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sex, lies and Tarantino. . .

Must be the new Rough Guide to American Independent Film

'Indie films can be unconventional, controversial and often downright disturbing, and they've given us some of cinema's most innovative and influential moments.' So says film critic and journalist Jessica Winter, author of a new book published this month in the rapidly expanding Film and TV series created by travel publishers Rough Guides – *The Rough Guide to American Independent Film*.

Jessica Winter charts the rise of America's more maverick directors and the considerable artistic influence – and, often, box-office takings – of their movies. Originally referring to the non-Hollywood *Sundance Film Festival*, "'Indie' was a brand," notes Winter, "an attitude connoting edge or prestige. But since corporate sponsorship flooded *Sundance*," she continues, "'independent'" increasingly became a label for major studios' boutique divisions, almost a euphemism for "art movie".'

For the most part, those boutique studio movies are not the films covered in the new Rough Guide. At the core of the book is a canon of fifty great independent movies, all of which, with a few significant exceptions – like Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* – were produced outside the major studio system. Many are first features, many were shot quickly, or over a period long enough to allow actors and film-makers to return to day jobs in between shoots. 'In the end,' says Winter, 'what links all of them is that somehow they were made against the odds.'

The Rough Guide's Top 10 US Indie movies

① *A Woman Under The Influence*, 1974

The ultimate declaration of independence: self-financed, self-distributed, singular filmmaking from indie godfather Cassavetes.

② *Mean Streets*, 1973

Scorsese's powerful semi-autobiographical tale of friendship and loyalty marked his breakthrough, spawning countless imitators.

③ *Pulp Fiction*, 1994

This exhilarating multi-strand gangster comedy made a superstar out of director Tarantino and turned Miramax into "the house that Quentin built".

④ *Safe*, 1995

At once cerebral and heartbreaking, Haynes's portrait of a woman allergic to her surroundings lends itself to a rich array of metaphorical readings.

⑤ *Do The Right Thing*, 1989

Lee's incendiary tale of racial conflict in Brooklyn roused fierce controversy and reminded audiences of cinema's power to stir debate.

⑥ **The Thin Blue Line, 1988**

Stylish, innovative and influential, Morris's true-crime documentary also got a wrongly convicted man off Death Row.

⑦ **Eraserhead, 1977**

Weird, entrancing and utterly unique, Lynch's avant-garde nightmare was the awakening of a superlative career.

⑧ **Before Sunrise, 1995**

Dense and dizzy with walking and talking, this brief encounter is possibly the sexiest of American independent films.

⑨ **Bad Lieutenant, 1992**

This harrowing descent into hell with a spiritually debased New York cop becomes the most unlikely of redemption stories.

⑩ **sex, lies and videotape, 1989**

Soderbergh's pensive four-hander was the film that signalled the Sundance-Miramax indie renaissance in the early 1990s.

Most underrated American Indie Film: *Schizopolis*

Virtually unnoticed upon its minuscule release in 1997, Steven Soderbergh's *Schizopolis* is one of the most radically experimental and startlingly personal works ever made by a mainstream American filmmaker. Pricelessly weird and invigorating on its own, the film is also important for influencing Soderbergh's filmmaking technique – the low-budget, seat-of-the-pants production style was evident in the fast-and-loose direction of his later films, especially *Traffic* (2000), for which he won an Oscar for best director. *Schizopolis* is still rarely seen, although the Criterion Collection did their part to rectify the situation by releasing a handsome DVD packed with extras in 2003.

Most overrated American Indie Film: *Clerks*

It remains true that anyone with a few credit cards and some indulgent friends can make a movie, and with a little courage and a lot of luck, can get it distributed too. This was the case with Kevin Smith's *Clerks* (1994), a film about an eventful day among the trash-talking cashiers and eccentric customers at a New Jersey convenience store. Shot in black-and-white on a shoestring, the movie won the crucial endorsement of the *New York Times*, whose lead critic praised "a buoyant, bleakly funny comedy ... an exuberant display of film-student ingenuity. . . a classic example of how to spin straw into gold." Really? *Gold?* Perhaps in the literal sense, since *Clerks* benefited from an extravagant Miramax publicity campaign and made a huge profit on its meagre budget. In terms of moviemaking, however, *Clerks* falls short on every count: the sound is bad, the camera setups ugly, the line-readings flat and grating, and the humour puerile. Reissued on DVD in a lavish three-disc package on its tenth birthday, *Clerks* is perhaps the most unlikely film to get the box-set treatment.

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NOTES FOR EDITORS

The **Rough Guide to American Independent Film** is part of Rough Guides' Film and TV list. Already published: British Cult Comedy, Kids' Movies, Cult Movies and film genre guides covering; Chick Flicks, Comedy, Gangster, Horror, Sci-Fi and Westerns. Forthcoming: Film Musicals and Film Noir. Rough Guides publish 300 travel titles and 60 reference books ranging from Classical Music to Climate Change and iPods to MySpace.

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