

Alternative Media Essay

Q6. 'Indie' often seems to defy classification; media falling under this category crosses genres, sub-genres, styles and subject matter; ranging from raw, no-budget projects to more polished highly-funded releases. Can 'indie' be defined in terms of genre, content and form, or is it more closely related to the means and process of production? Discuss with specific reference to film and/or music.

At its basis the term indie refers to particular types of film (or music) that are deemed as independent from the mainstream. Yet in today's contemporary media, indie has become increasingly associated to a complex and conflicting range of elements that are not always separate/alternative to mass media.

In this essay I explore the proposition that indie films are either defined through **form, content and genre**, or by **means and process of production**. Compare/contrasting each component to three film examples I discuss both classifications and what they entail, concluding with the suggestion that the blurring of mainstream and alternative film means it may not be fully achievable to define indie by either approach.

Holm (2008) outlines four different considerations for classifying independent cinema:

1. An Alternative to Commercial Storytelling
2. A Stepping Stone
3. Autobiography
4. Truly Independent

His first classification fits well into defining indie through its genre, content, and form where indie films are thought to provide stories and characters different or opposite to the mainstream constructed in new ways. Atton (2002) defines form as 'graphics, visual language; varieties of

presentation and binding; aesthetics' (Pg. 27) and like any film, indie has its own genres with associations to particular conventions/tropes.

Unlike the establishing shots and wide screen angles conventional in mainstream films, indie camera shots often use 'off-center framing, unique angles, and restricted views' (King, 2005, Pg.107-108). *Under The Skin* (2013, Dir. Jonathan Glazer) is a good example of this using unconventional camera shots, off-kilter angles, obstructed framing, and close up cuts.

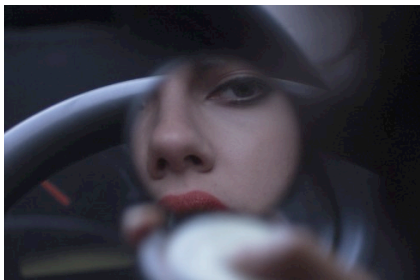


Fig.1: Under The Skin, 2013

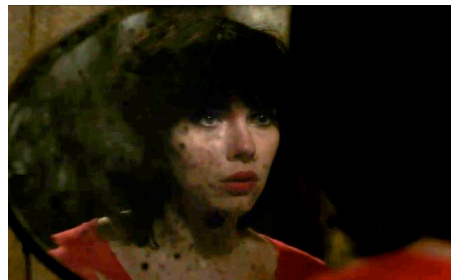


Fig.2: Under The Skin, 2013



Fig.3: Under The Skin, 2013

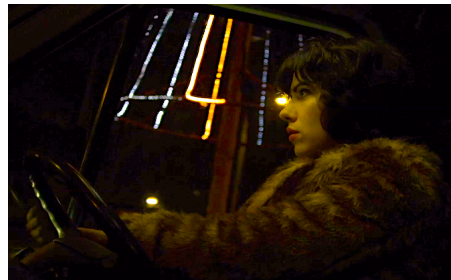


Fig.4: Under The Skin, 2013

The film also juxtaposes sci-fi, surrealism, and enigmatic imagery with gritty realism, guerilla filming, covert shots, and shaky cameras, often with scenes cutting abruptly between them.

[Appendix 1] Stylistic content and surrealist aspects are combined to create unease. Colour, chiaroscuro lighting/shadowing, and music, add to this in creating mise-en-scenes with an unnerving mood and a clinical detachment. Key examples of this are the seduction scenes where *Johansson* leads her male victims to their demise in a black goo substance that dissolves/turns them inside out. [Appendix 2]

The film's surrealism also evidences how content can work opposed to the escapism of mainstream by forming a subconscious, fantasy, and dream like place to question, critique, and face, hidden truths, issues, fears, and wants, and while mainstream cinema may be restricted

through censorship, indie films can tackle more taboo subjects or take a more controversial point of view.

