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"Upscale" Cinema

Fine Line Features and the Indie Boom of the 1990s

In what is likely the first official memorandum Ira Deutchman issued to New Line COO Michael Lynne, dated January 28, 1991, the executive marked the document with some telling marginalia.[1] Deutchman had joined the New Line organization the previous month to serve as president of Fine Line Features, a new division within New Line designed to "acquire, market and distribute upscale adult-oriented films."[2] Formed amid the swirl of organizational transformation in which Lynne officially joined New Line and the company expanded into television and home video, Fine Line intended to distinguish itself as a platform for high-quality, specialized "indie" cinema, aiming to compete with companies like Miramax and Orion Classics.[3]

Deutchman's 1991 memo is on company stationery topped with the NEW LINE CINEMA title. Deutchman used a pen to strike out NEW and CINEMA, and above these words wrote FINE and FEATURES, creating an improvised letterhead for the specialty division. Adding a line upon lines, and yet keeping "LINE" intact, these marks negated but did not erase New Line while they added Fine Line to the picture. In philosophy and critical theory, such marks are called putting something "under erasure," a practice popularized among thinkers like Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida, and Jacques Lacan. As in those more cerebral instances, Deutchman's marks on the memo create a palimpsest of overlapping signs, a simultaneous copresence that threatens the internal integrity of the individual elements. It is a stretch to say that Deutchman's marginalia deconstructs the New Line brand or logo, and also too much to say that Fine Line Features deconstructed New Line's industrial and cultural identity in the 1990s. But Deutchman's marks do suggest some of the complexities of Fine Line's creation, and Fine Line's history disrupts the narrative presented about New Line thus far.

FIGURE 16. Fine Line Features carved a new space within New Line Cinema for artistically sophisticated films. University of Michigan Special Collections Library, Ira Deutchman Papers.

As a division aiming for a prestigious cultural register high above the sewers of *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* and the dark boiler room of *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, Fine Line provided a new aspect to New Line. In some ways, though, Fine Line represented a *return* to form for New Line, which had distributed "quality" films in the 1970s, among other genres in its very mixed catalog. Internal heterogeneity had been a long-standing quality of New Line Cinema, from the films of Lina Wertmuller to those of John Waters. From this view, Fine Line simply institutionalized the organization's enduring eclecticism. As a new division of New Line Cinema, focusing on films from which New Line now largely abstained, however, Fine Line embodied New Line's growing logic of *incorporative heterogeneity*. That is, the division represents the company's expansion through its dedication to new, distinct film types in its repertoire. As a specialty cinema division, in particular, Fine Line was especially devoted to heterogeneity, as so much independent cinema gains industrial and cultural value through peculiarity and distinction. Further, Fine Line's emplacement inside the increasingly corporatized and conglomerated New Line Cinema of the 1990s aligns with the trend of specialty and indie cinema coming under the rule of media conglomerates during that decade.

As many critics and scholars have discussed, specialty and "indie" cinema attained remarkable importance in the 1990s. Yet, with the exception of Yannis Tzioumakis, critics and scholars have not looked closely at Fine Line, which played a crucial role in shaping independent cinema during this decade.[4] Alisa Perren has explored how Miramax shaped the indie film scene and altered the operations of Hollywood in the 1990s.[5] Perhaps no independent distributor operating in that decade was more devoted to legend building than Miramax. The company brought

new attention and financial rewards to independent films, with such noteworthy films as *sex, lies, and videotape* (1989), *Clerks* (1994), *Pulp Fiction* (1994), *Kids* (1995), and *The English Patient* (1996). But the field of specialty distribution was bigger than Miramax, and Fine Line played an active role in this scene. In addition to Miramax, Fine Line competed with independents like the Samuel Goldwyn Company, Gramercy Pictures, and October Films, as well as new Hollywood indie divisions, such as Sony Pictures Classics and Fox Searchlight Pictures.[6]

This chapter examines Fine Line Features from its beginnings in 1990 to the early 2000s when the division floundered and fell apart under the leadership of Mark Ordesky, who was occupied with New Line's production of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001, 2002, 2003). Given the dramatic way Fine Line's slate dwindled under Ordesky's tenure, this chapter focuses especially on 1991–98, which coincides with the "indie boom" of the 1990s and is also when the relationship between Hollywood and specialty cinema transformed definitively. During the first half of the decade, Fine Line carved out a distinct space for English-language "quality" movies in the United States, with hits like *The Player* (1992) and *Hoop Dreams* (1995), as well missteps like *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* (1993). The division also contributed markedly to the "New Queer Cinema" of the era with films like *Swoon* (1992).[7] Although Fine Line struggled from the mid-1990s onward, particularly after it engaged in more original productions rather than solely distributing films it *acquired*, the division continued to make a mark in indie cinema with films like *Shine* (1996), David Cronenberg's *Crash* (1997), and *Dancer in the Dark* (2000).

During an era when specialty cinema broached "mainstream" movie culture in new ways, Fine Line fostered a cinema in which "quality" was a quality all its own, distinct from Hollywood movies and from the more sensationalist films and marketing practices of Miramax. At a time when notions of "indie" underwent considerable change, including a shift toward a "cinema of cool," represented by the films of Robert Rodriguez, Kevin Smith, and Quentin Tarantino, Fine Line offered a more considered, sometimes critical vision for specialty cinema.[8]

AN INFLECTION POINT FOR INDEPENDENT CINEMA

The year 1989 represents a notable conjuncture of forces that spurred great changes in independent film. A whirlwind of activity brought together Miramax, the film *sex, lies, and videotape*, and the US Film Festival—later known as Sundance.[9] The trajectory of *sex, lies, and videotape* through culture helped to crystallize certain understandings about indie film in general. Independently produced for $1.2 million by first-time director Steven Soderbergh, *sex, lies, and videotape* quickly garnered attention when it debuted at the festival in January. Miramax acquired the film shortly thereafter and, from there, created considerable marketing and media buzz by highlighting its most commercially exploitative elements in a high-concept

mode of marketing.[10] After winning the Palme d'Or at that year's Cannes Film Festival, the film earned $24 million in North American theaters.

Sex, lies, and videotape held the promise that oddball, intelligent, low-budget films by young directors could be profitable, and the movie helped position Sundance as the launch pad for such breakout successes. Perren writes that "*sex, lies, and videotape* served as both an example and a model for the future of the low-budget film scene" because it demonstrated the commercial potential for "quality" specialty cinema as an alternative to B-grade independent films and Hollywood blockbusters.[11] The film's success at festivals and in theaters also established Miramax as a shrewd company that could market and advertise unusual material in such a way that it shaped what counted as "cool," "artistic," and "edgy" in the cinema at the time. Sundance, Miramax, and *sex, lies, and videotape* mutually reinforced their respective identities, and all three were "indie." Indie was smart, indie was slick, indie was young, indie was commercial.

However sudden this conjuncture appeared, a longer process laid the groundwork for this turning point and, more specifically, for New Line's creation of Fine Line. Several small, mostly New York–based distributors focused on offbeat films in the 1970s, such as Cinema 5, and other independent companies and studio specialty divisions fostered a space for "alternative," "artistic," "quality" cinema in the 1980s, including Cinecom, Circle Releasing, Island Pictures, United Artists Classics, Orion Classics, and others.[12] Distributors such as these shaped specialty cinema with critical and financial hits such as *Blood Simple* (1984), *The Brother from Another Planet* (1984), *Stranger than Paradise* (1984), *A Room with a View* (1986), and *She's Gotta Have It* (1986). Thus, while it remains true that 1989 set the stage for a new era of independent film, the industrial and artistic accomplishments of the previous decade laid a fertile ground upon which Sundance, Miramax, and Steven Soderbergh could achieve such success and attention.

The formation of Fine Line also drew on the work and accomplishments occurring in independent film through the 1980s, marked particularly by Deutchman's appointment as division head. During the 1970s, Deutchman attended Northwestern University and worked as a programmer for a film society there. After graduating, Deutchman was employed at Cinema 5, where his duties included working on acquisitions for the company, designing advertising materials, and handling financing, among other tasks. Cinema 5 released *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975) and *Pumping Iron* (1977) during his time there. Deutchman joined United Artists Classics in 1981, where he worked on the marketing of such films as *Diva* (1981) and *The Last Metro* (1981). Deutchman cofounded Cinecom in 1982, a company designed to operate in the same specialty arena as Cinema 5 and United Artists Classics. Cinecom enjoyed a remarkable run with an eclectic mix of art house fare through the 1980s. The company handled reissues like *Metropolis* (1927), documentaries like *Comic Book Confidential* (1988), socially conscious dramas like *El*

Norte (1983), and performance films like *Stop Making Sense* (1984) and *Swimming to Cambodia* (1987). The company scored a big hit with the period drama *A Room with a View*, which earned over $20 million at the box office and $4 million in profit for Cinecom in 1985.[13] The film won multiple BAFTA (British Academy of Film and Television Arts) awards, including Best Picture, Best Actress, and Best Costume Design, and several Academy Awards.

Deutchman left Cinecom to form the Deutchman Company in March 1989, a consulting firm that assisted independent filmmakers and distributors with production and marketing. Deutchman's work in this capacity put him at the center of the independent cinema "boom" in 1989–90, most conspicuously because Miramax hired him to aid in the launch and release of *sex, lies, and videotape*. From May through July 1989, Deutchman advised Bob and Harvey Weinstein about how Miramax might coordinate press coverage of the film, how the company should handle print and trailer advertisements, and how it should handle publicity related to the film's appearance at Cannes.

Deutchman wanted to push the film as "sexy," though perhaps with more restraint than the final ads displayed. In one memo, for instance, Deutchman advised that the key art for the film should be, "Simple, clean, classy, good use of the attractive faces, sexy without going overboard."[14] Deutchman continued to uphold this notion of classiness as he helped Miramax adjust the trailers for the film. In another memo he stated that the trailer should emphasize the film's entertainment value, "without crossing the line to make the film look like it's smutty, or silly or shallow," which elicited an extremely defensive response from Harvey Weinstein.[15] By July, however, Deutchman wrote, "I think the final trailer is terrific," and that he was "very fond of" the print ad layout.[16] These discussions help illustrate Deutchman's approach to marketing specialty cinema: as "classy" and "sophisticated" and avoiding sensationalism. These exchanges foreshadow some of the ways Fine Line would differentiate itself from Miramax.

