
SEAN BAKER'S ATYPICAL FESTIVAL TRAJECTORY AS AN INDEPENDENT FILMMAKER

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Abstract: Sean Baker is a contemporary American independent filmmaker who has been rising to prominence, culminating in his win at the prestigious Palme d'Or awards in 2024. However, what sets his career apart is the way he began - by making independent films with almost no budget, which have been labeled by critics as American Neorealism; he has remained true to his approach in spite of his limited budget and his notoriety has increased with each film. This article aims to unpack the manner in which his festival success has spun organically from his approach to making films, therefore analyzing his authorship and solution-oriented production mindset. By assessing his artistic identity, this article attempts to portray how Sean Baker represents a positive example of an organic route to festival acclaim.

Keywords: Sean Baker, American Neo-realism, independent film, indie, cult film, auteur, A24, Palme d'Or, Cannes, Sundance, low-budget, authentic.

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Introduction

Mainstream culture often associates American filmmaking with Hollywood and that happens due to the dominant players in the field, the big-budget studios which offer large-scale productions and blockbusters to cinemas worldwide, profiting millions of dollars from selling tickets everywhere. To cinephiles, however, there is another facet of American cinema that has been thriving for decades now, which is represented by *indie* films, whose more recent pioneer is the prolific and down-to-earth Sean Baker.

Born in 1971 in New Jersey, Sean Baker didn't grow up with connections in the film industry, but rather sought his own path after discovering, like many other now-famous directors, a passion for homemade movies during his teenage years. Before studying directing, he studied non-linear editing at the New School in Greenwich Village, New York. He then got a degree in directing from the renowned New York University, through Tisch School of the Arts, often mentioning in interviews how much of an influence his studies on non-linear editing have had on his directing style. He became known in 2004 for his second film, *Take Out*, and has since been having success with every film, culminating in winning the grand award in Cannes in 2024 for his film *Anora*.

There are various aspects pertaining to his particular style of directing, but they all boil down to the core values of independent filmmaking. In that sense, Baker represents a model of low-budget productions, as he's using the lack of money to fuel creativity and improve the story. While this narrative has been pushed again and again about art in general – that financial restraint is to be

used as a strategic advantage-, it cannot be denied that even though low-budget filmmakers end up frequently finding solutions for their shooting issues, most of them would much rather have better conditions. This fact does not take away at all from their cinematic charm, on the contrary, it creates more often than not a visual and thematic cohesion within the circle of independent films.

For instance, filmmakers such as Wes Anderson, who started out independently with *small* films, for lack of a better term, which were all appreciated for their offbeat charm, reminiscing of European arthouse cinema. As his budgets increased, he kept on working with the same actors, rotating them in different roles according to the film, and maintained the same type of charming visuals and storytelling with a slight dark edge, built around quirky characters. Beyond these few elements, however, if one were to watch his early films in comparison to the latest, one can easily notice the originality and spark fading under the weight of a lavish budget. The complexity of the constructed sets has transformed from fascinating to overbearing and the camera movements have become so technologically-ridden that they are missing their charm. For all these reasons, Anderson has lost part of his appeal to his cinephile fans by becoming too much of a mainstream figure, whereas his films constantly attract attention due to his notoriety and the trendy Hollywood names attached to the cast.

If one were to compare these two independent filmmakers, it is easy to notice that Baker has always been attracted to a low-budget filmmaking style and still abides by certain values he has been emulating, whilst an auteur like Anderson has surpassed the initial values and has moved on to a different type of cinema. Consequently, what sets Baker apart from other filmmakers is the full-force commitment to the values of independent cinema and resistance to increasing budgets, and that could also be why his 2024 Cannes win represents a triumph for the *indie* genre as well.

Baker's Auteur Approach

Sean Baker's cinema does not represent innovation *per se*, because many of the techniques he employs are traits usually and historically appropriated to European arthouse cinema, be it the naturalist acting or the handheld camera dynamics. Many of these have become staples of independent filmmakers in America as well, who tried to escape the market domination of the big studios. Where Baker's innovation stands is in the vision itself and how these techniques become a natural part of the storytelling process.

