



The retreat of Warner Bros and Co. marks a new era for Independent Film

Bob Alexander, President of IndiePix, the Internet-based distributor of independent films, reveals how the shift in the independent film industry is not a cause for concern but an opportunity to embrace new technologies

Over the last ten weeks, the independent film “industry” has been restructured before our eyes. Let’s take a look:

1. ThinkFilm, in a financial crisis having overpaid for films that it can’t make money on in distribution, sells its catalog to a Canadian investor/speculator.
2. New Line Cinema, respected for its having pioneered “edgy” films into the mass market, is closed by Warner Bros; 450 jobs in NY and LA lost.
3. Picturehouse, run by top indie film distributor Bob Berney, is closed by Warner Bros and titles folded into the studio.
4. Warner Independent, the so-called “independent” arm of Warner Bros managed by a former studio exec, Polly Cohen, is closed and folded into the studio.
5. Cablevision, owner of the IFC channel, successfully bids an estimated \$500 million for the Sundance Channel, now controls all cable presentation of independent film.
6. Discovery Networks, after purchasing rights to and then declining to show “*Taxi to the Dark Side*”, is rumored to be closing its independent film activity and some fear for its support of the respected Silver Docs film festival.

IndiePix has been convinced that the traditional models of distribution, which barely work for the major studios, do not work — at all — in some scaled down version for independent film. The economics of distributing films in theaters — with the extraordinary costs of theater rental, newspaper advertising, and related distribution expenses — simply make theaters outmoded. Digital distribution of high quality images to theaters doesn’t solve the problem: it’s a drop in the financial bucket that will be barely noticed if at all.

So if theaters are not part of the distribution of independent film, the indie labels (like Think Film, Magnolia, and others) — not to mention the so-called “independent” divisions of the studios (like Fox Searchlight, Universal's Focus Features, and Paramount Vantage) — don't have any good ideas about what to do next. What do they think about how to match the vision and artistry of non-studio filmmakers with the audiences that demonstrably exist? It's not that there is no demand for independent film. It's that those who are entrusted with “distributing” don't know how to reach that audience because their corporate organizations and structures are locked in to the physical structures and fixed economics of the last century.

The new technologies of the Internet era offer great new possibilities for the community of film fans. The flexible technologies of the 21st century make it possible for even larger audiences to enjoy more instances of the highest quality programming in the highest quality settings from the best filmmakers. The internet era of the 21st Century will not mimic the bygone studio era and deliver the occasional "Gone With The Wind" but will enable many talented filmmakers with many visions to be seen and heard in many parts of the world.

Filmmakers and film-lovers alike should be excited about the evolution of our industry. The frenzy surrounding social networking sites suggests what can happen to distribution and sponsorship without geographical and demographic boundaries. That kind of energy has rolled over well-established businesses in other sectors – newspapers, music, even some parts of the health industry – so it should not be surprising when those same forces combine to restructure the film business.

There *will* be a new era in independent filmmaking — an era in which the best films with the most amazing cinematography, seamless in their editing and storytelling, thrilling in their visions of the human experience, unlimited by geographical or cultural or language boundaries will find their audiences in every corner of the world. The changing economics of theatrical exhibition have contrived to bring down the structures intended to hold films up for view. But the economics of the new technologies will — and are — creating new opportunities for new voices to reach new audiences.

It will be an extraordinary moment and IndiePix is committed to help make it happen.