American indie cinema between DIY cultures and global Hollywood: Exploring the paradigm of *Slacker*

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Abstract

A landmark of the 1990s independent cinema and emblem of Generation X, *Slacker* (1991) is a significant event in the genealogy of Austin, Texas DIY scenes, with a long-lasting impact on the city's film industry and cultural history. The article applies research on DIY to the realm of American independent cinema, using Richard Linklater's iconic film to define indie cinema as a complex idea, linking the global media industries to cult performers emerging from intense subcultural contexts. After touching upon the history of American independent cinema, the film's content is read against its production networks, suggesting the historical role of DIY media ecologies in the value chain of Hollywood. The flexible career pathways emanating from *Slacker* chart various fates that creative labour undergoes in today's media industries. This methodological perspective reinforces a relational approach to the study of independent cinema, suggesting possible lines of inquiry for future research.

Introduction

Slacker is a landmark of American independent cinema (King, 2005; Newman, 2011; Tzioumakis, 2012), widely acknowledged as a catalyst of the discourse on Generation X (Ortner, 1998; Radwan, 1999; Lee, 2016; Soldani, 2017). Filmed in Austin, in the area adjacent to the University of Texas (UT) campus known as The Drag, not only *Slacker* marked Richard Linklater's breakthrough, but also revealed the possibility of independent creators taking control of the medium outside the constraints of the studio system, as noted by filmmaker Kevin Smith (Templeton, 2021: 3).

The film has an unorthodox narrative structure, portraying a day in the life of various eccentric people who wander through the city, engaging in conversations about politics, art, philosophy, conspiracy theories. *Slacker* weaves together loosely interconnected scripted vignettes, with virtually every character being

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played by a non-professional actor bringing on screen their own lifestyles and cultural practices, in a self-reflexive exploration of the socio-cultural context in which the film was produced.

In contrast to earlier projects, *Slacker* marked Linklater's shift to a more structured production model involving collaboration with a larger crew. However, the composition of the crew favoured a DIY-esque manpower, placing the project at the lower end of the industry's spectrum and aligning it closely with a DIY attitude towards media creation. *Slacker* can be seen as the product of an altruistic gift economy. It also sought to cater the growing demand for alternative media, one that held market value (Macor, 2010: 104–105).

The film premiered in 1990 at the Dobie Theatre, a hub for independent culture located within the UT campus. After facing rejection in 1990, *Slacker* entered the Sundance the year after, leading to a nationwide release. It was distributed by the 'mini major' Orion Pictures, which had played a pivotal role in releasing commercially successful independent and world cinema in the 1980s. Despite its micro-budget (US $23,000), the film left a socio-cultural impact, cementing the term 'slacker' in the media as a moniker for the aimless generation that followed the more prosperous baby boomers (Ortner, 1998).

In the 1990s, Linklater's progression from a local scale to a global film industry presence was paralleled by the transformation of 'weird' Austin into a hub for the tech and entertainment industries. This tendency was mirrored by grassroots festivals becoming global media events – such as the South by Southwest festival (SXSW), co-founded by one of the film's participants, Louis Black. In the 1990s, the city's distinctive trait of weirdness underwent co-optation, symbolized by the ironic parable of the 'Keep Austin Weird' movement, turning from act of resistance into a promotional tool for local businesses (Long, 2009). In a few years, Austin bohemianism shifted from being perceived as a political stance to a prevalent lifestyle (Long, 2017: 301). In 2002, Richard Florida published his celebrated and contested *The Rise of the Creative Class*, which would influence Austin's urban policies. A few years down the line Austin is an urban model that aligns with the 'creative class' thesis, but also a site to critique the 'externalities' of neo-liberal cities – higher cost of living, gentrification, growing social inequalities, etc. (Long, 2009). In retrospect, could *Slacker* prefigure the creative city?

Monographic works on Linklater (Johnson, 2012; Stone, 2013), book chapters and stand-alone articles (Speed, 2007; Macor, 2010; Pierson, 2014; Soldani, 2017; Maerz, 2020) document and analyse *Slacker*. While the film itself serves as an ethnographic text, there is a wealth of archival materials generated around it – press writing, documentaries and commentary tracks, interviews with participants in various arenas of interaction, social media and creative fandom. These sources provide often overlooked details not only about the process of crafting the film but also on the career trajectories of lesser known, yet symbolically significant players within the cultural geographies surrounding the film.

