

Primer (2004): A *Primer* in first-time indie filmmaking

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Shane Carruth's *Primer* (2004) is in many respects a model example of the kind of micro-budget indie filmmaking that displays what might be termed a home-made quality, a long way from the glossy productions of Indiewood or even of larger-funded but still fully independent productions. It is one among many instances of the survival of such work well into the twenty-first century, despite some declarations of the supposed 'death' of indie film (for more on this, see King 2013), offering a strong demonstration of the effectiveness with which productions of this kind can revisit and refresh otherwise familiar genre territory. While strikingly original in its take on more familiar time-travel science fiction scenarios, *Primer* embodies a number of traits typically associated with the varieties of indie film that came to prominence particularly from the 1980s and 1990s, including its conditions of production and circulation, its formal qualities and its use of generic material.

The enigmatic device at the heart of the narrative, a box containing a variety of electronic components that inadvertently turns out to create the potential for short-distance time travel, is partly cobbled together through the cannibalization of domestic products, including parts of a microwave oven, copper tubing from a refrigerator and material taken from the catalytic converter of a car. Its inexpensive creation in this manner, amid the ordinary suburban lives of its inventors, has much in common with the mode of production involved in films of this kind, an 'available resources' approach – according to which films are built around whatever elements are already freely on-hand to the filmmaker – popularized within indie circles in the

early 1990s (see especially Broderick 1993). *Primer* was shot on Super 16mm on a budget of \$7,000 by Carruth, a former engineer and mathematics graduate, and is an example of highly individual-centred production, even by the standards of the indie sector, the writer-director having also edited, scored and co-starred in the film. The primary settings, around which the film was written, are a series of quotidian locations such as the home of his parents, his brother's apartment, a hotel room and a storage facility.ⁱ

Shooting was completed within stringent limitations that are typical of the micro-budget sector, few scenes being shot more than once and very little footage having been wasted, to the point at which Carruth's character can be seen mouthing 'cut' under his breath on several occasions within the finished product. The film was storyboarded and effectively pre-edited before shooting, to minimize the volume of footage required. It was shot with almost no extraneous 'coverage' (usually employed to provide options during editing), reshoots only being taken when lines were fluffed – an approach made possible with a non-professional cast only on the basis of extensive rehearsal. Time for such preparation is one of the few luxuries sometimes available to productions of this scale. Most of the film was shot with available light, another key marker of low-budget production, boosted on some occasions by the use of cheap consumer fluorescents. Editing and other aspects of post-production, including the sound design and music, were all done by Carruth on a computer in his own apartment, a process that took two years, much of the dialogue having been post-dubbed as a result of shortcomings in the original on-set recording.

As in the best such low-cost productions, the very considerable constraints within which the film was produced are a major source of its merits, and also of the dimensions that mark other aspects of its belonging to broader indie tendencies. Both the ordinariness of the settings and the grainy, often hand-held cinematography create an impression of strongly naturalistic texture, one of the most obvious dimensions in which the film can be situated very clearly within the history of the independent sector, a principal claim of which has often been to offer portraits of worlds closer to those of everyday reality than those found in the more commercial mainstream. This can include, as here, the provision of strongly realist textures within what might otherwise be considered fanciful generic conceits (the most prominent such strain would be in lower-budget indie horror). *Primer* is something of a rarity as an indie feature of this kind that choose a science fiction locale, a format dominantly associated in the contemporary period with expensive Hollywood productions and one that is not generally seen as lending itself so readily to the low-budget arena (with some other exceptions, including Mike Cahill's low-key feature debut *Another Earth* [2011], which gained distribution by Fox Searchlight). But this is a very distinctly indie rendition of the territory, one that draws on a combination of two well-established indie tendencies at the level of narrative and related qualities.

One of these is the emphasis on the texture of quotidian, the ordinary, the everyday, both in locations, as established above, and in the manner of the development of events. The other is the introduction of complexity of a kind liable to challenge the cognitive powers of the viewer. The plot, in a nutshell, has Abe (David Sullivan) and Aaron (Carruth) as part of a team of white-collar engineers: not members of a garage band or garage-level filmmakers, but garage-and-kitchen would-be entrepreneurs,

seeking to increase their income through what appears to be a distinctly modest side-line to their day jobs. A separate project developed by Abe and Aaron leads to the creation of the time-travel device, which they then seek to exploit for financial gain, by playing the stock market with the benefit of short-term future knowledge.

