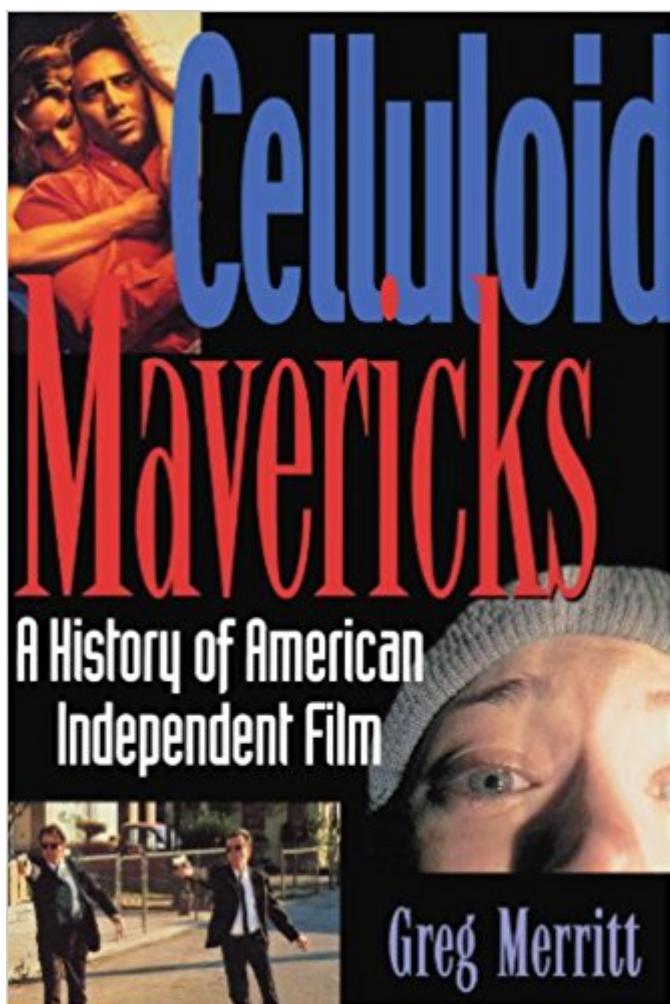


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Celluloid Mavericks: A History Of American Independent Film Making



Synopsis

Celluloid Mavericks: A History of American Independent Filmmaking documents this rich history, showing what it meant to be "independent" in the 1930s and what it means today. Author Greg Merritt distinguishes between indie and semi-indie productions, explores the genres represented under the independent umbrella, and addresses the question of what makes a movie independent -- its "spirit" or the budget backing the production. From one-reel flicks at the turn of the century to the blockbusters of the '90s, Celluloid Mavericks takes readers on a fascinating tour of the industry.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Somewhere between *Titanic* and *The Blair Witch Project* lies the demarcation between commercial and "independent" film. In this thorough and audacious history, Merritt (How to Produce an Independent Film) attempts to offer a century's-end definition to this carelessly tossed-about term. "To truly gain freedom," he writes, "filmmakers must completely disassociate themselves from the studios until their vision is put on film: no financing, no presigned distribution agreement, no help, no interference." The dubious origins of independent cinema can be traced to a private screening of D.W. Griffith's Ku Klux Klan epic *The Birth of a Nation* in 1915. Merritt bestows the indie label on a select roster of films, mostly by "celluloid mavericks"--John Cassavetes, Roger Corman, John Sayles, Quentin Tarantino and the other usual suspects--who have had the courage to defy mainstream ideas and ideals. His excessive plot/theme analysis and Pauline Kael aspirations notwithstanding, Merritt applies sound research and an infectious amount of enthusiasm, often

conveyed through sidebar anecdotes, cost-to-gross ratio charts, lists of award-winners and time lines. Yet while his linear narrative promises a sweeping conclusion, the last chapter fails to deliver. Instead of analyzing the relationship between the rise of Gen-X viewers and the recent proliferation of indie films, or offering predictions about the future of independent cinema, Merritt gets lost in the trees where the Blair Witch lurks and misses the forest. Agent, Victoria Sanders. (Feb.) Copyright 1999 Reed Business Information, Inc.

The blandness of current Hollywood product and the rise of a viable indie scene has increased public interest in the American independent filmmaking movement. This book is a timely look at a century of indie films--which the author defines as projects financed and produced outside the control of a studio. Attacking the subject from all angles, Merritt (a screenwriter and author of *How To Produce an Independent Film*) shows how forces like the Production Code, the blacklisting crisis, the breakdown of the studio system, and the counterculture of the Vietnam era shaped the indie film scene. But determining what an independent is gets more complicated as companies like Miramax fold into entertainment conglomerates, and Merritt stretches the definition by including genres like pornography, low-budget horror films, "underground" films of the 1950s and 1960s, even works by bad movie auteurs like Ed Wood. Although a narrower focus might have helped, this whirlwind tour of American independent films is recommended for most public and academic libraries. -Stephen Rees, Levittown Regional Lib., PA Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc.

fairly good research, but could do without the personal commentary. not that authoritative

Excellent product and service!

An interesting, fast read for a university film course. However, I can say it's a bit of a letdown learning how cheaply and efficiently these amazing independent films were made.