To understand his approach, one ought to consider the directorial decisions involved in his work. First of all, one of the key elements setting him apart from the

mainstream American directors is the casting. While others compete to grab the attention of stars that can tag along massive fanbases, Sean Baker values realism above all, which resonates deeply into the casting process. Oftentimes, he has cast people off the street, usually finding them while conducting his thorough creative scouting, where he hangs out in a potential script location just to get a sense of the place and the dialogues of the people passing by. He likes to search for atypical faces, which frequently leads him to casting non-professionals, who can add into the mix both richer, more natural performances, while also introducing a greater degree of creative risk. The cast is usually built as a combination of different types of actors; where there aren't non-professional locals, one can find either out-of-work performers, theatre-only actors, beginner professionals who haven't yet had their breakthrough in the industry, or even an Instagram sensation. Sometimes, it even goes backwards: he finds himself enticed by real-life humans and turns them into characters, constantly reinventing the script during pre-production. This weave of different sources of casting creates a blend of unique physical attributes and acting skills. One of the special qualities of Baker's films lies in the ingenious juxtaposition of the actors and the ability to direct them in such a manner that their performances come out as cohesive, without betraying the different level of skill or education of each actor.

The particularity lies not only in the eclectic cast, but in the manner of directing the cast. The difficulties involved in bringing together actors coming from such various professional environments create a higher pressure for the director, who is taking the risk of having to congregate uneven performances in the editing room. All the more reason to give credit where credit is due – Baker, it seems, has never failed yet. Guided by what can only be presumed as a strong intuition, he has managed to find common ground for all of these performers, helping them bloom into powerful and raw examples of top-notch acting, as his cast members always create roles that are both critically acclaimed and culturally significant.

I guess what it does for me is provide a fresh face, which I think is so important for certain characters, in order to have that suspension of disbelief kick in and stay in. When you mix seasoned actors and first-timers, something interesting happens. The seasoned actor will rub off on the first-timer and then the first-timer's freshness and naivety somehow excites the seasoned actor. It's a nice alchemy and it's different on set every time. (Baker, *Huck Magazine*, 2018)

In working with his actors, Baker's non-threatening, energetic and generally positive demeanor are certainly helpful attributes to an extent, but a director needs

much more for such a challenge, they need a deep and intuitive understanding of human psychology in order to bring out true emotions. Moreover, his mentality is always about being open-minded to changes that can occur in performances, which in turn naturally creates spontaneity. He brings together people that can engage with his project in a meaningful way and the preparation work that they do together varies from one character to another, depending on the background of the actor. Some have to do their own research on-site, while others that have been pulled from that location strive to channel their familiarity into the character. Sean Baker has been citing influences from directors like Mike Leigh, John Cassavetes or Hal Ashby, all of them known for coaxing extraordinarily authentic performances out of their leads. This authenticity is evidently the key element of Baker's process and implicitly, of the films. The environment they collaborate in is always intimate, maintaining a small crew and real-life locations to enhance the context of the actions and imbue them with what might be called, in the acting world, "the truth".

However, before acting out the truth, first of all there is the script, where the basis of said truth is formed. Mentioning the casting ahead of describing the writing process has been far from coincidental, it follows the path that Baker also sometimes follows, in that the script derives frequently from specific casting decisions, for instance in the way that an idea might spark from juxtaposing two particular characters, or from the true personal recollections of the untrained actors living in a certain community or space. In Baker's films, the story is deeply connected to the environment he is portraying, the cast, the approach to the actual shooting.

Thematically, he is known for approaching minority communities and giving them a voice through emotional, yet sometimes humorous stories, which are usually focused on one or two characters, who are usually hustlers trying to make ends meet. Whether it is a Chinese delivery man biking through the New York traffic in the rain, or a black transgender sex worker wandering in high heels on the Los Angeles boulevards, his characters oftentimes have to overcome some type of obstacle. Even though the stories he tells always revolve around minorities, in each film Baker makes, he has been appreciated for not making their social status the core of the plot, but rather treating it as a circumstance. The core of his plots in fact is a much deeper one: their humanity. By focusing on the intimate, personal problems of his characters, but at the same time never truly allowing them to escape their social contexts, one can see how Baker's scripts value a balance of both the authenticity and the construct, crafting poignant connections between the characters, while keeping the receiving end feeling as if they were witnessing real-life events of these people's lives.

