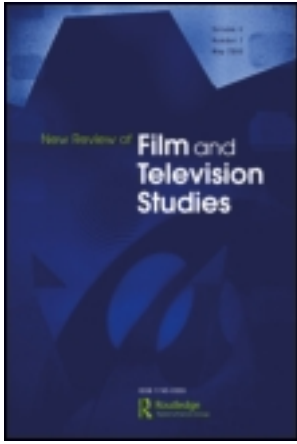


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### Miramax, Life is Beautiful, and the Indiewoodization of the foreign-language film market in the USA

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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### **Miramax, *Life is Beautiful*, and the Indiewoodization of the foreign-language film market in the USA**

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In the decades following the Second World War, foreign-language film distribution in North America operated as a distinct market sector. Foreign-language was a small market niche, outside the control of Hollywood, where independent distributors acted as the main suppliers. From the early 1990s, however, the major Hollywood studios either acquired successful independent distributors or formed their own in-house specialty distribution division, blurring the distinction between independents and the modern studio system, and giving rise to the sector of the film business which became known as 'Indiewood'. As part of this trend, Miramax and Sony Pictures Classics became the leading players in the foreign-language market. The two companies not only released the most commercially successful foreign-language imports but also dominated the foreign-language award categories of the Golden Globes and Oscars. Tracing these developments, this paper therefore outlines the Indiewoodization of the foreign-language film market in North America. One sign of Miramax's supremacy in this market was the box office success of the Italian import, *Life is Beautiful*, which in 1999 became the highest grossing foreign-language film to that date. The paper therefore looks at how strategic releasing and marketing made the film into a foreign-language hit.

**Keywords:** Hollywood; Indiewood; film industry; film distribution; Miramax; European film; *Life is Beautiful*; Roberto Benigni

In May 1993, the Walt Disney Company paid US\$60 million to buy the independent distribution company, Miramax. Harvey Weinstein, Miramax's co-chairman, described the deal as 'introducing one film-making culture to another' (Brown and Bahiana 1993, 1). Weinstein's observation was understandable. Disney, known for its animated features, came to the deal as the leading brand name in Hollywood family entertainment, whereas Miramax had acquired a formidable and often infamous reputation as a leading independent distributor, handling American independent productions along with imports from Europe and other foreign-language territories. If Disney belonged to mainstream

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Hollywood, the categories of film handled by Miramax identified the company with what, in the contemporary parlance of the US film industry, is known as the 'specialty' sector. Disney's acquisition of Miramax therefore blurred distinctions between the major Hollywood studios and the independents, and as the decade saw further movement by the majors into the specialty market, so Miramax came to exemplify what became known as 'Indiewood' (King 2009).

Until the 1990s, foreign-language distribution in North America was a distinct market sector, supplied by specialized independent distributors operating outside of Hollywood. The emergence of Indiewood however changed this. Miramax had risen to the forefront of independent distribution through its handling of American indies (e.g. *sex, lies and videotape* [Steven Soderbergh, USA, 1989]) and British productions (e.g. *The Tall Guy* [Mel Smith, UK, 1989] and *The Krays* [Peter Medak, UK, 1990]). Foreign-language films have always occupied a small share of the North American box office, and by the start of the 1990s, few foreign-language imports had grossed more than US\$9 million in North America (*Variety* 1991b). In this context, when Miramax's release of *Cinema Paradiso* (Giuseppe Tornatore, Italy/France, 1988) grossed US\$12 million in North America, it represented a stand-out hit. Following the Disney deal, this trend continued with *The Postman* (Michael Radford, Italy/France/Belgium, 1994) (US\$21.8 million) and peaked in the decade when *Life is Beautiful* (Roberto Benigni, Italy, 1997) grossed over US\$57 million, becoming the most commercially successful foreign-language film at the North American box office to that date. Miramax's dominance and the individual success of *Life is Beautiful* therefore represented the Indiewoodization of the foreign-language market in North America.

Richard Maltby has described Hollywood as 'essentially opportunistic in its economic motivation' (2003, 15). While the Hollywood studios have become known for, and identified with, specific forms of film, they constantly look to claim new commercial terrain. To fully understand the contemporary Hollywood film industry, it is necessary to note the many strands which make up the modern diversified studio system. Miramax is now very much part of that system and the company's control of the foreign-language market presents an example of Hollywood's opportunism at work. Initially, this paper looks at the role of foreign-language film in the formation of the art film market in the USA during the decades following the Second World War. It then outlines the impact of Miramax on the foreign-language market. While in many respects this is a story of Hollywood expansionism, the Indiewoodization of the foreign-language market cannot simply be understood as Hollywood bending the market to its will. Specialty distribution involves marketing 'a film to a limited target audience, in a smaller number of theatres than a commercial distribution, with limited advertising expenditures and a strong emphasis on publicity and critical reviews to reach a discerning public' (Cones 1992, 484). Specialty distributors succeed by their skills in 'special handling', 'marketing strategies for what may be quality films but which do not have obvious broad commercial appeal'

(ibid., 483). In the second half of the paper, a case study of Miramax's marketing and releasing of *Life is Beautiful* is used to illustrate the specific practices at work in the making of a foreign-language hit and to reflect on the type of European cinema which Miramax imported to American screens.

### The art film market

In the decades after the Second World War, foreign-language films were at the centre of the 'art film' market in the USA. This emerged due to several factors. As the major Hollywood studios underwent vertical disintegration from the late 1940s into the 1950s, they reduced their production output, particularly of lower grade B features. Exhibitors turned to other sources to fill their screens, with distributors of US independent films, reissues, and foreign-language imports, particularly films from Western Europe, making up the supply deficit. Social and cultural changes in the USA also created an audience attracted to the difference of foreign-language cinema. Barbara Wilinsky (2001) argues that as post-war affluence, suburbanization, and the democratization of home ownership created a mass middle class in the USA, socio-economic hierarchies were blurred and tastes in leisure and culture became crucial non-economic means for demarcating status. As a long-running critical consensus perpetuated perceptions of European films as art, so a taste for imported films provided one means of distinguishing oneself from middle-class society and middlebrow culture: as '[l]eisure activities and taste replaced economic markers as the means of distinguishing class positions ... art cinema, as a representation of high culture (and high class), could then offer people distinction' (ibid., 83).

European films played a vital part in the formation of the art film audience, for their consumption became an act of status differentiation demonstrating investment by cinema-goers in artistic and rarefied culture. European films had cultural status because cinema-goers were not only confronted by linguistic otherness but also, in many cases, modernist-inspired aesthetic innovation and narrative ambiguity. Studies confirmed the art film attracted an audience predominantly characterized by young adult cinema-goers located in university communities or major urban centres, particularly New York, with higher than average educational attainments and who regularly attended the cinema (Adler 1959; Smythe, Lusk, and Lewis 1953). European art films therefore circulated within a market for intellectual or high-brow taste.

