Introduction: Quentin Tarantino and the Commodification of Independent Cinema

“If you want to give me credit, I'll wear it, but I’m not going to take it. I’m not that presumptuous. There’s a little part of me that thinks everything is influenced by me, but that’s just my own megalomania.”¹

- Quentin Tarantino, interviewing for Vulture (August 23, 2015) -

In 1992, the debut film of a little known writer/director out of Manhattan Beach rocked the Sundance film festival, quickly becoming the most talked about independent film of the year despite relatively modest success at the box office. That film was Reservoir Dogs and the man behind it (writing, acting, directing and producing the picture from scratch) was Quentin Tarantino. The film was the first in what would become an iconic canon, and in a growing field of talented indie filmmakers, Tarantino himself emerged as an exceptional but prototypical figure in a new wave of Hollywood production.

¹ Tarantino & Brown
In the 1990s, American cinema took opposing elements of something film historians call ‘New Hollywood’ productions and combined them to create a stylistic trend unique in the history of U.S. film. Instead of creating big budget, high-concept movies and low budget, independent films separately, studios began to hire successful indie film artists for larger projects that could be marketed and sold on the same scale as a standard blockbuster. Through this, a commercial marriage was arranged between the more critically acclaimed alternative filmmaking and the more profitable style of high-concept blockbusters.

By the early 1990s a shift in so-called independent production became evident - whether you argue that independent studios were assimilated by major media corporations as Justin Wyatt does in The Formation of ‘Major Independent’, or whether you argue that independent cinema fractured across a spectrum of large studio involvement and cannot be readily defined as King et al. argue in American Independent Cinema: Indie, Indiewood and beyond. The production quality and methods noticeably changed for independent filmmakers in between the late 1980s and the year 2000, but what was responsible for this shift? Was it independent film festivals’ successful recruitment of great directors, or the work of the auteurs themselves? Was it the product of clever marketing strategies from wannabe Old-Guard studio execs or a result of technological innovations that allowed Americans to watch movies at home without ever having to set foot in a theater?

Much like Wyatt, I would argue that the main factors that affected the commodification of contemporary independent film can be found in the actions of studios both large and small. While film festivals’ rising prominence boosted critical reception for smaller

2 Monaco
budget movies and shifting technologies prompted a shift in ancillary markets (making box office earnings just part of the total profit a film could earn), both changes were relevant only through the deliberate involvement of business-minded studio executives.

However, unlike Wyatt, who explored the phenomenon through the tempestuous rise and fall of large independent studios such as Carolco and Orion in the 1980s, I would like to focus on how the career of an individual director working within the 1990s reflected the trends in contemporary independent cinema. Seeing as Quentin Tarantino’s was a seminal success story within the independent film explosion, I believe much can be explained by looking through his work, in examining how studio efforts guided his films into the public eye and in gauging the quality of their reception in both box offices and more critically by audiences.

To be sure, if film holds any significance for cultural or literary study, then it is my view that emergence and the hybrid successes of big-indie film producers like Tarantino deserve some carefully concerted scrutiny. It is through this firebrand lens that I hope to engage the major questions of contemporary American cinema as it turned the corner of a new millennium. But before we can understand this period of ‘indie’ Hollywood film we need to understand its context, which requires a foray into the history of independent film itself.
Part I - Parallel histories: Mainstream American Cinema and its Malcontents

The study of American independent cinema is as intricate and remarkable as the technologies that made movie-making possible in the first place. Starting in the late nineteenth century as an attempt to capture the anatomy of movement by English photographer Eadweard Muybridge, ambitious American capitalists quickly saw the potential of the moving picture as a novelty capable of earning a serious profit. The technology was soon adapted to play on peephole viewing screens and sold to eager audiences who reveled in the innovation. Having some success in selling short films like *The Kiss* in kinetoscope parlors, patent-hoarding inventor mogul Thomas Edison filed for the intellectual rights of most motion picture technology - including a patent on raw film. The patents on this technology were eventually consolidated into the Motion Pictures Patent Corporation (hereafter referred to as the MPPC), otherwise known as the Edison Trust.

At this time, the content of these short moving pictures merely captured the motions and nuances of everyday life, but these early films still held great money-making potential. Production of these early movies was controlled by a few key players, including the biggest producer of raw film, Eastman Kodak, the greatest distributor of moving pictures, George Kleine, and a handful of the most prominent production companies. Displayed in individual

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3 Hendricks
4 This patent was later revoked in *U. S. v. Motion Picture Patents Co.*, 225 F. 800 (D. C. Pa. 1915).
5 May, pgs. 62-63
6 New York Times October 2, 1915
screenings without sound, these short clips proved to be most popular among lower-class Americans and immigrants. In fact, though early film technology had the capacity to sync with sound, Lary May speculates that filmmakers may have kept their movies silent as a way to appeal to “an audience of immigrants who spoke many languages.”

