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THE QUESTION CONCERNING THE COOPTATION OF THE SUNDANCE FILM FESTIVAL: AN ANALYSIS OF THE COMMODIFICATION OF INDEPENDENT CINEMA

by

Matt Dee Cottrell

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

Sociology

Approved:

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UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY
Logan, Utah

2009

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ABSTRACT

The Question Concerning the Cooptation of the Sundance Film Festival: An Analysis of the Commodification of Independent Cinema

by

Matt Dee Cottrell, Master of Science

Utah State University, 2009

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Department: Sociology, Social Work & Anthropology

The Sundance Film Festival has transformed from being a fringe festival to a leading showcase for independent cinema. This research shows that studios now descend upon the festival to acquire films for commercial distribution. The Sundance Film Festival seems to currently operate as a marketplace for films rather than an independent festival. This research seeks to examine how Hollywood studios have been able to infiltrate and commodify independent projects from the Sundance Film Festival and what the potential ramifications are for emerging independent filmmakers seeking to have their projects screened at the festival. In other words, have Hollywood studios coopted the Sundance Film Festival and if so, what does this process look like? This research seeks to answer these questions through an analysis of Sundance Film Festival data and interviews with festival informants. (98 pages)

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-Matt Dee Cottrell

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RESEARCH QUESTION

The research presented here revolves around the question of whether the Sundance Film Festival has become commodified and how this may affect the types of independent films that are screened at the festival. Specifically, how has Hollywood studios been able to infiltrate and commodify independent projects such as those that are screened at the Sundance Film Festival and what are the potential ramifications for emerging independent filmmakers seeking to have their projects screened at the festival? In other words, has Hollywood studios coopted the Sundance Film Festival and if so, what does the process of cooptation look like? This research seeks to describe the process of studio cooptation of the Sundance Film Festival through analyzing historical trends in acquisition, distribution, and sponsorship.

INTRODUCTION

The Sundance Film Festival has been described by those in the film industry as being "the player" of US independent cinema (Biskind 2004; Means 2009b). The Sundance Film Festival is largely responsible for popularizing do-it-yourself filmmaking and has highlighted how low budget independent film is a viable option for film production within a modern market economy. Furthermore, Sundance has proved that with the right marketing strategy that independent productions can generate substantial returns even when in direct competition with large studio productions. The Sundance Film Festival has also showcased first-time and emerging filmmakers such as the Coen brothers, Quentin Tarantino, Spike Lee, Robert Rodriguez, and Kevin Smith among many others that have had a substantial impact on modern cinema. Although film in general can be seen as highly commercial and profit driven, independent film that is exhibited at the Sundance Film Festival is typically characterized as not only entertaining but artistic and thought provoking. Independent filmmakers and those associated with the Sundance Institute are supposedly encouraged to take artistic risks and be innovative and as result the Sundance Film Festival generally exhibits more diversity than the Hollywood studio system.

Sundance originated with the intention of allowing filmmakers to explore ideas without commercial pressure. Robert Redford started out wanting a platform to showcase emerging filmmakers by screening authentic film that was free from the constraints of money and Hollywood influence (Rexer 2002). However, as Sundance expanded, it seems more and more like a meat market or a business meeting where films are bought and sold as commodities. Redford, rather than being seen as artist visionary

within the film community, has been portrayed as a head of a production studio, little different than a Hollywood executive (Rexer 2002). The Sundance Film Festival has increasingly been showcasing films that market themselves as being independent although they are financed by distributors (Painter 1999). Sundance has evolved into such a distinguished forum for film that competition for acceptance into the festival is immense. Many independent filmmakers are left out of the festival while talks of negotiation, deals, and finance are commonplace (Painter 1999; Dargis 2008). Money has become a predominate fixture at the Sundance Film Festival and has marginalized certain films that resist commodification by not keeping the money out.

Money now seems to be the standard and measure of success at the Sundance Film Festival and gifting lounges, where celebrities receive free luxuries, can often attract more attention than the films screened at the festival (Means 2009a). Sundance has become a place to be seen. The announcement of the 2008 Sundance Film Festival included a list of Hollywood stars with films in competition such as: Winona Ryder, Ben Kingsley, Ray Romano, Paul Giamatti, Felicity Huffman, Mary Kate Olsen, and many more. This list of festival participants is far removed from the idea of focusing on first-time and emerging filmmakers.

How has this happened? How do modern market forces coopt and turn authentic cultural forms into commodities? The Sundance Film Festival originated as the Utah/US Film Festival in 1978. Since its conception, the festival has transformed from a small fringe festival on the margins of the film industry to a premier showcase of independent film that draws the attention of the entire film market. The purpose of this research is to analyze how this transformation has occurred. This analysis of the Sundance Film

Festival will highlight how studios have been able to assimilate and disseminate cultural projects, such as independent film, through market commodification. We should be concerned about the ability to turn unique cultural projects such as art and film into commodities because it makes the possibility of formulating long-term projects of differentiation, resistance, and sustainable alternatives problematic. If cultural production is always subject to market appropriation that is controlled by highly centralized means of production then the possibility for artistic diversity and differentiation is in crises.

THEORETICAL ORIENTATION

Although Marx highlighted the significance of capitalist appropriation within the marketplace as it relates to economic capital, Simmel advanced the theoretical significance of appropriation to cultural production (Marx 1977; Simmel 1957). Simmel argues that money is the purest form of social interaction but that cultural identity depends on differentiation and that under modernity, cultural differentiation is always subject to appropriation (Simmel 1957, 1978). This is highlighted in his work on fashion where he argues that tends are imitated and perpetuated but that once differentiation is appropriated from the original site that differentiation needs to become more radical in order to be seen as different and distinct. Although this process is similar to Marx's dialectical materialism, Simmel allows for differentiation and cultural diversity to be a perpetual possibility (Simmel 1957). However, Horkheimer and Adorno are far more skeptical than Simmel about the possibility for true differentiation and like good Marxists they focus their analysis on economic mechanisms of cultural production and argue that under the modern culture industry, differentiation is really illusionary. They theorize that seemingly differentiated production only serves to legitimize modern capitalist economics and perpetuates market economies. Horkheimer and Adorno argue that mechanisms of dissemination are highly centralized and require vast amounts of economic capital that artists and filmmakers do not have. As result, independent film production is easily acquired by studios further hegemonizing the independent cultural production, which breeds sameness even within independent cinema.

DiMaggio and Powell echo a similar notion as Horkheimer and Adorno in that they argue that there are powerful forces within the institutional environment that molds

differentiation into sameness. However, DiMaggio and Powell focus their analysis on the organizational level and argue that institutions become more similar over time which inhibits differentiation. They argue that there are incentives for institutions to model and resemble other institutions, a process of isomorphism. Through institutional isomorphism, cultural institutions such as Sundance will eventually resemble and operate like corporate studios. Bourdieu takes a different approach that displaces the discussion of appropriation out of the confines of economics and institutional theory. For Bourdieu, capital is not exclusively embedded in materialism or economics but that there is symbolic capital and this can be thought of as authentic art and innovation which Horkheimer and Adorno argue cannot come from the infrastructure of modern capitalist institutions such as studios. For Bourdieu, subjects can convert symbolic capital into economic capital in the sense that studios that are void of artistic vision depend on the appropriation of symbolic capital of the independent filmmaker in the form of innovative and differentiated projects. Therefore, an analysis of cultural appropriation must include a discussion of the economic and symbolic incentives Hollywood studios have in acquiring Sundance films. This analysis will also highlight the implications of studio cooptation for the Sundance Film Festival and independent film production.

The following analysis repeatedly uses the terms cooptation and commodification. By cooptation I mean the process by which one institution infiltrates and changes the nature of another institution and its production. Cooptation is manifest though a dominate institution infiltrating another institution and appropriating its differentiation through assimilating and disseminating cultural production. In the case of independent film, Hollywood studios have been able to infiltrate the Sundance Film Festival in a

manner that has turned the festival and its production into a process of commodification. By commodification, I mean the process by which the Sundance Film Festival and its production is first, objectified then marketed, bought, and sold. Although cooptation and commodification are separate distinguishable concepts they can work together. For example, Hollywood studios can coopt an independent film festival in order to acquire and commodify production that serves to be profitable for the studio. In other words, cooptation is the process where a dominate institution appropriates or "takes over" the production of another institution while commodification is likely, in this study, to be a result of commercial objectification.

The process of commodification can run parallel to cooptation but is distinguished by an institution's production being objectified while cooptation is often the prerequisite for one institution to infiltrate and acquire the production of another institution, allowing for that production to be commodified. The theoretical model that this study describes is one in which a cultural institution such as the Sundance Film Festival attempts to produce authentic artistic projects but is infiltrated by Hollywood studios. Once a project has been acquired by a studio, it is easily commodified by the studio through editing and marketing. It is common for studios to reduce films to trailers and posters for the purpose of advertising. These marketing strategies are material forms of objectification which allow films to be bought and sold. However, the greatest danger in Hollywood studios coopting and commodifying independent film is that studios can alter the content of films because once a studio acquires the rights to a film, the film is taken out of the hands of the filmmaker and becomes the property of the studio.

CULTURAL PRODUCTION OF FILM

Horkheimer and Adorno argue that the culture industry is paradoxical in the sense that cultural products depend on being exchanged while at the same time those cultural products prohibit exchange. In an economic sense, production depends upon consumption but when the market becomes saturated additional production is no longer required. The logic and rationality of the culture industry is conflated to economics. Horkheimer and Adorno see the culture industry as "infesting everything with sameness" in the sense that "mechanically differentiated products are ultimately all the same" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002:94, 97). This is similar to Weber's theory of the "iron cage" of modern rationality and Simmel's analysis of money form. While cultural production such as film, on the surface does not need to be limited to questions of logic because they are art, Horkheimer and Adorno argue that in the case of film, movies "no longer need to present themselves as art" because in reality "they are nothing but business" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002:95). It is here that Horkheimer and Adorno argue that modernity with its advanced economy and technology has a type of disciplining effect on the production of artists such as filmmakers.

For Horkheimer and Adorno the culture industry is controlled by those in positions of power within institutional organization that control production. They argue that the "technical antithesis between few production centers and widely dispersed reception necessitates organization and planning by those in control" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002:95). This creates a "cycle of manipulation and retroactive need" that unifies and standardizes the culture industry (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002:95). This can best be seen within the film community as the need for scarce resources that are for

the most part controlled by studios in a manner that makes production and distribution cost effective on a large scale while remaining costly for independent filmmakers. Horkheimer and Adorno, similar to Marx do not see social structures as independent from economics. Rather, Horkheimer and Adorno see the culture industry as a continuation of business that is predicated on the rational logic of modern economics. The goal for filmmakers increasingly becomes to make a product that will generate a profit while being less concerned with film as art.

While the "technology of the culture industry confines itself to standardization and mass production" it also surrendered what "once distinguished the logic of the work from that of society" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002:95). Horkheimer and Adorno argue that in a very literal way, as the culture industry begins to resemble the factory and the means of production becomes standardized, the products of the culture industry also become indistinguishable from the rest of society. Furthermore, any perceptible differences from what can be thought of as authentic art or independent film from advertisements or Hollywood studio productions can be thought of as variations of the same rationality. Horkheimer and Adorno argue that the distinctions between films "do not so much reflect real differences as assist in the classification, organization, and identification of consumers" in which "something is provided for everyone so that no one can escape" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002:97). The perceived differences between various films is a facade of autonomy and freedom when in reality the "advantages and disadvantages debated by enthusiasts serve only to perpetuate the appearance of competition and choice" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002:97).

There have been many major modern innovations that have sparked the rise of independent films. In the 1980s there were major technological innovations in computers, cameras, recorders, cable, and television that opened up new revenue streams that were located outside risky and expensive theatrical releases, all of which made it easier to turn a profit on smaller films (Lipke 2001:64). Independent films also filled the void created by major studios that were concentrated on producing and releasing large budget films. The rising popularity and increasing accessibility of cable television made viewers more accustomed to a wider variety of entertainment choices, which also made many people "more receptive to new kinds of films" (Lipke 2001:64). However, as Horkheimer and Adorno argue the dissemination and exhibition of these new kinds of films was illusionary in that they contained the same content as studio productions and were controlled by essential the same cultural institutional system.

THE RISE OF INDEPENDENT FILM

Robert Thompson, a professor of television, radio, and film at Syracuse University, argues that the "bulge of Baby Boomers, with their literary aspirations, are attracted to the artsy, niche-oriented nature of indies" (Lipke 2001:63). Thus, the convergence of new technologies in tandem with the demographic changes of the 1980s created the circumstances that facilitated the growth and popularity of independent films, specifically those that come out of the Sundance Film Festival. This is highlighted by every major Hollywood studio during the 1990s buying or establishing an "art house" or independent division in an attempt to win some of the market (Lipke 2001:63). As the major studios have gotten involved in the production and distribution of independent

films, the budgets of many independent films have matured and as result the distinction between independent and studio releases has grown fuzzy. Furthermore, independent films have become so mainstream that they have developed a market that does not so much run against Hollywood as it does parallel to it. This has allowed Hollywood studios and production companies to acquire and coopt independent projects in such a way that they never contradict their preexisting endeavors. This also facilitates Hollywood distribution companies coopting the aesthetics of independent cultural production while from the position of the studio.

While the culture industry for Horkheimer and Adorno increasingly becomes monolithic, it also perpetuates a "permanent compulsion to produce new effects which yet remain bound to the old schema, becoming additional rules, merely increases the power of the tradition which the individual effect seeks to escape" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002:101). In the case of Sundance and independent film, this can have multiple implications. The reception of a new independent film is evaluated in terms of what else is out there in the film community, always grounding the independent in the logic and rational of the larger film economy. At the most basic level, independent film and Hollywood studio productions are all movies and the various films in a sense compete against each other at the box office. An individual going to a film will have to decide on what film to see regardless of if it came out of Sundance or Hollywood. However, even when the independent filmmaker is successful, the filmmaker will be subject to being incorporated by studios though distribution. Distribution in the economy of film insures consumption in that without a film being acquired for distribution no one will see it. Therefore, studio distribution rigs the game in so far as viewing a particular film

presupposes distribution and that "anyone who resists can survive only by being incorporated" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002:104). An independent filmmaker can make a great film and it can even get screened at an independent film festival but unless the film is acquired for distribution by a studio, no one outside of the festival screening will ever see the film.

We can see this phenomenon explicitly in recent developments within the independent film economy in that the popularity of independent film has created an increase in the demand of independent distribution of which was consolidated by Hollywood studios in the form of parent companies. The indie-boom of the 1990s sparked the creation of independent distribution companies that focused on acquiring independent films but as the US economy plummeted over the last few years, many of these companies were purchased by major Hollywood studios or went out of business. Furthermore, when independent film is evaluated by distributors, part of what is being evaluated is the film's potential market success or its potential to make a profit which is dependent upon the films marketability. Therefore, it is easy to dismiss film that either resists commodification or fails to be acquired for distribution because of the assumption that it must not be good or that if it is a film worth seeing that it would have secured distribution. This is the same mentality as a free and self-correcting market in that the market naturally gravitates toward supplying the best product at the best price. However, Horkheimer and Adorno argue that being "disconnected from the mainstream," the independent filmmaker that resists incorporation into the Hollywood studio economy is "easily convicted of inadequacy" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002:106). This bestows great power and influence to institutions such as the Sundance Film Festival that award

independent films because distributors look at the success of films at festivals as an indication of its possible box office success.

The independent filmmaker or artist in this light is in a doomed position. If the filmmaker resists being incorporated by the studio then there is a high probability that no one will see their film but if the filmmaker allows a studio to produce the project then it simply perpetuates the business formula of mass cultural production that is increasingly void of any relevant art. Furthermore, the retroactive success that the studios create only serves to legitimize the system that the film industry operates in that the independent filmmakers that are "discovered by the talent scouts and then built up by the studios are ideal types of the new, dependent middle class" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002:116). The success of those independent filmmakers that are signed by studios at the Sundance Film Festival, in retrospect seems predestined, obvious, and logical which Horkheimer and Adorno argue provides legitimization of the system. The idea that a filmmaker just needs a good concept, determination, and hard work to get discovered and to have success provides Hollywood studios the ability to reproduce itself through their production. It also literally perpetuates the idea of the American Dream and the rationality that anyone can become successful even though "the choice of who is to receive from society the investment and confidence to be trained for such functions becomes entirely irrational" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002:117).

