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Indie Culture:
In Pursuit of the Authentic
Autonomous Alternative

by Michael Z. Newman

Abstract: American independent cinema since the 1980s has in common with other forms of "indie" culture its construction as an authentic, autonomous alternative to mainstream media. "Indie" is contradictory insofar as it at once serves to oppose the dominant culture but also to produce cultural capital that distinguishes its consumers.

> *In matters of taste, more than anywhere else, all determination is negation; and tastes are perhaps first and foremost distastes, disgust provoked by horror or visceral intolerance ("sick-making") of the tastes of others.*
>
> Pierre Bourdieu[1]

When Miramax Films was acquired by the Walt Disney Company in 1993, the *New York Times* described the leading American distributor of specialty films as "independent," "provocative," "unusual," "autonomous," "offbeat," "arty," "low-budget," and "niche-oriented."[2] These adjectives do not connote the values we generally associate with Hollywood; indie cinema, like indie culture more generally, derives its identity from challenging the mainstream. This challenge is figured first of all from an economic distinction between modes of production. "Indie" connotes small-scale, personal, artistic, and creative; "mainstream" implies a large-scale commercial media industry that values money more than art. To some champions of alternative media, American independent films are those and only those made and seen outside of the Hollywood studio system, just as indie recordings are those and only those released on non-major labels. In recent years, however, "indie" has become a buzzword, a term whose meanings—alternative, hip, edgy, uncompromising—far exceed the literal designation of media products that are made independently of major firms. It refers not only to movies and music but also to clothing and other forms of cultural expression. It includes social groups that cluster around these forms and the practices of entrepreneurship that produce and disseminate them.

1 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste,* trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 56.

2 Bernard Weinraub, "Business Match Made in Hollywood," *New York Times,* May 1, 1993.

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Disney's acquisition of Miramax was part of a larger process of mainstreaming indie culture during the 1990s, when Hollywood studios acquired or started their own specialty distributors to handle indie films. At the same time in the music industry, the big record companies began to partner with indies such as the seminal grunge label SubPop, which affiliated with Warner Records. Since independent media's autonomy seemed to be threatened by this process, it appeared that "independent" would soon be spent as a useful term. This was the stance taken by some cinephiles: one proposed that the film industry's mini-majors be renamed "dependies."[3] Some progressive critics of consumer culture will attack any instance they perceive as mainstream media "co-opting" alternative forms of expression for profit.[4] However, the mainstreaming of indie amplified rather than diminished its salience as a cultural category. The fact that cultural products identified as independent are now produced and consumed under the regime of multinational media conglomerates has not threatened the centrality of alternativeness to the notion of indie. On the contrary, the discourse of alternativeness remains central to crafting indie's appeal to a market ripe for exploitation, a group of consumers eager for movies, music, and other culture that do not conform to dominant commercial styles. Satisfying this niche makes the mainstream media into its own competition and opposition, as it swallows everything profitable in the sphere of cultural production.

In what follows I consider indie as a cinematic and cultural category that is not determined by the industrial definition. I argue that it is a contradictory notion insofar as it counters and implicitly criticizes hegemonic mass culture, desiring to be an authentic alternative to it, but also serves as a taste culture perpetuating the privilege of a social elite of upscale consumers. There is a tension at the heart of indie cinema and culture between competing ideals and realities: on one hand, an oppositional formation of outsiders that sees itself as the solution to an excessively homogenized, commercialized media, and on the other hand a form of expression that is itself commercial and that also serves to promote the interests of a class of sophisticated consumers. In other words, indie cinema is a cultural form opposing dominant structures at the same time that it is a source of distinction that serves the interests of a privileged group within those structures. This configuration is not unique to indie culture.[5] There is a history of this kind of dynamic animating alternative scenes, from the bohemia of 1920s Greenwich Village to the countercultures of the 1960s and 1970s.[6] What is new about this alternative formation is how enmeshed it is within the dominant culture. Today's media conglomerates offer their own alternative to themselves, bringing in even those consumers who might be contemptuous of their very existence.

In exploring the contradiction at the center of indie culture, I will first discuss two key concepts underwriting it: indie as an oppositional culture and indie as a taste

3 Michael Atkinson, "Autonomy Lessons: Paying the Price of Independence," *Village Voice,* April 14–20, 1999.

4 Naomi Klein, *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies* (New York: Picador, 1999); Alissa Quart, *Branded: The Buying and Selling of Teenagers* (New York: Perseus, 2003).

5 *Distinction* is the concept and title of Bourdieu's sociological study of taste, demonstrating correspondences between preferences in culture and social class in French society. My thinking about this process is indebted to this work.

6 On bohemian Greenwich Village, see Malcolm Cowley, *Exile's Return: A Literary Odyssey of the 1920s* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1934); on the 1960s counterculture, see Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

culture. I will then explore examples of how these concepts function by juxtaposing two media events and the discourses surrounding them from the same historical moment in the late 1990s: the release of Todd Solondz's controversial 1998 film *Happiness*, and the "Drivers Wanted" television advertising campaign of the late 1990s and early 2000s for Volkswagen automobiles. Although the latter might seem like a perverse example, I shall argue that these VW ads not only adopted the signature styles and ideals of independent cinema (and music), but also may legitimately be seen as having participated in producing indie culture no less than Solondz's film.

Although there is now a substantial scholarly literature on independent cinema, especially its contemporary iteration beginning in the 1980s with the rise of institutions such as Sundance and Miramax, this literature seldom positions "indie" as a genre identity that movies share with other media. Its focus, moreover, is typically on the production and distribution of texts rather than on their cultural circulation.[7] But the categories "independent" and "mainstream" apply to both production and reception; there are indie and mainstream texts and audiences. Although each one's meanings shift over time, so that an independent product or audience of one era might be the mainstream product or audience of another, in the historical moment under discussion I argue that there was a stable cluster of meanings associated with "independent," and that these meanings span various artistic forms and their audiences.[8] There is a literature in popular music studies that places indie musical idioms in the context especially of their consumption by subcultures of fans whose very identity as such is premised on their perception of the music's authenticity and on its autonomy from the mainstream.[9] I wish to build on the existing literatures on independent music and cinema by extending the approach taken in music scholarship to considering moving-image culture in the context of a wider notion of indie.[10]

One example of this scholarship is Sarah Thornton's study of music subcultures, in which she argues that it is too often assumed that mainstream media support the dominant ideology while alternative media oppose it. This essay, like Thornton's *Club*

7   Jim Hillier, ed., *American Independent Cinema: A Sight and Sound Reader* (London: British Film Institute, 2001); Chris Holmlund and Justin Wyatt, eds., *Contemporary American Independent Film: From the Margins to the Mainstream* (London: Routledge, 2005); Geoff King, *American Independent Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005); Emmanuel Levy, *Cinema of Outsiders: The Rise of American Independent Film* (New York: New York University Press, 1999); E. Deirdre Pribram, *Cinema and Culture: Independent Film in the United States, 1980–2001* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002); Yannis Tzioumakis, *American Independent Cinema: An Introduction* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006).