Until the early 1980s, independent distributors were the main importers of films to the USA (Balio 1998; Lev 1993; Mayer 1965). During the 1950s Janus Films played a leading role in advancing the reputation of European directors in the USA, releasing films from Federico Fellini and Ingmar Bergman. Likewise, in the 1960s, New Yorker Films and Embassy Pictures Corporation handled titles by Bernardo Bertolucci, Robert Bresson, and Jean-Luc Godard. Although the work of European directors was frequently greeted with critical acclaim, these distributors supplied a very small market niche. In the 1970s, foreign-language

titles gained an average 1.5% market share of the total North American box office, and less than 1% in many years, while in the 1980s that share averaged less than 0.8% (author's analysis of data from *Variety* 1991a). In this context, individual films could have a major effect on the overall foreign-language market. For example, when *I am Curious Yellow* (Vilgot Sjöman, Sweden, 1967) received its US release in 1969, it grossed US\$19 million, helping the foreign-language share of the US box office rise to 4.1%.

### Hollywood classics

Although Columbia and United Artists acquired the art film distribution companies of Edward Kingsley and Ilya Lopert in the late 1950s, the Hollywood studios retained very little involvement in this sector of the film market (Balio 1987). In the late 1950s, MGM was distributing several European titles including *Where the Hot Wind Blows* (Jules Dassin, Italy/France, 1959), *Meurtre en 45 tours* (Etienne Périer, France, 1960), and *The World in My Pocket* (Alvin Rakoff, West Germany/France/Italy, 1961). Frequently MGM's European acquisitions were characterized by the 'sword and sandal' cycle of ancient world epics, for example, *Giant of Marathon* (Jacques Tourneur, Italy/France, 1959) and *The Colossus of Rhodes* (Sergio Leone, Spain/Italy/France, 1961). Paramount (*Face to Face* [Ingmar Bergman, Sweden, 1976]), Twentieth Century Fox (*The Sicilian Clan* [Henri Verneuil, France, 1969] and *Kagemusha* [Akira Kurosawa, Japan, 1980]), United Artists (*Satryicon* [Federico Fellini, Italy/France, 1970] and *La cage aux folles* [Edouard Molinaro, France/Italy, 1978]), and Warner Bros. (*The Emigrants* [Jan Troell, Sweden, 1971]) made only occasional detours into foreign-language distribution.

This situation appeared to be changing when in 1981 Universal, Fox, and United Artists each launched their own 'classics' divisions that year to distribute domestic independent productions and foreign-language imports (Goldman 1987; Jacobson 1983; Springer 1983). Universal and Fox's divisions struggled and folded in less than a year, while UA Classics scored successes with European titles including *The Last Metro* (François Truffaut, France, 1980) and *Diva* (Jean-Jacques Beineix, France, 1981). Although UA Classics was disbanded in 1983, the trend continued as the new aspirant studio Orion Pictures formed Orion Classics. The subsidiary became a leading name in the foreign-language market until the early 1990s when financial difficulties beset the parent studio and from 1991 the operations of Orion Classics were gradually wound down (Tzioumakis 2004).

Following on the heels of the classics wave, Disney's acquisition of Miramax in the early 1990s marked a new phase of interest by the studios in specialty distribution. In February 1992, Sony hired the former executive team of Michael Barker, Tom Bernard, and Marcie Bloom from Orion Classics to head their new division, Sony Pictures Classics (SPC). This team was well established in the sector, for prior to Orion they had led UA Classics. That same year, Gramercy

Pictures was formed as a joint venture between Universal and European studio PolyGram, while in 1994 Twentieth Century Fox launched Fox Searchlight. Two years later Time Warner, the parent of Warner Bros., acquired Turner Broadcasting Company and with it the specialty distributor Fine Line Features, while in February 1998 Paramount Classics was launched. It was this acquisition of existing independents or the formation of in-house specialty divisions which marked the rise of Indiewood. While all these companies handled American indies and UK imports, only Miramax and SPC became substantially involved with foreign-language distribution. Independent companies still operated in the sector, led by New Yorker, the Samuel Goldwyn Company and, after its launch in 1991, October Films, but it was Miramax and SPC who became the most powerful distributors in the foreign-language niche.

Commenting on the Miramax/Disney deal, British trade periodical *Screen International* suggested the reason Disney and the majors in general were interested in distributing small independent films and foreign-language imports was because these films had the potential to deliver stronger profits (Brown and Bahiana 1993). Rising production and marketing costs were reducing profits from releasing big budget movies, requiring the majors to spread their risks. Although an event movie may achieve a gross box office considerably higher than even the most successful specialty release, if marketed right specialty releases could deliver better cost-to-earnings ratios. Miramax's success with *sex, lies and videotape* provided a clear example of what could be achieved. Produced for US\$1.1 million, Miramax acquired North American theatrical rights for the film at the American Film Market. After building the film's reputation through the festival circuit, marketing cleverly, and maybe deceptively, exploited the sexual connotations of the film, until the film eventually grossed US\$24 million at the domestic box office (Perren 2001). To a large extent, Indiewood was therefore built on the majors buying the skills of executives familiar with the unique demands of handling films for the specialty market. When Disney acquired Miramax, they were buying the Weinstein brothers, Harvey and Bob, while SPC was founded on the knowledge and experience which Barker, Bernard, and Bloom could bring from their time at UA Classics and Orion.

### **Miramax – indie turned major**

After a background in rock concert promotions, the Weinsteins moved into film distribution, forming Miramax in 1979, named after their parents, Miriam and Max (Thompson 1989). Foreign-language imports quickly featured amongst their releases, starting with the soft core feature *Goodbye Emmanuel* (François Leterrier, France, 1977) and followed by *Eréndira* (Ruy Guerra, France/Mexico/West Germany, 1982). After successes with *Pelle the Conqueror* (Bille August, Denmark/Sweden, 1987), *The Nasty Girl* (Michael Verhoeven, West Germany, 1990), *Mediterraneo* (Gabriele Salvatores, Italy, 1991), and *Like Water for Chocolate* (Alfonso Arau, Mexico, 1992), by the early 1990s Miramax

had consolidated its position as the leading distributor of foreign-language imports in the USA. Although the company's operations expanded beyond distribution to engage in original production, Miramax won its place at the forefront of the independent sector through skill and tenacity in securing acquisitions. At the start of the 1990s, of the 20–30 films Miramax distributed in any year, acquisitions accounted for the majority of titles released. Speaking at the Paradise Media Conference in November 1998, Jason Bloom, then Senior Vice President of Co-productions and Acquisitions, commented 'Miramax was built on acquisitions' (Hebert 1998).

