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Report from Sundance TwentyTen: Religion in Independent Film

William L. Blizek

University of Nebraska at Omaha, wblizek@unomaha.edu

Michele M. Desmarais

University of Nebraska at Omaha, mdesmarais@unomaha.edu

Rubina Ramji

Cape Breton University, ruby_ramji@cbu.ca

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Report from Sundance TwentyTen: Religion in Independent Film

Abstract

This is the report from the Sundance Film Festival 2010.

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SUNDANCE FILM FESTIVAL TWENTYTEN

“Rebellious Cinema”

REBEL: This is the renewed rebellion. This is the recharged fight against the establishment of the expected. This is the rebirth of the battle for brave new ideas. This is Sundance, reminded. And this is your call to join us (Sundance Guide).

The TwentyTen Sundance Film Festival has a new feel to it this year – the theme for this year can be called the “5 Rs”: Renewal; Rebellion; Recharge; Rebirth; Remember.



Religion makes its way into the Festival in various ways, including this snow sculpture.

So, what’s this rebellious rebirth about? Robert Redford, at the opening press conference this year, wanted everyone to know that this is not your glitzy, star-packed festival. It has always been, and still is, about independent films. That doesn’t mean that the parties have stopped and the stars aren’t here - but really what the Sundance Film Festival is about is the desire to showcase innovative, inquisitive and uncommon films. The films that were premiered on opening night reflect the way Sundance is breaking with tradition. They opened with a narrative film called *Howl* (recounting the life of Allen Ginsberg and the birth of counterculture), a gritty documentary titled

Restrepo (following a platoon in Afghanistan's Korengal Valley) and a short film program (4 shorts that cover love, greed and misery) – all the elements that truly make up the original movie line-up that runs for the ten days of the festival. Moreover, you no longer have to hope that a Sundance film will make it to a theatre near you. The Sundance Film Festival Select program is now making a portion of their film line-up available on demand for the true film lover – in fact, you can rent online Sundance films on YouTube.

Even though Sundance will never be able to shed certain commercial aspects, the true craft of film-making and film viewing can be enjoyed in Park City once a year (in a winter wonderland). Many of these movies will not make any money in a box office, but the thrill of watching the creative aspect of film creation in the various categories – documentary, shorts, drama and world cinema – continues on in fine form. I always feel privileged to experience the work of new, cutting edge film-makers. And I am happy to share these reviews with you.

So enjoy the renewed rebellion against the establishment of mainstream film, be brave and immerse yourself in the rebirth of Sundance and the new ideas that are being screened.



Brooks Addicott and Bill Blizek chat about the Sundance Film Festival.



Bill Blizek and Elizabeth Leidt talk in the Press Office at the Sundance Film Festival.

As usual, we wish to specifically thank Brooks Addicott and Elizabeth Leidt at the SFF Press Office for their help with credentials and helping us maneuver through the listings that make up the festival. To give you a taste of what goes on at Sundance, they get almost ten thousand submissions and screen about one hundred and sixty films, representing over forty countries. We hope that you enjoy the few reviews we can offer live from Sundance and that you get to watch a few yourselves. And if you're a die-hard Sundance fan, there's an app for that (check iTunes).

— Rubina Ramji, Film Editor

Armless

(NEXT Film)



Kyle Jarrow's play titled *Armless* is brought to the big screen by Habib Azar in this low-budget film with big issues. John (Daniel London) is a depressed man who leaves his wife Anna (Janel Moloney) to go to the big city in order to have his arms amputated. Not explaining the reason why he is leaving, his wife frantically searches for him, while suffering panic attacks, and she is joined by John's mother in their quest to find John. Although the storyline seems comedic at times, the character of John helps the audience realize that he's in fact suffering from Body Identity Integrity Disorder. The reason John wants his arms amputated is not because there is something wrong with them, but rather because they are there.

We are introduced to Dr. Richard Phillips (Matt Walton), who John has heard of in a chat room for others who have his "problem". It turns out that he's found the wrong Dr. Phillips, yet John impacts Phillips' life with his desire to remove his arms.

While we follow John on his mission to have his arms removed, we are forced to question what "normal" really is. As the film proceeds, we find that all the characters in the movie are suffering: Anna is constantly afraid and suffers panic

attacks so eats pills. Dr. Phillips finds his life dull so wants to climb mountains and take risks but his biggest risk is hitting on his secretary and regretting it the next day. John's mother has no clue that her son has had a problem since childhood because she is constantly longing to be with someone. Everyone feels lonely and alienated, while John is the only character searching for a way to end his suffering.

John explains that when he was a young boy he saw what a Vietnam veteran with no arms, and John knew this man had suffered, yet he had overcome his fear. This was John's desire – to know that he could lose the things that matter most in his life (his arms) and be happy.

This leaves the viewer wondering whether John is the one with the problem – do we have the right to alter our bodies as we see fit? In a world of plastic surgery and body alterations, why does John's disorder make everyone panic? John is the only person in the film truthful enough to acknowledge that he cannot change and sets off to cut off his own arms in Dr. Phillips' office, knowing that Phillips will have to save him from bleeding to death. This is a story about suffering and salvation and in the end, both John and Anna save each other. Although John cannot destroy his own arms, Anna is willing to see him as he wishes, armless and complete.

— RR

Bilal's Stand

(NEXT, First Feature, World Premiere, Comedy)



Bilal's "stand" is both a taxi stand operated by his family and the stand that Bilal takes in relation to his family as he tries to improve his own life and future by attending the University of Michigan.

