



Down and Dirty Pictures: Miramax, Sundance, and the Rise of Independent Film

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DOWN AND DIRTY PICTURES chronicles the rise of independent filmmakers and of the twin engines the Sundance Film Festival and Miramax Films that have powered them. Peter Biskind profiles the people who took the independent movement from obscurity to the Oscars, most notably Sundance founder Robert Redford and Harvey Weinstein, who with his brother, Bob, made Miramax an indie powerhouse. Candid, penetrating and controversial, DOWN AND DIRTY PICTURES is a must read for anyone interested in the film world.

"In DOWN AND DIRTY PICTURES, Biskind takes on the movie industry of the 1990s and again gets the story....Peter Biskind captures his era as John Dunne did that of the Zanucks." Frank Rich, The New York Times

"Dishy, teeming, superbly reported and packed with lively inside anecdotes...[a] juicy and fascinating expose." - Entertainment Weekly

Down and Dirty Pictures: Miramax, Sundance, and the Rise of Independent Film **Details**

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From Reader Review Down and Dirty Pictures: Miramax, Sundance, and the Rise of Independent Film for online ebook

Inna says

Very amusing description of the US independent film scene during the 1990s, especially of its business aspects. I am not sufficiently familiar with the field to judge each argument on its merits. In any case the notion that during the 90s there was an attempt to create a middle ground between the traditional independent film scene and large Hollywood studios, an attempt that eventually failed, makes sense.

Trish says

I finally polished off Peter Biskind's "Down and Dirty Pictures," the saga of the rise and fall of independent film in its Sundance and Miramax incarnations, from "sex, lies, and videotape" to the big-budget, mainstream not-really-indie flicks Miramax now supports (Kate and Leopold? She's All That?)

I'm a big fan of Biskind's gossipy dissection of the "golden age" of 70s cinema, "Easy Riders, Raging Bulls," and "Dirty Pictures" shares the same dedication to movie minutiae, the same exhaustive sourcing, and the same penchant for titillating tales (although this time around instead of sex and drugs we get frequent updates on both Harvey Weinstein's temper and his inhalation of various foodstuffs). In fact, the anecdotes about Harvey's rages -- frequently attributed to anonymous, no doubt fearful sources -- grow tiresome. Enough! We get it! The man's a pitbull! Now tell me more about the movies ...

Truthfully, this seems like a story told before the time was ripe. Yes, since the events described are recent we have the benefit of fresh memories, but genuine insights seem obscured by the copious details, byzantine deals, and unwieldy cast of characters. It's like those Magic Eye mosaics -- supposedly if you stare long enough you can spy the clipper ship floating beneath the surface flotsam, but I've never had the patience for those. Just draw me the damn picture!

Still, it's a fascinating book if you love movies or, in particular, if you have ever dreamed of making your own. Fascinating and discouraging. As a collaborative and commercial art, filmmaking requires resources, which means inspiration, vision, and talent won't get you across the goal line. You have to have the means, the opportunity, and the personality to persuade someone with deep pockets to commit to your dream, and you run the risk that the dream will become a pitbull-populated nightmare. Honestly, there is no truly independent cinema, unless you can make your entire movie yourself. Otherwise, you're bound to be dependent on someone to finance the filming and post-production, to distribute and market the movie, to put it on the screens and put asses in the seats.

Where is the National Endowment for the Arts in all this? Are there grants that would enable filmmakers to create without commercial considerations? Of course, grants don't necessarily allow greater independence; they just enforce different constraints.

Yesterday I saw a CNN/Money story that posited Newmarket as the "new Miramax." Biskind pointed out in his book that every new indie (October, Grammercy, Focus, et al) has been anointed the "new Miramax," but only Miramax is really Miramax, in all its profane glory.