8   There is no transcendent "American independent cinema" that spans the history of film; rather, in each era, a new discourse of independence arises in response to industrial, technological, and cultural configurations. This is one of Tzioumakis's central points. I am considering only one iteration of American independent cinema and culture, that coinciding with the notion of "indie" as alternative, which spans the period from the mid-1980s to the present. Although there have been many changes in independent cinema during that period, from increasing reliance on the Hollywood studios' distribution resources to the ballooning of budgets to the indie colonization of Oscar-season prestige films, the central conception of indie alternativeness that I describe here has remained fairly stable.

9   Matthew Bannister, "'Loaded': Indie Guitar Rock, Canonism, White Masculinities," *Popular Music* 25/1 (2006): 77–95; David Hesmondhalgh, "Indie: The Institutional Politics and Aesthetics of a Popular Music Genre," *Cultural Studies* 13/1 (1999): 34–61; Ryan Hibbett, "What Is Indie Rock?" *Popular Music and Society* 28/1 (2005): 55–77; Sarah Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1996).

10 These media are actually interconnected such that indie music and movies depend on one another for both their aesthetic identity and their marketing and promotion. For instance, Sofia Coppola integrates these media platforms under a unified aesthetic in her movies.

Cultures, aims to reveal that the reality of alternative media production and consumption is more complicated. Rather than doing only one or the other, alternative media may at once challenge *and* perpetuate society's dominant structures.[11]

Indie as Opposition. Traditionally, underground or oppositional culture has sought to portray mainstream culture as a force of mindless conformity that contaminates its audience and causes deleterious effects. Borrowing from Mary Douglas, Stephen Duncombe's analysis of alternative press zines proposes that the rhetoric of their producers in relation to mainstream culture is one of "purity and danger." The alternative practitioner sees autonomy and authenticity as markers of their purity, and this purity animates their need for creative expression through cultural production. All of this depends on a binary distinction between positive and negative forms of culture: "At the root of underground culture is its separation from the dominant society—its very existence stems from this negation."[12] In independent music and movies, the ideal of separation is most often figured as autonomy, as the power artists retain to control their creative process. Autonomy, in turn, is seen as a guarantee of authenticity. The flipside of purity is danger, which is figured in underground culture as selling out or being co-opted. Duncombe quotes one zinester on Green Day, a group that became wildly popular in the 1990s: "No band can be a threat or true alternative when they're just puppets of greedy corporate scumbags."[13]

In rejecting the dominant media, the phase of independent cinema which coalesced during the Reagan-Bush era championed novice artists and their generally limited technical and financial means.[14] In many cases a low budget would itself become a discursive fetish object, a means of concretizing a nebulous aesthetic quality (honesty, truth, vision). In his history of the independent music scene, Michael Azerrad writes, "The indie underground made a modest way of life not just attractive but a downright moral imperative."[15] The look or sound that is the product of such modesty in turn guarantees credibility. Like music, movies can be made cheaply, with limited funds and scant institutional support, and both indie rock and indie film can be epitomized by such autonomous productions: albums by Black Flag, Hüsker Dü, and Fugazi; John Sayles's *Return of the Secaucus 7* (1980), Jim Jarmusch's *Stranger Than Paradise* (1984), Kevin Smith's *Clerks* (1994), Robert Rodriguez's *El Mariachi* (1992), and Robert Townsend's *Hollywood Shuffle* (1987).[16] Perusing the titles in the movies

11 Thornton.

12 Stephen Duncombe, *Notes from Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture* (London: Verso, 1997), 141.

13 Ibid., 154.

14 Tzioumakis describes how during this era, which he dubs "Independent Cinema in the Age of the Conglomerates," low-budget filmmaking came to be privileged in the discourse of American independent cinema. Tzioumakis, 197.

15 Michael Azerrad, *Our Band Could Be Your Life: Scenes from the American Indie Underground, 1981–1991* (New York: Little, Brown, 2001), 6.

16 Ibid.; Tiiu Lukk, *Movie Marketing: Opening the Picture and Giving It Legs* (Los Angeles: Silman-James Press, 1997); Robert Rodriguez, *Rebel Without a Crew or How a 23-Year-Old Filmmaker with $7,000 Became a Hollywood Player* (New York: Dutton, 1995); David Rosen, *Off Hollywood: The Making and Marketing of Independent Films* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1990). While we should not take claims of heroic thrift such as Rodriguez's at face value, they are objects of significant mystique within communities of aspiring filmmakers and champions of alternative cinema.

section of a big-box chain bookstore reveals this DIY (do-it-yourself) logic clearly: *Rebel Without a Crew, Feature Filmmaking at Used Car Prices, How to Shoot a Feature Film for Under $10,000.*[17] Although some of the market for these books may aspire more to Hollywood than Slamdance, these titles still bespeak a notion central to the independent cinema's ethos that there is virtue in modesty, that, in the words of Derek Jarman, "the budget is the aesthetic."[18]

Indie cinema shares with other kinds of indie culture a basic principle that attempting to appeal to a mass audience on its own terms entails an unacceptable compromise. Better to struggle serving the audience that understands you than to give up your autonomy and sell out your integrity (and your cadre of loyal fans) in exchange for popular success. Today, many observers see independent films as coming in two varieties: inauthentic calling-card movies made by those gunning for a career in Hollywood and more authentic, true indies by artists without such mainstream aspirations. At the same time, though, directors such as Richard Linklater and Steven Soderbergh are admired for retaining an indie sensibility even when making movies with wider appeal.

Indie credibility depends more than anything on a perceived hostility to the mainstream—a perception that filmmakers and audiences share. This is why sometimes indie fans will turn on "small films" (e.g., the 2006 crossover hit *Little Miss Sunshine,* Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris) that do too well with mainstream audiences and why indie rock fans might insist that the recordings made before an artist signs with a major label are invariably superior. Too much popularity can make an artist appear to have been courting the mainstream's audience, whom many within indie culture view with some degree of suspicion. As one ironic indie t-shirt puts it, "Nothing is any good if other people like it."[19] Asked in 1986 to describe "the state of film today," Jim Jarmusch replied, "The public must, I mean people must—they *must not be that stupid,* to not at least suspect they're constantly being condescended to, *shoveled shit*" (emphasis in original).[20] Indie artists tend to be wary of becoming the shit shovelers or of being so perceived. Real popularity threatens indie artists' credibility, the status of their work as outsider art, and most of all the consumer's sense of being apart from the dominant culture. Never mind that, as Thornton argues, "mainstream" is a fluid, relational category whose critics construct it as an Other to justify their investment in their own subculture.[21] Belief in its own distinctness from the mainstream sustains the indie community and makes it cohere.