Deutchman first connected with New Line in an official capacity while working as the producer's representative for Whit Stillman's debut, *Metropolitan*. New Line acquired the film's distribution rights after it gained significant attention at the 1990 Sundance festival. New Line then hired Deutchman to plan the film's marketing and distribution.[17] New Line released the film in late summer 1990, and it earned over $1 million as it played through the fall.[18] Deutchman consulted on several other New Line films through that season, including *Pump Up the Volume*.

To the extent that New Line was considered "The House That Freddy Built" in the early 1990s, Fine Line significantly complicated that understanding.[19] When New Line launched Fine Line and hired Deutchman, the company issued a press release that aimed to discursively establish Fine Line's industrial identity and the division's contribution to the legend of New Line Cinema.[20] First, the press release

established Fine Line's pedigree by publicizing Deutchman's lengthy history in specialty cinema and connecting the division to previous New Line projects, including *Get Out Your Handkerchiefs*. It detailed that Liz Manne, who had worked at the Deutchman Company and Cinecom and had launched important films in those positions, would play a key role at Fine Line. The press release also suggested that Fine Line and New Line had a synergistic organizational relationship that would maximize their individual capabilities. And the announcement referred to the contemporaneous market for "indie" cinema as "emerging," "expanding," and capable of reaching a new "plateau." In this regard, the press release fell in line with public discourse about "indie" as a burgeoning commercial market and demonstrates that New Line intended to react strongly and quickly to this new landscape for specialty films.

Shaye asserted that Fine Line simply extended New Line's long-term strategy of cultivating "niche" audiences with "niche" films, but admitted that, recently, New Line had been devoted to more "commercial" films like *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* and *House Party* (both 1990).[21] In this regard, Shaye and the press coverage discursively aligned Fine Line closely with the overall shift in the entertainment media business at this juncture, which increasingly targeted multiple, distinct audiences while also trying to attract general audiences. Moreover, Shaye's comments suggest that the creation of Fine Line represents a strategic move to *enhance* New Line's efforts to enter mainstream cinema by cordoning off resources unrelated to that effort. Almost but not quite a paradox, Fine Line expanded the niches for this niche company at the same time that the division allowed New Line to move beyond niche movies.

Fine Line quickly assembled a robust roster of films, many inherited from New Line, comprising English-language productions that ranged greatly in quality.[22] The New Line transfers included *The Rapture* (1991), *Hangin' with the Homeboys* (1991), and *Shadow of China* (1989). But Fine Line also inherited Gus Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho* (1991) and acquired Hal Hartley's *Trust* (1990) and Jane Campion's *An Angel at My Table* (1990). These three films helped establish a formula for Fine Line, namely, offbeat, English-language films by auteurs with established reputations. Although Fine Line did not follow this template in every case, enough of the company's films conformed to this model that it distinguished the division during the first years of the 1990s. Fine Line continued in this vein through 1991, assembling a slate that included Jim Jarmusch's *Night on Earth* (1991), Ken Loach's *Riff-Raff* (1991), Derek Jarman's *Edward II* (1992), Spaulding Gray's *Monster in a Box* (1992), Hal Hartley's *Simple Men* (1992), and Whit Stillman's *Barcelona* (1994), along with films by emerging directors, including *Proof* (1991), *Swoon*, and *The Ballad of Little Jo* (1993). Although several of these films performed badly at the box office, en masse they bolstered Fine Line's reputation as a solid force in specialty cinema.

"A PERFECT FINE LINE MOVIE": *THE PLAYER* AND PRESTIGE

Two films in particular, however, made Fine Line's first years especially auspicious, *My Own Private Idaho* and Robert Altman's *The Player* (1992). Together, they established Fine Line's industrial identity and reputation for high-quality, English-language cinema. Fine Line acquired *The Player* in February 1992 and released it to much fanfare in April. An internal memo declared that *The Player* "has overnight become our most important film of the year."[23] Whereas Miramax, Sundance, and *sex, lies, and videotape* all helped define one another, *The Player* helped define Fine Line and cement the company's relationship to the larger film industry. It was sophisticated without being aesthetically demanding. With only English-language dialogue, it required no subtitles. It featured numerous recognizable performers and stars. It came from an established auteur, and indeed the film reestablished Robert Altman as a visionary director perhaps even more than it established Fine Line's industrial reputation.[24] Such characteristics marked the film as "quality" cinema, but in just the sort of way that made it feasibly accessible to broader audiences.

Based on a novel by Michael Tolkin, *The Player* is a dark comedy that tells the story of a scruple-less Hollywood executive, played by Tim Robbins, who gets embroiled in covering up a murder he commits. The film presents a deeply cynical and satirical picture of the business machinations and cultural behaviors of Hollywood workers. It features numerous scenes of writers pitching stories of questionable value to calculating producers, producers sabotaging one another's careers, and other Hollywood workers engaging in professional and personal gossip. Numerous stars appear in short cameo appearances throughout the film, including John Cusack, Anjelica Huston, and Burt Reynolds; megastars of the era Julia Roberts and Bruce Willis also appear in a film-within-the-film at the end as emblems of commerce trumping creativity in Hollywood.

These cameos, as well as the level of detail found in *The Player*, allow it to appear as a convincing portrayal of Hollywood. Simultaneously, the film's cynical plot and tenor denounce Hollywood's norms and priorities. Although the film's critical stance can be attributed to the writer and director, this sense of disapproving authenticity also aligns with Fine Line's identity within movie culture. *The Player* and Fine Line alike projected an intelligent alternative to the excesses, vapidity, and crass commercialism of Hollywood, while simultaneously upholding a cinephilia strong enough to be concerned with and critical of movies in the first place.

Fine Line made a splash immediately upon acquiring *The Player* in January 1991, with publications reporting that the company got the film for around $5 million, beating out multiple Hollywood studios as well as Miramax in a bidding war for the film.[25] Some coverage expressed "surprise" that it was Fine Line, and not

New Line, that took the film, and indeed there was debate between the companies about which would distribute *The Player*.[26] Just as important, public discussions pointed to Fine Line's emerging identity as distinct from New Line. One news article quoted Deutchman as saying, "We think 'The Player' is a perfect Fine Line movie."[27] Fine Line quickly began developing a strong legend of its own.

Because Altman had organized publicity events while Fine Line was still acquiring the film, the company had to work quickly to put together its own, organized promotion and release strategy. Fine Line planned for a highly tailored platform release of the film on a handful of screens in New York and Los Angeles, then to widen the release to two hundred more theaters after a few weeks. Early promotional work included print advertising aimed at the "upscale audience" so frequently invoked in public and internal discussions about Fine Line.[28] In addition, the company planned to have Altman appear at public events in more than ten major cities.[29] In this approach, characteristic of specialty films, Fine Line drew on the cult of auteurism as part of its marketing.

Fine Line also did massive outreach to media figures and outlets.[30] The company held multiple screenings for newspaper, magazine, and television critics, also a typical promotional activity for "quality" films. It coordinated with dozens of publications and television programs in attempts to have these venues cover some aspect of the film, whether it was an interview with Altman, a bio piece about one of the actors, or a behind-the-scenes account of the production of this behind-the-scenes film. On this front, Fine Line's promotional reach was wide-ranging and included industry-oriented publications like *Variety* and *Premiere*; high-end venues like *Vanity Fair, Vogue*, and the *Charlie Rose* show (1991–2017); and more mass-market publications and programs like *Entertainment Weekly, Newsweek*, and *Nightline* (1980–).[31]

Altman's auteur status played a key role in the marketing of *The Player*, but the posters for the film focused mainly on its dark comic tone, its reflexivity vis-à-vis the movie business, and the ensemble cast. Fine Line created different posters and print ads as the film's theatrical run extended through the summer of 1991, as a means of keeping the film "visible."[32] They all displayed a celluloid strip tied into a noose hanging above a silhouetted Los Angeles skyline, suggesting the film's connection to movies and moviemaking and giving a winking sense of danger. In later versions of the poster, Tim Robbins appeared lounging in the crook of the noose, wearing a suit and talking on a cell phone. These later posters and some newspaper ads also featured pictures of many of the cast members, rather than just their names, as well as glowing quotes from reviews. The posters featured several different catchphrases, including "Everything you've heard is true!" suggesting that the film provided an accurate and scandalous view of Hollywood. Some newspaper ads featured the phrase "The stars are out in your neighborhood!" similarly suggesting that *The Player* provided intimate access to the secluded world of moviemaking.

The trailer features numerous short moments from the film that convey its humor, its mysteriousness, and its negative assessment of creativity (or lack of it) in Hollywood. It interweaves a narration of the film's premise with snippets from many of the film's different "pitch" scenes, colliding the voiceover with adjectives and references used by the characters in an ironic montage of phrases. It also showcases several of the film's cameos, including Malcolm McDowell, Cher, and Nick Nolte. A television trailer uses similar devices, but, instead of narrating the premise of the film, it quotes numerous positive reviews for the film, alternating between positive phrases from the reviews, such as "masterpiece," "smart," and "sophisticated," with those found in the film, including "funny" and "we're going to have to have a little sex in this picture." Thus this television trailer appealed to viewers as savvy, in-the-know, discerning consumers whose tastes rise above the clichés found in typical Hollywood films.