Nic says

Using the same blend of cultural history, sharp-witted (occasional waspish) film criticism, and pull-no-punches gossip as in his earlier (and brilliant) *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls*, Biskind tells the story of independent US cinema in the 1990s and early 2000s, with a particular focus on the Sundance Festival and production company Miramax. Unlike with *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls*, which I treated in part as a guide to which 70s films I should add to my rental queue, I'd already seen most of the films discussed here. Finding out more about their production - the fights, the vision, the compromises, the personalities - has definitely enriched my experience of many of them, though (and tainted one or two...).

Harvey Weinstein emerges from this as every bit the vicious, vindictive, manipulative bully (albeit minus the specific charges of sexual harassment) that recent press coverage has painted him as. There are a couple of brave individuals who were willing to stand up to him (and speak on the record to Biskind), including Mira Sorvino and Ethan Hawke, but what comes out of this account most clearly is how many people went along, out of varying degrees of self-interest, inertia, and fear. Several episodes also show the consequences for those who defied Harvey, though; "You'll never eat lunch in this town again" very much springs to mind. I can only marvel at how many people Biskind spoke to; goodness knows how he got away with publishing this, given Miramax's notorious tendency to lawyer up at the slightest provocation.

Compulsive and fascinating reading.

Robert says

A quasi-sequel to Biskind's *Easy Riders Raging Bulls*, which I re-devoured recently, *Down and Dirty Pictures* illuminates how the seeds the 70's filmmaking mavericks planted sprouted a decade or so later. It is less about independent movies themselves as it is about the complicated process of how they are funded, how they get made and how they get distributed (or not distributed as it turns out). It starts in the mid-80's but really gets going with the 1989 release of Steven Soderbergh's *Sex, Lies, and Videotape*, the game changing hit launched at Sundance that kick-started the independent film scene into the glory days of the 1990's, when Miramax films rose to prominence and Sundance was cemented as the annual launching pad (and studio acquisitions feeding frenzy) for indie films that it remains today. It's a fascinating, juicy read, but also rather depressing. The main players are Harvey Weinstein, the man who with his brother Bob founded Miramax Films, and Robert Redford, the movie star who launched Sundance. Problem is that Weinstein is a massively insecure, volcanically abusive, horrible human being - the kind of boss who populates your worst nightmares - and Redford is a passive aggressive control freak (milder-mannered and well-meaning, but no less of a nightmare). Between them and their studios and organizations they did the world of independent film a whole lot of real good and a whole lot of terrible-bad. The genuine indie films - funded outside of the studio system and made out of passion and love above all other concerns, including monetary - were eventually supplanted by bigger budgeted quasi-indies. There is a world of difference between genuine zero-budget films like say, Jim Jarmusch's *Stranger Than Paradise* (1984) or Rose Troche's *Go Fish* (1994), and such relatively big budgeted, Oscar-winning indie/mainstream hybrid fare like *Shakespeare in Love* (1998). Once the big studios got involved in indies (after all, Miramax et al proved there was big money to be made) the former kind of film became the extreme exception and the latter the norm; as usual, the little guys got almost entirely squeezed out. Today the extreme polarization is evident: 75% of the year the mainstream

Hollywood movies available are mainly a wasteland of superheroes, sequels, franchises, and retreads, while late in the year we are offered the more mid-budget independent efforts, which sprout up just in time for Oscar season (luckily we haven't yet devolved to the point where shitty, bloated, empty blockbusters like Man of Steel are Oscar bait for anything other than technical awards). In short, the entire situation - further marginalization of the work of artists in favor of expensive corporate junk - pretty much sucks. But I digress. Back to the book, Biskind is a fine writer, with a talent for film analysis - as above, the book is more about the nuts and bolts of filmmaking but Biskind occasionally editorializes, and his pithy observations are to my mind generally spot-on (Bravo, I say regarding his contempt for the borderline offensive Roberto Benigni starrer Life is Beautiful (1997) and to his praise for excellent but all-but-forgotten films like L.I.E. from 2001). He is also adept at explaining the rather convoluted progression/regression of the indie film scene, keeping it all compulsively readable, hard to put down, and all those other clichéd phrases. But as I said earlier, it's a pretty depressing story. By the way, Down and Dirty Pictures was published in 2004 - I'd be very interested in reading an updated version.