What makes this story related to religion is the fact that Bilal is an African American Muslim, living in Detroit. Unlike the rest of the family, Bilal does make an effort to be a good Muslim, even though this is difficult in the context of his family. Although mostly a coming of age story, Bilal does draw on his Muslim faith as he makes his way from childhood to adulthood. In the end, Bilal takes the right stand.

— WLB

Bran Nue Dae

(Spotlight, Comedy, Music)



A cartoon image of a white angel flies by during the opening credits until the finger of God descends and turns him black – into an aborigine. *Bran Nue Dae* is a social

commentary musical robed in comedy. Set in 1969 Australia, we meet a teen-aged Willie (Rocky McKenzie) who is being groomed by his mother, Theresa, to become a priest – “because a priest has the respect of everyone.”

Although Willie lives in the small town of Broome in Western Australia, he spends the majority of his year in Perth, away from his friends and family and the love of his life Rosie, in order to attend boarding school at the mission, where he is being groomed by Father Benedictus (Geoffrey Rush) to be like him, successful. Success for an aborigine, in the eyes of Father Benedictus, can only occur by being close to God. Benedictus tells Willie that he doesn't want to be a “useless black fella” like the friends he has left behind in Broome - and that is surely what will happen to him if he doesn't become a priest.

We find a dichotomy of understanding in the boarding school. Benedictus talks of love but punishes students for stealing, even though they have taken food from the fridge because they are hungry from being constantly underfed. Willie, not wanting to see others punished for this theft, confesses to the sin and Benedictus spews vitriol at him, calling Willie “a rotten apple” and “an abomination.” Stating that there is no way to save the blacks, Benedictus goes to punish Willie when he breaks out into song. The song “Nothing I Would Rather Be” sums up how religion has been used to treat the Indigenous Australians as inferior. Willie, stating that he

doesn't need that "superficial existential shit" to know that he's a good, believing Christian, runs away from the mission school.

The rest of the movie becomes a bit of a road-trip story, where Willie meets Uncle Tadpole and a couple of German hippies who travel together on and off to Broome so that Willie can get his girl Rosie.

Even though the storyline is based on a 1990 theatrical musical, therefore making the story feel a bit trite at times, it's still an important film for Australia, where the land is still important - as Willie states once he returns to Broome, "God is here, this is Heaven." The movie leaves the viewer with the understanding that the traditions of the Indigenous hold as true as that of the Christian faith that has been brought to them. By the end, everyone in the film, be it the cruel Father Benedictus or the soul-searching Germans, get to be an aborigine for a day.

— RR

8: The Mormon Proposition

(Spotlight, World Premiere, Political)



This film is a documentary about the position of the Mormon Church (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) on homosexuality and gay marriage. The position of the Church is not difficult to determine.

Using the statements of Church leaders, the film shows that the Church is opposed to homosexuality and gay marriage. There is, as far as I can tell, nothing new here, nor is the position of the Church in any way a secret. What the film shows, however, is that the Church played a significant role in the passage of Proposition 8, a proposition on the ballot in California that changed the California constitution in order to prevent gay marriage – making marriage only between a man and a woman. Church leaders were told by God to encourage Mormons to send money in support of Proposition 8 and to spend time in support of California's Proposition 8. The participation of the Mormon Church in the California campaign in favor of Proposition 8 was not well known and the movie documents that participation. The movie suggests that the Mormon Church should lose its tax exempt status for its political participation.

— WLB

Enter the Void

(France, Spotlight)

Enter the Void is director/screenwriter Gaspar Noé's high-tech cinematographic contemplation of Eastern spirituality, life, death, sex and drugs. There's plenty of all of those to be had. Even as the credits roll, the viewer is submitted to sensory overload.



The film is a (nearly) three hour exploration of ideas from Buddhism, specifically the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, and experiences derived from the drug DMT, which is sometimes referred to as the spirit molecule. An argument might be made that the director aimed to merge form and content—giving a viewer the experience of samsara, the nearly endless cycle of birth, death and rebirth. Unfortunately, the result is simply a movie that seems nearly endless. Members of the press applauded at the end of the opening credits, not at the end of the movie. Who knew that sex, drugs and samsara could be so tedious?

— MMD

A Film Unfinished

**(World Cinema Documentary Competition, First Feature, World Premiere,
Political)**

The World Cinema Documentary Editing Award Winner



A Film Unfinished is a movie about a movie. The movie in question was discovered after the war and was simply titled, "Ghetto." There is no sound track.

There are no credits. And the film was essentially unedited. But, *Ghetto* is not a mere recording of daily life in the Warsaw Ghetto. It does show poverty, starvation, and death among Jews in the Ghetto, but it also shows scenes of Jews living a lavish lifestyle and of Jews ignoring the plight of their fellow Jews. Many of these latter scenes are obviously staged and were most likely to have been used as propaganda—showing Jews as rich and heartless. Since the movie was not edited, exactly how the movie might have been used is not clear, but *Ghetto* does provide material of different sorts that might be used to show Jews in a negative light.

Although little is known about *Ghetto*, the director was able to include interviews with survivors of the Warsaw Ghetto. Some of the survivors even remember the film crews at work and they remember the staging of various scenes. The director also tracked down one of the cameramen who filmed *Ghetto*. The cameraman confirms that scenes were staged, but claims to have little knowledge

of why and how the movie was made. *A Film Unfinished* shows us a unique perspective on life in the Warsaw Ghetto, but it also, to quote from Shannon Kelley's description of the film in the Sundance Guide, "indicts both the evil and the astounding narcissism of the Nazi state."

