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# Comparison Of Clerks And Titanic Movies

## American Independent Films - A Comparative Analysis

The American independent film comprises a branch of the Hollywood industry, birthed since the 1970s but which exploded in the 1990s owing to a spurt of interest and funding. Clerks (1994) cannot be challenged as one of the films which answers to every characteristic of the American independent film. American independent films or indies came to prosper with time and sponsorship. Clerks was the brainchild of an American film director and shot primarily on locations such as Atlantic Highlands and New Jersey, USA, this film originated in America. The content of the film as well aims to give a frank portrayal of American life and demonstrates the ideals of the American independent film. On the other hand, Titanic (1997) is classic film which typifies high concept Hollywood cinema, contrasting greatly with the customary indie film.

One of the landmarks of an American independent film is the low-budget to satisfy production costs. Film directors are not well-established enough to put out large sums of money to pay for exotic locations or to damage a lot of material. A cost-effective budget is necessary because often the money proceeds from the film director's limited supply of funds or from unconventional funding. Characterizing American independent film Schamus summarizes that, "American independent scene is often stirred and inspired by tales of no-budget films – films made so cheaply that there is no significant economic risk involved in their production" (Schamus 1998, p. 98). Clerks (1994) is one such low-budget production costing as little as \$27,575. However, this film gets off the ground. In the end, it generated over \$3 million dollars in the USA. Kevin Smith independently financed this movie the capital which was earned from the sale of his prized comic book collection, his college education fund, loans from friends and family, and insurance money. Due to the financial constraints his Smith's family acted in roles of this film.

Hollywood and American independent film vastly differ financially from one another with high Hollywood budget and a firm foundation of investors. The sources of funds would usually come from a production company who already had millions of dollars for capital. The high-cost budget would be channelled toward paying professional actors and crew, distributors, and perks. For the production of Titanic (1997), director James Cameron sources almost \$200 million dollars. However, in the end, he reaped an abundant harvest, grossing about \$2 billion in profits worldwide, testifying that "the ties between high concept and marketing are numerous and strong" (Wyatt 1998, p. 109)

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American independent films are done almost single-handedly by film directors. They write the scripts, orchestrate the scenes and may even do some acting. Robert Rodriguez aka 'One-man film crew' stands as the paragon of directors of American independent film. Authoring the book, *Rebel Without Crew*, he describes his filmic initiative as he "would write two scripts both about the same character but I would film them on a low, low budget all by myself..." (Robert 1995, p. xv). His independent style of directing drives him to not only write the scripts but also to direct, edit sound, edit script, operate the camera, perform visual effects and accomplish production designing. In the classic American independent film *Clerks* (1994) is another film by Kevin Smith that fit the definition of the one-man crew. Kevin Smith directed, produced, edited and even starred Kevin Smith. He also did the cinematography. The independence of the American films is further enhanced by the worldviews of the directors which endorse most times a personal and radical perspective.

On the other hand, for Hollywood high concept films, producers employ several members to carry out the task of production. An almost 2000-man crew and the major and minor actors numbering into the thousands consisted of the magnitude of staffing for *Titanic* (1997). The division of labor is far more expansive, inclusive of stuntmen, make-up artists, sound department team, production department team, visual effects team, sound system department, costume/wardrobe department, editorials, extras, and auxiliary staff.

The content of the American independent film contains a series of profanities, nudity and controversial scenes which merely mirror the liberality of American society in the 1960s and 1970s. The American independent film is usually typified as gritty and unconventionally frank in its presentation due to the "increased visibility and activism of formerly marginalized social groups in terms of race and sexuality or age...all these factors contributed to a remarkable change in attitude and mores in American culture...the most liberal films (Tzioumakis 2006, p. 169). Thus, the origin of the American independent film explains this phenomenon: the unorthodox subculture of the 1960s and the trend toward midnight movies of the 1970s. As a result of these factors, the American independent film was born. The American independent film was also geared toward a specific target group: the college-aged, recent graduates and single youth. The appeal of the American independent film was its non-adherence to the status quo. The social and political viewpoints would be more unconservative and the material would pioneer advancing moves in its daring. In the movie, *Clerks* (1994), there was explicit and foul language and some vulgar scenes. Many of the scenes feature sex-related conversations and some pornographic content. In American independent films, drug usage, alcohol intake and smoking are almost mainstream practices. Seeking to portray the carefree world of American young people, one observes the unrestricted indulgence of sex and drugs, all of which are deemed counterculture. It is no surprise since while making *Clerks* (1994), Kevin Smith is a 23-year old college student film director novice with great ambitions. Another rebel film director, Robert Rodriguez affirms that as a rule, he goes against the grain advising aspiring filmmakers

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to “question everything, make your own rule book and invent your own methods” (Rodriguez 1995, p. 202).