MARKET SUCCESS AND THE STUDIO

Horkheimer and Adorno's idea of the culture industry being irrational can be illustrated by the concept of industry buzz. Within independent cinema there is "the

phenomenon of buzz, which predetermines much response" and reaction to a particular film being screened at the Sundance Film Festival (Chin and Qualis 2001:45). This further marginalizes already marginalized films because if the film industry and specifically the independent film market follow a "herd mentality" then films without a "buzz" or distribution prospects are less inclined to develop or secure distribution. Although the Sundance Film Festival is one of the most important film festivals, many of the films that premier at Sundance rely on a "buzz" to create success. Chin argues that events like Sundance become "an exercise in vanity," in that possible distribution and acquisition depends on a specific studio's bottom line (Chin 1997:62).

Furthermore, "buzz" and the opinion of critics often reflects a "herd mentality" in which many after viewing a film ask themselves whether they should or should not like the film in question (Chin 1997:62). Although buzz, reviews, and economics are separate elements, they often work in tandem through two important sources that have the ability to sway opinion about films and generate box office success, the New York Times and the Village Voice (Chin 1997). According to Chin, if these two sources dismiss a film the prospects for distribution vanish. Quentin Tarantino's film *Reservoir Dogs* is an example of the interplay of legitimization, economics, and buzz. Although *Reservoir Dogs* did not have great audience appeal, the critics were quick to proclaim the film as "an event" and many followed along generating a cult like following allowing Miramax to cash-in on *Pulp Fiction* (Chin 1997:64). There is such a strong desire for critics to be "in the know" that many wait and echo the opinions of important players in the independent film community such as Geoff Gilmore, the director of the Sundance Film Festival (Chin 1997:62). The predominance of the herd mentality in the film community

correlates to the lack of historical awareness and privileging box office success that is conflated to marketability over artistic value and intellectual diversity. As Chin argues, because the focus of movies is on performance the creative producers of film are largely invisible to the general public. This highlights the notion that no one is interested in anything beyond one's immediate environment and rational.

The Sundance Film Festival seems to produce box office successes every year. However, each success is a product of industry buzz and marketing but filmmakers also rely on social capital and networks. *The Brothers McMullen* is an example of a typical market success that heavily depended on external factors independent from the quality of the film itself. Chin argues that director and writer Ed Burns was able to "work the market" by getting a producer's representative to look at his film (Chin 1997:65-66). Burns was able to get Bob Hawk, who was on the advisory board at Sundance to look at a rough cut of *The Brothers McMullen*. Hawk in turn referred Burns to a few other people in the industry and the film eventually screened at the 1995 Sundance Film Festival and won the Grand Jury Prize for best dramatic feature, the festival's top honor.

Furthermore, Chin argues that before 1996 independent films were distinguished by how raw they were. Many independent films now seem well-tooled and polished. As technology becomes more accessible, "seemingly everybody can get one of these small cameras and just start shooting" which has facilitated the rise of do-it-yourself filmmaking (Chin and Qualis 2001:34). However, even though available technology is drastically less expensive than it was in the past, making movies still requires some deep pockets, deeper than many have and the cost of distribution requires an infrastructure that continues to make filmmakers dependent upon studios. Furthermore, a majority of

independent films incurs debt that in turn leaves filmmakers needing a fairly significant payday from their films in order to break even let alone get paid for their labor (Chin and Qualis 2001). While some filmmakers get rewarded for their work in a big way such as Quentin Tarantino with *Pulp Fiction* and Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sanchez with *The Blair Witch Project* but those types of pay outs are generally the exception considering that only a fraction of a percent of Sundance Film Festival submissions get screened and the average cost to acquire a film out of Sundance has gradually increased.

On the institutional level, DiMaggio and Powell argue that organizations are becoming homogeneous through a process of isomorphism in that once institutions "in the same line of business are structured into an actual field… powerful forces emerge that lead them to become more similar to one another" (DiMaggio and Powell 1983:148). Furthermore, organizational actors work within an environment that limits acceptable action and ability to differentiate themselves operationally from other institutions. In this light, the process of isomorphism "forces one unit in a population to resemble other units that face the same set of environmental conditions (DiMaggio and Powell 1983:149). As result, institutions such as Sundance are seen to model other organizations such as studios, at least to the extent that Sundance coordinates ideologically with distributors in the promotion of a certain kind of independent film in response to environmental and market forces. It is possible that as Sundance and studios coordinate in a way that specifies what kind of films are screened and acquired through the festival that emerging filmmakers produce films in accord with the parameters of successful Sundance Film Festival projects. Through this process the production of the Sundance Film Festival

becomes homogeneous and makes institutional change more problematic as the festival entrenches itself in the studio economy.

Institutional isomorphism continues to prevail because "organizational decision makers learn appropriate responses and adjust their behavior" in light of the market environment and other institutional operations (DiMaggio and Powell 1983:149). DiMaggio and Powell give an example of neighborhood organizations in urban communities that are committed to the idea of participatory democracy. They argue that such neighborhood organizations "are driven to developing organizational hierarchies in order to gain support from more hierarchically organized donor organizations" (DiMaggio and Powell 1983:151). DiMaggio and Powell's argument supports Horkheimer and Adorno's notion of actual differentiation being artificial and that emancipation from sameness, at least on the institutional level is problematic. Furthermore, DiMaggio and Powell's analysis gives an institutional description of how the ideology of advanced capitalist market economies are perpetuated giving additional credence to Simmel's notion of money being the universal standard of measurement. The Sundance Film Festival has become a marketplace because it commodifies independent film. Studio acquisition of specific films is conducted through the exchange of money that is facilitated by Sundance adopting a modern capitalist model of organization. This affects what kinds of Sundance films get screened and distributed in that the films who readily lend themselves to studio marketing strategies are more likely to be acquired by studios and screened at the festival. They are also the same films that get disseminated to the general public because they are more easily commodified than films that resist objectification.

What can be thought of as authentic art, or art that either resists commodification, or at least have not yet been coopted, is constantly subjected to being appropriated by the culture industry because "art supplies the tragic substance which pure entertainment cannot provide on its own yet needs if it is to adhere to its principle of meticulously duplicating appearance" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002:122). For Horkheimer and Adorno there is no pragmatic way for independent filmmakers to emancipate themselves from this predicament while still being filmmakers. Just as the capitalist needs low wages in order to generate the maximum profit, Hollywood studios need the symbolic capital of independent artists to generate success at the box office. As people grow tired of the traditional romantic comedy, Hollywood studios need to find new concepts that cannot come from within the studio but come from outside Hollywood. Those new concepts have the ability to draw in audiences and through those new concepts being coopted by Hollywood studios a new standard or tradition is created and the system is perpetuated. As Horkheimer and Adorno argue, even the idea of freedom within the space of art "is essentially conditioned by the commodity economy" in the sense that even "pure works of art, which negated the commodity character of society by simply following their own inherent laws, were at the same time always commodities" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002:127).

Horkheimer and Adorno argue further that as the culture industry becomes total and all encompassing, exchange-value replaces use-value in the Marxian sense, meaning that things are increasingly evaluated in terms of whether a product can serve as something else (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002:128). This rationality allows institutions to promote "identical commodities under different brand names" (Horkheimer and

Adorno 2002:129). An example of this within the film economy is dual marketing in that a film can be promoted as being an Art House film while at the same time can be marketed as a romantic comedy. This can also be thought of as a marketing strategy that will increase the likelihood of people viewing the film in that if I am not part of the crowd that watches art house films but I do watch romantic comedies, I am not going to dismiss the possibility of viewing the particular film in question although it is the same product.

APPROPRIATION OF SUNDANCE FILM

Bourdieu, like Horkheimer and Adorno, sees the general science of economic practices having powerful implications for cultural production. For Bourdieu the science of economic practices or modern rational has the ability to reduce "all practices, including those purporting to be disinterested or gratuitous, and hence non-economic, as economic practices directed towards the maximizing of material or symbolic profit" (Bourdieu 2006:183). However, unlike Horkheimer and Adorno, Bourdieu explicitly states that the symbolic capital that the culture industry depends on is rooted or originates in "material forms of capital" (Bourdieu 2006:183). Hence the Hollywood distribution studio enjoying high economic capital but lacks symbolic capital will be motivated to sign an independent filmmaker and acquire an independent film, typically being low in economic capital while having high symbolic capital, in order to accumulate more capital. Since studios can acquire independent films at a relatively low price by virtue of their economic capital being high while the independent's is low, the studio can generate a profit. In a bargaining situation the studio will always have the upper hand especially if

they are negotiating with a first time filmmaker because studios have a monopoly on film distribution. There is no other alternative for independent filmmakers to have their films distributed but be acquired by a studio.

For Bourdieu the process of cultural production can be thought of as not fully rational action or thoughtless reaction but residing within "an economy of practices, a reason immanent in practices, whose origin lies neither in the decisions of reason understood as rational calculation nor in the determinations of mechanisms external to and superior to the agents" (Bourdieu 1990:50). Bourdieu points out that the symbolic forms, utilized in the cultural practices such as the production of independent film are relatively autonomous with respect to the objective social conditions and are not simple mechanical manifestations of individual orders (Bourdieu 1990:139). In this light, Bourdieu describes a type of dialectic of "chance" and "necessity" that is actualized in struggles with the tendency to centralize while appealing to the notion of spontaneity (Bourdieu 1992:59). This can describe the consolidation of independent aesthetic and creation of a homogeneous independent product. As Sundance films become characterized and marketed in a certain way the independent films that deviate from that established pattern resist assimilation and commodification. Those types of films will also typically be left out of, or at least marginalized, at the Sundance Film Festival.

For Bourdieu practice and production are not just simply a mechanical result of social conditions, nor is there ever a fully free and creative individual or artist that is independent of social conditions. To overcome this dichotomy of objectivity and subjectivity, Bourdieu introduces the concept of the habitus, which can be thought of as a product of economic and social processes (Bourdieu 1990:50). Bourdieu argues that the

habitus, as the internalization of externality, structures the individual's perception of the social world while at the same time, it is itself a product of social and historical conditions (Bourdieu 1990). The habitus functions as the schemes of perception, thought, and action that incorporates individualist and collectivist dimensions of society. This allows the habitus to enable and constrain actions that in turn are reproduced in the very social conditions that structure the habitus. The habitus can literally be understood as a kind of mental filter that structures perception, practice, and experience that forms dispositions (Bourdieu 1990:131). Furthermore, Bourdieu in *Logic of Practice* describes the habitus as functioning generatively in that:

> The conditionings associated with a particular class of conditions of existence produce habitus, systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them. Objectively 'regulated' and 'regular' without being in any way the product of obedience to rules, they can be collectively orchestrated without being the product of the organizing action of a conductor. (Bourdieu 1992:53)

In a sense the habitus produces responses to objective possibilities predicated on the totality of a history. Thus, the habitus mediates both action and thought in that it can be understood as an internally organized set of transposable dispositions and practical categorization that enable the individual subject to understand the social world while also producing and reproducing specific inequalities in a seemingly natural manner. This provides the site of Bourdieu's dialectic of incorporation and objectification (Bourdieu 2006:72; 1992:56). Similar to Marx's theory that capitalism will produce wealth that cannot be distributed to all participants, Bourdieu argues that social institutions not only produce and reproduce knowledge but that such production is inseparable from

inequalities that are dependent on the individual subject's opportunity to appropriate socially legitimate knowledge (Bourdieu 2006). Furthermore, Bourdieu explicitly states:

> Economic power lies not in wealth but in the relationship between wealth and a field of economic relations, the constitution of which is inseparable from the development of a body of specialized agents, with specific interests; it is in this relationship that wealth is constituted, in the form of capital, that is, as the instrument for appropriating the institutional equipment and the mechanisms indispensable to the functioning of the field, and thereby also appropriating the profits from it. (Bourdieu 2006:184-5)

It is here that Bourdieu argues that objectification is a prerequisite for appropriation. For Bourdieu objectification "guarantees the permanence and cumulatively of material and symbolic acquisition" and this places production, especially cultural production to be perpetuated external of specific subjects recreating them (Bourdieu 2006:184). In a sense, Bourdieu is arguing that once a specific case of cultural production is objectified that the reproduction of cultural production perpetuates the distribution of capital and its congealed social relations "because the profits of these institutions are the object of differential appropriation" (Bourdieu 2006:184). Once the motivation of a cultural institution is to appropriate capital that is generative of profit the underlining system of exploitation that makes profit possible is also perpetuated.

This creates a kind of hegemonic system grounded in modern capitalistic ideology that depends on relatively autonomous subjects or institutions such as Hollywood studios that are in a position to impose their vision through the command of mechanisms of production to appropriate material or symbolic profits from independent filmmakers. This strategy or mechanism of appropriation by studios from independent filmmakers maintains and perpetuates the domination of the Hollywood studio distribution system. In this light, the independent filmmaker can create and produce a film that can be

differentiated from studio projects but that production is subject to objectification that removes the filmmaker from production in the case of its iteration. In a literal sense, the distribution of acquired independent film appropriates the capital from specific independent films to the Hollywood studio in the same manner that symbolic capital is converted into economic capital which allows institutions to maintain their position of domination through the allocation of profits and resources that they appropriate.

THE MATTER OF MARKETABILITY

The hegemony of the culture industry is manifest in the Sundance Film Festival's cooptation by the Hollywood studio economy through acquisition, marketing, and distribution of differentiated independent cinema. As Hollywood studios expand their market artistic and raw independent film is further pushed further into the margins creating a need for of alternative independent film festivals and distribution. Since film distribution requires high amounts of capital and resources, filmmakers depend upon studios to release and make their film available to audiences. As the Sundance Film Festival becomes utilized by Hollywood studios the Sundance Film Festival reflects the same homogeneous product as Hollywood production companies. This has led to the need for alternative independent festivals that have not been coopted by major studios such as Slamdance which was born out of the belief that Sundance had become too commercial and neglected first time filmmakers and credit card productions. This process of cooptation has a perpetual marginalizing effect where venues increasingly exhibit the same type of film and as result differentiated film is further pushed into the margins.

An example of this is the development of New Black Realism in film which like the Sundance Film Festival arose in the late 1980s and increased in popularity gaining studio validity during the early and mid 1990s. Many of these films highlight the conditions of poverty and racism in the inner-city ghetto. While many of these films succeeded in drawing attention to issues of social justice they also contained a neoliberal solution which lends themselves to crossover appeal among hesitant white and conservative audiences. Most recently the 2005 Sundance audience award winning drama *Hustle & Flow* contained the same message and crossover appeal as many New Black Realism films before. The major difference between *Hustle & Flow* and Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* is that while *Hustle & Flow* perpetuates a neoliberal and conservative advocacy, *Do the Right Thing* highlights how issues of race, poverty, and intergenerational relations are far more complicated. While New Black Realism films and *sex, lies, and videotape,* which beat out *Do the Right Thing* at the 1989 Sundance Film Festival, appeal to crossover marketing strategies that maximizes potential profits for distributors, *Do the Right Thing* portrays a complicated social world that does not lend itself to simplistic marketing hooks and Manchurian notions of good and bad.

However, *sex, lies, and videotape* is not itself the picture perfect image of marketability, it was far easier for distributors to push it than *Do the Right Thing*. Soderbergh had a specific idea for how he wanted his film portrayed and it clashed with the strategy Miramax had in mind. Miramax wanted to play to the film's strengths and establish various advertisements and trailers depending on the population and thus maximizing the film's crossover appeal. Soderbergh on the other hand worked on producing a provocative trailer that Miramax described as "art house death" (Perren

2002:34). This highlights the modern problem of cultural production and art in that once a film has been produced it is taken out of the hands of the artist and essentially becomes the property of the studio that acquired its distribution rights.

The studio as a corporate entity whose business and goal is to make money reduces the film to an advertisement. At this point the aesthetics, substance, and artistic vision of the film become arbitrary and irrelevant to the marketing strategy. As in Horkheimer and Adorno's description of the culture industry's appeal to the masses is in the industry's ability to make success seem logical while portraying an element of commonness in that actors and actresses, themes, and stories, especially in the independent sector generally aim to connect the film to our own experiences and portray a world like the one we live in. This results in a description of success that is paradoxical in that it is utterly arbitrary as in depending upon being in the right place at the right time while also being predicated on talent and characteristics that make success seem predestined. Chin and Qualis argue that independent film festivals like the Sundance Film Festival are less concern with the quality of the film than with its box office potential in that box office success is the paramount consideration when evaluating films. Moreover, there are so many independent films that are finding commercial release that films "that enter the market without any distribution prospects are already classified" (Chin and Qualis 1998).