Naturally, many Americans had an interest in producing film, but with the Edison Trust in place, filmmakers outside of the main movie-making cartel constantly faced legal action from the MPPC. Though Edison standardized the industry and commissioned some of the most influential movies of the era (such as the Great Train Robbery), his attempted stranglehold on filmmaking technology sought to restrict the ability for filmmakers outside of the trust to compete. Independent and foreign films were still being made - but they were actively suppressed by a company which sought to monopolize the industry. Indeed, harassment from the Edison Trust seems to be one of the main reasons that film production moved west to California, where patents and lawsuits were harder to enforce for the New York based company.

That said, by the time the American center of film production had started to move west, the days of the Edison Trust came to a close. In 1915, a federal court ruled in U.S. v. Motion Picture Patents Co. that the MPPC’s patents on film technology went “far beyond what was necessary to protect the use of patents or the monopoly which went with them” and thus were a violation of the Sherman Antitrust Act. But with the MPPC now defunct, a new type

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7 May, pg. 39
8 May, pg. 38
9 Edidin pg. 42
of film cartel had begun to form, poised to lay claim to the production on the west coast: the Hollywood studio system.

While the MPPC had been in decline, crafty businessmen had been building studio structures with their own production and distribution networks. Initially, the MPPC void had allowed for a greater range of opportunity in film production for newcomers, but as studios developed they gradually became larger and more influential - the industry equivalent of a coup d’état. In lieu of a solitary trust, there were now dozens of distinct studios that controlled American cinema. Among these, some were larger and more affluent like Warner Bros. and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (mostly due to their being first on the scene) while a majority subsisted on what came to be known as Poverty Row. Over time, the top five major studios\(^\text{10}\) gained a powerful oligopoly over the industry - each one owning a chain of theaters.

Within this system, many of the minor studios struggled to compete against the majors - who seemed to be constantly integrating both horizontally and vertically. Though their fare was often hugely successful in independent movie houses, the majors had control over a huge chain of theaters throughout the country. With a theater chain, a studio like Paramount could guarantee a wide-release of whatever film they chose to show- whether it be one of their own movies or a movie from another studio that was willing to pay Paramount for the use of its theaters. This was an enormously effective way of manipulating the film

\(^{10}\) Warner Bros., RKO, Paramount, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, and 20th Century Fox
\(^{11}\) Shatz, pg. 15
market and it gave major studios almost complete control over what could be and what could not be successful at the box office. 12

Interestingly though, Paramount’s theater chain would ultimately be the straw that broke the camel’s back (the camel being the Golden Age of studio Hollywood). In 1942, the Society of Independent Motion Picture Producers (an anti-studio system group founded by luminaries such as Walt Disney and Orson Welles)13 brought a suit against Paramount, contending that the company’s Detroit theaters constituted a violation of antitrust law - an allegation that was evaluated by the Supreme Court six years later. 14 U.S. v Paramount Pictures, Inc. declared that ‘block booking’ and the ownership of theater chains constituted a violation of antitrust law and spelled the end of the studio system of Hollywood’s golden age.

That is not to say that studios ceased to exist. Despite a decline in their near-total control of American movies, studios adapted to the new legal climate by “[concentrating] on financing and distribution rather than production.”15 This meant that where in the past, major studios produced the majority of films in Hollywood themselves (with every aspect of production being coordinated and financed by the studio) majors would start to outsource their creative talent - commissioning Hollywood outsiders to write screenplays, edit film and direct features. Every once in awhile the major studios would put together a big-money project such as Ben-Hur (produced by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer for between $15 and $16

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12 May, pg. 175
14 United States v. Paramount Pictures, Inc. 334 U.S. 131 (1948)
15 Shatz, pg. 16
million\textsuperscript{16} to dazzle the American movie-goer but for the most part, the role of Hollywood studios became a managerial one\textsuperscript{17, 18}.

Over the next several years, the overall trend in the industry was decline. RKO, the once mighty ‘big five’ studio, sunk around the middle of the century\textsuperscript{19} while the other remaining players contended with the emergence of television as a competitive market and a general winnowing of theater audiences. Imported foreign films (like the 1962 best picture winner - the British production \textit{Lawrence of Arabia}\textsuperscript{20}) and alternative, art-house style films inspired by the French new wave (like the 1967 countercultural sleeper hit, \textit{Bonnie and Clyde}\textsuperscript{21}) became a hot commodity among the maturing baby-boomer generation while extravagant multi-million dollar studio endeavors proved to be notoriously hit or miss\textsuperscript{22}.

