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Report from Sundance 2006: Religion in Independent Film

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Abstract

This is the report from the Sundance Film Festival 2006.

Introduction

Photo by Abi Williams

The weather may have been colder this year, but the movies were as good as ever. One of my colleagues said that she expected to see good movies but she did not expect to see as many movies that could be said to transform one's own life. Even at press screenings, the usually stoic press corps laughed, cried, and applauded some of the best films of the Festival. We should be reminded by this of the power of film.

One of the interesting questions that arose during the Festival was: For whom are independent movies made? This is a big question that we will continue to consider, but it was clear that some movies seem to be made for very small, select audiences. These films probably will not be of interest to a larger, general audience. Some movies seem to be made for a general audience, even if they are not expected to be shown in theaters across the country or expected to rake in big bucks. We did find one or two films that seemed to be made for only the filmmaker him/herself but were in some way so personal that they resonated with a larger audience. Even raising this question indicates something about the great diversity to be found in

independent filmmaking and this is one of the reasons we report to our readers from Sundance each year.

Irene Cho, Manager, Media Relations and Press Office, and Bill Blizek discuss the Press Screening Schedule.

Bill Blizek and Chelsea Hedquist, Coordinator, Publicity World Dramatic Competition, World Documentary Competition, discuss arranging an interview with director Jocelyne Saab.

We must again thank the Sundance Film Festival Press Office for helping us get to the movies that we wanted to see and for arranging interviews with directors. This year, for the first time, Irene Cho was in charge of the Sundance Press Office and her work was exemplary. She was assisted by Wesley Salter, an old friend of JR&F and a veteran of the Press Office, and by Levi Elder, who manages the credentials of the hundreds of journalists who attend Sundance each year. Chelsea Hedquist, Lagan Sebert, and Richard Stenger were of particular help to us as we sought to review those movies related in some way to religion. Everyone in the Press Office, however, was welcoming and eager to help. We simply could

not accomplish our goal without the help of both the staff and volunteers of the Press Office. Our hats are off to them.

Adam's æbler

(*Adam's Apples*)

(Spectrum)

As the title suggests, this is a story about the battle between good and evil. As the plural (apples) indicates, however, this is not merely another retelling of the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

Adam is a middle-aged, neo-Nazi. He has been assigned to community service at a country church where Ivan is the vicar. Adam is surly and uncooperative. Ivan is unrealistically optimistic. All that Ivan asks of Adam is that he choose a goal, one that will keep him occupied while he serves his time at the church. Petulant Adam decides that his goal will be to bake an apple pie. So, Ivan assigns him the task of caring for the only apple tree in the churchyard.

As time passes, Adam and events destroy Ivan's optimism – it is, after all, unrealistic. But, when Ivan loses his faith (optimism), Adam discovers that those who depended upon Ivan's optimism no longer have it, so Adam takes on the task

of being the optimist that others need. In the end, Adam salvages one apple from a tree that has been attacked by birds, infested by worms, and struck by lightning. From the one apple, he bakes the pie that was his original goal. Ivan's optimism returns and Ivan is now joined by Adam, the newly converted optimist.

This is a story that is more about faith and goodness than any particular religion. The message of the movie is that faith and goodness will prevail in an otherwise difficult and unpleasant world. Ordinarily this would be a hokey message, but given the likeable nature of the characters and the superb acting, the movie is outrageously funny and the message is one that the viewer can enjoy.

— WLB

The Blossoming of Maximo Oliveros

(*Ang Pagdadalaga ni Maximo Oliveros*)

(World Cinema Competition: Documentary)

The Blossoming of Maximo Oliveros, the directorial debut of Aureaeus Solito, is a coming of age story set in the gritty slums of Manila. Twelve year old "Maxi" (Nathan Lopez) lives with his father and two older brothers–his kuvas. Maxi's brothers have joined their outlaw

father in his underground world of petty crime. Maxi's father quit his factory job after Maxi's mother died, vowing that he would never again lack the money to care for his family. In his mother's absence, Maxi cheerfully fulfills the feminine role of dalaga for his family--cooking, sewing, shopping, and even braiding his brother's hair. Maxi's family has status in the neighborhood and more financial security than most.

One evening Maxi, perilously close to being raped by neighborhood thugs, is rescued by the rookie cop "Victor" (JR Valentin). Victor is masculine, handsome, and virtuous. Victor's golden crucifix, a gift from his father, is a symbol of his commitment to disavow vice and police corruption. Maxi quickly develops a strong crush on Victor. Victor befriends Maxi, in part because Victor's moral stance has left him socially isolated from his colleagues. He is lonely and welcomes Maxi's company and cooking. Victor encourages Maxi to go back to school so he can find a "legitimate" job someday. Maxi increasingly finds his family lacking in comparison to the flawless Victor.