Supported by this marketing and numerous positive reviews, *The Player* did well when it debuted. As planned, Fine Line expanded the film's release to a few hundred screens after a few weeks, and it earned $2.4 million in less than three weeks. For context, seven Hollywood releases grossed more than $100 million each that year, but *The Player*'s returns certainly compared well to other indie films of the time. *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), for instance, grossed just over $2 million during its entire theatrical run. Internal memos and public reporting indicate that Fine Line hoped *The Player* would break out beyond the limited market for specialty films. However, press coverage predicted the film would play well to cinephile audiences on the coasts but "die in the heartland."[33] Another story in the *Los Angeles Times* carried the title "Sure, It's Juicy in Hollywood but How Will it Player in Peoria?"[34]

In fact, when Fine Line first released *The Player* in April in selected theaters in Los Angeles and New York, it also released the film on around twelve screens in Denver to see whether it could succeed in a "mainstream" media market in "middle America."[35] Fine Line held advance screenings for newspaper critics in the area, and coordinated reviewers to interview Altman as a means of gaining their support.[36] In addition to placing ads in area newspapers, as well as on local radio, television, and cable stations, the company held several free promotional screenings in local theaters and distributed tickets to local film society members. The insights provided by these experiments in Denver were apparently quite detailed, and Fine Line learned that the film "could achieve a solid following in upscale suburban theaters, but in blue collar neighborhoods this black tale of Hollywood would fall flat."[37] The film's audience was shaped by income, it seemed, prompting Fine Line to attune its distribution plan to the class compositions of cities and particular neighborhoods.

Fine Line expanded *The Player*'s release in May to include theaters that Deutchman said were "hand-picked by New Line's distribution department in zones where we think we can make money" and that avoided "marginal areas."[38] Specific sites that proved successful included Washington, DC, Dallas, a suburb north of

Detroit, a theater outside Chicago that *Variety* called an "upscale suburban venue," and, despite previous conjecture about the film's potential, Peoria.[39] This expansion into additional theaters took place during the exact moment of the Los Angeles Uprising of 1992, following the acquittal of the police officers who beat Rodney King. *Variety* reported that *The Player*'s run in Los Angeles "was, of course, interrupted because of the curfew" imposed in that city due to the public violence.[40] Such timing appears conspicuous in light of *The Player*'s depiction of Hollywood as a cutthroat fantasyland wholly detached from reality, a reality that now included massive social unrest just down the road from real Hollywood studios. Moreover, the film succeeded in "upscale" theaters across the country, at a physical and cultural remove from areas like South Central Los Angeles.

Ultimately *The Player* played in over 430 theaters around the country and earned more than $21 million, making it Fine Line's biggest hit until *Shine* displaced it in 1996.[41] *The Player* stood as one of the most successful specialty films of 1992, beating other noteworthy films such as *El Mariachi* and *Reservoir Dogs*, but behind *Howards End*. With its reputation well established, Fine Line endeavored to earn *The Player* additional prestige and awards. The film was selected to play in competition at that year's Cannes festival in mid-May, when it was still in its theatrical run in the United States. The film received a standing ovation when it screened at the festival, and Robert Altman won the Best Director prize and Tim Robbins won Best Actor.[42] *The Player* continued to earn acclaim during the award season in 1993. It won the Best Director and Best Film awards at the New York Film Critics Circle Awards, as well as Golden Globes for Best Comedy or Musical and Best Actor for Tim Robbins. It also got Best Feature from among the Independent Spirit Awards, and author Michael Tolkin won a Writers Guild of America Award for Best Adapted Screenplay. Further, the film was placed on more than one hundred film critics' lists of the best films of 1992.[43]

With the award season in mind, Fine Line re-released *The Player* in twenty-five cities across the United States during the holiday season of 1992.[44] An internal memo from February 1993 stated: "The re-release is not making as money as we had hoped [*sic*], but it is definitely having its intended effect of keeping the film in the minds of Academy voters. The award season is almost over, and the results so far have positioned the film as a favorite in most of the major categories for the Oscars."[45] Fine Line also released the film as a double feature with New Line's *Glengarry Glen Ross* in select Los Angeles theaters just prior to the Academy Awards, and advertisements declared it was, "the most acclaimed double feature in town!"[46] Moreover, Fine Line delayed the home video release of *The Player* to match with the lead-up to the Academy Awards in March.[47]

The film was nominated for Oscars in Best Directing, Best Editing, and Best Screenplay Based on Material Previously Produced or Published. Some in the press treated it as a snub that the Academy did not nominate the film for Best Picture. One writer opined that Miramax's hit *The Crying Game* had displaced the film in

this category and bemoaned this "single most outrageous oversight in this year's Oscar competition."[48] This writer also suggested that Fine Line's independence from—and the film's critical stance toward—Hollywood had also contributed to the Academy's choice not to nominate the film for Best Picture. Ultimately, *The Player* earned no Academy Awards.

Nevertheless, *The Player*'s critical and financial success bolstered Fine Line's standing within the industry. By August 1992, *Variety* reported, "Fine Line has already risen to the top of its field as a distributor of sophisticated American art-house films."[49] Likewise, in a memo about *The Player*'s award season successes, Deutchman signaled Fine Line's importance in expanding New Line's cultural legitimacy: "We have delivered what we promised in terms of profile and prestige."[50] With *The Player*, Fine Line found an early hit that reflected the company's intentions. It was a critical success that gained *some* interest beyond the specialty film market, but still encountered limitations with more general audiences and acceptance within the mainstream industry.

THE NEW QUEER CINEMA MARKET

The other early win for Fine Line was *My Own Private Idaho*, which contributed to the company's industrial legend by signaling Fine Line's inclination to work with queer cinema. Fine Line, in fact, helped construct and popularize the new queer cinema during this time. In 1991 and 1992, the division released a handful of films made by gay directors that centered on queer male characters, including *Edward II* and *Swoon*. The company continued its specialization in queer cinema through the following decade with such films as *The Incredibly True Adventure of Two Girls in Love* (1995), *Love! Valor! Compassion!* (1997), *Trick* (1999), *Before Night Falls* (2001), and *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (2001), among others.

The marketing and distribution of *My Own Private Idaho, Swoon*, and *Edward II* occurred amid a flurry of filmmaking heralded as the New Queer Cinema by B. Ruby Rich in an essay published in the *Village Voice* and reprinted in *Sight and Sound*.[51] Looking at the way films like *Paris Is Burning* (1990), *Poison* (1991), and *The Living End* (1992) gained attention at international film festivals, Rich also discussed Fine Line's *My Own Private Idaho, Edward II*, and *Swoon* in her account of this new cinema, which explored sexuality in novel and provocative ways. Rich's article brilliantly contends with the institutional contexts in which these and other queer films were produced and viewed. But she attends more closely to the festivals than to the companies that acquired, marketed, and distributed these films. It is thus important to see how Fine Line shaped a public image for this new cinema and for queerness in cinema culture.

Notably, Rich's work uses the term "queer" to describe a variety of sexual minorities and anti-heteronormative sexualities and practices—as well as films that depict such figures and practices. She deploys the words "gay" and "lesbian"

too, but uses "queer" in ways that appear to encompass these other descriptors. While some object to the way "queer" in such usage overlooks the particularities of and differences among a huge range of sexual practices and positionalities, it is important to note that Rich's essay vitally participated in the conceptualization of "queerness" over time in relation to discourses of homosexuality, gayness, and lesbianism.[52] My use of "queer" largely takes its lead from Rich's in order to maintain historical fidelity in signaling a variety of non- and anti-normative sexual positionalities and films that convey them. Just as important, it is crucial to see how "queer," "gay," and related terms were deployed by Fine Line, in the public discourse about its films, and in relation to those involved in making and distributing these films. Fine Line and the films it released contributed to a shifting vocabulary about sexuality in the media during the 1990s.

Fine Line was not alone in releasing queer films in the 1990s, as other specialty distributors, such as Zeitgeist, Orion Classics, and especially Strand Releasing, released queer films during the decade that gained attention in the press, including *Jeffrey* (1995). Miramax, too, released Neil Jordan's *The Crying Game* to much fanfare in 1992 for its "secret" of portraying a transgender character in a prominent role. *The Crying Game* also earned Miramax numerous awards and significant box office revenue in 1992 and 1993, the same years when critics and scholars held up *My Own Private Idaho, Edward II*, and *Swoon* as evincing the new queer cinema wave.

For Fine Line, films by and about queer subjects were part of its larger effort to distribute intelligent, alternative, and critical films. Yet the way the company discussed these films internally, advertised them publicly, and released them in theaters demonstrates a complicated contribution to the new queer cinema aesthetic and market for queer films. As Katherine Sender has discussed, the 1990s were an important time for the construction of "gay" and, to a lesser extent, "lesbian" as cultural and commercial entities through the work of ad agencies, magazine publishers, and related circulating media texts.[53] Conforming well to Sender's analysis, Fine Line demonstrated a flexible and negotiated approach to presenting queer material for cinema audiences from a variety of social positions, backgrounds, and identities. Using an approach similar to what Sender has found in other realms of media culture, Fine Line blended "business" with "politics," even if the company treated the two as independent in its internal communications.[54]

New Line became involved in the production of *My Own Private Idaho* in 1990, prior to the founding of Fine Line. New Line had some background in queer cinema, having worked on films like *A Very Natural Thing* (1974), *Torch Song Trilogy* (1988), and, in a very different register, the movies of John Waters. Although *Torch Song Trilogy* proved to be a financial dud, New Line had high expectations for it and released it with ambitions for awards season.[55] It appears that New Line's interest in *My Own Private Idaho* was related to its efforts to produce more films with recognizable stars in the late 1980s and early 1990s, including *No Holds Barred*

(1989) and *Suburban Commando* (1991) with Hulk Hogan, and *Heart Condition* with Denzel Washington. In fact, New Line committed to producing *My Own Private Idaho*, budgeted at $2.5 million, only after River Phoenix and Keanu Reeves joined the project.[56] Reeves's stardom had grown following his appearances in *River's Edge* (1986), *Parenthood* (1989), *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure* (1989), and *Point Break* (1990). Phoenix was also a major teen idol, having appeared in a variety of Hollywood films as well as smaller dramas like Nancy Savoca's *Dogfight* (1991). As a pair, Reeves and Phoenix endowed *My Own Private Idaho* with recognizable names and a sense of youthful hipness.