With the box-office winners typically being the studio outsiders, there was a shift in confidence from the old-style studio method of movie making and the fresh perspectives that would come to define the film-school generation (e. g. directors like Steven Spielberg, George Lucas and Francis Ford Coppola). Studios further relinquished creative control to up-and-coming producers and directors, sometimes offering percentages of a film’s gross like Warner Brothers did for Warren Beatty with \textit{Bonnie and Clyde} (1967), offering him a $2 million dollar production budget and 40% of the film’s gross. \textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{16}Ben-Hur
\textsuperscript{17} Belton, pgs. 86-87
\textsuperscript{18} Monaco, pg. 141
\textsuperscript{19} Shatz, Pg. 16
\textsuperscript{20} Monaco, pgs. 167-68
\textsuperscript{21} Monaco, pgs. 180-82
\textsuperscript{22} Performing sensationally as \textit{Ben-Hur} did (Monaco, pgs. 156-57) or losing big, as with the spectacular failure of \textit{Cleopatra} (Monaco, pg. 169)
\textsuperscript{23} Lennon
Techniques such as this allowed studios to minimize risk while still enabling risky, low-budget filmmakers to create profitable movies. If *Bonnie and Clyde* had tanked at the box office, the studio would only be out $2 million plus distribution costs, whereas Warren Beatty would have made only a shadow of the $30 million that he ended up making on the movie. Filmmakers were incentivized to create winning movies, and if they did well, studios would reward them with bigger budgets and greater distribution, while letting them keep their creative control over their works – a marked shift from the studio system of old.

It’s at this point – the era of “New Hollywood”24 – that distinctions between independent film and studio productions begin to blur significantly. The affiliation with major studio money that had historically defined a film’s status as mainstream began to cross over into the realm of alternative production – changing the nature of American independent film and confusing its meaning to such a point that scholars of contemporary independent film still do not agree on its exact definition.25 While what defines this ill-defined category of American film production is still unclear, an analysis of individual films and filmmakers suggests that the deliberate market-oriented actions of smaller distribution studios precipitated this synthesis between establishment moviemaking and its anti-establishment offshoots.

24 Shatz, Pgs. 19-21
25 King et al., pgs. 5-6
Part II: Contemporary Independent: The Rise of Big-Indie

“I think the independent revolution is the most exciting thing that’s happened since the French New Wave. The independent film has always been with us, but it’s never had this commercial reception.”

- Steven Spielberg, interviewing with Kenneth Turan in 1998 -

What makes Quentin Tarantino such an interesting figure in American cinema is not so much the controversial violence or vacuousness of his movies/scripts - but the way he combines the aesthetic of independent film (the eccentric Hollywood renegade persona) and the production methods and creative control that independent filmmakers have historically resisted. Tarantino walks a precarious line between the status of Hollywood outsider (with problematic and postmodern qualities to his films) and Hollywood insider (with a close working relationship with the Disney-owned arthouse studio Miramax). So while Tarantino can be convincingly identified as an independent filmmaker, he clearly represents something a little more complex.

In fact, the term ‘independent’ itself is a point of contention in film studies because, as film scholar Robert Belton puts it, “virtually all films are constricted by economic, social, and political forces in the motion picture marketplace.” Even studio majors with resources and capital far exceeding smaller producers face economic constraints in making a movie - no one

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26 Spielberg, pg. 216
27 Belton, pg. 399
can claim complete independence from the operational obstacles required to make a film. However, some have significantly more limitations while others have significantly fewer. Greg Merrit, author of *Celluloid Mavericks: A History of Independent Film*, offers a practical definition by labeling an independent as “any motion picture financed and produced completely autonomous of all studios, regardless of size.”

Under this definition, alternative filmmakers like Wes Anderson, Quentin Tarantino, and Joel and Ethan Coen lose their status as independents - despite the fact that they frequently submit their works to ‘independent’ film festivals such as Sundance and Cannes. Though they work with contemporary studios (albeit small ones), their works are celebrated in venues like Sundance that were “founded to foster independence, risk-taking, and new voices.” Is it really the case that movies that can win the Palme d’Or (the top prize at Cannes) or the U. S. Grand Jury Prize (the top prize at Sundance) must be lumped into the same category as multi-million dollar major studio blockbusters?