John says

After loving Easy Riders and Raging Bulls I dismissed this because I thought the description was boring. I still think the description is boring but audiobook-wise it was great!

Aj says

UGH, FINALLY finished this. I have to say that most of the reason that I hated this book had little to do with the research or the author's ability to string together a history narrative. I hated reading this book because basically everyone in it is terrible. I was indifferent regarding most of the known players in this book (the Weinsteins, Redford, etc.) prior to reading it, but am now in full on loathing for everyone. It makes me glad I'm not much of a movie fan anymore because I feel dirty having supported any of these people.

Overall, the author did a great job with the subject, up until the last few chapters where it sort of petered out rather than made a strong wrap-up. And while I get why it did kind of meander to a stop rather than actually conclude (events and what happened next weren't KNOWN because the book timeline ended in about 2004/2005, and all of these players are mostly still in the game), it felt really jarring considering the meticulous tone of the earlier chapters. Moreover, big players through the first 2/3rds of the book just... didn't appear again. Most jarring examples are Bingham Ray, who ended up in a coma and wasn't seen again until the last chapter where, whoops! He's fine! He's working for Universal! Just, what? Also, Redford, for being a huge presence in the earlier chapters just doesn't exist except for a brief mention in the conclusion chapter.

So, while I'm glad I read this book as it gave some pretty deep history and insight into the US's independent film movement, I am SO FREAKING GLAD I'M DONE WITH IT AND NEVER HAVE TO READ IT AGAIN.

Sean Condon says

Tries to push the idea that the distributors are the true heroes of the indie film business; I do not buy it. Pretty

interesting but nowhere near as good as Easy Riders Raging Bulls.

Boris Lermontov says

De entrada hay que partir de la base de que no es un libro sobre cine independiente, es un libro sobre Miramax y los hermanos Weinstein con otros personajes secundarios (Sundance, October Films) que van apareciendo de forma más o menos esporádica.

Tiene el mismo defecto que se le puede achacar al libro de Toros salvajes del mismo autor de centrarse en unos personajes concretos según le conviene para darle más forma de relato dejando de lado a otros igual de importantes, aunque aquí se nota de forma mucho más acusada (un libro de cine independiente que solo menciona a Jim Jarmusch y los Coen de pasada no es serio). Además, a veces se nota que selecciona algunos hechos de forma interesada de acuerdo con lo que quiera transmitir o quedándose con las versiones que mejor le vienen de ciertos incidentes.

A cambio es muy entretenido pese a su larga extensión (aunque a veces cansa un poco cuando detalla los tejemanejes más burocráticos o legales, pero sigue siendo información objetivamente relevante) y me ha servido para refrescar autores y películas que tenía olvidadas así como para rescatar otras que no conocía, que es lo más importante.

Ruth Berent says

Abandonado en la página 16.

Letra muy pequeña+ libro muy gordo+ interés no muy grande = Abandono.

Seth says

Here's a summary of *Down and Dirty Pictures*:

- 1) Harvey Weinstein acts like a lunatic because of some movie deal
- 2) Another either repellent or uninteresting Hollywood exec has a bad business experience because of some movie deal
- 3) An either repellent or uninteresting actor or director has a bad creative experience because of a movie deal
- 4) Repeat above for 12 chapters

Possibly the most interesting thing about the book is how the author, Peter Biskind, somehow manages to bring himself across as equally repellent as his characters despite not even being part of the story. He's the type of know-it-all who feels the need to interrupt his reportage about the distribution of *Life is Beautiful* to rattle off the titles of six obscure Holocaust movies he thinks are better.

Despite all that, DaDP is surprisingly readable, assuming you don't actually have any interest in Nineties independent movies. Biskind assumes you've seen them all, even the ones that were forgotten months after they came out. This book isn't about great food; it's about how that food makes it's way through assholes that

shit it out into the world.