Messages/critique on slaughterhouses (animal farming), gender/sexuality/body image, and what it means to be human are ambiguous and open for interpretation in *Under The Skin* linking to Martin McLuhan's theory of cool media by offering added participation and audience interaction in encouraging analysis/decoding of the text. The film also fits well with McLuhan's term pattern recognition, where media acts like a puzzle/mosaic that audiences have to piece together and take a reflective step back from to form meaning.

Applying an experimental style to film is another indie classification that fits with the content approach. *Under The Skin* plays with technology/effects/form/music, practices filming techniques, has art-house links, and creates scenes that seem to make little sense on the surface or to have no comprehensible meaning at all.



Fig.22: *Under The Skin*, 2013



Fig.23: *Under The Skin*, 2013

Another indie classification (conformed to in all three films) is a focus on the lives/stories/emotions of everyday, minority, and marginalised characters. Thompson (1999) writes that rather than establish locations/settings indie films tend to cut to close ups on characters. Supporting this, King (2005) writes that when long angles are used it is often a device to show a character's isolation/emotional state and create a feeling of alienation (Pg.125). This is also present in *Under The Skin*. [Appendix 3]

Whereas mainstream narratives tend to have 'a clearly marked beginning, middle and end' (King, 2005, Pg.60), such as *Todorov's narrative theory of equilibrium/disruption/new-equilibrium*, indie

films are often classified as more character based with small events/stories taking place rather than a 'narrative that follows an established plot sequence' (King, 2005, Pg.170).

Only Lovers Left Alive (2013, Dir. Jim Jarmusch) showed this with the film acting as a glimpse into the long lives of the two leads and the relationship they share. With no clear beginning/middle/end the film instead creates a feeling of drifting. [Appendix 4]

Indie films can also disrupt conventional narratives by subverting the mainstream, such as in *500 Days of Summer* (2009, Dir. Marc Webb) where the story plays out through the re-telling of 500 days of the main character in a non-chronological order. This film also uses two other indie conventions, juxtaposing sound and image from seemingly different events/times in the same shot, and, the use of split screen sequences (Tzioumakis Pg.179). This second technique was used to show two alternative timelines play out at the same time, one that was actually happening and the other to show what the character wished was happening.



Fig.25: 500 Days of Summer (2009)

The classification of alternative music and sound being linked to indie films was also supported in varying ways in each of the three films. [Appendix 5] *500 Days of Summer* conformed to genre conventions of combining indie film and indie/alternative (genre) music with the songs also devices to further reflect the emotions of the characters. Unlike with *Only Lovers Left Alive* and *Under The Skin* these music choices were not independently composed/produced/sourced [Appendix 6] (an issue linking to the later discussion of assessing production/industry in defining indie).

With *Only Lovers Left Alive* music/audio creates a distinct underground and cultural based style whilst setting moods and reflecting the characters personalities. [Appendix 7] Jim Jarmusch's underground/alternative musical background is also evident. 'Now part of rock trio SQÜRL and collaborating with Dutch lute player *Jozef van Wissem*, the two music styles were combined music to create the films soundtrack' (Romney, 2014).

"One thing about commercial films is – doesn't the music almost always really suck?" - Jim Jarmusch (Romney, 2014)

This quote links to how the distinct styles and content of a filmmaker can also be significant in defining a film as indie and *Only Lovers Left Alive* features many themes similar to Jim Jarmusch's other work. This includes mood setting, a character focus, long drawn out scenes, a lack of plot/action/narrative/action, and perspectives of characters outside/foreign/marginalized on societies fringes, a lack of plot. In its content the film also focuses on Jamusch's fascination for alternative styles/culture, particularly music based. The film references subculture/alternative imagery/objects, lifestyles, and sound/music whilst also linking them to the character's moods/emotions or using them in the place of narrative.

Despite all three films being definable as indie through content, genre, and form there is a criticism in that the indie label has become a genre/sub-genre of mainstream cinema, now a brand for audiences to recognise. Genre is used to advertise/sell films to audiences through applying a set of conventional characteristics or tropes (Edgar & Sedwick, 2008) and providing a particular classification framework constructed by mainstream cinema institutions (Holm 2008).