Surely not, considering the fact that Michael Bay’s most recent film in the Transformer’s franchise, *Transformers: Age of Extinction*, cost more to produce than the sum budget of every film Wes Anderson has ever made. Independence in movie-making seems to operate on a sliding scale, with major studios being the least independent, non-studio productions being the most independent and a large slice of American cinema falling somewhere in between.

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28 Merritt, pg. xii
29 Sundance Institute
30 $210 million versus $203 million - [http://www.the-numbers.com/movie/budgets/all](http://www.the-numbers.com/movie/budgets/all)
More than just monetary, the difference between the products of major studios and the products of subsidiary, minor, or art-house studios represents a schism in American film that traces its roots to almost half a century ago: the mid 1970s. This period referred to by Paul Monaco and others as “New Hollywood” saw the emergence of two distinctive styles of U. S. film production: the high-concept film (i.e. the high dollar blockbuster) and the “edgy, alternative feature.” While the ultra-high budget Transformers franchise distinctively falls into the high concept camp, the persistent contributions of, say, the Coen brothers strikes viewers as almost aggressively alternative. But what do these particular film styles entail other than just vast resource disparities?

In *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood*, former film industry market research analyst Justin Wyatt describes the style of high concept as “an easily marketed story, idea, or image” with:

- Saturated booking (a practice in which thousands of theaters release a film on a particular release date)
- A large-scale marketing campaign (including television advertisements for the first time) and,
- “The creation, solely from the movie, of its own merchandising industry, with control over franchising.”

Like the production code of the bygone Classical Hollywood era, the style of high concept filmmaking proved to be an effective tactic for producers seeking to minimize risk on the inherently risky endeavor of funding a major motion picture. It predicated a winning

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31 Monaco, pg. 217
32 Monaco, pgs. 219-20
formula for films that worked at a variety of different levels of expense, making it a more “fiscally responsible way of making films.” Not only is a high concept movie likely to perform well in theaters, it also has the opportunity to pull in a profit in a number of ancillary markets like television, merchandising and home video (which proved to be more the territory of successful A movies). Additionally, as major studios merged into international media corporations, they opened up distribution networks for their films overseas - widening the scope of their presentation (and thus potential for profit) even further.

In contrast, the films Monaco terms “alternative” typically represent a much less stable/marketable product with greater individual creative control for its production team. These films typically have more complicated themes with morally ambiguous protagonists, non-linear, branching plots and violent and/or difficult subject matter. Further, as David James notes, so-called “American Art Films” are often based on “relatively complex narrative premises, [lacking] major stars, and some… [exhibit] a deliberately rough-hewn, ‘primitive quality.” The example Monaco uses to illustrate this trend is the 1975 adaptation of Ken Kesey’s popular countercultural novel: One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest.

In many ways, Cuckoo’s Nest represents American alternative film perfectly - R. P. McMurphy is a convicted felon feigning insanity to avoid a prison sentence only to discover that life in an asylum reflects larger conflicts in American society. Not only is this character subversive and countercultural, he folds in the face of his conflict. Instead of escaping his

33 Maltby, pg. 218
34 Wyatt, Smith, pg. 75
35 Maltby, pg. 219
36 Mostly between 1966-1970 (Monaco, pg. 195)
37 Smith, pg. 10
mental health prison, he is lobotomized and smothered by the one inmate he was able to change. In typical alternative fashion, this film broaches difficult and introspective questions about American society and individual sanity, while pessimistically subjecting its hero to a hideous and violent failure to resist institutional pressure.

Naturally, these sorts of films end up being harder to market and much riskier to produce - because while an alternative filmmaker like David Lynch can produce a sensationally popular cult classic like *Eraserhead*³⁸, he can also make a multi-million dollar flop like *Dune*³⁹ - with the critical difference between the two being notoriously hard to pin down. In short, there is no recipe for success for the alternative as there is for the high concept - an alternative film relies on its execution rather than its premise. If the production team for an alternative film can manage to craft a powerful film experience out of an unconventional premise, then they have also crafted a commercially viable alternative film.

However, perhaps as a means to minimize risk or perhaps as a response to studio pressures, alternative filmmakers since the 80s have combined some elements of high concept with their films - blurring the lines between major and minor film production even further. Wyatt considers the role of four independent (that is to say, non-major) companies within the film industry during the decade: Carolco (which produced the Terminator series among others), De Laurentiis Entertainment Group (*Blue Velvet* and *Evil Dead II*), the Cannon Group (makers of *Death Wish II*, III and IV) and Vestron (*The Princess Bride* and *Dirty Dancing*). These alternative producers specialized in consolidating funding for films by pre-selling rights in “foreign and ancillary markets”, reducing overhead by renting studio space and

³⁸ Which earned 70 times its production budget - [http://www.the-numbers.com/movie/budgets/all](http://www.the-numbers.com/movie/budgets/all)
³⁹ Which lost $17.5 million dollars at the box office - [http://www.the-numbers.com/movie/budgets/all](http://www.the-numbers.com/movie/budgets/all)
making large productions flush with big name actors\textsuperscript{40}. More pertinently, Carolco is notable for its action franchises, which stand out as both distinctly alternative and yet reminiscent of a major studio blockbuster series.