To raise the profile of specialty films, Miramax became skilled in cultivating controversy in order to generate publicity. As Justin Wyatt (1998, 83) notes, Miramax was infamous for its 'ability to apply "exploitation" techniques to art house product'. Generally the strategic use of controversy was reserved for domestic productions such as *kids* (Larry Clark, USA, 1995), but with Pedro Almodóvar's *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* (Spain, 1990), Miramax opened up a debate which eventually changed the MPAA's ratings system. When the MPAA rated the film X, Miramax appealed the decision and initially released the film unrated. After the MPAA refused to revise the rating, Miramax and Almodóvar as co-plaintiffs took the case to the New York Supreme Court, stating the decision was 'arbitrary and capricious' for they claimed the film contained no more sexual activity than could easily be seen in many films rated R (Huff 1990). Floyd Abrams, attorney for the MPAA, commented 'I think it's a frivolous suit which appears to have been commenced solely for its publicity value' (quoted in Kissinger 1990, 7). Although the court eventually found in favour of the MPAA, the judge, Justice Charles E. Ramos, criticized the rating system for stigmatizing and thereby limiting the market for films with adult subject matter but without the salacious content usually associated with the X rating. Ramos was equally critical of Miramax's motivations, saying the 'allegations of economic prejudice and discrimination are unsubstantiated . . . and the exploitation of the X rating by the petitioners in their advertising . . . leads to the inference that this proceeding may be just publicity for *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!*' (Tusher 1990, 20). Subsequently the film made US\$4.1 million at the domestic box office and, on 27 September 1990, the MPAA replaced the X rating with NC-17 for 'no one 17 and under admitted'.

As the 1990s progressed, Miramax underwent an identity change. Following the acquisition by Disney, Miramax demonstrated its continuing commitment to US indies and foreign-language distribution but increasingly the company steered towards the same market as that occupied by the six major studios. Miramax's status in the US film business was transformed, as it moved from being an independent distributor and producer to become a mini-major. While still holding a dominant position in the foreign-language market, imports and indie acquisitions became less important for Miramax's release slate. Shortly after the Disney deal, the in-house production *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, USA, 1994) grossed US\$107.9 million at the domestic box office, becoming the

company's most profitable title to date, and subsequently investment in original production increased. Dimension Films, Miramax's own subsidiary label for producing genre-based films, found a lucrative franchise with the *Scream* trilogy (Wes Craven, USA, 1996, 1997, and 2000). Miramax remained a key gatekeeper for the entry of foreign-language films into the USA, but the company's overall survival depended on successes with its own English-language productions. It was not *The Postman* or *Life is Beautiful* which carried the company through the decade, but rather the healthy box office performance enjoyed by *Pulp Fiction*, *The English Patient* (Anthony Minghella, USA/UK, 1996), *Good Will Hunting* (Gus Van Sant, USA, 1997), or *Shakespeare in Love* (John Madden, USA/UK, 1998). Miramax's commitment to foreign-language distribution was therefore always to a great degree subsidized by the performance of its English-language hits.

### Niche cinema and the economy of prestige

At the North American box office in the 1990s, annually, domestic productions secured a share of over 90%, while European foreign-language films averaged approximately 1% (Table 1). Foreign-language distribution was a niche market, where success was overwhelmingly represented by productions or co-productions from Western Europe, particularly France, Germany, Italy, and Spain, together with some limited representation from Taiwan, Japan, and Latin America (Brazil and Mexico). Orion Classics and the Samuel Goldwyn Company achieved successes, and shortly after its formation, SPC made its mark with *Indochine* (Régis Wargnier, France, 1992) and *Belle Époque* (Fernando Trueba, Spain/Portugal/France, 1992). But it was Miramax, with a series of European, Mexican, and Japanese acquisitions, which became the dominant force in this dominated market sector (Table 2).

In the specialty market, success cannot be measured by box office revenues alone. Critical recognition is also enormously important for specialty distribution, as are annual awards ceremonies which validate the quality of films. It is one of the distinctive features of specialty distribution that the market is not only ruled by the economics of ticket sales but equally by what

Table 1. Gross box office market shares for films in North America by origin 1996–2000 (%).

	France	Germany	Italy	Spain	Other EU	Total European foreign- language	UK and UK/USA	Total all European	USA
1996	0.3	0.0	0.4	0.0	0.3	1.0	1.7	2.7	95.71
1997	1.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.2	1.3	4.5	5.8	92.35
1998	0.1	0.1	0.2	0.0	0.2	0.6	2.6	3.2	95.89
1999	0.4	0.0	0.9	0.1	0.1	1.5	5.0	6.5	91.33
2000	0.3	0.2	0.0	0.1	0.1	0.7	4.0	4.7	93.68

Source: Compiled from data in EAO (2003).



Table 2. Top grossing foreign-language films in North America 1990–99.

	Gross	US title	Origin	US distributor
1	57,563,264	<i>Life is Beautiful</i>	It	Miramax Films
2	21,848,932	<i>The Postman</i>	It/Fr	Miramax Films
3	21,665,468	<i>Like Water for Chocolate</i>	Mex	Miramax Films
4	11,990,401	<i>Cinema Paradiso</i>	It/Fr	Miramax Films
5	9,499,091	<i>Shall We Dance?</i>	Jp	Miramax Films
6	8,272,296	<i>All About My Mother</i>	Sp/Fr	Sony Pictures Classics
7	7,294,403	<i>Eat Drink Man Woman</i>	Tai/USA	Samuel Goldwyn Company
8	7,267,585	<i>Run Lola Run</i>	Ger	Sony Pictures Classics
9	6,933,459	<i>The Wedding Banquet</i>	Tai/USA	Samuel Goldwyn Company
10	5,820,020	<i>Cyrano de Bergerac</i>	Fr	Orion Classics
11	5,770,254	<i>Kolya</i>	CzR	Miramax Films
12	5,603,158	<i>Indochine</i>	Fr	Sony Pictures Classics
13	5,596,708	<i>Central Station</i>	Br/Fr	Sony Pictures Classics
14	5,575,738	<i>Europa Europa</i>	Fr/Ger	Orion Classics
15	5,418,216	<i>Belle Epoque</i>	Sp/Pt/Fr	Sony Pictures Classics
16	5,017,971	<i>La Femme Nikita</i>	Fr/It	Samuel Goldwyn Company
17	4,532,971	<i>Mediterraneo</i>	It	Miramax Films
18	4,228,275	<i>Antonia's Line</i>	Neth/Bel/UK	First Look
19	4,087,361	<i>Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!</i>	Sp	Miramax Films
20	4,071,548	<i>The Dinner Game</i>	Fr	Lions Gate

Sources: Compiled from Box Office Mojo, imdb.com, and *Variety* (1999b).

James F. English (2005) has described as the 'economy of prestige'. Awards become a kind of currency in the specialty market, a tangible form of exchange which represents value. Held at the end of January each year, presentation of the Golden Globes by the Hollywood Foreign Press Association (HFPA) is frequently seen as a precursor to the annual honours of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, the 'Oscars'. While both award ceremonies largely serve to celebrate the achievements of American cinema, each reserves a category for best foreign-language film. As visible signs of prestige, film nominations and awards can be seen as combining forms of what Pierre Bourdieu (1995) described as objectified and institutionalized form of cultural capital: objectified because they are tangible, material signs of artistic worth; institutionalized because they are granted by authorized agencies.