Nonetheless, the realism of both the story and the performances reaches the audience by means of the cinematography, therefore one should consider the visuals that Baker employs to convey emotion and story to the viewer. He always opts for a rougher look, akin to the low-budget tradition long established by European waves and has been known to emulate the Dogme 95 aesthetic, embracing seemingly spontaneous handheld camera movements, ditching equipment like the dolly and the tracks in favour of adaptability and easier mobility. The camera setup is always minimal, whether it is a 35mm film camera or iPhones, and that results in a minimal crew as well. There is a prevalent low-budget approach, no matter the camera or format, which allows him to film sometimes almost without being noticed. Adding the fact that he often edits the films himself, the budget expenses already become much more manageable.

His auteur vision is tightly interconnected with the production strategy, which is probably also the reason why he shares close relationships with his recurring producers. For his projects, Baker describes taking long scouting days of just him and the producer driving around, looking for the right places to shoot in. This is how he has found his most memorable locations, such as the iconic donut shop, but due to financial restraints, they were never able to secure the entire location for the whole duration of the shoot, therefore, the places kept their business open and the crew were squeezing in, like a fly on a wall, always filming in a corner and integrating whatever interaction with a customer into the film, through improvisations. This represents an example of the aforementioned ability of certain independent filmmakers to twist low-budget limitations into a creative outcome. They avoid altering anything in the locations, which are mostly used exactly as they are. The lack of set construction or even set design is another marker of a low-budget-specific film, but also of a film that highly values realism in its portrayal. On top of that, there is rarely any lighting equipment involved (apart from the on-screen light sources), meaning the flexibility of the camera and actor movements effectively create the freedom to film anything that happens at the expense of a more polished cinematography. Baker is easily willing to give it up, compensating for the raw quality of the footage with dynamic compositions and a pictorial approach to the light and shadow balance. One disadvantage of less costly digital cameras is the chromatic inaccuracy, his solution to it being to ramp up the saturation and hues, creating a completely non-realistic look to counterbalance the gritty realism of the stories.

„*These characters were so colourful that I thought: «Let's make a colourful movie.»*”, he says in an interview for ScreenSlam, after explaining how social realism in films is usually depicted through desaturation of the colors. This explanation singles him out as disinterested in following trends, but striving to find his own way on an already beaten path.

Milestones

The filmography of Sean Baker includes eight films, spanning from 2000 to 2024, and he is credited as a director, writer, producer and editor for all of them, missing only one producing credit on his first film. He is also credited as a director of photography for two of them. For the sake of brevity, this paper will only refer to five of his films, which are also his most notorious: *Take-Out*, *Tangerine*, *The Florida Project*, *Red Rocket* and *Anora*. They have all been selected because they represent certain milestones in his career as an independent filmmaker, as reflected in the festival trajectory.

Not his first film, but his second, *Take-Out*, was the one that put Baker on the map, with a nomination for the John Cassavetes Award in the Independent Spirit Awards. It came out in 2004 and was the only one co-directed with his university colleague Shih-Ching Tsou, who often collaborates as a hands-on producer, set designer and even sometimes acts in his films. It tells the story of Ming Ding, a New York City immigrant who is trying to cover a huge debt in one day by running as many deliveries as possible from a small family-run business, the neighborhood's popular spot for noodle and rice cravings. As he bikes through the gray city streets, he is quickly caught in heavy rain and, since he has no choice but to confront it, the downpour becomes an expressive backdrop for his struggle. The film was shot on digital video with almost no budget, with a total of 3000 US dollars from their own money, forcing them to adopt creative solutions, such as shooting inside a real-life takeout kitchen, or in the aforementioned rain, which was an inevitable forecast difficulty, which brought out the city lights so poignantly on camera that Baker ended up feeling grateful.