Victor is on a collision course with Maxi's family, his growing relationship with Maxi only heightens the drama. Unable to resist the lure of corruption, Victor falls from grace and betrays Maxi with fatal consequences. Ultimately, Maxi's life is redeemed by the love of his brothers, who free him from his role as dalaga and

send him back to school. In the final scene we see Maxi, now dressed and groomed as a school boy, pass Victor on the street as if he is invisible.

— BR

Eve and the Fire Horse

(World Cinema Competition: Dramatic)

Eve and the Fire Horse is a magical and intelligent film. A first-time feature by Canadian director Julia Kwan, *Eve and the Fire Horse* tells the story of two young Chinese-Canadian girls who, while being raised with Chinese Buddhism, begin to learn about and embrace Roman Catholicism.

The film opens with beautiful images of horses swimming under water, setting the tone of magic-realism. Nine year-old Eve (Phoebe Jojo Kut, in her first role) was born in 1966, the year of the Fire Horse. A Fire Horse year only occurs once every 60 years and Fire Horse Children, we are told, were sometimes thought of as unlucky or strong-willed and therefore were drowned.

Eve certainly is strong-willed, but bad luck visits the family only when her mother, May-Lin (Vivian Wu), cuts down their apple tree. According to the elderly

ladies of the neighborhood, this is an inauspicious act when performed by a woman. Shortly after, May-Lin suffers a miscarriage, and Eve's beloved grandmother (Ping Sung Wong) dies.

The film offers a glimpse of some traditional practices as the family grapples with their losses. May-Lin visits a Buddhist temple, chants scriptures and begins to practice meditation. Eve's father, Frank (Chan Chit Man Lester) supported by relatives, attends the funeral for his mother, burns other-worldly money for her, and undertakes a journey back to China with her ashes. A visit from Christian missionaries, however, triggers the interest of Eve's older sister Karena (Hollie Lo). As she learns more about Christianity, Karena begins to attend Roman Catholic Sunday School, and brings a puzzled Eve along on a quest for purity and sainthood.

Much of the charm and value of this film lies in its ability to represent, without any sappiness, religion as seen through the eyes of a child. Karena interprets doctrines and values literally and rigorously, and seeks to spread the Good News. When she invites a Sikh boy whom she likes home, Karena asks him "Have you opened your heart to the Lord?" "I'm a Sikh," he responds. "That's not your fault," says Karena, and prompts him to become a Christian. "No thank you," is his polite, but strained response. Although May-Lin becomes concerned when Karena begins to resist praying and paying respect to ancestors, she generally

supports her daughter's interest in Catholicism, reasoning that "two gods in a house are better than one."

It is primarily through Eve's eyes, however, that we see Buddhism and Christianity, and a world of magic-realism opens to us. Eve believes that her grandmother is reincarnated as a goldfish, and with her, we watch the goldfish dance and sing Chinese songs. As Eve tries to sort through the various religious practices in her household and at Sunday school, she asks her mother, "Would Jesus and Buddha get along?" "Buddha and Jesus teach you to be a good person. Why wouldn't they get along?" her mother replies. At night, Eve watches as Jesus and the Buddha waltz together, and laughing, they lift her up to join them.

Confusion grows in Eve though as her sister involves her more and more in what, to Eve, is the foreign religion of Christianity. Even Eve's beloved goddess (Jennifer Cheon) who normally dances and dispenses blunt advice to the girl, becomes depressed and chooses to work on the plumbing instead of acting like a goddess.

In the end, and the end has a surprising amount of suspense, all religious worlds eventually manage to co-exist in the household as both Eve and Karena

achieve a form of baptism. In a gentle, humorous way, *Eve and the Fire Horse* explores different religious beliefs and practices, as well as issues surrounding religious syncretism and conversion. The blending of these explorations with charming, well-developed characters, an increasingly intense plot, and great beauty makes this film a rare treat.

— MD

5 Days

(World Documentary Competition)

The movie begins with a very brief description of the prisoner's dilemma. The prisoner's dilemma is a thought experiment designed to show, contrary to first appearances, that people do better (get more of what they want) by cooperating with others than by seeking their own benefit exclusively. We would do better acting only in our own self interest if others were not doing the same. But when everyone acts selfishly, then we all are worse off than if we acted with some consideration for others.

This movie, then, tells a story of cooperation, cooperation between the settlers in the Gaza strip and the Israeli army and police as the army and police evacuate the settlers from Gaza. During the evacuation, many deals are made so that both sides of the conflict can do better than they would if they refused to

cooperate. The result of this cooperation was a remarkable process of moving highly emotional people from the land that they believe had been given to them by God. At one point in the movie we see a woman slap the face of the General in charge of the evacuation. When he gets in his car, his companion says that he would like to harm the woman for slapping the General and the General replies: "What slap?" Clearly the General is going to ignore this insult (cooperate) to keep the evacuation process moving toward a successful conclusion. This is just one of many moments captured by the film in which people with very different views about what should happen, cooperate to bring about a solution that is beneficial to everyone.

