equal terms with indie cinema. The same auteurism that sustains indie culture had earlier promoted the notion that within mainstream culture industries some authors, through the strength of their individuality, prevail against forces of conformity and commercialism. Of course this conception of authorship in popular media reinforces the same negative view of commercial culture that animates indie ideals.

In film, no less than in other media, the indie value equation has placed the highest emphasis on autonomy, authenticity, and opposition to mass media. These are not natural values. One can imagine a system with a different set of priorities. However,

to the extent that indie culture's existence is premised on a conception of mass culture, it takes its priorities from opposing mainstream media, from making possible something Hollywood and other culture industries seemingly fail to offer.

Slanted and Enchanted and *Indie Game*

To observe these ideas in action and appreciate how their sustaining rhetoric functions, across media, I want to look at two sources that are explicitly concerned with identifying and celebrating indie values: Kaya Oakes's 2009 nonfiction trade book *Slanted and Enchanted: The Evolution of Indie Culture* and the 2012 documentary *Indie Game: The Movie*, directed by James Swirsky and Lisanne Pajot. These texts are both expressions of indie sensibility and also didactic, programmatic assertions that prescribe norms of indie aesthetics and entrepreneurialism. Although they take different forms and celebrate different genres, *Slanted and Enchanted* and *Indie Game* share an investment in distinction that coalesces around the same cluster of ideals that animate indie cinema: autonomy, authenticity, and opposition.

Of these texts, *Slanted and Enchanted* is more historically minded, eager to sketch a trajectory for indie culture that stretches back into a storied past, but that also has the potential to project past the moment of writing and publication, producing an enduring and sustaining tradition for the future. This long-duration concept of indie means that the name is less important than the thing it stands for: outsider culture, unconstrained and personal, going against the grain of the wider mass culture. The origins Oakes locates are necessarily subcultural, and the artists, writers, musicians, and thinkers she describes belong to related groups of artistic and creative activity. These stretch in her telling back to the postwar years in the United States, "when many artists established the tenets of networking, making art outside the mainstream, valuing creativity above profit, and working at the grassroots level, which were revived in the eighties indie scene" (Oakes 2009, 12). Despite the vagueness of her description, Oakes makes it clear that a common lineage connects many disparate scenes: Beat poets, guerilla theater performers, punks and riot grrrls, zinesters, underground comic book artists, and indie rockers of the 1990s all share the same spirit of countercultural inventiveness and refusal to compromise. She has little to say about indie cinema, though *Slacker* (1991) and the ethos it expresses helps to set the scene for the early 1990s indie rock movement.

Over and over again, Oakes stresses the autonomy of indie artists, such as the underground comix scene with its "insistence on creative control" (Oakes 2009, 103). She often asserts the paramount value of independence as a creative rather than more prosaically an economic term: independence means the artist working for him or herself only. Hence the centrality of DIY (do-it-yourself) production in discussions of indie aesthetics. The freedom of the artist or creator who does it him or herself is not guaranteed by autonomy from commercial institutions, but the two very often go together (Oakes 2009, xiii). "It's about serving your community, self-actualization via creativity, and it's about empowerment, all of which occur as a result of DIY" (Oakes

2009, xiii). Although Oakes is not very specific about the commercial arrangements in the indie culture she celebrates, she still insists that what it all has in common is its "lack of compromise" (Oakes 2009, 11). Autonomous art in this conception is free from the demands of the marketplace, and this is precisely what makes it valuable. Oakes consistently contrasts this with mainstream culture, which always threatens indie culture not only by being bigger and more profitable, but also by perpetually strategizing to cannibalize indie styles and make them a profitable niche of the mass media and mass culture. She sees through this, insisting that, while indie culture is unpredictable, mainstream media will never surprise you. Unlike indie forms, in mainstream culture, "everyone is simply trying to please as many people as they can in order to make a profit" (Oakes 2009, 15).