— WLB

Four Lions

**(World Cinema Dramatic Competition/First Feature/World
Premiere/Comedy/Political)**

Chris Morris, in his Director's Statement writes: "where's the joke in terror?" And then he proceeds to show us where it is in *Four Lions*. It's a simple premise: four men in Britain want to become jihadis. The joke comes in the form of the folly that ensues from such grandiose plans. Morris, Armstrong and Bain have written a tragedy filled with comedy.

Omar (Riz Ahmed) is the ring leader – he's tired of the way Muslims are treated in the world and wants to do something about it. Waj (Kayvan Novak) sees Omar as his best friend and would do anything that Omar wants. Barry (Nigel Lindsay) is a white Islamic convert who truly wants to dominate the world and finds his narcissistic desires fulfilled in being a soldier of God. Faisal (Adeel Akhtar) can make bombs but doesn't want to blow himself up



because he has to take care of his father who has starting eating newspaper, so he trains crows to fly bombs in his place.

This unruly cast of jihadis thrusts the viewer into the actual lives of so-called terrorists and makes us realize that these men are flawed, confused, friendly, loveable and even redeeming. *Four Lions* also breaks down the barriers of “otherness”. We do not see these men as religious fanatics, following radical religious beliefs. This movie does not condemn or promote Islam. Rather, it demonstrates the everyday mundane elements that we all share when chasing our dreams to their limits.

We come to see Omar for the friend he truly is when he tries to save Waj from martyring himself (because he’s only doing it for Omar). We see Barry for the sadist that he truly is – only wanting to bully and dominate others. We see these jihadis for the humans that they are, their conflicting beliefs, and the idiocy that exists in being human. The humour that fills *Four Lions* in no way competes with the tragedy that unfolds because of extremism. But it was unfortunate that so many of the press members laughed at these scenes of tragedy – in a way removing themselves from the characters they had come to understand.

Morris, in researching jihadi training camps and speaking to ex-mujahadeen, terrorism experts, Muslims and imams, found that the element of comedy appears routinely, yet is never really brought to light. Much like the real-

life jihadis who sank their boat by filling it with too many explosives while trying to ram a US warship, *Four Lions* also has the same concept of the farcical within it. Interspersed with moments of death and destruction, we find no fundamentalist beliefs that would lead to such actions. Religion is not mocked, but rather set aside. It allows us a glimpse into the lives of people who may carry out such acts, who are thought of as masterminds behind well thought out plots. Reality is plainly funnier than the fears we have created in preconceiving terrorism.

— RR

Get Low

(USA, Premieres/First Features)



If a person commits an act that results in death, the Christian way to gain redemption is to confess that sin and to ask God for forgiveness. However, in *Get Low*, the perspective of Felix Bush (Robert Duvall) is different “They keep telling me to ask Jesus for forgiveness. I never did nothing to him.” Instead of accepting the Christian path, Felix takes the hard low road of personal penance and, in the end, communal friendship and forgiveness.

Set in a small Southern town in the 1930s, Felix Bush is a hermit who has lived in a cabin out in the woods for forty years (“the first thirty-eight are the hardest,” he quips at one point). Taunted and feared by children, scorned and

shunned by adults, Felix lives in splendid if fraught isolation with his mule. “No Damn Trespassing,” reads his sign “Beware of Mule.” When contacted about the death of another man though, Felix shows a glimmer of interest in ending his self-imposed solitude. He wonders about the stories others will tell of him when he dies. So Felix contacts Frank Quinn (Bill Murray) the director of a funeral parlor, who agrees to help Felix plan a funeral for himself – to be held while he’s still alive.

Felix’s funeral grows into a four county event thanks to a combination of morbid fascination, the good efforts of the funeral parlor and plans for a raffle prize of Felix’s land once he’s actually dead. As plans proceed, Felix encounters people from his past and we realize that what Felix wants is not so much to hear the stories other people would tell about him, but rather he wants, if he can, to tell his own story. At his “funeral party,” Felix reveals the reasons for his forty year isolation. His story is not monstrous, but altogether human. It is a story of misdirected, but nonetheless real love and the tragic consequences of that love for a deep-thinking, stubborn and guilt-ridden man. Forgiveness, as with all else in this movie, is subtle, evoked through small gestures between people.

This is a tale of redemption and one based, at least partially, on a true character – the eccentric Felix “Bush” Breazeale, of Tennessee whose “living funeral” drew national attention in 1938.

— MMD

Gone to the Dogs

(Shorts, World Premiere, Comedy)

While waiting for *Armless* to be screened, *Gone to the Dogs* preceded it and, although a short, packed a punch about societal concepts of how we treat



each other and our pets. The story centers on a dinner party where one of the guests, Leslie (Martha Plimpton), brings her dog as her “plus one”. The dog angers the other dinner guests as it sits at the dinner table and eats out of Leslie’s plate, so eventually the host asks Leslie to take her dog downstairs for the duration of the party. Leslie, attributing human characteristics to her dog, assumes that the dog will be lonely and leaves the dinner party to have dinner with her dog.

The remaining dinner guests then get into an argument about the relationships humans have with dogs. This argument becomes an ethical and moral debate on the suffering dogs endure when their owners insist on spending exorbitant amounts of money on them when they become ill. The idea of selfishness becomes the crux of the argument: Is it selfish to keep a dog in pain while giving it treatment to live? Is it selfish to stay with a dog when people are trying to save you (this example is taken from Hurricane Katrina)? Is it selfish to spend money on dogs instead of taking care of needy humans?