This movie is about the evacuation of Gaza, but it is also about religion. It is about inter religious conflict – the Jews of Israel and the Muslims that surround the State of Israel. But it is also about intra religious conflict – the Jews of Gaza who believe that the land on which they have been living was given to them by God and the majority of Israelis who want to maintain a Jewish State in the middle of a hostile environment.

— WLB

Another version of this story can be seen in the movie, *Ten Days in Gaza*, directed by Dov Gil-Har and produced by Israel's Channel 2 News.

Gesture Down

(*I Don't Sing*)

(Shorts with Features)

Gesture Down (*I Don't Sing*) is one of two short films produced by Native filmmakers at this year's Sundance Film Festival. *Gesture Down* is an intensely personal short film by Cedar Sherbert (Kumeyaay), inspired by the poem "Gesture Down to Guatemala" by the Native author James Welch (Blackfeet, 1940-2003).

The piece opens with Native singing and rattling and a panoramic shot of a Christian graveyard on the filmmaker's home reservation in northeastern San Diego County, CA. It is the site of his grandfather's grave. His grandfather was a Kumeyaay singer, but Cedar Sherbert tells us, "I don't sing. I never learned." Sherbert seeks out the "last" Kumeyaay singer who apparently lives on the Mexican side of the border.

Gesture Down is an exploration of identity, acculturation, and symbolic cultural renewal. Traditional Native singing is both prayer and healing. In the final scene, Pulido (the last Kumeyaay singer) hands his rattle to Sherbert and asks him to sing "one song."

— BR

The Giant Buddhas

(World Cinema Competition: Documentary)

This is a film about the Giant Buddhas of the Bamiyan Valley in Afghanistan. Director Christian Frei records a rambling, but interesting documentary that explores the terrible destruction of the giant Buddha statues by Taliban decree, the post-Taliban attempts to begin reconstruction of the statues, and the search by an archaeologist for another giant Buddha statue that lies buried in the valley.

Frei offers a historical perspective on the Giant Buddhas of Bamiyan. Most likely constructed in the fifth or sixth centuries, the statues were the largest standing images of the Buddha until their destruction in 2001. When Buddhism was at its peak in Afghanistan, five thousand monks lived in caves surrounding the valley. A choir of monks would chant each evening from behind a mask over the upper face of one of the sculptures. The statues were also mentioned in the writings of the famous Chinese Buddhist monk Xuanzang who traveled along the Silk Road through that area in 639 CE. It was the mention, in Chinese Buddhist writings, of another similarly large reclining Buddha in the valley that led an archeologist to search for another, hopefully undisturbed, giant Buddha statue.

As Frei brings the story of the Buddhas into the present, he reflects on religious fanaticism, the need to create images of faith, and the ways in which humans reject or connect with the past. Along the way we get a fascinating glimpse of the daily lives of the people who live in the Bamiyan valley.

— MD

God Grew Tired of Us

(Independent Film Competition: Documentary)

God Grew Tired of Us is a documentary that follows three of Sudan's Lost Boys, John Bul Dau, Panther Bior, and Daniel Abul Pach, as they journey from a refugee camp in Kakuma, Kenya to new homes in the United States. Filmed over the course of four years by director Christopher Quinn and his crew, this is a profoundly moving, informative and inspiring movie.

In 1983 a civil war began between the North and South in Sudan. Over two million people lost their lives in this war. Besides these casualties, there were boys who, under threat of death, had to flee their villages, or who were orphaned. Eventually these boys, ranging in ages from three to thirteen years, found each other and banded together. Nearly 25,000 of the boys set out across the harsh terrain of

Sudan to find a safe refuge. They became known to the world as the Lost Boys of the Sudan.

First they walked to Ethiopia. The boys formed "families" to take care of each other as they crossed the desert. At the age of thirteen, John, one of the young men from the film, was in charge of 1200 "brothers." In the last days, he said, conditions were so bad he thought perhaps "God got tired of us and He wanted to finish us." Once the families reached Ethiopia, they stayed in a refugee camp for three years. However, when the government there toppled, they were forced to flee again. Of the original 25,000, only 12,000 survived that trek, which took them to Kenya.

God Grew Tired of Us opens as lists are posted in the Kenyan refugee camp providing destination countries for the Lost Boys, who are now young men. We become aware of the incredible jump across cultures that they face as one muses, "I imagine it is very hard to use electricity;" "There is something called an 'apartment'." After fifteen years together as family, parting with their brothers is heartbreaking.