Hence the high contempt with which Oakes treats putatively mainstream forms of popular culture that aim to sell indie aesthetics to credulous consumers eager to be seen as hip and trendy, trying to cash in on authentic expressions by turning their outward appearance into a commodified style. The Pitchfork Music Festival, she notes, is sponsored by major corporations: the supermarket chain Whole Foods and the restaurant chain Chipotle, both of which cater to an upscale urban clientele. In decrying the promotion of indie as a commercial style, Oakes draws hard borders between authentic and inauthentic forms. She is disdainful of how young people are "being sold indie not as a philosophy but as a genre" (Oakes 2009, xii). She lays much blame in this area on the Fox television series *The O.C.* (2003–2007), whose central character, the teenage Seth Cohen, is portrayed as a connoisseur of indie rock bands whose music was played on the show's soundtrack. It seems that to Oakes the appearance of a type of music she considers authentically indie in a network television series aimed at a broad audience of American teens is a cynical sellout and a threat to the cultural forms it served to popularize. The positioning of Seth Cohen as a model of indie identity threatens indie authenticity by making it available as a style to millions of consumers who do not necessarily buy into its worldview and politics. In a similar vein, she lambastes the trend of "indie crossover" marketing using indie appeals in campaigns for retail brands such as American Apparel and Scion automobiles. Her most acid contempt is reserved for Urban Outfitters, a chain of stores catering to the young accused of tricking impressionable consumers into believing that its products are indie, though they are merely in her telling a deceptive simulation of that. The crossover she decries is one in which indie, like punk and other subcultures before it, "has been branded by corporate culture and repackaged as an aesthetic" (Oakes 2009, 194–195).

This process, which Dick Hebdige (1979) calls *incorporation*, is part of a predictable cycle of subcultural absorption into mainstream media. Incorporation brings subcultural expression within the framework of meanings possible under the mainstream social order, and commodifies the symbolic challenges of the subculture. In Hebdige's analysis, even if youth subcultures originate in protest and opposition to the mainstream society, they can become domesticated as fashion choices for sale to consumers, which trivializes them, defusing their subversive power. However, he also approaches the hard distinction subcultures often make between authentic and commodified expression with critical skepticism. "It is difficult," he argues, "to

maintain any absolute distinction between commercial exploitation on the one hand and creativity/originality on the other, even though these categories are emphatically opposed in the value systems of most subcultures" (Hebdige 1979, 95). Even granting to indie cinema and culture the same subversive status as the spectacular youth subcultures of Hebdige's analysis such as mods and punks (a debatable proposition), the rhetoric of indie selling out or being coopted by mainstream consumer culture assumes that mainstream attention and success is unwanted and even offensive, and that subcultures or indie cultures cannot be produced as commodities while retaining their identity and value. Oakes conveys this assumption through her disdain for *The O.C.* soundtrack and Urban Outfitters. The value system of indie culture enforces a semiotic boundary between authenticity and inauthenticity, autonomy and corporate control, opposition and complicity, always figured in terms of the threat posed by mainstream society and its institutions. And this threat is ultimately not just the threat of corporations profiting from independent artists' creative work, but of the wrong kind of people (whether TV audiences or retail shoppers) having access to indie culture as a consumer product without necessarily appreciating its symbolic value within a community of shared meanings. The real significance of indie culture is by this account contained not within texts, their forms, or inherent meanings, but in the semiotic realm of meaning-making within a community of shared values. To appreciate it requires understanding value propositions about production and reception.

Like *Slanted and Enchanted*, *Indie Game: The Movie* celebrates the makers of indie culture and recognizes their accomplishments in distinction to mass media. A small number of video game artists form the nucleus of *Indie Game*, a film chronicling their emotionally intense struggles to create and find success in the artisanal mode of game development. As in so many stories about indie cinema, the characters in *Indie Game* have a deep, abiding desire to make personal, expressive artworks. They are driven by passion and a distinct sensibility. As in the mythologizing of every kind of indie culture, these figures are mavericks, rebels, outsiders, eccentrics, unable to function in a commercial institution that dictates to them roles and goals and standards of success. They aim to serve no master but their own inspired genius. "We get to do whatever we want," says one of these artists, "we don't answer to anybody." Their art is contrasted with the games of major corporations. Jonathan Blow, an indie game *auteur* profiled in *The Atlantic* under the headline "The most dangerous gamer" (Clark 2012), says that the major game companies produce a highly glossy commercial product, not a personal form of expression. The hugely popular games produced by EA and Epic are condemned as pandering to the masses, and one of the developers calls games in the vein of *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (2007) "shit games." "I don't make shit games." An important part of indie game authorship, Blow asserts, "is trying not to be professional." In interviews in which these artists speak about their formative experiences and struggles to create, the Romantic notion of art as individual expression familiar from cinematic auteurism, among other authorship discourses, is never far from the surface. The point of indie games is to push up against boundaries, the developer Edmund McMillan says. "If I'm not doing that, I'm bored, and if I'm bored, I'm not creative."

Figure 1.1   Edmund McMillan, creator of *Super Meat Boy*, in *Indie Game: The Movie*. © Flutter Media Inc., 2012.