At no point in time do the people around the table look to each other to better understand the notion of selfishness they are discussing, as each is caught up in their own selfish needs and desires. Touching on the theme that will arise in *Armless*, the short film focuses on the alienation of humans from each other and the lack of compassion to each other and other living creatures. When they realize that no one is listening to each other, they change the topic to something else – offshore drilling – and begin the argument fresh. Nowhere is there room to show human compassion and caring for one’s fellow human beings, or to understand the human need for love and companionship, even if it’s from a dog.

— RR

Holy Rollers

(U.S. Dramatic Competition)

If the title of this film makes you think of Christian Charismatic movements, you’re in for a surprise. *Holy Rollers*, inspired by true events, is a film about a group of Hasidic Jews smuggling ecstasy tablets between Amsterdam and New York.

Sam Gold (Jesse Eisenberg) is a twenty-year old Hasid from a close family. He works with his father and lives within a tight-knit Hasidic neighborhood in Brooklyn, but is frustrated with his family’s



financial problems. The opening scenes beautifully communicate the warmth, closeness and rich religious life within family and community. However, Sam is also drawn to his friend Leon's (Jason Fuchs) elder brother, Yosef (Justin Bartha). With his restlessness, Rolex and Nike footwear, Yosef is clearly the "bad boy" of the neighborhood, but his charisma is as undeniable as his marginality in his own family.

In the film, the Rebbe says "All men must know where they stand with respect to HaShem's presence. Either they move closer or further away." *Holy Rollers* explores this through human relations and actions. When the film begins, Sam is an insider and the outside world, the secular world, is foreign and far removed from his daily life. However, when plans for an arranged marriage fall through, Sam believes that the reason is because his family does not have enough money. Yosef offers a way to make some extra cash, and Sam's journey into the outside secular world begins.

One of the many strengths of this film is the acting of Eisenberg, who conveys the innocence of someone raised in a traditional community without, for a moment, appearing as anything other than caring, intelligent and ambitious. Because of this, Sam's entanglement in a drug smuggling ring is all the more heart-breaking. On his first trip to Amsterdam, he and his friend Leon believe that they are bringing back "medicine for rich people." By the end, Sam is recruiting other

couriers, sewing packets of ecstasy into their Hasidic clothes, and demanding more power within the ring. Shunned by his family and community, he becomes an insider in the secular drug world – for a while – and an outsider to everyone who ever cared for him. As a symbol of his religious loss, Sam shaves off his payot (long side-burns) and becomes indistinguishable from others in Brooklyn.

Eventually, everything begins to unravel for Sam, Yosef and others in the ring. As he flees the chaos in Amsterdam, Sam meets another Hasid on the street. Noting Sam's distress, the other man asks if he has prayed. Sam says "no," so together they begin. Sam, who has smuggled ecstasy tablets in head-tefillin, now prays. Thus starts the possibility of his return from the far away, the outside.

During 1998 to 1999 the Hasidic couriers smuggled over a million ecstasy tablets in to the United States. The couriers and leaders of the drug ring were eventually caught. *Holy Rollers* ends with Sam in prison, but in community and, one senses, knowing again the closeness of HaShem, family and joy.

— MMD

Howl

(U.S. Dramatic Competition)

"This is the renewed rebellion. This is the recharged fight against the establishment of the expected." This is the promise of the 2010 Sundance



Film Festival, and this is Ginsberg's *Howl*: "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked..."

Howl as poem and film explores life, death, the soul, madness, friendship, love, sex, homosexuality and holiness. The film is appropriately non-linear, moving fluidly between arguments at the 1957 trial in which Lawrence Ferlinghetti, the poem's publisher, was charged with obscenity; Ginsberg's musings on his life and role as a poet; a reading of the poem; and evocative animations suggested by the words of the poem. It's a compelling and informative mix that does justice to both poem and poet.

James Franco does an incredible job both portraying Ginsberg and giving his poem an impassioned reading. He is utterly believable. Ginsberg eventually became a Tibetan Buddhist, and the film and poem foreshadow some of this perspective. Beyond this though, the themes of the poem *Howl* are religious, although certainly some at the time did not perceive this. There are the evils of Moloch:

"What sphinx of cement and aluminum bashed open their skulls and
ate up their brains and imagination?"

Moloch! Solitude! Filth! Ugliness!

...

Moloch whose eyes are a thousand blind windows! Moloch whose
skyscrapers stand in the long streets like endless Jehovahs! Moloch whose

factories dream and croak in the fog! Moloch whose smoke-stacks and antennae crown the cities!

Moloch whose love is endless oil and stone!”¹

These evils of Moloch – generic, mindless evils binding us to conformity and meaninglessness – are challenged and perhaps even overcome by Ginsberg’s visions of beauty, love, friendship and truth. The film follows him to this beautiful arrival ending with the glorious “Footnote to Howl”

“Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy!

Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy!

The world is holy! The soul is holy! The skin is holy!

The nose is holy! The tongue and cock and hand

and asshole holy!

Everything is holy! everybody's holy! everywhere is

holy! everyday is in eternity! Everyman's an

angel!”²

Finally, the film ends with a clip of the aged Ginsberg himself singing Father Death Blues. Ginsberg died in 1997. The rebellion continues. Renewed.

— MMD

Kick in Iran

(World Cinema Documentary Competition)

Kick in Iran is a documentary capturing the new but flourishing practice of women's martial arts in Iran. Specifically, it follows Sara Khoshjamal-Fekri, the first female athlete from Iran to qualify for the Olympic games (Beijing 2008).