\textit{First Blood} (1982), for instance, involves some complicated themes dealing with the Vietnam War’s effect on veteran soldiers in American society, survival guilt and small-town xenophobia. It contains brutal depictions of violence, mostly at the hands of disgruntled and disillusioned Green Beret John Rambo. At the same time, the film’s premise is simple: a psychologically unstable veteran is provoked into a murderous rampage. It was given a saturated release - grossing over $6 million over its opening weekend\textsuperscript{41} - and it sold numerous merchandising tie-in products ranging from T-shirts and lunchboxes made in 1985\textsuperscript{42} to a 2014 video game\textsuperscript{43}. John Rambo became an iconic figure of repressed rage and wanton destruction, setting off a franchise that has survived more than thirty years. The character has lasted longer and been more fruitful than either Rick Deckard from \textit{Blade Runner} (affiliated with Warner Bros.)\textsuperscript{44} or \textit{Conan the Barbarian} (with Universal)\textsuperscript{45} - both similar protagonists affiliated with major studio productions from the same year.

Evidently then, starting in the 1980s alternatives to the post-classical studio system began to resemble the high concept blockbuster stylization of the majors while maintaining a certain \textit{je ne sais quoi} that marked their production as independent. In terms of Monaco’s two strands of American filmmaking, the production of high concept franchises like \textit{Rambo}, the

\textsuperscript{40} Wyatt, pg. 144
\textsuperscript{42} http://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah_881547
\textsuperscript{43} http://www.rambothevideogame.com/#!/news/cjg9
*Terminator* or the *Nightmare on Elm Street* series represent a sort of hybridization of the alternative and the blockbuster, where elements of the winning formula for a big budget movie are applied on a smaller scale by filmmakers outside of the mainstream. Because the solvency of these independent production companies was more uncertain - the stakes for their large-budget alternatives were much higher. One or two big failures could jeopardize a company operating outside of the majors, and so it should not be surprising that independent producers would apply the blockbuster formula to minimize risk.

“The major studios are the big American army.” Bob Weinstein opined, “If we went straight up against them, they would nuke us. We’re the guerillas. We snipe and we hit and we win a few battles, then we retreat.” Rather than relying on the uncertain marketability of a truly alternative film, independent producers followed the precedent of major studios in order to “win a few battles”. Neither blockbuster nor art house, the movies that independent production companies made in the 80s and 90s toed a careful line between creative freedom and creative control. After all, the Weinsteins and other independent distributors/producers “[didn’t] want to become another Walt Disney,” but they certainly didn’t want to go broke either.

It was within this nebulous major/minor conflation that Quentin Tarantino’s film career began, and from the very start, Tarantino’s career has been muddled between its alternative independent flair and the strategic injection of larger studio involvement. Though the initial funding for Tarantino’s *Reservoir Dogs* had almost required producer/director

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46 Executive at the independent film company Miramax
47 Gubernick, pgs. 109-11
48 Gubernick, pg. 111
Monte Hellman to mortgage his home\textsuperscript{49}, Hollywood veteran Harvey Keitel became interested in the script and offered to play a role. Like some of the big name actors involved with 80s independent productions, Keitel’s name lent the project a sense of seriousness that ultimately allowed Hellman to secure funding for the production with LIVE entertainment - a company that specialized in financing small movies\textsuperscript{50}.

Once produced, the 1.2 million dollar project pulled enough buzz to attract the attention of Miramax, who by this time had merged with the Walt Disney Corporation and become something of a juggernaut in the independent film world.\textsuperscript{51} Screened at the Cannes film festival and promoted through television and print media, \textit{Reservoir Dogs} was an indie hit, earning more than 250\% of its production budget.\textsuperscript{52} The most distinctively alternative of Tarantino’s films, \textit{Reservoir Dogs} was fraught with depictions of extreme violence (a severed ear, and Mr. Orange - who is bleeding out through most of the film), non-linear storytelling, and gritty conversational dialogue. At the same time, the film was also a highly independent production, having a very small budget, a limited release and a narrow marketing campaign that put it solidly outside the realm of mainstream studio fare. The same cannot be said for his next film.