But ironically, indie credibility can be maintained in the eyes of the indie community even as an alternative artist achieves success through the channels of the corporate mass media. The handmade t-shirt on Nirvana's 1992 *Rolling Stone* cover reading "Corporate Magazine Still Sucks" was a strategy for negotiating the terrain between authenticity and popularity. Lead singer Kurt Cobain was implying that taking a pub-

17 Rodriguez; Rick Schmidt, *Feature Filmmaking at Used Car Prices,* 2nd ed. (New York: Penguin, 1995); Bret Stern, *How to Shoot a Feature Film for Under $10,000 (and Not Go to Jail)* (New York: Collins, 2002).

18 Quoted in Pribram, 13.

19 The vendor is Diesel Sweeties, http://store.dieselsweeties.com/products/nothing-is-any-good-if-other-people-like-it-shirt (accessed February 27, 2009).

20 Ludovic Herzberg, ed., *Jim Jarmusch Interviews* (Jackson: University Press of Mississsippi, 2001), 68.

21 Thornton, 87–115.

lic stance in opposition to corporate culture can be a means of insulating the artist from its negative effects. Likewise, indie film fans continue to respect and admire directors such as Soderbergh, whose mass market studio projects may be viewed against the background of his indie roots and the experimental aesthetic of his "small" films like *The Limey* (1999) and *Bubble* (2005). The community of admirers can continue to respect indie artists after they achieve wider success as long as they can strategically rationalize that the newly popular act has not really sold out—that popularity can be achieved while subversively working in elements of alternative culture, taking on the mainstream from within either in the supercilious manner of Cobain or through a more subtle critique as Soderbergh offers in *Erin Brockovich* (2000), a rather conventional drama with an anti-corporate theme, or *Out of Sight* (1998) and *Ocean's Twelve* (2004), which both work elements of challenging style into rather generic material.

As in the cases of Cobain and Soderbergh, the reality (as opposed to the myth) of indie culture is that despite the rhetoric of opposition, there is no real divorce between mainstream and alternative forms of media. This operates on the level of reception as well as production. Consider the practice of ironic consumption of the dominant culture, for instance, by watching reality television to revel in its contrived sensationalism. A viewer might adopt a superior reading position—"so bad it's good"—in relation to such culture that allows for the mainstream's pleasures without sacrificing credibility as its opponent or critic.[22] Whether such a stance is indeed critical or is just an alibi for engaging in things one professes not to like, it means that indie consumers are also often mainstream consumers. As well, there is an increasingly pervasive exploitation of indie styles by corporate media to draw indie consumers in. When a main form of exposure for indie bands is getting their songs onto soundtracks for prime-time network television programs like *The O.C.* (Fox, 2003–2007), no strict distinction between authentic alternatives and "corporate scumbags" will hold (even as the distinction may still be something to struggle over). The intertwining of indie culture with the media conglomerates has made the rhetoric of purity and danger less forceful when formulated bluntly. What we get in its place is a softened stance that implies a notion of binary values, indie-good/mainstream-bad, without the underground's more highly charged militancy. We get the possibility of strategic compromise and subtle negotiation of indie positioning vis-à-vis the dominant media.

Most impressively, the indie scene has managed to negotiate a major shift in the popular understanding of "selling out" and its relation to alternative credibility. When in the late 1990s there was an upsurge in popular music being licensed for use in television commercials, including songs by Moby, Fatboy Slim, and Nick Drake, rather than outrage the prevailing opinion among the community of alternative musicians and fans was that this was a welcome development. It was seen as a way of finding exposure for interesting music that would be unlikely to break into the increasingly safe and homogeneous radio and MTV playlists controlled by the major labels. "Selling out," reported *Entertainment Weekly*, "now seems a quainter notion than a less-than-$50 concert ticket."[23] Around the same time, in early 2001, the *New York Times Magazine*

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22 Klein, 77–79.

23 David Browne, "License to Shill," *Entertainment Weekly*, January 12, 2001, 79–80.

ran a story about an indie band, The Apples in Stereo, struggling with the decision to license its music for a Sony ad. The headline read, "For Rock Bands, Selling Out Isn't What It Used To Be," and the article made their case for taking the corporate payday very sympathetically:

> If you want to hear interesting, ambitious, challenging pop music these days, the place to turn is not mainstream radio but television—and not MTV but commercials for establishment products like banks, phone companies and painkillers. As pop radio has constricted around a handful of slick teen acts, commercials screech and thump with underground dance music and alternative rock, selling products whose reach extends way beyond that of the musicians.[24]

How do indie artists justify this compromise? One champion of alternative bands makes the case as follows: "We're able subversively to put some of these groups into the living rooms of America."[25] As in the case of the Cobain t-shirt and the indie director cross-over, the rationalization of selling out as infiltration of the establishment recuperates the credibility of the indie artist. Note that this recuperation of the notion of selling out does not challenge the construction of indie as anti-mainstream. Rather, it challenges the construction of mainstream as anti-indie and demonstrates how practitioners of alternative media might remake the mainstream in their own image while maintaining enough of the authenticity and autonomy that they believe distinguish indie culture.

Indie as Distinction. The oppositional stance that defines indie culture is one key to its status as a source of distinction, a means by which its audience asserts its superior taste. By seeing independent cinema as the alternative to Hollywood films, the indie audience makes authenticity and autonomy into aesthetic virtues that can be used to distinguish a common mass culture from a more refined, elite one. Techniques employed in sustaining the indie/mainstream binary operate on the level not only of production, then, but also of consumption. Although the various media are distinct, they are all products of the same social and cultural contexts, which influences how their audiences experience them. Moreover, the indie rock listener and the indie filmgoer are often the same person. Audiences for these cultural forms overlap, and are mainly young (though we often stereotype music fans as teens and cinephiles as adults), white, educated, affluent, and urban. And despite claims that the independent film scene is where one is most likely to find American films made by marginalized voices—women, gays and lesbians, people of color—the creative personnel behind the indie film movement are still demographically of a piece with its audience: mainly urban, educated, middle-class, straight, and white. (They are also still mostly male.) This is not to accuse indie music and cinema and their fans of racism and sexism,