After touching upon the history of contemporary American independent cinema, I examine how *Slacker*'s production networks interweave with Austin's cultural geographies. Subsequently, a brief analysis of the film performance is set against the career trajectories of a sample of the film participants. DIY is used in the context of the article to describe an attitude that characterizes various forms of media making but also the lives and lifestyles of the subjects of post-industrialism, where 'how one lives becomes a biographical solution to systemic contradictions' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002: xvi). DIY cultures offer a platform for like-minded individuals to 'come together and build new forms of community, asserting their solidarity and distinctiveness in the late-modern urban context' (Bennett and Guerra, 2019), contributing to create meaning for their lives.

By contextualizing *Slacker* within its topological self-reflexivity, we observe how the value chain that runs Hollywood often weaves itself with various kinds of alternative art forms – in music, video, theatre, fashion, the visual arts, etc. Beyond the dichotomy independent/mainstream, I look at indie cinema not only as structure – economic or cultural – but via the participants' real lived 'struggles' (Threadgold, 2017), using life stories as research tools (Feixa, 2018). This aligns with an ethnographic approach that

accounts for the 'industrial reflexivity' (Caldwell, 2008) embedded in the production and cultural practices of professionals in the media industries. Despite the challenge posed by the over one hundred film participants, I tried to curate some of the most illustrative life stories for inclusion in this paper, drawing a map of various fates of creative labour in today's media industries.

Indie cinema, global Hollywood and DIY cultures

From being more of an industrial marker, the modern idea of 'independence' gained traction in the early 1960s into the 1970s, particularly after the demise of the Production Code and the emergence of a new American auteurism that altered the style of Hollywood films. Contextually, from the late 1960s onwards filmmakers and audiences alike were impacted by the rise of academic film studies and the increasingly important role of productive media cultures such as cinephilia that will be fully acknowledged only a couple of decades later. The independent cinema of the 1980s and 1990s has roots in various registers of American film that challenged or offered alternatives to mainstream Hollywood during the 1960s and 1970s, often in dialogue with contemporary music scenes. Amongst them, John Cassavetes' art-house films, avant-garde/underground cinema, direct cinema, countercultural films, the New Hollywood and even Roger Corman's B-movies. Since their emergence, these works developed relations with mass culture, resonating with a broader market trend characterized by the adoption of countercultural discourses by the corporate world (Frank, 1997).

Existing research suggests a periodization of the shifting models of contemporary American independent cinema (1980s onwards), from 'independent' to 'indie' to 'indiewood' (King, 2005; Perren, 2012; Tzioumakis, 2012, 2013). Let me offer an overview of this cinema as a mode of cultural production and circulation. In the 1980s the independent sector was characterized by small-scaled projects, independent production companies and stand-alone distributors with little ties to Hollywood majors. Concurrently, the advent of user-friendly equipment was making film more accessible to independent creators. The rise of cultic media practices in the 1980s reflects larger socio-cultural shifts that also manifested in MTV's global success – and the subsequent proliferation of cable and satellite stations broadcasting music videos – which used independence to target specific demographics. The music video (Kinder, 1984; Kaplan, 1987; Straw, 1988; Grossberg, 1993) became a medium for independent authors to experiment with (Beebe, 2007), one that trained viewers to a less conventional visual language, generating a new demand for cultural products, particularly within youth (Jenkins, 1995: 115–116). Independent filmmakers of this era, including Amos Poe, Susan Seidelman, Jim Jarmusch, Jonathan Demme, Rob Reiner (and many others), produced significant intersections with alternative music and art scenes, as in the New York-based No wave scene and Cinema of Transgression. From now onwards, indie music would become integral to the indie film aesthetics.

The 1990s are a defining moment in the history of independent/mainstream interactions. In the 1980s, the label of 'independent' signalled opposition to Hollywood's modus operandi. In the 1990s, during the golden age of indie cinema – the 'Sundance-Miramax era' – the studios started to control several independent companies or established subsidiaries and specialty divisions to meet the rising demand for alternative visual media, 'making independence into a brand' (Newman, 2011: 4). The deployment of stars, stronger generic frameworks and marketing elements became major drivers of indie cinema from the mid-1990s onwards (Tzioumakis, 2012: 8). Previously, independent cinema emphasized a logic of social realism in its casting and performances (Newman, 2011: 31). With the onset of the Sundance-Miramax era, numerous Hollywood stars sought to rebrand themselves through association with indie directors to elevate their status, while indie-culture performers gravitated towards the mainstream, developing a 'dependency' on Hollywood (McDonald, 2017). This has become the norm today: actors curate their careers like freelancers,

seeking a balance between taking on prominent roles in blockbuster franchises and engaging in smaller-scaled, more quality-oriented cinematic products that offer recognition and gratification.