Complications ensue, including the creation of an unspecified number of doubles of each of the principals, eventually resulting in mutual recrimination and separation, although it is never quite as clear as is implied by any such summary. As Abe and Aaron begin to discover something weird, in the early stages of the film, following the results of one of their experiments, the film blends aspects of the ordinary and the complex, the straightforward and the uncomfortably oblique. The early stages are filled with a thick texture of unexplained scientific-technical jargon, the role of which is to support the more generally naturalistic aesthetic. It creates a rhetorical impression of authenticity, a quality maintained through the refusal of much in the way of the kind of clear exposition that would be expected in a more mainstream production; there is no moment in which an outsider character is wheeled in to be given an explanation, as stand-in for the viewer.

What exactly is happening is sometimes less than entirely clear, even in the relatively early stages. As the plot develops, the complications begin to multiply and seriously to challenge the capacities of the viewer. From having a conventionally linear understanding of the plotting of the film, including a process in which Abe appears to subject himself to the time-travel process for the first time and then reveals this to Aaron, any such comfortable moorings begin to become unattached. Each time one of the protagonists undergoes the process, a double is created, we are told, but exactly how or why – or, of more immediate import – what happens to these, remains far

from clear, beyond the eventual disturbing revelation of the presence of some such figures locked away in attics or closets. The film lacks the kind of more familiar/conventional plotting of this material that might usually be expected. There is no process of clearly articulating the status of a character original, then of a double, say, and then of the kind of overt narrative dilemmas that might be anticipated (misrecognitions, meetings of doubles with their originals or with other doubles, and so on). The doubles lurk obliquely, instead, at the edges of perception, as doppelgangers whose status is for the most part implied more than fully dramatized.

As the film progresses, we begin to realize that what we thought was the first instance of time travel was not and that others preceded this, and that exactly what is happening, how or when, in what order, or how many times it might already have occurred, is increasingly difficult to fathom. If one familiar indie trait displayed by the film is a kind of narrative that is grounded in some ways in seemingly ordinary daily activity in quotidian settings, without much of the dramatic heightening of events usually associated with the more commercial mainstream, another, with which this is combined, is a growing complexity of narrative fabric that places greater than usual demands on the cognitive ability of the viewer (for more on these two tendencies in indie film generally, see King 2005, 59-104). The particular mixture of these dimensions is a major source of the distinctive quality of the film. Where more overtly dramatic events do occur, these are treated in the same oblique manner as the multiplication of the doubles. These include an incident in which Aaron intervenes to prevent a potentially violent incident at a party, which is interrupted by a figure armed with a shotgun, an event he appears to have pre-experienced several times

beforehand, *Groundhog Day* (1993) style, as a result of previous shifts in time, to the point at which its climax does not even require direct representation.

A similar combination of qualities associated more widely with the indie sector marks the visual style of the film, where the naturalistic impression created by the instability of hand-held footage – creating a texture similar to that of *vérité*-style documentary, with its claims to the immediate and the authentic – is blended with more expressive effects. The latter include the employment of jump cuts on numerous occasions – including what appears to be the immediate aftermath of Abe's first dramatized time shift – the effect of which is to create an impression of temporal dislocation of the kind experienced by the protagonists. Other devices, such as series of quite rapidly cut dissolves or movements in and out of focus, add to the general impression of disorientation, creating a distinctly 'artistic' impression but one that also remains within a realm familiar to the indie sector (rather than the more radical avant-garde) in its motivation through aspects of subjective character experience.

While lacking any obvious ideological agenda, a feature it shares with many such films, *Primer* also offers a vision of contemporary American society that provides a typically indie form of implicit alternative to the outlook associated with mainstream production. Scientific discovery, along with the rest of the narrative, is subjected to a process of de-dramatization, the major breakthrough achieved by Abe and Aaron being downplayed and barely even subjected to a clear, explicit articulation at the time. The protagonists are portrayed as neither heroes nor villains in their endeavour, in avoidance of obvious cliché, although the film proceeds to develop a bleak portrait of the impact of the invention on what appears to have been a close friendship. The

latter stages amount to a critique of the greed and rivalry that seems to result from the power created by the device – the power, especially, for each in turn to go back further than the other appreciates at the time, and thus to manipulate events. As with the rest of the film, however, this dimension is developed implicitly and obliquely, the effect of which is to create a creeping impression of disillusionment and alienation that is all the more effective as a result. There is no direct struggle or conflict between the protagonists – or, at least, the versions of the protagonists whose actions we witness – other than the verbal disagreement and split that comes at the end.