Film awards are presented as economically disinterested appraisals of artistic achievement, and to a large degree their significance resides in how they act as markers of value cut off from commercial interests. Yet, in this sector of the film market, prestige is never entirely separate from profit. For the foreign-language film market, nominations and awards are valuable resources which can be deployed in marketing media to generate audience interest and maybe ticket sales.

For little-known foreign films, an Oscar nomination is a prize almost as coveted as the gilded statue itself. It can mean picking up an American distributor, which in turn can open up markets, even those close to home that are otherwise inaccessible...

A nomination can also translate into a rush of free publicity from mainstream publications that typically pay little attention to films made far from Hollywood. And for directors it means a boost to their reputation and an automatic increase in the value of future films. (Bohlen 2001, 1)

Nominations and awards are marketable forms of cultural capital, and it is now standard practice for distributors of foreign-language films to foreground nominations and awards across posters, trailers, and other media. In the foreign-language film market therefore, power is not only achieved by companies contesting the limited economic capital available in this niche but also by competing for the even rarer honours of cultural distinction. Value is measured not only by the accumulation of economic profit but, in Bourdieu's terms, of 'symbolic profit' too (1993 [1983], 48).

Before the emergence of the Indiewood subsidiaries, independent distributors always picked up the awards in the foreign-language categories at the Golden Globes and Oscars (see Tables 3 and 4). From 1988, however, Miramax, and later SPC, prevailed. Recognizing the cultural and economic value of awards in the specialty market, Miramax systematically and aggressively chased Academy nominations. Between 1990 and 1999, Miramax won the Best Foreign-Language Film Oscar 4 times, and of the 50 films nominated in the category over the decade, 15 were distributed by Miramax. The Indiewoodization of the foreign-language market in the 1990s was therefore not only marked by the economic

Table 3. Golden Globe Awards for Best Foreign-Language Film 1980–2000.

	US title	Origin	US distributor
2000	<i>All About My Mother</i>	Sp/Fr	Sony Pictures Classics
1999	<i>Central Station</i>	Br/Fr	Sony Pictures Classics
1998	<i>My Life in Pink</i>	Fr/Be/UK/Ch	Sony Pictures Classics
1997	<i>Kolya</i>	CzR	Miramax Films
1996	<i>Les Misérables</i>	Fr	Warner Bros.
1995	<i>Farinelli</i>	It/Fr/Be	Sony Pictures Classics
1994	<i>Farewell My Concubine</i>	HK/Cn	Miramax Films
1993	<i>Indochine</i>	Fr	Sony Pictures Classics
1992	<i>Europa Europa</i>	Fr/Ger	Orion Classics
1991	<i>Cyrano de Bergerac</i>	Fr	Orion Classics
1990	<i>Cinema Paradiso</i>	It/Ft	Miramax Films
1989	<i>Pelle the Conqueror</i>	Dk/Se	Miramax Films
1988	<i>My Life as a Dog</i>	Se	Skouras Pictures
1987	<i>The Assault</i>	Nl	Cannon Films
1986	<i>The Official Story</i>	Ar	Almi Pictures
1985	<i>A Passage to India</i>	UK/USA	Columbia Pictures
1984	<i>Fanny and Alexander</i>	Se/Fr/W. Ger	Embassy Pictures Corporation
1983	<i>Gandhi</i>	USA/In/UK	Columbia Pictures
1982	<i>Chariots of Fire</i>	UK	Warner Bros.
1981	<i>Tess</i>	Fr/UK	Columbia Pictures
1980	<i>La Cage aux Folles</i>	Fr/It	United Artists

Source: Hollywood Foreign Press Association.

Table 4. Academy Awards for Best Foreign-Language Film 1980–2000.

	US title	Origin	US distributor
2000	<i>Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon</i>	Tai/HK/USA/Cn	Sony Pictures Classics
1999	<i>All About My Mother</i>	Sp/Fr	Sony Pictures Classics
1998	<i>Life is Beautiful</i>	It	Miramax Films
1997	<i>Character</i>	Nl/Be	Sony Pictures Classics
1996	<i>Kolya</i>	CzR	Miramax Films
1995	<i>Antonia's Line</i>	Nl/Be/UK	First Look Pictures Releasing
1994	<i>Burnt by the Sun</i>	Ru/Fr	Sony Pictures Classics
1993	<i>Belle Epoque</i>	Sp/Pt/Fr	Sony Pictures Classics
1992	<i>Indochine</i>	Fr	Sony Pictures Classics
1991	<i>Mediterraneo</i>	It	Miramax Films
1990	<i>Journey of Hope</i>	Ch/UK	Miramax Films
1989	<i>Cinema Paradiso</i>	It/Fr	Miramax Films
1988	<i>Pelle the Conqueror</i>	Dk/Se	Miramax Films
1987	<i>Babette's Feast</i>	Dk	Orion Classics
1986	<i>The Assault</i>	Nl	Cannon Films
1985	<i>The Official Story</i>	Ar	Almi Pictures
1984	<i>Dangerous Moves</i>	Ch	International Spectrafilm
1983	<i>Fanny and Alexander</i>	Se/Fr/W. Ger	Embassy Pictures Corp.
1982	<i>Starting Over</i>	Sp	20th Century Fox International Classics
1981	<i>Mephisto</i>	Hu/W. Ger/Au	Analysis Film Releasing Corp.
1980	<i>Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears</i>	USSR	International Film Exchange Ltd

Source: Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

dominance of this box office niche by Miramax and SPC, but also by how these distributors systematically accumulated nominations and awards as prestige indicators for imported features.

Miramax's releases of *Cinema Paradiso* and *Kolya* (Jan Sverák, Czech Republic, 1996) both won the Oscar for best foreign-language film and achieved box office success, as did SPC's award winners *Indochine* and *Belle Epoque*. In these cases, cultural awards were accompanied by cash rewards. Winning the same award did not however change the fortunes of Miramax's release, *Journey of Hope* (Xavier Koller, Switzerland/Turkey/UK, 1990), nor *Character* (Mike van Diem, Netherlands/Belgium, 1997) from SPC, which respectively grossed only US\$0.3 million and US\$0.6 million (*Variety* 1999a). Although awards are important to foreign-language films gaining extra exposure, there is no direct causal connection between the accumulation of awards and increased box office revenues. Even so, banking the economic and cultural capital available from foreign-language hits, Miramax and SPC not only enjoyed the largest share of revenues available from the foreign-language market but also muddied the division between the popular commerce of Hollywood and the cultural prestige traditionally associated with European and foreign-language cinema as a legacy of the art film market.