Some of the films lighter moments come as we are allowed to witness John, Panther and Daniel's introduction to their new world. Almost all the food is strange, everything in the apartment, including electricity, must be explained. But as they

settle in, some things are familiar. Having a first drink of soda out of the refrigerator, one of them remarks, "This is Pepsi? Very nice. In Africa we call it Coca-cola." Other parts of the culture are both familiar and very strange. The connection between Christmas (familiar) and Santa Claus or the Christmas tree (unfamiliar) is puzzling to them. "Is Santa in the Bible?" one asks. "How is it connected to the birth of Jesus Christ? In Africa on Christmas eve people march around streets to prepare spiritually for Jesus Christ to be born in our hearts."

As John, Panther and Daniel settle into their apartments in American cities, they encounter not only superficial differences in culture, but also isolation. All, after a three month grace period, need to not only find work to fully support themselves, but also to earn enough to repay the government for their airplane tickets to the U.S. In order to achieve this, and to send money back to the refugee camps, the three take multiple jobs. The isolation they encounter is nearly devastating. Even when they share an apartment, going to work in separate places means that the young men rarely see each other. Their reflections on American culture - "You can't go to a house of someone you don't know here, even though you are all Americans. It's a great shame actually" - are particularly thought-provoking.

While the story itself is a remarkable one, the individuals in this documentary are the reason the film is so inspiring. The courage, dignity, dedication

and faith of these three Dinka men are unmatched. They are true heroes. While overcoming unthinkable suffering in their own lives, the men reach out to others. "Being a Dinka man," one states, "means to help others." The men find many ways to help each other: by organizing a national organization and providing emotional support to each other in the U.S.; by helping other brothers left behind in the refugee camps; and by sending financial aid when they do find surviving family members.

Thank goodness people make documentaries like this. God Grew Tired of Us is a film that can help the world change for the better.

— MD

The Hawk is Dying

(Independent Film Competition: Dramatic)

Director/screenwriter Julian Goldberger's film, based on the novel by Harry Crews, should be a story of freedom and transcendence, but unfortunately it rarely rises above clichés and obvious metaphors.

The Hawk is Dying tells the story of George Gattling, who is a disillusioned everyman type of character, and his search for liberation from an unhappy life. The

problem is, there really isn't too much wrong with Gattling's life, at least nothing that some common sense and a few therapy sessions couldn't fix. That is part of what makes the story frustrating and unfulfilling.

Paul Giamatti (Sideways) as Gattling once again sighs, swears, and twitches his way through a role. Gattling utters trite observations about life such as "Get, get, get. It's all a dead end." It's a fairly one-note performance until Gattling's mentally-challenged (but oh so wise) nephew dies, allowing an even greater amount of hand-wringing and raging about life.

In the end, all problems are solved, but not by common sense and therapy. Gattling captures a hawk and, rather than ineptly killing it as he has done in the past, manages instead to break its spirit and make it dependent on him. In the final moments of the film, Gattling releases the hawk, which is now willing to return to his arm. We are, at this point in the film, supposed to feel joy as Gattling attains his ambition to train and control a hawk. However, Gattling is an unsympathetic character, and therefore his attempts to resuscitate his life and spirit by capturing a beautiful wild creature are unlikely to move many viewers to anything other than scorn. Given the limited choice of options, if I were the hawk, I probably would have chosen death.

— MD

Into Great Silence

(*Die große Stille*)

(World Documentary Competition)

In 1984, director Philip Gröning (*L'amour, l'argent, l'amour*; *The Terrorists*) met with the General Prior of the Grande Chartreuse Carthusian monastery to request permission to make a film at the monastery. The Prior said that he would contact Gröning when they were ready. Fifteen years later, the Prior contacted Gröning. The director then began the process of making Into Great Silence.

It is tempting to describe *Into Great Silence* as a documentary about life in a Carthusian monastery, but it is much more than that. For six months Gröning lived in the monastery and shared the life of a monk. He also filmed 49 minutes each day using only available light. With no voice-over narration, music track, and very little speaking, this film is a meditation on silence and the richness of the present moment. In an interview at Sundance, director Gröning described the film as an exploration and experience of "what time is and what time can do in cinema. Creating a space where time can be tangible."

Gröning says that he chose the Carthusian order because it is the most "iconic." The Order of Carthusians was founded in 1084 and is considered to be the Catholic Church's strictest order. It is a contemplative order in which monks dedicate themselves to a spiritual life and permanent silence. While the better-known Cistercian order (Trappists) also tends toward silence, monks live in community, pray together and take their meals together. In contrast, the Carthusian monks seek solitude by separating from the world, living in cells, and nurturing an inner "solitude of the heart." Other than twice a year, when monks receive visits from family members, the Carthusian monks do not receive visitors. The Prior informs them of events in the outside world, but otherwise the monks do not have television or radio. The monks only leave the monastery once a week for a walk, during which time they are permitted to speak.

