

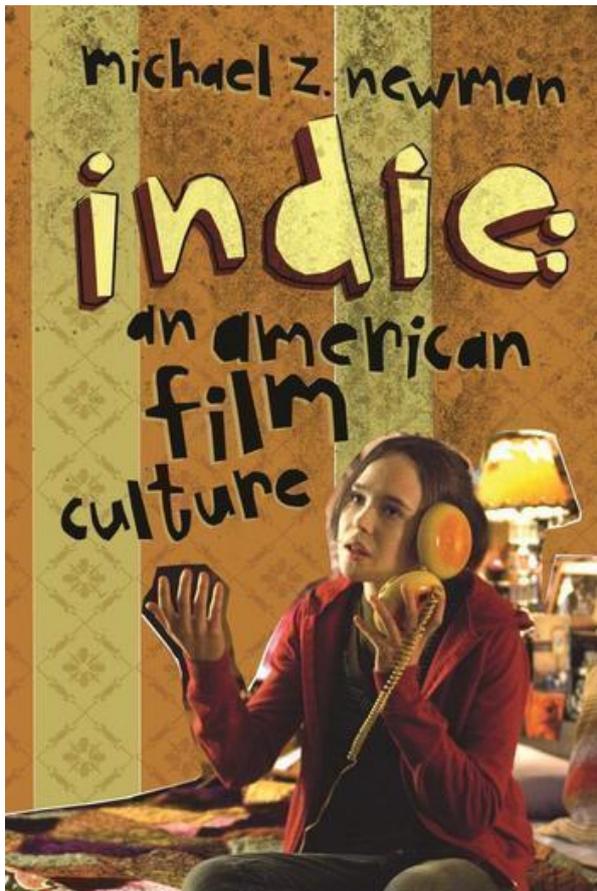
**BOOK REVIEW**

*Indie: An American Film Culture*

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***Indie: An American Film Culture.***  
**Michael Z. Newman. New York: Columbia**  
**University Press, 2011.**

In 1989, Steven Soderbergh's *sex, lies, and videotapes* won the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival and the Audience Award at the Sundance Film Festival, bringing American indie cinema to the forefront. In the following two decades, a series of indie American films found widespread success around the film festival circuit, both locally and internationally. Yet despite all these, the concept of indie – as a critical term applied to a collection of films – has been notoriously difficult to pin down. Todd Solondz's *Welcome to the Dollhouse* (1996) could not be more different from Michel Gondry's *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004), which in turn looks nothing like Christopher Nolan's *Memento* (2000). How then, can we approach indie cinema?

In response, Michael Z. Newman's *Indie: An American Film Culture* (2011) sets out to look at independent cinema as countercultural, positioning itself as a series of films which goes against the Hollywood hegemony that is not usually appreciated by mainstream audience. American independent cinema, Newman suggests, gains its status mainly by travelling through specific cultural institutions that allow the indie culture to flourish and proliferate. Film festivals, for instance, belong to one such circuit. Newman convincingly argues that the genesis of the Sundance Film Festival – which bookends the beginning of the Sundance-Miramax period (starts with the festival in 1989 and ends with the closure of Miramax in 2010) – that this book explores, had the most significant impact on American independent cinema due to three reasons. Firstly, the merger of the Utah/U.S. festival with the Sundance Institute allowed both organisations to bring together their expertise, and commit to Sundance's ethos of nurturing talent within American cinema outside of established film schools, allowing filmmakers to bring on-board their individual voices. Secondly, due to budgetary constraints, Sundance had to shift its focus from screening retrospectives of established *auteurs* to new pieces of work in competition. As such, this resulted in an increase in the production of independent films. Lastly, Sundance's unique link with Robert Redford meant that the festival received much attention from the national press, attracting a healthy amount of visitors to keep this culture growing and going.

Ultimately, then, Sundance played an invaluable role in promoting indie films to the status of higher art as compared to the conventional mass-marketed Hollywood narratives. This approach, Newman suggests, exposes the dilemma faced by indie film culture: on the one hand, it aims to resist Hollywood, and can be seen as liberal and counter-hegemonic. On the other, independent cinema is an elite culture that stratifies and discriminates, quite ironically going against its aim to be progressive.