Although \textit{Pulp Fiction} had a relatively small budget\textsuperscript{53}, it was anything but independent. Once produced, Miramax took an active role in promoting the film - sending it off to be screened at the Cannes Film Festival\textsuperscript{54} and bringing it back to American audiences.

\textsuperscript{49} Bernard, pgs. 131-32
\textsuperscript{50} Bernard, pgs. 134-35
\textsuperscript{51} Bernard, pgs. 159-60
\textsuperscript{52} $2,832,029 - \text{http://www. the-numbers. com/movie/budgets/all}
\textsuperscript{53} Hovering around $8 million - \text{http://www. the-numbers. com/movie/budgets/all}
\textsuperscript{54} Bernard, pgs. 208-10
with an “aggressive marketing campaign”\textsuperscript{55} that highlighted its critical reception while selling an image to action-thrill seekers of the film’s plentiful instances of “action, comedy, and sex.”\textsuperscript{56} But to be fair, despite being “self-consciously conventional in content”\textsuperscript{57} and being highly involved with studio distribution, the film did have wide critical acclaim and can reasonably be said to be an alternative film - though not completely. The synthesis of both the art-film techniques that won \textit{Pulp} the Palme d’Or at Cannes and the lower elements of the film that made it a popular box-office smash place it somewhere solidly between the style of a Hollywood blockbuster and the alternative independent.

As an alternative film, \textit{Pulp Fiction} seems to fulfill most of the requisites that film historians like Paul Monaco have delineated. It’s highly non-linear, delivering between five and six storylines without much regard to chronology; it contains executions, graphic depictions of drug use, crude language, rape and implied torture; and its two main characters (aging boxer Butch Coolidge and heroin shooting hit man Vincent Vega) are morally ambiguous, dishonest, murdering criminals. By all accounts, \textit{Pulp Fiction} should at least meet the threshold requirements for an alternative film - and yet the film also features a cast of prominent actors (John Travolta, Christopher Walken, Bruce Willis, Harvey Keitel, Uma Thurman, Samuel L. Jackson, etc.) and received a huge push from Miramax’s concerted efforts to promote the film through its marketing campaign and through its distribution: which included a much anticipated saturated release.\textsuperscript{58}

\begin{thebibliography}{10}
\bibitem{55} Levy, pg. 17
\bibitem{56} Wyatt, Smith, pg. 81
\bibitem{57} Dowell and Fried, pg. 4
\bibitem{58} Biskind, p. 189
\end{thebibliography}
Further, despite a modest production budget, the high levels of studio involvement in the mass marketing campaign and the saturated release gave *Pulp Fiction* a strange duality in the quality of its studio vs. independent status. Like an independent film, *Pulp Fiction* was produced with a smaller budget and with great artistic freedom for those involved. However, like a major studio film, Miramax actively promoted the film and cut distribution deals that allowed for its widespread release. In other words, it was produced like an independent, but marketed like a small blockbuster - and the result was groundbreaking.

Within a month, *Pulp Fiction* had earned more than $45 million dollars in its weekly box office revenue - more than indie watershed *Sex, Lies, and Videotape* had earned in its first year. When the film had run its course, it ended up making over 200 million dollars worldwide and receiving seven nominations at the Academy Awards - an unprecedented cross of critical and popular success for an independent film. While *Sex, Lies, and Videotape* had demonstrated the potential profitability of a low budget film, *Pulp Fiction* showed how, with proper marketing and distribution, a low-budget alternative feature could potentially rival even high cost blockbusters at the box office. As film historian Peter Biskind writes, the success of *Pulp Fiction*

transformed the industry's attitude toward the lowly indies…. Once the studios realized that they could exploit the economies of (small) scale, they more or less gave up buying or remaking the films themselves, and either bought the distributors, as

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60 [IMDb](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0111161/quotes) - “Pulp Fiction Awards”
Disney had Miramax, or started their own... copying Miramax's marketing and
distribution strategies.\textsuperscript{61}

In the early 90s, and especially following \textit{Pulp Fiction}, major studios made strides to join the
now bustling market for indies - acquiring existing independent studios (as the Walt Disney
Corporation did with Miramax)\textsuperscript{62} or forming their own independent studio wings within their
company (as 20th Century Fox did with Fox Searchlight.)\textsuperscript{63} Although major studios had
commonly held classics divisions, it wasn’t until the 1990s that the independent cinema
marketplace had become “a high-stakes commercial arena”\textsuperscript{64} where studio involvement in
non-studio productions would become more the norm than the exception.