The film has little directly to say about religion, but its relevance here is that it allows a glimpse of women's lives – and religion permeates these lives – in Iran. Sara Khoshjamal-Fekri and her coach, Maryam Azarmehr, are proud to show the world that a woman can wear a head-scarf, be Muslim, and compete in athletics at a high level. For that matter, they're trying to show the same to people in their own country as well.

— MMD

Lourdes

(Spotlight)



This is the story of a young woman suffering from Multiple Sclerosis who travels to Lourdes looking for the purpose of companionship and social interaction. The year

before she had "vacationed" in Rome. The movie follows her adventures through the various activities associated with a tour of Lourdes. There is, of course, the element of tourism, including carefully scheduled activities, multiple tour groups following the directions of their leader, a souvenir shop, and the statue of Mary with the neon halo. There are also the formal religious rituals, performed mechanically so as to get as many people through the various stations as possible as quickly as possible. And there is the debate about what really counts as a miracle. There is actually an office of miracles where authenticity is decided – there need to be some real miracles for advertising purposes. Toward the end of the film, the main character experiences a miracle – she is able to move her hands and then her feet and finally she is able to walk with the help of a cane. Or, maybe this is just a temporary change in her condition, one that will not last. We will never know. And that is one of the most interesting features of this film – we are given many opportunities to think one thing or another, but the movie does not decide for us what to conclude.

But the movie is not just about the possibility of physical healing at this world famous site. We also get to see what motivates those who participate in the operation. We learn that Sister Ceceile, the group leader, is herself suffering from cancer and while she gives the appearance of being at Lourdes for the sake of others, she is hoping for a miracle of her own. The young woman's roommate is there to take care of others and resents it when the young woman no longer needs her help.

The young assistant is mostly there to interact with young men who serves as guides or guards. This does not mean that she behaves badly, but rather that she has multiple interests as she performs her duties. There also is the question – from both sides – of why one person experiences a miracle but others do not, and there is resentment of those who do experience miracles – as well as good wishes.

What the movie shows is that there are two sides to every story. Things may not be what they seem. It really is complicated – both human motivation, the use of religion, and what would count as God's will. Such ambiguity creates a kind of tension or suspense that permeates the film. Although the movie shows rather mundane activities, I found myself caught up in the suspense, much like I would if I were watching a mystery movie. But, then, the movie is about mystery. Because the main character is paralyzed from the neck down, and because we see things through her perspective there is an eerie, unsettling quality about the film, a quality that the filmmaker wants to audience to feel as a parallel to the feelings of the characters themselves.. All of this is enhanced by a cinematography that is remarkable, without being obvious.

Is religion a tourist attraction? Are its' rituals performed in a routine and perfunctory way? Are there genuine miracles of the body? Are there genuine miracles of the heart? Are we jealous or resentful when we should be happy? How would you respond if someone else, but not you, experienced the miracle? How

would you respond if you were the one experiencing the miracle – the miracle celebrity? Crass commercialism? Just a job? A caring heart or a need to help others? All of these elements and others arise throughout this simple story making it a film that you will never forget.

— WLB

My Mom Smokes Weed

(Shorts Program II)



My Mom Smokes Weed is a semi-autobiographical story about a young man whose mother ... well ... smokes weed. It's a coming-of-age tale as well as a narrative about acceptance and love. In seventeen minutes, director Clay Liford tells the story of a widowed aged mother and her twenty-something year old son, who is forced to grow up and see his mother for who she is – not a doddering delinquent, but a woman who has survived her husband's death to cancer. Maybe she's even a little cool. Liford illustrates how one moment can change a person's outlook and makes us realize that we are who we perceive ourselves to be. We can grow up, act mature, and be cool, just because we change our outlook. The moral of the story is not to judge someone by their actions.

Sometimes, we must undergo a moment of tribulation (in this case encountering a drug dealer who may want to kill you) to see the truth of the people around you.

— RR

Photograph of Jesus

(United Kingdom, Shorts, Comedy, Political Animation)



Photograph of Jesus is Laurie Hill's story about odd requests for photographs or film footage from the Hulton Archive of Getty Images.

The Archive is home to over 60 million images and 30 thousand hours of film footage. It receives requests for photographs on a daily basis, most of which are pretty straightforward. Sometimes, however, the request is quite odd.

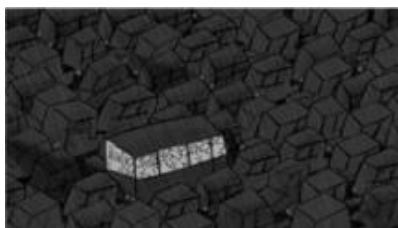
Someone once requested, for example, a picture of Hitler at the 1948 Olympic Games in London. Someone else wanted a photograph of a Dodo bird, even though Dodo birds were extinct by the time the camera was invented. Others have requested photos of Jack the Ripper or the Abominable Snowman. The strangest request, however, was for a photograph of Jesus—not an etching, or an engraving, or a painting or anything like that, but a real photograph.

It is an interesting question: How does one understand Christianity if one requests a photograph of Jesus?

— WLB

Rains (L'Ondee)

(Shorts/Environmental/Animation)



The sun disappears and the rains come. As the rain falls we see various scenes of people huddling together – the birds huddle together too. We see people who do not go out—they stay inside their apartments. Finally the clouds break up and we see a flock of birds flying together. As the rains end, we see one bird flying off by itself. What do "the rains" stand for? What do the rains do to us as human beings? If the rains stand for fear, then it is fear that causes us to huddle together and it is fear that keeps us in our homes and keeps us from going out from living life. When the rains cease, we see one person going off by himself to live life. Salvation comes when we overcome fear.

