



## In Response to Dan Schoenbrun's Claim That We Need to "Kill Independent Film to Save It"

In an article on Filmmaker Magazine's website published October 17th, 2016 entitled Independent Film is a Meaningless, Outmoded Term, and We Need to Stop Saying It, writer Dan Schoenbrun posits the questions "what does the term "independent film" mean to you?" I'm no stranger to this question, having asked it in interviews myself, and been asked it multiple times while on the film festival circuit. My answer is usually the same; independent film, to me, is both a movement and a branding. It encompasses both the independent spirit, but also a label reserved for movies made outside of the studio system. Filmmakers I speak to tend to offer similar responses, albeit in their own words. In addition to my previous response, I will also add that the term "independent film" also has a history attached to it, and a legacy that needs to be preserved and not treated like a four-letter word just because it's been inconvenient to one's career.

While the generally perceived definition of "independent film" has grown in scope in the movie industry over the past couple of decades to include multi-million dollar budgeted works, franchises, and digitally released originals, they get away with using this term in their marketing materials because many of these projects are still considered acquisitions that were financed and produced independently. While I personally don't agree with this methodology, I at least can understand the game that's being played.

This brings me back to Dan's article. While I understand his frustration and call to action, he gives the speech we hear every year, usually around this time during the "for your consideration" period, and almost always hot on the heels of some article indicating that "indie film is dead". While Dan makes many very solid points, one thing he doesn't do anywhere in his article is to offer a solution. Just saying that the term independent film needs to die, isn't going to solve any underlying problems and is about as effective as offering thoughts and prayers in the wake of tragedy.

If you want to solve the problem, first let's look at the root of the problem. The issue isn't the term independent film. The first indie film to win an Oscar was back in 1953 (LITTLE FUGITIVE), and before that and since then indie film has been alive and well from the Borscht Belt to the New Beverly. To try to strike that term from the lexicon is kicking sand in the face of every filmmaker who ever was stonewalled and blackballed by Edison or humped their film from state to state, movie house to movie house, in order to get their work in front of an audience.

Do you want to know what has changed since then? Opportunity and technology. Marketing



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methods really haven't changed all that much over the last 100 years (if you don't believe me, take a look at how movie posters have traditionally been made over the course of the history of film), but new technology has giving way to new opportunities for independent filmmakers to share their art with audiences. Now, that doesn't mean everyone is making money doing it, but the ones who hustle, put in the work, the time, the blood, sweat, and tears, are the ones that rise to the top. Whether you think mumblecore films like *THE PUFFY CHAIR* are good or not, you have to admire the hustle that the Duplass brothers put in to get that project together, in front of audiences, and more importantly, in front of executives that allowed them to make more content with more money. The same goes with filmmakers like Kevin Smith, Ed Burns, and Quentin Tarantino. Is there a certain amount of luck involved? Absolutely. Is there a magic button to press that will guarantee your film distribution? Not exactly, but there are great aggregators that work in the pay-to-play space that will get your work in front of an audience. Isn't that the most important thing here? Is it getting your film seen? Or is it making money? Those are questions that I can't answer for you. You need to ask yourself those questions before you roll one frame (or pixel) of your movie.

Dan, to say that Hollywood looks at independent film as a ghetto is a harsh insult to an industry that supports and curates new talent. If your argument is that the Independent Spirit Awards is basically just a test run for the Oscars, then you're right, it probably is.

Hollywood hasn't been creative on its own since the 70's, and it snatches indie films all the time and claims them as their own. But the only way we get new talent in Hollywood like [James Gunn](#), [Neill Blomkamp](#), and [Fede Alvarez](#) is by mining the indie film talent pool.

There are tens of thousands of indie films made every year and with the advances in technology, it's only going to encourage new filmmakers to come to the table. Not everyone can be [Alejandro G. Iñárritu](#), and I don't want them to be. I want filmmakers to continue to be defiantly independent, to create new and interesting stories with unique ways of telling them, and I want them to create new opportunities for themselves to find their audience.

To your other point. I agree, words have power. By your own words, you are asking filmmakers to shed their film heritage off like oppressive chains, and forget why the fight for independence is so important, probably now more than ever, in the media. Filmmakers need to understand and embrace the term independent film as a brand, a marketing tool, and a call to action. "Independent Film" is nothing to be afraid of, and it certainly isn't the Hollywood ghetto that you paint it to be. Indie film is a vibrant canvas that simply lacks the gallery to properly showcase it. There's just too much of it out there in the world to give



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everyone a Hollywood premiere or an Oscar. And if you're taking the latent position of "it's not fair", then you're right, it isn't, and it never will be because that's life kid. People don't need to "break things down", that's already happening. It's happening in every medium of entertainment right now. Just look at the advances in the past several years in VR, cross-platform storytelling, and audience interaction within created storyworlds. We are in the new golden age of film, where technology and opportunity have finally caught up to vision and ability. Yes, money, representation, and distribution are still concerns, but those are changing too, just give it time. Hollywood isn't going to change how they do things until they figure out a way to profit from it. Indie film can be the agile change that Hollywood can borrow (or steal) from, and that's how important the term "independent film" is. It isn't a genre, it's a catalyst.

As usual, the answer isn't the violent act of killing anything, but letting this thing we call independent film evolve into the next stage in how we consume media.

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