24   John Leland, "For Rock Bands, Selling Out Isn't What It Used to Be," *New York Times Magazine,* March 11, 2001.

25   Quoted in ibid.

only to identify that indie's otherness from mainstream music and movies parallels its audience's self-differentiation from a social mainstream.[26] Locally and independently owned record stores and art house theaters are spaces opposed to big national retailers and megaplexes. The consumer who prefers the small shops and theaters implicitly rejects the mainstream-mega experience as "more is less" in favor of a rarefied sphere of cultural consumption in which taste in music and movies forms part of a larger mobilization of social difference between groups of consumers.[27]

Whatever the medium, "indie" functions as a taste culture offering its audience a sense of distinction.[28] In asserting itself as more legitimate than commercial pop culture, indie gives its fans a space in which to exist apart from the mainstream. It is a source of cultural capital, a form of knowledge that elites use in differentiating themselves from masses and perpetuating their own privilege.[29] Like traditional high art, indie cinema appeals to an audience who has the wherewithal to appreciate it, which is to say knowledge and interest, and a community of like-minded people. In the 1980s American indie rock was often known as college rock, as it was most often heard on college radio stations, and the connotations of "college" here include not only a level of education but also a social class.

If indie is at once an anti-mainstream cultural formation, opposing corporate media and the ideology they support, and also a taste culture, a site for the exercising of distinction, then we have here a potent clash of values. David Hesmondhalgh recognizes as much in his discussion of British indie rock of the 1980s: "Indie was contradictory: its counter-hegemonic aims could only be maintained, it seems, by erecting exclusionary boundaries around the culture."[30] Indie is in some respects radical. It calls for questioning or challenging the cultural status quo. Its spirit opposes structures of media ownership. It subverts reigning styles, genres, and meanings. It is a voice of the dispossessed. Its sensibility is intrinsically democratic: anyone can create. In cinema, indie has been the most visible forum for diverse voices and viewpoints. The content of indie culture is often politically left and almost never reactionary. ("Conservative indie film" has the same false ring as "Jewish pope"—if it exists it is a strange exception.) But indie is also a culture of affluence, at the levels of production and especially consumption. The decor, ambience, and food services available in art house theaters have long been of a different and more refined level than one finds in ordinary theaters.[31] "Authentic" indie styles are for sale at the upscale Urban Outfitters, not the discount

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26 For an argument that indie music privileges white, male identities, see Bannister.

27 The rise of new media purveyors such as Amazon, iTunes, and Netflix is certainly changing this dynamic by offering an astoundingly wide selection of non-mainstream media to anyone with a computer and a credit card. For a discussion of the implications of this change on popular culture, see Chris Anderson, *The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business Is Selling Less of More* (New York: Hyperion, 2006).

28 Hibbett.

29 "Cultural capital" is Bourdieu's term.

30 Hesmondhalgh, 38.

31 Barbara Wilinsky, *Sure Seaters: The Emergence of Art House Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 111–114.

Wal-Mart. A Sundance Institute founder, Jiban Tabibian, describes the market for independent films as

> simply not a grab-bag, all-inclusive, one-size-fits-all segment of frequent moviegoers between eighteen and twenty-four years of age. Instead, these demographics more likely involve the steady, stable preference and profile of middle-age lefties, or urbane graduate students, or Sierra Club members, or pacifists, or ethnic pride advocates, or *New Yorker* readers, or Volvo drivers.[32]

In other words, the imagined audience for indie culture is a cliché of liberal elites, and independent cinema is a consumer product to be marketed like an imported car or a magazine subscription.[33]

Indie is at once oppositional and privileged; it asserts its privilege by opposing itself to the mainstream. It is antiestablishment like the avant-garde at the same time that it is bourgeois, serving a prime social function of maintaining status. In the following two case studies, I will probe the contradiction at the heart of indie moving-image culture by considering how it functions in two specific instances from the same cultural and historical context, the United States in the late 1990s.

Autonomy as Authenticity: Todd Solondz's *Happiness*. Independent cinema's authenticity as an alternative to Hollywood is sustained by the notion of the filmmaker as a creative artist working unhampered by corporate influence. This ideal of autonomy is crystallized in moments of confrontation between business logic and art logic, suits and talent. One such moment occurred upon the release of Todd Solondz's *Happiness*, a kind of depraved, suburban version of *Hannah and Her Sisters* (Woody Allen, 1986). The film was produced by independents Ted Hope of Good Machine and Christine Vachon of Killer Films under a distribution agreement with October Films, which was then the specialty division of Universal Pictures. *Happiness* was screened during the Directors' Fortnight at the 1998 Cannes Film Festival, attracted considerable buzz, and won the international critics prize. It would go on to win acclaim at several more prestigious festivals, including Toronto and New York, and to win many more honors, including best director at the Independent Spirit Awards. But when Universal's CEO, Ron Meyer, screened the film a few months before its scheduled fall release, he was offended by a masturbation scene. According to Peter Biskind, Meyer immediately ordered October to dump *Happiness* from its slate.[34] Thus was the once-independent October, like Miramax in the case of the (at least) equally controversial *Kids* (1994), revealed to be beholden to its corporate parent, which prevented it from distributing a film on a dark theme by an artist with strong indie credibility. Examination of how the rhetoric of autonomy and control informed responses to the film reveals much about how indie values are constructed.

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32 Jibab Tabibian, "Afterword," in Rosen, 283.

33 Hibbett makes many similar points in relation to the construction of indie rock in particular.

34 Peter Biskind, *Down and Dirty Pictures: Sundance, Miramax and the Rise of Independent Film* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 334.

In many ways, *Happiness* is the quintessential American independent film. It tackles disturbing subject matter, including pederasty, which mainstream cinema would never represent in such morally ambiguous terms. Most notoriously, the film seems to invite sympathy for an adult plotting to sodomize a child. In all of his films, Solondz expresses a countercultural sensibility in exposing the underbelly of complacent suburban life, opposing mainstream values through narrative and thematic configurations. *Happiness* has an aesthetic to match its low budget (nearly $3 million),[35] foreswearing fancy set design, expensive stars, and high-gloss technique in favor of a more plain, direct form of realism. Vachon proclaimed that *Happiness*, "like all groundbreaking films, is provocative and cutting edge."[36] It is just the sort of film that inspires reviewers to praise its honesty and daring, its uncompromising consideration of contemporary living. David Edelstein, then of *Slate* magazine, admired the way it went around "smashing taboos on all sides" and called it "the dark side of *There's Something About Mary*," implying that the film stands as the indie alternative to Hollywood's safer excursion onto similar terrain. Edelstein also took a dig at Universal for dropping the film. At the time, Universal was owned by the Canadian distiller Seagram's, run by the Bronfman family, and so Edelstein wrote, "That the booze-peddling Bronfmans wanted nothing to do with a film that functions as the opposite of an intoxicant is the kind of irony with which *Happiness* teems."[37] The connections are all there: indies are the antidote to the commercial dope of the Hollywood mainstream. *Happiness* is not only different from a mass market film, but opposed to it. Hollywood is danger, *Happiness* is purity.