The 1990s indie cinema differs from its predecessors due to a convergence of factors: the accessibility of new technologies but also the attention received from the Hollywood studios, which perhaps sensed an ongoing anthropological shift in the up-and-coming American dominant class becoming more progressive after years of political conservatism (Ortner, 2013: 96–101). The growing demand was linked to specific demographics (initially the baby boomers and subsequently Generation X) alongside the new funding opportunities deriving from a more globalized film market (Berra, 2008: 24–27) in which the new wave of American independent films functioned as a suitable replacement for the declining European arthouse cinema (Levy, 1999: 32). The studios quickly seized the opportunity. Around the same time, indie directors with a DIY spirit such as Quentin Tarantino, Robert Rodriguez, Richard Linklater and Kevin Smith became prominent.

Throughout the 1990s, with the mainstream and independent sectors matching up in terms of industrial practices, the independent spirit remained the major marker of distinction. Scholars have progressively migrated from the idea of 'opposition' to that of 'distinction' (Sconce, 2002; Newman, 2011: 2; Perren, 2012: 3). Research on indie music cultures (Bannister, 2006; Fonarow, 2013) comes to similar logical conclusions, mirroring an idea of indie as 'quality cinema' serving a dual purpose: countering mainstream culture and functioning as 'a taste culture offering its audience a sense of distinction' (Newman, 2009: 23). For polarizing debates over authenticity overshadow the complexity of these cultures (Hesmondhalgh, 1999; Jenkins, 2002), various authors highlight the relationality of indie cinema (King, 2005; Tzioumakis, 2006) in the interplay of 'texts, institutions and audiences' (Newman, 2011: 11).

Around the turn of the century, in the wake of indie box-office hits such as Gus Van Sant's *Good Will Hunting* (1997), the intensification of take-overs and mergers by the Hollywood studios paved the way for an even greater convergence of the studio and independent sectors referred to as 'indiewood' (King, 2009). By the late 2000s, the studios reduced their presence in the specialty film market (Tzioumakis, 2023). This trend led to the current post-indiewood media order, wherein Hollywood's interest in quality or avant-garde productions has diminished in favour of cinematic universes and high-value serial media, while many contemporary films directed by 'indie' names defy the definition of independent. Further, the role of high-technology concentrations as new gatekeepers has changed the landscape of independent film – platforms like Netflix but also well-capitalized production or distribution companies such as Annapurna Pictures led by the hip, culturally eclectic, tech-savvy generations of new financiers who have become in many instances the patrons of independent culture.

Scholars are already exploring intersections of indie film and music (Sexton, 2017; Soldani, 2018), while the use of Bourdieu's relational sociology is becoming more prevalent in film studies (Mathijs and Sexton, 2011; Ortner, 2013; Austin, 2016). Research on DIY cultures can reinforce a relational approach to independent cinema. McKay offers an inclusive definition of DIY culture as 'a combination of inspiring action, narcissism, youthful arrogance, principle, ahistoricism, idealism, indulgence, creativity, plagiarism as well as the rejection and embracement alike of technological innovations' (1998: 2). Originating in the context of self-made home improvement, the idea of DIY has flowed through the twentieth-century cultural history, from Levi-Strauss' *bricolage*, the Dada and Situationist movements to 1960s countercultures until its association with the ethos of punk, evolving in various music and stylistic scenes (including post-punk, hip hop and EDM) at local/trans-local/global/virtual level through the rise of digital cultures. The term is now applied to cultural, political and aesthetic practices, within and outside the realm of alternative economics.

The study of the boundaries between leisure and work in subcultural scenes is often framed as a confrontation with theories on creative labour (Lee, 2013). Whilst the Autonomists register an undeniable exploitation at play in the global media order (Terranova, 2000), productive of precarious identities (Standing, 2011), studies on DIY cultures emphasize their underestimation of self-valorization (Gill, 2014). DIY

music careers are the focus of a seminal issue of *Cultural Sociology* (Bennett, 2018) illuminating the transformative nature of youth involvement in alternative scenes, where lifestyles are 'creative projects' (Chaney, 1996) that may open doors to various pathways. Forms of capital acquired in these cultural ecologies can be mobilized to nurture professional growth in relative autonomy (Guerra, 2020; Oliveira, 2023). This challenges the common allegations of selling out that alternative artists undergo (Moore, 2005), nuancing a more complex idea of indie culture.

'Everyone was a cineaste': *Slacker* and Austin, TX as a strategic site for exploring DIY cultures and independent cinema

> Austin was cheap, laid back, and fairly tolerant of tasteful artistic expressions like daytime drinking, impromptu outdoor concerts, and occasional public nudity. As new waves of college students arrived in town in the late 1980s and early 1990s, they blended well with the locally grown, lost Generation Xers. […] This new generation of bohemians weren't hippies, but they also stood in stark contrast to the yuppie workers who had begun to migrate to the city in search of jobs at IBM, Motorola, Texas Instruments, 3 M, and other tech companies. This was a new breed of Austin bohemian: the slacker (Long, 2009).

