

# QUIRKY CINEMA: WES ANDERSON (AND BEYOND)

## Session Two

### Quirky and Indie Branding

Department of Film & Audiovisual Culture,

Masaryk University

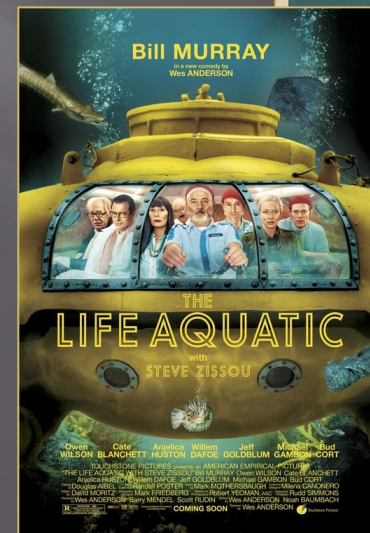
Dr. Richard Nowell

# Agenda

I. Quirky and Independence

II. The Values of Indie

III. Quirky Films and Indie



# **Today's Targeted Learning Outcomes**

To develop a demonstrable understanding of:

I. The values of Indie Culture.

II. The logics of Indie branding.

III. How indie values are projected by/in quirky films..

# Quirky, Auteurism, and Branding

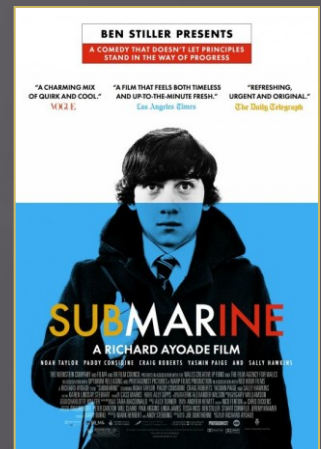
As we saw last time, approaching Quirky cinema as an Auteur cinema risks obscuring key nuts-and-bolts issues

This is because Auteurism is a Romantic model that eschews – is even antagonistic to – the industrial nature of cinema

As well as obscuring Quirky's status as a format, Auteurism also obscures Quirky's heavy reliance on branding practices

Tellingly, the branding strategy used for Quirky films goes to great lengths to emphasize their Auteur credentials

Such branding frames Quirky films as examples of American Independent cinema otherwise known as Indie



# **Quirky and American Independent Cinema**

While prevalent, claims in Anglophone audiovisual culture of a film's independence or indie status are perhaps best understood as rhetorical

To claim a film is indie is to declare its supposed distinctions from the content and structures of Hollywood; these are far from clear-cut though

1. Hollywood releases are independent productions; Hollywood consists of distributors that outsource production or buy films from third parties
2. Films deemed to boast the textual hallmarks of independence are also often financed and distributed by the Hollywood companies themselves

Conversely, films handled by non-Hollywood companies often boast the very features we typically associate with standard Hollywood releases



# Indiewood: Quirky's Textual/Industrial Meeting-Point

The conditions that undermine the credibility of industrial and textual independence are pronounced in Quirky Cinema



This is because Quirky Cinema belongs to the the industrial and aesthetic terrain that Geoff King famously called “Indiewood”



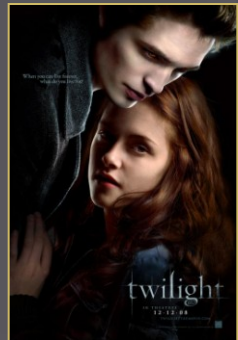
King reminds us films labelled as independent are often handled by specialty divisions that are owned by Hollywood companies



He argues such films combine traits of “standard” Hollywood films with those considered to distinguish independent films