— WLB

Secrets of the Tribe

(World Cinema Documentary Competition)



If we view religion as concerning itself, at least partly, with morality, kinship relations, a sense of the sacred and the responsibilities that all of these demand of a person, then *Secrets of the Tribe* is a story of religion gone wrong. Having said that, this documentary is about anthropologists and their interactions with people of the Yanomami tribe in the Amazon Basin.

José Padilha's film opens with a Yanomami tribal elder who says, "Look, here they are! Taking my picture again. I don't like to believe anything you [Whites] say, because you lie." The Yanomami peoples were isolated. One of the first anthropologists to make contact with them and to study them was American Napoleon Chagnon. More anthropologists, linguists, scientists and others followed. The documentary is riveting as Padilha allows anthropologists and members of the Yanomami tribe to speak for themselves, and in the case of the anthropologists, to justify their actions. "They [the Yanomami] became famous through my book," Chagnon states grandiously at one point.

The arrogance one can find in many academic settings, along with long-time debates about the nature of a discipline, move into ugly accusations of flawed

data, ideological debates (Marxist materialism, Noble Savages, etc.) then deteriorate into dishing the dirt on people's personal lives and then (it does get worse) into accounts and chilling justifications of underage marriage, rampant and widely known pedophilia by a French anthropologist with Yanomami boys, and callous exposure – in the name of science and research – of the Yanomami to questionable vaccination practices, measles and influenza. They could have included this documentary on a bill with horror movies.

In the end, one realizes that the title of the film, "Secrets of the Tribe," refers not so much to the Yanomami people as to the field of anthropology – or at least this particular group of anthropologists. Director Jose Padhila has brilliantly turned the methods of anthropology on the anthropologists themselves, and we do come to see that the nasty "secrets" have not been very secret at all, but well-known for a long time. The result is a film that challenges us to look at definitions of self and other, and that provides a record that is almost the same as the entire history of contact and colonialism suffered by many Indigenous peoples of many lands over many centuries – but in this case condensed into thirty or so sordid and appalling years.

Ultimately, the film lays the blame for all of this not only on the anthropologists, but also on the universities that support and promote people based on this type of research, on the granting agencies that fund it, on the publishing

industry that popularizes this work and makes a living off of it, and, generally, on the academic world. It is not, as one might think from this, a heavy-handed film. Padhila is too intelligent for that and the film moves along quickly and engagingly; interspersing interviews with archival footage and allowing the viewer to encounter multiple perspectives.

Returning to the topic of religion, the anthropologists interviewed in this film tell their stories and gain no redemption from it. *Secrets of the Tribe* instead provides us with a clear and cautionary tale of how ego skews perspective and, in doing so, creates a world of suffering. I left the theater ashamed to be a member of the ‘academic tribe.’ And having said that, this is a film that I would recommend to all – especially academics.

— MMD

Shimásání

(maternal grandmother)

(USA, Shorts, World Premiere, Political)



Shimásání is the story of Mary Jane, a young Navajo girl who spends her days herding sheep. When her older sister runs away from school she

brings home a book on world geography, *The Old World and Its Ways*.

When Mary Jane sees the pictures in the book she is introduced to a world outside of the reservation, a world unimaginable to a sheep herding teen. Mary Jane wants to experience this new world, but her grandmother wants her to stay on the reservation and take care of their livelihood and also to take care of her grandmother. Like many teens, Mary Jane has to decide whether to obey her parents (in this case her grandmother) or strike out on her own journey. But, for Mary Jane it is not merely a question of obedience. If she leaves the reservation she also leaves behind a way of life without knowing what the new world will bring.

Shimásání is a sad story, gently told, but one that offers hope to Mary Jane and to all of us who have to move beyond our traditions.

— WLB

*Son of Babylon**

(World Cinema Dramatic Competition/Political)



Shortly after the fall of Saddam Hussein, a number of mass graves were uncovered near the city of Babylon. Ahmed and his grandmother set out from Kurdistan in search of Ahmed's father who had become a prisoner of war. They first travel to Baghdad where they believe that war prisoners have now been set free. But they do not find Ahmed's father there. So they go on to the mass graves near Babylon in the hope that they might at

least find the body of Ahmed's father. The graves are, of course, a mass of confusion. In the end, the grandmother does not find her son and Ahmed does not find his father. They do, however, share the search and find each other. It is assumed that Ahmed's father has been killed and buried in one of the graves near Babylon. Thus, Ahmed become a true son of Babylon.

*Throughout the Bible, Babylon is a symbol for confusion imposed as punishment by God for the arrogance and godlessness of the people.

— WLB

Editor's Note: Leeds, UK, 30th August 2010 – Iraq's Official Oscar submission, *Son of Babylon*, was given its Croatian premiere in Zadar and secured the Film Forum 'European Co-Production Award'. In addition to the film's previous accolades, including the Amnesty Film Award and Peace Prize, and the Netpac Award at Karlovry Vary, this award not only sets the precedent for Zadar's first film festival, it ups the ante for *Son of Babylon's* ever-mounting Oscar hopes.

The festival screening conjured highly emotional audience reactions, realising the film's ambitions to expose Iraq's hidden horrors, highly acclaimed Croatian filmmaker Sergej Stanojkovski the festival founder and director was amazed by the audiences reactions "people were crying all the way through and were very touched." The audience a mix of industry and locals included helmer

producer Branko Lustig, ("*Gladiator*", "*Black Hawk Down*", "*Schindler List*", "*American Gangster*") who was impressed by the film. Noticing the film's receipt of the loudest applause after the filmmaker's video acceptance speech at the awards show, audience member Marina Bee emailed the filmmakers "Zadar will always remember you and we are already crossing our fingers for it winning an Oscar." The themes of the film resonated with the Croatian audience, drawing direct parallels with the atrocities suffered there during the early nineties. Following the screening over 200 people lined up to sign the petition.