Furthering this, the same/similar genre conventions can occur in both independent releases and studio projects making it difficult to distinguish between the two. One example of this is the 'alienated worker theme...where people lead drab lives while oppressed in the workplace, their dreams frustrated, the office politics vicious' (Holmes, 2008, Pg.41).

500 Days of Summer conformed to this whilst also evidencing how form can similarly be problematic in defining indie. Independent films are thought to depart from the conventions, styles, narratives, and structures that are found in mainstream cinema yet Yannis (2006) points out that many indie films follow similar structures and techniques that can become conventions themselves.

'In terms of aesthetics, independent films retain a certain grounding on mainstream traditions, the extent of which varies from film to film' (Yannis, 2006, Pg.9). This suggests that there are also elements of recognisable narratives, characters, and styles in many independent films that emulate mainstream cinema conventions. Even when the films are subverting mainstream genre/content/form conventions other more conventional elements are still recognisable and being used i.e. romance (*500 Days of Summer*), vampires (*Only Lovers Left Alive*), being an outsider (*Under The Skin*).

Another issue in defining by content is that numerous mainstream films also disregard conventional styles, narrative patterns, characters, effects, and storytelling. Yannis (2006) argues that there has been a move from clear-cut narratives, storytelling, frameworks and genres to reflect the more stylistic and aesthetical elements found in indie films. He adds that a major reason for the transition from simple narratives to more fragmented and complex ones is to create added enigmatic structures that encourage sequels, spin-offs, and tie-ins.

Similarly aesthetical and artistic elements in mainstream films create added opportunities for unique advertising. Rather than being an attempt to provide counter-hegemonic narratives/representations/views, conventional indie content can be about reinventing commercial within the oversaturation of adverts/structure/similarity in today's society/media landscape.

Also problematic both mainstream and indie films can 'emphasis style, spectacle special effects and images at the expense of character, substance, narrative and social comment' (Strinati 2003, Pg.211).

Due to these issues in defining through content/genre/form, Michael Albert's argument of defining alternative media through creation, institution, and way of operating (Waltz, 2005) could be better suited, with indie classified in relation to mainstream film through means and process of production. [Appendix 8]

The concept of means originates from Marxism theory that particular modes of production are linked to significant periods of history based on societal organisation/structures (Storey 2012). 'Today, audiences are subdivided by analysts according to age, ethnicity, sex and income, amongst other markers, and never before have movie audience been so segmented' (Holm, 2008, Pg.118).

Contemporary mainstream cinema is commercial, with goals of profit and sales, selling films to audiences and audiences to advertisers. This suggests indie is then defined by other intents, classified through films opposing/contradicting the creation of cinema/film as a commodity/product to be sold for profit (grossing more than its budget).

Clemencia Rodriguez argues defining alternative media through intentions, aims, and processes to promote change, put out ideas, and be critical (Waltz, 2005). Whilst each of the three film examples highlights intent outside of profit through providing messages/self-reflection/critique non are attempting to promote change/action, encourage audiences to produce themselves, or be active outside of interpretation/reading/decoding.

Under The Skin has the most critical messages/questions for the audience and also challenges mainstream production with its cast and crew and in its creation/filming techniques. In particular, the use of guerilla filming, covert cameras, and the incorporation of non-actors, blurs/breaks boundaries between producers and the public to some degree.

Only Lovers Left Alive combines social critique with self-reflective elements and the autobiographic perspective of Jamusch (Romney, 2014). Jamusch's values and dedication to

staying independent is also significant and supports classification for defining indie through intent within his vision, personal commitment, and rejection of the mainstream/commercial.