What makes this logic especially persuasive is the very controversy that supposedly threatened the film's release. That the film was too hot for the studio to touch confirms that it is worthy of authentic indie status. As some popular reviews noted, the film was released without an MPAA rating, meaning that many theaters would not book it and many publications would not advertise it. Thus, this would be a film that could not very easily appeal to a mainstream audience. Many reviews also noted that the film was dropped from distribution and that this was the product of the filmmaker's refusal to compromise by cutting to earn an R rating.[38] As is so often the case, the audience for alternative culture is potentially reassured rather than threatened by subject matter tagged as morally inappropriate by the dominant social structure, in this case by a publicly traded company ostensibly fearful of offending its shareholders. Thus, the marketing of a controversial art house film can under the right circumstances practically take care of itself. As *Variety*'s Todd McCarthy wrote in his Cannes review, "Controversy and critical support will create want-see among discerning and adventurous specialty audiences."[39] Indeed when Good Machine created a domestic distributor to release *Happiness* in the United States, it had no need to use the film's controversial

35   Howard Feinstein, "A tender comedy about child abuse? What is Todd Solondz up to?" *Guardian* (UK), March 26, 1999.

36   Dan Cox, "'Happiness' over at October Films," *Variety,* July 2, 1998.

37   David Edelstein, "Bleak Houses," *Slate,* October 18, 1998 (accessed October 2, 2008).

38   For example, Janet Maslin, "'Happiness': Music Is Easy Listening and Dessert Is Hard to Take," *New York Times,* October 9, 1998.

39   Todd McCarthy, "Dark Side of 'Happiness' Explores Sexual Taboos," *Variety,* May 18, 1998.

content or its distribution shuffle to woo audiences. Tastemakers like the *Village Voice*'s J. Hoberman knew of all this from following the Hollywood trade press (and the *Voice* itself had already reported it as well, as Hoberman mentions) and happily referenced the studio's rejection in reviews as implicit evidence of the film's uncompromising take on its themes.[40] Bob Berney, the head of Good Machine's distribution arm, told *Variety*, "We pushed the black comedy aspect of the film, knowing reviewers would clue people into the disturbing subject matter."[41]

At the time of its release, *Happiness* was seen as a cautionary tale. Critics took it as evidence that Hollywood and indie cinema are fundamentally incompatible. One observer wrote, "Working outside the studio system is no longer a guarantee against interference and censorship. Since the majors dominate the distribution system, they also—in effect—control the independent sector."[42] Frightening as the prospect of total Hollywood control might have seemed to champions of alternative culture, however, the details of *Happiness*'s release would seem to support a completely contradictory conclusion: that there exist channels outside of the domain of the major studios to distribute works of daring and originality. A partner in October Pictures, John Schmidt, told *Variety*, "Rather than say to Todd [Solondz], you have to cut your film, which was contractually our right, we sat down with Todd and our partners at Good Machine and decided it would be a terrific situation."[43] That is, the filmmakers were able to circumvent the system and retain control. The film's problematic content was not edited out to satisfy prudish corporate demands. At the same time, however, the independent producers, whose credibility among the alternative cinema community is unimpeachable, were able to claim that the film's lack of box office success was Universal's fault. They claimed that Good Machine, as a novice distributor, was unable to give the film "a proper marketing push."[44] This reveals how the indie scene attempts to have it both ways: it seeks autonomy but also profit, authenticity but also a marketing push, art without the taint of commerce but enough commerce to make the art pay. At the heart of independent filmmaking is thus a contradiction between the nature of feature filmmaking as what one observer calls an "undercapitalized business venture" undertaken by passionate entrepreneurs, and the desire of the indie community to be aloof from anything that seems too driven by the values of business culture.[45]

To some the lesson of *Happiness* was that "movies that might attract controversy and consumer protests will be shunned like the late-capitalist heretics they are."[46] But *Happiness* was hardly shunned. Although it did not earn as much at the box office as its producers and distributor might have liked, it attracted impressive New York audiences upon its release, owing partly to the controversy.[47] In its first week it aver-

40   J. Hoberman, "Kin Flicks," *Village Voice,* October 7–13, 1998.

41   Andrew Hindes, "'Happiness' at B.O.: Gotham Venues Embrace Controversial Pic," *Variety,* October 13, 1998.

42   Andrew Gumbel, "Letter from Hollywood: How 'Happiness' Won," *The Independent* (UK), October 25, 1998, p. 16.

43   Dan Cox, "October axes 'Happiness'; Good Steps In," *Variety,* July 13–19, 1998.

44   Biskind, 336.

45   Rosen, 273, is the source of the phrase "undercapitalized business venture."

46   Atkinson.

47   On the box office revenue, see Biskind, 336; on the film's New York opening, see Hindes, "Happiness at B.O."

aged $34,000 per screen in its release to six theaters, an impressive tally.[48] (*Happiness* grossed $2.5 million in its domestic theatrical release, compared with $4.4 million for Solondz's 1995 film, *Welcome to the Dollhouse*.)[49] A week after its New York premiere it debuted in Los Angeles, and a week after that it opened in fifteen more cities, a typical "aggressive specialized rollout" for a film being marketed on the basis of controversy, critical praise, and prestige.[50] After four weeks in release it was playing in eighty-three U.S. cities and still increasing its weekly gross.[51]

Indeed, the film was not even really shunned by Universal. Although it refused to allow October to release the film, Universal advanced a loan to the new distributor "under the table," and stood to profit if the film made money.[52] The vanguardist critic could thus call Hollywood on its hypocrisy: the studio didn't want to create negative publicity for its shareholders but still wanted to gain from the movie if it became a hit.[53] But this fact also complicates the issue of autonomy at the heart of this episode. Solondz had autonomy precisely because he stood up to Universal. The fact that his film was distributed with the help of the studio's dirty money is an inconvenient detail for those for whom authenticity is guaranteed by the mutual rejection of visionary indie artists and philistine Hollywood executives.

