

The Aesthetic Sensibility of Indie TV

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The 2008 financial crisis helped to usher in the end of the Sundance-Miramax era of American independent filmmaking by collapsing its funding model. Investment capital dried up, financing through advanced sales to foreign markets remained available only to select filmmakers, and a number of studio specialty divisions closed their doors. Television and streaming services stepped into this gap to provide indie film personnel more stable sources of distribution and exhibition. If we adhere to a definition of “indie” based on economics, then this transition has been a relatively smooth one: television productions have found ways to successfully translate the practices of indie film to successful shows. Take, for an example, the TBS series *Search Party*. Its creators Sarah-Violet Bliss and Charles Rogers previously directed the 2014 indie film *Fort Tilden*, a caustic take on the vapid elements of Brooklyn hipster culture, then were recruited to television by writer-producer Michael Showalter. *Search Party* is the first self-financed project from Jax Media, founded in 2011, and newly purchased by Imagine Entertainment. Jax is known for its auteur comedies – among them, *Broad City* and *Difficult People* – and its success partly stems from utilizing indie film’s small-scale budgeting strategies. Jax guarantees creative autonomy to marketable talent by keeping production costs low (typically \$750,000 per episode). It limits shooting days and writing staffs, and incentivizes talent by funneling unspent budget back into the show. This streamlined approach is directly modeled on indie film (the *Search Party* producers routinely raise this comparison), demonstrating how indie film personnel have adapted to a shifting media landscape, in the absence of viable paths to stable work in filmmaking.

However, “indie” is not merely an industrial designation. The term is also a socio-cultural marker, a sensibility with no set textual or contextual features, whose definition is continually reformulated by a broader film culture. It is less clear what coherence an indie sensibility has when it migrates to television and streaming services. Do the narrational aspects and aesthetic categories (quirky, twee, hipster) that had come to define American indie filmmaking no longer serve as relevant markers of distinction? Indie had long signaled an oppositional posturing against the mainstream, a similarly shifting discursive category that stands for popular norms, but television and streaming services disrupt the center-periphery model on which the mainstream-indie distinction turned. *Search Party* is interesting in this regard. The murder-comedy series takes up the same themes as *Fort Tilden* – the difficulty of acting morally within a hipster culture that values inauthenticity over authenticity – and adopts the same deadpan tone for its satirical bite. But its mode of address is harder to identify. *Fort Tilden* circulated among the very same audiences it was satirizing – that is, it was insular to the community it was mocking – but *Search Party*, picked up as part of TBS’s rebranding as an “edgy” channel aimed at the 18-49 demo, is less targeted or less specific about its audience. *Search Party* does feature a show-within-the-show that is a mocking imitation of a

network TV crime-investigation series, and thus we could say that it tries to establish its “indie TV” credentials by distinguishing itself from some idea of mainstream TV conventions. The difficulty here is that these narrational and aesthetic qualities only constitute a coherent sensibility because they are sustained by indie’s cultural supports, and arguably “indie” has become uprooted from its autonomous institutions and distribution channels (exemplified by an indie film lost in Netflix’s scroll). We have seen the expansion of traditional indie institutions to include television; Sundance and SXSW each now have sections devoted to episodic content. Both *Fort Tilden* and *Search Party* premiered at the Austin festival, for example, and this suggests some continuity in linking texts to audiences. Nonetheless, the convergence of previously autonomous industrial sectors (the amalgamation of indie filmmaking and television by way of Silicon Valley’s outsized role after the waning of the Sundance-Miramax era) suggests a need to reconsider indie’s aesthetic categories. Does “indie TV” abrade or newly inflect TV’s typical marker of aesthetic distinction, “quality”? Can television and streaming services sustain what gave indie its definitional coherence – that is, regional specificity and subcultural identity? What other possible aesthetic categories or tonal qualities have emerged from the intermixing of an indie sensibility and televisual genres and narrative forms? Indie filmmaking, in short, arguably functions as a more formative influence for the reshaping of TV under media convergence than earlier modes of television.