Jen Crichton says

You know why I started to read this book in October 2017. And having liked Peter Biskind's *Raging Bulls* about 70s moviemaking, I should have read this sooner. But I had heard that *Down and Dirty Pictures* was sloppily written, could use tightening up by a good editor and was ultimately depressing. All true. But I listened to this as an audiobook where the lack of tightening up means you can miss a sentence or two while the water is running when you're doing the dishes and still come away with the essence of the thing.

The essence of the thing is that Harvey Weinstein was abusive, cruel, sadistic to every person who worked for him, male and female. Sometimes stories of sexual abuse and harassment seem so at odds with the deference with which a man treats his male colleagues and subordinates. Then you can only attribute his behavior to the triumph of patriarchy, male entitlement, and sexism. If you read this book, you will view (if you didn't before) Harvey W's abusive behavior with young women as a seamless extension of his abusive behavior with competitors, peers and underlings: behavior intent on humiliating and dominating them and making life a misery for them. Biskind's portrait here completely supports the Harvey W. we hear about now. Kudos to Barry Diller who around 2000 called him out as a bully to his face and to Spike Lee who anticipated that "God don't like ugly" and that one day Harvey's heinous behavior would come back to bite him in the ass (that's a mild paraphrase) -- and they were hardly alone.

The book is supposed to be equally about Robert Redford and the rise of Sundance. But that story is such a bland tale of Redford's egotism and egocentricity -- anyone who has read a *Vanity Fair* dispatch from Sundance can write that subplot in their own head on their own. But it is fascinating to read about the rise of Harvey knowing the fall that lay ahead. And fascinating to see how Harvey set his own trajectory in motion. He even admitted to behaving badly after being particularly violent and abusive, pledging to go into therapy to become a better man (his initial defense this October).

It is a wonder the fall took so long. According to Biskind, Harvey's powers were on the wane and his movies were losing money (despite the suites at the Peninsula Hotel) even at the time of the book's publication in 2004. A slew of film people had already vowed never to work with such an abusive, unethical bully again. But the book was also criticized for being a hatchet job on Harvey. Pretty sure Harvey's forces had gone into overdrive to undermine its credibility.

If I were Biskind and his publisher, I would retrofit the book to be about the rise of Miramax, cut the lackluster Sundance story, and add a hundred paged epilogue. Edit well and send back out to the world. The book as it is is no sacred text. But the story is an important one that should be read and learned from. And it stops in the second act, just as Harvey's trajectory begins to enter its long -- and then sudden -- decline.

Llew says

This book makes Miramax and the Weinsteins out to be a pox on, not just independent cinema, but the film world as a whole.

The Weinsteins sound like the worst caricature of Hollywood producers. Demeaning to everybody around

them, almost psychotically so to interns, but having no sense of what makes movies good, driven solely by greed and their own ego.

It made me not so much want to watch more independent movies, but viscerally angry that they have been able to thrive despite destroying people's careers, making terrible movies, and making people despise them along the way, yet have few still would speak about it to protect their careers.

While the book doesn't say it, it really seems like the Weinsteins set out to actually destroy the nascent American independent cinema of the 90s. By flooding the market with over-marketed foreign films, buying films by up-and-coming directors and never releasing them, or chopping up films in post-production hell, they stifled careers and prevented the industry from evolving.

Some people praise their ability to market indies to the world at-large and merging indie with studio system, but they also seem responsible for the current wasteland that is creative filmmaking, where studios imitate indie films to make films cheaply and overmarket them, giving them some praise simply because they were supposedly independent.

They probably didn't invent the concept of hyping movies for Oscars and belittling the competition, but they may have mastered it. And you look at some of the heavily praised Miramax movies of the last two decades and begin to wonder if they were good or simply the result of successful word of mouth marketing campaign.

But who cares if the company producing it is the same kind of demeaning, manipulative personality that people avoided the major studios for in the first place? Who cares if it crosses some border of sex and violence.

