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« Transnational Hollywood » Research Project

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“Indie” cinema: what circulations between Hollywood and France?

I intend to investigate the circulations of the concept of “independence” between France and Hollywood. The reference to “indie movies” has indeed become increasingly important in Hollywood (Sundance, IndieWire, indie divisions of the studios, indie esthetic) and the use of a similar label has also developed in France. My hypotheses so far are the following: 1) the rise of “Indies” has been made possible by the affirmation of alternative valuation criteria to commercial ones. From the 1920s to the 1970s, circulations between Hollywood and Europe played a major role in the legitimation of cinema as art, a pre-condition to the constitution of the « indie film » category. The promoters of a « highbrow » status for cinema had strong ties with Europe, and especially with France. 2) Indies do not exclusively refer to « auteurist » cinema, by contrast to box-office oriented movies (at the economically dominant pole of the cinema field), “independent cinema” encompasses a wider scope of film productions, including, notably, the DIY style (categories of B-movies, genre movies, cult movies). This extensive definition of what an Indie film may be allows different categories of film professionals to brand movies as “indies,” not only in the US, but to some extent, also in France. At a more general level, this research aims at shedding light on the way in which transnational circulations can impact the modes of structuration of a movie industry and the definition of cinematic genres, with Hollywood and France as typical case studies.

Previous academic works, especially by US academics, have already investigated the constitution of “Hollywood Highbrow.” I propose to complement these studies with a focus on independent movie distribution and exhibition, with interviews and observations with “indie” movie theater managers and programmers conducted in San Francisco (June 2016) and New York (September 2016) (to compare with my research on “Art et essai” movie theaters).

The second research axis relates to the constitution of the indie cinema category in Hollywood, with 3 main dimensions. 1) I plan to collect data on the career path of the Indiewood actors (funders of distribution and production companies at the fringes of the studios, CEO of the majors’ indie divisions, organizers of indie cinema festivals), using interviews and various secondary sources, in order to gauge their distance to mainstream Hollywood professionals. 2) Making indies may be a way of entering a market, especially for newcomers such as Netflix and Amazon (interviews and secondary sources). 3) I will explore the heterogeneity of the “indie” category. I intend to build a database of the movies selected for the Sundance Film Festival over the last two decades to test the link between commercial success and various “indie indicators”.

Fieldwork in the US and readings of academic studies on the genesis of “independence” concept have already been realized; the database has still to be built up.

Regarding the transfers from US to France in the cinematographic field, I am currently publishing a contribution in the collective work *Screen Policies: Geographies, Economics, Technologies* edited by Cecilia Tirtaine and Nolwenn Mingant, to be published by Routledge in 2017.