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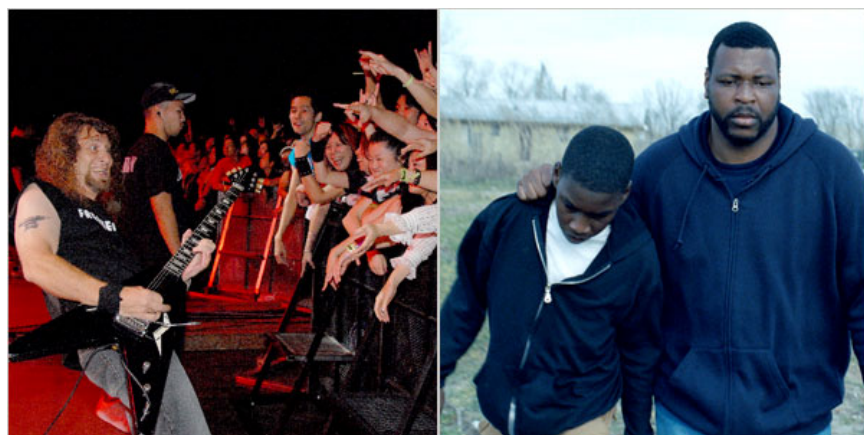
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FILM

Declaration of Indies: Just Sell It Yourself!



Brent J. Craig/Anvil! The Story of Anvil!; Alluvial Film Company

"Anvil! The Story of Anvil," left, and "Ballast" are two movies not distributed by a major studio.

By **MANOHLA DARGIS**
Published: January 14, 2010

LAST November inside a conference room at the [University of Southern California](#) in Los Angeles, a film consultant named Peter Broderick was doing his best to foment a revolution. Mr. Broderick, who helps filmmakers find their way into the marketplace, was spreading the word on an Internet-era approach to releasing movies that he believes empowers filmmakers without impoverishing them economically or emotionally. Mr. Broderick divides distribution into the Old World and New, infusing his PowerPoint presentation with insurgent rhetoric. He has written a "declaration of independence" for filmmakers that — as he did that afternoon — he reads while wearing a tricorn hat.

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In the Old World of distribution, filmmakers hand over all the rights to their work, ceding control to companies that might soon lose interest in their new purchase for various reasons, including a weak opening weekend. ("After the first show," Mr. Broderick said, repeating an Old World maxim, "we know.") In the New World, filmmakers maintain full control over their work from beginning to end: they hold on to their rights and, as important, find people who are interested in their projects and can become patrons, even mentors. The Old World has ticket buyers. The New World has ticket buyers who are also

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Peter Broderick

[Facebook](#) friends. The Old World has commercials, newspapers ads and the mass audience. The New World has social media, YouTube, iTunes and niche audiences. “Newspaper ads,” Mr. Broderick said, “are mostly a waste of money.”

The 200 filmmakers inside the conference room laughed, soaking up Mr. Broderick’s pitch as if their careers depended upon it, which perhaps they do. Independent filmmaking has never been for the faint of heart. But the consensus is that the past few years have been especially brutal. Sales have slowed, deal prices have dropped, and most of the major studios have retreated from the independent scene, closing or scaling back divisions like Warner Independent Pictures and Paramount Vantage, which released the kinds of movies that win critical hearts and awards. And good films are going unsold. Given the changes and downsizing, these might seem like worrisome times for movie lovers as well. After all, if these companies disappear, how do we find the next great American independent filmmaker, the new [Jim Jarmusch](#), [Wes Anderson](#) 2.0?

For consultants like Mr. Broderick and filmmakers like Jon Reiss (the documentary [“Bomb It”](#)) the answer lies in self-distribution, in filmmakers doing it themselves or, more accurately, doing it themselves with a little or a lot of help from other people, including consultants like Mr. Broderick and Richard Abramowitz. Last year Mr. Abramowitz, a film-industry veteran who runs an outfit in Armonk, N.Y., called Abramorama with one full-time employee (him), helped shepherd [Sacha Gervasi](#)’s documentary [“Anvil! The Story of Anvil.”](#) about a 1970s metal band and its rebirth, into a success, with almost \$700,000 at the North American box office. Consultants guide filmmakers on every angle of distribution. They can simply offer advice, but can also develop a marketing strategy, book theaters and collect the money.

If the D.I.Y. drumbeat has grown louder in recent years, it’s not only because the major studios have backed away from the independent sector. That’s a factor, but there are other issues involved, among them that the economic barriers to filmmaking have never been lower. [Martin Scorsese](#) once said that [John Cassavetes](#)’s first feature, [“Shadows.”](#) shot in the late 1950s with a 16-millimeter camera, proved to filmmakers that there were “no more excuses,” adding, “If he could do it, so could we!” Still, even in the glory years of the new American cinema movement, from the late 1960s to the mid-1970s, when the major studios appeared more open to original voices, Cassavetes had to self-distribute his 1974 masterpiece [“A Woman Under the Influence.”](#) which he did successfully, pulling in \$6 million domestically.