Such a life, described in words, sounds barren. *Into Great Silence* though powerfully depicts the beauty of this life and invites the viewer to experience it. The cells, though small, are graced with the beauty of old wood and stone. Here a monk prays, eats, sleeps, washes his dishes, and fosters silence. Gröning filmed at the monastery long enough to capture spring thaw, summer and winter. The slant of sunlight in the cell, a white-robed monk studying a book, the old tin dishes, all express something of awareness and the present moment.

The film is close to three hours long with only a few minutes of speaking. Yet the film is full of sound. Sounds that begin as unfamiliar odd creaks, cracks, drips, and clangs become a monk kneeling on the wooden floor to pray, a fire burning in a stove to warm the cell, an ancient leaking faucet, and the tin plates with food being delivered to each cell. Beyond this are wind, bird song, thunderstorms, bells and Gregorian chant.

The lack of narration in the film was intentional. Gröning says that the strongest reason to almost entirely omit language was because language "helps us to constantly form judgments, plans and goals, instead of experiencing the presence of things." There are many moments in the film when the camera lingers on a bowl of fruit, a piece of wood, or an old stone passageway. Gröning hopes from such shots that "the viewer has a moment of absolute perception...a moment of happiness."

Many people might associate Gröning's views and experiences of awareness, time, silence and presence with Zen Buddhism, but Gröning insists that Western cultures also have these values and practices. He believes that there is an enormous need, and potential, in the West to reflect on time and the meaning of life. And we can do this, Gröning says, "in our own culture, not on the back of Zen Buddhism."

Despite the verbal silence in the film, there are 'interviews' with monks and fathers. These consist of an individual staring straight at the camera. We are unfamiliar with simply encountering someone on film who doesn't speak or do something, yet after the initial shock, these interviews communicate a great deal. While the life is strict for all, the people who live at the monastery are individuals. Some do express a sense of grace or holiness in an interview, others embarrassment, mild suspicion, or amusement. The latter is perhaps the greatest surprise in the film. Unlike many popular views of such monks as dour and somehow limited, these individuals who have chosen this life, are "very strong people" according to Gröning. Even to the viewer they seem content, well balanced, and happy. Indeed, Gröning says that when the monks and fathers finally saw the completed film, which they loved, there was interest and amusement. Normally the monks do not have a chance to see what each other does in a cell. Bending of rules, and chants in private sung off-key were greeted with great laughter.

Into Great Silence director Philip Gröning and Dr. Michele Desmarais

The only interview in which a person speaks comes near the end of the film. A very old, blind monk reflects on his approaching death. "Why fear death?" he asks, "It is the end of our lives. For us it is a great joy." While others have expressed

similar sentiments, the many years in a Carthusian monastery add weight to his words, "In God there is no past, only the present prevails." For a life spent in awareness of the present moment, death is simply another moment. The present is always and eternally present.

Three hours is a long time for many viewers to encounter a film such as *Into Great Silence*. As Gröning himself admits, the person coming to the film must "let go of the feeling of being a competent viewer. All the knowledge about how cinema works will not help you." The best thing is to regard *Into Great Silence* as a type of retreat, or an experience more than a film. And Gröning believes that we strongly need such a retreat in modern culture. "Our culture has been hijacked by industrialization," he says, but now things are changing "the time when you can base your self-concept on work is over...and everyone is afraid of what will happen next." However, Into Great Silence, by showing the life of this monastery—and people whose lives are lived in an eternal present—reveals the relative brevity of the industrial and modern age. We are not, it turns out, so far removed from silence. As the soft-spoken Gröning gently insists "The function of a human being is not to work. The function of a human being is to be aware.

— MD

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Iraq in Fragments

(Independent Film Competition: Documentary)

Winner in Documentary Directing, Excellence in Cinematography, and Documentary Film Editing

Filmed in cinema verité style, *Iraq in Fragments* powerfully documents three compelling narratives (Sunni, Shia, and Kurd) in post-war Iraq. In three acts, the filmmaker James Longley (Gaza Strip) masterfully explores complex religious and ethnic themes that unite as well as divide Iraq today.

The first act follows the life of Mohammed Haithem, an eleven year old Sunni mechanic's assistant, a first grade dropout. We learn Mohammed's father, a Baghdad policeman before the war, has been imprisoned leaving Mohammed to help support his mother and grandmother. Mohammed suffers emotional and physical abuse from his employer, yet he declares, "He loves me." Mohammed dreams of becoming a jet pilot someday, leaving his shattered Iraq behind. Through the eyes of the Sunni men who inhabit Mohammed's Sheik Omar neighborhood in the heart of old Baghdad, we see a bruised portrait of a once dominant people forsaken by the occupation. They ask, "Who is God? Where is God?"