Indie Drivers Wanted: Branding Alternative Culture. The indie sensibility stands opposed to the commercialism of mass culture, to the packaging, branding, and marketing of mainstream music and movies. But as Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter argue convincingly in their book *Nation of Rebels: Why Counterculture Became Consumer Culture,* there is no real contradiction between the practice of consumer capitalism and that of alternative cultural movements such as indie rock and indie film.[54] After all, records and movies, as well as games, apparel, posters, and other indie products, are objects in a consumer-driven economy and their acquisition and ownership bestow status on their owners by giving them a sense that they are different, members of an elite. Even if this elite configures itself as anti-elite in some respects, it still seeks its distinction from that which it constructs as mainstream. Although many consider it co-optation, the practice of countercultural products, styles, and ideas being packaged and sold by mainstream purveyors has been a staple of Western consumer culture for several decades. Marketers seek the cachet of vanguard cultural outsiders, and as Thomas

48 Christine Vachon with Austin Bunn, *A Killer Life: How an Independent Producer Survives Deals and Disasters in Hollywood and Beyond* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), 92.

49 "Mixed Bag for the Rest of the Indies," *The Hollywood Reporter,* January 7, 1999.

50 Monica Roman and Andrew Hindes, "'HAPPINESS' FOR DUO: Vets Berney, Kalish handle distrib'n for pic," *Daily Variety,* July 23, 1998.

51 Andrew Hindes, "'ELIZABETH' RULES: Art films bow big as Oscar season nears," *Daily Variety,* November 9, 1998.

52 Biskind, 336, is the source of the phrase "under the table"; on the possibility of Universal profiting from the film, see Nigel Andrews, "Make way for the originals," *The Independent* (UK), April 15, 2000, p. 8.

53 Gumbel.

54 Andrew Potter and Joseph Heath, *Nation of Rebels: Why Counterculture Became Consumer Culture* (New York: HarperBusiness, 2005); published in Canada with the title *Rebel Sell*. Potter and Heath discuss contemporary culture with many considerations of historical context. Similar points are made in reference more specifically to the 1960s in Frank.

Frank argues, since the 1960s the very culture of American business—and especially advertising—has shared the anti-conformist, individualistic, heterodox sensibility of the counterculture.[55] Ads for consumer goods and services don't tell you to be just like all the other consumers; they tell you to be different, to blaze your own trail. Like indie culture, much mainstream advertising sells autonomy and authenticity. Similar to *Happiness* and its surrounding discourses, some television commercials construct a specifically indie identity for consumers of commercial goods by marketing alternativeness as a desirable style and associating consumer products with this very quality.

No major company's branding strategies have made more prominent use of countercultural notions of difference and distinction than Volkswagen's. Beginning in 1959, its ads for the Beetle famously eschewed the convention of showing off an automobile's impressive performance and eye-catching styling. In referring to the car as "ugly" ("It's ugly but it gets you there") and proclaiming "Think Small," the advertisers were recognizing the consumer's awareness of branding conventions and appealing to their fatigue with conventional sales techniques. The product itself was small and in some ways unimpressive, but VW and DDB, the firm who made its ads, counter-intuitively used these as selling points. As one history of American advertising puts it, "The admakers took an offbeat approach to turn the VW's apparent shortcomings into well-crafted virtues."[56] As the 1960s wore on, Volkswagen was presciently positioned to become the car of choice for the nonconformists of the burgeoning youth counterculture, who adopted the Beetle and rechristened it the "Love Bug." The "most powerful feature" of Volkswagen's 1960s advertisements, writes Frank, "is their awareness of and deep sympathy with the mass society critique."[57] In other words, VW was sold as the car for those critical of the prevailing order. The very idea of an anti-materialist, anti-establishment, anti-corporate movement having a car of choice might seem contradictory, but the 1960s counterculture's ideals were often expressed through consumer choices of products such as apparel, music recordings, and jewelry. Like Volkswagens, these products were constructed as icons of rebellion against the mainstream. And as Frank argues, "[a]s a form of anti-advertising that worked by distancing a product from consumerism, the Volkswagen ads introduced Americans to a new aesthetics of consuming."[58]

The revival of the Volkswagen brand in the 1990s and 2000s in a campaign under the slogan "Drivers Wanted" reinvigorated the association between the product and youth counterculture, reimagining the latter as alternative or indie culture. The signature tag line—"On the road of life there are drivers and there are passengers. Drivers wanted"—sounded a familiar refrain: the product will distinguish consumers as active, autonomous individuals and save them from being passive followers. This notion is common enough, but the Drivers Wanted campaign linked this rhetoric to sounds, stories, and images which, within the context of their time and place, signified a spe-

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55   Frank.

56   Juliann Sivulka, *Soap, Sex, and Cigarettes: A Cultural History of American Advertising* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1998), 304.

57   Frank, 64.

58   Ibid., 68.

cifically alternative, indie culture. Thus, in considering the significance of indie culture and the range of sites in which one encounters it, it pays to consider even such things as television commercials, which one seldom thinks of as in any way independent of the mainstream. One must acknowledge that the corporate world's desire to court anti-mainstream consumers creates a mediascape in which even advertisements for big-ticket consumer products can not only borrow from an alternative, independent sensibility, but can even function to promote and disseminate it.

The first of these VW ads to win widespread recognition, including the award for best of the year from *Advertising Age*, aired in 1997.[59] In "Sunday Afternoon," a pair of twentyish men, one black and one white, drive around seemingly aimlessly in a Volkswagen Golf. As they drive past post-industrial landscapes, the color palette accentuates their bleakness with its desaturated hues. In contrast, however, the scenario that unfolds is light and playful. The passenger goofs around, miming martial arts moves, making a plunger-activated plastic figurine dance, and blowing bubbles with his gum. On a residential street, they pass an old easy chair by the side of the road and stop to pick it up. A moment later they realize that the chair smells (we can tell by their sniffing and by their glance at each other) and they drop it back off by the roadside and continue on their journey. The spot contains no dialogue, but the soundtrack is what makes it come together: we hear the German new wave hit from the early 1980s, "Da Da Da," with its repetitive nonsensical chorus and cheery techno beat underscoring the quirky, low-key adventures onscreen. In the final ten seconds of the one-minute spot, a female voice that sounds young and hip reads, "The German-engineered Volkswagen Golf. It fits your life. Or your complete lack thereof. On the road of life there are passengers and there are drivers." The "Drivers Wanted" graphic appears to finish her thought. This spot craftily shows off one of the product's virtues, a hatchback that is big enough for a large chair, without trumpeting it or seeming to make a hard sell. What the spot emphasizes, rather, is its narrative qualities: off-beat realism centered on characters (such as they are) with whom the audience is invited to identify. Every detail of the ad is calculated to create an impression of youthful nonconformity and independence in line with the then-prevalent construction of youth as "Generation X," whose signature aimlessness is so perfectly captured by the activity of just driving around. The appeal to having "no life" as a positive value is directly in conflict with the mainstream, official culture's emphasis on ambition and hard work. Rather than going out to buy new furniture at a store like good consumer-subjects, the characters scavenge for trash. Thus, in a text whose primary function is to encourage consumption, we have a sympathetic representation of a generation that ostensibly rejects it. And the alternative ethos of opting out of the dominant society's expectations and strictures is communicated not only through this short narrative but also through the playful repetition of "da da da" on the soundtrack, itself a rejection of sense and meaning.