Sympathy for Delicious

(U.S. Dramatic Competition)

Special Jury Prize: Dramatic Award Winner



Actor Mark Ruffalo makes his directorial debut with *Sympathy for Delicious*, a story about a young man, paralyzed, searching for a way to be healed so that he can go back to his life of being a famous DJ known as "Delicious" Dean (Christopher Thornton).

Christopher Thornton, who plays the starring role of "Delicious" Dean, had a tragic accident seventeen years ago that left him paralyzed and Mark Ruffalo, his friend for the past twenty years, encouraged Thornton to write a story based on his own life. Thus *Sympathy for Delicious* is not just a well acted story about a

paraplegic, but a glimpse into the life of a man who has lived with anger and pain hindered by a true disability and searched for answers in his own way.

We find “Delicious” Dean at the opening of the movie looking for a miracle by a Christian faith healer but is not “chosen” to be healed that day. Another paraplegic, Rene, who has taken Dean to meet the faith healer tells Dean that he has to believe, to let Jesus into his heart, and believe that he’ll walk one day. Dean, wanting to walk now, leaves in anger.

Mark Ruffalo plays Father Joe, a priest running a soup kitchen on Skid Row in Los Angeles. He finds out that Dean had touched one of the Skid Row inhabitants earlier and has now healed him. Although Dean does not want to believe he may be a healer, word gets out and Dean is forced to heal a blind woman. With success, he rushes off to try and heal himself and realizes that he cannot. Joe tells Dean that he’s never seen anything like Dean’s power in his life and takes him to someone who knows why God chose Dean to be a healer. Even though Dean is unable to heal himself, Father Joe explains that “God may not give you what you want because God cares about your soul.” Joe is told that he has a calling – and that is his healing. It takes Dean the rest of the movie to truly understand this concept.

Dean barter with Father Joe to perform healings on Skid Row for a motel room to sleep in and a small daily allowance. As he begins healing on Skid Row, it becomes clear that Dean is unsure of his “calling” as he has no faith – he does not

feel like helping people; in fact, he does not want to know their names or illnesses. He sees the church and Father Joe making money off of his abilities and wants part of the funds. Dean then tries to resurrect his DJ life and goes to an audition for a band “Burnt the Dipthongs” but ends up burning a band member and then healing him. This act of healing leads Dean into a world of celebrity and money. The leader of the band, The Stain (Orlando Bloom), sees fame and fortune for his band by using Dean as a faith healer during their shows – eventually called “Heal-a-palooza”.

The actions of Father Joe are ethically irresponsible (as he wants to make himself known for the healings being performed on Skid Row) and Dean is left searching for his true calling when a tragedy occurs onstage – Ariel Lee (Juliette Lewis), a band member, overdoses and Dean tries to heal her but fails. In doing so, he is charged with manslaughter and the question of his ability to heal is called into question. Through this ordeal Dean comes to grips with his abilities and in the end, heals himself, even though he is never able to walk. The redeeming power of compassion towards other heals Dean’s heart and eradicates his anger. The film aptly ends with the Bee Gees singing “I started a joke which left the whole world crying, but I didn’t see that the joke was on me”, perhaps leaving the audience with a little sympathy for “Delicious”.

— RR

The Taqwacores

(Spotlight)



'Taqwa' means 'piety,' 'shield,' and 'cores' comes from music – hard core and punk. *The Taqwacores* is a film about young Muslims in the punk scene. *The Taqwacores*

was originally a novel by Michael Muhammad Knight about a "fictitious" Muslim punk scene. The novel not only inspired the movie of the same name, but also the formation of real Muslim punk bands such as The Kominas, whose music is featured prominently in the film.

In the film, Yusef (Bobby Naderi), a young engineering student in Buffalo NY, moves in to a house of fellow young Muslims – most of whom happen to be punks. From an electric guitar call to prayer to discussions about the Quran, masturbation, weed, drinking, politics, tampons, feminism – and, of course, music and Muslim identity – *The Taqwacores* challenges everyone's perspectives about Islam. As one character says, "Islam is about surrender – take your hands off the wheel and see how it feels."

The hands are way off the wheel in *The Taqwacores* and the ride is exhilarating.

— MMD

12th & Delaware

(U.S. Documentary Competition)

12th & Delaware refers to a corner in Fort Pierce, Florida. An abortion clinic opened up on one side of the street and a year later a Catholic pro-life pregnancy center opened on the other. This documentary records the lives and views of those on both sides of the street, including some young women facing difficult choices regarding pregnancy and abortion. Some of these women arrive at the pro-life center mistakenly thinking that they are at the abortion clinic. Staff then work hard, some might even say deceptively, to convince the young women to change their minds about having an abortion. The film seems a fair representation of the viewpoints involved. More time is spent on the pro-life side of the street, but we do get a glimpse of what it is like at the abortion clinic – staff who feel constantly harassed and worried and who try to smuggle doctors in to protect their identities, which is a necessity since a number of abortion providers have been threatened and murdered.

This is a timely film given the trial of Scott Roeder for the murder of Dr. George Tiller last year in Kansas. Currently there are 816 abortion clinics and 4000 pro-life pregnancy centers in the U.S. This film makes clear that whether these numbers are cause for optimism or pessimism depends upon which side of the street one stands.

