

FILMMAKER

FILMMAKER FLASHBACK: FALL, 1996

By Scott Macaulay | August 28, 2010

Al Pacino, Robert Young, Joe Berlinger & Bruce Sinofsky, Cheryl Dunye, Curtis Charm, Nina Menkes, Alexander Payne, Steve Buscemi, Eric Bogosian and Nick Cassavetes were all featured in our Fall, 1996 issue, an edition that was dominated by one feature: our “50 Most Important Independent Films.” What makes one film more “important” than another? Here’s a portion of my intro:



When we sent a letter out to several dozen critics, curators, distributors, and producers asking them to pick the most important American independent films of all time, we received a slew of responses ranging from the excited to the confused. Many of our respondents welcomed the chance to take a critical look back at indie film history while others were perplexed by our lack of clear guidelines. “What’s the difference between ‘best’ and ‘important’?” some respondents asked, while others brought up the age-old question of what constitutes an independent film. As was obvious by our phrasing, we wanted the responses to define “independent” film, and we were excited by the variety of responses we received.

For those whose indie film canon begins with sex, lies, and videotape, consider the following: Abe Polonsky’s *Force of Evil*, Charlie Chaplin’s *City Lights*, George Kuchar’s *Hold Me While I’m Naked*, James Benning’s *11 1/2 x 14*, Don Siegel’s *Private Hell 36*, Robert Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North*, Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen’s *Riddles of the Sphinx*, Charles Laughton’s *Night of the Hunter*, Robert Downey’s *Putney Swope*, and Nicholas Ray’s *Johnny Guitar*. All these films were defined by their respondents as “independent.” For some, “American independent” was a term not limited by geography. Godard’s *Breathless* was at the head of James Schamus’ list, while his partner Ted Hope’s first pic was Chris Marker’s *La Jetee*; both films are as vital to the consciousness of indie filmmakers as any other. And others used their lists to make statements about the current indie film scene. Film Forum’s Karen Cooper, for example, selected only documentaries because that’s where “independents truly distinguish themselves.”

So how did the list shake out? Only a few selections are online at the link above, but here are the first ten:

- 1) *A Woman Under The Influence*
- 2) *Stranger than Paradise*
- 3) *She’s Gotta Have It*
- 4) *sex, lies, and videotape*
- 5) *Return of the Secaucus Seven*
- 6) *Harlan County, USA*
- 7) *The Thin Blue Line*
- 8) *Scorpio Rising*
- 9) *Blood Simple*
- 10) *Slacker*

Interestingly, when we did our “Indie Films and Youth” list this summer, it was also topped by Cassavetes’ tale of marital crisis. Also on both lists was *Stranger than Paradise*, but the rest of the selections were all different.

If we did this list today, what do you think are the most important indies?