The words of human geographer Joshua Long paint the city's socio-cultural landscape around the times when the film was produced. During the 1970s, Austin had experienced a significant population surge: universities expanded their enrolments, while a youthful labour force flocked to the city, attracted by the sparkling music scene and easy access to nonconformist lifestyles, embodied by music venues such as the Armadillo World Headquarters (Long, 2017). By the 1980s, Austin had become an epicentre for up-and-coming alternative youth scenes alongside other American cities such as Seattle, Portland or Athens (Shank, 1994). Many scene-makers of that era recall the city as a nurturing environment for aspiring artists, as noted by one of them, Kal Spelletich:

> I had lived in Iowa City. I talked to a few friends who were like, 'Man, Austin's happening. It's cheap, and it's full of kids. It's just rocking'. And it was insanely cheap – you could rent a big old house for, like, 300 dollars (Raftery, 2006).

For Michael Laird, a local skateboarder featured in the film who later became a library scientist, the alternative scenes that enlivened The Drag stood in stark opposition to the mainstream college lifestyles:

> There were a lot of people around the area of West Campus who you would see at parties. It was a very loose community. The contrast between those people and, say, the fraternity and sorority people was very striking and obvious: the fraternity people had their frat houses – these great big temples of prosperity – and people like us, the slackers, wore second-hand clothes and rode bicycles (Raftery, 2006).

For Spelletich, 'there was a great supportive scene in Austin then – we booked our own shows, sometimes in a gallery we started, in parks, backyards and bigger nightclubs' (The Cave, Liberty Lunch) (2023, personal communication). This sentiment is echoed by numerous others, including Linklater's friend and crew member, Deb Pastor, who underscores the collaborative and self-driven nature of Austin's alternative culture during that era:

> What you were thriving upon was all the ideas flowing. And those ideas motivated you to make stuff. That's how I think of those days. The scene was all about DIY – do-it-yourself (Maerz, 2020).

After working on an offshore platform, Linklater was able to purchase film equipment and relocate to Austin in the early 1980s. Being denied admission to the prestigious Radio Television and Film Department at UT, he took cinema classes at Austin Community College, under the aegis of professors George Morris and Chale Nafus. One of his first 'film attempts' was *Woodshock* (1985), shot with roommate and cinematographer Lee Daniel at a local alternative music festival. That same year, MTV landed in Austin to feature the New Sincerity artists in I.R.S. Records Presents The Cutting Edge, a new program spotlighting regional music scenes across the States. Among these artists was Daniel Johnston, whose ascent to fame was unprecedented in the Austin alternative music scene (Shank, 1994: 157–158).

In 1985, Linklater launched with like-minded people the Austin Media Arts collective to foster arthouse and independent cinema in the city. This later evolved into the widely recognized Austin Film Society (now complemented by the Austin Studios – a 20-acre media production complex). *Slacker* propelled him and Austin into Hollywood's spotlight – just as the local alternative music cultures showcased by MTV had placed the city on the map of the music industry. By the mid-1990s, Austin 'was striving to be rock's next Seattle', as reported in a New York Times article that announced it as the 'next big thing' (Cohen, 1994). Cinematographer Lee Daniel sums it up:

> I can't tell you how many hundreds of people said they moved here because of *Slacker*. That was not our intention! If you look at the film you'd think, why would you want to come here? It was a catalyst for something I didn't see coming (Purcell, 2022).

Linklater dragged in the project an array of participants connected to Austin's youth scenes – mostly friends and acquaintances, while others answered a flyer distributed across the city. Spelletich recalls:

> Rick and Lee Daniels and D. Montgomery were in the scene and participating regularly as well. As were the Butthole Surfers, Ed Hall, Liquid Mice, Seemen, the UT Art Department folks, ST-37, Biscuit, Scratch Acid, Daniel Johnston. They were all in the scene and a lot more folks. We traded and stole ideas from each other. We drank and smoked and partied to our hearts delight (2023, personal communication).

Linklater characterizes his film's participants as 'friends' with a 'common aesthetic' (Criterion Collection, 2004). Clark Walker, camera assistant and actor, captures this sentiment:

> In a sense, we were all slackers […] Aside from a consuming passion for cinema, what we held most in common was a desire not to work for a living, if work meant doing anything we didn't love (Maerz, 2020).

Several local artists contributed through acting, on-screen music performances, or involvement in the music score. The soundtrack features the likes of Butthole Surfers, Ed Hall, Glass Eye, Bad Mutha Goose, Shoulders, Stick People, The Hickoids, Crust, Jim Roche, Not For Sale, The Jackofficers, The Texas Instruments, Pocket Fisherman, Brent Bingamon and St Cecilia.