Whilst *500 Days of Summer* was self-reflective through the actor/director/writers experiences of heartbreak, it wasn't critical/social/political and out of the three films it had the most mainstream ties. The film also evidences how defining indie through intent can be problematic as indie produced films can have; commercial purposes, a goal of breaking into mainstream cinema, aims to get noticed through film festivals, or have an intentional target of a niche/specific audience (or following/fanbase) through 'the creation of 'quality', stylish, cultish, or offbeat films' (King, 2005, Pg.2).

Also problematic in defining *500 Days of Summer* as indie is the reception, gross/profit, and awards the film received. Whilst independently produced, the film had commercial marketing, promotion, and distribution/exhibition. It became increasingly part of the mainstream and a big hit receiving a mass audience viewership. Despite this mainstream popularity it was continuously advertised and labeled as an indie film suggesting a flaw in the classification of indie as the film arguably ends up as no longer independent.

In all three films the casting of well-known actors with mainstream ties also blurs the gap between independent and mainstream with Hollywood/blockbuster known actors like *Hiddleston* and *Johansson* are likely to bring in more audience and have the potential to influence funding/budget. Yet *Swinton's* involvement across the seven years of creation of *Only Lovers Left Alive* also suggests an investment outside of money for stars. Similarly the thirteen-year process of *Under The Skin* suggests personal commitment/intentions away from means of profit.

Considering this, is intent the best classification for indie? Or is a film truly indie when a combination of both content and process alternative to mainstream cinema can be applied?

King (2005) argues indie should be defined through form/aesthetic strategies, distinctive attitudes towards social and political issues, and in terms of its industry relations. Yaniss (2006) similarly defines indie films as 'low budget projects made...with a strong personal vision away from the influence and pressures of the few major conglomerates that tightly control the American film industry' often with a gritty style or offbeat subject matter and a clear expression of the filmmakers personal vision (Pg.1).

In contrast indie may be a classification that cannot be applied at all through the argument that the label is more a genre/sub-genre of mainstream cinema than to do with films that are independent/alternative. Holm (2008) suggests that defining a film as indie today is problematic because the term has become based around preconceived notions and illusions of rebelling against the mainstream or being seen as different when in reality indie is both more complex and entwined with mainstream cinema.

'Indies' now form an industry that runs not so much against Hollywood as parallel' (Levy, 2014)

This blurring of independence and mainstream was evidenced in all three films I assessed in varying aspects of their production and their content. "Independence' under one label or another has existed within or on the fringes of commercial moviemaking since its inception' (Holm, 2008, Pg.16). It both challenges Hollywood and, to an extent, been 'embraced by the commercial mainstream' (King, 2005 Pg.1).

[Appendix 10] Yannis (2006) writes 'any film that has not been financed, produced and/or distributed by a major entertainment conglomerate' is classed as independent (Pg.2) but conflicting this I found that despite all three films being considered indie they did not always met this criteria. Whilst each had a relatively low budget and all were first shown at film festivals before moving to limited release they were produced, financed, and distributed to varying degrees of independence to the mainstream.

'There are more 'independent' film distributors then ever, but fewer truly independent films' (Holm, 2008, Pg.115). *500 Days of Summer* supports this criticism of defining indie in its distribution by *Fox Searchlight Pictures* a subsidiary of conglomerate *Fox*. Similarly *Under The Skin* was both produced and distributed through industry ties known specifically for the management/creation of indie films (*Film4, StudioCanal, BFI*).

Though indie-specific subsidiary studios give a degree of autonomy and potentially offer more freedom/experimenting/removed censorship, Yannis (2006) points out that conglomerates 'are still financially accountable' and have the power to close, reorganize, manage, interfere, change, influence, and effect budgets (Pg.3).

To sum up; 'What we have come to call 'Independent Cinema' has evolved from experimental works by filmmakers free of corporate supervision to what amounts to a genre unto self....closely stage managed by corporations' (Holm, 2008, Pg.33).

By assessing the varying ways of classifying indie the essay demonstrates how individually neither production nor content fully encompasses an accurate definition of an independent film.