The Sundance Film Festival also treats the diversity of films' as exhibited in their content as commodity in that studios appropriate distinction through the organization of the festival in an economic fashion. Not only is diversity a mark of differentiation for independent films and festivals but the content of that diversity can be acquired by

studios through economic negotiation. In this light, Sundance can be thought of as a commodity itself and an institution of cultural production but it can also function as a kind of "free trade zone" for independent projects in the sense that boundaries are regulated and is where the consequence of the objectification of the symbolic, which under Bourdieu's theory can be thought of as symbolic capital but also the raw ideas that when organized produces capital in that capital can be thought of here as a process, that takes on material forms of differentiation as commodities. This can be two-fold for films because not only can films contain discourse of diversity in content and the idea of independent film is differentiated from Hollywood studios, but the Sundance Film Festival can now be seen now as a literal and viable marketplace for film. This requires, as Bourdieu argues, the objectification and placement of culture and art within the economy in the form of a commodity.

THEORETICAL AFTERTHOUGHTS

Many movie chains like Regal, AMC, Clearview, Loews, and Sony have built huge state-of-the-art multiplexes to showcase films. Since the vast majority of these new theaters show the same movies as their older counterparts, people will generally prefer to see a film at the newer and nicer venue (Chin and Qualis 2001). As people migrate to the newer theaters, the old ones need something that will attract customers and rejuvenate business. These older venues need an alternative product to what the multiplexes offer which is why many older art houses end up exhibiting independent films, which over the past ten years or so have become increasingly popular and profitable.

As independent films have become mainstream, others have realized that they can capitalize on the profit potential of independent projects. Landmark Theaters opened a new five-screen movie house in the Chicago suburb of Highland Park, a place where you are more likely to find a Starbucks and Pottery Barn than merchants of alternative subcultures. However, the theater shows only independent and foreign films. The new theater is representative of the new mainstream audience for independent films. The number of independent films released in US theaters has doubled from 165 in 1990 to 338 in 2000 and have continued to grow (ShowBIZ Data Inc. 2008). Furthermore, access to independent products has grown in that there are now two major cable channels, the Sundance Channel and the Independent Film Channel, which are devoted to airing independent films.

Lipke argues that the growing popularity of the Sundance Film Festival and the substantial increase in independent outlets have made independent films a trendy and stylish commodity for Hollywood studios (Lipke 2001). It now seems like every big name in Hollywood wants to take a stab at the independent market in hopes of landing a low-budget independent project that will turn out to be a success. The “collapse” of communism has ushered the triumph of capitalistic ideology and with it, in the independent film market, an atmosphere that "translates everything into winners and losers” (Chin and Qualis 1998:40). If a project is a success, then those associated with the film are “winners.” This has essentially killed the concept of “art” in cinema because there is nothing that contradicts commerce.

It can be argued that the idea of commerce and money being paramount is not revealed only in the films themselves but also at Sundance Institute itself. The Sundance

Channel has formed strategic alliances with companies such as Amazon.com, Starbucks, Joe Boxer, Volkswagen, and Skyy Vodka. Tim Brunelle, an associate creative director at Volkswagen's advertisement agency Arnold Worldwide, says that Volkswagen is trying to align themselves "with something that's very cool" (Lipke 2001:62). Sue Hearn, public relations manager at Skyy Vodka says that the "demographic for our product is trendy and young" and that "indie films and the innovation they represent are a great tie-in" (Lipke 2001:63). Skyy Vodka now sponsors 150 film festivals in the US and has its own independent film contest. Blockbuster has been a major sponsor of the Sundance Film Festival since 1998 and has bought the rights for distribution to hundreds of films, making it the largest single acquirer at the Sundance Film Festival (Lipke 2001:63). In agreement with the Sundance Channel, Blockbuster provides a "Sundance" section at about 3,800 locations (Lipke 2001:63). Blockbuster has such high hopes for the potential of independent films that in January 2001 it created DEJ Productions, a new division that distributes and produces independent films in theaters and video. Liz Greene, a Blockbuster spokeswoman says that they have "really noticed a hunger for new films" (Lipke 2001:63).

As Liz Greens of Blockbuster notes, there is always going to be space for new and exciting film. The question becomes if the idea of new film is actually new and differentiated from traditional cultural production or is simply illusionary in that it is more of the same but marketed as innovative. Simmel argues that there is a shift in traditional cultural boundaries and that differentiation becomes increasingly more radical and extreme. However, the implication of Simmel's theory is that there is always a possibility for differentiated and authentic cultural production although it is always

fleeing in that such production constantly has to differentiate itself from the consuming boundaries of the mainstream. Horkheimer and Adorno on the other hand are far more skeptical. They see the possibility of a truly authentic cultural product such as film or art as impossible because of the centralization of the means of producing and disseminating such production. Furthermore, they argue that perceivable distinctions in film are not only arbitrary but also expand the power and influence of the culture industry in such a way that no one can escape its influence.

The problem with theorizing about the Sundance Film Festival is that there is reason to question whether or not independent cinema ever really existed. Furthermore, there is reason to believe that once an independent film is acquired by a studio that the product ceases to be thought of as art, being taken out of the hands of the filmmaker and is subsequently reduced to a commodity. For the purpose of advertising and marketing, films are reduced to posters, trailers, and commercials that highlight the film's attractiveness. Also, by a film's ability to be bought and sold presupposes Bourdieu's notion of objectification and commodification which is a prerequisite for studio cooptation.

METHODOLOGY

The data used in the descriptive statistical section comes from verity of sources. Data relating to the Sundance Film Festival's attendance, submissions, and screenings was collected from the Sundance Institute's archive department. The Sundance Institute does not organize a lot of this information in an analyzable fashion so a lot of the data presented in this study comes directly from annual film guides that the institute publishes prior to the actual film festival. Data regarding the distribution of Sundance Film Festival award winners and box office performance was collected through intensive internet searches and film databases such as Box Office Mojo as well as industry press releases. Since there have been more than 3,400 films screened at the Sundance Film Festival, searching for distribution information on all Sundance films would have required far more time and capital than I could provide so I limited my investigation to festival award winners and influential films identified by critics as being important. The Sundance Institute does not track what films that are screened at the festival that are acquired by studios so I systematically searched for information regarding the film's acquisition through press releases, trade magazines, industry reports, and film databases.

The qualitative data from secondary sources was gathered from director and filmmaker commentary from DVDs, interviews as published in trade magazines, and film journals. I also conducted interviews first hand by identifying individuals associated with the Sundance Film Festival through press releases and internet searches. In the process of gathering information on film acquisition and distribution I was able to identify individuals that could provide me with qualitative data that could potentially fill in the gaps of knowledge that existed in the descriptive quantitative data. To protect the

identity of participants I have used aliases and have not specified where they work. Questions were asked about the evolution, distribution, significance of awards, and acquisition practices at the Sundance Film Festival. Specific questions were asked about changes in the Sundance Film Festival over time and how those changes impact the kinds of film screened at the festival.

The objective in this research is to identify reoccurring characteristics from the historical and statistical analysis and relate them to the responses provided by the interviews in order to uncover themes salient to cooptation. This approach facilitates the discovery of relationships in the data within a historical and market context. Although data was categorically gathered, sorted, and analyzed it is presented here has an integrated synthesis. The goal of this study is to conflate both qualitative and quantitative data to larger theoretical concepts of modernity and capitalist free markets in order to provide insights into the evolution of the Sundance Film Festival as it relates to cultural production.

ROADMAP

I will first provide a brief introduction to the origins of the Sundance Film Festival as a showcase of independent cinema. Next, in relation to the question of whether the Sundance Film Festival has become commodified, I will present descriptive quantitative historical data with regards to the festival's evolution that highlights the festival's growth and increased Hollywood studio infiltration. This section discusses the significance of festival awards, distribution, and sponsorship with regards to commodifying Sundance film. Next, I explore the ramifications of the Sundance Film Festival's cooptation relaying on secondary sources and interviews. This qualitative section will also highlight the importance of marketability, box office success, and the influence of the Sundance Film Festival on independent cinema. I will also discuss the general mechanisms that allow independent cinema such as Sundance Film Festival projects to be assimilated and disseminated by Hollywood studios. In conclusion I will discuss the implications of the cooptation of the Sundance Film Festival for independent filmmakers and highlight the need for future research.

THE BIRTH OF THE SUNDANCE FILM FESTIVAL

Since 1985, the festival is a feature of the Sundance Institute, a nonprofit organization. According to its official website, Sundance is "dedicated to the discovery and development of independent artists and audiences" (Sundance Institute N.d.). Sundance in its mission statement says it attempts to "discover, support, and inspire" independent film artists and to "introduce audiences to their new work" (Sundance Institute N.d.). The Sundance Institute, founded in 1981 by Robert Redford, and at the time was headed by Sterling Van Wagenen, took over the former Utah/US Film Festival in 1985. The festival originated before the Sundance Institute and was referred to as the Utah/US Film Festival. The festival began in Salt Lake City in 1978 and according to the Sundance Institute, was a collaborative effort between Utah's art and commercial industries, which were motivated to attract more filmmakers to Utah. The festival was originally founded by Sterling Van Wagenen and Charles Gary Allison, with Robert Redford serving as a chairperson. The original festival was radically different than the Sundance Festival today. The Utah/US Festival focused on presenting a series of retrospective films with filmmaker and panel discussions but also included a small program of independent films made outside the mainstream Hollywood studios. This small program ventured to showcase the potential of independent film.

The festival came to have Park City as its "headquarters" through a comment made by director Sydney Pollack. During the early years of the Utah/US Film Festival, Pollack served on its Board of Directors and in March 1980, he recommended that the festival relocate to Park City during the winter to increase attendance, since it would be the only film festival held in a ski resort during ski season. Upon Pollock's

recommendation, the 1980 festival was postponed to January of 1981. The festival expanded its program, of independent films at the suggestion of program director Lory Smith. Smith pointed out to festival directors that independent films were considerably cheaper to present because, unlike Hollywood studio productions, it was not required to pay rental or screening charges (Craig 2005).

This maneuver was controversial because it was believed that screening Hollywood productions would enable the festival to easily attract financial sponsors. This opinion seemed to gather validity because despite the festival's expansion of its independent film program, the festival experienced financial troubles and there was further pressure for the festival to abandon showcasing independent films in favor of screening Hollywood studio productions (Craig 2005). Also in 1981, Robert Redford gathered with a group of colleagues to create an institute to cultivate new, unique voices in film. In the spring of that year, ten emerging filmmakers were invited to the Sundance Institute Filmmakers and Directors Lab, where they worked with leading writers and directors to develop their projects. According to the Sundance Institute, each artist was encouraged to take "creative risks" and to produce a film that was "true" to their "unique vision" (Sundance Institute N.d.).

Sustained financial difficulties of the Utah/US Film Festival led the Sundance Institute to take over the festival in 1985. Under direction of the Sundance Institute, the 1985 film festival doubled the previous year's attendance and presented 86 independent features including a program of international films. Whereas the early years of the Sundance Film Festival can generally be defined as turbulent and marked with insecurity, currently the festival is considered "America's preeminent film event" and is "arguably

one of the most influential film festivals in the world" (Turan 2002:35). Is Sundance's growth indicative of it being coopted and commercialized? How has Hollywood been able to infiltrate the Sundance Film Festival and commodify independent projects?

QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

To be able to answer the question of whether the Sundance Film Festival has been coopted by Hollywood studios, the notion of cooptation must first be operationalized. This study understands cooptation to be the ability of corporate institutions to commodify the production of a particular cultural institution, such as the Sundance Film Festival through the assimilation and dissemination of cultural products, in this case films. This includes the ability of Hollywood studios to objectify independent films and to infiltrate the Sundance Film Festival in a manner that allows for the appropriation of independent projects. This study identifies the Sundance Film Festival as a part of the independent film culture that may be coopted by the Hollywood film industry through studio acquisition. Specifically, this study looks at how Hollywood studios have infiltrated the Sundance Film Festival and acquired the festival's production which in turn is disseminated among consumers in a commodity form. This is most directly accomplished by Hollywood studios acquiring Sundance films for distribution. Hollywood studios also infiltrate the Sundance Film Festival through sponsorship. In this light, tracking sponsorship can also indicate cooptation because it illustrates corporate involvement at the Sundance Film Festival.

Cooptation is operationalized in this study through analyzing screenings, attendance, distribution, and sponsorship because through those categories the production of the Sundance Film Festival is appropriated by studios. All the data utilized in the following tables was gathered directly from the Sundance Institute by the author. I will first look at Sundance Film Festival screening and attendance levels because both indicate the level of participation the festival experiences year to year. If the festival is

drawing more participation from filmmakers and has higher attendance then it can be argued that the festival is more popular. As the festival has grown in popularity companies will tend to maneuver themselves to take advantage of the market. For example, as the Sundance Film Festival grows in popularity and its films prove successful at the box office, companies will be more likely to invest in the festival and seek to acquire its films because they are potentially profitable. Therefore, levels of corporate sponsorship and distribution are analyzed. Since sponsorship and acquisition are the most significant measurements of the cooptation of the Sundance Film Festival because both directly describe the involvement of corporate institutions in appropriating capital from the festival and its production, I will then analyze levels of sponsorship and studio acquisition at the Sundance Film Festival.

SCREENINGS

The number of films screened at the US/Utah/Sundance Film Festival has significantly increased from the time the Sundance Institute took over the film festival in 1985. The year the Sundance Institute took over the film festival there were 86 films that were screened and throughout the remainder of the 1980s, the number of films remained fairly steady never dropping below 83 films but not rising above 99 films. However, during the 1990s the Sundance Film Festival recorded substantial growth most likely because of an increase in the popularity of independent film. Films like *The Brothers McMullen, Reservoir Dogs, El Mariachi, Pulp Fiction, Shakespeare In Love,* and *The Blair Witch Project* were all released during the 1990s and were influential in reshaping the market of independent cinema.

In 1990, the festival screened 121 films and every year following, the festival screened more films than the year before until 1998. In 1997 the Sundance Film Festival screened 199 films but following the 1997 festival, the number of screenings dropped slightly to 187 screenings. From 1998 through the 2000 festival, the number of screenings did not rise above 197 until the 2001 festival where there were 220 films screened. From 2001 to 2004 the festival grew substantially, screening 256 films during the 2004 festival. As Figure 1 illustrates, the following two years the festival's level of screenings fell slightly but then during the 2007 festival Sundance screened an unprecedented 271 films, the most in festival history.

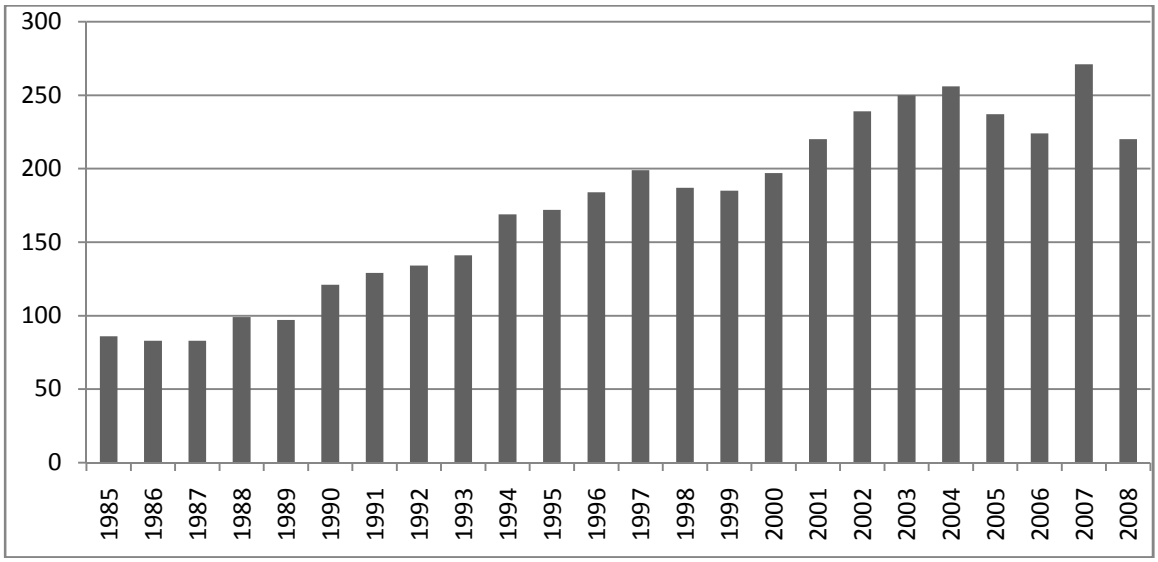

Figure 1: Number of films screened each year from 1985 to 2008.
Source: Author's Calculation (2009).