My Own Private Idaho tells the story of two sex workers: Scott, who comes from a privileged background; and Mike, who is destitute, suffers from narcolepsy, and is in search of his mother, played by Reeves and Phoenix respectively. It has a loose, picaresque structure that accounts for the characters' encounters with both male and female clients around Portland, and follows them as they search for the mother in Idaho and Italy. The film's quiet, meditative tone echoes Van Sant's earlier film *Drugstore Cowboy* (1989) and is interspersed with more rambunctious scenes with various clients and with a gaggle of fellow hustlers and their leader, Bob, who is modeled on Shakespeare's Falstaff character. *My Own Private Idaho* also features several surreal vignettes, often occurring when Mike experiences visions during narcoleptic episodes. The film opens, for instance, with Mike wandering on a desolate, two-lane road in a barren landscape, presumably in Idaho, and hallucinates about his mother; in another such scene, Scott appears on the cover of a porn magazine and comes to life and speaks directly to the camera.

Deutchman had worked with queer cinema during his time at Cinecom, which distributed films like *Parting Glances* (1986), *Maurice* (1987), and *The Times of Harvey Milk* (1984). Despite Deutchman's and New Line's previous work with queer film subjects, however, Fine Line's handling of *My Own Private Idaho* reveals a complex treatment of queerness in relation to specialty cinema. Fine Line appeared to value queer cinema because of an imagined overlap between the genre and indie film more broadly. Ron Becker has observed comparable logics at work in 1990s television programming, as "network executives incorporated gay and lesbian material into their prime-time lineups in order to attract an audience of upscale, college-educated and socially liberal adults," a formulation that sounds conspicuously like portraits of the indie film audience of the time.[57] In Fine Line's case, however, it seems the company valued artistic distinction and other qualities of "indieness" more highly than it did queerness, however much those qualities might overlap.

One sees these presumptions play out in Fine Line's handling of *My Own Private Idaho* from the very start. An internal memo indicates, for instance, that prior to the film's release, Fine Line thought that the director and stars offered "a great package" but that "the subject matter makes it a very tough sell."[58] Fine Line primarily conceived of *My Own Private Idaho* as an indie picture with a solid artistic

pedigree and treated the film's queerness as a commercial hurdle that needed to be overcome.

Fine Line launched *My Own Private Idaho* with a highly active festival run. Although the film was not accepted at Cannes, it gained praise and awards when it played at the Venice, Toronto, Chicago, and Deauville festivals in September and October 1991. Fine Line did not, however, enter *My Own Private Idaho* in festivals specifically dedicated to gay and lesbian films. When the film was not entered in the Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Film/Video Festival, the festival's director expressed disappointment with Fine Line and Van Sant. "Private Idaho is a gay film and they're not looking at the audience that first embraced Gus," the festival director said, referring to Van Sant's *Mala Noche* (1986), which had played at the festival previously.[59] The film's publicist, Mickey Cottrell (who also appears in the film as one of the clients), complicated the issue by saying, "The distributor doesn't want the film positioned as a gay film. . . . Then many people would be frightened away. It's better to have the critics say how wonderful it is in dealing with gay characters."[60] Thus, in its festival run, *My Own Private Idaho* was identified as indie *and* queer, with queerness being the secondary trait.

Fine Line initially placed the film in two theaters in New York City, where it did well on a per-screen average, and then expanded it to more than seventy screens around the country after a few weeks.[61] The company spent $1.5 million on newspaper, magazine, and television advertising and an additional $350,000 on other marketing activities, including media appearances by the stars and a premiere screening and party attended by many young celebrities.[62] Some of Fine Line's advertising for the film deflected attention from the film's sexual content and instead focused on its stars and auteur. A one-sheet, for instance, did not allude to the characters' work as prostitutes but rather played up the class differences between Scott and Mike.[63] Newspaper advertisements for the film likewise avoided reference to the characters' sexuality and featured bold close-ups of the two main stars and pull quotes from the film's many positive reviews. Print ads for the film also featured the slogan "Wherever, Whatever, Have a nice day," suggesting a Gen-X, slacker sensibility that aligned with the star personae of the lead actors.

In contrast, the theatrical trailer showcases moments when the characters engage romantically with both male and female characters. It also depicts several surreal interludes from the film, including a barn falling from the sky onto a highway. The trailer plays up the stars and emphasizes auteurism by noting that the film is "from the director of *Drugstore Cowboy*." The trailer ties this all together by highlighting moments from the film that suggest that family, and a search for belonging within a family, is the film's central theme. This includes interactions between Scott and his father, Mike's dreams of his mother, and dialogue in which Mike directly states that he wishes he had a normal family. For all that the trailer indicates that characters engage in nonheteronormative sexual behaviors and

gestures toward the film's stylistic oddities, it appears to qualify these markers of queerness and indieness with a conventional and universalizing ideology of "family" as a normative social formation. From another perspective, however, the film and the trailer's invocation of family resonated with contemporaneous discourses about "family of choice" that were prominent in the LGBTQ community.

Press coverage consistently scrutinized the film's representations of and relation to sex and sexuality. In some cases, the press considered these issues in relation to commercial and industrial considerations, such as when one reviewer asserted, "The biggest commercial gamble [Van Sant] takes is making his lead character gay. . . . For all the advances gay culture is making toward integrating with mainstream society, gay themes still aren't exactly box-office magic."[64] Another article noted that "Hollywood actors are notoriously paranoid about playing gay roles" and that Van Sant had to get the script directly to Phoenix because his agent refused to show it to the actor.[65] The press universally felt compelled to identify the actors as straight, and one writer even referred to them as "macho."[66] The critics frequently lauded the actors for taking the roles, as though doing so were a sign of bravery. After the film performed well at the box office, one commentator noted, "The fact that Reeves and Phoenix are playing bisexual and gay street hustlers, respectively, isn't hurting the film commercially."[67]

The press consistently identified Gus Van Sant as "openly gay," with one story referring to him as "matter-of-factly gay."[68] When asked about the film's sexuality, however, the director was slippery and unproscriptive. He told *The Advocate*, "I think it would be odd to pigeonhole it as a gay film." Van Sant was similarly ambiguous in defining the characters, telling *The Advocate*, "I don't see [the characters] as gay or straight."[69] On occasion, he gestured toward the film's social relevance, in one case saying, "That's a good thing about filmmaking—you can comment on social issues and bring things up for discussion that people tend to shy away from." Then he quickly universalized this statement by adding, "Everyone can listen to a good story."[70]

Reviews of *My Own Private Idaho* focused on elements that endowed it with artistic distinction as a "quality" film and thus helped to define the film as "indie." Critics held up Van Sant as a visionary auteur, and some compared him to David Lynch, John Waters, Jim Jarmusch, and the Coen brothers.[71] Critics praised the film's acting and especially described River Phoenix's performance as exceptional.[72] Many reviews gestured at its cultural prestige by discussing its use of Shakespearean elements, while others compared it to the works of Dickens or *Of Mice and Men*.[73] But reviewers commonly discussed these points of artistic "quality" alongside a concern with the film's queerness, holding *My Own Private Idaho* up as a representative text for understanding contemporary queer identity, the real-life queer community, and the politics of such representation. Several critics took issue with the film's representation of sexuality as problematically vague or unrealistic, and specifically noted its lack of reference to AIDS.[74]

Cumulatively, however, the reviews were not able to pin down the sexuality of *My Own Private Idaho*. The film's fluid sexual identity was especially noted by the reviewer for *Gay Community News*: "Part of the trouble in looking at My Own Private Idaho as a 'gay film' is that it isn't a gay film, at least not in the usual sense of that over-used and under-explicated term."[75] He added, "Here we have an openly gay filmmaker who is avowedly not very interested in what is traditionally seen as a gay male sensibility and who has made a film that deals with some aspects of male homosexuality in a manner that is quite unlike what would be done by other gay or straight directors." Thus, for this reviewer, *My Own Private Idaho* was notable for explicitly expanding the bounds of male queer representation.

As the film entered the end of its theatrical run in February 1992, it had earned $6 million at the box office and nearly $1 million in pay television and other ancillary media revenues.[76] Fine Line expected to make over $2.5 million in profit.[77] In addition, Phoenix won the Best Actor Award from the National Society of Film Critics, and the film won an Independent Spirit Award. Its success at festivals, in theaters, and with critics helped establish Fine Line as a strong force in the realm of specialty cinema, and, like *The Player*, it signaled the division's overall business strategy. A Fine Line memo from the end of 1991 asserted: "This is one inherited film [from New Line] that is a perfect example of everything a Fine Line film should be—a true art film that has promotable elements. . . . The most important aspects of the film were the director (almost always the case with a Fine Line film), the fact that it was different from anything else in the marketplace, and the fact that the stars gave us access to levels of press that seem unimaginable for a small independent film."[78] By this point, Fine Line estimated, *My Own Private Idaho* had become "the most profitable specialized film of the year" and was Fine Line's "first certifiable hit."[79]

Fine Line picked up *Swoon* and *Edward II* in November 1991, as *My Own Private Idaho* was still playing in theaters.[80] The company handled these two films differently than it had *Idaho* in terms of business strategy and marketing. Directed by established gay auteur Derek Jarman, *Edward II* had already earned accolades at the Venice Film Festival when Fine Line acquired the film's North American theatrical rights.[81] The film is adapted from Christopher Marlowe's play of the same title and dramatizes the political consequences of Edward's love affair with another nobleman. The film colors this narrative with stylistic oddities and anachronisms, especially in its costumes and music. A Fine Line memo identified *Edward II* as an "openly gay" film by "well-known British filmmaker Derek Jarman, who is dying of aids [*sic*]."[82] By early 1992 the company's plans with the film were self-reflexive in regard to its queer subject. Indeed, by that point Fine Line was *responding* to press coverage that connected the company with a new wave of gay cinema. "[*Edward II*] should be the biggest 'downtown' film of the year," an internal memo noted, "getting major coverage in the gay press, the alternative press, and even in some mainstream press. Some publications are planning

stories about a new 'trend' toward 'gay films' breaking out into the mainstream, with 'Idaho' as the prime example. 'Edward' will be the focus of a lot of those articles, and Fine Line is being positioned as being on the cutting edge of marketing in that niche."[83]

This memo suggests that "New Queer Cinema" was crystallizing as an identifiable cinematic phenomenon due to an interaction among film festivals, film critics, and Fine Line and some other distributors. For its part, Fine Line initially worked in queer cinema as part of its practice of distributing modestly budgeted, artistically distinct, nonmainstream films, but as public discourse around queer cinema coalesced, the company took a more direct, self-conscious approach toward these films; this activity in turn helped the new queer cinema further cohere. Cultural politics impacted Fine Line, even while the company's contribution to New Queer Cinema was conceived as "business" more than "politics."