He found the main actor Charles Jang through word-of-mouth in the Chinese community of New York, then managed to persuade the real-life vendors of the takeout place to accept being filmed throughout the day. A large part of the narrative consists in the camera following him as he goes up to different floors of different, but typical New York apartment buildings, interacting with many tenants - one can catch a glimpse into their lifestyles as they stand in the door to pay for their order. Watching this film in our current technological era, in the omnipresence of delivery apps, shows the audience a nostalgic reminder of how even a small aspect of urban life, the food take-out system, has changed irrevocably in the past twenty years into less of a social experience. The film was shot during a time when plenty of people would line up to order and wait around for a while until the food was ready, or instead, they would order through a phone call, in this case to a memorable cashier Big Sister (the actual cashier at the real-life location), and either come down to pick up the order, or get take-out, which

they would have to pay upfront in cash. The camera makes sure to capture all the strange, sometimes comforting moments of customer interaction, culminating in a tense moment of harsh bullying towards the end. However, the film later ends on a hopeful note, leaving behind not an empty social critique, but a powerful and moving portrait of a Chinese immigrant overwhelmed by life in the rough metropolis. The film premiered at the Slamdance Film Festival and had a limited theatrical release, primarily in arthouse theatres, where it grossed an approximate 40,000 dollars. Throughout the years, it has found a cult audience through home video and streaming services, and it is still remembered as a quintessential milestone in independent cinema of the early 2000s.

The next significant milestone in Baker's career was *Tangerine*, which has created quite a hype, especially after having been selected in the prestigious Sundance Film Festival, the pinnacle of independent cinema. Again, one can recognize the same sensibility and sincere curiosity towards marginalized communities, in this case, the black, transgender and sex worker communities respectively, represented by the two characters Sin-Dee Rella and Alexandra, played by first-timers Kitana Kiki Rodriguez and Mya Taylor, an example of one of the many cases of successful on-street casting in a Baker project. The auteur builds the plot around Sin-Dee impulsively chasing down a girl after hearing of an infidelity with her boyfriend and/or pimp, and the whole story unravels a tapestry of characters, each coping with their own current issues. By focusing the main action on the messiness of her love life, the director and the actress highlight the emotion and uniqueness of the character, while still accurately and touchingly depicting the difficulties stemming from her social status. There is generosity and candor in the way he encourages the viewer to connect with these women, and the film has been praised for the sensitive and thoughtful approach to depicting characters who are black, transgender and sex workers. The author's sensitivity is translated on-screen into agency, instead of frailty: the characters are empowered in their everyday life by their bodies, by their sister-like kinship, by their strong, vivacious personalities. *"It does not depict Sin-Dee and Alexandra as passive victims of the sex industry. In fact, it shows their choice to engage in sex work as remarkably benign."* (Macintosh, 2018, p. 212)

For these reasons, *Tangerine* has been hailed as culturally significant, but there is another aspect of this film that gives it the status of a milestone, not just for Baker's individual career, but for independent cinema in general, and that would be the technological breakthrough – shooting on the iPhone, instead of a camera. Although it is not the first film to attempt this feat, it is the first one to surpass the low-budget look and transcend into a truly cinematic experience, nonetheless with critical accolades to boot. This film was shot on location, on the famous Santa

Monica Boulevard in Los Angeles almost in guerilla style (the production did obtain permits, but they were unable to have a designated crewmember block the traffic, so they would just start shooting on the street) during the winter holidays, same as the time the action of the film takes place in, meaning they were even able to snatch a few shots of Christmas decorations. Shooting on location in such an expensive city like Los Angeles gave them almost no choice but to consider an alternative to the classical filming equipment – the whole budget of the film was a 100,000 dollars, far from the budgets of the beginning of his career, though insubstantial for the prices of LA. This context ended up enhanced by the use of iPhones and an almost complete lack of other equipment such as lighting or video village, not just from a financial standpoint, but for flexibility as well, since the small crew were able to move along with ease, seldom noticed by passers-by. The lack of attention drawn to them certainly bears an important contribution to the authenticity of the film, allowing for the full-fledged immersion in the street hustlers' community.