This VW campaign got a boost when "Sunday Afternoon" aired during the much-publicized coming-out episode of the ABC comedy *Ellen*.[60] This did much to add to

59   Bob Garfield, "The Best of TV: VW," *Advertising Age,* May 18, 1998, S1.

60   "The Puppy Episode: Part I" originally aired April 30, 1997.

the campaign's credibility with a young, trendy, upscale slice of the television audience. Not only were the men in the ad perceived by some viewers to be a gay couple, but the fact that VW chose to support *Ellen* when more conservative companies such as JC Penney, Wendy's, and Chrysler had withdrawn spots, attached considerable virtue to the brand in the eyes of many in its target market.[61] (Never mind that ad prices for this episode were nearly twice what the network usually charged, anticipating the program's huge audience of more than forty-two million Americans.)[62] Moreover, the basic "be different" message of the VW campaign dovetailed perfectly with the celebration of difference (including the celebration of Ellen Morgan/DeGeneres's coming out) that had become essential to left-wing American culture and especially to its young, hip, and alternative wing.

Driving around is the essence of many a car commercial, but in the Drivers Wanted campaign, driving around is often placed at the center of a narrative in which wandering, being on the road ("the road of life"), moving along, exploring, is figured as a quintessential experience for those of an alternative bent. A key example is the spot for the Volkswagen Cabrio from 1999 called "Milky Way," another minute-long ad in which young people drive around. Like "Sunday Afternoon," "Milky Way" has no dialogue, an apt soundtrack song, and a narrative-in-miniature that expresses the spirit of both the brand and the demographic toward which it makes its appeal.

"Milky Way" opens with a sweeping helicopter shot up a river at night. The camera picks out a convertible Cabrio crossing the river on a bridge, moonlight illuminating the water and the trees on its shores. The passengers are four young people, two men and two women, and one of the women is African American. They look up at the brilliant moon and exchange glances with one another to register their wonder, smiling, reaching to the sky as the wind blows their hair. The camera follows in more aerial shots and instead of straight cuts, the transition from shot to shot is often made with an introspective fade to black. About midway through the spot, the car pulls up in front of a house where a party is in progress. We see a number of parked cars, colored lights strung up, young people acting a bit boisterous, perhaps drunk. The passengers in the car exchange glances again and wordlessly they determine to go back out on the road instead of inside the house. In close-up, we see the white reverse lights illuminate as the car begins to back away. The group drives along, appreciating the moon and each other some more. The song on the soundtrack is "Pink Moon," by the late British folk-rock singer/songwriter Nick Drake. It has a quiet rhythm carried by a strummed acoustic guitar and a gentle vocal line singing, "pink moon gonna get you all." There is no voice-over at the end, only the VW logo, the name of the model, and the Drivers Wanted slogan (with web address and phone number in small print) against a rotating starry sky.

Like "Sunday Afternoon," "Milky Way" offers a vignette of youthful free-spiritedness, making driving with your friends into the epitome of autonomous experience. But it does even more to appeal to a specifically indie audience. The commercial's style is suggestive rather than obvious, lyrical rather than bombastic, and low-key rather

61   Joy Brema, "Volkswagen and Pop Culture Branding," *The Brock Press,* March 24, 2004.

62   Ron Becker, *Gay TV and Straight America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 166.

than energetic. Ads for many products try to link a brand to a notion of life as a perpetual party, but this one has its characters skip the party in favor of a more authentic experience of friendship and nature. It figures its characters as independent spirits who go against the grain. Its narrative has several qualities typically associated with indie films: it is offbeat, understated, and character-centered.

"Milky Way" also appealed to an indie audience in its use of Nick Drake's music. Drake was a fairly obscure figure before his recent revival, spurred by this very Volkswagen ad. Since his suicide in 1974, his recordings had sold very little. The album *Pink Moon,* from which the commercial's soundtrack song comes, had sold five thousand copies in the twenty-five years of its release in the United States, but it had been an underground favorite among serious indie music fans. Evidently, one such insider worked for Arnold, the ad agency with the Volkswagen account. Using Nick Drake gave the campaign another jolt of credibility and it also introduced Drake to a new generation of fans, who snapped up as many copies of *Pink Moon* in three weeks after the ads began to run as had been bought since 1974.[63] By this point, as I have described, the notion of good music being "sold out" by its use in television commercials was under revision. Commercials were coming to be seen as a legitimate venue for non-mainstream acts to gain exposure. Thus, as one fan recounted some years later, "Hearing one of my dead idols singing in a car ad brought mixed emotions, but it was such a great ad it didn't cheapen the song or Drake's memory in the slightest."[64] (A new release of "Pink Moon" as a Rykodisc single carried a sticker identifying the song with the Volkswagen Cabrio commercial.)[65]

By the year 2000, the mainstream media was commenting on Volkswagen's zeitgeist-tapping television ads by asserting that they had connected with a younger generation whose values they had adopted. A story in *Newsweek* reported that the "quirky ads backed by hip music" delivered a pitch that "rang true to kids weary of marketing hype."[66] The two ads I have discussed were joined by dozens more with similar approaches. The artists whose music was featured make an eclectic mix, but they typically were seen to have anti-mainstream artistic legitimacy. They included Charles Mingus, Stereolab, The Roots, Lush, Velocity Girl, Son Volt, and The Orb. Volkswagen exploited indie culture in music and movies to appeal to consumers on the basis that the Volkswagen brand was of a piece with their cultivated, sensitive outsider's perspective on mainstream society. In doing so, Volkswagen perpetuated the processes of configuring alternative culture as a taste culture and of bestowing distinction on its participants.

Perhaps the most convincing case to be made that the VW Drivers Wanted campaign constructed an indie identity for itself and its target market comes from a professor of marketing at Oxford University, Douglas B. Holt, who sees the whole brand

63 Douglas Wolk, "Nick Drake's Post-Posthumous Fame," *Salon,* June 19, 2000, http://archive.salon.com/ent/music/feature/2000/06/19/drake/index.html (accessed October 2, 2008).