The second act profiles the volatile political/religious movement of Moqtada Sadr's Mehdi Army in Naseriyah and the holy city of Najaf and carries the most overtly religious themes of the film. In this act, the Shias represent themselves as an oppressed, persecuted, and devoutly religious people. Brutally persecuted by Saddam, they were the Iraqi population who arguably stood to gain the most by regime change. They suggest that the present "ethnic/religious" divisions between the Iraqi Sunnis and Shias were fueled by Saddam's oppression, specifically Saddam's suppression of Shia religious traditions. After a series of misguided American military/political blunders, even the moderate Shias in this film have come to view the American occupiers as the successors of Saddam's legacy of Shia oppression. Cast in a classic struggle of good versus evil, the Americans are seen as the "enemy of God", set on killing, torturing, and falsely imprisoning Shias. Longley adeptly avoids the shop-worn script of presenting the Shias as irrational, religious zealots or even "terrorists." His remarkable access to Sadr's inner circle reveals their thoughtful, sophisticated and pragmatic political discourse.

The tone of the third act, which profiles the comparatively idyllic lives of rural Kurdish brick makers and farmers south of Arbil, is both jubilant and victorious. A Kurdish man triumphantly declares that any place touched by the sun

will be ruled by Islam. He continues, "The Kurds brought the Americans to Iraq", but "God brought America to the Kurds." After surviving genocidal atrocities under Saddam's regime, the Iraqi Kurds profiled in this act are well established politically and economically. One of the most striking contrasts to the previous two acts, is that the Kurds are able to look optimistically toward the future. The most dramatic personal sequence focuses on whether an adolescent son, learning English at school, will abandon his dream to become a doctor in favor of his father's desire for him to become an Imam.

The lived experiences of the Sunnis, Shias, and Kurds are masterfully presented by James Longley in this film. Any illusion of a timely, peaceful, political solution in Iraq is irredeemably swept away.

Iraq in Fragments received three prestigious awards at the Sundance Film Festival (Documentary Directing, Excellence in Cinematography, and Documentary Film Editing).

— BR

Jewboy

(Spectrum)

Yuri is a Jewish boy, a religious student in Jerusalem, and the son of a Hassidic rabbi. When his father dies, Yuri returns to Sidney to bury him. Yuri's

grief, however, sparks in him a rebellion from the religious life he has known and sets him on a journey of self discovery.

Yuri gives up his rabbinical training, moves out of his grandmother's home and into a place of his own, takes a job driving a cab, and starts a relationship with a non-Jewish co-worker. Yuri's is the rebellious journey that allows him to find himself.

— WLB

KZ

KZ offers a remarkable perspective on the Holocaust. This documentary, directed by Rex Bloomstein, was filmed in and around the charming town of Mauthausen on the Danube in Upper Austria. Two kilometers from this picturesque town is the former WWII concentration camp where thousands of people from thirty different countries were imprisoned, tortured and exterminated. The former camp is now a memorial. *KZ* focuses on the impact that this memorial--and KZ's atrocious history-

-has on three groups: visitors coming to the memorial; the guides who educate visitors; and citizens of Mauthausen who live their lives in the shadow of KZ.

One of the early scenes of the film shows tour buses arriving at KZ. The tourist aspect and attitude at first appears shocking given the horrors that took place at KZ. Indeed the director captures some astounding reactions to the camp - tourists who merrily pose for a picture by the ovens; gum chewing teens on a school trip who roll their eyes and appear bored. In the end though, all end up touched and transformed in some way by their experiences at KZ. One of the strengths of this documentary is watching this transformation - for some it comes at a memorial for the children who died there, for others as they stop in the gas chamber and for others as they touch the bullet holes in the walls.

Such transformation of the visitors is aided by the skill and commitment of the educational guides. For some this commitment, and the impact of working day after day recounting the horrors at KZ, leads to depression and alcoholism. One young guide, whose skeletal frame, shaved head and intensity lend a haunting presence to his tours, admits that his grandfather was in the SS.

The documentary also explores how many of the citizens of Mauthausen still live in silence and sometimes even outright denial of what took place at KZ. They would like Mauthausen to be just another picturesque town. Their dissociation

from history, the consequences of the Holocaust, and the presence of the memorial demonstrates the necessity for both the memorial at KZ and films such as this.

KZ is a valuable addition to the historical record and Holocaust Studies.

— MD

No. 2

(World Cinema)

World Cinema Audience Award: Dramatic Winner

This is a story of family and ritual. No. 2 is the house where Nanna Maria lives, after moving from Fiji to urban New Zealand. After the death of Nanna Maria's husband, the front door to No. 2 is sealed shut to keep out the evil spirits. But, the door has been closed for years (not the three or four days required by Fijian tradition) and during that time the family, for various reasons, has fallen apart. Some family members hold grudges and others are too busy in an urban environment to participate in the life of an extended family.