Newman, however, is quick to insist that art cinema and independent cinema are – though similar in many ways – two completely different entities. Unfortunately, though, many of these distinctions are sweeping. In one instance, Newman proposes that independent cinema “is hardly as ambiguous as art cinema, and in general its style is not nearly as challenging” (28). In another, Newman writes that independent films usually “end without conventional closure, but the radically challenging endings of the likes of *8 1/2* (1963) and *Persona* (1966) are seldom duplicated in recent American independent films” (28). These differences are unhelpful for they are so deep-rooted in the audience’s value judgement. Who is to say that Charlie Kaufman’s *Synecdoche, New York* (2008), with its complex film-within-film-within-film structure, is less challenging than art cinema? Again, who is to say that Julie Dash’s *Daughters of the Dust* (1991), with its conscious collision of three different temporalities, has a more conventional closure as compared to Fellini’s oeuvre?

Notwithstanding these generalisations, Newman does propose a set of viewing strategies that audiences employ in order to differentiate independent cinema from both art and mainstream cinema, and this takes up the remaining parts of the book. To be more specific, indie cinema is “a cluster of interpretive strategies and expectations” that is shared by audiences (11). By audience, Newman also refers to the film’s creators and distributors for they are very much part of the viewing culture propagated by independent cinema. In order to understand this deliberately vague definition – for, as will become clear later, the line between indie and other forms of cinema is extremely

blurred – Newman suggests three distinct aspects of indie cinema that audiences can recognise: first, rather than driven by the narrative, indie realist films focus more on characters; second, independent cinema has a penchant for playful pastiches and narrative forms; and, third, indie culture very much authenticates its status by positioning itself against the mainstream.

To begin, Newman writes that mainstream realist films are fundamentally plot-driven, where C is caused by B, which in turn is a result of A, whereas indie realist films focuses more on its characters, at times at the expense of a causal narrative. At its heart, the term ‘realism’ is a hotly debated topic in academia that can be traced back to the works of André Bazin (or even further back, some may argue). Here, Newman takes a (very agreeable) stance on realism: ‘Realism is the product of a rhetorical process – within given production and reception contexts, certain artworks may appeal as realist – rather than a necessary relation between reality and representation, which is naturally greater in realist than in nonrealist artworks’ (96). Indie realist films, then, are not so much concerned with the replication of reality qua reality, but instead are more engrossed with psychological realism. To argue his case, Newman draws on in-depth textual analysis of four films – *Walking and Talking* (1996), *Lost in Translation* (2003), *Welcome to the Dollhouse* (1996), and *Passion Fish* (1992) – to demonstrate that in indie realist cinema, these fully fleshed out, individualised characters are more often than not oxymoronicly emblematic. For example, using the case of *Welcome to the Dollhouse*, Newman suggests that because the protagonist is so well drawn, she “can stand for every preteen misfit, especially for the idea of adolescence carried as memories of challenging coming of age as recalled by an older indie audience” (122). This type of argument is extremely problematic for there is a tendency to casually blanket the audience into one singular entity, disallowing deviances. What about a spectator who is neither white nor middle class? Will they still be able to relate to the protagonist on screen? Unfortunately, this is where *Indie* falls short; although close formal analysis is undoubtedly helpful to identify one of the audience’s viewing

strategies, Newman's argument on emblematic characters in indie realist films would have been a lot more convincing if supported by some form of reception research and analysis – how did the real bodies in the cinema receive and respond to *Welcome to the Dollhouse*?