The deployment of crew members as actors served as another performative strategy, one that both incorporated Austin's youth scenes and eroded the traditional boundaries between production and consumption. Friends such as Lee Daniel, Clark Walker, Tommy Pallotta, Deb Pastor and Denise 'D.' Montgomery, remained professionally connected with Linklater and the film industry beyond *Slacker*. In numerous accounts, Montgomery emerges as a pivotal figure in the cultural milieu that produced the AFS and *Slacker*. Following her passing in 1997, Louis Black wrote:

> There are well-known figures on the scene, many names known to the general public. D. Montgomery is not as well-known, but she was there from early on and is as important as anybody. In the early days, I always remember stumbling over D. in some basement or an attic as she ran the projector at a showing of experimental shorts, a Meat Joy

show, some program of endless Super-8 mm doodlings, or an American cult feature. If she wasn't running the projector, she was in the audience, but most often she was connected to the event. […] D. was a filmmaker but, as importantly, she thought in terms of 'community', lending her energy and support to any number of different projects (Black, 1997).

Slacker fostered a space where anyone could become an on-screen performer or creatively contribute. The film is woven into the social fabric of Austin's youth scenes, as Teresa Taylor of Butthole Surfers emphasizes:

There was a real thriving punk rock community in Austin of musicians and fans, freaks and weirdos, and D. was kind of the ring-leader of that. And then there were the cineastes. Rick [Linklater] was a cineaste. Well, *everyone* [emphasis added] was a cineaste (Maerz, 2020).

The performance of the slacker

In the film, the performance of the slacker unfolds at a street level, reminiscent of what Florida terms 'street-level culture' (2002: 183) to describe an urban landscape that nurtures the creative class, providing room for authentic experiences and interactions. The camera moves across sidewalks, coffeehouses, clubs and diners, student houses, alleys, backyards and empty lots, mapping a network of local weirdos – students, underemployed twenty-somethings, conspiracy theorists, petty criminals, musicians, t-shirt makers, video amateurs, writers and all sorts of artists and anti-artists – mostly young, white, educated, urban identities. In the credits, characters bear designations such as Pap Smear Pusher, Conspiracy a-go-go, Been on the Moon Since the 1950s, T-Shirt Terrorist, Video Backpacker, Paranoid Paper Reader, Dostoyevsky Wannabe and Budding Capitalist Youth. Their names recall actions, ideas and attributes of cultural capital.

Instead of focusing on the creative process, the camera meanders around the city, patiently searching for the moments in between the creative act. Most scenes consist of people dawdling around the area surrounding the UT campus. A man speculates about an ongoing moon colonization; another sells self-made T-shirts invoking political resistance; others discuss conspiracy theories on JFK's assassination, Elvis, or the Smurfs. We see a burglar defused by an old anarchist (played respectively by a local skater and his former university professor). After running over his mother, a youth performs a bizarre ritual using cut-outs from a photo album and a home video before being arrested. A missing guy has left behind a series of postcards containing enigmatic political musings. In the film's most iconic scene, featuring musicians from Glass Eye and Butthole Surfers, a man runs into a friend recently returned from rehab and invites her to his band's concert; another woman appears on the sidewalk, rambling about a sensational car chase and then attempting (unsuccessfully) to sell an alleged Madonna's pap smear, as a valuable commodity. At night, people drink, smoke, talk, loiter around; youngsters moisten and transfer an ink admission stamp onto each other's arm to sneak into a concert, while a band (Ed Hall) performs in a semi-deserted club. A man proclaims himself an anti-artist, while another shoots the band Triangle Mallet Apron with a Fisher-Price Pixelvision, a toy camera. In relation to the idea of DIY, the performers in *Slacker*, both as social actors and film characters, can be seen – borrowing from Deleuze and Guattari (2004) – as 'schizophrenic on a walk' for their emphasis on nimble, anti-hierarchical approaches to thought and action.