The low cost of the American independent films evidently attests to the absence of major Hollywood actors. Hollywood actors would demand fortunes too outrageous for an American independent film director. In the film, *Clerks* (1994), some of director Kevin Smith's family and friends participate as actors in the play. Grace Smith (Kevin Smith's mother) and Virginia Smith (Kevin Smith's elder sister) appear in *Clerks* (1994). His close friends from college, Jason Mewes and Scott Mosier also play several parts in the film. The key actors for this movie are little-known people whose careers exploded after the release of *Clerks*. Brian O'Halloran, Jeff Anderson and Marilyn Ghiglotti do not have previous professional acting experience, yet, they make this film a success and they leaped ironically to a measure of Hollywood stardom.

Hollywood's high concept hegemony promotes glamour, finesse, and opulence usually with a cheery denouement. Idealized characters leading enviable lives are at the core of Hollywood film. Hollywood typically features “the big genre blockbuster with high concept visuals and heroic conventionally attractive protagonists played by bankable stars” (Newman 2011, p. 89). The star-studded cast and crew would absorb most of production costs in Hollywood film. Acclaimed national and international stars have the potential of drawing more viewership and magnetizing more interest in the movie. *Titanic* (1997) is such a movie in which stellar actors such as Leonardo DiCaprio, Kate Winslet, Billy Zane, Frances Fisher, Gloria Stuart, Kathy Bates, Danny Nucci and Victor Garber propel the film into wide acclaim. Director James Cameron at the time of the *Titanic* is a seasoned movie director proficient in high concept film production.

“Miramax and to a lesser extent Sundance (film festival) dominate...the indie world” with a compelling influence (Biskind 2004, p. 2). Another trait of American independent films is the lack of official distributors for the movies. To fill the film distributor vacancy Miramax steps in, helping hundreds of American independent films to launch out, releasing independent films to TV and VHS audiences. Miramax's initiative proved lucrative since several independent films ended up with favorable outcomes. Miramax would facilitate Kevin Smith in his venture of *Clerks* (1994). Under the Walt Disney Company since 1993, Miramax aided in developing the American independent film industry. Spearheaded by Bob Weinstein and Harvey Weinstein, two filmmakers who support independent filmic art and hold financial independence. Miramax headed the 1990s boom of American independent film, distributing top independent films such as *Chicago* and *Clerks*. The Sundance film festival is another entity which fuels the American independent film culture. Held in Utah, this special occasion honored American and foreign independent filmmakers. Judged by certain criteria, independent filmmakers would earn fame and recognition for their contributions to American indie culture. Kevin Smith gains wide exposure through the Sundance film festival in addition to Robert Rodriguez.

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The Sundance Film Festival presents many career opportunities for American indie filmmakers seeking to debut into Hollywood cinema. "The Sundance Film Festival is the most important event on the indie calendar" (Biskind 2004, p. 2). Serving as a springboard to catapult actors and filmmakers to further notoriety, the Sundance Festival is one of the steps to attain to Hollywood grandeur. With the keen competition to enter into the exclusive and coveted Hollywood circles, indie crew and cast began imitating Hollywood, compromising the initial values and producing a hybrid of American independent cinema and Hollywood - Indiewood. It has been observed that at the Sundance Film Festival "there are so many Hollywood types" (Lukk 1997, p. 119). The desire to imitate was mutual since Hollywood too began to sit up and take notice of the goings-on in the American indie world. In this mutuality of attraction, Miramax finds a convenient place, "offering the best of both worlds, giving the films the tender loving care that indie distributors excelled at and spending big money buying the TV spots (Biskind 2004, p. 82). Miramax's affluence with Disney's backing helps propel American independent cinema to such heights, privileging both parties in the process. Nevertheless, American independent film was still left without major distributors or awards to spur its success.

