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Report from Sundance 2011: Religion in Independent Film

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Abstract
This is the report from the Sundance Film Festival 2011.

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Cinema has shown over and over that, as human beings, we share values beyond any border, real or imagined.

- Robert Redford

Sundance has come to Park City once again – the streets are filled with avid movie star oglers, film students who’ve hitched their way to Utah, the press corps, unknown filmmakers who are hoping to find a way to share their movies with a larger audience, industry movers and shakers and a few stars. It’s one of those few times where we are all brought together and made equal: for the love of movies.

The films this year seem to have taken a distinctive twist: filled with hate, anger, vengeance, and sometimes love, the film lineup at Sundance 2011 has already left us dazed, emotionally drained and inspired. There are more “difficult” films screening at Sundance this year because the organizers find that the festival itself proves that there is a hunger for an alternative kind of entertainment. How is it possible for Sundance to keep finding such gems? This festival is one of the few places where the art of story making becomes film. While some of the
movies that premiere at Sundance follow the “Hollywood” formula, the majority are chosen for their commitment to social consciousness.

Over nine thousand films are submitted to the annual festival, from various categories: US and international feature films; US and international documentaries; and, US and international shorts. Only about one hundred films will be chosen to be screened. Also, Sundance began a tradition last year where filmmakers across the US were able to screen their films across eight different cities - this year it’s nine cities. On one night during the festival (January 27), audiences across the United States get to share the night with film and dialogue. Nine filmmakers from Park City are dispatched to nine cities across the country to screen and discuss their direct-from-Festival films with audiences. On the same night, Utah Festival goers celebrate this collective moment with special screenings and other events. This is “Sundance Film USA”. Robert Redford, founder of the Sundance Institute created this event with the goal of sharing as many films with the country: “the concept of Sundance Film USA is to ignite dialogue as people across the country engage in a collective film experience.” This year Sundance is also including a Native Showcase, focusing attention on emerging Native American and Indigenous filmmakers, and this report shares this focus – check out the

Dr. Ruby Ramji, Film Editor, Journal of Religion & Film
reviews by Michele Desmarais. With a desire to support filmmakers from diverse backgrounds, this showcase is an excellent way of displaying this commitment. Hopefully this showcase will become a regular part of Sundance, but no decisions have been made about the future.

On top of the entries that have been chosen to screen at Sundance, there are also other features and documentaries that will be “Spotlighted” because they are considered special and worthy of re-screening. In total, one hundred and ninety nine films will be screened over ten days. What struck me as exciting this year was that three of the six films we considered important to readers interested in religion were developed through the Sundance Institute’s Feature Film Program: Circumstance, Martha Marcy May Marlene and On the Ice. As the Sundance Institute mentors independent filmmakers and their scripts to complete these film projects, it will be interesting to see how many future offerings will carry important religious messages that will be made available to larger audiences.

So far, we have found that the films being screened at Sundance this year are hitting the extremes in terms of emotion. Some people leave the theatre confounded, angry, or ecstatic. Redford acknowledges that “some films are not going to be liked at all, and some will be very much liked.” The Sundance Film Festival does not want you, the viewer to have the “happy ending” story: they are here to create opportunities for filmmakers and film audiences to find their work.
We can’t watch all the movies being screened at Sundance this year, but we hope this report adds another opportunity for you the reader to find some of these works worthy of watching when made available to the public.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone at the SFF Press Office, especially Brooks Addicott, Kelly Frey and Casey De La Rosa. They always make navigating through the numerous films an easy process. The entire Press Office team makes the Sundance experience better every year and their efficiency and support are most valued.

The spirit of indie filmmaking continues on – the low/no budget film premieres side by side with stellar names in the film industry, allowing viewers to absorb and be stimulated by new names as well as the regulars. Intertwined amongst so many of these films are outright themes of religion, but so far the true finds have discreet themes embedded in them, sometimes hard to find and explain, which makes finding these kernels all the more exciting. We hope that you will enjoy these diamonds we’ve picked for you, and better yet, we hope these reviews will encourage you to search out these films, as many will not make it to a big screen,
but they are so important to be experienced. Engage in the collective film experience.