This memo makes it clear that Fine Line's work in queer cinema aimed to appeal to viewers beyond an imagined gay audience. A later memo about *Edward II* made this intention still clearer: "Indications are very strong from the press, with the possible exception of the notoriously homophobic New York Times, which has yet to see it. . . . In the gay community, the release of this film is being greeted like the second coming. Our positioning at this point is to see how far we can cross it over to straight audiences without losing the core. The NY Times will probably be the key to whether that will be possible."[84]

Fine Line's marketing for *Edward II* neither emphasized nor avoided the film's sexual subject matter. The trailer highlights the film's connection to the Marlowe play, with the narration calling it a "one of the jewels of the Elizabethan theater" and the imagery identifying it as a British costume drama with anachronistic flourishes. The trailer also highlights many scenes of kissing, as between Tilda Swinton and a man, but also kisses between male characters. The posters for the film centered on Swinton, and also highlighted that the film was by Jarman and adapted from the Marlowe play. In these ways, the promotion for *Edward II* situated it as a refined, sophisticated drama with a link to cultural heritage while also containing queer romance.

Critics locked onto the film's queerness and asserted that it was a commentary on contemporary sexual politics and homophobia. In describing the film, they used words like "ideological statement," "political," and "audacious."[85] Contrary to Fine Line's concerns, the review in the *New York Times* leaned toward praise and stated that the "movie is a tract against the oppression of homosexuals through the ages, filmed by a director who is himself openly gay and living with AIDS."[86] This connection to the AIDS epidemic and contemporary social activism about LGBTQ issues was magnified by the film's inclusion of Annie Lennox performing "Ev'ry Time We Say Goodbye," a song originally released as part of the *Red Hot + Blue* benefit album, proceeds from which went to organizations supporting HIV and AIDS awareness.

FIGURE 17. Focusing on the romance between Leopold and Loeb, *Swoon* won the Cinematography award at Sundance in 1992.

Edward II never gained the attention or financial success of *My Own Private Idaho*. The film's revenues dropped quickly after its first week of release, and by the end of its theatrical run it had not cleared $1 million.[87] This was likely one of several factors that prompted Fine Line to adjust its strategy when it released *Swoon* later in the fall. Produced on a small budget and shot in 16-millimeter black-and-white, *Swoon* is a dramatic rendering of the Leopold and Loeb murders that focuses on the pair's romantic relationship. First-time director Tom Kalin had developed the film independently, but Fine Line joined with American Playhouse to provide additional funds for the film's completion.[88] *Swoon* gained attention when it played at the 1992 Sundance Film Festival, where it was viewed in relation to Gregg Araki's *The Living End*, also playing at the festival, as well as *Poison* and *Paris Is Burning*, which had been at Sundance the previous year.[89] *Swoon* earned the Sundance award for Best Cinematography and won the Caligari Award at the Berlin Film Festival in February. In March, the film was chosen to play in the New Directors/New Films Series run by the Film Society of Lincoln Center and the Film Department of the Museum of Modern Art.

Although *Swoon* attracted such positive attention, including a positive review in the *New York Times*, Fine Line was cautious with it. One memo, written just prior to the film's theatrical release, stated: "We expect very big results from our first few weeks, and in major city situations. However, we are being realistic about how far this film can go, and are therefore keeping expenditures *very low*. This is a publicity driven film for a very specific and small audience. We'll make money on it, but it is inherently limited."[90]

Guided by this conception of *Swoon* and its audiences, Fine Line was more direct in advertising the film's queerness than it had been with *My Own Private Idaho* and *Edward II*. Deutchman complained that the MPAA process for approving trailers meant "there was no way in the world that they were going to allow

us to be so overt about the gayness in the movie."[91] But the company used queerness as a salable feature of the film nevertheless. The trailer intersperses multiple scenes from the film with single-word intertitles that read "Geniuses," "Murderers," "Jews," and finally "Queers." The trailer enlivens these elements with a fast-tempo jazz song, giving the ad an upbeat, even humorous tone. Likewise, the film's poster displays close-ups of the two lead actors, attended by the labels "Genius," "Jew," "Murderer," and "Queer." Directly invoking "queer" rather "gay" or "homosexual," Fine Line's ads directly reflect the fluctuating discourse around sexuality at the time. Both negative and positive reviews of *Swoon* noted the way the film used the Leopold and Loeb story to critique homophobia and other forms of prejudice against social "outsiders."[92]

Although *Swoon* was only a moderate success, it remained a touchstone for critics, commentators, and scholars looking for innovative representations of queerness in American cinema. Indeed, with *My Own Private Idaho, Edward II*, and *Swoon*, Fine Line made queer cinema a discernable aspect of its operations while helping queer films achieve greater cultural prominence. The company elevated queerness as a defining aspect of specialty cinema during the indie boom of the 1990s, and queer films remained a commercial focus for Fine Line until its dissolution.

NOT COOL

With its offbeat subject matter, dialogue-driven script, and a few recognizable faces from Hollywood, *sex, lies, and videotape* provided an aesthetic model for indie cinema in the 1990s. The film's small budget, tight production schedule, and festival circulation provided an optimal business plan for specialty films, as well. One can see these formal and industrial strategies play out in any number of Fine Line releases, including *My Own Private Idaho, Night on Earth, Household Saints* (1993), or *Barcelona*. Yet a wave of films threatened to change the character and financial ambitions for specialty cinema as the 1990s went on. Alisa Perren observes that the indie cinema scene shifted toward a "cinema of cool" in the mid-1990s, with smaller-budgeted films, such as *Clerks*, made by male directors that focused predominantly on younger, quirky, verbose male figures.[93] A preponderance of the cinema of cool took on a film noir–ish character, and some of the movies even veered into action film territory, such as Robert Rodriguez's *El Mariachi*. That film gained much attention for the director's young age, the DIY production techniques employed by Rodriguez and his crew, its incredibly small budget, and its unusually well-choreographed action sequences. This film, *Clerks*, and others created a cultural narrative according to which one could make a hit film with credit cards, loans from family and friends, and little to no formal training in filmmaking—especially if one was a Gen-X male.

More than anyone, Quentin Tarantino embodied and incited this generic shift within indie cinema. Tarantino quickly gained widespread attention for directing *Reservoir Dogs* in 1992, which was successful on home video, and for writing the similarly violent, noir-infused *True Romance* (1993) and *Natural Born Killers* (1994). This streak reached a zenith with *Pulp Fiction* in 1994, which earned over $100 million in North American theaters following a savvy marketing campaign from distributor Miramax.[94] Tarantino's films and screenplays appeared alongside a number of other modestly budgeted crime films at the time, including *El Mariachi, Kalifornia* (1993), *Romeo Is Bleeding* (1993), and, later, *Things to Do in Denver When You're Dead* (1995) and *The Usual Suspects* (1995), which all added guns, crime, and grim plots to the flavor of indie cinema. This neonoir tendency continued in specialty cinema through the end of the decade, launching the careers of several other young male directors; cases include Danny Boyle's *Shallow Grave* (1994) and *Trainspotting* (1996), the Wachowski siblings' *Bound* (1996), Paul Thomas Anderson's *Hard Eight* (1997), Guy Ritchie's *Lock, Stock, and Two Smoking Barrels* (1998), and Christopher Nolan's *Following* (1998) and *Memento* (2000).

Although the cinema of cool gained a lot of attention, it did not eliminate the continuing "cinema of quality." Perren cites Miramax's *The Piano* (1993) as a prime example of this ongoing trend. Under Deutchman's continued leadership through 1995, Fine Line deliberately abstained from the cinema of cool, and especially from neonoir, films. This was partly a matter of financial strategy, as Deutchman believed that the division should largely avoid trying to match the rapidly escalating acquisition prices that films were fetching in festival markets.[95] In a memo that described the division's upcoming plans for 1993, Deutchman wrote: "Our major competitor, Miramax, is aggressive to the extreme, which makes for a difficult equation—on the one hand it means that we have to be just as aggressive in order to compete, and on the other hand we can't allow their craziness to make us as rash as they sometimes can be."[96]

Deutchman also noted that the financial success of indie films like *The Player* had prompted the major studios to move into the specialty cinema business and that they, along with Miramax, "contributed to the spending spree" that was raising prices in that market.[97] Those working at Fine Line perceived how the indie boom of the early 1990s was inciting a shift in Hollywood's strategy regarding specialty cinema and the niche markets it served. Yet, as it entered the mid-1990s, Fine Line continued to focus on modestly budgeted, English-language films that had potential to extend the bounds of the art house market but never competed directly with Hollywood.

This financial plan was paired with an aesthetic agenda that contrasted with the cinema of cool and neonoir dramas. In addition to saying that a number of recent specialty film hits were "sensationalistic or wildly audacious or both," the business plan for 1993 states: "The relative success of such extremely violent films as 'Reservoir Dogs' and 'Bad Lieutenant' is not relevant because I think that there is a

limited appetite for such films among serious moviegoers, and that appetite is further dampened by bad word-of-mouth for both films."[98] This assessment displays a miscalculation about the kinds of specialty films that would become the biggest breakout hits. Fine Line remained committed to providing those whom it viewed as "serious moviegoers" with auteur-driven dramas.