Genre/form/content defines indie as producing alternative styles, narratives, characters, and frameworks to what mainstream films offer audiences, but there was a criticism highlighted in how the indie label can also be a mainstream genre, a branding tool, and can conform to its own conventions.

In comparison means and process of production defines indie as outside the control of mainstream film studios, producing films with intent other than commercial/profit. Yet a complication was highlighted in the varying degrees of independence films labeled as indie actually have to the mainstream. The three film examples evidenced this, each with different mainstream ties whether through actors, funding, production, or distribution.

These partial links to the mainstream were through indie-specific funder/producer/distributor subsidiaries of the mainstream film studios. Here an argument was highlighted that, because of this ownership, degrees of control/influence by conglomerates over the films always exist meaning they are never truly independent.

Finally highlighted was the blurring between what is viewed as indie and what is mainstream, entwined in producing films, and content wise mirroring one another or appropriating similar techniques (even when subverting them or changing their meanings). This symbiosis also suggests there may be no accurate classification for indie in either approach.

What was evidenced though was potential for instead defining indie through intent (or this combined with content and production) where indie is defined through aspects like; the directors vision/self-reflection/autobiographical, critical messages, representation/voice of the marginalised, politics/actions/pro-change, low-budget, not-for-profit, non-hierarchical, community, and participatory encouragement.

Word Count: 2568

Appendixes

Appendix One

Reflection, small aperture focus (blurring), and the use of mirrors, are also significant tools in the films framing and camera shots.

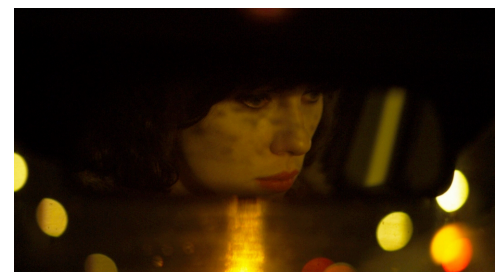


Fig.5: Under The Skin, 2013

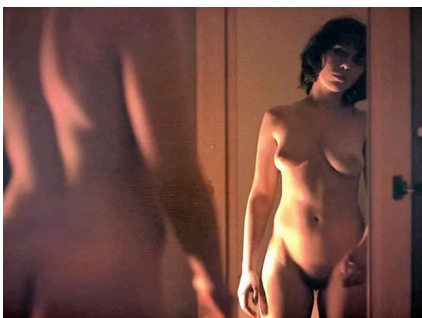


Fig.6: Under The Skin, 2013

These are devices used to reflect both the emotional state of the character and as a reflection of her true alien self, unable to fit into society instead being out of place. Her human form is a mask or 'skin' and mirrors highlight she is not who/what she seems whilst also reminding her that she is hiding her true form that she desires to return to.



Fig.7: Under The Skin, 2013

We see this foreshadowing play-out when she finally sheds her human disguise and stare back at her face moments before her own death.

Appendix Two

Black Goo Scene 1st Example, in: Under The Skin (2013):



