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FILM

Little Films on Little Screens (but Both Seem Set to Grow)



Sarah Ingerson as Claire in the film "Soft for Digging," which was written and directed by J. T. Petty.

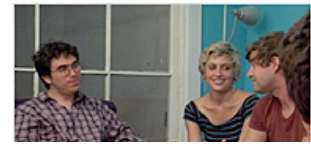
By NOAH ROBISCHON Published: March 18, 2007

IN the award-winning 2005 movie "Black," the Bollywood actor Amitabh Bachchan plays an eccentric, disillusioned teacher who helps a blind, deaf and mute girl learn to speak and rejoin her family. But the "Miracle Worker" roles are reversed years later, when the girl discovers that her teacher is suffering from Alzheimer's disease.

Multimedia



Trailer: Black



"Black" was chosen as one of the 10 best movies of 2005 by Time Europe. But chances are you've never heard of it. Like the vast majority of films made each year "Black" was never released theatrically in the United States. It is not even available on DVD. You can, however, watch it on your computer screen for \$1.99 at Jaman.com.

At least a half-dozen download services like Jaman want to become your digital art-house cinema, offering movie lovers a universe of alternative films they otherwise might never have known they wanted to see, or had a clue on how to find if they did. At the moment these sites pretty much appeal only to hard-core cineastes, mainly because watching movies on a computer monitor is far from an

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ideal entertainment experience.

But a slew of gadgets, like the coming Apple TV, promise to erase the divide between the Internet and your home entertainment center by easily transporting a movie file sitting on the computer to the 52-inch plasma television in the living room, or magically giving the set Internet access. If that transition becomes seamless, digital film distribution might just make celebrities out of a new crop of talented unknowns, just as the advent of home video in the 1980s jump-started the careers of filmmakers like [Steven Soderbergh](#), [Spike Lee](#) and [John Sayles](#).

“There is an ever-widening opportunity for non-mainstream content to get discovered,” said Curt Marvis, co-founder and chief executive of CinemaNow. “I’m not talking about YouTube videos, but films that might go to Sundance. And because the subject matter is too

controversial, or the audience is too hard to reach, or because of the dynamics of the finances involved, traditional distribution doesn’t work. There is absolutely an audience for those films on the Internet.”

Like most digital movie theaters CinemaNow ([cinemanow.com](#)) offers a confusing number of ways to pay for and watch a film. You can rent a 24-hour digital movie stream for as little a dollar. Pay a slightly higher price, and you can buy a movie and store it on a computer hard drive. You can also sign up for a rental subscription plan similar to that of a DVD-by-mail service, or even purchase the rights to burn a hit film onto your own DVD for \$14.99. But CinemaNow’s focus is on mainstream releases like [“Borat.”](#) and only around 300 of its movies are undistributed elsewhere.

The offerings on Jaman, on the other hand, are the antithesis of mainstream. The site, whose backers include former Senator [Bill Bradley](#) and Jeff Berg, who runs the talent agency International Creative Management, has a catalog of 1,000 documentaries, features and international releases harvested almost entirely from film festivals, like the Mexican psychological drama [“Las Lloronas.”](#) Watching the movies requires that you download a separate player application that improves the quality of the video while also speeding the time required to transfer a file.

A similar technology underlies Joost ([joost.com](#)), an interactive TV platform from the creators of the pioneering Internet phone service Skype. Instead of paying rental fees, visitors to Joost must sit through advertising to enjoy its wares, which includes 67 hours of programming from the DVD distributor IndieFlix ([indieflix.com](#)), including festival award winners [“Outpatient”](#) and [“The Flats.”](#) GreenCine ([greencine.com](#)), the five-year-old grand dame of the online indie film scene, has the quirky documentary [“24 Hours on Craigslist”](#) alongside such classics as the 1961 [Marlon Brando](#) film [“One-Eyed Jacks.”](#)

While navigating GreenCine is a pain, its video-on-demand catalog of 12,000 titles is huge compared with the 400 or so movies now available from Apple’s iTunes store. More familiar companies are taking on the upstarts. Amazon acquired the obscure DVD distributor CustomFlix in 2005 and is now using the company to stock its all-digital Unbox store. And the DVD-by-mail company Netflix is investing \$40 million this year in its “Instant Watching” feature, which lets subscribers rent digital movies as part of their monthly plans.

Two thirds of the “Instant Watching” offerings come from outside the studio system.

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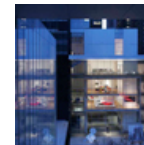
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“It’s universally accepted that porn is the biggest trailblazer in new technology,” said Netflix’s chief content officer, Ted Sarandos, who trolls the festival circuit for new material. “It’s overlooked that indie and foreign films also benefit disproportionately from the conservatism of Hollywood.”

Major studios — fearful of both piracy and cannibalizing the money they make from DVDs, their biggest source of revenue — are entering the Web film market cautiously. The few hit films online are generally put there only after they are widely available elsewhere, and often for the same price as a DVD.

But the major studios may not be able to play possum much longer. The DVD business is flattening. And media forecasters are busy out-predicting one another about how many billions of dollars Internet video will throw off each year.

Those predictions are looking far more realistic than they did a decade ago. Sony recently introduced the Bravia Internet Video Link, a device that attaches to the back of its popular line of TVs and delivers high-definition online programming. And TiVo’s 1.5 million Internet-connected subscribers already have access to downloadable movies from Amazon’s Unbox and the Independent Film Channel.

Then there is the \$299 Apple TV. A hard drive about the size of a thin hardcover book, it wirelessly synchronizes the movies and series downloaded from the iTunes store and plays them on your flat screen. Apple TV, which is set to be released this month, could do for movies what the iPod did for music.

But scrolling through 1,000 songs is a lot easier than trudging through an Internet full of movies. Almost every Web film purveyor is planning to solve this bane of the modern culture consumer — too much choice — with some form of social networking. Recommendations, user reviews, friend lists and member pages are designed to help viewers determine which films they should watch. Jaman even allows its members to write commentary tracks onto its streaming movies to share with others.

“If you tell me you’ve seen this film and you like it, that’s what is going to get me interested rather than advice from above,” said Edward R. Pressman, an investor in Jaman and a producer of films like [“Badlands”](#) and [“The Cooler.”](#) But community-driven recommendations can, instead of opening up new worlds, reinforce existing tastes. Hockey die-hards may be able to convince fans of other sports to watch the underground hit documentary “In the Crease” (available on Unbox), but someone who loves romantic comedies aren’t likely to come across their testimonials. And the digital download sites will also have to overcome the hesitation of moviemakers wary of supplying their newly finished films.

The audience for Joe Swanberg’s films, for example, got a boost from his Web-only series “Young American Bodies” for [Nerve.com](#). But Mr. Swanberg still considers digital distribution a last resort. Showing a film online, he said, would hurt his chances of being accepted into a festival like South by Southwest, where his third feature, “Hannah Takes the Stairs,” made its debut last week. “Sitting in that room with all those people and seeing it on the big screen just reconfirmed that it is the best experience,” he said, “and the one I’m always going to shoot for.”

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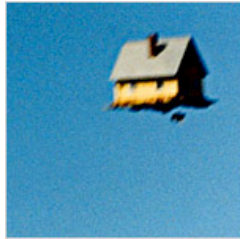


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