Slacker encompasses the dynamics of small-scale art projects and communitarian activism which sometimes find their way into large-scale commodified culture. It maps, from below, the value chain running between the 'live scenes' that fuel independent culture, and the global media industries, wherein subcultural capital fluctuates and converts in correlation to mediatization processes (Thornton, 1995). A scene is not only 'a place of assembly' but also a 'space of transit between visibility and invisibility' (Straw, 2014: 8). Undoubtedly, music scenes were the most powerful domain of DIY media cultures in the United States

of the 1980s and 1990s (Straw, 1991; Azerrad, 2001), a cultural backdrop cherished by numerous indie directors, and also by entertainment industry talent scouts. What is common to Linklater's choice of actors is the biographical inclination to a postmodern reflexivity in their lives and performances in intense local cultural contexts, which defines them as ready-made media bodies suiting both the aesthetic and economic requirements of the project. Guided by a logic of distinction, in the Bourdieusian sense, the director believed that he could elicit performances from individuals with their unique socio-cultural dispositions, as filmmaker and participant Brecht Andersch notes:

> Rick quickly came to the conclusion that musicians tended to make interesting actors. Austin was chock-full of incredible bands at the time, which made for a bunch of interesting characters (Andersch, 2019).

The cast played a crucial role in shaping the film's performances. As Larry Strub of Ed Hall explains,

> *Slacker* was loosely organized and very open for people who wanted to participate. A lot of the vignettes' ideas were generated by the people playing the roles, then Rick would help them work out the dialogue (2019, personal communication).

This occurs because of the director's realization that non-professional actors are more at ease inhabiting the media space by using elements of their own persona, character quirks and emotional states as intersubjective elements of the film performance. The slackers could be arguably thought of as creative fandom, consumers of media culture but also 'active producers and manipulators of meaning' (Jenkins, 1992: 23). In rehearsals, scenes were honed collaboratively, with the non-professionals primarily taking on self-reflexive roles. Kal Spelletich portrayed a version of himself wearing a TV backpack in his artist's studio filled with a plethora of screens and cassettes, part of his work of disrupting the pervasive media flows. In Kal's case as in many others, there is an ongoing dialogue between performers who pitch lifestyles, and the fictional roles they play in the film. Drawing on Kirby's seminal essay on the taxonomy of acting (1972), Baron and Tzioumakis place the film's performances 'on a continuum that ranges from not-acting to acting' (2020: 57), one that maximizes the social proximity between characters and performers. Using Bourdieu's framework, subcultural media practices could be thought of as habitus endowed with value. The actor's performance in *Slacker*, in a Goffmanesque sense, is a reflexive enactment of their habitus. *Slacker*, as much of independent cinema, could be profitably seen as a series of interconnected media habitus, media itself that encompasses deep life and social structures for the players in the film.

Flexible stardom and DIY careers in indie cinema

A closer look at the performers' media biographies unveils the porous dimensions of lifestyles of both performers and characters in the film. *Slacker* involved people which could be seen around in the city, spanning from local DIY enthusiasts and prosumers to musicians aiming for a niche stardom within local and broader networks. Through the decades, Linklater has 'survived' as an indie artist and community organizer in Austin. He maintains a critical distance from Hollywood, while participating in its economy with an array of projects that differ in scale, genre and productive methods. Meanwhile, others involved in *Slacker* have negotiated diverse career trajectories. In 2020, three decades after the film's release, the Austin Chronicle reported that 28 of the 139 film contributors were untraceable, inviting the readers to help Linklater to locate them for the fair distribution of profits (Whittaker, 2020). Considering the biographies as mediatized performances, *Slacker* and Austin's DIY scenes represent an ideal site for exploring alternative modes of existence, but also a space of potential co-optation or compromise.

For instance, the Butthole Surfers played a significant role in the Austin alternative scene, distributing their music through independent labels and creating provocative live acts. Their cult status acquired

global outreach, particularly after Kurt Cobain included the band's records in a list of influential albums for Nirvana. A member of the historical line-up, Teresa 'Nervosa' Taylor portrayed the Madonna's pap smear peddler, and was featured on the original theatrical poster as the film's most iconic character:

> I played drums for the Butthole Surfers. I had gotten it into my head that I was some huge rock star and so I was like, 'Well, I guess I'll be in your little movie' (Raftery, 2006).

Following the film's release, the band signed with Capitol Records. Their music featured in Hollywood films, from mainstream movies like *Dumb and Dumber* (1994) and *Mission Impossible: II* (2000) to indie ones like *Romeo + Juliet* (1996). In 2023, Taylor's sudden passing was reported by Rolling Stone (Dickinson, 2023) and *The New York Times* (Williams, 2023), acknowledging her status as a Gen-X icon.

Ed Hall was another cult band in Austin's post-punk scene, labelled 'Austin's resident heirs to the Butthole Surfers' (Ferguson, 2019). Formed by UT students in 1985, they garnered niche recognition and partnered with respected indie labels, including Trance Syndicate (founded by Butthole Surfers' drummer King Coffey), but never went mainstream. After disbanding in 1996, Larry Strub lived in Thailand for a couple of years, while Gary Chester and Lyman Hardy joined local bands. The trio reunited in 1998 for the dance rock project Pong which is still active in the local scene.