— Rubina Ramji, Film Editor

The Sundance Film Festival would not be possible without the help of approximately 1,600 volunteers who come from all parts of the country, indeed from all over the world to participate in the SFF. We want to take this opportunity to thank all of the volunteers who make the Festival possible. We have selected three of those volunteers to represent the entire group. Below find: Jeri Smith and Bill Blizek at the Information Desk at SFF Headquarters; Waldy Feliz and Bill Blizek at the bus stop on Park Avenue, and, with Bill Blizek, Shane McCullogh, who has been a volunteer for seven years. Born in Ireland, Shane now lives in Stockholm, Sweden.
Signs keep things moving as the festival proceeds full-steam ahead.

Michele Marie Desmarais and Monica Blizek outside Festival Headquarters.
William L. Blizek walking in Park City, Utah where the Sundance Festival is held each year.
The Japanese film *Abraxas (Aburakurasu no matsuri)* is not only an enjoyable, even wondrous, movie. It is an important contribution to the field of Buddhism and film, and a must-see for those generally interested in religion and film and/or Buddhism.

Director and screenplay writer Naoki KATO based *Abraxas* on a novel of the same name by Sokyu GENYU. GENYU is an award-winning writer and a Japanese Zen monk. The novel and film provide us with a story about Jonen, a Zen monk who used to be a punk rock musician. Japanese musician and first-time actor Suneohair embodies this central role with complete authenticity.

*Abraxas* opens with the Zen temple monk Jonen meditatively taking medication prior to a career day talk at a local high school. Despite the treatment, he crumbles under the pressures of his own doubts, anxieties and public speaking. Before a largely uninterested and tittering high school audience, Jonen finally stammers, “Shrimps molt all their lives.” The moment is humiliating, but even this statement of Jonen has wisdom—all beings, from simple to complex, “molt,” that is, we all change. This is the Buddhist doctrine of anicca (anitya, impermanence). Given the reality of constant change, how is it possible that we have any sense of continuing identity, of self (atta, atman), and why then do we cling to that self/identity to such
an extent that we cause suffering for ourselves and others? The Buddha himself taught about the nature of anicca (anitya, impermanence), anatta (anatman, no self), and dukkha (duhkha, suffering, unsatisfactoriness) and these have remained central doctrines and themes for Buddhists since.

“Self, self, self,” whispers Jonen at points throughout the film, recollecting his sense of identity and his struggle to both embrace and transcend it. Jonen’s career day crisis causes him to question his vocation as a monk, but with the support of his master, Genshu (Kaoru KOBAYASHI), Jonen decides to move beyond his fears—by giving a punk rock concert. This will force him to confront past demons directly (alcohol, a mental breakdown) as well as to offer him the possible liberation and expression that punk rock music (noise to some!) once provided.

Much of the film’s charm comes as Jonen makes arrangements for the concert and we meet the community members of his small town. These include a struggling father, his sullen teenage son, the neighborhood nosy do-gooder, Genshu’s beloved dying dog, and Jonen’s own wife and son (monks and priests in some Japanese traditions can be married).

Abraxas continues to explore, with wisdom and sensitivity, key Buddhist doctrines as the plot unfolds. Along with themes touching on the nature of anicca, anatta, and dukkha, the film provides an intensely beautiful scene illustrating the
important doctrine of paticca-samuppada (pratitya-samutpada interdependent origination/arising), the idea that nothing exists independently. For example, life and death depend upon each other—one without the other renders each meaningless. The interdependence of sound/noise/silence, of self/not-self comes to a climax when Jonen, verging on another mental breakdown, duels with noise, self, and past by playing a crashing cacophonous punk guitar solo on a rock at the ocean’s edge. An electrical short knocks him out. Jonen awakens to a splash of water on his face, to “self, self, self,” and silence. As Jonen says, “If we become one with noise, then the noise disappears…and self is a kind of noise.” Director Naoki KATO, in an interview, stated that although raised in a Buddhist culture, his primary attraction to the novel and to the film as a project, came because of the music. And the music is wonderful—lots of punk music and a gloriously quirky rendition of Leonard Cohen’s Hallelujah—but the duel on the rock lifts all the music to the status of a powerful teaching about interdependence.