Fig. 8: Under The Skin, 2013

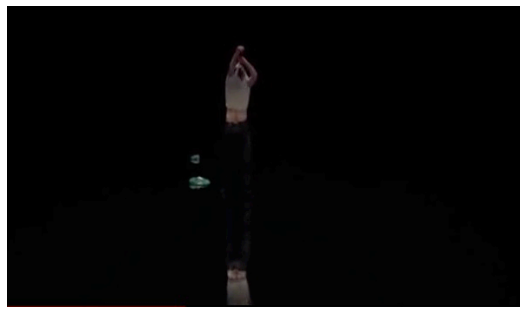


Fig.9: Under The Skin, 2013

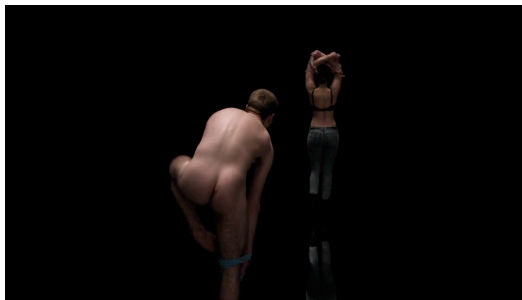


Fig.10: Under The Skin, 2013

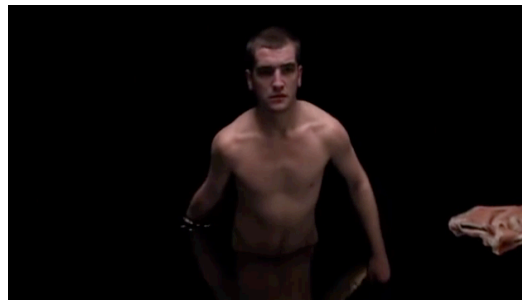


Fig.11: Under The Skin, 2013

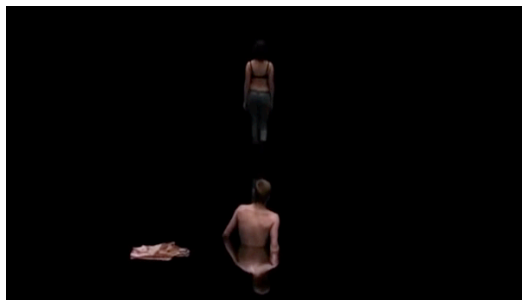


Fig.12: Under The Skin, 2013

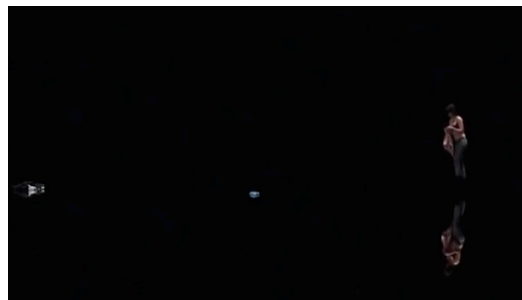


Fig.13: Under The Skin, 2013

Black Goo Scene 2nd Example, in: Under The Skin (2013):