### **Miramaximizing *Life is Beautiful***

Specialty films make distinctive marketing demands, as distributors aim to expand the appeal of minority interest entertainment. Starring, directed, and co-written by the Italian comic actor Roberto Benigni, *Life is Beautiful* was set in Italy during 1939–44. In the small city of Arezzo, Jewish waiter Guido Orefice (Benigni) falls in love with and marries Dora (Nicoletta Braschi), and they have a son, Giosué (Giorgio Cantarini). The family's carefree existence is shattered when Guido and Giosué are deported by the Nazis to an extermination camp and Dora follows. Guido endeavours to conceal the horrors of the camp from his son by convincing the boy that everything around him is an elaborate game which he can win by hiding from the guards. Just before the liberating forces arrive, Guido is murdered but Giosué survives and, amongst the displaced inmates, finds his mother. Miramax's handling of *Life is Beautiful* is interesting, therefore, because not only did it involve scaling the obstacle of foreign-language difference, but also selling the difficult proposition of a comedy about the Holocaust. Miramax's marketing and releasing of the film exemplified four key strategies which are common to foreign-language distribution: building a film's reputation through the festival circuit; platform releasing; constructing a marketing campaign to mask a film's foreignness; and aggressively chasing awards recognition. By looking at these strategies it is possible to identify a template for Indiewood's packaging and making of a foreign-language hit.

### ***Doing the festival circuit***

Produced by Melampo Cinematografica of Rome for US\$6.5 million, the film was released in Italy on 20 December 1997. By early February 1998, the film had already made US\$35 million in Italy, and was nominated in six categories for the Nastro d'Argento or 'Silver Ribbon' awards by the Italian film critics association, Sindacato Nazionale dei Giornalisti Cinematografici Italiani. Based on this performance, that month Miramax paid over US\$7 million to acquire worldwide (not including Italy) rights to the film (Roman 1998b).

As a first step towards building the film's international exposure, in May 1998 Miramax showed the film in competition at the Festival International du Film de Cannes, where it won the jury's prestigious Grand Prix, usually regarded as second to the Palme d'Or in the festival's awards rankings. After Cannes, the film went to the Montréal Festival des Films du Monde in September, where it was shown out of competition in the 'Hors Concours' or 'World Greats' stream of programming. Nine days later, it screened at the Toronto International Film Festival, winning the event's leading honour, the People's Choice Award. Compared to major event movies, specialty films are marketed on very modest budget. Festivals provide a cost-effective platform for gaining exposure, as films can gain free publicity from the overall media coverage which an event attracts. Miramax has therefore exploited the international festival circuit as a large publicity generator. Although Cannes remains the pre-eminent event in the

festival calendar, because of its place in the year, Toronto is arguably more important for foreign-language imports entering the North American market, as the festival provides a launch pad for potential Oscar contenders. Even before the film was released in North America, Miramax had inserted *Life is Beautiful* into two key systems: the international festival circuit and the annual awards calendar.

**Platform releasing**

*Life is Beautiful* opened in the USA on 23 October 1998 with a PG-13 rating. Initially the film was shown on 6 screens in Los Angeles and New York, and in the following week expanded to 38 screens in the top 20 markets, before in the third week it was showing on 110 screens in the top 40 markets. Over the next three months the scale of release gradually expanded: during January 1999 it was showing on 215–225 screens, and grossing approximately US\$1 million per week, an exceptional performance for a foreign-language release (Figure 1).

Opening the film in this way, Miramax gave the film a platform release. With platforming a film initially opens at a single cinema or small group of cinemas in the major metropolitan centres of Los Angeles, New York, and Toronto, before the release is gradually widened over subsequent weeks and months. This release

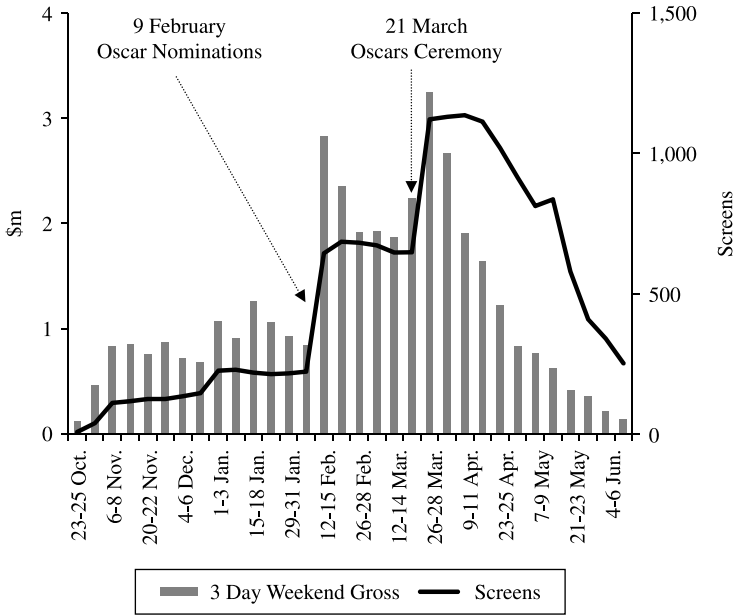


Figure 1. Platform release of *Life is Beautiful* in North America. Source: Compiled from screen counts and box office grosses reported in *Screen International* 6 November 1998–18 June 1999.

strategy has the conscious aim of attracting strong reviews from critics and generating favourable 'word-of-mouth' amongst cinema-goers (Fellman 2006). As a release strategy, platforming is situated between the economic and cultural dynamics of the specialty market, for a film is sold to audiences through the long-term cultivation of a critical consensus amongst reviewers and audience peers.

### *Packaging foreignness*

Film marketing media create a prism through which a film is viewed by potential cinema-goers. Promotional materials combine to form what John Ellis (1982, 30) calls the 'narrative image', the vision of the film constructed across posters, trailers, television, and radio advertisements, etc. Given the size of the foreign-language market in North America, promotional media must present films in ways designed to attract cinema-goers potentially alienated by imported features. Marketing therefore has to mediate the foreignness of imports.

Amongst the range of marketing materials deployed by film distributors, trailers condense a range of promises and attractions offered to audiences. Trailers do not directly present films, for as Lisa Kernan observes, trailers rarely adhere to the narrative logic of a film, but rather, through editing, 'construct a new *trailer* logic' (2004, 10 emphasis in original). Images and sounds are selected and combined to form ways of seeing or anticipating the film. This was the case for the North American release of *Life is Beautiful*, where theatrical trailers and television spot advertisements presented a montage of selected moments without following their chronology within the film's narrative. In the case of the main theatrical trailer, a broad three-part structure was created. Initially, moments from the first half of the film illustrated the joyful carefree life of Guido and Dora in Tuscany. This was followed by scenes of deportation and the life of Guido and Giosué in the extermination camp. Although moments were combined outside their chronological order, across these two parts the movement from Tuscany to the camp meant that trailer logic approximated the film's narrative logic. In the final section, however, the trailer entirely departed from the narrative, producing a logic of its own by presenting a montage of moments juxtaposing life in Tuscany and the camp.