In 2008 the festival screened 220 films, a fairly significant drop compared to the previous year. However, the 220 films screened represents over a 155 percent growth in film screenings from the time the Sundance Institute took over the film festival in 1985. As Figure 1 shows, since the 2001 festival, there have not been fewer than 220 films

screened at the festival, the most being 271 films that were screened during the 2007 festival. Figure 1 also indicates that the most significant period of growth for the Sundance Film Festival occurred between 1985 and 1997 where there was more than a 130% rise in the number of films screened, 86 films in 1985 to 199 in 1997.

The Sundance Film Festival constantly reworks submission categories to adapt to trends in filmmaking. Prior to the 1996 festival all submissions were classified as dramatic features but the 1996 festival expanded the spectrum of films to include documentaries and short films. By the 1996 Sundance Film Festival documentaries such as *Roger and Me* had become popular and proven to be profitable for distribution companies. However, short films remained unmarketable because of their nature and the cost of material distribution has remained high in proportion to the content. For example, if a typical DVD movie runs an hour and a half and costs about $15, largely because of the material costs of the DVD itself, distributing short film on DVDs is more costly in comparison because the running length of the film is a third of a feature. However, the Sundance Film Festival and the Sundance Institute have recognized short film not only as a viable film as art form but also as a way to discover and launch emerging talent as John Cooper, the Sundance Film Festival Director of Programming stated in a 2007 Press Release (Sundance Institute 2007).

The 1998 festival expanded the spectrum of screened films further by including world cinema or foreign films. World cinema has been the fastest growing feature category of the Sundance Film Festival and now represents about 25% of the total feature submissions and over 10% of the festival's yearly submissions since the 2000 festival. Analyzing the submission breakdown represented in Figure 2 reveals some interesting

trends. There has been a dramatic increase in the number of documentaries and international films since the 2000 festival. When the festival initially expanded its spectrum to include documentaries there were only 185 submitted but for the 2008 festival there were 953 submissions. The 953 submissions for the 2008 festival were about 150 more documentaries than were submitted from 1996 through 1999 combined.

Year	Dramatic	Documentary	World Cinema	International Documentary	Short Films	International Short Films	Online Films	Yearly Totals
1992	250							250
1993	250							250
1994	325							325
1995	375							375
1996	500	185			1,200			1,885
1997	600	215						815
1998	675	194	190		1,479			2,538
1999	840	210	275		1,730			3,055
2000	849	347	454		1,978			3,628
2001	860	390	510		2,174		18	3,952
2002	750	440	550		2,100		25	3,865
2003	832	537	440	214	3,345		31	5,399
2004	744	541	798	402	3,389		30	5,904
2005	761	624	843	385	2,790	1,097	33	6,533
2006	1,004	760	836	448	3,011	1,300	30	7,389
2007	996	856	929	506	2,932	1,513	105	7,837
2008	1,068	953	983	620	3,054	2,053	10	8,731
Totals	11,679	6,252	6,808	2,575	29,182	5,963	282	62,731

Figure 2: Yearly composition of film submissions from 1992 to 2008.
Source: Author's Calculation (2009)

Every festival since 1999 there have been more documentaries submitted than the prior year. It is also interesting to note that despite there not being a large commercial market for Short Films, there continues to be thousands of Shorts submitted each year to the Sundance Film Festival. Figure 2 shows that there have been a total of 29,182 short films submitted and since the festival expanded to include international shorts in 2005

there have been 5,963 films submitted. Combining both short categories there have been 35,145 short films submitted to the festival comprising about 56% of the grand total of film submissions the festival has received.

In 2006, there was a significant change to the Sundance Film Festival's Short Film Program. The Sundance Film Festival, in partnership with its Presenting Level Sponsor, Adobe System Incorporated, began providing short films online. Two years later, the Sundance Film Festival announced that in continuing its mission "of building audiences for short films," it was making a selection of Festival shorts available for purchase and download on Apple's iTunes Movie Store, Xbox LIVE, and through Netflix (Brunt and McGee 2007). The rhetoric used in the 2008 Sundance Film Festival Short Film Press Release is significant. Brunt and McGee argue that the mission of the Sundance Film Festival is to build audiences for films.

While the official Sundance Mission Statement does state that the Institute though the Festival is "dedicated to the discovery and development of independent artists and audiences," on the surface it seems problematic for the host of a competitive festival to engage in distribution partnerships (Sundance Institute N.d.). However, audiences of Sundance Film Festival films rarely view films that are not commodified because most people do not attend the festival but rather view the films in local theatres or through rentals. Therefore, it can be argued that the commodification of a film is a prerequisite for Sundance Film Festival "success." The consequence of festival commodification is that it further marginalizes certain other types of independent film. For example, it was *sex, lies, and videotape* and not *Do the Right Thing* that was instrumental in introducing popular markets to independent film and sparked the independent film boom.

ATTENDANCE

Assuming that Hollywood studios are profit-seeking institutions, they would only acquire Sundance films or sponsor the festival if there is going to be an audience present. In other words, Hollywood studios as for-profit corporations, want to see a return on their investment which requires consumers. In the economy of film festivals such as Sundance, consumers are those who attend film screenings. Therefore, analyzing festival attendance not only indicates the growth and popularity of the Sundance Film Festival but also highlight why corporations want to sponsor the event. From 1983 to 1996 the Sundance Film Festival measured attendance solely by tabulating the number of seats sold for the year's festival. In 1996, Sundance started to keep track of the actual number of people that attend the festival, which eliminates double counting and included those that participate in forums and lectures.

Before 1996, if an individual purchased two tickets to two different film screenings then the festival counted them twice, once for each. Therefore, evaluating festival attendance from 1983 to 1996 is somewhat problematic but the numbers can also provide insights into the festivals popularity because seats represent the actual number of people viewing screenings. For example if the average Sundance Film Festival attendee attended one screening in 1990 but attended three in 1991, it can be concluded that the 1991 Sundance Film Festival has grown in popularity regardless of whether or not the actual number of people attending the festival has increased.

While looking at the seats purchased for film screenings is valuable, it needs to be kept in mind that as the festival screens more films there are going to be more seats available. Therefore, it is important to look at the number of seats purchased in a

percentage of total capacity because knowing the capacity will account for the festival years when there are more screenings. As Figure 3 illustrates, the number of seats purchased in 1984 was down from the previous year's festival. During this period the festival was struggling as indicated by the low seating numbers. Figure 3 also shows that shortly after the Sundance Institute took over the film festival in 1985, attendance grew through the mid-1980s then generally leveled off throughout the early 1990s.

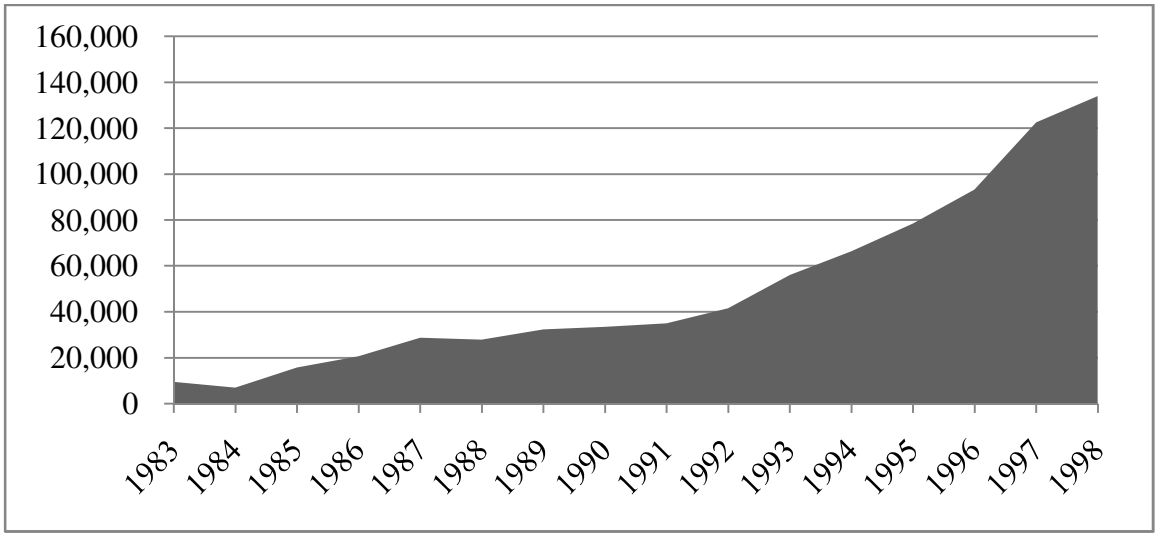

Figure 3: Number of seats purchased from 1983 to 1998
Source: Author's calculation (2009).

During the 1985 Sundance Film Festival, there were 86 films screened and 15,750 seats sold. During that year's festival, the Coen Brothers won the Grand Jury Prize with *Blood Simple,* which was eventually acquired by Circle for distribution and grossed over $3.8 million domestically (Box Office Mojo 2008). Building off the success of the 1985 festival, the following year's festival screened three fewer films but sold 4,850 more tickets. The 1987 Sundance Film Festival screened 83 films and sold 28,700 seats, 8,100 more than the previous year and 12,950 more than its first year. During these early years, films screening at the Sundance Film Festival were generally raw and financed on a

fraction of the budgets that Hollywood studios produced pictures. For example, in 1985 *Santa Claus: The Movie* was made for $50 million, *Back to the Future* was made for $19 million, and the *Care Bears Movie* was made for $2 million while *Blood Simple* operated on a $750,000 budget (Lowenstein 2000; Box Office Mojo 2008).

The 1989 Sundance Film Festival sold more seats than any other Sundance Film Festival during the 1980s selling 56,205 seats. The 1989 festival was also significant because of Steven Soderbergh's *sex, lies, and videotape*. Not only did *sex, lies and videotape* win the Audience Award over Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (which was subsequently nominated for two Academy Awards, a Golden Palm, and won three Chicago Film Critics Association Awards) but it also ignited a studio bidding war in which Miramax offered $1 million for the film's distribution rights (Biskind 2004:66). Some criticized Miramax's large offer but *sex, lies, and videotape* ended up grossing about $25 million and sparked the indie-boom of the 1990s (Means 2009b:D1). In an interview, Steven Soderbergh acknowledges that a lot of the discussion about the impact *sex, lies, and videotape* had on the independent film industry is "almost entirely financial" and that the success *sex, lies, and videotape* had at the box office showed the film industry that independent films do not have to be "small in financial terms" (Means 2009b:D1). The notion of success being measured by financial comparisons that Soderbergh describes illustrates Simmel's argument that money is the universal standard of modernity (Simmel 1978).

Throughout the early 1990s, festival attendance continued to grow steadily each year. During this period the Sundance Film Festival also produced major successes. In 1992, Quentin Tarantino presented his debut feature *Reservoir Dogs,* which was

subsequently acquired by Miramax. After the 1992 festival, attendance grew rapidly and continued to grow substantially throughout the rest of the 1990s, which correlates with the dramatic increase in film screenings that occurred in the mid-1990s. The 1993 festival featured Robert Rodriguez's *El Mariachi* and Jennifer Lynch's *Boxing Helena*. Both films generated attention and have been credited for pushing the do-it-yourself trend in filmmaking (Craig 2005). During that year's festival, a shift of focus from the films themselves to the business of acquisition became apparent. Newsweek journalist David Ansen noted during the 1993 Sundance Film Festival that "agents and lawyers were crawling all over the streets" and that it was not uncommon to have them "whispering" into their cell phones as theatre "lights go down" (Ansen 1993). Furthermore, the William Morris Agency had 25 representatives in place "scouring the festival for the next breakthrough twenty-something filmmaker" which facilitated the meat market feel to the festival (Ansen 1993). The Sundance Film Festival had become a pressure laden auction block where the future of young filmmakers hanged in the balance.

Looking at the actual level of attendance illustrated by Figure 4, festival attendance has remained fairly constant from the mid-1990s through 2002. It is interesting to note that there was not a dramatic increase in attendance directly following the 1999 success of *The Blair Witch Project*. Although the film did not win any festival awards, it was acquired by Artisan Entertainment and grossed over $248 million on a production budget of about $60,000 (Box Office Mojo 2008). However, attendance for the 2003 festival dramatically jumped from 20,435 the previous year to 38,707. The 18,000 increase in attendance represented more people than the total attendance at the 1996 and 1997 film festival. Figure 4 also illustrates that although attendance for the

2004 festival did drop slightly, attendance picked up again in 2005 and 2006. More than 50,000 people attended the 2006 Sundance Film Festival, more than doubling the attendance levels of Sundance Film Festivals prior to 2002.

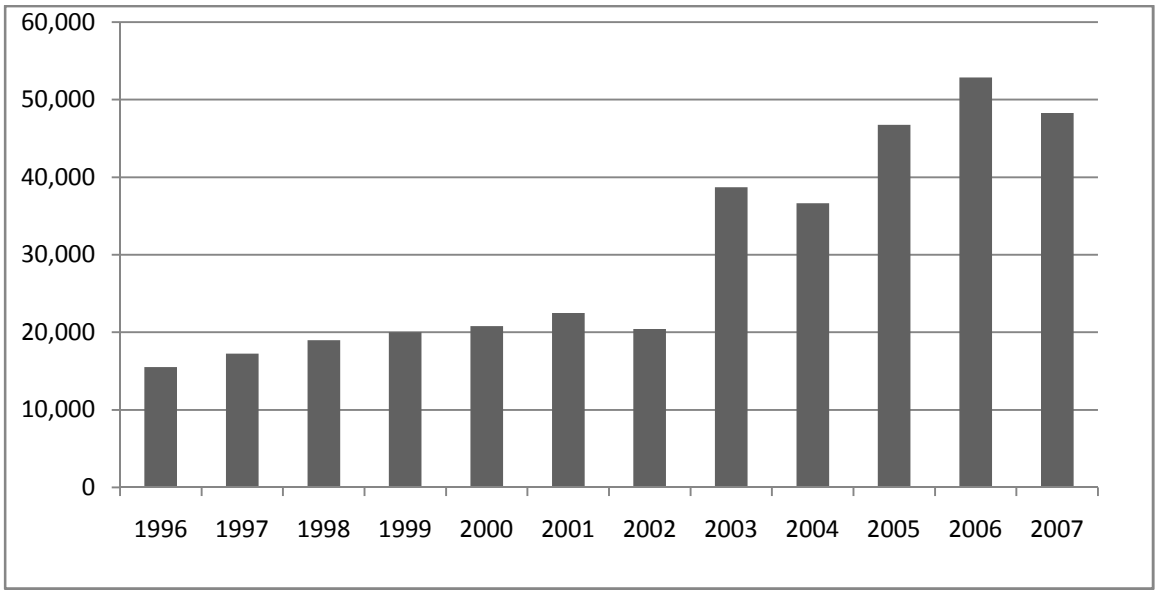

Figure 4: Yearly attendance from 1996 to 2007.
Source: Author's calculation (2009).

This represents rapid substantial growth in Sundance Film Festival attendance after the festival intentionally scaled back operations in 2002. By the 2003 Sundance Film Festival many of the successful festival films were available on DVD for purchase and to rent may have provided increased exposure for the Sundance Film Festival subsequently increasing festival attendance. Furthermore, increased advertising, box office success, and outlets for independent films may have influenced previously reluctant film goers to attend the Sundance Film Festival. Regardless of the specific mechanisms that increased attendance during this period, by the late 1990s independent cinema and the Sundance Film Festival had become popular and fashionable. As result,

more people were attending the Sundance Film Festival and more films that were screened at the festival found distribution and box office success.

