

## **The Myth of “Indie vs. Mainstream” in Film**

*by Xian Oquendo*

Films have always been compartmentalized ever since. Back then, it was a clash between genres such as drama, romance, horror and action. But then the industry grew to fuse and form sub-categories of these genres; like a mix and match, becoming more and more dynamic. And when film started to be perceived like an art-form culture more than a show business, then came a more mystifying division: Indie vs. Mainstream.

The rise of independent films in the Philippines started in the 70s when alternative filmmakers like Ishmael Bernal, Lino Brocka, Mike De Leon, Mario O’Hara, and Kidlat Tahimik entered the scene with films exploring poverty, sex, and oppression – themes that mainstream films usually veer away from. These films are mainly characterized by low-budget production and small production houses.

On the other hand, mainstream films, in the simplest definition, are those which are produced by big production companies and are released and screened in first-run theatres. What makes the film “mainstream” is that it caters to a wider audience, and that it is also popular with most people.

When Indie films swarmed awarding bodies and claimed international recognitions, Filipinos seem to have formed the impression that indie films are more meaningful and artistic. Brillante Mendoza being a regular visitor of Cannes Film Festival and Lav Diaz snatching trophies in international film organizations—these things have captured the scene to make Indie more of a strong and successful force.

Today, when you ask people which films make more meaning, Indie or Mainstream—they always answer “Indie”. Thus, a myth was formed.

This is a debate that’s been going on for quite a while now. Supporters and filmmakers of both teams would always have their own stereotypes as to what kind of films they like and produce. Team Mainstream would say that indie films are nothing but deep and artsy productions that only a few can understand. Team Indie, on the other hand, would say that mainstream films are meatless, profit-oriented films that only aim to entertain the audience, and nothing more.

No one has benefited most on this narrative than the Indie film scene itself. Indie filmmakers have seemed to grasp the myth with great might, always clinging to the idea that “indie is better” just to lift their level or endorse their craft. It’s a perception that has clung to the industry for so long now.

In reality, the illusion works as a vehicle of elevation for them. In popular culture, the constant presentation of societal issue, class struggle or political message has enabled Indie to form a bait to awarding bodies inside and outside the nation, merely just a tool to quench their thirst for prestige than actually translating the plea of the mass, as they portray to be. One can

visibly see the manifestation of this idea in the emergence of the term “poverty porn” which refers to films that exploit the poor's condition in order to generate the necessary sympathy.

Can you consider a Brillante Mendoza film about prostitution a mass-oriented eye-opener when it is only screened internationally and doesn't seem to solve the abuses happening in the sphere it uses and tackles—thus only glorifying the misfortune? To say the least, not all the time are Indie films like this, some actually bears a purpose and teams up with organizations to help and represent the lower sector that their film would present. But perhaps ‘most’ of the time, the opposite thing happens.

Indie bloated the impression that their films are always mass-oriented, when the truth is, their films are nowhere near there. A simple display of social struggle doesn't signify a mass-oriented film or a sobering eye-opener. The true parameter is its accessibility to the mass, so that the message would reach a wider grasp and produce the vital realization to many. But sadly, the Indie is a scene that is being gatekept for the upper class only, for so long now, always absent to the access of the mass or regular people. Screenings for indie films are always just limited to film festivals which are usually really expensive to access. It's always as if these films were made for the upper class only, to make them feel better for being apathetic to the struggle of others. An exploitative nature that debunks the long-running myth “Indie is better.”

As aired by Werner Herzog, a notable German film director and figure of New German Cinema, in an interview by IndieWire: “I don't believe that independent cinema exists. It's a myth. Cinema is always dependent on distribution systems, money, and technology.”

In reality, the quality of the film is not merely always dependent to the budget or its commerciality. Mainstream films could be just as good as Indie films, and some Indie films could be just as bland or deficit as the mainstream ones. And not a lot of people seem to be aware of that. Even worse is how the crowd seems to be unaware that the line between indie and mainstream films are blurring or nearly non-existent now. Indie films can be commercially successful now, if picked up by the right distributors. And big-production films can be hidden underground if they fail at the market, thus putting them in the indie outfit.

The term “Maindie”, a fusion of indie and mainstream, emerged during the 2010s. The films that fall under this category are basically those which are independently-made but were adapted and distributed by the bigger production companies. Marlon Rivera's *Ang Babae sa Septic Tank*, Antoinette Jadaone's *That Thing Called Tadhana* and Sigrid Andrea Bernardo's *Kita Kita* are some of the most notable films of this category, with the latter grossing over ₱320 million, proving the blurring line of indie and mainstream. Did the value and meaning of these films lessened after hitting popularity? Perhaps not.

Moira Lang, an eminent screenwriter and a current MMFF executive committee member, shares the same sentiment in an interview by CNN: “Kaya ayoko yung ginagamit yung ‘indie vs. mainstream’ kasi it's as if you already ‘resigned’ indies to the margins forever. Kasi pag sinabi mo na na ‘indie vs. mainstream,’ it's like saying that an indie can never go mainstream.’ So ano na

yung term pag naging mainstream na ang indie? So dapat talaga tigilan na 'yang 'indie vs. mainstream' na 'yan eh."

The bottom line is: it has been a long-running myth now to say and believe that 'indie films are always better', because it's definitely not true, nor is the belief that the two are polar opposites and can never meet.

Maybe the illusion imprinted in the popular culture serves as tool or edge for either of the two sides. But at the end of the day, mainstream and Indie are merely just classifications as to how the films are made and doesn't really have any bearing as to which has more depth and value than the other. There will always be something good and of quality to come out from the bunch of mainstream films that are made; and there will always be independently-made films which will not always meet the expectations of its intended crowd.