Inexpensive digital cameras and editing software have lowered the barrier for filmmakers even further. Yet even as the means of production have entered into more hands, companies — large and small — continue to dominate distribution. Hollywood’s historical hold on resources and the terms of the conversation have made it difficult for an authentic alternative system to take root in America. The festival circuit has emerged as a de facto distribution stream for many filmmakers, yet the ad hoc world of festivals is not a substitute for real distribution. And then there’s the simple fact that there are independent filmmakers who do not fit inside the Hollywood (and Hollywood-style) distribution model and do not want to. For some stubborn independents D.I.Y. distribution has at times been either the best or only option.

In 1992, the year before Disney bought Miramax Films, thereby initiating the indie gold rush, [Joe Berlinger](#) and Bruce Sinofsky became a model for true independence when they distributed their own documentary [“Brother’s Keeper”](#) (1992) to substantial critical and commercial success. In the years since, those entering self-distribution have included emerging talent like [Andrew Bujalski](#) (who initially sold DVDs of his 2005 film [“Mutual Appreciation”](#) online) and established filmmakers like David Lynch (who released his 2006 movie [“Inland Empire”](#) in theaters himself). As self-distributed movies have found levels of critical or commercial success or even both, others have followed, including

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Some self-distributed titles find their audiences with help from consultants, while others make their way into the marketplace with the help of consultants and companies that take a fee, rather than a percentage of the profits and all the distribution rights. Innovative strategies abound. Mr. Broderick is an advocate of what he calls hybrid distribution, which, as he has put it, “combines direct sales by filmmakers with distribution by third parties.” Thus filmmakers hold on to their sales rights and sell the DVD retail rights to one buyer and the video-on-demand rights to another and so on — rather than handing them all over to one distributor, as has been traditional. This allows filmmakers to reach audiences directly while controlling their own work and destinies, at least in theory.

The new D.I.Y. world is open-source in vibe and often execution. Participants refer to one another in conversation and on their Web sites and blogs, pushing other people’s ideas and projects. (On his Web site, [peterbroderick.com](#), Mr. Broderick even posts discount codes for other people’s books.) But these new-era distribution participants are not engaging in blog-rolling. By sharing information and building on one another’s ideas, they are in effect creating a virtual infrastructure. This infrastructure doesn’t compete with Hollywood; this isn’t about vying with products released by multinational corporations. It is instead about the creation and sustenance of a viable, artist-based alternative — one that, at this stage, looks markedly different from what has often been passed off as independent cinema over the past 20 years.

Although D.I.Y. has become shorthand for this new movement, a more complex idea of the filmmaker-audience dynamic is emerging (Mr. Reiss calls it “a sea change”), partly as a response to the shifts in the industry, though also in reaction to the changes in the audience or more specifically *audiences*. Although some viewers still enjoy the ritual of going out to see movies, others don’t want to experience their entertainment in a theater, preferring to immerse themselves in a media-saturated world across a variety of platforms. “My son,” Mr. Reiss said, speaking by phone from Los Angeles, “consumes media on his computer and his iPod, and he will occasionally go out to a movie theater.” He tries to encourage his son, who’s 13, to go to the movies, but finds it tough. “He would rather interact with media on his computer than anywhere else.”

One of the buzzy ideas in D.I.Y. is transmedia, a word borrowed from academia, in which stories — think of the [“Star Wars”](#) and [“Matrix”](#) franchises — unfold across different platforms. “Star Wars” helped expand the very idea of a movie, because it involved a constellation of movie-related products, from videogames to action figures, all of which become part of the understanding and experience of the original, originating work. This isn’t just about slapping a movie logo on a lunchbox or a screensaver: it’s about creating an entertainment gestalt. As the theorist Henry Jenkins writes, “Reading across the media sustains a depth of experience that motivates more consumption.” In other words, you can sell one ticket to a moviegoer or enlist fans into media feedback loops that they in turn help create and sustain.

It might seem counterintuitive that D.I.Y. independents are borrowing a page from the [George Lucas](#) playbook. But only if you forget that Mr. Lucas is the most successful independent filmmaker in history. 20th Century Fox distributed the first “Star Wars,” yet Mr. Lucas kept the sequel and merchandising rights. “If I make money,” he said when the movie was released, “it will be from the toys.” The new generation of D.I.Y. filmmakers might not be pushing toys on their Web sites (though I’d like to see an Andrew Bujalski action figure), but they do peddle DVDs, posters, CDs, books and — much as [Spike Lee](#) did before them — are getting hip to selling themselves alongside their art.

The downside to this new D.I.Y. world is that filmmakers, who already tend to expend tremendous time and effort raising money, might end up spending more hours hawking

their wares than creating new work. "I struggle with this all the time," Mr. Reiss said. But artists who want to reach an audience are rarely if ever really free of the marketplace, and filmmakers working in the commercial arena tend to be even less so. For Mr. Reiss and other do-it-yourselfers, the most important thing is to reach their audiences, any which way, niche by niche, pixel by pixel, in theaters or online. "This is the other voice of film," Mr. Reiss said with urgency, "and if this dies, all we're left with is the monopoly."

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