Primer is also a characteristic example of low-budget indie film in its mode of circulation to viewers: which is to say, it achieved only a small-scale theatrical release but had success on the festival circuit sufficient to have come to wider attention than many other films of similar means. The chief source of awareness of the film was its presence at the 2004 Sundance Film Festival, the most high-profile showcase for the sector, at which it garnered positive critical attention – a crucial ingredient in the success of any such production – and won the Grand Jury Prize, a source of further coverage and an imprimatur of quality employed in marketing materials such as the film’s trailer and poster. Its success at Sundance, where it also won the \$20,000 Alfred P. Sloan Feature Film Prize for projects that explore issues relating to science and technology, gained *Primer* a release from the small independent distributor ThinkFilm, after reported interest during the festival from others including Sony Pictures Classics, Magnolia Pictures and Palm Pictures (Rooney and Dunkley 2004). Its total domestic gross was distinctly modest at \$424,760, after an opening on four screens (one in New York and three seeking to capitalize on the local connection in Carruth’s home city of Dallas). The figure will have been a disappointment to the

distributor, even for a film of such small scale, given the unstated costs that would have been incurred in distribution and niche-marketing (the substantial cost of the blow up from 16mm to 35mm was met by a friend of the filmmaker), although it is worth noting that its per-screen average in the first week was approximately the same as the initial production budget. *Primer* remained on release for 10 weeks, achieving a maximum number of 31 theatres, figures also very much in keeping with the norm for indie features of the kind that gain some critical traction without crossing over to a larger audience (figures from the film's entry on boxofficemojo.com). At Sundance the same year, for example, was the much more crowd-friendly *Napoleon Dynamite*, which the studio division Fox Searchlight took to a domestic gross on another plane, at more than \$44 million.

Even a passing comparison with *Napoleon Dynamite* offers another avenue into the relatively distinctive character of the film, as far as its broader cultural milieu is concerned. The world of *Primer* is very 'straight', owing little if anything to the broader realm of alternative/indie culture on which indie films have often drawn or to which many might be understood to belong (for more on this dimension of indie, see Newman 2011). Abe and Aaron are painted as somewhat 'geeky' in their engagement with matters of science and technology, but this is a very mainstream-conventionally aspirant version, in a world of collars and ties and a search for financial gain, rather than one that displays the kind of manifest quirkiness embodied by a figure such as the protagonist of Jared Hess's film. There is also no attempt to draw on other aspects of alt/indie culture, through reference points such as music or hipster fashion (for more on this dynamic, widespread in Indiewood and more commercial parts of the indie sector, see Newman 2012).

Within broader discourses surrounding the indie sphere, this is another respect in which the film might be accorded a certain kind of ‘authentic’ status. It might be interpreted as genuine product of a specific milieu, that of the background of its maker in the worlds of mathematics and engineering, rather than being seen as an attempt to confection a self-consciously ‘indie’ impression or to borrow such an effect from elsewhere. The latter is an accusation that has been leveled at many other examples, particularly some of those that have been embraced by the studio Indiewood divisions, such as *Napoleon Dynamite* and other Searchlight releases including *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006) and *Juno* (2007), especially where they have enjoyed larger-than-usual commercial success, as in these cases (for analysis of the terms in which attacks have been made on this basis, see Newman 2012 on *Juno* and King 2013 on *Little Miss Sunshine* and *Juno*). *Primer* is the kind of film that is likely to be lined up on the virtuous side of any opposition between what is understood to be the ‘pure’ or ‘true’ indie and that considered to be a manifestation of artificial confection or sell-out, notions that are in many ways questionable in their basis but that play a significant role in the shaping of the discursive field around this part of the American film landscape (for more on this, see King 2013, introduction). This was certainly the case in some of the critical and other journalistic coverage of the film and Carruth’s subsequent career, although critical reaction was in some cases divided between those who admired or rejected its more challenging and oblique dimensions.