"Celluloid Mavericks," by Greg Merritt, New York, Thunder's Mouth Press, c2000, 463pp. On the one hand, filmmakers want to be courted by the studios, to receive phone calls telling them that yes, we are going to finance your picture big time. On the other hand, directors want creative control. They do not want Paramount and Warner and Fox and Universal to dictate what they put into their films. Those film-makers who are adamant about creative freedom may actually choose to raise the money for their films on their own, without any help from the big OR small distributors. What they

produce completely without help from studios is called independent cinema, or indies. Some of these indies are later picked up by studios. They're still indies. Other filmmakers are willing to accept a even considerable degree of control from the suits in return for wide distribution and big bucks. Their movies are called commercial. As Greg Merritt points out in his lively new book "Celluloid Mavericks: A History of American Independent Film," a large segment of films actually fit into a less precise category that he'd call semi-indies. Semi-indies are those works which are not produced by studios but do have guarantees of distribution before they are made. "Pulp Fiction" is his example of a semi-indie, the \$2,500 "David Holzman's Diary," which consists simply of a man talking to a camera, is independent, and "Titanic" is commercial. Merritt's definition is distinct from that of "Variety" critic Emanuel Levy's, who states in his own recent book "Cinema of Outsiders" (reviewed in the February OFCS journal), that an indie is a film produced outside the studio network but one which must essentially be challenging, edgy, a personal vision. While Levy does not recognize the separate category of semi-indies, for his part Merritt does not require his indies to be edgy. He divided the book chronologically rather than topically but within each chapter, he sorts out the movies according to genre--gay films, porno, African-American pix, films that have more gentility than edge (such as "Room with a View"), sexploitation, blaxploitation, horror and the like. What may surprise some readers is that indies did not have their origin within our own lifetimes but actually were given birth in 1896, as one-minute flicks screened between vaudeville acts at Koster and Bial's Music Hall in New York on April 23. One of these flicks, featuring a shot of waves breaking on a beach, caused the audience to recoil with fear of getting drenched. Talk of naivete! Today's audience might, if polite, stifle a yawn at even some of the magical, highly financed pictures produced by IMAX. Since studios until recently had been reluctant to finance pictures representing points of view that challenged American policy, we do not wonder that during the troubled times of the 1930s, movies far to the left of center were not appreciated by the moneyed set. King Vidor won a stream of rejection letters for his proposed "Our Daily Bread" in 1934 but got his movie into production by putting up his own \$90,000 and then securing a \$125,000 bank loan. Though the movie was screened by Pres. Roosevelt at the White House and was ultimately released by United Artists, controversy mounted. The L.A. Examiner called the movie pinko and the LA Times refused to run ads. Truth to tell "Our Daily Bread" was not a good movie, Merritt acknowledges. The conflicts are slim and the people are not real. When asked to throw their possessions on a common pile, they comply like zombies. Conflict, says the author, should have been born out of the very concept of cooperative living and its departures from capitalism. "Our Daily Bread" does show people finding the ultimate fulfillment through the strength of a collectivist group. No individual wealth, no

structured government, no profit motive. Greg Merritt runs through hundreds of independent and semi-independent films in this manner. The breakthrough pics are given some analysis, brief, of course, since the book weighs in at only 462 pages. For the bulk of movies, Merritt must be content with appraisals of a sentence or two each. Here are some of his incisive statements...He calls the 1995 movie "Safe"--which plays like a disease- of-the-week TV movie but is really a devastating critique of the self-help movement and the devastating effects of modern society "one of the best movies of the decade." And remember that Merritt is no blurbmeister. He insists that the success of art films is driven by reviews and word-of-mouth; that those who regularly attend nonstudio fare are "typically more discerning than others and place greater emphasis on critical opinion." (Take a bow, Harvey.) When art movies are marketed, the advertising is literate and subdued, reflecting an aura of quality and a lack of celebrities or explosions to hype. He describes how an ordinary person can make a micro-budget movie: 1) limit the number of locations and characters, avoiding extreme weather conditions; 2) finance with bank accounts and credit cards; 3) use a nonunion crew or union members willing to work nonunion including friends; 4) shoot 16mm black and white; 5) rent an editing machine. Still you're going to have a hard time because "most movies made without a prior agreement with a studio are never screened in a commercial theater...their directors are never known." "Celluloid Mavericks" is not only good reading for those in the general public who want to know more about the movies but can stand as a handy reference guide for critics who can use the volume to enrich their own writing. (C) Harvey Karten

This is the best book ever written on independent film. I wish I could give it more than 5 stars, because *Celluloid Mavericks* is a pure pleasure to read: witty, informative and always extremely entertaining. No other book comes close to its breadth and detail, especially in regards to the previously uncharted territory between 1896 and 1960. This is my all-time favorite film book, well deserving of its many rave reviews.

This book blew me away. I love the way it covers the whole spectrum of indie film, not just "art" but "exploitation" as well. The story of how these films came to be against great odds makes for great reading. I learned something new on every page. Highly recommended for fans of non-Hollywood films.

More than 100 years of the coolest movies. This is the first book to map out and detail the whole history of indie film. It's a truly wild ride, very informative, and a great read! Highly recommended.

This is a very thorough book. I liked the way it covered most everything from the lowest trash to the highest art--as long as it was made outside of Hollywood. Whether or not you're a film fanatic, this is a great read.

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