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## Sundance 2016: Celebrating the Diversity of Independent Cinema

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# Sundance 2016: Celebrating the Diversity of Independent Cinema

## **Abstract**

Introduction to the Sundance Film Festival 2016.

## **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.

*Sundance 2016: Celebrating the Diversity of Independent Cinema*  
Sundance Report by Rubina Ramji

Reviewers: William L. Blizek, Rubina Ramji and Kanani Fong  
Photographer: Monica Blizek



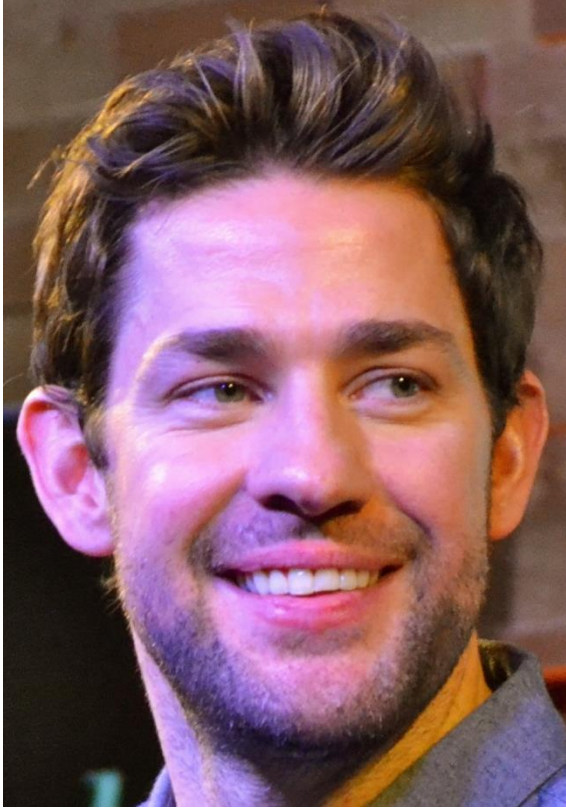
Arriving in Park City for SFF2016

Courtesy of Rubina Ramji  
Park City, UT January 21, 2016

By far, the 2016 Sundance Film Festival program was amazing in comparison to the past few years. It celebrated storytelling. This year's film line-up had brilliant world premieres of dramatic films, groundbreaking international documentaries and enticing shorts. The program itself was packed full of interesting panel discussions, installations, and music events. The New Frontier Initiative of Sundance focused heavily on virtual reality and creative technology. Even though past years have included impressive events, this year seemed to be filled with so many that we were only able to attend a fraction of them. The best part about this year's film schedule is that we, the film reviewers, were able to see so many excellent screenings from around the world.



One of the highlight panels this year focused on actors who, even though they come with a large status, explained why they found independent films worthy of their time. High profile actors, including Viggo Mortensen, Bryce Dallas Howard, Diane Ladd, Rebecca Hall, John Krasinski and Thomas Middleditch, gathered at Sundance TV Headquarters to discuss why they chose to be part of independent films. Viggo Mortensen worked in a small art house theatre and got to see old and foreign films that wouldn't necessarily make it to big screens. He found that he related to such characters and wanted to know how it was done: this led to his career in acting, appearing first in small roles in *Witness* (1985) and *Crimson Tide* (1995). They were all attracted to roles where the characters they played were memorable and inspirational.



John Krasinski and Viggo Mortensen, Sundance TV Indie Film Panel

Courtesy of Monica Blizek  
Park City, UT January 2016

Countering this panel was another bringing together independent filmmakers: John Carney (known for *On the Edge* [2001] and *Once* [2007]), Liz Garbus (directed and produced *Bobby Fischer Against the World* [2011]), Diego Luna (directed and produced *Cesar Chávez* [2014]), James Schamus (co-wrote *Eat Drink Man Woman* [1994] and directed *Indignation* [2016]), Whit Stillman (directed and produced *Metropolitan* [1990]) and Christine Vachon (produced *Boys Don't Cry* [1999]).

The films that these actors, writers, directors and producers create are what make Sundance what it is – they have created a space where one can also find fresh perspectives and new voices. Sundance provides a forum for a new generation of filmmakers, and their stories are captivating.

We hope that you will find the same sense of admiration in the stories we watched on screen – stories we wish to share with you through our reviews.



Rubina Ramji and Elijah Wood

Park City received multiple snowfalls, making it seem like a winter wonderland, filled with sightings of stars, colorful Sundance banners and thousands of avid film viewers. Even though there were many film stars to be seen in the streets (for instance Elijah Wood, Ellen Page, Daniel Radcliffe, Casey Affleck and Danny DeVito), the *Journal of Religion & Film* was here to watch movies, and that's what we did!



Journal of Religion and Film Swag

This year, we found that the films varied widely in theme – some had to do with overcoming religious, societal and cultural pressures (*Sonita, Agnus Dei, The Lobster, Naz & Maalik, Captain Fantastic*); others focused on personal relationships within religious contexts (*Sand Storm; Halal Love*); while still others examined the hard choices we face in life and how we handle them (*Holy Hell, Viva, Under the Shadow, Embrace the Serpent*); and, as always, the dark underbelly of humanity was explored (*The Lure, Equity, How to Let Go of the World*). Regardless of the various topics explored in these films, they all seemed to transcend the standard storytelling formula – young protagonists became heroes, religion was often more harmful than helpful, and many of the movies left viewers feeling afraid for the future. We found that most, if not all, the movies we screened this year will be of interest to our readers as they provide a diverse commentary on religion and spiritual ideals.



Elizabeth Moss in *The Free World*



James Purefoy in *Equity*

Courtesy of Monica Blizek  
Park City, UT January 2016

When given a few moments reprieve from watching films, the reviewers were able to attend a few social events celebrating independent film festivals. We attended the Louisiana International Film Fest's fourth annual celebration of culture, talent, food and Mardi Gras Parade at Sundance.





Rubina Ramji and William Blizek at the Louisiana Film Fest and Mardi Gras Parade

123 feature-length films were selected for the Sundance Film Festival competition and 72 shorts. In total, 12,793 films were submitted. Along with 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 has truly come to represent diversity, in its storytellers and the stories they screen.

While we were not able to review all the films at Sundance for our readers (there just aren't enough of us to watch them all!), we were able to review enough films for our readers that the annual visit to Park City was well worth the effort. Of the films we reviewed, these outstanding films won the following awards:

- ❖ *Sand Storm*, from Israel, won the World Cinema Grand Jury Prize: Dramatic competition.
- ❖ *Sonita* won the World Cinema Grand Jury Prize: Documentary competition and the Audience Award for World Cinema Documentary.

- ❖ *Between Land and Sea*, from Colombia, won the Audience Award: World Cinema Dramatic competition. As well, Vicky Hernández and Manolo Cruz, in *Between Sea and Land*, won the World Cinema Dramatic Special Jury Award for Acting.
- ❖ *Embrace the Serpent*, by Colombian director Ciro Guerra, won the Alfred P. Sloan Feature Film Prize.
- ❖ *Trapped* won the U.S. Documentary Special Jury Award for Social Impact Filmmaking.
- ❖ *The Lure*, from Poland, won the World Cinema Dramatic Special Jury Award for Unique Vision and Design.

As always, we would like 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. We appreciate all that you do. And, thanks to the many volunteers who show up every year to help us make our way through the maze of venues and schedules and people.