



How A24 is Disrupting Hollywood

Description

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by Zach Baron

The story behind the studio that produced “Moonlight” and “It Comes At Night”, as told by Barry Jenkins, Sofia Coppola, James Franco, Robert Pattinson, and the founders of A24 themselves.

There are more glamorous things to be, in Hollywood, than an independent distribution company. For instance, an actress. Or a director. Or a screenwriter. Key grip. Maybe even that guy with a two-way radio who keeps you from walking through a movie set. Film-distribution companies tend to be important but invisible: They buy finished films, cut trailers, make posters, and put movies into movie theaters—or, more often these days, dump them onto VOD, never to be heard from again. There are exceptions to this rule, such as Miramax, the company that upended indie cinema in the '90s, backing then unknown filmmakers like Steven Soderbergh and Quentin Tarantino. And there are studio subdivisions, like Fox Searchlight, that have consistently guided films like *12 Years a Slave* and *Birdman* to Academy Awards and box office success over the past twenty years. But in general distribution is like plumbing: unseen, unnoticed, and notable only when it malfunctions.

So it was strange, if you were a moviegoer in 2013, to see the A24 logo pop up again and again before movies as varied and weird as Harmony Korine’s *Spring Breakers* and Sofia Coppola’s *The Bling Ring*, James Ponsoldt’s *The Spectacular Now* and Roman Coppola’s *A Glimpse Inside the Mind of Charles Swan III*. It wasn’t just that, for a new distribution company, it seemed to have a level of taste and an instinct for cool that is atypical in Hollywood. It was also that A24 was releasing these films not with a sigh and a shrug, but with panache, style, and humor: bright neon colors, guerrilla marketing tactics, and in the case of James Franco’s Britney Spears-loving gangster character from *Spring Breakers*, an actual Oscar campaign. The company, improbably, was based in New York, not Los Angeles. Its trio of founders—Daniel Katz, David Fenkel, and John Hodges, who’d known each other through years of work in New York’s indie movie circuit—rarely granted interviews. If you were paying attention, you had to wonder: Who were these strange upstart New Yorkers who were making Hollywood a little bit great again?

That was 2013. Four short years later, the company's first original production, Barry Jenkins's *Moonlight*, won the Academy Award for Best Picture. In between, A24 went from being a tiny, disorganized room of eight or so people to being the place where big stars like Robert Pattinson and Scarlett Johansson go to make small, strange movies, and auteurs like Jonathan Glazer and Denis Villeneuve go to make deeply personal films unmolested by studio notes or clueless executives. We spoke with the company's friends, collaborators, and employees to make sense of how A24 became the most interesting, creative, and reliable film company of the 21st century.

Robert Pattinson (actor, *'The Rover,' 'Good Time'*): It's crazy that there is an article about a distribution company. That's completely nuts.

Harmony Korine (director, *'Spring Breakers'*): They have balls.

Barry Jenkins (director, *'Moonlight'*): A24's the kind of company where they say, "Yeah, they don't need to know what it's about. They just need to know how it feels."

James Franco (actor, *'Spring Breakers,' 'The Adderall Diaries'*): This is one of the things they're great at: taking something small and delicate and giving it the kind of support that other people can't.

Sofia Coppola (director, *'The Bling Ring'*): I really like those guys. They don't have the personality of movie executives.

Asif Kapadia (director, *'Amy'*): I suppose most filmmakers have had bad experiences in the past where you do all the hard work, and then these guys in slick suits come along and they're like, "We know what we're doing now! We'll handle it!" And if it works, it's them; if it doesn't work, it's all your fault anyway. And I felt with these guys it was a dialogue. I felt like we were all on the same team.

James Ponsoldt (director, *'The Spectacular Now,' 'The End of the Tour'*): I've heard people refer to Miramax. There's music labels I can think of as well. Where it's like: *I'm in*. I just trust, you know, Drag City or Merge or SST or Dischord. There's aesthetic and political values to the people behind the company. It's super inspiring.

Denis Villeneuve (director, *'Enemy'*): I never saw them as businessmen.

Colin Farrell (actor, *'The Lobster,' 'The Killing of a Sacred Deer'*): They have such a great eye for these small little films and rich and unique stories that may have not found it to the big screen if it wasn't for them.

Sasha Lane (actress, *'American Honey'*): They were like, "You guys are who you are and we're not going to change that." No one had to be perfected for anything. No one cared about our language or our clothes.

Daniel Radcliffe (actor, *'Swiss Army Man'*): I've had experiences on films in the past where they get bought by somebody who sees something in it that they like, which is nice, but it also happens to be not—and is sometimes antithetical to—what the people who made the film wanted it to be. When you can get a distribution company that likes the film for the same reasons that people that made it like the film—I've found that rare. They're one of the few companies that have shown that indie films can still

be viable.

Alex Garland (*director, 'Ex Machina'*): They make things work that according to standard procedures really shouldn't work. And I'm not saying they're magicians. I think what they've understood is there's a sufficient number of people out there who want more challenging or different material. And they're aiming at them.

Brie Larson (*actress, 'Room,' 'The Spectacular Now'*): A24 has the unique ability to find and champion authentic narratives that cut to the core in a raw and honest way.

Patrick Stewart (*actor, 'Green Room'*): [The premiere of *'Green Room'*] was at the Toronto Film Festival's Midnight Madness. And although it describes itself as Midnight Madness, the film didn't start until close to one o'clock in the morning. And, I mean, there was one moment in the movie when my character was booed and hissed so vociferously, I felt as though I was in a Roman arena and my life was at stake. And I was ready to say: "It was me! It was me! And I was just acting! That was just acting!" It was not like being in a cinema. It was like being in some kind of arena. So, um, well done, A24!

Noah Sacco (*head of acquisitions and production, A24*): I think some of our biggest movies had no stars in them at the time of release—*Ex Machina, Moonlight, The Witch, Room, The Spectacular Now*.

David Fenkel (*co-founder, A24*): We find movies [for which] our perspective, our system, our people, can act to make it something special. If it's gonna be released the same way by another company, we usually don't go after it.

Daniel Katz (*co-founder, A24*): We used to always talk about "Oh, there's gotta be a better way."

John Hodges (*co-founder and co-head of TV, A24*): It was one of those conversations where it was always like, "How would we do it differently?" And it was usually fueled by beer and things scribbled down on napkins and a lot of bravado.

Katz: Some of it was probably misplaced, don't you agree?

Fenkel: Ignorance.

Katz: Yeah. Exactly.

Fenkel: That's a big theme.



A24courtesy Everett Collection



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