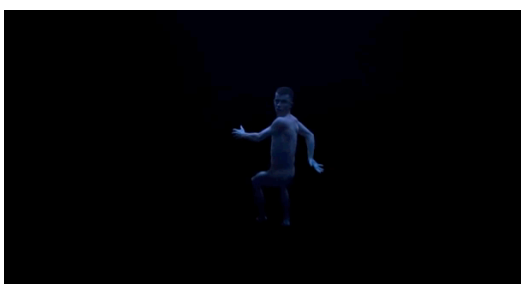


Fig.14: Under The Skin, 2013

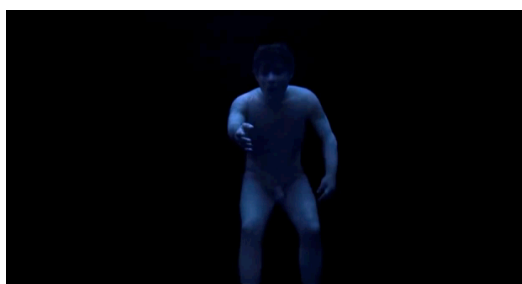


Fig.15: Under The Skin, 2013



Fig.16: Under The Skin, 2013

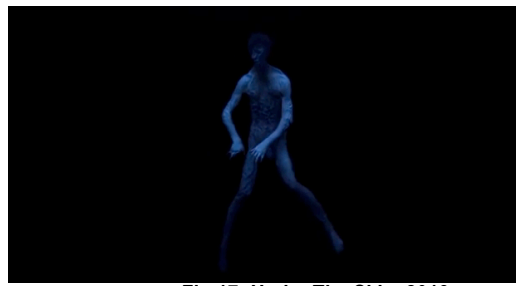


Fig.17: Under The Skin, 2013



Fig.18: Under The Skin, 2013



Fig.19: Under The Skin, 2013

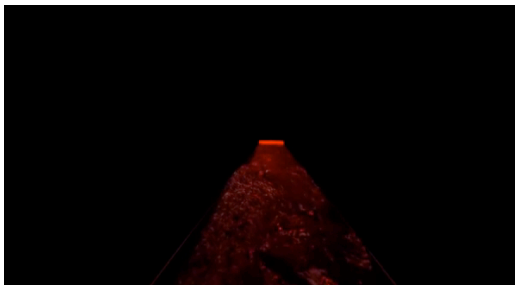


Fig.20: Under The Skin, 2013

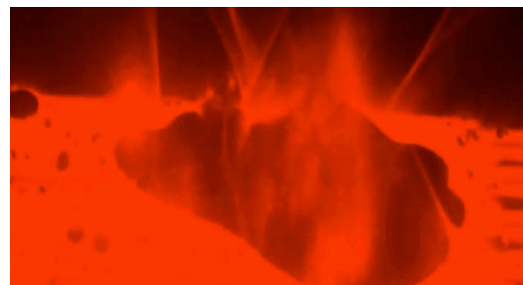


Fig.21: Under The Skin, 2013

Appendix Three

Wide shots show *Johanssen* as out-of-place and as a device to reflect her interaction with everyday Earth life/people as an alien trying to blend in and find victims.

Appendix Four

Similarly many scenes in *Under The Skin* (2009) feature Johanssen aimlessly driving/traveling and there are large sections of the film with little dialog and long sequences that seem to almost overrun in their length.

Appendix Five

Under The Skin (2013) uses audio and sound effects to add to the film's mood, build tension, create an otherworldly place, reflect the alienation from society, and unnerve the audience with unconventional sound to mainstream films.

Appendix Six

A combination of modern indie/alternative pop-rock-techno (*Temper Trap*, *Regina Spektor*) and classic alternative such as rock hits with subculture group links (*The Smiths*) to create a quirky/youthful/artistic soundtrack.

Appendix Seven

A combination of the quirky/artistic mixing of alternative music genres (both classic and contemporary) seen in *500 Days of Summer* (2009) and the unique sounds and audio of *Under The Skin* (2013).

Appendix Eight

Film Fact Files - Production and Means of Process:

Only Lovers Left Alive:

Written, directed, and co-composed by Jim Jarmusch, the film stars Tom Hiddleston, John Hurt, and Tilda Swinton. Three actors' known for mainstream and alternative media projects in film, TV, and theatre.

It took seven years to finance, was filmed in just seven weeks (Bliss, 2013), and had a budget of \$7 million (boxofficemojo, 2014), funded by European producers, Reinhard Brundig (Germany) and (British veteran) Jeremy Thomas (Romney, 2014) after the American backers dropped out (Pulver, 2013).

It was first exhibited as a competition entry at *2013 Cannes Film Festival* (Tartaglione, 2013), then at other film festivals before being released at cinemas in UK, Germany, America in early 2014.

Though casting did change during its seven-year creation Tilda Swinton was involved since it's beginning (Bliss, 2013) suggesting that to her the role was not just a job for money.

Supporting the idea of subverting the hierarchal structure of industry is Jozef van Wissem's following quote on working with Jim Jarmusch; "*I think Jim likes to be creative in a way that involves just a few people, as opposed to directing. He likes the gang idea of being in a band.*" (Romney, 2014).

Whereas mainstream films intent is commercial and profit based, *Only Lovers Left Alive* (2013) was about a new perspective on the vampire genre that has become so popular in mainstream cinema. Conventional/mainstream tropes are subverted in favor of character study over plot and emotional state over horror. There is a running theme in the film of questioning what humans are and do (Bliss, 2013) and a celebration of poetry, culture, and the alternative (Romney, 2014),

Furthering this Jozef van Wissem writes that the film's cultural references are 'authentically close to Jarmusch's heart. "It's a very personal film, maybe even autobiographical. Jim is a cultural sponge, he absorbs everything" (Romney, 2014)

Jarmusch quote: "We made this film last summer in seven weeks over three continents and it was one of the most rewarding experiences of my life" (Bliss, 2013).