In order to bring the family back together and to name her successor, Nanna Maria wants to host a traditional Fijian party. The party is to include a roasted pig,

kava, music, and even fighting. (At least when family members are willing to fight with one another the family is alive.) Nanna asks her grandchildren to prepare for the party, but since most of them are not familiar with traditional Fijian parties, their efforts are bumbling and humorous.

In the end, the grandchildren manage to throw just the kind of party that Nanna Maria wanted. During the party one of the grandchildren breaks down the door to No. 2 that has been closed for so many years. This is the grandchild Nanna Maria selects to be her successor as the head of the family. With the reopening of the door and a successful party--yes, it does include a fight between cousins--the family begins to heal its wounds and come back to life. The movie emphasizes the importance of tradition and ritual in family life.

— WLB/BR

Smudge

(Shorts with Feature)

The Sundance Film Festival was blessed this year with the screening of *Smudge*, a powerfully insightful short film by Canadian Métis filmmaker Gail Maurice. This film focuses primarily on

the traditional Native practice of "smudging" (the burning of sage and sweetgrass) used in prayer and purification rites. In the film several Natives (an academic, a counselor, and an actor) relate aspects of their personal spiritual journeys and the obstacles they have faced expressing their Native spiritual practices in the city.

Using trademark Native humor, a Native actor searching for an appropriate place to "smudge" in his theatre deadpans, "How is the urban Indian to survive?" How indeed? Maurice reveals the dilemma urban Indians face when trying to practice their traditional ceremonial ways in an inhospitable environment. This film is set in the city of Toronto, but the message is equally relevant for any urban area in North America. In the United States, the majority of Native Americans are now "urban"--more than 2/3 of Native Americans no longer live on reservations. This film speaks directly to their struggle to maintain (or perhaps even re-discover and cultivate) their Native identity and culture. One of the most poignant vignettes of the film occurs when an Aboriginal woman is struggling with whether it is appropriate to "offer tobacco" in an urban landscape. When she consulted an elder, she learned that "everything" in the built environment is still "Mother Earth." The moon is still the moon…no matter where you live.

— BR

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Interview with Gail Maurice

Gail Maurice is strong, intelligent, beautiful, modern and gracious. Film and TV roles should reflect these qualities of Native women. Unfortunately for all of us, industry portrayals of strong Native women are lacking. But Gail Maurice is changing that through her life and her films.

Gail Maurice is a Métis-Canadian filmmaker and actor. She was raised in a small village in Saskatchewan, where she learned traditional ways - and the Métis traditional language Michif/Cree - from her grandmother. Maurice is now one of the few who still speak Michif.

Gail Maurice (left) and Michele Demarais

Maurice's motivation to leave village life was education. She attended the University of Saskatchewan and the University of British Columbia (U.B.C.) and holds degrees in Psychology and Sociology. While Maurice was in Vancouver attending U.B.C., she became interested in acting and the film industry. Ten years of acting, however, led to dissatisfaction with the roles she was asked to portray.

Stereotypes, the Toronto-based Maurice says, are still a problem for Native actors. Sometimes she would argue with directors about the lines she was asked to say. Most roles for native women, according to Maurice, "are bad." Because of this, Maurice began writing and directing her own films. While Maurice remains committed to accurate portrayals of Native people, she found that she also enjoys the focus that comes from being behind the camera.

Maurice wrote, directed and produced her first video, Little Indians, in February 2004. Little Indians was screened at the ImagineNATIVE film festival in Toronto, as well as film festivals in Russia, Palm Springs and Moose Factory. Several other short videos and films followed, including Memory in Bones which was screened at the Inside/Out film festival and Smudge, a short documentary which aired on the CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Company) and was screened at the 2005 Sundance Film Festival.

Maurice says that Smudge shows "that Native spirituality does not stop just because you're in a city." The point of Smudge is to share this spirituality and "show some of that sacred knowledge." Remarkably gentle and open, Maurice says of beliefs and rituals, "there is not a specific way, as long as you believe, as long as you're communing with the Creator and with the Ancestors. That's the point."

Throughout our conversation at the Sundance Film Festival, Maurice repeatedly marveled and commented on indigenous peoples around the world. "We're all the same," she said excitedly. Maurice spent some time living in a village in Nepal, and found Buddhist beliefs as well as village life remarkably similar to her own upbringing. There is an emphasis, she noted, on connection and respect in Buddhism and Native traditions, on recognition of interdependence and compassion.

Such recognition and interest in part led to Maurice's latest feature length documentary, *Scream Your Dreams*, which she is filming in the Arctic, Beauval (mid-North) and Toronto. *Scream Your Dreams* examines the environmental/cultural connection to the land and its affects on youth and their dreams, hopes and art. Maurice's blog about making *Scream Your Dreams* is at http://www.screamyourdreams.blogspot.com/

Gail Maurice represents a powerful new voice in filmmaking. Omaha audiences can have a chance to meet her at the 2006 Native American Speakers Series "Lights, Camea, Action: Native Americans & Film" on 13 April at 7 p.m. in the University of Nebraska at Omaha's W.H. Thompson Alumni Center.