— MMD

Welcome to the Rileys

(USA, US Dramatic Competition, World Premiere)



Welcome to the Rileys is one of those cute little signs that people put on their houses (in this case the garage) in the suburbs to indicate a happy family. This is not a happy family. As we learn along the way, Lois hasn't left the house in years, not even to go out and get the mail. Lois and Doug haven't made love in about the same number of years so Doug has been having a relationship with a waitress when he has been claiming to be playing poker. All of this is in response to the death of their daughter, Emily, who died in a car accident when she was fifteen years old. Both Doug and Lois blame themselves or each other, but they cannot bring themselves to talk about the tragedy.

Doug has a convention to attend in New Orleans and he has asked his lover to join him and things would have pretty much remained the same, but his lover dies of a heart attack before the trip and Doug finds himself all alone in New Orleans. To avoid other conventioners, Doug ducks into a strip club and then when the guys come into the strip club Doug goes with his dancer, Mallory, to the VIP room. He now finds himself face to face with a 16 year old runaway, dancer, and prostitute whose real name is Allison. Without realizing it (and not realizing it is

crucial to the film) Doug sees an opportunity for redemption, an opportunity to somehow set things right.

When Lois learns that Doug is going to stay in New Orleans awhile, she musters up the courage to drive down to meet up with him, only to find that Doug has moved in with Allison, not for sex, but as a kind of father figure. Together, Doug and Lois now seek redemption by saving Allison from her life on the streets. Of course, Allison is not willing to cooperate and when Doug and Lois realize that Allison is not Emily and that they cannot change the past by saving Allison, they let Allison go her own way-letting her know that they are only a phone call away and take on the real task of redemption, which is to repair the damage done to the family by the death of Emily.

This is a movie that easily could be overdone and ham fisted. But excellent acting by the three main characters makes this a subtle film that draws the viewer in. The pain of the characters builds slowly, but in the end the viewer feels the full sadness of the movie. The end of the film offers hope to all of the characters but it does not offer a happy ending.

— WLB

THERE'S MORE TO SUNDANCE THAN A FILM FESTIVAL

There is more to the Sundance Film Festival than the orgy of independent films for which the Festival has become world famous.

Another feature of the Sundance Film Festival is the Sundance ASCAP Music Cafe. The Music Cafe offers a continuous program of music from both famous and cutting edge artists. This year's Cafe included such artists as 2 AM Club, Richard Marx and Matt Scannell, and LeAnn Rimes.

Others who provided the musical program included Sonos, Colin Devin, John Forté, Adrian Younge & The Black Dynamite Sound Orchestra, Brendan



Benson, The Fray, Sass Jordan, The Rescues, Vadera, Carney, Sam & Ruby, Mike Posner, Isobel Campbell, Califone, Youth Speaks, Joey+Rory, AM, Grace Potter & The Nocturnals, Holly Palmer, and Joey+Rory

2AM Club



Richard Marx and Matt Scannell



LeAnn Rimes

Screenwriters/directors labs

Most people associate Sundance with the annual independent film festival held in Park City, Utah, each January. It turns out, however, that the Sundance Film Festival is only a small (even if very visible) part of the activities of the Sundance Institute, founded by Robert Redford in 1979. The Sundance Institute was designed to provide a home and support for film makers who were working apart from the studio system. It now includes two screenwriters labs, one in January and one in June., where young screenwriters perfect their craft under the supervision of and with the encouragement of the Institute staff. While everyone wants to put the script they bring with them into final form during the three weeks of the lab, the institute sees the lab as a safe place for screenwriters to try out new ideas, make mistakes, and learn what they might not under the pressure of producing product. The Institute also includes a directors lab where directors can work on a couple of the

most difficult scenes in the film they want to make. The directors get to cast the parts they will direct and they choose scenes from their screenplays that seem to be more difficult. Some of the directors come from the screenwriters labs and bring with them the screenplay they have been working on.

Native American and indigenous /composers labs

Early in the history of the Sundance Institute, Robert Redford made it clear that the Institute would actively encourage the development of Native American artists.. But instead of setting one or two slots aside for Native artists, in conjunction with UCLA, the Institute created separate Native American and indigenous labs that could accommodate a group of Native artists all working together. Since movies can be narrative in nature or documentary, the Institute has established separate labs for both kinds of films. In addition to the variety of labs mentioned above, the Sundance Institute runs labs for musicians who want to compose works for film.

The Sundance Theater Program

Most people are unaware of the fact that the Sundance Institute also includes a Theater Program. This is an opportunity for playwrights to have the same kind of experience that the screenwriters have. The Theater Program is less well known in part because its products come to the attention of the public in a more indirect manner than the films that show at the Sundance Film Festival. The Theater

Program, originally designed for playwrights, is now open to directors, composers, choreographers, and performance artists as well.

The Sundance Collection/Archives

The Sundance Institute includes two other components. One is the Sundance Collection. Film studios have a contractual obligation to preserve at least one copy of the films that they produce. There is no such requirement for independent films. So, the Institute has taken on as one of its tasks the preservation and in some cases the restoration of many of the best films to come out of Sundance. Since the Institute and the film festival have been around now for more than twenty-five years, they have themselves produced a number of artifacts that record the history and success of both the Festival and the Institute. So, the Institute has established an archive, housed in downtown Salt Lake City, to collect the materials that record the history of the Institute and the Festival.

¹ <http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/15308>

² <http://www.americanpoems.com/poets/Allen-Ginsberg/3685>