Reiterating that the film was shot on iPhone is a bit of an incomplete statement, since the Apple smartphones would have been unable to carry on the job by themselves, in that it would have been impossible to create a cinematic look on them alone, especially since the film was shot at the end of 2014 meaning the model employed was the iPhone 5S, nowhere near the technological advances of newer models. It would be fair to mention that the smartphone camera itself was aided by special anamorphic lens adapters and a handheld gimbal rig, not to mention the Filmic Pro app, designed for professional use of exposure and focus on phone cameras, thus obtaining the image quality that allowed them to ramp up the saturation and obtain a specific aesthetic, called “pop verité” by critics. In brief, all of these technical solutions represent the mark of a hands-on director, going to great lengths to be able to shoot the film as authentically as possible, while at the same time maintaining the least possible amount of compromises in respect to the cinematic quality of the final product. Premiering at the Sundance Film Festival helped cement Baker as a leading voice in indie filmmaking, with a highly distinctive visual style and an ability to tell unconventional stories, he opened a new window of innovation for low-budget filmmaking. The film was distributed by Magnolia Pictures and managed to gross an approximate 924,793 dollars worldwide, qualifying as a breakthrough moment of success in his career.

The following milestone in Baker's professional trajectory is represented by *The Florida Project*, a project of multiple firsts for him: first collaboration with a an A-List actor, Willem Dafoe, first time working with a considerably larger budget (2 million dollars, still considered low-budget compared to studio standards), first project shot on 35mm film, first Academy Award nomination

for one of his films (though not for Baker as a director, but for Dafoe), first sales contract with the world-famous indie distribution company, A24, first premiere in the prestigious Quinzaine des Cinéastes. The story follows a precocious six-year-old girl and her single mother living in a dilapidated motel next to the famous Disney World amusement park, as well as the diligent, but compassionate motel manager (Dafoe). The narrative touches on themes like poverty and childhood innocence, maintaining both Baker's trademark naturalist, authentic style, and his penchant for showcasing the humanity of marginalized people. The significantly larger budget allowed him to make specific production decisions, enhancing the film's scope without compromising the intimate storytelling. A key decision during pre-production was to opt for shooting on 35mm film stock, an aesthetic choice that allowed him to depict the sun-soaked motel's kitsch and vibrant colours, forming an expressive contrast with the gritty realism of its world, and granting a rich and textured look to the film. Moreover, the budget raise allowed for an expansion of the team, adding a more experienced director of photography and camera crew in order to properly handle shooting on film. His collaboration with a celebrity like Dafoe would have hardly been possible without the increased financing. Nevertheless, the budget extension was not as substantial as to provide total production comfort or a completely different approach to directing. Consequentially, the rest of the roles were cast in typical fashion, true to his method, a mix of non-professional actors and locals, although the idea of such extremes made Baker feel uneasy in the beginning:

Our fear was that having a recognizable face would pull the audience out of it in a second," Baker said. "The suspension of disbelief would be killed. But Willem is such a transformative actor, willing to take the time to develop the character and become this guy, that I felt like he could blend in. (Kohn, 2017, IndieWire)

Another representative element that he has maintained, despite the larger income, was shooting on location, keeping the motel running its business as usual, which was crucial to grounding the film's story in a real-life setting. He still embraced a guerilla-style tactic of working with a compact crew and plenty of improvisation, especially in the scenes involving children. Even the writing kept its naturalism, as Baker has stated that he "wanted the audience to feel like they've spent a summer with these characters" (*Medium*, 2020), meaning that he has willingly forgone a conventional three-act structure in favor of a more realistic, meandering narrative. Overall, the director has remained true to his roots, focusing on authenticity as the primary artistic goal. This effort has paid off, as

the film had two breakthrough results: a premiere in the acclaimed Quinzaine des Cinéastes parallel section in Cannes, bringing him closer to European arthouse cinema than ever before, and an acquirement by the distribution company A24, renowned for supporting edgy independent projects. Moreover, after the Cannes premiere, the film was also screened in the Toronto International Film Festival, not to mention the Academy. All these factors considered, the film grossed 11 million dollars, a whopping number compared to the previous one; it also earned the Academy Award nomination for Dafoe. For Baker, it marked a turning point in his career by shining a light on his ability to handle a slightly larger budget, while still remaining true to his indie sensibilities.