Yet, at the same time that Fine Line flopped with movies like Van Sant's *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* and Altman's *Short Cuts* (1993), violent neonoir films like *Pulp Fiction* garnered nearly Hollywood-level revenues. Moreover, many other companies took part in the cycle of violent neonoirs. October Films released *Killing Zoe* (1994) and *The Last Seduction* (1994). Miramax handled almost everything related to Tarantino, including *Four Rooms* (1995) and *From Dusk till Dawn* (1996). Hollywood studios distributed some violent neonoir films too, such as *True Romance* and *Natural Born Killers* from Warner Bros. and *Out of Sight* (1998) from Universal. Even New Line gained substantial revenues with the grim crime drama *Seven* (1995). Amid this increasingly competitive trend, pressure mounted for Fine Line to create another breakout hit like *The Player*. But in the mid-1990s the company stuck with less flashy dramas such as *Mrs. Parker and the Vicious Circle* (1994), *Death and the Maiden* (1994), and *Total Eclipse* (1995), which did not gain the attention that other companies' films did at the time.

The division broke this mold with *Hoop Dreams*, a three-hour documentary about two high school basketball players living in economic difficulty in the Chicago area. The film was produced over several years on a small budget that included financing from the Public Broadcasting System and the MacArthur Foundation.[99] Fine Line acquired it for less than a half million dollars in March 1994, following the film's appearance at Sundance, where it won the Audience Award.[100] Fine Line was one of at least six distributors that vied to acquire it, making this a bit of a coup for the company.[101]

Documentaries were not a major element of the specialty film scene in the mid-1990s, so Fine Line's work with *Hoop Dreams* was even more noteworthy. Deutchman said that *Hoop Dreams* entailed "the most complex marketing scheme we've ever pulled off."[102] The press noted not only that the film was a documentary but that it was unusually long and depicted social conditions that were not typical for art house cinema at the time, specifically young Black men playing basketball in "the inner city."[103] Fine Line endeavored to build on the critical momentum the film attained, first at Sundance and then in October when it was chosen as the closing film at the New York Film Festival.

But elements of the marketing plan for *Hoop Dreams* deviated strongly from a more typical publicity campaign for a specialty film. In addition to placing ads in newspapers and on cable to attract "upscale, educated, discriminating movie consumers," Fine Line secured a sponsorship for the film from sportswear company Nike.[104] Fine Line also attempted to draw on corporate "synergy" with Turner Broadcasting following Turner's purchase of New Line in 1994. In addition

to cable, the Turner empire included the Atlanta Braves baseball team and the Atlanta Hawks basketball team, and Deutchman thought this offered opportunities for promoting *Hoop Dreams* to general sports fans.[105] Ironically, Fine Line got support from the Turner group only *after* securing the deal with Nike.[106] *Hoop Dreams* gained backing from the NBA as well, and trailers for the movie were shown in stadiums during games for the Hawks and the Golden State Warriors. Nike covered the expenses of promoting the film through radio campaigns around the country in which the stations gave away tickets to the film, soundtrack CDs, and Nike shoes.[107]

Although corporate promotions, cross branding, and endorsements were common with Hollywood films, such deals were uncommon for specialty cinema. In a move perhaps even more unusual, Fine Line used Nike's sponsorship to engage in a targeted, grassroots marketing plan with local groups and communities. With Nike's support, Fine Line set up a call-in system that community groups could use to request tickets to the films. In addition, the company mailed fliers to thousands of schools, churches, and fraternal organizations.[108] Fine Line, with additional support from *Sports Illustrated*, also distributed thousands of classroom study guides to teachers and students, particularly aiming to reach teenagers in the Chicago area.[109] Thus, the marketing and promotion of *Hoop Dreams* represent an odd mixture of corporate synergy across multiple venues and participants and guerilla-style marketing. Fine Line incurred $1.6 million in traditional print and advertising costs while spending only $300,000 on other publicity and educational outreach.[110]

Hoop Dreams did well in theaters, initially playing in two and then expanding to nearly fifty theaters across the country after a couple of weeks. By the time it ended its theatrical run, the film had earned nearly $2 million in theaters.[111] In a survey of forty film critics in the United States, *Hoop Dreams* was ranked the highest of all the year's films.[112] Siskel and Ebert gave the film two thumbs up, while Kenneth Turan called it a "landmark of American documentary film."[113] Encouraged by critics' universal praise, Fine Line engaged in an intensive advertising campaign to get *Hoop Dreams* nominated for Academy Awards. In multiple ads in Hollywood trade magazines, the company pushed the envelope by campaigning for Best Picture, in addition to or in lieu of Best Documentary. In the *Hollywood Reporter*, for example, Fine Line showcased *Mrs. Parker and the Vicious Circle* and *Death and the Maiden* alongside *Hoop Dreams* under a banner reading "For Your Consideration," and it specifically held up *Hoop Dreams* for Best Picture, Best Director, Best Editing, Best Cinematography, Best Score, and Best Original Song.[114]

Fine Line reached out directly to Academy members, sending around six thousand letters to specific individuals.[115] The first of these letters urged, "It is, in part, because of [its] unprecedented reception that we ask you to consider and vote for 'HOOP DREAMS' in the Best Picture Category" and then directed the member to special Academy screenings of the film as well as to the theaters in Los Angeles

and New York where the film was still playing.[116] Subsequent letters, mailed to thousands of Academy members, included videotapes of *Hoop Dreams* with the assumption that many of them had not seen the film in a theater.[117] These letters asked, "Can a documentary film be nominated for Best Picture? The answer is YES . . . with your help."[118] The company expanded the film's theatrical run to more than two hundred theaters in February 1995, before the announcement of Oscar nominations, by which point it had earned over $3 million.[119]

This extraordinary effort was for naught. The *Chicago Tribune* reported, "Not only was [*Hoop Dreams*] ignored for the Best Picture nomination, for which it was a long shot candidate, but it was not even among the five nominees in the Documentary category."[120] The press treated it as a "shocking" snub that the film was overlooked for both Best Picture and Best Documentary. Some blamed the system by which the Academy nominated documentaries.[121] Others blamed those Academy members who voted in the documentary category, which had a history of members overlooking popular and financially successful films.[122] Interestingly, one article cited Fine Line's "brash" effort to get the film nominated for an Oscar, a tactic regularly used by Hollywood studios and independent distributors alike.[123]

Hoop Dreams proved to be Fine Line's last great success under Deutchman's leadership. Although untypical of other specialty films at the time, the film was another example of Fine Line taking a niche film and extending its reach to new and bigger audiences. After winning a single Oscar in the editing category, *Hoop Dreams* played in theaters into the early summer of 1995 and earned nearly $8 million at the box office, surpassing the revenue of Michael Moore's previous breakout documentary, *Roger and Me* (1989).[124] The film also sold well on home video, and in a sort of homecoming, PBS aired *Hoop Dreams* in 1995, followed by a reunion segment detailing what happened to the film's subjects following the production.[125] In summer 1995, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences modified the way documentary films can be nominated for an Oscar, apparently in response to the press coverage of *Hoop Dreams*.[126]

MID-DECADE SHIFTS FOR FINE LINE AND SPECIALTY CINEMA

Ira Deutchman was dismissed as the specialty division's president as he and other Fine Line workers were in the middle of packing VHS tapes of *Hoop Dreams* to mail to Academy voters. The *Los Angeles Times* called Deutchman's departure "abrupt."[127] Rumors had circulated a year earlier that Deutchman might leave the company after distributing an unimpressive slate of films in 1993 and after *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* received a negative reception at the Toronto International Film Festival in September, but at that point he managed to sign a contract for an additional three-year term.[128] Yet, aside from *Hoop Dreams*, Fine Line continued to struggle in 1994 with films like *Mrs. Parker and the Vicious Circle* and *Death and*

the Maiden. The company's floundering contrasted sharply with Miramax's success with *Clerks, Pulp Fiction*, and *The Crow* (1994) from its Dimension division.

One report suggested that executives at Turner Broadcasting were dissatisfied with Fine Line's performance under Deutchman's leadership.[129] Whether or not it was a matter of Fine Line's new corporate situation, Deutchman's departure coincided with dramatic shifts in the indie film scene in the mid-1990s. Miramax and other independent distributors were achieving big hits, and Hollywood was transforming the industry with the creation of several specialty divisions. A story from 1996 noted, "Executives and agents say there has been a subtle shift in the kinds of independent films being distributed, a shift marked by more expensive productions, more mainstream films with top actors and a new awareness, even among the most feisty independent producers, of creative boundaries."[130]

The scale of the market appeared to grow—or be inflated by the ambitions of companies working in the domain—and the pressure to create big hits out of specialty films was intense. *Four Weddings and a Funeral* earned over $200 million in 1994, for example, a film that Fine Line had lost to Polygram/Gramercy. That company also scored with *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994), a queer Australian road movie that would have fit well within Fine Line's catalog. Yet, if specialty cinema proved lucrative at this time, it was mainly the larger companies that benefited. As Perren details, many smaller, boutique distribution companies floundered and failed under the pressure of companies like New Line and Miramax, now part of major conglomerates, and even stronger companies like Goldwyn fell apart in the changing market.[131] English-language specialty films *could* make blockbuster revenues, but not for everyone and not for Fine Line.

New Line changed the direction of its specialty division, appointing Ruth Vitale as Fine Line's president. Vitale was already an established industry executive, having worked at several media companies before joining New Line in 1992 as a senior VP of acquisitions. Moving to Fine Line, Vitale brought members of her New Line staff with her. Under her leadership, Fine Line appeared to take an approach more resembling New Line's business model at the time, which was becoming increasingly "commercial," as detailed in the previous chapter. The press talked about how Fine Line would be "much more aggressive" in the market.[132] The division would release ten to twelve movies per year, half of which it planned to develop and *produce*, while also continuing to acquire films at festivals and film markets. Further, the types of films the division planned to produce were much larger and more expensive than previous Fine Line films, comparable to previous New Line films like *Corrina, Corrina* (1994) and *Don Juan de Marco* (1995).[133] The budgets for Fine Line films of this caliber were expected to be as high as $15 million, considerably more than any of the division's previous acquisition or production costs.[134] Signaling the division's move toward the mainstream in both practical and symbolic terms, Fine Line opened a branch office in Los Angeles. The changing needs of the corporation appeared to reshape how heterogeneous Fine Line films would be.