This confluence of New Hollywood film styles is notable in the movies distributed by
major studios' independent wings going into the early 21st century. In fact, it’s difficult to
ignore the influence of blockbuster tactics when ‘art house’ wings began selling such films as
2002’s \textit{Super Troopers} (Fox Searchlight)\textsuperscript{65}, the 2001 epic \textit{The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship
of the Ring}\textsuperscript{66} (New Line Cinema\textsuperscript{67}) and \textit{Pokémon 4Ever}\textsuperscript{68} (2002) or \textit{Pokémon Heroes}\textsuperscript{69} (2003)
released theatrically in the U. S. by Miramax. These films either capitalized on existing
franchises, such as the Pokémon series or the Lord of the Rings saga or they presented a
quirky, low budget film that followed the high-concept method. In any case, these studios

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{61} Biskind, pg. 193
\textsuperscript{62} Holmlund, pg. 7
\textsuperscript{63} Tzioumakis (2012), pg. 133
\textsuperscript{64} Belton, pg. 401
\textsuperscript{65} http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0247745/companycredits
\textsuperscript{66} http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0120737/companycredits
\textsuperscript{67} A subsidiary of Warner Bros.
\textsuperscript{68} http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0287635/companycredits?ref_=ttfc_sa_4
\textsuperscript{69} http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0347791/companycredits
\end{footnotes}
ended up presenting a finished product that was much more conventional Hollywood than their alternative label might imply.

Although *Super Troopers* presents drug use, police corruption and questionably heroic protagonists, it surrounds a basic premise (a jurisdictional conflict between highway patrol and local police); although the *Lord of the Rings* conveys a richly complicated tale with hopeless and at times fatalistic characters, it also unleashed a wave of LOTR merchandising that is still persisting nearly fifteen years later; and although a reasonable budget estimate for either of Miramax’s Pokémon productions would assume that they cost less than $10 million dollars to produce, the two movies stray very little from the safety of traditional blockbuster narrative that was seen in *Pokemon: the First Movie* or *Pokemon 2000* - either of which seem to function more as products in the massive multi-media Pokémon franchise than as actual movies (as its reviewers have noted).  

The groundswell of increasingly blockbuster/alternative hybrids from small distributors may have been the result of a number of factors, but Miramax’s profitable relationship with Tarantino surely featured strongly in their decisions to market more conventional fare as they sought to root out “the next low-budget film with breakthrough potential.” Unlike Steven Soderbergh (who was unable to reclaim the same level of box office success following *Sex, Lies, and Videotape* (1989) until 1998’s *Out of Sight*), Quentin

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70 In relation to other films in the Pokémon film franchise, which ranged from between $3 million and $30 million.  
[http://www.thenumbers.com/movies/franchise/Pokemon#tab=summary](http://www.thenumbers.com/movies/franchise/Pokemon#tab=summary)  
71 Ebert  
72 Koehler  
73 Tzioumakis, pg. 256  
74 See “Technical Credits”:  
Tarantino maintained his momentum, earning over $74 million on *Jackie Brown*, $150 million on *Kill Bill: Volume One*, $150 million on *Kill Bill: Volume Two*, and over $300 million on 2009’s *Inglorious Basterds.*

But in addition to their money-making consistency, Tarantino’s films presented a predictability in style and presentation that became distinct: the comic-book reveling in violence, bantering anti-heroes, and non-linear branching plots. The consistency within his films and with Miramax’s marketing had the effect of making Tarantino’s name a kind of brand name (or commodity) that promised “an ‘alternative’ worldview and a ‘quality’ product” along the vein of his past movies. So in the same way that high-concept films could rely on the simplicity of their own premise to market and sell their content, Miramax could stand behind the particular alternative aesthetic of Tarantino’s movies that marked him as a filmmaker.

The official trailer for *Jackie Brown*, for instance, cuts almost immediately to Tarantino’s name before launching into a trailer brimming with images of guns, bill stacks and sultry women, accentuated by the sound of gunshots and 70s Motown. You almost don’t even need to be told that Tarantino was involved with the movie for it to bring back flashes of *Pulp Fiction*. The film does indeed parallel some of the qualities of *Pulp Fiction* that mark it as alternative including the non-chronological narrative, trademark violence, drugs

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76 Perkins & Verevis, pg. 10
77 Perkins & Verevis, pg. 3
78 Miramax
and sex, ubiquitous pop culture references and protagonists engaging in blatantly illegal
activity.

But as Kent Jones argues in *Film Comment* in 2004, it makes sense that a director like
Tarantino should be consistent in manufacturing a product. He contends that the indie sector
of contemporary Hollywood “necessitates a strategy of ‘the self-defined filmmaker’ who must
‘[wear] his or her sensibility like a suit of armour’ . . . [who define] themselves right out of
the gate to such an extent that their reviews must almost write themselves.”