During the early stages of the COVID pandemic, Baker shot the following film, *Red Rocket* (2021), a milestone that marks his first premiere in the Official Competition of the Cannes Film Festival. Shot on gritty 16mm film stock, its plot revolves around a former porn star, Mikey, who comes back to the small town where he was living with the wife he had left, because he is completely broke and has no other option. Meanwhile, he meets underage redhead Strawberry, whom he tries to drag into the porn world as a ticket for his own redemption. The shooting budget was tighter - less than half of the budget he had raised on his previous film - but was still higher than that of his earlier productions. One could say that this film represents the ideal case for proving the point in discussion, that Baker has determinedly kept the independent cinema core values no matter the conditions. The entire logistics of the shoot were intertwined with the auteur vision, molding the storytelling with the production possibilities. Thus, the whole process developed organically, which is the reason for circling back to it in greater detail in a following section. After the French premiere, the film was also screened at the Telluride Film Festival and the New York Film Festival, while also gaining plenty of viewers upon its theatre release, due to another successful collaboration with A24 as the distributor.

Last, but not least, the most recent milestone to be considered is the honorable win of the 2024 Palme D'Or, one of the most coveted awards in the industry on a global scale, with the film *Anora* (2024), not yet launched in cinemas at the time of writing this paper. The exact figure of the budget has not been made public so far and it would be hard to gauge the scale of the project. From various press sources and reports from Cannes, it comes up that he has kept true to his guerilla filmmaking ethos by shooting on location and to his vision by portraying once again the “underdogs”, characters from a marginalized community that have the potential to overcome said difficulties. In this case, akin to a few of his earlier works, the protagonist is a sex worker and the performance has been praised for its authenticity. The title character, Anora, becomes entangled with the son of an

extremely wealthy man in a narrative that emphasizes the stark contrast between the two social backgrounds they originate in. The film is currently handled not by A24, but by another dominant distributor in the indie genre, Neon. Additionally, as it reaches its worldwide audience, one can further investigate whether the auteur's values have changed, or have remained essentially the same.



Still frame from *Tangerine*, 2015
(c) Duplass Brothers Productions & Through Films (c)
Photo source:

https://www.imdb.com/title/tt3824458/mediaviewer/rm661502209/?ref_=ext_shr_lnk

Strategies

One thing that can be observed, regarding the aforementioned reception of a few of his most well-known projects, is that Sean Baker has always made a profit on his films so far and that mainly pertains to the manner in which he plans his projects around a low budget, to minimize the risks. Since the theater release of an arthouse independent film can only be limited, such a film must count on alternative ways to reach its audience. Those alternatives are: taking up a festival route first, before premiering in theatres (which is more common for films in Europe, rather than the US), aiming to hopefully create a buzz and joining up with a powerful distribution company to widely promote the picture. Baker's own opinion about it leans more towards the idealistic side:

Going to festivals throughout the world is inspirational and motivating, because bonding with another filmmaker allows for comradery and support. So I hope that more young filmmakers will see the value in

it and understand that we are living in a global time, which is why it is important to think globally. (Baker for Locarno Film Festival, 2018)

Looking beyond the subjective point-of-view, there are plenty of ways in which Baker's selections in highly-regarded film festivals have made an impact on independent filmmaking as a whole, thus marking festivals as being the sole gateway to recognition for such small-scale projects. Precisely because independent cinema often emulates the values of arthouse cinema, the films frequently find their way into European festivals. Taking a look at Baker's festival strategy, before acquiring enough appraisal to have the world premiere in Cannes, his route was usually to premiere a film in US-based festivals such as Slamdance, Sundance or South By South-West (SBSW), and then continue with European-based festivals such as Locarno Film Festival or Karlovy Vary International Film Festival. This kind of approach raises awareness of the projects and critical appreciation, giving additional visibility on a global scale.

Independent films have long had their place in festivals, as they have always represented a response to the mainstream studio productions. Since independent filmmakers struggle to produce these films, they entail a certain level of passion and commitment that oftentimes are lacking in studio films, considering the transactionary nature of these productions: they are, quite simply, made to earn profits. The reason why the indie scripts are often more personal than the mainstream ones is because they are personal projects in themselves, that the auteur fully believes in. Festivals are always looking for a fresh voice and personal, authentic stories, which bodes well for the independent filmmaker, who needs that validation from festivals, because there is no other way for them to reach an audience, firstly, and then secondly, to earn money for the next project. The audience that they reach through festivals is one already inclined to or at least curious about this type of films, less polished and more truthful to their core, which boosts their chance to have a good reception. „[...] ***The independent film world thinks of itself as «telling the truth,» as against the «lies» and falseness of Hollywood movies.***” (Ortner, 2013, p. 10)