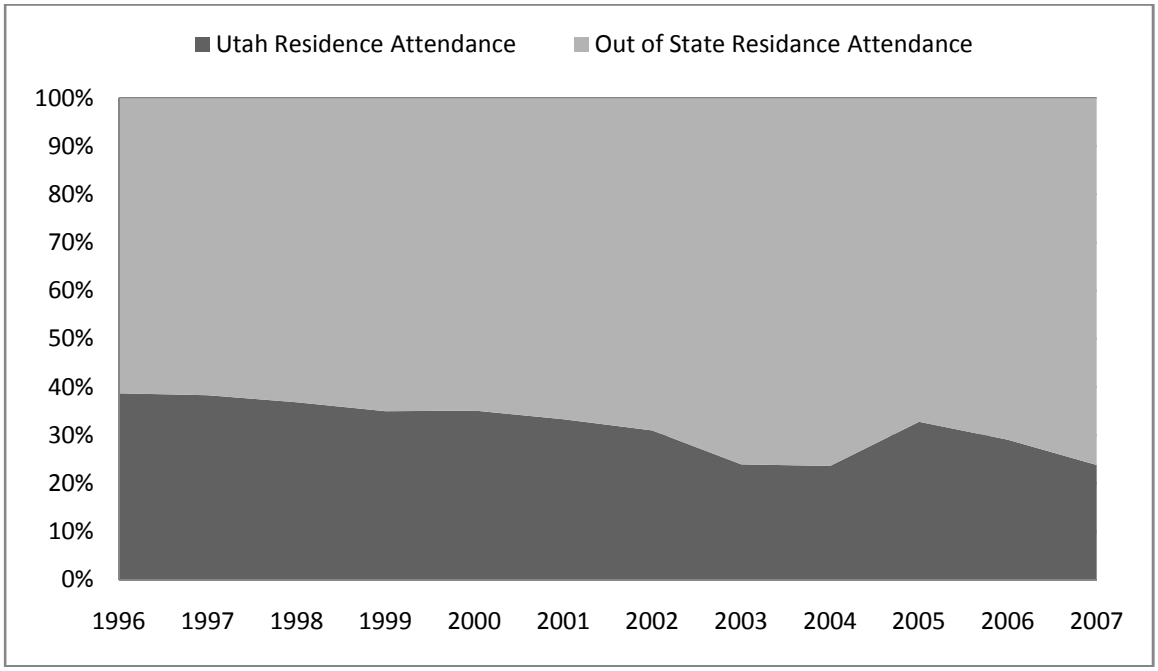

Figure 5: In-state and out-of-state attendance from 1996 to 2007.
Source: Author's calculation (2009).

When the Sundance Film Festival started keeping actual attendance numbers in 1996, the festival also began keeping track of in-state and out-of-state attendance. Although the Sundance Film Festival generates a lot of in-state support, most who attend the film festival come from outside the state of Utah. As Figure 5 illustrates, about 40% of festival attendees came from Utah in 1996, which is highest proportion of in-state attendance for a given Sundance Film Festival. In-state attendance has dropped in proportion to out-of-state attendance continually from 1996 to 2004. Figure 5 also shows that in 2005 there was an increase in Utah resident in proportion to out-of-state attendance but in-state attendance dropped again the following year and Utah resident

attendance has continued to fall through the 2007 festival in proportion to out-of-state attendance.

While the proportion of in-state attendance has fallen in respect to out-of-state festival attendance, the amount of in-state festival attendance has grown every year except for the 2002 festival. Festival attendance had grown steadily from 1996 to 2001 but in 2002 total attendance was down about 2,000 attendees. However, festival attendance rebounded the following year recording highs for both in-state and out-of-state attendance. In 2004, attendance dropped again slightly but then rebounded in 2005 and set all time highs for in-state and out-of-state attendance during the 2006 festival. Although, on the surface in-state verses out-of-state attendance does not directly inform us about the commodification of the festival, it does suggest that the festival is able to generate an economy that is of great benefit to the State of Utah in that the Sundance Film Festival is able to bring external income generating more than $63 million in total economic activity in 2008 alone (Means 2009a). The average festival attendee spends more than $1,400 during the festival and those from out of the state of Utah stay for 6 days (Sundance Institute 2007).

DISTRIBUTION

As illustrated by Figure 6, from 1992 to 2008 there has been a dramatic rise in the amount of submissions to the Sundance Film Festival but the number of films screened at the festival has remained fairly constant. In 2008 there were close to 9,000 films that were submitted to the Sundance Film Festival. With the exception of the 2002 film

festival, from 1998 to 2008, every proceeding festival has experienced an increase in the number of submissions.

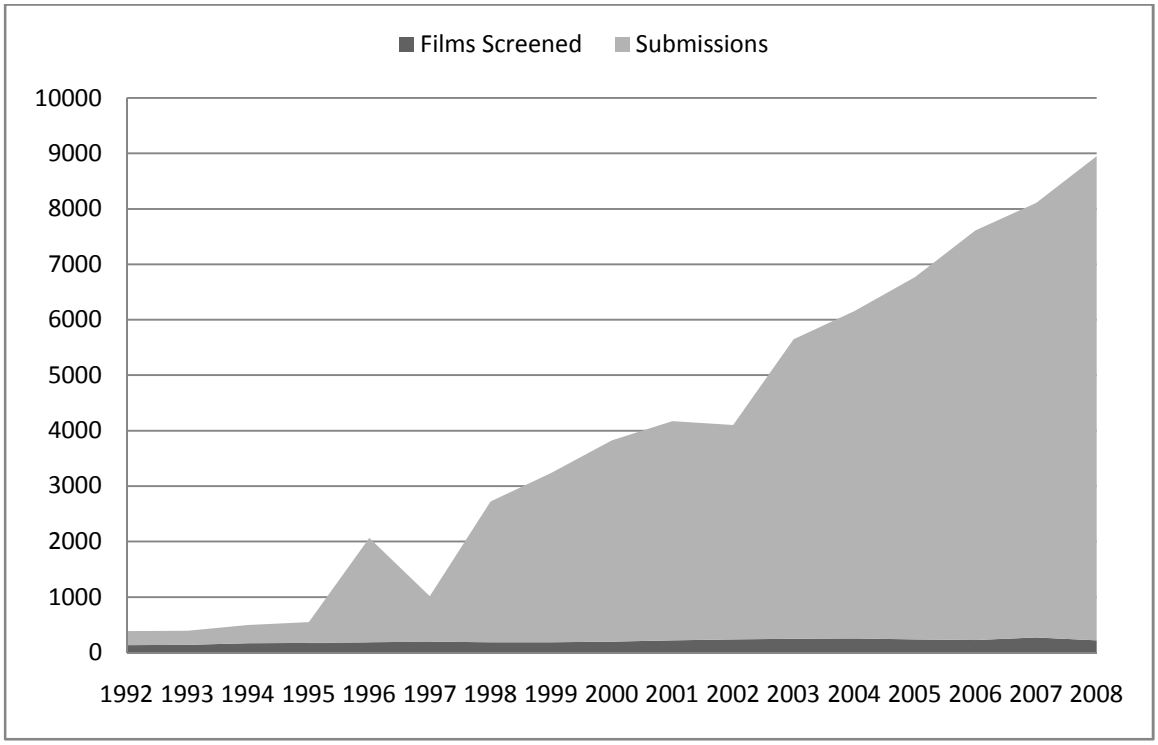

Figure 6: Yearly submissions compared to films screened from 1992 to 2008. Source: Author's calculation (2009).

While analyzing the level of festival attendance and participation of filmmakers can indicate the general popularity of the Sundance Film Festival, trying to determine the level of cooptation requires market information that the festival does not keep track of. The Sundance Film Festival does not keep track of which screened films are acquired for distribution. While it would be ideal to compare films that were acquired by studio and distribution companies to those films that were not picked up, time and financial restrictions prohibited a full analysis. However, this study looks at the level of distribution from Sundance Award Winners. While it cannot be said whether winning an award at the Sundance Film Festival increases the likelihood of being acquired for

distribution, using the Sundance Award Winners as a sample population is valid in that award winners are supposed to represent the best the festival has to offer.

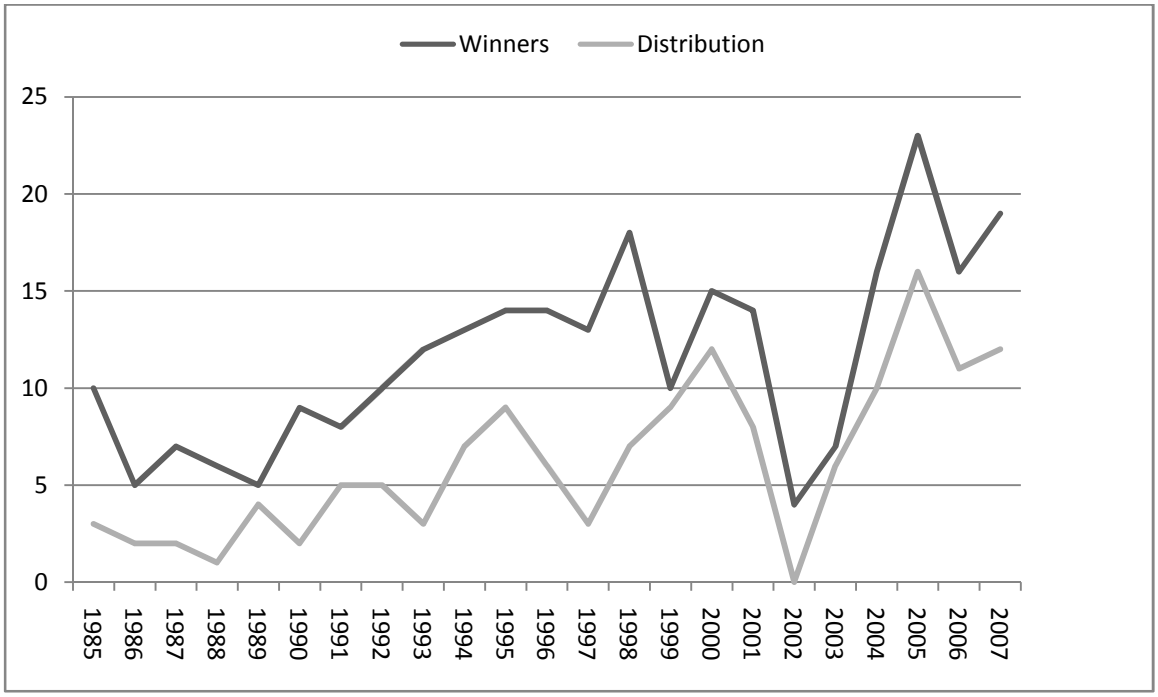

Figure 7: Number of festival award winners and films acquired for distribution from 1985 to 2007.
Source: Author's calculation (2009).

The amount of awards given at the Sundance Film Festival fluctuates from year to year. In 1985 there were 10 awards given and out of the 10 award winners, 3 films were acquired for distribution. From 1985 to 1990 there were a total of 42 films to win Sundance awards and out of those 42 films 14 of them were acquired for distribution, approximately 33%. From 1991 to 1998 there were 102 films to win Sundance awards and 45 of the award winners were picked up for distribution, approximately 44%. From 1999 to 2008 there have been 124 films to win Sundance awards and 84 of those films were acquired for distribution, about 68%. From these numbers it can be argued that the amount of Sundance award winners finding distribution has grown substantially in

comparison to past Sundance Film Festival winners in that the ratio of Sundance award winners from 2002 to 2007 securing distribution is substantially larger than previous Sundance Film Festivals. This might be a result of the increase acceptability and popularity of independent films as the data on Sundance Film Festival attendance indicates. Furthermore, more studios have been involved in the Sundance Film Festival which has increased their exposure to Sundance films.

Prior to the 2000 Sundance Film Festival, no more than 9 award winning films in a given year found major distribution. However, from 2004 onward, there have never been fewer than 10 Sundance award winning films in a given year to secure distribution. There were 33 films from the 2007 Sundance Film Festival that were acquired for distribution and seven other films that had secured distribution before they were screened at the festival. Generally, independent films can be acquired at a small fraction of the cost to finance most studio films. The most expensive film acquired from the Sundance Film Festival was *Little Miss Sunshine* which was acquired for about 10.6 million dollars.

SPONSORSHIP

While tracking attendance and film screenings are practical ways to monitor festival growth, on the surface it does not directly inform us about the cooptation of the Sundance Film Festival. However, attendance can indicate the general acceptability and popularity of Sundance films because as more people attend Sundance screenings then there are more people watching Sundance films. Also, higher attendance levels may attract sponsors because more people are likely to see their advertisements. The more

people who attend the Sundance Film Festival then the more profitable it is for sponsors and distributors to be involved at the festival.

Tracking the level of sponsorship can be somewhat problematic because the Sundance Film Festival has not kept track of sponsorship and the festival has also frequently changed the requirements and standards for sponsorship. For example, from 1982 to 1984 the festival made no distinction between volunteers, donors, and sponsors. It has only been relatively recently that the Sundance Film Festival has made it explicitly clear to the public what corporations are official sponsors of the festival. Also, since the festival is an annual event, sponsors can change but the Sundance Film Festival and the Sundance Institute have never kept track of reoccurring sponsorship or provided descriptions of what the sponsors do. It can be argued that tracking donors of the Sundance Film Festival would be better for evaluating cooptation but it is possible for donors to receive nothing in return, whereas sponsorship guarantees some level of advertising.

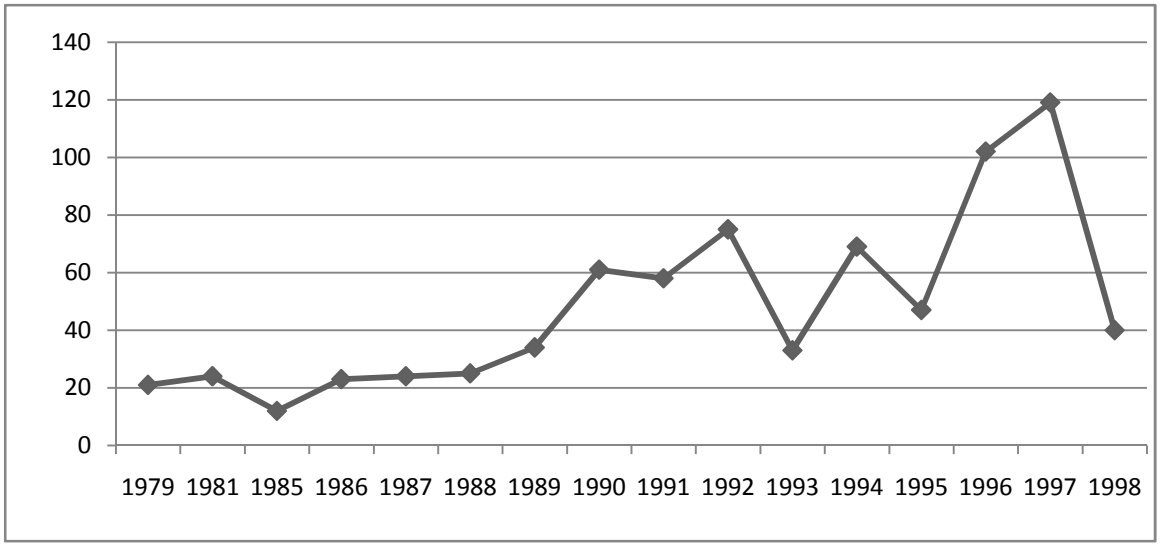

Figure 8: Yearly official sponsorship levels from 1979 to 1998.
Source: Author's calculation (2009).

Sponsorship data collected from 1979 to 1998 shows a dramatic increase in festival sponsorship after the Sundance Institute's takeover of the festival in 1985. From 1985 to 1990 the number of corporations that sponsored the film festival increased from 12 to 61. While corporate sponsorship has declined drastically following the 1997 Sundance Film Festival, the number of studios and film distribution companies has continued to grow. With the rise of corporate sponsorship, there has also been a rise in the sponsorship of studio and distribution companies such as Miramax, Fox, and Warner Bros.