That is to say, in order for an indie filmmaker to overcome the inherent risk involved with alternative
filmmaking they must adopt either the tried-and-true blockbuster formula or else a reliable
outside method that denotes a similarly recognizable style. Otherwise, their films play the
same sort of quality gambit that made independent productions a risky investment in the first
place.

Alternative as contemporary indie films may be, the particular brand that they endorse
represented a predictable and marketable success. Once a brand had been developed for an
alternative or independent filmmaker, specialty divisions of major studios could offer a fuller
range of funding for production, marketing and distribution - promising greater monetary
success for the film while simultaneously endowing it with some of the qualities that might
have jeopardized its status as an alternative/independent in the 70s (such as budget flexibility,
big-name actors, marketing campaigns and a saturated release).

Though predictability in content may be a boon for a filmmaker’s distributors, it also
diminishes their ability to recreate the wow-factor that made their content interesting in the

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70 Quoted in Perkins & Verevis, pg. 2
first place. Predictability, after all, earned Tarantino rebukes from the National Review for becoming “boring”\textsuperscript{80} and from the New Yorker’s David Denby, who described \textit{Django Unchained} as “garrulous and repetitive.”\textsuperscript{81} Far from exciting audiences, the formulaic processes that studios prefer stultify alternative movie-making - the result being a product that initially promised to provide an escape from Hollywood mainstream but which instead proved to be “an intensification, a distillation of them.”\textsuperscript{82}

As Tom Rothman\textsuperscript{83} remarked on the special role of classics divisions in major studios, they have “the best of both worlds. That is, the risk-taking and flexibility of a specialty label and the power, leverage and scope of a major studio.”\textsuperscript{84} And truly, these specialty wings did have the ability to cross the border between independent and studio; between alternative and blockbuster - at least for a time. Although the Walt Disney Corporation began to significantly downsize Miramax in 2010\textsuperscript{85}, New Line was merged with Warner Bros. in 2008\textsuperscript{86}, and a number of other classics divisions and specialty labels had closed their door by 2010\textsuperscript{87}, the impact of these major studio subsidiaries on American indie film was substantial.

For an aspiring actor and screenwriter, they promised the funding and support to get his career off the ground, while he in return, promised to return a healthy profit on the investment. Whether he knew it or not, Quentin Tarantino typified the industrialising trends

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    \item \textsuperscript{80} Hibbs
    \item \textsuperscript{81} Denby
    \item \textsuperscript{82} The Guardian (2001)
    \item \textsuperscript{83} President and founder of Fox Searchlight (Sony Pictures)
    \item \textsuperscript{84} Quoted in Tzioumakis, pg. 265
    \item \textsuperscript{85} Lawson
    \item \textsuperscript{86} The Guardian
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
of contemporary independent cinema, as his initially eclectic and minimalistic projects became more expensive and elaborate. Though unlike the defunct independent studios of the 80s (Carolco, DeLaurentiis Entertainment Group, etc.) Tarantino maintained the alternative characteristics of his work, his movies represented the deliberate efforts of major studios to make money on the specialty market of independent film. This, at once, made his films more likely to succeed monetarily but less likely to recapture the critical acclaim that had originally brought him into the limelight - a dilemma common among filmmakers working within the new realm of lower budget Hollywood production.
Conclusion

Of course, a study as brief and narrow and haphazard as this cannot explain this trend in its entirety. The commodification of contemporary independent cinema is complex, with many avenues for research and discovery. By limiting myself to the career of one director (and by spending so much time putting his career into context) I have no doubt missed opportunities to compare the different careers of other filmmakers from the same era - whether they be directors like Kevin Smith or Wes Anderson, producers for arthouse/specialty divisions like Harvey Weinstein or Tom Rothman, screenwriters, directors of photography, film editors, sound mixers, etc. This is not even to mention the rich potential in researching the business decisions of major studios and their subsidiaries, which doubtlessly would be quite revealing.

My hope, however, is not to have an explanation that pigeonholes the subject, but one that encourages further research and reflection. The fact that major studios affect the day to day production of popular American cinema is obvious, but the ways that they impact independent productions tell us a lot about the state of the industry as an art and as a business. As it stands, Tarantino’s career seems to suggest that the two can coexist, but not without certain gains and losses for profitability or overall quality. You can create film as a commodity to be bought and sold, you can create film as art to display to high-culture audiences, or paradoxically as Tarantino demonstrates, you can do both.
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