The origin of independent cinema lies in this dichotomy. It is true that a number of contextual factors did contribute to a real rise of the indie scene in the 1990s, such as cable television channels the likes of HBO dedicated to showing movies, more screens in cinema theatres, and the home video market growth. However, independent films in the United States have steadily been supported by the defiant festival named Sundance, founded in 1978 and devoted specifically to independent cinema. The reason why Sundance was born was to counteract the studio system with support and awareness for lower-budget, higher-creativity

projects. Due to its tradition, the audience attending knows what to expect, in fact, it can be said that Sundance's cultural significance resides in the way they have shaped the audience worldwide, meaning that today, cinephiles everywhere know that when a film has the Sundance laurel on the poster or the first frame, it will pose some sort of social or cultural critique. It essentially helped the audiences understand what independent films stand for.

But if Hollywood is hegemonic and independent films are (self-defined as) counter-hegemonic, then they call for different kinds of interpretive perspectives. For Hollywood movies the job is to, using the term loosely, deconstruct them, to take them apart in terms of their coded ideological messages, their forms of subjectivation of viewers, their false pictures of the real world. Independent films, on the other hand, form a kind of «counter-cinema» (Steven 1985). They are in the business of «cultural critique», going up against the dominant culture by way of being «not Hollywood». (Ortner, 2013, p. 10)

Another aspect worth considering on the history of independent filmmaking is the consequential manner in which it reflects, on a social scale, the end of what is known as “The American Dream” - a cultural concept which states that anyone can move to the United States and make their ideal life come true. This idea gained more traction in the post-war years, when the economy was booming and there were plenty of well-paid jobs available, nevertheless it was later, coinciding with the economic crisis of the 1970s, that this concept truly declined and these films blossomed. Thus, independent films appeared to illustrate the *zeitgeist* on a more profound level than the mainstream cinema. Along with the 1980s came a significant shift, in that the indies finally managed to move out of art house theatres and into more mainstream cinemas, due to the rise of fresh directors like Jim Jarmusch, the Coen brothers, David Lynch, Spike Lee and other household names, and the powerful marketing intuition of Miramax and the present day *persona non grata* of Hollywood, Harvey Weinstein. In his 2004 book *Down and Dirty Pictures – Miramax, Sundance, and the Rise of Independent Film*, Peter Biskind analyses the comeuppance story of Sundance and the alleged downfall of it, raising the point that currently, Sundance has grown so much that it has become an industry in itself, much like the studios it was boycotting in the first place. On a speculative note, that might be a proper reason for Baker as an auteur who values authenticity so highly, to move past US-based festivals and reach out to European arthouse festivals like Locarno, Torino, Karlovy Vary, all of which have received him with praise. Nonetheless, it is the win of the Palme d'Or that has unequivocally and permanently elevated his status of arthouse filmmaker.