Indie Game is both an independent film, made in an entrepreneurial mode for festival and online audiences (its debut was at Sundance; it had very limited theatrical exhibition, and found its audience largely through digital distribution [Pajot and Swirsky 2012]), and a celebration of indie culture, expressing the ideals and aspirations of a community that includes producers and consumers of media. Because indie games have a less established history in criticism than indie movies and music, fairly recent expressions of their basic qualities and animating ideals, such as *Indie Game*, are establishing their cultural identity and reasserting the central claims of indie culture on popular imagination. The usage of *indie* to communicate central values of this mode of game production and experience establishes connections and continuities, and these feed back to cinema, music, and other forms of indie culture. The rejuvenation of indie culture through new forms and their rising visibility is a testament to its enduring value even many years after the point at which *The O.C.* and Urban Outfitters commodified and commercialized its 1990s and 2000s version of aesthetics.

There is also in *Indie Game* a suggestion that new technology has opened up indie culture and made possible more alternative, outsider expression. As with the internet's opportunity for distribution of moving image media (indie TV, for instance, is largely synonymous with web TV [Christian 2015]), the digital online distribution of video games also makes possible more creative work reaching more players, according to the artists profiled in the documentary. It also makes possible significant earnings for indie developers. Steam, the digital distribution channel, allows millions of dollars to flow to small teams of developers, much in the same way that digital streaming video eliminates some of the obstacles filmmakers previously faced in reaching audiences. There is an element in this discourse of technological solutionism, the seductive

idea that digital and online technologies can change the world and improve our lives, in this instance by both democratizing cultural production and by ameliorating issues with mass media by disrupting its networks and their reliance on mass audiences (Morozov 2013). However, digital distribution of indie games has also produced the effect of modeling entrepreneurial achievement so that the type of small-scale production portrayed in the movie can lead to fame and wealth. The measure of success in *Indie Game* is not purely aesthetic or cultural, but also commercial. As in indie cinema, enough commercial success to keep the entrepreneurial mode of production going, to sustain the artist for future endeavors, is a good thing. Too much might signal overly commercialized work. However, the more modest scale of success possible through Steam is represented as the artist's redemption, his (there are no female developers in this movie) deserving reward for tireless creative toil.

Thus the narrative arc of *Indie Game* draws on tropes from Hollywood biopics and their tales of heroic creative work under adverse circumstances leading to triumph and recognition. The story stretches back to childhood years, as the developers found inspiration in the play that first drew them into video games. It works through an early adulthood in which the artists suffer and struggle. The young men in *Indie Game* risk their wellbeing on the creative work that consumes them. They need to succeed in order to continue to work, but this success depends ultimately on others, on the judgment of their fans and critics and their willingness to spend their money on the product the developers work so hard to produce.

The drama of the film is not only about the effort to complete the works in progress to the artists' own satisfaction, but about the audience's reception. The trials and tribulations of Phil Fish, a Canadian game developer making work that is compared to Cubist painting, are foregrounded as the film builds toward a climax. He has struggled through many challenging, emotional situations: family illness, relationships

Figure 1.2   Phil Fish, creator of *Fez*, in *Indie Game: The Movie*. © Flutter Media Inc., 2012.

falling apart, funding crises, overwork, and the stress visible in his expressions and speech. At the PAX expo, a gaming convention, the demo version of his work in progress is very glitchy and the partner from whom he has split apparently threatens to prevent the game from being brought to market. The audience is encouraged, through techniques of dramatic storytelling and characterization, to root for Phil Fish and hope that his game really will be the masterpiece we have been led to think it can be. We are encouraged to hope for all of the developers that they realize their dreams, which are figured not just in aesthetic terms but also in commercial ones. Their emotions run high: one developer says he cries "at the idea of crying about it," a reference to potential success, both artistic and commercial, when the game hits the market. These situations are meant to be intensely dramatic because of how personal they are. When Phil Fish's demo is failing, he becomes very upset and speaks of "deep personal failure." When ultimately some of the developers triumph, they are hugely gratified.

One can imagine a similar narrative arc imposed on a documentary about video-game production in a larger-scale, industrial setting. Artists also work for big corporations, and surely are invested in their success and emotional about their work. The specific value expressed in *Indie Game* is not just the value of overcoming obstacles to success, but of the outsider hero who succeeds through an investment in authentic, autonomous individual expression. It is merely ironic that commercial fortunes are one key marker of achievement in *Indie Game*; the deeper accomplishment is creative and communal, a product of being true to one's vision, working outside the system, and connecting with an audience that recognizes the distinct value of indie as opposed to mainstream culture.

