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Independent Filmmakers Distribute on Their Own

By **MICHAEL CIEPLY**LOS ANGELES — [Quentin Tarantino](#) never had to go through this.

When “The Age of Stupid,” a [climate change](#) movie, “opens” across the United States in September, it will play on some 400 screens in a one-night event, with a video performance by Thom Yorke of [Radiohead](#), all paid for by the filmmakers themselves and their backers. In Britain, meanwhile, the film has been showing via an Internet service that lets anyone pay to license a copy, set up a screening and keep the profit.

The glory days of independent film, when hot young directors like [Steven Soderbergh](#) and Mr. Tarantino had studio executives tangled in fierce bidding wars at Sundance and other celebrity-studded festivals, are now barely a speck in the rearview mirror. And something new, something much odder, has taken their place.

Here is how it used to work: aspiring filmmakers playing the cool auteur in hopes of attracting the eye of a Hollywood power broker.

Here is the new way: filmmakers doing it themselves — paying for their own distribution, marketing films through social networking sites and [Twitter](#) blasts, putting their work up free on the Web to build a reputation, coying up to concierges at luxury hotels in film festival cities to get them to whisper into the right ears.

The economic slowdown and tight credit have squeezed the entertainment industry along with everybody else, resulting in significantly fewer big-studio films in the pipeline and an even tougher road for smaller-budget independent projects. Independent distribution companies are much less likely to pull out the checkbook while many of the big studios have all but gotten out of the indie film business.

“It’s not like the audience for these movies has completely disappeared,” said Cynthia Swartz, a partner in the publicity company 42 West, which has been supplementing its mainstream business by helping filmmakers find ways to connect with an audience. “It’s just a matter of finding them.”

Sometimes, the odd approach actually works.

“Anvil! The Story of Anvil,” a documentary about a Canadian metal band, turned into the do-it-yourself equivalent of a smash hit when it stretched a three-screen opening in April into a four-month run, still under way, on more than 150 screens around the country.

“I paid for everything, I took a second mortgage on my house,” said [Sacha Gervasi](#), the film’s director.

Mr. Gervasi, whose studio writing credits include “The Terminal,” directed by [Steven Spielberg](#), nearly three years ago, began filming “Anvil!” with his own money in hopes of attracting a conventional distributor. The movie played well at Sundance in 2008, but offers were low.

So Mr. Gervasi put up more money — his total cost was in “the upper hundred thousands,” he said — to distribute the film through a company called Abramorama, while selling the DVD and television rights to VH1.

The aging rockers of Anvil have shown up at theaters to play for audiences. Famous fans like [Courtney Love](#) were soon chattering online about the film. And an army of “virtual street teamers” — Internet advocates who flood social networks with admiring comments, sometimes for a fee, sometimes not — were recruited by a Web consultant, Sarah Lewitinn, who usually works the music scene.

The idea behind this sort of guerrilla release is to accumulate just enough at the box office to prime the pump for DVD sales and return the filmmaker’s investment, maybe even with a little profit. “Anvil!” has earned roughly \$1 million worldwide at the box office so far, its producer, Rebecca Yeldham, said.

Finding even relatively small amounts of money to make and market a film is, of course, no small trick. “The Age of Stupid” raised a production budget of about £450,000 (about \$748,000) from 228 shareholders, and is soliciting a bit more to continue its release, Franny Armstrong, its director, said.

“Money has simply vanished,” said Mark Urman, an independent-film veteran, speaking of the financial drought that has pushed producers and directors into shouldering risks that only a few years ago were carried by a more robust field of distributors.

Many of those distributors have either disappeared or severely tightened their operations, including Warner Independent Pictures, Picturehouse, New Line Cinema, Miramax, the Weinstein Company, Paramount Classics and its successor, Paramount Vantage.

Typically, the distributors have paid money upfront for rights to release films. That helped the producers recover what they had already spent on production, but it often left the distributor with most or all of the profit.

Mr. Urman’s own position as president for distribution at Senator Entertainment evaporated this year when financing fell through for a slate of films. So he started a new company, Paladin, to support filmmakers willing to finance their own releases.

In September, Paladin is expected to help the filmmaker Steve Jacobs and his fellow producers release “Disgrace,” a drama with [John Malkovich](#) that is based on a novel by the Nobel laureate [J. M. Coetzee](#).

The film won a critics prize at the [Toronto International Film Festival](#) last year, but no attractive distribution offers. One key to releasing it without a Miramax, said Mr. Urman, is to minimize expensive advertising in newspapers or on television and play directly to a friendly audience — in this case through extensive promotional tie-ins with Mr. Coetzee’s publishers.

“Everyone still dreams there’s going to be a conventional sale to a major studio,” said Kevin Iwashina, once

an independent-film specialist with the Creative Artists Agency and now a partner at IP Advisors, a film sales and finance consulting company. But, he said, smart producers and directors are figuring out how to tap the value in projects on their own.

Some big companies will still be on the hunt in Toronto this year, where the annual festival is scheduled to begin Sept. 10.

“We’ll be there in full force,” said Nancy Utley, a president of Fox Searchlight Pictures, which last year acquired rights to “Slumdog Millionaire” and “The Wrestler,” both screened in Toronto.

“It’s a great opportunity for us,” said Robert G. Friedman, a chairman of Summit Entertainment, which acquired “The Hurt Locker,” directed by [Kathryn Bigelow](#). The film was offered in Toronto last year and has already been mentioned widely as an Oscar contender.

But some filmmakers and producers pointed toward the festival have already started working for themselves, rather than waiting for the few remaining, and ever fussier, buyers to swoop in.

In fact, the next-wave Tarantinos are in Canada already — coddling not prospective buyers, but concierges, who just might steer people to promotional parties and screenings.

“These guys have figured it out,” Barry Avrich, a member of the festival’s governing board, said of the do-it-yourself crowd. “They’re into all the cool hotels, to get the concierges thinking about them.”

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