The overall verdict of the review aggregation site Rotten Tomatoes starts with the terms ‘dense’ and ‘obtuse’, language that could be taken either way, although it concludes more unambiguously that the film is also ‘stimulating’ and ‘for viewers

ready for a cerebral challenge’ (www.rottentomatoes.com/m/primer/). Many prominent print critics, figures who retain a key role in the what Pierre Bourdieu (1993) would describe as the ‘consecration’ of works considered to be of particular merit or value, responded positively, if with some reservations on occasion. The valorization of the film was articulated in some cases through association with established classics from the art or indie-leaning film sectors (Lim [2004], for example provides reference points including the ‘puzzle’ films *Mulholland Drive* [2001] and *Memento* [2000] and the art-leaning science fictions *2001: A Space Odyssey* [1968] and *La Jetée* [1962]) or in familiar tropes of distinction between those likely to ‘like’ or ‘hate’ the film (for example, Ebert [2004] suggests *Primer* is a film for ‘nerds’, ‘geeks’ and ‘brainiacs’ while ‘It will surely be hated by those who “go to the movies to be entertained”’).

The making of such distinctions can certainly be understood as an important part of the pleasure offered to some viewers by the consumption of films of this kind, via the kind of mobilizations of cultural capital examined in the classic sociological work of Bourdieu (1984), a figure whose approach has been applied to the indie sector by myself among others (for example, King 2009, 2013). If, in one dimension, *Primer* offers scope to be consumed as an ‘authentic’ indie, a film that comes from particular grass roots rather than being seen as the product of a template, its narrative complexity is clearly another source of distinction, as indicated by critics such as those cited above – a marker of its status as not a film for everyone but only for those suitably equipped to engage with such material, a particular version of broader dynamics of inclusion/exclusion at play in the consumption of certain kinds of indie, art or other kinds of non-mainstream cinema. The film can also be understood in this

dimension to be an example of what John Fiske (1992) terms a ‘producerly’ text, one that creates greater than usual space for the viewer to play an active part in the creation of understanding of its contents – here, in trying to follow the exact sequence and nature of some of the central events, in some cases through the online dissemination of attempts to map the central timeline (a google images search during this writing revealed the existence of at least a dozen such graphical interpretations of the film). Carruth maintains in interviews and in his DVD commentary that most of the material required to grasp exactly what is going on is available in the film, to the suitably attentive viewer, one exception being how another character – a prospective funder the protagonists are seeking to woo, Thomas Grainger (played by the filmmaker’s father, Chip Carruth) – comes to find out about and also to use the device, subsequently ending up in a coma. Of the two versions of the principals confronted with this development, neither seems to be able to imagine how they would have told Grainger, hence, Carruth suggests, the refusal of such information to the viewer.

If one marker of ‘authentic’ indie status is not to have parlayed an awards and critical success such as *Primer* into a more sustained and/or conventional career – to have ‘sold out’, even, as such a process is sometimes framed – then this is another ground on which the film might qualify, whether or not by design. After a number of projects that failed to come to fruition, it took Carruth nine years to get a second feature into release, *Upstream Color* (2013) being another work with a science fiction dimension and one that is if anything more oblique in its narrative design than *Primer*, despite having a more glossy and professional-seeming visual texture. Carruth again took on multiple roles, as writer-director, editor, cinematographer and one of the principal

performers and displayed an extra-indie approach by organizing the theatrical release himself, earning further positive media coverage for his position as what the *Los Angeles Time* headlined ‘Indiedom’s purist’ (Zeitchik 2013). The reason for taking this stance, Carruth suggested, was to gain control over the selling of the film in order to be more candid than is usual, even in the indie sector, where it is far from uncommon (often, it seems, more like standard practice) for marketing materials to bend towards the most conventional possible spin on the material involved. He wanted to make no effort, he suggests, to shy away from the fact that *Upstream Color* ‘is a challenging film’, a rare degree of honesty and another marker of distinction from the more commercial realms of the independent sector.

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ⁱ These and most other such background details included here and below are from Carruth's commentary on the Tartan DVD release