Major players in Hollywood film production and distribution such as MGM, Paramount Pictures, Warner Brothers, 20th Century Fox "consolidated their control over big budget and programmer production contracting workers from directors and stars go down...dominating a good deal of distribution and exhibition" (Holmlund 2004, p. 4). Paramount Pictures is instrumental in distributing the Titanic (1997) internally across America, while 20th Century Fox is responsible for disseminating the movie internationally. The Academy or Oscar awards are also landmarks of a high concept Hollywood film in which Hollywood directors and stars would be dignified with coveted titles based on their work for a given year. When Titanic (1997) was released, it was an immediate success, seizing 14 Academy award nominations, eleven Oscar wins and four Golden Globe successes. Another denominator which distinguishes American independent cinema from Hollywood is the realist lens.

American independent film rejects classical Hollywood hegemony and opts for lower-classed, plain-clothed individuals whose lives are dogged by failure. American independent filmmakers endorse "indie cinema's investment in realism aligning with an interest in character, and in particular with certain characters and characterizations" (Newman 2011, p. 89). Conversely, the characteristics which define American independent film are the quotidian life, failure and disappointment. Reality is not painted in glitter, nor is it viewed through the lens of rose-colored glasses. Individual struggles and societal ills recurrently surface. The film takes as an example one routine day in the life of a commoner experiencing the rigors of adversity. It scrutinizes and critiques daily life while making ideological statements during the course of the movie. The ambience of the film can be predominantly gloomy with characters bearing somber countenances. Clerks (1994) represents a low-income, not very intelligent convenience store clerk as he goes through a typical day at work. In microcosm, the American independent film

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portrays the life of an average working-class American. In the end, circumstances do not improve for the protagonist. The low budget or no-budget factor actually fosters and accentuates realism since “obviously if you’re on a low budget you can’t afford to dazzle people with the same kinds of effects Paramount can afford” (Lukk 1997, p. 115). Contrary to high concept Hollywood cinema, the American independent films tended to be devoid of visual effects, sound enhancements and other techniques employed to enthrall the audience.

Far from espousing realist views, attaining the image of perfection is the goal for Hollywood where “the self-consciousness of high concept suggests...the configuration of perfect images, stars, music, narrative and genre” (Wyatt 1998, p. 61). Air-brushed, refined characters, processed music and seamless narratives match with the Hollywood high concept standards. The highly commercial orientation of the Hollywood film industry motivates these criteria. The commercial pitch of Hollywood ultimately combines with American independent cinema, sparking competition and inspiring the implementation of new technologies.

Technology is one distinctive factor separating American independent cinema from Hollywood. American independent cinema traditionally opted in favor of cheaper, low-budget and unsophisticated material. As a result, takes for different scenes would be longer and the quality of the projected video would be less than the desired. The growing need for a more efficient crew and the consequent pressure for more marketability and profitability necessitated the modernization of American independent cinema. The consequence was that budgets had to be beefed up, introducing camera dollies, stills photography, steadicam, walkie talkies, editing equipment, titles and opticals, post production labs and other essentials (Vachon 1998, p. 89). The 1990s, during which American independent cinema peaked, also ushered in the information technology era, therefore computers are integrated as part of the fundamental tools in American independent cinema. Using “computers, you can make fine cuts that were much, much harder to do on celluloid. And as the technology has changed the language and syntax of the cinema has changed with it” (Vachon 1998, p. 189). Over time, it does not take long for Indiewood to also demand a studio for film production – an attribute trait of Hollywood. 1999 marks the year in which Indiewood produced wholly studio produced and distributed film such as American Beauty and Three Kings (King 2009, p. 192). These modifications to traditional American independent cinema evolved because of the anticipated mass scales of production as well as budget changes.

In sum, one clearly sees the initial stark differences between American independent film and Hollywood through Clerks (1994) and Titanic (1997) also, the dilutions which inevitably blur the lines between the two film industries. In this treatment one can attest to the transitions of American independent cinema from its pristine indie form to Indiewood and the unfortunate downward trend for the industry.

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