Visually, as a collection of achronological moments, the trailer could produce a level of incomprehension amongst cinema-goers – what do these images mean? Use of music and voice over however created a coherent logic for the images. Music fixed meaning at a very broad level. Following the tripartite structure of the montage, musical excerpts from the original soundtrack signalled changing moods between each section. Over the Tuscany section a whimsical tune established the playfulness of this early state before its interruption by a more melancholic and mournful melody to set a sombre atmosphere for the deportation and camp scenes. For the third, concluding section, a soaring orchestral theme provided a sense of spiritual triumph.

Trailers prepared for the North American release concealed the European difference of the film by removing any Italian dialogue and adding an English-language male voice over. Music only directed the meaning of the montage in broad tonal terms, but this voice over more precisely defined the terms by which the montage should be read and understood. As Roland Barthes observed, linguistic signs can fix or 'anchor' the polysemy or multiple meanings of visual signs, 'direct[ing] the reader through the signifieds of the image, causing him [*sic*] to avoid some and receive others . . . it remote-controls him [*sic*] towards a meaning chosen in advance' (1977, 40, emphasis in original). With the first and second sections, the voice over pulled together all the audio and visual elements, giving them narrative coherence: narration for the first section outlined a love story and with the second section set up the game in the camp. With the final section, the montage of moments from Tuscany and the camp was accompanied by the lush orchestral theme, and the voice over narrowed down the potential meanings of these elements with the concluding platitude, 'a story that proves love, family and imagination conquer all'. No mention was made of the Holocaust in the voice over. Instead, the brutalities of a specific period in European history were ignored and the film was presented as a story of universal meaning. Arguably, the film does this anyway, but the trailers were constructed in such ways as to encourage this line of reading. What the voice over did, therefore, was not only to add a coherent logic to the montage of moments but also constructed a preferred way of orienting anticipation of what the film would deliver. Overall, trailers therefore not only worked to conceal the film's foreignness, removing dialogue to mask the film's linguistic difference, but also presented the film as a story of universal significance and appeal.

### Banking on the Oscars

By releasing the film in autumn 1998, *Life is Beautiful* was eligible for consideration at the 71st Academy Awards the following year. To be eligible, any imported film had to have been released in its country of origin between 1 November 1997 and 31 October 1998, and to have shown for at least seven consecutive days in a commercial cinema (Roman 1998a). From the moment *Life is Beautiful* was released, advertisements appeared in the trade press inviting members of the Academy to private screenings as Miramax immediately worked towards making the film an awards contender. Early television spot advertisements cited press quotes to hype the artistic achievement and awards potential of the film: the *Chicago Tribune*, *Boston Herald*, and *Los Angeles Daily News* were all cited as describing the film as 'A Masterpiece!', while the *Chicago Tribune* was further quoted as describing 'Roberto Benigni is an artist of rare genius!' Although the earliest television spots were prepared several months before the Academy nominations, the renowned film critic Roger Ebert was quoted in these as 'predict[ing] it will be nominated for Best Picture'. By frontloading these credentials, television advertising marked the film with

critical prestige early in its release and provided a weight of opinion supporting it as a realistic awards candidate. Across the theatrical trailers and television advertising, cinema-goers were therefore confronted by two narrative images for the film: a universal story of love and imagination triumphing over adversity, and a showcase of (potentially) quality award winning cinema.

By the end of 1998, the film and/or members of its cast had already picked up awards in the USA, together with honours in France, Italy, Canada, Greece, and Poland. On 9 February 1999 the film was nominated in seven Oscar categories: best picture, director, actor, screenplay, editing, foreign-language film, and original dramatic score. Of the five films nominated in the foreign-language category that year, *Life is Beautiful* was one of three contenders from Miramax, while the other two were SPC releases. Newly edited trailers hailed the film as 'Winner of 40 international awards' and highlighted the Oscar nominations.

In the week before the awards were presented, a minor scandal occurred when an article in *New York* magazine alleged Miramax had unduly influenced Academy members in their voting. In the article, it was claimed Miramax paid veteran Hollywood publicist Warren Cowan and Academy members Dick Guttman, Gerry Pam, and Murray Weissman to create press coverage and entertain their fellow members in the distributor's interests. It was alleged Miramax had paid Cowan to organize dinners for Benigni to meet the publicist's clients and eminent Academy members, Kirk Douglas, Jack Lemmon, and Elizabeth Taylor (Finke 1999). After Benigni's win, ex-publicist Mark Urman commented, 'Roberto made a lot of friends, and it won him an acting Oscar even though I think history will tell us that it was perhaps not deserved. He won it for his dinner performances' (quoted in Biskind 2005, 370).

At the ceremony on 21 March 1999, *Life is Beautiful* won in three categories. Benigni picked up the award for Best Actor and Nicola Piovani for Best Original Dramatic Score. *Life is Beautiful* took the Best Foreign-Language Film award but missed out on the Best Picture statue, which went to Miramax's own release *Shakespeare in Love*. These achievements triggered a new phase in Miramax's release and marketing strategy for the film. Revised television spots and other promotional materials integrated the award victories into their marketing address. When the nominations were announced, the film was showing on 221 screens but the following week the scale of release jumped to 644 screens, precipitating a rapid expansion of the release through the remainder of February and first three weeks of March (Figure 1). By the week of the ceremony, the film was showing on 647 screens but the run of awards triggered a further surge in exposure as the scale of release nearly doubled to 1,121 screens. Here was one of the clearest statements of Indiewood's power, for none of the independent distributors who handled foreign-language imports had the same financial resources to mount such a size of release. Throughout April, the film continued to show on over 1,000 screens per week, and after this peak, the film played through May before concluding its run in June, nine months after it opened.



*Life is Beautiful*'s initial theatrical run can therefore be divided into three phases. From October 1998 to early February 1999, platforming expanded the scale of release from 6 to 221 screens, building publicity and audience word-of-mouth. A second period of six weeks followed the Oscar nominations as Miramax approximately tripled the number of screens the film was shown on. Finally, following Oscar victories, the scale of release doubled, reaching its widest point, followed by a gradual reduction over the next three months. Miramax's releasing demonstrated the interconnectedness between cultural and economic capital in the foreign-language market. Before the nominations were announced in February, the film had grossed a total of US\$18.4 million, a performance which already made the film a major foreign-language hit. Following the nominations, in just six weeks the film nearly doubled its gross, taking an additional US\$17.6 million, and after the awards were presented, it made a further US\$21.2 million before concluding its run. Over two-thirds of the film's total North American box office gross was therefore made following the Oscar nominations (Figure 2). By scheduling the scale of the film's release to coordinate with key stages in the build up to the Academy Awards, Miramax was able to convert the symbolic profit of nominations and awards into the economic profit of box office revenues.