As the division aimed for larger films with broader appeal, some working at the companies raised questions about what differences there would be between New Line and Fine Line moving forward. Similar questions had occasionally cropped up in the press in the past as far back as *The Player*, and Deutchman once noted that "New Line's product in the last quarter of '92 looked suspiciously like Fine Line Product."[135] But Fine Line's change in direction in the mid-1990s is more comprehensible if considered in light of the changes occurring at New Line after Ted Turner purchased the company. With New Line producing more populist comedies like *The Mask* (1994) and more films with notable stars like *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1996), Fine Line's films would remain smaller and more niche *in comparison*.

Fine Line continued distributing dramas from notable auteurs, like *Total Eclipse* from Agnieska Holland and *Kansas City* from Robert Altman (1995), and queer films such as *The Incredibly True Adventure of Two Girls in Love* and *Nowhere* by Greg Araki (1997). Yet Fine Line films also ventured into the neonoir cycle and also released several straightforward, middle-of-the-road films with bigger-name Hollywood stars. In the crime drama area, Fine Line released *Little Odessa*, starring Tim Roth and which won the Silver Lion awards at the Venice International Film Festival in 1994. It distributed the romantic drama *Frankie Starlight* (1995) with Matt Dillon and Gabriel Byrne, the romantic comedy *Pie in the Sky* (1996) with John Goodman, the drama *Carried Away* (1996) with Dennis Hopper and the romantic comedy *Feeling Minnesota* (1996) with Keanu Reeves, Vincent D'Onofrio, and Cameron Diaz. These films were narratively straightforward and formally unremarkable. They were inexpensive films within conventional genres, and all were failures at the box office.

Under Vitale, Fine Line also worked on some "edgy" indie films with provocative content and themes, an area of specialty cinema that Deutchman had avoided. In this regard, Fine Line appeared to take a cue now from competitor Miramax's strategy of seeking publicity through controversy. As one example, Fine Line released *Gummo* in 1997, Harmony Korine's directorial debut after writing *Kids*, which, as Perren explains, gained a notorious reputation. Although *Gummo* was less successful than *Kids* financially, it gained attention for its depiction of young people engaging in socially aberrant behavior. In many ways *Gummo* continues a long history of art cinema that depicts provocative themes, narratives, and characters. One might compare the film's focus on social outsiders living in poverty to John Waters's films in the 1970s, though *Gummo* has none of Waters's knowing humor. Critics and other tastemakers both celebrated and renounced *Gummo* when it played at film festivals, and it earned praise from some reputable filmmakers like Gus Van Sant and Werner Herzog. While the look, feel, and dramatic content of *Gummo* is not unprecedented, it was unusual amid Fine Line's catalog to that point.

One gets an even clearer sense of Fine Line's mixed pursuit of prestige and scandal in the second half of the 1990s by comparing *Shine* and *Crash* (1997).

Whereas *Shine* had all the hallmarks of a traditional "quality" film, Cronenberg's *Crash* developed a scandalous public reputation comparable to Miramax's *Kids*. *Shine* is a biographical film about Australian pianist David Helfgott and dramatizes the personal and psychological challenges he faced in his childhood, teenage years, and as an adult; three different actors play Helfgott at these different stages, with Geoffrey Rush playing him as an adult. After depicting challenges he faced throughout his life, the last portion of the film turns upbeat and uplifting. The adult Helfgott finds a community of support at a local restaurant, where he plays piano on a regular basis and finds a romantic partner. The film closes with Helfgott performing at a "comeback" concert, where he is met with cheers from an enthusiastic audience.

Shine had many elements that could be found in other recent critically acclaimed specialty films. Fine Line had released a handful of films from Australia previously, including *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1993), *The Last Days of Chez Nous* (1993), and *An Angel at My Table*. Miramax also had a run with Australian specialty films at the time, including *Strictly Ballroom* (1993) and *The Piano*. *Shine* is best compared to Miramax's *My Left Foot* (1989), starring Daniel Day Lewis in a biographical drama about the artist Christy Brown, who struggles with cerebral palsy. Both films draw inspiration from real-world male figures who display creative talent in the face of disability and other challenges. Both films feature dynamic performances from male actors who have no disability, and critics celebrated both actors for convincingly embodying a character with physical and psychological differences from themselves.

Fine Line promoted *Shine* as a prestige picture with cultural importance through its connection to the arts, but also as a film that had universal appeal through its story of overcoming adversity. Whereas the trailer focused on Helfgott's piano playing, social oddness, and conflict with his father, the poster and print ads for the film conveyed uplift and optimism with pictures of Geoffrey Rush appearing jubilant. Fine Line acquired *Shine* at the 1996 Sundance festival, following a bidding war with Miramax. A Fine Line executive said at the time, "It's a brilliant film with Oscar-caliber performances."[136] Fine Line campaigned heavily for the film with critics, members of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, and other awards institutions throughout the awards season of 1996–97.[137] Both Rush and the film's director did hundreds of interviews throughout the year and mounted other promotional events with Academy members, critics, and other high-powered film industry workers.[138]

Shine earned over $35 million in theaters around the world and appeared on hundreds of US critics' top-ten lists.[139] The film was nominated for seven BAFTA awards, winning in the categories of Best Actor and Best Sound; it was nominated for eleven Australian Film Institute Awards, winning nine; it was nominated for five Golden Globe Awards, winning one, again, in the Best Actor category. It was nominated for seven Academy Awards, including Best Picture and Best Director,

amid intense competition with films like Miramax's *The English Patient* (1996), Gramercy's *Fargo* (1996), and October Films's *Secrets and Lies* (1996). *Shine* won only a single Oscar, in the Best Actor category for Geoffrey Rush, while Miramax won the night with *The English Patient*, which received nine Oscars.

Shine's circulation through culture contrasted markedly with Fine Line's much-anticipated and much-discussed film from the same period, David Cronenberg's *Crash*. Fine Line acquired the North American theatrical rights to *Crash* while it was still in development in 1995, and it was regarded at the time as one of the "hottest projects" available in festival markets.[140] Based on the novel by J. G. Ballard, the film tells the story of several people who form something of a sex cult aroused by car crashes. A number of Hollywood and indie film stars joined the project, including James Spader in the lead male role, Holly Hunter, Rosanna Arquette, Elias Koteas, and the lesser-known Deborah Unger.

The press treated the film as provocative before its premier at Cannes, with one article predicting, "controversy may follow Cronenberg's dark and erotic 'Crash.'"[141] When *Crash* did screen, reports indicated that some in the audience walked out and many who remained booed during the credits.[142] Although *Crash* played in competition, it did not win any of the festival's conventional awards. Instead, the jury, which was headed by director Francis Ford Coppola, gave the film a Special Jury Prize for "audacity, originality and daring."[143] Coppola stated that "certain members of the jury abstained [from voting] very passionately, but we felt it was important to give an award to a film even though, in trying to find some truth in the human condition, it offended—in the great tradition, as we know."[144] Todd McCarthy's review after the Cannes screening was negative and doubtful of the film's financial potential.[145] Fine Line even considered reselling *Crash* to another distributor, given the reaction it had garnered at Cannes.[146]

Crash's notoriety continued to grow when the MPAA rated it NC-17. By 1996, distributors commonly appealed NC-17 ratings or agreed to make edits in order to receive an R rating, as they regarded the NC-17 as harming a film's potential box office and video revenue, especially given that chains like Blockbuster Video refused to carry any NC-17 films. Yet, in a turn away from its tradition of respectability and prestige, Fine Line accepted the rating without contest. Ruth Vitale was reserved: "'By accepting the NC-17 rating, we are acting in a responsible manner. . . . NC-17 means no one under 17 years of age should be admitted. This is a film that was made by adults for adults." Cronenberg appeared to be pleased with the rating on artistic grounds. "It's perfect," he said, "because it means I don't have to cut anything and that's the way I like it."[147] Contrary to Miramax's historical practices, Vitale asserted that Fine Line would not challenge the rating in order to drum up public discussion of the film.[148] One story made a point of distinguishing Fine Line's work with *Crash* by noting that Miramax would no longer release NC-17-rated films because that was the policy of parent company Disney, though Miramax's owners occasionally created loopholes in this policy.[149]

Crash provoked strong, highly uneven reactions outside the United States. In the United Kingdom, for instance, there was debate as to whether the film would receive any rating certificate at all following numerous newspaper editorials and reviews that blasted the film as immoral pornography.[150] Several politicians weighed in on the debate, some calling for local theaters to never screen it.[151] As a result of this discourse, *Crash* struggled to find a distributor in the United Kingdom, and the film performed badly when it finally did get a theatrical release from Columbia TriStar in that territory in June 1997, more than a year after it appeared at Cannes and following its release in almost all other major film markets around the world.[152]

However, *Crash* was unusually successful when it played in French movie theaters, though Fine Line did not hold the distribution rights to that country.[153] *Crash* was a Canadian production that had received state support, but the film's Canadian distributor withheld it from the Toronto International Film Festival, which often serves as a platform for launching specialty and foreign films in the North American market.[154] Advertising in Canada centered on Cronenberg as an auteur and highlighted the controversy around the film, and *Crash* did well at the Canadian box office, earning $1.4 million in its first month.[155] Moreover, *Crash* was recognized with six Genie awards in November 1996, given by the Academy of Canadian Cinema and Television to recognize excellence in Canadian cinema.