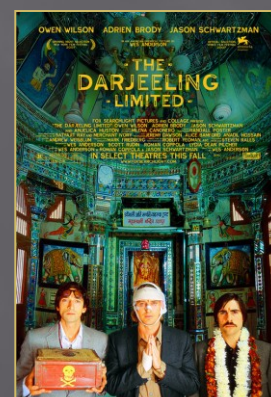
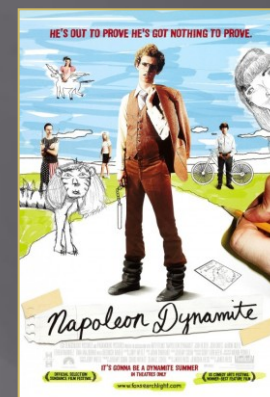
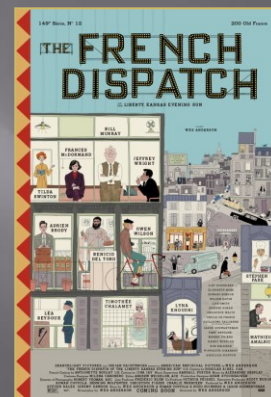
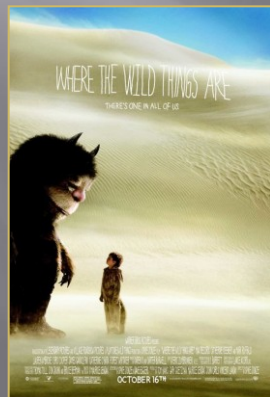
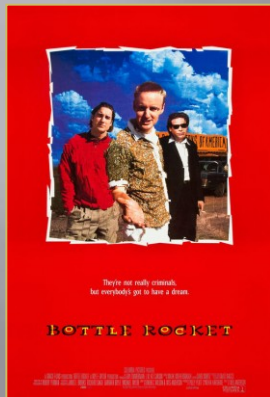
Often released by Hollywood companies or their indie divisions, Quirky films mix “Hollywood” sincerity and “indie” detachment



# Quirky Film Distribution (US)

HOLLYWOOD: MPA-MEMBER  
QUIRKY FILM RELEASES

INDIEWOOD: SPECIALTY  
DIVISION QUIRKY RELEASES









# **Michael Z. Newman (2009) and Indie Values**

Given the entwinement of Hollywood and independent cinema, we may wish to ask not if a film is indie, but rather how it is branded as indie?

Newman's theorization of indie values helps us by providing a conceptual framework that enables us to examine individual cases ...

1. What is indie's relationship to the "mainstream"?
2. What are the three core values that define indie?
3. Why does Newman consider indie an elitist subculture?

# Indie Values: Or the Three A's

Newman shows us that indie is built around a series of values, which are mobilized in and around cultural products to position them as indie

This branding strategy is used to try to convince consumers that the product in question embodies values they as consumers deem attractive

1. It insists a product is shaped by an autonomous individual rather than the the complex hierarchical structures of large corporations
2. It also insists a product is authentic: that it reflects a unique vision of integrity rather than the formula of “more commercial” products
3. These notions cast certain cultural products as a superior alternative to a mainstream of commerciality, conformity, and conservativeness

# A Convincing Fantasy

Newman does not suggest that indie branding reflects the realities of cultural production; it conjures credible fantasy

It rests on the mainstream actually existing, when it is a mutable concept stakeholders invoke to give indie meaning

It rests on near-absolute creative autonomy, when cultural products like all films derive from creative collaboration

It rests on authentic visions, when cultural products belong to broader trends and borrow from established traditions

These ideas permit folks to imagine their indie tastes as superior to a foil of their own creation: i.e. the mainstream





# Quirky Film Content as Branding

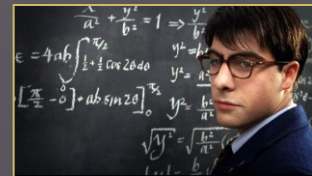
Perhaps more than any other type of film, Quirky Cinema's commercial imperatives are bound up with indie branding

This is because Quirky's indie credentials are jeopardized by its use of a sincerity generally associated with Hollywood

This situation means steps are taken to shore up a quirky films' indie credentials to avoid alienating indie consumers

As Newman's examples indicate, a brand is not just conveyed by marketing materials: it is projected by content as well

Branding of this sort invites us to approach films as active agents in their own cultural positioning and heirarchizing



# Screening I: *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou (2004)*

1. How does this film use characters, narrative, and aesthetics to project indie's core values?
2. How does this film depict creative endeavor to position itself as indie?
3. How does this films use their content to distance itself from the “mainstream”?