### The beautiful life – Miramax's Europe

Miramax's strength in the foreign-language market was mainly formed through its European acquisitions (Table 2). As distribution shapes the visibility of films, it is worth asking what vision of European cinema did Miramax bring to American screens? *Kolya* and *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* represented a fair degree

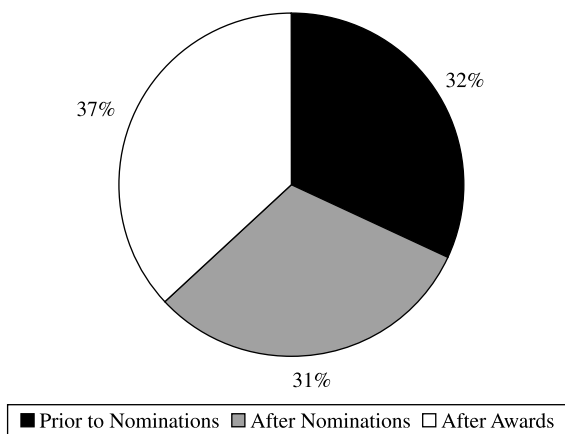


Figure 2. *Life is Beautiful* proportion of North American gross before, during, and after nominations for the 71st Academy Awards. Source: Author's analysis of box office grosses reported in *Screen International* 6 November 1998–18 June 1999.

of diversity but the Italian imports *Cinema Paradiso*, *The Postman*, and *Mediterraneo* brought a particular vision of Europe to American screens. In each case, a small town or rural location provided the setting for narratives of simple people living simple lives. These stories did not work toward evolving an arc of plot developments but rather concentrated on relationships between small clusters of characters in relatively closed communities. While characters came and went, community stability and continuity prevailed. Characters did not therefore change their world but rather adapted to a world which was largely unchanging. Particular historical and political circumstances were acknowledged in each case – the exile of Chilean poet Pablo Neruda to Italy for *The Postman* or the Second World War in *Mediterraneo* – but the communities seen in these films always appeared cut off from these realities. Instead, political and social challenges forever remained outside the community. In these closed little universes, a relaxed sexuality, or at least sensuality, became the value underpinning the whole quality of life. Frequently these films gloried in the touristic attractions of serene and picturesque vistas. Sensuality and landscape tied these communities to nature, creating a world in which simple pleasures defined the very substance of life. Music, colour, pace, and light incident served to underpin this quality by setting a tone of whimsy and gentle humour within these films.

As these films achieved success, they popularized a certain vision of European cinema for the American market, and *Life is Beautiful* fitted this trend perfectly. Guido and Dora's life in Arezzo evoked exactly the form of idyllic, little world Europe presented by other Miramax imports. Deportation to the camp demanded the central characters must confront change, but as the film continued in the same playful tone, this was hardly registered as the film confined the realities of genocide to a single shot of heaped corpses. It was this clash of creative tenor and historical fact which became the central talking point for the film's reception, as US journalists focused on a single issue: the film's handling of the Holocaust. A repeated line of criticism compared Guido's game of illusions to Benigni's direction, arguing that presenting the Holocaust as a comedy infantilized the audience. 'You'll laugh! You'll cry! You'll smile through the evils of genocide!' wrote Owen Gleiberman (1998, 54) in *Entertainment Weekly*, suggesting the film '[a]s shot ... looks like a game. We don't see any brutality ... and so the film, stylizing reality to an insane degree, treats us like children, too.' David Denby (1999, 99) in the *New Yorker* echoed this view: 'Benigni protects his audience as Guido protects his son; we are all treated like children.' Similarly J. Hoberman (1998) in the *Village Voice* commented:

*Life is Beautiful* shows not just an attempt to save a child but also an attempt to protect his innocence – and hence that of the spectator who may or may not know (or want to know) how the extremity of the death camps compelled parents and children to unbearable acts of sacrifice.

Hoberman summed up the film as ‘funny (kinda) and even tasteful (sorta). But in its fantasy of divine grace, it is also nonsense.’ Criticizing the emotional tone of the film, Richard Schickel (1998, 117) in *Time* commented: ‘Sentimentality is a kind of fascism too, robbing us of judgment and moral acuity, and it needs to be resisted. *Life is Beautiful* is a good place to start.’

Miramax achieved success by importing the cosy vision of a sun-drenched Europe lost in a not too distant past. With the success of the Italian imports, American audiences were presented with a retreat into a Europe which was historically placed yet apparently timeless, a touristic cinema of welcoming countrysides and easygoing lifestyles. *Life is Beautiful* shared this vision, and so belonged to a highly marketable form of European cinema, but its playful treatment of the Holocaust became a point of contention, resulting in a contradiction between the film’s marketing address and its critical reception. While Miramax’s marketing aimed to dis-embed the film from historical realities and give it a universal appeal, it was precisely the light handling of history which attracted the hostile reception amongst reviewers. In the specialty market, where positive reviews really count, this contradiction could have undermined Miramax’s marketing efforts, but instead it became an object of critical debate. Although the negative reviews could have discouraged cinema-goers, the film’s performance proved this was not the case, and in fact it could be speculated that this press attention maybe intensified public interest.

### The language of dubbing

When it comes to trading culture, Hollywood’s opportunism may be expansive but still has its limits. Language continually presents an obstacle for the trade in films. Like other cultural products, when films cross borders they are subject to the ‘cultural discount’, as markers of cultural difference – languages, styles, beliefs, history, or behaviours – frequently diminish their commercial value (Hoskins, McFadyen, and Finn 1997). For the US film industry, subtitling has proven the preferred response to the cultural discount of language differences, but the perception endures that reading subtitles remains an obstacle to popular success:

we’ve always had problems with foreign films – from the films of Italy’s Federico Fellini and Germany’s Rainer Werner Fassbinder, to the more recent works of Spain’s Pedro Almodóvar. There’s often an ‘If I wanted to read, I would have stayed at home’ mentality when it comes to foreign films. Many folks – and you know who you are – grimace and groan the minute they realize a film has subtitles, if they bother to go at all. (Graham 1999, E1)

Dubbing provides a solution to that problem but has faced widespread antipathy amongst distributors and audiences. Former distributor Ben Barenholtz commented in the mid-1990s that the

art of dubbing has improved in recent years, with the annoyance of ‘lip-flapping’ reduced, if not eliminated. Even so, United States distributors these days seem

to think that their countrymen are about as likely to flock to dubbed movies as are the French to eat a breakfast of cornflakes instead of croissants. (quoted in Pristin 1996, 1)

Dubbing provides a cultural solution to an economic problem: how to expand the appeal of imported culture. Yet why is the practice so widely rejected by critics and audiences? Foreign-language imports belong to the specialty market, where the appeal of films is partly based on their difference and inaccessibility. In the specialty market, preserving the original language of a film can count not only as an indicator of authentic foreignness but may in certain cases be also prized for protecting the original artistic vision of a film's creators. When considered in this context, dubbing appears to do violence to the original, removing the otherness which to a certain extent explains the exotic appeal of imported culture. Dubbing foreign-language films creates accessibility in a sector of the market where lack of accessibility is actually a mark of cultural value which fosters exclusivity. In the specialty film market, the cultural discount of language differences may therefore be a cultural bonus.