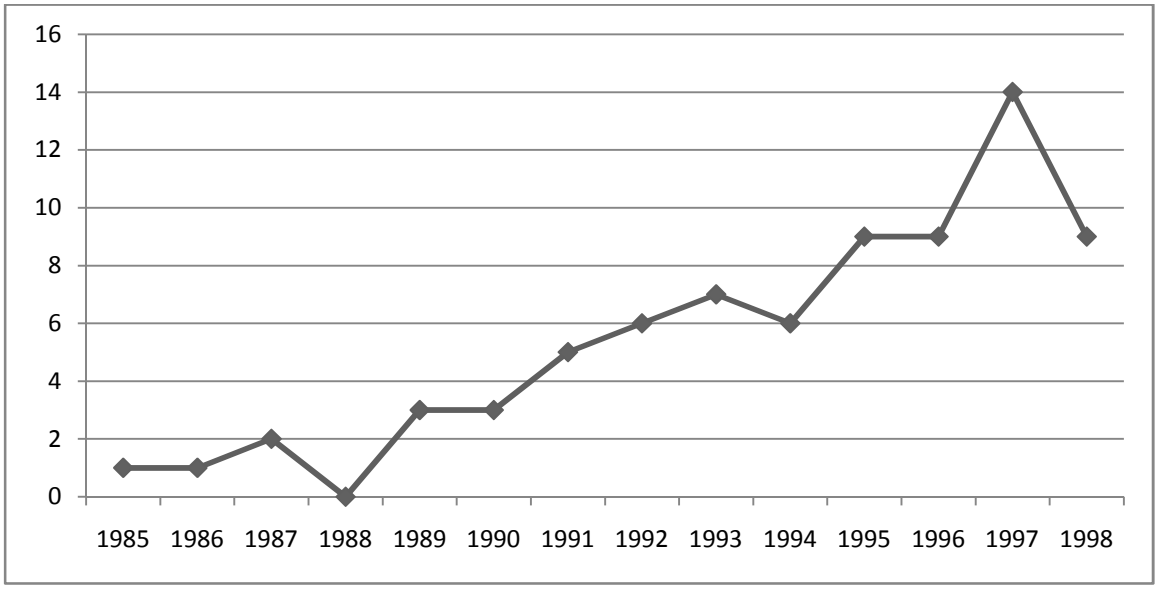

Figure 9: Number of distribution sponsors from 1985 to 1998
Source: Author's calculation (2009).

Prior to the 1988 Sundance Film Festival, Universal and Sunn Classic Pictures were the only distribution companies that sponsored the festival and neither ever picked up distribution rights to Sundance award winners. Nine years later, there were 14 major studios that sponsored the Sundance Films Festival and during the following year's festival, of the 13 feature-length films that won Sundance Awards, seven of the films

were acquired by distribution companies that sponsored the festival. Moreover, prior to the "indie-boom" of the late-1990s, a Sundance film was never financed by a production company or studio. However, during the late 1990s up to now, it has become common place to have Sundance feature films produced and financed by major studios. At the 2007 Sundance Film Festival there were seven films that had secured distribution by the time they premiered at the festival.

The sponsorship data show that corporate and distribution sponsorship may depend on market conditions that can also be contingent upon the films themselves. For example, the 1997 Sundance Film Festival recorded the highest amount of sponsorship from distribution companies up until that time but the following year the festival experienced a decline in distributor sponsorship despite a 10% increase in attendance. At the 1998 festival, as the number of sponsors declined, the number of films that were festival winners that were acquired by studios for distribution were at all time highs and many of the films were acquired by companies that were sponsors of the previous year's festival.

As a result, sponsorship levels may not directly inform us about that year's festival but rather are indicative of general tends in the popularity of the festival. However, sponsorship is also contingent on market forces outside of the film economy. For example, in tough economic times it may not be feasible for companies to invest in the Sundance Film Festival whereas during economic booms, companies may be more willing to spend money. Regardless of the specific motives behind corporate sponsorship, the number of film distribution companies sponsoring the Sundance Film Festival from 1985 to 1998 has dramatically increased. Furthermore, the rise in film

distribution companies sponsoring the Sundance Film Festival has generally grown in proportion to the amount of festival award winning films being acquired for distribution.

Most recently, some companies that are not official Sundance Film Festival sponsors chose not to advertise at the 2009 festival such as Chrysler, according to Christopher Ryan of Oceanside Entertainment, others had pulled out of sponsorship obligations months before the festival. Specifically, two of last year's Presenting Sponsors (Sundance's top-tier official sponsorship), Volkswagen and Adobe Systems, did not sponsor this year's festival (Means 2009a). However, Volkswagen's slot was filled by Honda and the festival has also attracted new sponsors including Google/YouTube, Brita, and Timberland. Furthermore, for about the last 5 years, the Sundance Film Festival has been in a position to require a three year minimum commitment from companies for certain levels of sponsorship.

QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

In this section I will draw on interviews and analysis by those who work within independent cinema and have worked with the Sundance Film Festival in an organizational capacity. The interview data that I draw upon is either from secondary sources or from interviews I have personally conducted. Although I had on numerous occasions tried to arrange an interview with Robert Redford and other Sundance Film Festival directors, I have been unsuccessful up to this point. However, the interviews I was able to conduct along with the rich information contained in interviews from secondary sources illuminates the paradoxical position of independent film as showcased by the Sundance Film Festival in relation to Hollywood studios. This section will explore how studios have been able to infiltrate the Sundance Film Festival and describe how the festival has evolved into a marketplace for independent films. Under the general research question of whether the Sundance Film Festival has been coopted by studios, this section will highlight the role of distributors, specifically Miramax, in the commodification of the Sundance Film Festival and highlight the festival's influence within the film industry. Miramax is an important studio to include in this discussion because they have been the largest acquirer of Sundance films from the late 1980s through the 1990s. This section will also discuss the importance of box office success and the significance of Sundance Film Festival awards in securing distribution for independent filmmakers.

I will begin this section by discussing the importance of marketing strategies of studios such as Miramax and the appeal of independent film in distribution. Second, I turn to the issue of Sundance being a kind of economic opportunity for studios and the

idea independent film differentiation. Third, I look at how the popularization of the Sundance Film Festival spurred industry attention and studio infiltration. Next, I highlight the significance of Sundance Film Festival awards and their implications for studio distribution. Throughout this section I repeatedly refer back to Steven Soderbergh's *sex, lies, and videotape* which won the 1989 Sundance Film Festival's audience award for best dramatic feature because of the film's profound impact on the Sundance Film Festival and the independent film industry. Soderbergh's film was the first independent production to come out of the Sundance Film Festival to be a major box office success. It was also the first major film out of Sundance that was acquired and distributed by Miramax and marketed in such a way that facilitated its crossover appeal which, established new standards in independent film acquisition and marketing. The box office success of *sex, lies, and videotape* also established the festival's reputation as the premier showcase of independent cinema and ignited massive interest in independent film. This cemented Sundance's place within the film industry as a marketplace for independent film and subsequent cooptation.

CROSSOVER APPEAL IN FILM

During the 1980s, Miramax consistently released three or four films a year that fit a certain criteria for successful mass distribution (Perren 2002). For instance, the film had to be able to be marketed as a "quality" or artistic film and Miramax preferred its films to be non-classical in that the Weinstein brothers wanted their films to be "focused on unconventional subjects and styles" (Perren 2002:31). Also, the Weinstein brothers wanted to acquire films that allow for the development of marketing hooks that would

assist Miramax in transitioning the film from the art house to the multiplex. By appealing to multiple niches and utilizing controversy as a sales strategy, the Weinstein brothers carved out a place in an "increasingly competitive marketplace and attracted the attention of producers and financiers looking for a distributor" (Perren 2002:32). Although *sex, lies, and videotape* in tandem with Miramax's marketing strategy has been credited by Biskind and Pierson for creating the indie-boom, Miramax did not have any involvement in the film until it premiered at the Sundance Film Festival. The film fit Miramax's criteria because the content of the film is far from classical in that women confess their sexual histories and anxieties on videotape in order to help the central male character satisfy himself sexually. Perren argues that the film was "timely and distinct" for "technological and social reasons" (Perren 2002:33).

Marketing has such a significant influence in whether an independent film is a blockbuster or not that Miramax's role is crucial in a film's box office success (Perren 2002). Although *sex, lies, and videotape* was initially screened for the Cannes Film Festival's main competition, it was rejected and was subsequently placed in the venue for new films from up-and-coming directors called the Director's Fortnight. However, because of a last minute cancellation from another film, *sex, lies, and videotape* was placed in the main competition but writer and director Steven Soderbergh was concerned that his film would get lost in the shuffle, particularly because it was competing against Spike Lee's high profile film *Do the Right Thing* (Perren 2002). Despite the tough competition, *sex, lies, and videotape* played to standing ovation and ended up shutting out *Do the Right Thing* for awards including the prestigious Palme d'Or, which gave the film enormous publicity (Perren 2002). A similar phenomenon played out during the

Sundance Film Festival where *sex, lies, and videotape* beat out *Do the Right Thing* for the festival's Audience Award for best dramatic feature.

Soderbergh's film, *sex, lies, and videotape* is a perfect example of how Miramax was able to package its films and ride the hype created at independent film festivals as a marketing strategy. For example, Soderbergh had developed his own trailer but Miramax rejected it, calling it "arthouse death" (Perren 2002:34). But, Soderbergh understood his trailer as containing "a mood perfectly emulating the mood of the film" and "not like any other trailer he had ever seen" (Perren 2002:34). Eventually there was a compromise reached between Miramax and Soderbergh in which Miramax used its own trailer but integrated additional footage shot by Soderbergh (Perren 2002). This suggests that although Miramax may distribute each film on its own merits, the company had certain specific ideas about what works in promoting films such as high concept but low budget films. However, to many in the film industry, Miramax's attempts to "find the high concept in low budget film" while targeting specific niches in the market was thought of as "a welcome approach" to what was then a "struggling independent film scene" (Perren 2002:36).

However, for Miramax to be able to promote and distribute independent films in a way that utilized their position in the market to their advantage, the Weinstein brothers recognized that their films had to complement and not compete with major studio projects (Perren 2002). Perren argues that Miramax "had no illusions that they could match the studios in terms of either financial investment or marketing scale" and as result Miramax had to rely on "free publicity, word of mouth, and counter programming strategies" (Perren 2002:33). Miramax opened theater distribution slowly at first building

off of positive reviews, letting the word spread over more than a six month period eventually releasing the film on about 350 screens (Perren 2002). In 1990, Steven Soderbergh returned to Sundance to find a substantially different environment and something he felt was negative (Means 2009b; Biskind 2004; Perren 2002). Soderbergh told the Associated Press that he was "concerned by what sex, lies might have wrought here" at Sundance further stating that Sundance has "become more of a film market than a film festival" and also describing the atmosphere of the Sundance Film Festival as a "gold rush" (Perren 2002:33; Means 2009b:D1). However, Soderbergh's opinion was in the minority because many working in the independent sector looked favorably at Sundance as fostering a mutually beneficial relationship in that may independent filmmakers want to be discovered and get paid for making movies and distributors want to acquire films to sale.

Few could have anticipated that ten years following Soderbergh's return to the Sundance Film Festival, the pervasive attitude at the festival would be described as "buy low, but buy dammit" because if a distributor fails to "snap up a certain movie" you might "miss out on the next 140 million dollar cash cow" (Gordinier and Nashaway 2000:20). Furthermore, Gordinier and Nashaway note that there was a sense that if distributers turn up their "nose at a trend" that the "future might pass" them by, similar to missing out on getting in on a great investment opportunity from the ground floor (Gordinier and Nashaway 2000:20). It can be argued that the indie-boom following *sex, lies, and videotape* was a result of a larger industrial shift within the film economy. Rather than *sex, lies, and videotape* being anomalous in the market, it represented a "broader structural and aesthetic changes afoot" in the film industry (Perren 2002:37).

According to Perren, the movies that were returning the most profits with the smallest risks were either: 1) high budget and high concept films with broad international appeal or 2) low budget independent films that could be targeted at a number of audiences inexpensively through festivals, word of mouth, and critical response (Perren 2002). Instead of the global expansion of the film market contributing to the demise of independent and low budget films it seems to have facilitated their growth, specifically contributing to the growth of the Sundance Film Festival.

OPPORTUNITIES AT SUNDANCE

Both Biskind and Pierson argue that the growing popularity of independent film facilitated the growth of influence that Sundance and Miramax had in the independent film industry. In 1996, Peter Biskind interviewed Grainy Pictures' president John Pierson about his book *Spike, Mike, Slackers and Dykes*, which offers an analysis of the explosive growth of independent film and the Sundance Film Festival. In the interview, Biskind asked Pierson if it was good that Miramax dominated independent distribution. Pierson replied by saying that "Miramax may have more power than other people" but that he does not "find the same amount of bullying abusiveness" that has been connected to Microsoft (Biskind 1996:28). Furthermore, Pierson argues that "in 1985, the ceiling for an indie was supposed to be $10 million then *Kiss of the Spider Woman* came along and did $17 million" (Biskind 1996:28). By the 1990s it was common for independent films to generate box office successes. As independent films gained popularity the expectations and standards of success were also adjusted. By the early 1990s many independent films were making over $10 million at the box office, *The Piano* made about

$28 million and *The Crying Game* generated about $63 million, both illustrating mainstream interest in independent film (Box Office Mojo 2008). Biskind argues that the ultimate culmination of this evolution can be seen in the phenomenon of *Pulp Fiction*, the first off-off-Hollywood film to top $100 million (Biskind 1996:28). The consequence of this rapid success of independent films and the Sundance Film Festival is that "it unfortunately gives further credence to this idea of quantifying everything according to how much business it does" (Biskind 1996:28). Additionally, Pierson argues that "audiences become more obsessed with keeping up with the huge hit of the moment rather than with casting a wider net and checking out a lot of different films, which was traditionally the case with the off-Hollywood audience" (Biskind 1996:28).

Furthermore, Pierson argues in *Spike, Mike, Slackers, and Dykes* that the last movie to break out of Sundance in a big way without the benefit of Hollywood big names or industry connections was Kevin Smith's 1994 comedy *Clerks* (Pierson 1997). Pierson argues that the days when Hollywood could come to the Sundance Film Festival and snatch up a film like *sex, lies and videotape* or *Reservoir Dogs* for practically pennies on the dollar are long gone. In contrast to Biskind, Pierson argues that "instead of blaming Sundance for becoming this monolith, you really have to look at all the other parties, press, all media, distributors, the other various and sundry agents, for essentially ceding all their power to Sundance" (Means 2004:D1). Pierson also argues that Hollywood studio infiltration of the Sundance Film Festival "wasn't an invasion, and it wasn't an unfriendly takeover" but that "step by step, company by company, they decided to let Sundance decide what the cream of the crop was" (Means 2004:D1).

Biskind is far more critical than Pierson with regards to the current state of independent film and the role of the Sundance Film Festival. Biskind argues that the "disconnect between appearance, as it is presented in the media, and the reality of what actually occurs behind the scenes is as great in Hollywood as it is in Washington, if not greater" (Horgan 2004:D1 para. 4). Furthermore, throughout *Down and Dirty Pictures: Miramax, Sundance, and the Rise of Independent Film*, Biskind repeatedly describes situations where Redford has sabotaged independent productions and depicts Harvey Weinstein as the Suge Knight of cinema and Miramax as resembling Death Row Records in the company's acquisition and negotiation strategies. Biskind notes that back in 1989 when Weinstein acquired Steven Soderbergh's *sex, lies, and videotape* he was himself just another struggling independent. However, through the years, Weinstein now has ten years of bankrolled Disney financing which have been poured into increasingly less independent-like projects such as Cold Mountain that operated on a lofty $79 million budget (Box Office Mojo 2008). With Redford and Weinstein dominating the independent film industry, Biskind argues that the pair has turned the Sundance Film Festival into a glorified business rather than a showcase for independent cinema. Furthermore, Biskind explicitly states that Weinstein through Miramax not only is responsible for transforming the distribution business but also "brokered a marriage of indie and mainstream that resulted in a novel kind of picture that did more than just cross over; it exchanged DNA with commercial movies" (Biskind 2004:470)

Perren argues that independent films are attractive for distributors because they easily lend themselves to the rhetoric of quality. Being able to label a film as "sophisticated" enables distributors to market it as something "special" rather than as an

industry product. Perren argues that companies like Miramax could take terms such as "independent," "quality," "specialty," and "sophisticated" and utilize them as points of distinction (Perren 2002). This was further perpetuated that in the late 1980s in that studios were frequently portrayed in the media as "ever expanding monoliths" that were "cranking out cookie-cutter sequels with excessive action and minimal plots" (Perren 2002:38). In this light, because independent films can be described by the rhetoric of quality, they situate themselves apart from industry products and thus reach those that are turned off by mainstream products.