Three members of Glass Eye, a prominent Austin art-rock band active from 1983 for a decade, also had roles in *Slacker*. Glass Eye contributed to the New Sincerity movement in Austin, blending punk with country and blues roots in a sincere songwriting and performance style in which 'the do-it-yourself ideology of punk rock blended with the populist tradition of the small, independent, local farmer battling the impersonal structures of national corporations' (Shank, 1994: 247–249). The members balanced their music pursuits with part-time McJobs. Glass Eye remained independent and attained national fame, before disbanding in 1993 while trying to sign for a major. Despite limited commercial success, the band accrued a cult status within the 2000s revival of Austin's New Sincerity and briefly reunited.

If these bands rose to prominence in their niches, other artists featured in *Slacker* pursued diverse careers, utilizing skills honed in Austin's alternative scenes. Frank Orrall, frontman of Poi Dog Pondering, still performs, solo and with noted electronic music duo Thievery Corporation, while his Chef Franc project blends together music and cooking. Singer Abra Moore earned a Grammy nomination and featured in *Sliding Doors* and *The Newton Boys* in 1998, but stayed on the fringe of the music industry. After *Slacker*, Jean Caffeine, a folk singer and artist, remained invested in the local scene, while songwriter Keith McCormack, portraying a busker in the film, featured in *Forrest Gump* (1994). Wammo, DJ and member of the band Asylum Street Spankers, was 'at the frontline of slam poetry' (Criterion Collection, 2004) but moved to Pittsburgh years later as Austin's cost of living had dramatically increased (Toohey, 2014).

Most performers in *Slacker*, though demonstrating potential, did not actively pursue film careers. After studying in New York under Lee Strasberg, working in theatre and film (including in adult movies throughout the 1970s), Jerry Delony co-founded an acting school in Los Angeles before moving to Austin around 1990 (beckchapels.com, 2017). Praised by Linklater for his 'verbal gift' (Criterion Collection, 2004), Delony displayed talent in portraying a long-winded conspiracy theorist, yet his career never truly took off. Mark James, described as an 'interesting drummer' (Criterion Collection, 2004), post-*Slacker* appeared in *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994) but his current whereabouts is seemingly unknown. One of the few pursuing a film career, Charles Gunning, had taken acting classes with Linklater and was active in Austin's art scene since the 1980s. After working with Linklater and the Coen brothers in 1990, Gunning moved to Los Angeles and enjoyed a fruitful career throughout the 1990s.

The involvement in DIY scenes had an impact on the career pathways of several participants. Louis Black, a graduate from the UT Austin film program and among the early promoters of the Austin Film

Society, co-founded the Austin Chronicle, the weekly newspaper that helped foster an alternative taste culture in the city (Shank, 1994: 195–196), and co-created the SXSW. First held in 1987, the festival is currently one of the world's premier events for showcasing emerging talent in music and media arts, tuning with the development of Austin as a technological epicentre alternative to Silicon Valley.

Athina Rachel Tsangari, a Greek student at UT at the time of *Slacker*, went on to become an exponent of the so-called Greek Weird Wave of cinema. Her involvement in Linklater's film *Before Midnight* (2013) highlights her continued engagement with the Austin independent film scene. Writer Kim Krizan, who appears in Linklater's *Slacker, Dazed and Confused* (1993) and *Waking Life* (2001), earned an Academy Award nomination for co-screenwriting *Before Sunrise* (1995), another milestone in the Texan director's career. The reputation acquired has enabled her to pursue a career as a creative-writing professional, which she continues to sustain through her social media presence.

Artist Kal Spelletich's involvement in alternative scenes spanned over a decade before *Slacker* was filmed, marked by an affinity for 'non-traditional expression […] be it noise music, abstract filmmaking, Burroughs, Einsturzende Neubotten, Jean Tinguely, Duchamp' (2023, personal communication). His interest in multimedia interfaces, dating back to the creation of the Seemen art collective in 1989, has established him as a central figure in San Francisco's machine-art scene (Kino, 2013). In retrospect, Spelletich reflects on how the affective practices marking his involvement in the subcultural milieu impacted his life trajectories:

> Cheap rents, lots of folks from different art scenes, a melting pot. Like a healthy forest needs fresh water and space and good air and light. I always say, We haven't the money, so we've got to think smarter. And I have no money so I must work harder than those with money. […] Being in alternative cultural scenes definitely contributed to my work pathways to this day. We had the courage to live a life true, not the life others expected of us. […] I am still in scenes like this some 34 years after *Slacker*. It is amazing and fun and hard (2023, personal communication).