Fine Line originally planned to release *Crash* in the United States in fall 1996, simultaneously with the Canadian release, but the company held off. New Line owner Ted Turner so objected to the film on moral grounds that he resisted the idea of releasing the film at all.[156] "I personally was appalled and am appalled by it," Turner said.[157] What began as a crisis regarding a film's content soon entailed a crisis between specialty cinema and Hollywood, between independent distribution and corporate media. Naomi Klein invoked the issue of Turner and *Crash* in an article that criticized "corporate censorship" in media and the arts.[158] Cronenberg discussed Turner's meddling in similar terms: "'Turner was not supposed to be involved. To me this illustrates the potential danger of feisty, independent studios like New Line and Miramax used to being 'Disney-fied' and 'Turner-ized.'"[159]

Statements and editorials like these assessed the fluctuating relations between specialty cinema and Hollywood. Alisa Perren discusses how the film industry settled into a "three tier" system in the 1996–97 period, encompassing the Hollywood majors, studio-based indie firms like Miramax and Fox Searchlight, and true independents like Strand Releasing.[160] Thus, the discourse around *Crash* occurred in the greater context of a shifting logic of indie cinema in both artistic and industrial terms. Indeed, *Crash* is emblematic of these tensions as it got caught up in them, rhetorically and industrially. Turner's reaction to *Crash* occurred during the same period when Turner Broadcasting was merging with Time Warner. As discussed in chapter 3, there was discussion at this juncture that Turner might sell New Line, and Fine Line along with it, as part of the overall deal in merging

with Time Warner. Thus, it is possible that Turner's public outcry about *Crash* was fueled, at least in part, by his desire to gain leverage by distancing himself from New Line. Whether or not this is the case, it is striking that *Crash* came to symbolize an antithesis to corporate cinema at the very moment when New Line's relationship to Hollywood was in significant flux.

Eventually, Fine Line released *Crash* in March 1997. Reports indicated that Turner had been overruled by Shaye and Lynne, who, according to Cronenberg, were inspired by the film's solid performance in Canadian and French theaters.[161] When *Crash* did appear, one article noted, "Crash finally hits U.S. movie theaters Friday, carrying a lot of baggage."[162] *Crash* was greeted with wildly mixed reviews from critics with major US newspapers, many of whom invoked the film's troubled reputation. Fine Line placed the film in around 350 theaters in various cities, far fewer than the 1,000 that the company had originally planned.[163] Liz Manne blamed the NC-17 rating for the scaled-back release as well as for the limited and negative coverage the film received in the press.[164]

Fine Line's marketing and publicity neither fully rejected nor completely embraced *Crash*'s notoriety. The US trailer opens with a quote from a review—"A cool, rigorous film exploring a link between SEX and CAR CRASHES"—followed by a montage of moments that display exactly those two activities, while narration suggests the way the film explores fetishistic sexualities. After the narration highlights the director, the cast, the film's connection to the original book, the screen is filled with text describing the film's unusual award at Cannes.

Despite Fine Line's tempered marketing, *Crash* was still consigned to the identity it had developed over the previous year. Some critics still claimed that Fine Line courted controversy with the film. Kenneth Turan wrote, "It's amusing to note that great pains are being taken to label this film as controversial," since, in his view, "frank indifference is the most likely reaction to 'Crash.'"[165] Ultimately, Americans' view of the film was not particularly animated at all, and the energy around the controversy was already spent by the time it got to US theaters. The film made $3.4 million in the United States, but more than $20 million internationally, making *Crash* a marketing *and* financial failure for Fine Line.[166]

FINE LINE FADES TO BLACK

Each in its own way, *Shine* and *Crash* made a mark on the independent cinema scene in 1996 and 1997. But Fine Line no longer occupied the place of importance that it once had within this sector of the film industry. At the beginning of the decade, Fine Line had rapidly and boldly established a public legend as *the* major new specialty film company. It successfully launched a number of distinctive, heterogeneous films. It contended particularly well against Miramax in the first years of the 1990s. But Fine Line dwindled significantly in the second half of the decade. Vitale continued to push the division's mandate and identity further away from its

beginnings, at least rhetorically. In 1996, for instance, she significantly discounted the company's attachment to independent cinema and showed disregard for specialty films. "I don't consider us to be an independent film company," she said. "We're kind of beyond that now. We're part of Ted Turner and all of that, so we are much more part of the studio system than an art house entity. You know, we're not making movies for a million dollars any more—that's what I kind of consider independent film . . . for the most part we're producing and financing our own movies that are upward of $10 to $20 million."[167] Vitale cited *Twelfth Night* (1996) and *Mother Night* (1996) as evidence of Fine Line's new, significant production capacity. Yet these films earned less than $1 million in North American theaters and the press described both films as "flops."[168]

Nor was Miramax completely untroubled at this juncture. It had ongoing issues with parent company Disney, for instance, such as with the Weinsteins's decision to release *Kids* separately from Disney with an NC-17 rating.[169] Yet Miramax's overall slate became much larger than Fine Line's, and it continued to release well-regarded and largely financially successful indie hits. In addition to the Oscar-sweeping *The English Patient*, the company released *Basquiat, Emma, Trainspotting, Swingers*, and *Sling Blade* through the summer and fall of 1996. A fall 1996 story in *Variety* was generous toward the increasingly unguided Fine Line in its assessment: "While others like Sony Pictures Classics, Fox Searchlight's New York Office, and October Films vie to compete in the art house genre, Fine Line and Miramax remain at the top. If the companies were heavyweights, Miramax would likely be the reigning champion and Fine Line a scrappy contender."[170]

In truth, Miramax dominated the specialty cinema scene through the end of the 1990s. In 1997, the company released Kevin Smith's *Chasing Amy*, which earned over $10 million; Quentin Tarantino's *Jackie Brown*, which earned over $70 million; the British period piece *Wings of the Dove*, which earned over $10 million in the United States; and the Japanese film *Shall We Dance?*, which earned nearly $10 million in North American theaters. Moreover, that film spawned Miramax's English-language remake, which earned over $150 million in 2004. The year 1998 was even more notable for Miramax, with *Life Is Beautiful*, which earned over $150 million and three Oscars, and *Shakespeare in Love*, which earned nearly $300 million worldwide and nine Oscars. Miramax sustained nearly this level of achievement with *The Cider House Rules* (1999), *Chocolat* (2000), *Amélie* (2001), and the blockbuster *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001).

The entire specialty cinema sector diminished between 1997 and 1999, with many more indie films performing badly than achieving outlying success.[171] Already operating as an underdog in this context, Fine Line similarly had a couple of triumphs but more commonly released films that fizzled and faded quickly. The most successful of these were typically made by established auteurs, including Woody Allen's *Deconstructing Harry* (1997), Atom Egoyan's *The Sweet Hereafter* (1997), John Waters's *Pecker* (1998), and Bernardo Bertolucci's *Besieged* (1999). But

even these films never approached the success of *The Player*, and the vast majority of Fine Line releases from 1997 through 1999 made less than $1 million.

New Line replaced Ruth Vitale with Mark Ordesky as Fine Line's president in 1998. Liz Manne also left; at that point she was the division's longest-serving executive.[172] Ordesky's appointment and Manne's departure had immense symbolic and practical importance for the division thereafter. It signaled New Line's decreasing valuation of specialty cinema. Whereas Fine Line spent $8.6 million in advertising in 2001, it spent only $1.7 million in 2002.[173] Ordesky had joined New Line in the late 1980s and became New Line's head of acquisitions in 1995. Notably, he had acquired several recent Fine Line films, including *The Sweet Hereafter* and *Deconstructing Harry*.[174] But he was also responsible for New Line's run of films with Jackie Chan, beginning with *Rumble in the Bronx* in 1995, an indication of his interest in poplar genres and mainstream cinema and also in creating international business opportunities.[175]

Despite his new role with Fine Line, Ordesky continued operating from his Los Angeles office and, more tellingly, remained the head of acquisitions and coproductions for New Line.[176] Under Ordesky, Fine Line reflected, in its own way, two forces that were significantly shaping the larger media business at the turn of the millennium: increasing globalization and the continuing growth of cable as a site for "serious" audiovisual entertainment. Soon after attaining his position, Ordesky formed the Fine Line International division, devoted to finding foreign partnerships and assisting with foreign acquisitions and presales. This effort had mixed results overall, but the successes it brought helped sustain the company's presence in the specialty cinema market.

In 1999, for instance, Fine Line partnered with Good Machine on a two-picture deal with Danish director Lars Von Trier.[177] The film that resulted from this arrangement was *Dancer in the Dark* (2000), a deconstructive musical melodrama that starred Icelandic music star Björk as a struggling single mother who is losing her eyesight.[178] Shot on digital video, the film mixes realist immediacy with fantastical song and dance numbers. The film premiered at Cannes and won both the festival's Palme d'Or award and its Best Actress award for Björk's performance. The fanfare around the film continued when one of the songs was nominated for an Oscar, which Björk performed at the ceremony in an outlandish, swan-shaped gown. In addition to this public recognition, *Dancer in the Dark* earned over $40 million.

Other Fine Line auteur-driven hits from the period include Julian Schnabel's *Before Night Falls* (2001) and Alejandro Amenábar's *The Sea Inside* (2004). In addition to these international endeavors, Fine Line joined with Time Warner partner HBO in 2003. At the same time that the cable channel was expanding in the area of original, adult-oriented, sophisticated programming like *The Sopranos* (1999–2007) and *The Wire* (2002–8), it produced films in the "specialty" vein and needed a partner with experience in this area. The results were occasionally noteworthy,

with Gus Van Sant's *Elephant* (2003) winning the Palme d'Or and Best Director prizes at the 2003 Cannes Film Festival, and *Maria, Full of Grace* (2004) also winning awards at multiple festivals and attaining a respectable audience in the United States and abroad.

New Line effectively shuttered Fine Line through the creation of another specialty division in 2005, Picturehouse, which was directly partnered with HBO.[179] Ordesky's continuing duties at New Line took precedence over his work at Fine Line, particularly as he became involved in the development and production of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001–3) in August 1998, acting as one of the executive producers of those films. New Line focused on the three films composing *The Lord of the Rings* as it entered the new millennium, and they are the primary focus of the following chapter.