However, at the same time Miramax described their independent films as something different from Hollywood pictures, they also portrayed their films as what Hollywood offers and more, containing more sex, violence, and risky content. Such a marketing strategy helped Miramax and other low budget distributors "carve out a financially lucrative and aesthetically viable space" (Perren 2002:38). Examples of this include *Pulp Fiction* (1994), *Good Will Hunting* (1997), and *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1999). Although, *sex, lies, and videotape* generated about $25 million in its US theatrical release and created new standards and expectations for Sundance films, it generated a small sum compared to the $80 million plus made by other independent films mentioned above (Box Office Mojo 2008). However, from an industrial standpoint *Pulp Fiction*, *Good Will Hunting*, and *The Talented Mr. Ripley* are independent films and aesthetically, their independence is questionable because of their large production budgets and ties to studios (Perren 2002). Independent films increasingly are employing established stars and talent which has complicated and blurred the idea of what distinguishes an independent film from a Hollywood studio production. Perren argues

that the idea of independence is a "discursive tool employed by the press and the industry" (Perren 2002:38). In a sense, what can be observed is that the notion of independent film has been commodified and coopted by market institutions such as studios to expand their customer base.

The idea of "independent" film was introduced to the press during the late 1980s as a descriptive label to explain the structural and aesthetic changes in the Hollywood film industry (Perren 2002). However, by the mid 1990s, the term no longer held any definitional value although the press continued to celebrate independent filmmakers and distributers as if they were "guerillas and renegades fighting Evil Hollywood" (Perren 2002:38). The 1995 Oscars highlighted independent film as requiring legitimate industry consideration and also highlighted how the market place had changed. That year the Oscars were referred to as "the year of the independents" because four relatively low budget independent films, *The English Patient*, *Breaking Waves*, *Fargo*, and *Shine* were all nominated for best picture (Biskind 2004). The only studio nomination for Best Picture in 1995 was *Jerry Maguire*. However, the irony in this "year of independence" was that all of the independent films nominated for Best Picture were released by subsidiaries of major media corporations. However, this phenomenon was largely ignored until Miramax tried to promote *Shakespeare in Love* (1998) as an independent film which led to a significant portion of the press openly questioning the use of the term "independent" (Perren 2002). Labeling a project as an "independent film" seems to be more of a marketing strategy rather than an accurate description of the production of a certain film. Furthermore, the concept of independent film seems to no longer describe any specific style or kind of cinema but rather has more to do with identifying the

location of exhibition and the number of theatres providing screenings for the film in question.

POPULARIZATION AND ATTENTION

Today with so many industry players trying to cash in on independent films and the highly competitive environment of the independent market, newer filmmakers and independent distributors struggle to find a place in the market (Perren 2002). The industry is now dominated by a combination of studios releasing big budget films and specialty distributors handling the majority of niche films, truly independent distributors are fighting to acquire films and secure available screens. This is manifest by many influential independent distributors succumbing to market pressures either being acquired by Hollywood studio parent companies or have simply gone out of business. Today there is a much more competitive and uncertain environment for filmmakers outside of the Hollywood studio system. As Miramax led the way in transforming industry aesthetics, economics, and structure, the company is now a vital part of the system.

Sundance has also evolved, heavily influencing the independent film market and becoming part of hegemonic film industry and culture industry. The Sundance Film Festival became a site for distributors to acquire films and demanded the attention of the entire film industry because Sundance displayed the potential to produce box office successes on marginal production budgets, thus providing greater potential profits. However, the greatest distinguishing characteristic of the Sundance Film Festival is in its ability to consistently produce box office successes. Anthony Scotts (alias), a film critic for an independent newspaper, has covered the Sundance Film Festival for over 10 years

says that "what distinguishes it [Sundance] is that it's the player, you know, it sort of has the ability to exert that power a little bit in the sense that if you, you know, if you've made an independent film and you want it to get noticed you want it to be at Sundance" (Author interview 2009). Scotts went on to say that Sundance "became the place where you had to go and take a look at things if, you know, if you were a distributor in this field this is where you had to go because a lot of things were coming out of this festival that were kind of becoming, if not, you know, huge box office hits" (Author interview 2009).

In a sense, the incentive for distributors to acquire Sundance films preceded what can be observed as a media circus or heightened commercialization that literally lends itself to being coopted by Hollywood studios. Scotts argues that as the Sundance Film Festival became an important industry event "it became an important event for the film press to attend so that the coverage increased and because Sundance sort of capitalized on that and realized, well this is a chance to also to, when you have all this attention, you bring in the premiers and you bring in films that actually have stars in them then you're going to get more attention and you're also going to get more attendance" (Author interview 2009). This description highlights how the commodification of the Sundance Film Festival is perpetual and feeds on itself in the sense that as the festival screens movies that lend themselves to certain market strategies that become popular the more people attend the festival and as the more people attend the more media attention is devoted to the festival which in turn makes it a favorable place for industry players to be seen, promote, and advertise.

It is within this space of high commercialization and preconceived marketing strategies that has affected the types of films and possibly the content of films that are

screened at the Sundance Film Festival. Scotts suggests that the heightened commercialization of the Sundance Film Festival has given rise to alternative festivals. When asked about films that had been unfairly rejected by Sundance, Scotts responded by saying that it is "why Slamdance was created was because you had a lot of filmmakers that thought we're making things, Sundance is getting too commercial they're looking for stars, they're not looking for these first-time filmmaker you know that's made on my credit card kind of movies so they were going to be the alternative to that" (Author interview 2009). Furthermore, Scotts argues that Sundance as a marketplace is not necessarily negative in that it allows for future Sundance films to be produced. For Scotts, the Sundance Film Festival's facilitation of film acquisition by Hollywood studios is performed

> …to the extent that they have an industry office and they make sure that there is a way for film buyers to get in touch with publicists. But I think there is this misguided sense of purity whereby you really made this artistic film if nobody sees it. And I think the point of a festival like Sundance should be finding something that's worth seeing, worth an audience finding in the lighter world, and getting it out to that audience. So, if you don't have a means by which a distributor can find out how what it's going to cost them to buy the film and show it to the rest of the country and the rest of the world. You know you have 10 days of movies that will show there and then never be seen again and I just a huge waste, I think you want to support these filmmakers and give them a chance to make their next movie and they're not going to do that without money. So the idea that there's this fantasy world in which money is completely removed from the equation is just that a fantasy. And not only that, it's one that is also damaging to what you want to do if you're try to support film as an art form. What you have to do is get people to see and support the good. (Author interview, 2009).

Scotts makes an interesting point when he brings up the notion of purity because it raises the question of what distinguishes an independent film or specifically, a

Sundance film from a Hollywood studio production. As mentioned earlier, the Sundance Film Festival is distinguished from other films festivals by the amount of power and influence it has on the larger film economy. Biskind among others have argued that at least "historically, independents have defined themselves against Hollywood" (Biskind 2000:32, para. 2). However, as filmmaker Kevin Smith illustrates in a 2000 interview, the notion of an authentic and pure independent film has always been problematic because "independent cinema is a myth" in that "it was always kind of weird when people went, yeah, you're an 'indie,' with the exception of *Clerks*, I've always made studio films, *Mallrats* for Universal, *Chasing Amy* and *Dogma* for Miramax, which is now a studio" (Biskind 2000:32, para. 6). Furthermore, Christine Vachon, producer of *Boys Don't Cry,* echoes a similar notion as Smith and states:

> I'm wondering if "independent" ever really did mean anything, you know? When I started producing ten or twelve years ago, an independent film was essentially a movie that you managed to finance by conning your friends and relatives into giving you money for [it], and all the so-called independent films I worked on were some kind of permutation of that, like *Parting Glances* or the first film I produced, *Poison*. I guess independence was supposed to mean free from any kind of creative control. But it's very rare these days that any money is "free." Whether it's the studio telling you that you have to put a star in or an equity financier telling you that you have to put a star in, they're still both saying it. So what difference does it make if that money is coming from New Line or if it's coming from Paramount or if it's coming from Joe Blow? Somebody wants to get their money back. (Biskind 2000:34, para. 7)

Vachon's argument about money is similar to Renshaw's in that money has a standardizing affect for film that ultimately makes differentiated films the same but also establishes a universal standard that allows differentiated products to be compared such as box office success. Steven Soderbergh in commentary on the *sex, lies, and videotape* DVD not only acknowledged his film's role in extending the Hollywood box office

rational to independent and Sundance films but also described securing a studio production budget of over a million dollars for the supposedly independent *sex, lies, and videotape* (Soderbergh 1999). This highlights the validity of Kevin Smith's notion of independent film being mythical in that studios and distributors are able to get in on independent projects on multiple different levels including financing. Furthermore, once independent projects are complete they in turn naturally lend themselves to marketing strategies involving crossover appeal.

SUNDANCE FILM FESTIVAL AWARDS

The Sundance Film Festival has become a powerful and influential cultural institution for film not only because it has produced successful films but also because by virtue of the festival giving an award to a film, it increases the likelihood of that film securing distribution. Randolph Torris (alias) who heads an independent film society and provides venues and year round screenings for Sundance Film Festival says that when evaluating what films to exhibit, the film society bases their decisions on the values of their mission statement. Those "core values are: Does the film have artistic merit? Does it have a festival awards history? Does it have critical merit? And does it serve a community need? And we stick to those core values when we're programming" (Author interview 2009). Torris goes on to clarify that distribution and exhibition of independent film is evaluated in the following context:

> Does it have a festival track record, has it been on the radar of other independent film artists, you know, does it have some sort of pedigree behind it in other words, you know, is it a foreign director that we've all known about and that this film only went to Berlin and fell off the face of the Earth and never got a distributor but we feel that the content is really kind of speaks to what is on Utahans minds right now, then we would

> pursue a film like that. You can't always get them. Sometimes it's just a matter of you pursue it and the director doesn't own his rights or the distributor isn't interested in selling you the film and you have to beg over and over and over again and promise that it's worth their time to even bother to take your telephone call but you pursue them at any rate. (Author interview 2009)

This provides the Sundance Film Festival enormous influence in determining the fate of independent films in that if the festival does not award a particular film with an award the film's chance of securing distribution and screenings is diminished. A film that fails to win a Sundance Film Festival award is not doomed to never be seen but as Torris illustrates, it is easier for exhibitors to screen films that have a successful festival history. This highlights how the Sundance Film Festival works in tandem with distributors to disseminate a particular kind of film that lends itself to be conceptualized within a preexisting market structure. Torris also argues that the Sundance Film Festival has radically changed recently:

> [I]t changed recently in the last 10 years or so in that Hollywood distribution companies essentially became the parent company of a lot of independent distributors. And therefore they weren't necessarily allowing for the creative thinking in terms of business models and or protections of the filmmaker or themselves as distributors or the exhibitor at all and you know what happened is that trend has led to the many distributors who have a parent company tending to follow too close to the business model as the parent company. And that doesn't always work when you're talking about an independent distribution model. Sometimes what gets lost in the shuffle is the artist or the filmmaker themselves or the really good film that somebody maybe doesn't think is marketable and therefore you know, pulled from the list of being able to spend the marketing money on and kind of a little bit loss of creativity on how to expose communities to individual films. (Author interview 2009)

Within this framework, film that is presented as independent and authentic art is diminished and marginalized as film as commodity increasingly becomes adopted by

alternative venues for film such as the Sundance Film Festival and other sources of independent film. This can be seen in the problematic distinctions between Sundance films and Hollywood productions. This is also evident in the necessity for filmmakers to acquire distribution for their films and that distribution options have been consolidated by Hollywood studios. Furthermore, this consolidation of distribution power has allowed Hollywood studio distributors to infiltrate and coopt the Sundance Film Festival from multiple positions including financing, distribution acquisitions, and thus creating hegemony within the film industry that compulsively reinforces an ideal type of film that is defined by marketability.

CONCLUSION

Twenty years ago *sex, lies, and videotape* sparked an independent film boom that secured the recognition of the Sundance Film Festival by popular culture. It is now common place to have films come out of the Sundance Film Festival and be nominated for Academy Awards, Golden Globes, and to have commercial success. However, as the Sundance Film Festival has grown in influence, size, and attendance, it has also succumbed to influences of market forces. In a recent interview on the 2009 Sundance Film Festival, Robert Redford said he would not be troubled if the festival experienced lower attendance because the focus of the festival should be about the films (Means 2009a). However, there have been major changes in the independent film marketplace compared to previous years. In 2008, Warner Bros. eliminated three of its independent film divisions: Warner Independent, Picturehouse, and New Line. Also, ThinkFilm and the distribution branch of the Yari Film Group have recently filed for bankruptcy.

The Sundance Film Festival has created a pathway for independent filmmakers to have their work distributed to the masses. Not only do festival screenings ensure an audience for a particular film but the opportunity to secure distribution as a result of festival performance has increased in tandem to the festival's growth. Prior to Sundance taking over the film festival in 1985, not one film was acquired for major distribution. Since the Sundance Institute took over the film festival, there have been 32 Grand Jury Prize winners for dramatic feature and documentary to be acquired for distribution up to the 2007 festival. Furthermore, the data indicates that the probability of a film securing distribution increases if the film receives a Sundance Film Festival award. In a way Sundance way seems to be a significant influence in what films are acquired for

distribution. It can be argued that the festival's preference of *sex, lies, and videotape* over *Do the Right Thing* was in part because the former was more market friendly. Whereas *Do the Right Thing* confronted issues of racial conflict and community action, *sex, lies, and videotape* portrays a generation of white alienated slackers and underachievers that is still very much in vogue in current cinema (Pineapple Express among every Kevin Smith and Wes Anderson film, just to mention a few). In this light, films that resist objectification and commodification are less likely to be screened at the Sundance Film Festival and therefore less likely to be acquired by a Hollywood studio for distribution.

The data presented above highlights that since the conception of the Sundance Film Festival, the festival has transformed from a small struggling festival on the margins of the film industry to a premier showcase of independent film that draws the attention of the entire film market. The data indicates that the Sundance Film Festival is an influential institution for independent film but the data is limited in that it does not determine the significance of festival awards on possible distribution acquisition because correlations between festival award winners and non-award winners to distribution were not analyzed. With the ability to draw on data collected from all Sundance Film Festival movies a comparison can be made regarding award winners to acquisition patterns which will help quantify the level of influence the Sundance Film Festival has in the larger independent marketplace. However, the data illustrates how Hollywood studios have been able to assimilate and disseminate genuinely authentic cultural projects, such as Sundance Film Festival movies, as a commodity through festival sponsorship and acquisition.

Furthermore, the data presented here indicates that there has been an increase in studio involvement on multiple levels such as acquisition, distribution, and sponsorship. Additionally, more Sundance Film Festival award winners are acquired now than in the past, which indicates that the institutional influence of Sundance in determining what films get distributed has grown. The growing number of films that come out of Sundance that secure distribution by Hollywood studios also reflects the growing demand, popularity, and acceptability of independent cinema. There may have been a stigma against independent film prior to the 1990s. Interview participants indicated that there was a common public belief that independent film was boring or not as entertaining as studio productions. However, such stereotypes no longer seem to have as much influence on the current movie-going public.

Sundance films have also proven to perform well at the box-office especially when one considers that they are produced on a small fraction of a typical Hollywood studio production budget. However, there is a risk that Sundance becomes another "academy" in that while it prides itself on its progressive view of film it rewards in a certain way that it creates new norms that are not mutually exclusive of the Hollywood studio system and therefore further perpetuates the marginalization of truly independent cinema. If a studio budget, cast of well known actors and actresses, industry buzz, and secured distribution prior to the festival increases the likelihood of screening than filmmakers without those kinds of resources are left out. This is abundantly clear from the data that illustrates the dramatic rise in submissions while the level of screenings at the Sundance Film Festival has remained fairly constant. The data also indicates that there has been substantial growth in the amount of studio involvement with regards to

sponsorship and having agents present at the festival in order to secure acquisition deals. This creates an environment where independent filmmaking at the Sundance Film Festival is seen as a pathway to future studio production. The independent filmmaker that does not desire to be acquired or appropriated by a studio will likely be marginalized at the festival because the institutional operations of Sundance privilege studio acquisition. Thus, the pragmatic purpose of the Sundance Film Festival is to showcase a certain kind of filmmaker that can work within a studio system so that they can be signed by a studio. This gives credence to the idea that the Sundance Film Festival is a site for emerging studio filmmakers.