— MD

The Tribe

(Shorts Program III)

The Tribe is a short history (18 minutes) of the Jewish People and the Barbie Doll that quite powerfully illustrates how Jews in America define their Jewish identity. It provides various illustrations of the wide spectrum of Jewish identity and shows the change in attitude toward assimilation in the under 35 age group in America.

The Barbie Doll is one device used in the movie to connect a variety of images and various elements of the story. Barbie (actually Barbara Millicent Roberts) does not look Jewish, nor does she act Jewish (looking and acting Jewish being one of the topics of the film), but she is the product of the imagination of Ruth Handler, a Jew who named Barbie after her own daughter and Barbie's pal, Ken, after her own son. Since the movie is a montage of images and a wandering story, you will be amazed at how well the Barbie Doll is used as a device for ideas that the writer wants to bring to the audience and as a device for connecting elements of the story.

The Tribe of the title is how Jews frequently identify themselves - as members of The Tribe - but the movie begins with a description of the population

of the planet as a tribe, and it ends by noting that there are other tribes (and subtribes) on the planet, so that while we are learning what the writer wants us to think about The Tribe, we learn much more about tribes in general, whether that means the tribe to which we belong or the tribe that seems to be a problem for us.

Narrated by Peter Coyote, the messages of the movie (and there are many) are serious, but the expression of those messages, both about The Tribe and tribes in general, is done with delightful humor. This means that the result of seeing the movie is similar to hearing a lecture, but the audience never feels that it is the object of a lecture. The audience is listening to a complex and funny story, but the result is that you will come away with a different view of The Tribe and of your own place in the world.

— WLB/GM



What Remains: A Film About the Life and Work of Sally Mann

(Spectrum)

The documentary, *What Remains*, is a meditation on death and its intimate- and surprisingly beautiful-connections with life.

In 1991 Steven Cantor shot a short film, *Blood Ties* (later nominated for an Academy Award), about an American photographer named Sally Mann. At that time Mann was photographing her children for a series of portraits she later called Immediate Family. Mann's artistic sensitivity, along with her use of the archaic wet-plate photographic technique, resulted in hauntingly beautiful, timeless portraits.

What Remains documents Mann's recent work. Sometimes Mann's photographs are meditations on the land and death. Her landscapes of Civil War battlefields record what happens to the land when there is a massive amount of death upon it. The film also shows Mann taking photographs at a body farm, normally used for forensic research. Mann's close-up portraits of decaying corpses communicate her respect for her subject matter. The resulting photographs have a holiness to them that challenges the viewer to look closely at death.

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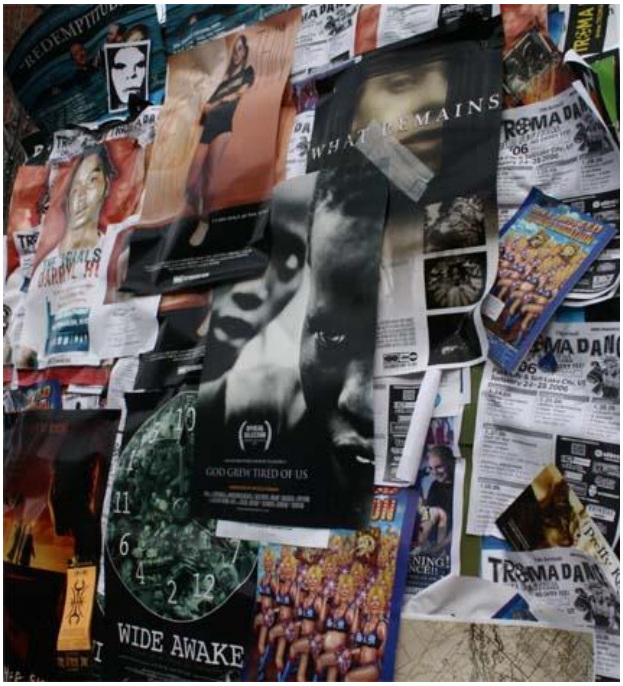
Mann continues her photographic meditations on death at her family farm in Virginia. Her husband, Larry, suffers from a form of muscular dystrophy and Mann, with Larry's encouragement, records the changes to his body. While photographing and confronting the inevitability of death, Mann also reflects upon her artistic process, the nature of photography, and her own feelings about aging.

In all, *What Remains* could be a difficult film to watch. However most will find that Mann's intelligence and artistic talent allow us to see death not as something disgusting or upsetting, but rather as an organic part of life.

— MD

Photo Gallery

Photos by Abi Williams and The Journal of Religion & Film Editors
and Dr. Beth Ritter

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