

Specialist Writing Option B: 'What Makes a Film Independent?'

[Adapted from *Studying American Independent Cinema* (pp. 18-19), by Rona Murray, 2011, Auteur]

Independent cinema can be, and has been, defined as **something that strays artistically from the norm**. As Geoff King defines it "industrial factors are important, but do not provide the only grounds for definition of the particular varieties of film-making to which the label independent has most prominently been attached in recent decades". Arguably for example, **independent cinema does not need to adhere to generic patterns** since it is not expected to deliver their certain pleasures. In many independent films, genre is a more fluid concept. Genre in mainstream cinema structures our expectation and provides us with cinematic pleasures based on its 'repertoire of elements'. Genres are sold to us (through the advance publicity) as a guaranteed set of pleasures – of narrative, of visual style of set pieces, of stars. Independent cinema, as part of our definition does not need to adhere to those guarantees because it has less of a need to deliver a mass audience (albeit, as we saw above, the pressure to produce breakout successes increased). Therefore, genre tropes and signifiers can be subverted to challenge the ideologies contained implicitly within them. Similarly, narrative expectations do not always need to be met. **The audience for independent cinema specifically takes pleasure in these disruptions of expected enjoyment to find a more subversive and oppositional position outside of the norms**. This can be part of an audience's wish to position themselves by their consumption of products.

Against this is the example (often quoted) of something like *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002). Defined purely by its financing this is an independent film, yet it is often quoted as an example of how a purely economic definition draws in a mainstream narrative and genre. It is institutionally an independent production, but it is 'spiritually' and structurally a piece of mainstream cinema. Without wanting to denigrate its achievement and the genuine commercial leap of faith films like this take (especially casting the writer, Nia Vardalos, rather than a Hollywood performer to take the lead). American independent cinema, therefore, is defined for our purposes as a form of cinema that may usually be financed outside of the studio system, but which generally **challenges this cinematic form artistically and looks to create something individual in either its aesthetics or its ideological viewpoint, or both**.

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Adapted extract from *Studying American Independent Cinema* office@auteur.co.uk