By applying Bourdieu's sociological tools to the study of the 'symbolic commerce of Hollywood stardom', McDonald (2012) delves into the dual role of star brands in serving both commercial and symbolic purposes. Elite actors strategically move between big-budget and independent/auteurist films, expanding their horizons and capitalizing on diverse opportunities. These performers make choices by which they leave room for non-mainstream endeavours that create meaning for their lives and careers. Similarly, subcultural participants often carve out careers sociologically defined by a DIY ethos – the ethos of the slacker – that counter the conventional portrayal of apathetic youth in mainstream media. This finds expression in a film scene, where Denise Montgomery's character distributes from a deck of 'oblique strategies', referencing Brian Eno's well-known concept, a card bearing the message 'withdrawing in disgust is not the same as apathy'. Several *Slacker*'s participants, starting with the director himself, despite having roots in subcultural scenes that fuel Hollywood stardom, remain reflexively distanced from the mainstream, posing ethical questions to the economics and culture of today's global media industries. Conversely, through films like *Slacker* Hollywood opened up to a wider spectrum of the performative economy and started building an alternative star system.

Yet, it is perhaps the relationship with the city that lends additional depth to the film's reflexive dimension. The years since *Slacker* have witnessed Austin becoming a gentrified tech and entertainment centre. In this evolution, the creative class theorized by Florida became increasingly intertwined with what Farrugia calls 'economies of youthfulness': networks of immaterial labour in which the quality of youthfulness is an economic asset 'mobilized to distribute playful affects, offer[ing] the possibility of hedonistic leisure/pleasure and confer[ring] symbolic distinctions of cutting edge style' (2018). Today, with everyone, irrespective of age, reclaiming 'youth' (Threadgold, 2023), people's ties to indie cultures seem more cultural and economic than age-related. Austin is a prime example of the systemic mobilization of youthful capital within

global-local cultural flows. Meanwhile, the city struggles to keep its bohemian character, in a state of liminality (Long, 2017). *Slacker* may represent for Austin the last flare of an era of creative autonomy before the very idea of DIY underwent co-optation during the 1990s, but also the potential for symbolic resistance.

Conclusions

Reading *Slacker* against its production networks reveals the film's inherent irony towards the precarious media labour that many times goes nowhere and many times generates newer and newer modes of global cultural production that consistently push the mainstream towards the DIY and the subcultural. The idea of indie cinema is a complex one, linking performers in high-end big media industries and extreme cult performers in a very local context that have a certain economic and cultural purchase in fan and cult bases outside the mainstream. After all, all filmmakers are themselves consumers and manipulators of film and media cultures that influence their work or provide the context for its interpretation. Some of them, like the 1990s American independent filmmakers, act manifestly as creative fandom, referencing and mobilizing various media forms, characters and generic frameworks, including the cast of their favourite films, or beloved music. In *Slacker*, this process, which Jenkins (2002) calls 'of appropriation and transformation' in relation to creative fandom, unfolds in the context of 'weird' Austin and its youth scenes. It may be intriguing for future research to explore different instances of participatory cultures that permeate independent cinema's production networks, styles and world views – from the video-store clerk cultic approach of Quentin Tarantino to Robert Rodriguez's Tex-Mex grindhouse pastiche, from Linklater's slackers to Kevin Smith's comic shop geeks to Harmony Korine's immersion in the suburban skateboarding scene, and so on.

The film industry now includes within its logical stardom more layers of the performative economy. Filmmakers, actors and audiences form part of a unique performative continuum: many film stars have subcultural roots, while Hollywood continues to scout for new edgy stars. Agents operating outside or at the margins of the system are willing to work within an affective-labour altruistic economy, as long as they find some kind of gratification; conversely, at the high end of the spectrum, indie stars could be seen as idealistic in trying to maintain an 'indie status'. This aligns with Threadgold's idea of 'choosing poverty' (2018) originally applied to Australia's indie music scene – an idea that, in a play of scales, is recast in the context of the film industry.

While indie directors and performers bring in an autobiographical intersubjective element in the film performance, the indie audiences see themselves as would-be stars and media characters. Like indie stars, the audience too considers itself talented and on the verge of becoming part of cinema, as it appears in *Slacker*. Cult and indie audiences also share the slacker lifestyle of indie films, both as a marker of distinction and political radicalism of opting out of capitalism. At a macro level, Hollywood sees marginality and youthful 'weirdness' – informal, negative or radical forms of capital – as resources to be tapped. Indie cinema takes up these prosumer lives and incorporates them in its films and alternative star system. Hidden forms of capital move through a network of performance formalism, creating avenues for local recognition to translate into work opportunities within the media-industrial complex. At a micro level, performers across the whole spectrum struggle and reflexively define success and gratification beyond material terms, finding interesting niches for themselves.

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