The book criticizes Redford and Sundance for not knowing what they were doing, but looking at a list of the films that came out of Sundance and I couldn't help but get a little sad for what was and what could have been. Sundance was a beacon of integrity in comparison. You had movies like Blood Simple, El Mariachi, and Stranger than Paradise.

Then you look at some of the movies that Miramax brought up, like Dogma and Gangs of New York that make it seem like they have any idea what makes a good movie and maybe they were all terrible all along.

Still says

Want to know how horrible a person Harvey Weinstein is? I mean, apart from being a rapist.

Harvey's always been a right bastard and so has his brother Bob.

Favorite part was the segment on the Weinstein-Billy Bob Thornton feud.

Sean says

Having read "Easy Riders and Raging Bulls" - I thought I'd check out the sequel, about indie cinema in the 1980s and 1990s. The subject itself seems very interesting and is worthy of being studied in greater depth. There was an excellent book to be had in the subject matter - it's just that Biskind didn't write it.

While I can't fault his research and scoring interviews with most of the key people involved, which seem impeccable - I didn't find the various machinations and double-dealings quite as intriguing as the ones in "Easy Riders..", which seems a shame, as the 1990s, in their own way, were just as revolutionary as the 1960s had been.

The main points I got from the book are: 1) The Weinstein brothers, contrary to their working-class hero image, seem to be sociopathic thugs not above using outright intimidation to get what they want and 2) Robert Redford is pretty unreliable and fickle.

There's other stuff about Quentin Tarantino (he likes being famous - who knew?), Kevin Smith and Steven Soderbergh, but while they've made some excellent films, they aren't exactly charismatic personae. Sure, they're guys you can hang out with, but would you want to? At least Biskind does cover some of the women involved in independent film, like Allison Anders, instead of focusing entirely on the 'boys club' of "Easy Riders...".

After a while, I was bored of reading dollar signs and which indie set-up was going to score the hit of the year. If you're into the business side of the film business, this is the book for you.

Sam Quixote says

I'm one of those who came of age in the '90s and who loves film, remembering all the great films that that decade produced is great fun as well as finding out how they came about from the mouths of the filmmakers themselves. That said, I loved the book but it goes further than talking about the directors and actors, to the guys who held the purse-strings and the exposure, namely the Weinstein brothers, Harvey and Bob, who created Miramax and Dimension, and Robert Redford, the movie star who founded the Sundance Film Festival.

You read about the Weinsteins' humble beginnings as concert promoters onto small films released on tape, and then small pictures released widely to garner a small profit. From there they go large, getting more pictures, some of which gain success enabling them to seem attractive to a massive corporation like Disney who then buys them and gives them the financial clout to corner the market on low budget films. Redford starts Sundance which then grows, after the initial few years, into a recognisable entity and then comes to be regarded as the place to have your film shown at, given how guys like the Weinsteins go there to buy films.

The Weinsteins themselves come across as monsters. Both screaming and abusing staffers, making them wait hours for meetings, docking pay, threatening them, throwing furniture. They really seem like bipolar ogres smashing around to get what they want. Redford comes across as a control freak who is unable to make decisions and thus contributes greatly to the Sundance brand failing to become as mainstream as he

had hoped.

Contributions are from many recognisable faces, from the superstar directors Quentin Tarantino, Spike Lee and Kevin Smith to actors Edward Norton, Ethan Hawke, Uma Thurman, Ben Affleck and Matt Damon. Even Harvey Weinstein agrees to contribute to the book (Redford declines as he holds grudges). Biskind uses these to create a vivid and compelling portrait of the `90s throughout. While some might say the narrative is repetitive (Weinstein doesn't change nor does Redford and the anecdotes rarely differ - Redford bumbling about, Weinstein screaming foaming at the mouth) I found it too interesting and could easily have kept reading until the present day (it stops at 2003).

I loved it, as a fan of good writing and a fan of film, it's a fantastic read and utterly great fun. Here's hoping Biskind does a follow up of the `00s.