If Sean Baker's festival strategies have changed along the years, one cannot state the same about the type of cinema he constantly produces as an auteur. The core values of low-budget filmmaking and the independent mindset as a mission have respectively remained staples of his work. For a better summarization of them, one can circle back, as previously affirmed, to his 2021 film, *Red Rocket*, selected for the fact that it represents the meeting point between Baker's both formally and logistically rough-around-the-edges beginnings, and his more comfortable budgets and growth of notoriety which came along later in his career. Thus, *Red Rocket* can be considered a mark of how Baker accomplished applying the best of both worlds, keeping the grit and the truthfulness at core, while also allowing the film to take a more aesthetically conscious form. Through continually avoiding a potential collaboration with an established studio, Baker has managed to preserve his creative freedom, hence being able to take potent decisions, such as choosing to shoot it on Super16mm film stock. Another important aspect of independent filmmaking that Baker's approach indicates is flexibility as a non-negotiable value. If the camera setup is minimal, it allows for spontaneous on-set decisions and for a more accurate portrayal of the environment, contributing to the overall authenticity. This flexibility also occurs due to the small number of crewmembers, which is always the case for Baker's films, but in this case, a few other circumstances overlap. While it is true that the budget was significantly higher than those preceding, Baker followed his artistic vision by choosing to invest in shooting on film stock, which naturally has taken up a large amount of the expenses, in conjunction with the filming taking place during 2020's peak pandemic climate. Consequently, the feat he attempted was succesful: he shot the film with a crew of six people (to be exact, besides him and the producers, there were also the director of photography, two camera assistants, one grip/electrical, one sound mixer/boom operator and one production designer), the point being for each of the two producers to wear more hats than one. Every aspect of production is generally intertwined, therefore the minimal crew, in turn, allowed for shooting on location. Most of the times, they did not have permits, much less the capacity to close down locations, but because of the pandemic there were few people on the streets as it were, so they managed to get by in the guerilla style. This *modus operandi* has proven to be a gateway to the so-called *happy accidents* to be embraced as a momentuous part of the narrative, such as when Mikey, the two-timing former porn star kneels down to make a proposal to Strawberry and the local train passes by at perfect timing, making the dialogue unintelligible and forcing the actors to shout in a ridiculously funny turn of the situation. Without this unique event, the scene would have had a radically different atmosphere.



Still frame from *Red Rocket*, 2021
(c) FilmNation Entertainment & CRE Film(c)
Photo source:

https://www.imdb.com/title/tt13453006/mediaviewer/rm2253199361/?ref_ext_shr_lnk

As an artistic voice, all of Baker's films contain the outstanding feature of independent films, their „edge”. The term is frequently observed in relation to projects that embody a certain darkness, pertaining to moral relativism. Going back to the strong opposition between indie films and Hollywood studio productions, the clear-cut morality depicted in mainstream films leaves no room for gray areas, characters mostly existing within the good/bad dichotomy, whereas the edge of independent films stems precisely from embracing and exploring those morally gray areas.

If I had to translate [the edge] with a single word, I think I would choose the word “off”—off-center, off-balance, off-moral, somehow or other not quite right. The idea of edge seems closely bound up with the idea noted above, that a good independent film should make the viewer uncomfortable, disturbed, destabilized. There is no single way to be edgy; there is edgy-dark, edgy-dangerous, edgy-perverse, edgy-disgusting, and so on. The common thread is that viewers should not be easy—whether with the story, the look, the music, or some other aspect. (Ortner, 2013, p. 62)

Therefore, the edge is what the audience needs from indie films to feel immersed in their story – in Baker's case, it comes from authenticity, among other. It is because of this quality that his latest projects' distribution rights have been

acquired by two companies, A24 and Neon, especially well-known for curating a selection of films whose common denominator is undoubtedly their edge. All in all, one can certainly observe the way that independent films were considered outsiders of the industry a couple of decades ago and have now blossomed into their own industry, albeit smaller, but nonetheless remarkable, gaining both warm critical receptions and solid numbers in theaters, not to mention on streaming platforms which the two companies also often employ as means of distribution.

Conclusion

Analyzing an overview of Sean Baker's career turns reveals the ways in which his distinctive presence in the film festival scene has influenced the overall impact of independent films and perhaps the public perception of them. Nevertheless, one factual truth is that Baker has proven that low or almost-no-budget films can achieve festival success on their own. By screening his films in international festivals, he has expanded the worldwide acclaim for indie cinema, thus inspiring filmmakers to focus on creativity rather than means of production. For struggling filmmakers who have still not achieved their passion projects, it can be encouraging to discover how limited resources can be compensated by versatility and creativity.

Additionally, Baker's cinema stands out by elevating socially conscious narratives. In the arthouse film world, social themes and the struggles of the overlooked or marginalized are oftentimes common, leading to a sense of platitude or even cliché sometimes that cannot be denied. However, it is a deeply authentic voice like Baker that can breathe charm and sincerity into stories about empowered characters who are never reduced to the victim label, and imbue them with candor, humor and, lastly, an edge. "*Indies are attracting both talented filmmakers and sizable, committed audiences, and a case could be made that, collectively, they are at least destabilizing, if not overturning, the Hollywood hegemony.*" (Ortner, 2013, p. 9) As indicated, film festivals play a sizable role in this overturn.

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