Allied Artists' release of *A Man and a Woman* (Claude Lelouch, France, 1966) and Triumph's release of *The Boat* (Wolfgang Petersen, West Germany, 1981) belong to a history of failed attempts by US distributors to sell dubbed versions of European hits to American audiences (Klady 1999). Aware of both the market possibilities and pitfalls, during the 1990s Miramax had tried to expand the audience for foreign-language films by dubbing hit films from Europe. After *The Visitors* (Jean-Marie Poiré, France, 1993) made US\$90 million at the French box office, Miramax invested US\$500,000 in creating an English-language dub for the USA, but when test screenings indicated a poor response amongst cinema-goers, the film was only given a limited release in a subtitled version. Speaking to *The New York Times* in 1996, Harvey Weinstein mourned the difficulties of gaining an audience for dubbed films in the USA but remained convinced that dubbing would work 'if you find the right movie' (quoted in Pristin 1996, 1). Despite the cultural discount, Miramax's subtitled release of *Life is Beautiful* had already delivered box office records for a foreign-language import by the conclusion of its original theatrical run. Approximately 13% of regular cinema-goers had seen the film. Based on this astonishing performance, Miramax believed the audience for the film could be further extended by releasing a dubbed version in US theatres. Opening on 27 August 1999, Miramax tested the dubbed edition across 15 screens in the New York and LA areas with plans to extend the release elsewhere (Seiler 1999). Although the new theatrical release provided the opportunity for a further crossover into the popular market, Mark Gill, President of Miramax's LA office, indicated the motivation behind the dubbed release came from parent company Disney, based on the impression amongst retailers that the video release, timed for November, would benefit from a simultaneous release of Italian and English-language versions (Mathews 1999). Further speculation suggested Miramax had the intention of undermining the forthcoming September release of Sony's own English-language *Holocaust*

comedy-drama, *Jakob the Liar* (Peter Kassovitz, France/USA/Hungary, 1999), starring Robin Williams (Koehler 1999).

Press responses to the new edition were characteristic of the enduring resistance to dubbing. *Variety*'s Robert Koehler levelled criticisms at the performances of the dubbing artists, describing Ilaria Borelli's voicing of Dora as 'close to mush . . . when she proclaims, "I wash jusht like patty in heesh hahnds"' (ibid., 54). Koehler was representative of the broad critical rejection of the dubbed version. Writing in the *New York Times*, Janet Maslin (1999, 14) provided a solitary positive review, arguing 'dubbing is easy to get used to, and it has the effect of emphasizing what a universal language *Life is Beautiful* spoke in the first place. Mr Benigni's improbably funny and tender Holocaust fable never felt foreign anyhow.' Maslin's comments optimistically suggested a universal message – that love, family, and imagination can conquer all – was capable of cancelling the cultural discount of linguistic difference. However, on its opening weekend, the dubbed edition averaged US\$4,262 per screen (US\$63,934 weekend total) compared to the US\$19,820 screen average (US\$118,920 total) of the subtitled print on its first weekend (Lyons 1999). After six weeks on release, the dubbed edition only added US\$381,896 to the total gross before it closed and was released on videocassette.

For an import with the popular attraction of *Life is Beautiful*, the foreignness of language differences spoke louder than any universal message of narrative content. Perhaps it was not dubbing but the exhaustion of the possible capacity audience by the subtitled release which was responsible for the failure of this secondary release. Even so, the antipathy amongst critics which greeted the prospect of the dubbed release is representative of the more general rejection of dubbing. In other international territories, dubbing is widely accepted: for example, it is common practice in France and Italy for English-language releases, predominantly films from Hollywood, to be dubbed and reach wide audiences. Considering the outstanding success *Life is Beautiful* had enjoyed, the failure of dubbing to energize any substantially new audience for the film demonstrated the resistance of the American market to dubbing. More significantly, the case was symptomatic of how language differences operate as a major cultural barrier, insulating and protecting the American film market from the entry of foreign-language films. Dubbing reveals an interesting paradox at work in foreign-language distribution: language differences limit the market for imported films but the preservation of those differences remains essential to the market. Consequently, while Indiewood may have expanded into the foreign-language market, it has not expanded that market and is unlikely to do so.

## Conclusion

Indiewood colonized the foreign-language film market in North America during the 1990s. Miramax and SPC, the specialty distributions subsidiaries of Disney and Sony, not only dominated the micro-niche of the foreign-language box office

but also acquisitively chased and accumulated the cultural capital of nominations and awards. Distributed by Miramax, the box office and award winning success of *Life is Beautiful* was representative of this new found relationship between Hollywood and European cinema. Through special handling, Miramax was able to turn the film into a genuine hit. During the 1990s, European imports achieved the greatest successes in the foreign-language market. Subsequently, East Asian cinema has moved to the fore, led by *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (Ang Lee, Taiwan/Hong Kong/USA/China, 2000) and *Hero* (Yimou Zhang, Hong Kong/China, 2002), with the former surpassing *Life is Beautiful* to become the highest grossing foreign-language release in North America to date, with US\$128.1 million in ticket revenues. But with SPC and Miramax handling both films, respectively, Indiewood has remained central to shaping the commercial and artistic visibility of foreign-language films in the world's richest cinema-going territory. Foreign-language distribution may only cater for a small, exclusive audience, but for this market, Miramax and SPC now define popularity.

Hollywood's opportunism has led the majors to diversify their operations into the foreign-language market, and through their specialty subsidiaries, Disney and Sony hold a leading presence in this niche. Indiewood's involvement in the foreign-language market offers just one example of how far the modern Hollywood studio system has diversified as it chases further revenue streams. Yet, for those majors who have entered the market, foreign-language distribution remains merely a sideline. When Indiewood was on the rise in the 1990s, box office revenues from the distribution arms of the main studios dwarfed the performance of the specialty divisions (Table 5). By the end of 1999, *Life is Beautiful* was an exceptional foreign-language hit, but the film's gross was meagre compared to the US\$276.4 million which *The Sixth Sense* (M. Night Shyamalan, USA, 1999) made for the parent studio that same year. Foreign-language distribution may be at the periphery of the modern Hollywood studio system, but the Indiewood subsidiaries now have a powerful role in controlling and defining the visibility of imported film culture in North America.

Table 5. Disney and Sony: gross annual revenues by distribution division 1992–98.

	Disney		Sony	
	Buena Vista	Miramax	Sony/TriStar/Columbia	Sony Pictures Classics
1992	851.3		328.0	17.2
1993	851.5	137.7	322.2	24.5
1994	1033.1	141.3	470.9	12.1
1995	987.5	149.4	676.2	23.0
1996	1301.1	154.6	626.1	39.0
1997	885.7	320.0	1262.3	21.9
1998	1084.1	276.9	735.9	44.6

Source: ShowBIZ Data.

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