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Sundance Film Festival 2015

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Abstract
This is an introduction to our coverage of the 2015 Sundance Film Festival.

Author Notes
Rubina (Ruby) Ramji is an Associate Professor in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Cape Breton University. After serving as a Chair of the Religion, Film and Visual Culture Group for the American Academy of Religion and then on the steering committee, Rubina continues to serve on the Executive Committee for the Canadian Society for the Study of Religion as President and is the Film Editor of the Journal of Religion and Film. Her research activities focus on the areas of religion, media and identity, religion in Canada, and religion and immigration.
The 2015 Sundance Film Festival was filled with panels, music, presentations and lots of independent movies this year! Of interest was the “Power of Stories” panels put on during the festival. The “Serious Ladies” Panel astonishingly included five Hollywood women who are amazing storytellers: Emily Nussbaum, Jenji Kohan, Lena Dunham, Mindy Kaling, and Kristen Wiig, who discussed the entertainment business and how difficult it is for women to get into the business. The “Visions of Independence” Panel included powerhouse filmmakers Robert Redford and George Lucas. They discussed how they used their imaginations and dreams to bring their visions to the big screen, themselves becoming an inspiration to young filmmakers who aspire to bring their visions to fruition. This is why we attend Sundance – to find those creative stories and visions and share them with our readers. The art of film is celebrated in Park City and so we trek through airports and stormy weather to celebrate with fresh faced filmmakers.

This year all the reviewers returned home (to Omaha and Canada) to find multiple inches of new snow and below zero temperatures. Park City had some of the mildest weather we've ever experienced – 40 to 50 degrees, no snow or rain. This made it easy for us to get around to screen more movies for our readers, but it made for poor snow conditions for skiers in Park City.
This year's Sundance Film Festival was different from previous years. There did not seem to be as many movies related to religion as in previous years. The most explicit was *Last Days in the Desert*, where Ewan McGregor played both Jesus and Devil.
Yet there were more movies about coming of age or finding oneself than usual. If the Festival had a theme this would have been it. Movies of this kind are often related to transformation and transformation is an element found in many religions, but the connection does not always work. We did find many movies, however, that we think will be of special interest to our readers and some movies that might not seem on the surface to be related to religion but which can be seen to comment on religion in various ways.
The second difference in this year's Festival is that it seemed more crowded than usual. The Press screenings are now combined with the Industry screenings. The result is that we did not get to see a number of movies that we would have liked to have reviewed. *The Witch* (won the Directing Award, U.S. Dramatic), for example, turned away about 150 people from its first Press and Industry screening. They did eventually add other screenings, but they conflicted with our schedules. The other movie we especially wanted to cover was *Going Clear: Scientology and the Prison of Belief*, the documentary about the Church of Scientology (based on Lawrence Wright’s book of the same name). While we were not able to review these films for our readers, the large turnout of people for Press and Industry screenings probably indicates both a significant interest in movies related to religion and the continued industry interest in Sundance films. Even
though we did not see every movie we wanted to see, we were able to review enough films for our readers that the annual visit to Park City was well worth the effort.

Waiting in the Press and Industry line to see Knock Knock at Sundance Film Festival 2015
Courtesy of Jodi McDavid
Park City, UT January 25, 2015

This year, 118 feature-length films were selected for the Festival competition: they represented 29 countries and 45 first-time filmmakers. In total, 12,166 films were submitted. Along with the films screened at the Festival, there were additional feature-length films in the Spotlight, Park City at Midnight, New Frontier, Sundance Kids, Premieres and Documentary Premieres sections. The Sundance Film Festival is truly global and we watched many
groundbreaking and award winning films this year. Of the films we reviewed, these outstanding films won the following awards:

- *Umrika* won The Audience Award for the World Cinema Dramatic competition.

- *The Stanford Prison Experiment* won The Waldo Salt Screenwriting Award for the U.S. Dramatic competition. This film also won The 2015 Alfred P. Sloan Feature Film Prize.

- *Advantageous* won the U.S. Dramatic Special Jury Award for Collaborative Vision.

- *Partisan* won the World Cinema Dramatic Special Jury Award for Cinematography.

As always, we want to thank everyone in the Sundance Press Office. Because the Festival is so large, we would simply not be able to keep up without their help. Thanks to everyone. And, thanks to the many volunteers who help us make our way through the maze of venues and schedules.