64 Drake LeLane, "It's a Pink Moon: A VW Flashback," *Thus Spake Drake,* June 16, 2006, http://drakelelane.blogspot.com/2006/06/its-pink-moon-vw-flashback.html (accessed October 2, 2008).

65 Keith Naughton, "VW Rides a Hot Streak," *Newsweek,* May 22, 2000, pp. 48–50.

66 Ibid.

identity of Volkswagen as a specifically indie identity. In his book *How Brands Become Icons: The Principles of Cultural Branding,* Holt discusses the Drivers Wanted campaign precisely in terms of the cultivation of an anti-mainstream sensibility. In discussing "Sunday Afternoon" airing during the coming-out episode of *Ellen,* Holt asserts that this earned the brand "authenticity points."[67] He specifically identifies an "independent film aesthetic" in the campaign and argues that this is geared toward selling the product to fans of off-Hollywood cinema by creating "an aesthetic centered on the conventions of art house independent films."[68] All of this is part of the advertisers' attempt "to overcome the indie counterculture's inoculation to mass marketing,"[69] to reproduce the 1960s-era kind of anti-advertising that would draw a desirable demographic to the brand. Holt discusses the use of Nick Drake in "Milky Way," writing that reviving this forgotten hero of alternative music "gives Volkswagen tremendous authenticity as an indie voice."[70] Finally, of Volkswagen campaigns old and new alike, Holt maintains that their success arises from the way they adopt "the art world's disdain for mass culture."[71] Just as the 1960s campaign internalized the mass society critique, so the more recent one is predicated on the desire of a subset of consumers—indie consumers who are young, affluent, and culturally plugged in—to see themselves as separate from and superior to the consumers of ordinary, mass-market culture. The power of VW as a brand, argues Holt, is precisely the way it comes to be identified with a specific culture—indie culture. Indie culture, then, is not just being exploited by Volkswagen and Arnold. It is also being produced by them, in collaboration with them. If Nick Drake is seen to have credibility among participants in indie culture, it is in no small measure because a certain Cabrio commercial has credibility among them too.

In the years since these spots aired, other campaigns have sought to exploit a similar sense of anti-mainstream authenticity by adopting the style of indie culture. One especially successful example is the "Get a Mac" campaign for Apple computers (2006–2007) in which a Mac and a PC are each represented by a man standing against a white background.[72] (The measure of the cultural significance of these ads is the substantial number of parody videos posted online.)[73] PC guy is a square, attired for business, his hair combed, his diction a bit stilted. Mac guy, by contrast, is a hipster. He wears jeans and a hooded sweatshirt to contrast against PC guy's dark suit and

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67   Douglas B. Holt, *How Brands Become Icons: The Principles of Cultural Branding* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2004), 89.

68   Ibid., 90.

69   Ibid.

70   Ibid., 88.

71   Ibid., 69.

72   I am describing the US version of these ads. Versions shown in the UK and Japan are different in various ways. Cyrus Farivar, "Apple's 'I'm a Mac, I'm a PC' Ads Cross the Pacific," *Engadget,* November 13, 2006, http://www .engadget.com/2006/11/13/apples-im-a-mac-im-a-pc-ads-cross-the-pacific/ (accessed October 2, 2008).

73   "Top 5 'I'm a Mac' Parody Commercials," *Gizmodo,* December 17, 2006, http://gizmodo.com/gadgets/press/top-5 -im-a-mac-parody-commercials-222404.php (accessed October 2, 2008).

tie, his shirt is untucked, he wears his hair longer than PC guy's, and casually keeps his hands in his front pockets. The overt message spoken in the characters' dialogue is that Macs are simpler, easier, more logical, and less problematic to use than PCs. But the subtext, of course, is that PCs just aren't cool like Macs are. By adopting as its signifier of cool an indie persona, Mac constructs its brand identity as an authentic alternative to mainstream computers. The "Get a Mac" campaign, like the "Drivers Wanted" campaign, participates in the construction of not only a brand but a style, a cultural category, an us and an Other. Its significance extends far beyond computers and advertising.

Indie Culture and/as Consumer Culture. By seizing on these ad campaigns, I do not mean to be facetious or disrespectful toward those for whom independent or alternative media cannot be reconciled with something as seemingly compromised as network television advertising. I sympathize with their desire to remain aloof from commercialized culture even as I think most indie fans have softened the absolutist stance vis-à-vis creative autonomy and the major media. I do mean, however, to oppose critics who condemn the practice of supposedly authentic indie culture being "co-opted" by big corporations, the so-called brand bullies.[74] A central problem with this perspective is that it gives too much uncritical credibility to the "authentic" subculture, failing to identify its function in maintaining class distinction. It also, crucially, misrecognizes the relation of indie culture to commercial culture as one of actual autonomy—as if such a thing were possible. At the same time, these critics implicitly pass negative, patronizing judgment on the mainstream of consumers whose agency they slight through an emphasis on the pervasive power of brand bullies. This gives the already privileged alternative culture the authority to define not only itself, but also its Other, and recognizes its own agency while configuring the dominant culture's consumers as passive victims of corporate-consumerist ideology. In considering how an advertising campaign may harness the styles and meanings of indie culture, I do not mean to point out that indie culture has been co-opted or that it has sold out, but that the mainstream culture has to some extent bought in, and that the indie culture may be no less credible as a result because that culture's participants—not critics who pronounce from on high—ultimately are the ones empowered to determine what is and is not credible within the context of their experience.

The dynamics of mainstream and alternative cultures are more complex, relational, and fluid than the brand-bully position allows. As I have argued, the key notions of autonomy and authenticity are hardly absolutes. They are mobilized when expedient by producers and consumers eager to distinguish their culture from the Other of the mainstream. We might also see these terms as ideals toward which some strive rather than qualities inherent in a particular practice or product. The events surrounding *Happiness* and the VW campaign I have discussed are both examples of products of commercial culture being positioned within a consumer economy to appeal to a

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74 The paradigmatic case of this kind of criticism is Klein. See also Quart and Kalle Lasn, *Culture Jam: How to Reverse America's Suicidal Consumer Binge—And Why We Must* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999).

distinct audience. Ultimately, this is what the myriad examples of indie culture are: products, objects for sale in the culture market. To see them (or some of them) as somehow more legitimate than other objects for sale in the culture market is to participate in producing the rhetoric of autonomy, authenticity, and distinction that is so central to the construction of indie as we know it. This is not to say that the production and consumption of alternative cinema and other media is not itself a useful or necessary thing, but to point out that inherent in that production and consumption is a set of values—an implicit moral equation.   ✳