# **Conflating Content and Off-Screen Fantasy**

This film advances its indie credentials as a Quirky film, by lampooning an imagined Hollywood mainstream



It is after all concerned with an eccentric leading a group of guerilla filmmakers who make distinctive movies



The film also unfolds as a struggle between an offbeat human drama and a ridiculous Hollywood action movie



In the end, the former wins out, as Steve walks away from sensational filmmaking to be a surrogate parent



It also promotes the idea of indie adaptations like itself via its Greek chorus of Portuguese David Bowie covers





# Screening II: *Me, Earl, and The Dying Girl* (2015)

1. How does this film use characters, narrative, and aesthetics to project indie's core values?
2. How does this film depict creative endeavor to position itself as indie?
3. How does this film use their content to distance itself from the “mainstream”?



# A Film that is Aware It's Trying Very Hard

This film goes to great lengths to elevate its formulaic teen drama through overt, systematic indie branding strategies



It centralizes filmmakers whose amateur status enables them to operate as fully autonomous creative practitioners



It centralizes characters whose authentic identities derive from superior nonmainstream tastes including for indie films



It mobilizes characters as foils whose identities and tastes it derides to position its protagonists as a superior alternative



It does all of this not only to position itself as indie, but also to protect itself from rejection for not being indie enough



# A Call to Integrate Emotional Sincerity in Indie

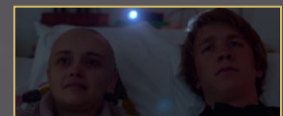
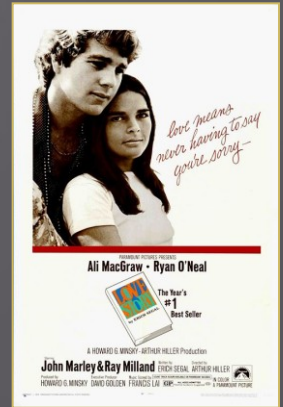
The film emphasizes indie values in order to justify its place in indie culture, as it leans heavily into quirky's sincere side

After all, the film promotes sincerity via Greg's embrace of vulnerable sincere engagement over protective ironic distance

It is also pairs indie values and a story reminiscent of hyper-mainstream teen melodrama like *Love Story* and *A Fault...*

Evidently, Greg's abandonment of quirkily remade indie films for emotional expressionism calls for a new direction in indie

This positions the film as a self-proclaimed end-point for quirky, in favor of a more emotionally-engaged indie cinema





## **In Sum**

Approaching Quirky through Auterism risks misrepresenting its cultural politics as purely personal rather than a product of branding practices

Conceptual problems with claims of independence are avoided if we approach these films as vehicles for established Indie branding regimes

Such branding enables them to be presented as credible avatars for values that position them as a superior alternative to an imagined mainstream

This highly marketable status is pursued by implying unattainable qualities of absolute authenticity of vision and autonomy of execution

Such values are invoked by the films' ironic aspects; but also characters who embody them, oftentimes because of their own creative endeavors

# **Next Time...**

Quirky's ironic/sincere content and its indie branding have been used to make it marketable and appealing to a specific segment of the public ...

Topic: Quirky and the Hipster Audience

Readings: Newman (2013), "Movies for Hipsters".

Home Screenings: *500 Days of Summer* (2009)  
*Ghost World* (1999)

[Preparatory Questions on MS TEAMS and in the Syllabus]

Meeting: Thursday 20 October