On the whole, the agenda of *Indie Game* is celebratory, cheerleading for a vital form of creative work. Video games, like many forms of new popular culture aimed at the young, find themselves subject to fear and even panic over their potential harms (Critcher 2003, Newman 2010). Many dedicated players avoid identifying as "gamers" for fear of the stigma attached to them (Shaw 2012). Like comic books and indeed movies, in their early years their identification with young audiences made them objects of suspicion to adults of the mainstream parent culture. In media such as comics and cinema and more recently television, one response to this low status has been cultural legitimation, which art cinema and later independent cinema, inheriting many of art cinema's functions, helped to establish (Baumann 2007, Newman and Levine 2012). Indie games have very clearly been the newest iteration of this cycle of cultural legitimation of popular media (Parker 2013). Their novelty as of the mid-2010s was still fresh enough, their emergence recent enough, their community of enthusiastic participants and champions vital and young enough, that indie games had the promise and verve of an artistic movement. Indie cinema had more of this in a past era, a moment of emergence and vitality, when its challenge to mainstream cinema felt promising and Hollywood's incorporation of independent cinema was a work in progress. However, the dynamics are virtually the same; the mass-society and mass-culture lay theories animating many of these iterations of indie culture are quite continuous and constant. Supposed postmodern relativism, cultural omnivorism, and the fracturing of audiences into many narrow interest groups and niches might

have diminished its centrality, but the enduring value of indie as a descriptive term and a flag around which alternative culture can rally testifies to an ever-present fear and disdain for Hollywood and other villainous faces of mass media.

Conclusion

There is a tendency within considerations of independent or indie film, music, games, and so on to fall on one or another side of the value equation I have outlined in this chapter. Some writing, aiming to account for the specificity of indie culture, gives its divergence from mainstream culture a positive valence, and proceeds to critique or appreciate the culture in question as work whose value derives from this dimension (among others) of its aesthetics. For instance, in the critical literature on indie cinema (perhaps including other chapters in this volume), particular authors or texts appear at least implicitly as exemplars of an alternative practice. This is hardly surprising, as criticism tends toward the particular, and showing how an individual artist or text, or a small number of these, work in their own unique and distinct ways pays off critically. Independence in this approach functions to distinguish some artists and texts from others, and makes a case for taking a critical interest in them. Arguing that an artist or text is merely conventional does not ordinarily pay off so well.

Another approach is to take indie culture as a sociological as well as an aesthetic category, and this way of seeing can ask different questions and push in different directions. To see indie culture as a taste culture of cultural distinction is to call into question the social functions of its aesthetic difference. As a form of elite culture, it reproduces the social relations of the dominant structure, maintaining high and low aesthetic hierarchy as a proxy for other forms of hierarchy. Indie culture is one example of how class distinction that was formerly produced through the separation of high from popular or mass culture – through the consecration of artistic tradition and the circumscription of commercial culture, denying its status as art – has shifted into distinction *within* popular culture. Movies, popular music, and video games are commercial mass culture by nature and tradition, but within their many forms and genres familiar sorting processes bestow legitimacy to some more than others, to fit some more than others into ways of thinking about and understanding high culture. This involves more than practices of critical interpretation and appreciation; as *Slanted and Enchanted*, *Indie Game*, and many considerations of indie cinema make clear, the production, distribution, and reception of media can be no less important than the text. Indie and independent, after all, are unusual as genre terms in the way they make an extratextual reference, putting the context of production and distribution ahead of formal, stylistic, or thematic markers of group identity (Hesmondhalgh 1999).

It is possible to marry these approaches, but it means appreciating the way they contradict one another as value propositions. Indie culture (or, to the purist, the examples of indie culture deemed authentic) is not simply a subversive, resistant alternative to mainstream culture; nor is it simply the way elites reproduce their

privilege. It can be both. However, these meanings and functions of indie culture are inhospitable to one another; indie culture's subversions are counterbalanced by its separation from forms of media associated with audiences of lesser status. Its potential for undermining mass culture's ideology might be reversed by its potential for reinforcing an unequal social structure. These two potentials coexist insofar as they rely on a shared conception of popular culture's stratification. Perhaps when the mass society critique and its assumptions about mainstream media can eventually be put aside, renewed notions of authenticity and autonomy will offer fresh ways of thinking about popular media.

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