The nature of independent cinema, specifically the kinds of film that is exhibited at the Sundance Film Festival, has changed radically. Over the course of 30 years, production budgets have "gone through the roof," and more big-name stars are being attached to independent projects (Clinton 1999:para. 2). Aside from the changes in what goes into a Sundance film, what has been the most troubling is that many Hollywood studios now own so-called "independent studios" and those "independent studios" have to ultimately have to answer to their parent company with regards to content and marketing. The Sundance Film Festival has remand silent on this problem of conflict of interest while they are in position to give voice to truly independent filmmakers. Furthermore, the Sundance Film Festival has perpetuated this conflict of interest by facilitating deals for studios in acquiring independent films. This needs to stop and the Sundance Film Festival needs to start showcasing truly independent film that is not financed by studios and has big-name stars. The Sundance Film Festival needs to exhibit cinema that is not attached to Hollywood studios, large production budgets, A-list stars,

or major distributors. Jodie Foster says that “independents have changed….It used to be like guerrilla warfare out there, looking for money and inventing new actors and seeing new discoveries….That changed pretty radically after 'Pulp Fiction,' they saw if you had stars in the movie, and you paid them nothing, you could make tremendous profits” (Clinton 1999:para. 3). The implication of these radical changes is that studios and distributors could commercially produce an independent film with Hollywood stars that could open in a lot of theaters and therefore make a lot of money.

While it may seem that there is a plethora of independent outlets for films that is really not the case. Miramax is now owned by Disney, Gramercy Pictures and October Releasing is owned by Universal Studios, Sony Classics, as the name suggests is owned by Sony Studios, and Fine Line and New Line are owned by Time Warner. As independent cinema has become popular, many studios and distribution companies have taken notice of the potential profits of independent films such as those that are exhibited at the Sundance Film Festival. William H. Macy argues that “making the film is only half the battle, the other half is you've got to get it distributed…That's when you have to form a pact with the big guys” (Clinton 1999:para. 17). Macy further argues that the term “independent” has become generic in that “last year at Sundance a lot of people were saying, 'independents my butt, that's Miramax, that's not independent, they've got money up the wazoo'… .And the people who had gone to their grandmothers and all their friends to raise the $150,000 they made their film with, they're going, 'It's not fair that we're competing with these guys” (Clinton 1999:para. 17).

The term “independent” does not seem to mean much anymore and the Sundance Film Festival is in the best position to do something about it because of the festival has

substantial influence on the film community. There have been numerous films that have called themselves independent that never premiered at an independent film festival and never had to compete for distribution. For example, *Elizabeth* (Gramercy Pictures), *Waking Ned Devine* (Fox Searchlight) and *Shakespeare In Love* (Miramax) all claimed to be independents but were all financed by studios (Clinton 1999). Actress Gina Gershon has appeared in small independent films such as *Bound* in 1996 and in *Guinevere,* which was in the dramatic competition at the 1999 Sundance Film Festival, she argues that "independent film has always been a cool thing, although the lines seem to be getting blurred now….You go to movies, you don't know what's the big studio film or what the independent film is" (Clinton 1999:para. 26). The Sundance Film Festival can remedy many of these problems by clearly defining what independent film is and not allowing films attached to studios or projects with distribution already in place. Furthermore, the Sundance Film Festival can commit to showcasing innovative cinema and social justice films that differ radically in content from studio productions.

According to the Motion Picture Association of America, worldwide box office sales grew by nearly 13% between 2004 and 2008, up to $28.1 billion from $24.9 billion (Motion Picture Association of America 2008). However, during the same period, the US domestic box office increased by only 6.2%, to $9.8 billion from $9.2 billion (Motion Picture Association of America 2008). While the growth of domestic box office revenues may not seem substantial, it is the highest total in history and up 6.8% from 1999 when it was at $7.3 billion (Motion Picture Association of America 2008). However, domestic theater admissions were $1.4 billion in 2008, which was down 2.6% from 2007 but movie ticket sales have been fairly flat the past 10 years (Motion Picture Association of

America 2008). The increase in domestic box office revenue can be explained by the increase in ticket prices. From 2007 to 2008 the average movie ticket increased about 30 cents from $6.88 to $7.18 but from 1999 to 2008 there has been about a 30% rise in the average ticket price (Motion Picture Association of America 2008).

Between 1993 and 2006, the average cost of movie production more than doubled to $65.8 million from $29.9 million, reflecting the blockbuster or event film model of rising fees for star talent and special effects but the full cost of a studio film in 2006 topped $100 million when the $34.5 million for marketing is included in the budget (Rosen 2008). During this same period, Hollywood studios adopted a release strategy for the promotion of overpriced blockbusters that systematically increased the number of theaters for the opening weekend to maximize marketing efforts and profits (Rosen 2008). Between 1999 and 2008, the total number of films released domestically increased about 23%, up to 610 theatrical releases from 471 theatrical releases. However, over the same period non-studio theatrical film releases increased by more than 42% and now almost triple the amount of studio releases (Motion Picture Association of America 2008). This is a substantial shift in the theatrical film marketplace considering that in 1985, the first year the Sundance Institute took over operations of the Sundance Film Festival that non-studio films accounted for only 43% of all releases, now non-studio releases account for more than 73% of all theatrical releases (Motion Picture Association of America 2008; Rosen 2008).

The above factors such as, flattening box office revenues, Hollywood's increased reliance on blockbusters or event films, and new marketing strategies highlight major shifts in the film economy. As more expensive but fewer blockbusters are being

promoted at more theaters there is an accompanied increased reliance on independent films to make up the difference. This provides a unique opportunity for independent cinema such as films that come out of the Sundance Film Festival to find new audiences and filmmakers. Since the Sundance Film Festival plays an important role in generating attention and critical recognition for films, there should be a renewed commitment to discovering new talent and artistic independent projects. The Sundance Film Festival should also invest a concerted effort in promoting not only social justice films that depart from the Hollywood norm but also practice a kind of institutional justice that cultivates new filmmakers through workshops that target low-income and minority youth. There are too many films that depict a white yuppie perspective. Although independent cinema continues to grow there is still a lack of new African American and other marginalized voices in film. The Sundance Film Festival and the Sundance Institute needs to invest more time in discovering new artists rather than bridging independents to studios. As suggested by the Motion Picture Association of America figures, studios are playing less of a role in the film economy and Sundance must recognize that it is in position to cultivate a new kind of market that privileges art and social justice over corporate profit.

RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

This research highlights the highly competitive environment for independent film screening and distribution at the Sundance Film Festival. The ability for studios to sponsor the festival, acquire, and finance films simultaneously perpetuates the marginalization of films not tied to studios at the Sundance Film Festival. The competition aspect of the festival creates an environment where studios have substantial power and influence, which is the opposite of what an "independent" film festival should be. As result, Sundance needs to restrict the multiple ways studios are involved with the Sundance Film Festival. For example, if a studio has financed a particular film that same studio should not be allowed to sponsor the festival. Policies should be implemented that limit conflicts of interest. Sundance also needs to implement a policy that encourages the film selection committee to analyze the level of studio involvement in films submitted to the Sundance Film Festival. Films that are produced independent of Hollywood studio assistance should have priority with regards to screenings and receiving festival awards. Furthermore, Sundance should also give priority to films that enter the Sundance Film Festival without distribution in place.

Nonetheless, the analysis that is presented here advances the discussion on the commodification of cultural production and differentiation from the mass production of Hollywood studios. Furthermore, this research highlights the how the dissemination of independent films is problematic because independent filmmakers are dependent on studios distribution. Like Horkheimer and Adorno's argument on the centralization of cultural production, within the film industry, distribution is costly and requires a vast amount of capital that makes it problematic for any single independent filmmaker to

solidify an endeavor to distribute their production themselves. Therefore, distribution is a business affair that is irrelevant to film as art itself in that access to the means of distribution are located within the hegemony of the culture industry and specifically within the system of Hollywood studios, which treats the question of what gets distributed as a business matter and not a matter of art or social justice. When film as business triumphs over film as art and social justice the distribution of independent films is turned into a kind of investment for profit and Sundance can be seen as a marketplace of value-commodities. This creates an environment where institutions with access to distribution do not so much as consider the value of the film itself but turns independent films into a fetish. Furthermore, public access to particular films is determined by the cost of studio acquisition being weighed against the ceiling for potential profit, this removes value from the quality in a particular film to a matter of institutions extracting value from the film.

The Sundance Film Festival can do a lot to resolve some of the conflicts regarding studio cooptation of independent film. Sundance can use its channel and outlet relations to exhibit festival films before they are acquired and to showcase quality films that are not distributed. Furthermore, Sundance needs to rethink and clarify its purpose and mission. Currently the festival seems to functions kind of like a talent scout for studios and as a bridge from do-it-yourself filmmaking to studio production. This directly facilitates studio commodification and cooptation of independent film. Rather than helping studios take over independent projects, the Sundance Film Festival should consider acting as an alternative to Hollywood studios. Through the Sundance Institute and festival, Sundance is able to assist independent filmmakers in the development and

promotion of their films. The Sundance Film Festival should consider utilizing its preexisting infrastructure to distribute independent projects outside of studio acquisition. This will disseminate projects while avoiding Hollywood studio distribution.

At the most practical level, Sundance should consider providing expanded festival screenings via pay-preview cable, satellite, and on iTunes. There are already certain festival selections available for download through Xbox and iTunes. The Sundance Institute is a not-for-profit organization and should be able to disseminate films at a competitive price because the films are not attached to a studio and the films will be exhibited in the rawest form. Providing screening via cable and satellite during the Sundance Film Festival will not only cultivate an audience for DVD distribution but guarantee at-cost revenue for screening, through the medium of screening. For example, if I have Comcast, DirecTV, or any other cable provider, dissemination through the dates of the Sundance Film Festival should be provided at-cost since there is not a studio attached to the distribution. The films available for screening should be truly independent films, films that are not attached to a studio and should typically be films made by first-time filmmakers. Historically, festivals have been an effective medium for providing screenings because of their influence but each festival should operate autonomously like a union. Festivals can be community projects and methods of representing various unique artistic perspectives. Why should audiences be dependent on studios for what gets seen in this highly evolved market?

This research suggests that as the means of development and dissemination become centralized that film production becomes homogenous. Also, as independent filmmakers have become less dependent on studios for production, innovative

differentiated independent film from Hollywood projects have become fashionable. As independent film and the Sundance Film Festival have gained general acceptance and popularity, there have been maneuvers made by studios to market their productions as independent. Recently, there have been radical shifts in how the general public consumes music there have been similar shifts in how people can view movies. Blockbuster and Hollywood Video have been threatened by Netflicks as CDs have been overtaken by internet downloads, the dissemination of independent film should take advantage of how the general public is less dependent upon the material form of CDs and DVDs to consume art. With newer technologies available that eliminate the need for costly raw materials such as DVDs and packaging, independent films should be less dependent upon studio distribution. Da-Da and Surrealistic art that questions the medium and method of art can be most pragmatically realized in cinema because the actual product can be mass-consumed without the significance of an original as there are with paintings, pottery, sculptures and in the case of editions, with books. However, regardless of the medium of dissemination, the Sundance Film Festival should reserve more screenings for films that feature first time filmmakers, projects that are not financed by a studio or has studio involvement including having an established actor or actress, and should provide greater outlets to the development of writers.

RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

This study is drastically limited by the data collected, specifically the analysis of studio acquisition was limited to Sundance Film Festival award winners and ignored films that did not win awards but were subsequently acquired by studios for distribution. Future research should expand the scoop of distribution analysis to include all films screened at the Sundance Film Festival. This will allow researchers to determine the correlation of winning an award at the Sundance Film Festival to distribution acquisition and the extent of the festival's influence on what films are acquired for distribution. This will quantify the influence of the Sundance Film Festival has on studio distribution because it is possible that the festival uses awards as a way of drawing attention to films that have not secured distribution but this research cannot speak to that possibility.

Furthermore, there have been dramatic changes in the film economy that has placed less of an emphasis on theatre revenue and more on DVD sales and rentals. Future research should draw on data that contains information on DVD sales and rentals which I suspect is a substantial revenue source for distributors as indicated by the decision to have some films go straight to video rather than having theatrical releases. Being able to draw on this sort of information will also allow researchers to analyze Sundance films that are not exhibited in theatres but are nonetheless produced. This will allow future research to hypothesize the extent that quality films are marginalized in their inability to secure distribution due to preconceived institutional ideals of what independent films should be.

While it would have been highly beneficial to have someone accept the invitation to be interviewed that currently worked for the Sundance Institute and at the Sundance

Film Festival, the information I was able to gather paints a far more complicated picture than I originally anticipated. Initially when this research began, I thought gathering data was simply a matter of talking to some Sundance Film Festival employees and hopefully a few organizers about what has changed at the festival. As I gathered data I was shocked by Sundance's lack of assistance and inability to provide basic information regarding the films they screen. However, the historical research along with the few interviews I was able to conduct has given me insight into why Sundance might be reluctant to provide a description of its inner workings. It seems that some have been highly critical about the seemingly arbitrary criteria Sundance uses when selecting films for screening and awards. As one interview participant put it, "you're not going to nail down anyone…they keep it under their hat" when describing Sundance's secrecy regarding film selection (Author interview, 2009).

However, the research presented here indicates that the Sundance Film Festival is an influential cultural institution for independent film but it cannot be quantified has to the significance of festival awards on possible distribution acquisition. With the ability to draw on data collected from all Sundance Film Festival movies, a comparative analysis can be conducted between award winners to acquisition patterns which will statistically indicate the level of influence the Sundance Film Festival has in the larger independent marketplace. Furthermore, since this study looks at the level of sponsorship as the number of companies participating at the Sundance Film Festival, future research should analyze the amount of money institutions pay Sundance for sponsorship and kind of donations Sundance receives. However, it is possible that the number of sponsors does not determine or does not correlate to the amount of revenue the Sundance Film Festival

receives from sponsors. Since it is possible that a single sponsor can contribute a large amount of money and resources, it would be better for future research to analyze the level of financial support and the monetary value of donations that the Sundance Film Festival receives from its sponsors and supporters.

Perhaps the greatest danger for Sundance and other independent films in being acquired by studios is that there is increased risk of content change, alteration, and manipulation. Once a studio acquires a film it becomes the property of the studio and the filmmaker has no legal right to protect the film from alterations. A film's value should be evaluated on the merits of its content but if studios can edit the contents of a film then there should be great concern regarding possible studio censorship. There are already heavy restrictions regarding the length of theatrical releases and the Motion Picture Association of America has strict guidelines for rating films through their content. Since the primary goal of studios is to generate profit, there is substantial incentive for them to make a film appeal to the widest audience. This can prompt studios to edit and change the contents of certain films in order to make them appeal to a larger audience and therefore make the film more profitable.

The theoretical model identified in this study suggests that as cultural innovation and production are introduced that dominate preexisting institutions such as Hollywood studios act to coopt those projects into its own infrastructure. This process of studio assimilation and dissemination breeds sameness where all cultural production looks alike. In the case of film, content can be altered, concepts are recycled, and newer movies resemble older ones in order for studios to maximize potential profits by appealing to the broadest audience. Bourdieu, Horkheimer, and Adorno argue that differentiation plays an

essential role in the system of the culture industry. Differentiation is a marketing strategy whereby studios market certain films as being diverse and new while in reality there is little difference between them and other exhibited films. The theoretical model illustrated by Simmel, Bourdieu, Horkheimer, and Adorno suggests that cultural production becomes isomorphic.

While Horkheimer and Adorno are skeptical of all differentiation in that they argue that there is none, Simmel and Bourdieu allow for the possibility of cultural production to be distinct from other forms of production although it might only be temporal because of the ability of institutions to appropriate the differentiation of production. This study has highlighted how Hollywood studios have appropriated independent film through the Sundance Film Festival and has adopted independent differentiation to the extent that the distinction between independent and studio projects has become trivial. What is ultimately at stake in the case of film is the manipulation and censorship of content that does not serve to profit the studio. In this type of environment the only films that are exhibited and secure distribution are those that are deemed profitable while innovative and authentic independent projects are marginalized.

Analyzing monetary contributions from festival sponsors and studios can provide further insights into the relationship and possible obligations the festival has to its sponsors that make objective film evaluation problematic. Furthermore, it would be interesting to see how Sundance allocates its resources and how much is invested in its filmmaker development program. If there is a lack of artistic independent vision perhaps it would be profitable to spend more resources cultivating authentic style and perspective in emerging filmmakers. Perhaps Sundance can develop and polish the art of filmmaking

where film schools leave off. The major problem with filmmaking is that to make a film requires a lot of resources that typical people do not have. As result discovering new and authentic talent is problematic. The Sundance Film Festival and Sundance Institute needs to do more in the way of discovering provocative voices and developing film as a form of art rather than a method of gaining studio finance. There are many stories to be told and perspectives to be explored and an institution such as Sundance should actively be engaged in the materialization of what comes next in independent cinema.

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