500 Days of Summer:

Directed by Marc Webb the film was independently produced with a budget of \$7,500,000 (IMDB.com, 2009) and first exhibited (like both other films) *2009 Sundance* film festival where it 'got a standing ovation' (Wiseman, 2009). It was then picked up by and distributed through *Fox Searchlight Pictures*.

Like in both other films the actors, Joseph Gordon-Levitt and Zooey Deschan, are known for indie and mainstream roles, yet in contrast not to the same blockbuster/Hollywood extent.

Exhibition also differs here from the two other films as Levitt and Deschan were involved in multiplatform advertising for the film. They took part in a film mash up project, starred in a dance music video, and each released a song for the bonus features of the soundtrack album.

The film's intent was a coming of age story subverting rom-com genre to focus on truth and emotion rather than the conventional form and structures. For director Marc Webb the unconventional conclusion of the film was key in separating the film from mainstream alternatives, providing a more honest resolution and an emotional truth (Wiseman, 2009) the genre lacks in mainstream films.

At the same time the film is also a reflection on its creators own past heartbreaks as it critiques this as a phase so many people go through (Wiseman, 2009) and can recognise in the protagonist.

Under The Skin:

Directed and co-written by Jonathan Glazer, Scarlet Johanssen leads the film with most of the supporting characters non-actors with many scenes unscripted and conversations filmed using hidden cameras (Crawford, 2014 & Jones, 2014).

In contrast to *Only Lovers Left Alive* (2013) use of well-known actors Aftab (2015) suggests Johansson may have been chosen to boost the films funding. Despite this, like with Swinton, the actors who were involved were there to challenge themselves (Jones, 2014) rather than to be paid.

There is also a similar struggle in this films creation, with *Under The Skin* (2013) taking 13 years to complete (Wiseman, 2014), receiving a budget of \$13.3 million (boxofficemojo, 2014). Whereas *Only Lovers Left Alive* (2013) was much more independent this film was produced through BFI (*British Film Institution*) and *Film4*, and distributed through *StudioCanal* (UK) and *A24 Films* (America).

Similar to *Only Lovers Left Alive's* (2013) exhibition, the film was first shown at film festivals (2013 *Venice* and 2013 *Telluride*), then at several others before limited cinema release March 2014 (UK) and April 2014 (America).

Intent wise *Under The Skin* (2013) was a very loosely based novel adaptation; the script was changed multiple times (one early version had a part written for Brad Pitt) before settling on the focus of an alien's perspective/point of view in today's society. Adding to this, use of the sole perspective of a female lead, is uncommon in mainstream cinema.

Recognition, Response and Awards:

All three films were well acclaimed by critics, did well at their film festival releases, and were nominated/award winning with the films' soundtracks also praised. In spite of this there is one significant difference in terms of mainstream success, profit. *500 Days of Summer* (2009) had a worldwide gross of \$60,722,734 only three-months after August release, (IMDB.com, 2009) making '27 times its budget during its American opening weekend' (Wiseman, 2009). In comparison *Under The Skin* (2013) made a total gross of \$2,614,251 (boxofficemojo, 2014) and *Only Lovers Left Alive* (2013) \$1,879,534 (boxofficemojo, 2014).

Appendix Nine

King (2005) suggests characterising indie against an unfixed scale in three ways, considering the positioning of a film or filmmaker in relation to:

1. Its industrial location (with indie being a low budget produced away from big studios).
2. The formal or aesthetical styles/structures adopted (where indie disrupts or abandons the mainstream conventions of films).
3. The relationship to the 'broader social, cultural, political or ideological landscape' (King, 2005, Pg.2) (where indie challenges the audiences or perspectives on social issues).

Appendix Ten

There are six conglomerate film studios that dominate today's film industry; *Time Warner/Warner Bros. Pictures, Viacom/Paramount Pictures, Walt Disney, Sony/TriStar/Columbia Pictures, NBC/Universal Pictures, and Fox Entertainment/20th Century Fox* (Horina, 2013).

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