The second of the three viewing strategies suggested by Newman is incrementally more persuasive. Here, Newman effectively demonstrates the playful formal games – recognising allusions, and deciphering the complex narrative – that indie directors invite the audience to take part in. Newman opens by dissecting the umbrella term 'intertextuality' which is frequently smeared onto indie cinema and culture, calling for a more nuanced application. He argues that instead of thinking about independent cinema as intertextual, it would be more helpful to think of these texts as allusions, and more specifically as pastiche (not homage, tribute, nor parody). If a spectator who watches an indie film made by the Coen brothers and does not appreciate the onslaught of textual pastiches, they will be unable to unlock this specific viewing strategy, merely valuing it as a well-made movie. This is an extremely interesting point because, as Newman writes, "allusiveness is communal" (152). Hence, indie culture is essentially exclusive until everyone becomes more cine-literate. The argument, however, can be complicated by cult films like *The Room* (2003) and *Cry-Baby* (1990), which also generate a similar level of "allusiveness" within the cult community but may (or may not) be rejected by the indie culture; Newman's argument could have been reified with this consideration.

Additionally, Newman posits that indie cinema has an increased tendency to – unlike mainstream Hollywood films – experiment with the narrative form (though one could also argue that Hollywood is beginning to do so). This is usually, he avers, a playful invitation to actively put the puzzle together. For instance, the audience is encouraged to work out the links between the two different types of narratives in *Memento* before the final big reveal at the end. This is different from the plot twists at

the end of *Fight Club* (1999) and *The Sixth Sense* (1999). For indie cinema, the narratives may not necessarily make sense till the puzzle fits. The best exemplar can be traced to *Pulp Fiction* (1994), where the audience may be confused as to what is happening until they realise that the scenes are not played out in chronological order. They are then invited to rearrange the different scenes together to make better sense of the film – the viewing pleasure is primarily derived from playing. In the case of these two mainstream films, however, the narrative still makes sense before the final plot twist. The revelations at the end of these films simply function to give the audience a way to look at the films from a different viewpoint. The viewing pleasure, then, comes fundamentally from surprise or relief.

Here, a critique may have been levelled at Newman because the use of the word “play” as a critical term faces the danger of suggesting that indie films are ultimately style over substance. However, Newman defends himself that playfulness has a critical function too. Pastiche, for instance, has the critical function of distilling history down its important (or unimportant, depending from which angle you come from) bits, engendering conversations about the role of cinema as a mediator of cultural memories. In terms of playing with types of narrative, Newman argues that it is counterproductive to try and pin down one exact critical function due to the myriad of formal experimentations present in indie cinema. However, he does suggest that playing with form has the ability to destabilise the audience’s inherent worldview, “nudging us out of habits of viewing so that we may look upon both art and life with fresh eyes” (210). Play, therefore, is not merely for play’s sake.

The two aforementioned viewing strategies constitute the predominant exemplars of indie cinema – realist and formalist. Sticking to these two conditions ultimately puts a lot of films out of the independent cultural category. At this point, the third viewing strategy comes in handy: when uncertain, analyse the film as anti-Hollywood. Fundamentally, the book posits that in order for a film to be indie, it needs to

authenticate itself: “The ideal of independent cinema is as an authentic, autonomous alternative” (226). At this stage, Newman gives two very persuasively argued case studies – *Happiness* (1998) and *Juno* (2007) – delicately balancing a complex cocktail of textual, reception and production research. In the case of Todd Solondz’s film, Newman demonstrates how, after losing the funding from Universal Pictures, the discourses surrounding *Happiness* (intentional or not) geared towards authenticating it as an independent picture, and positioning Solondz as a maverick who works against the Hollywood system. Conversely, *Juno*, originally hyped up to be an indie film, was hostilely de-authenticated by the media after it received mainstream success.

The notion of authenticity reminds us that the cultural boundaries between art, indie, and mainstream cinema are very fine, and that attempting to pigeonhole a text into a particular cultural category is – ultimately – a futile task. Thus, thinking in terms of viewing strategies is an extremely useful way of looking at indie cinema as a cultural category. After all, culture is a two-way street – the text creates a response in the audience, and the audience in turn also creates the text. Though the arguments in *Indie* are not consistently convincing, the book is still nonetheless a tremendously thoughtful book that is very well researched and fluidly written, challenging us to rethink the boundaries of American independent cinema.