In a later scene, Jonen’s wife Tae (Rie TOMOSAKA)—worried about him and largely unsupportive of his efforts to give another concert—comes to her own realization. One night she views first Jonen then herself in the endless reflection of multiple mirrors. “When there’s so many, you can’t tell which one is really you.” Realization of the interdependent nature of things—self/not-self, noise/silence, suffering/cessation of suffering—leads to awakening.
Director Naoki KATO enhances this experience and exploration of Buddhism through such beautifully shot scenes and also through his choice to shoot pivotal moments in the film showing only the back of the characters’ heads. As KATO later explained, this allows the viewer to decide what emotions the character is feeling. This is much the same function that the renowned Zen rock gardens have. The gardens themselves do change, but their very simplicity serves to remind us that it is the mind of the viewer that continuously and powerfully shapes and changes the experience, the ‘reality’ of the garden at each moment. Hence even the very act of viewing the film Abraxas ushers one into the experience and doctrines of Buddhism.

Finally, the film’s value also comes from the chance to understand what Jonen’s life is like as a temple, ‘salaried-worker’ monk and as a person. Too many movies in the West have portrayed Buddhism as some other-worldly, almost other-than-human tradition. Some of us in the field have termed such portrayals the ‘Shangri-la Syndrome.’ Abraxas, in contrast, gives us a human: Jonen suffers from mental illness, often can’t remember his suttas (sutras, verses), has to perform various rituals, experiences good times and difficult times with his wife, loves his young son, and must attend to the many needs of the people in his community. At the end of the film, Jonen walks down stairs and into the sunlight—not into the temple, but into the world. This, ultimately, is what Abraxas does. It leads us into
Buddhism and simultaneously into a world of joy, suffering, difficulties and breakthroughs. It is a rare accomplishment indeed to give the world a film that is this enjoyable, this charming and this wise.

Perhaps the purpose and meaning of this film are best expressed though, in the words of Naoki KATO himself, “This visual expression of human insanity and fragility made me decide to make this film. I hope the life of Jonen, who cannot control the noise inside him but finally accepts himself as he is, gives a hint of life to those who have concerns in their life.”

Special thanks to director Naoki KATO, producer Hiroku MATSUDA, assistant producer Yuki Saito, sales agent Kumi Kamimura, and translator Greg Burnham for their gracious help at Sundance Film Festival arranging an interview and screening of the film for JRF editors.

A final note: Abraxas was filmed in the Fukushima Prefecture, later the site of the nuclear reactor disaster that occurred after the 2011 earthquake and tsunami. Many of the extras in the film, along with some central characters (such as Jonen’s young son played by Taku Yamaguchi, and even Genshu’s dog) are local residents, as is the writer and monk Sokyu GENYU. Indeed, Sokyu GENYU’s temple, where he is deputy resident priest, is just 28 miles west of the Fukushima Daiichi plant. He is continuing to aid efforts to help the people of this area.
Another Earth

US Dramatic Competition

Alfred P. Sloan Feature Film Prize

Special Jury Prize: Dramatic competition Award Winner

This is one of the best two or three films that we have seen here at Sundance. Another earth has been discovered. It had been hidden by the sun and only now has it made its appearance. It is speculated that the other earth is a mirror image of our own planet—a mirror image in every way. But, it is also speculated that things have changed since the discovery of the new planet. Maybe things can turn out differently on the other earth. The other earth, then, offers us hope that things can be changed, that we can make things right, that we can have a second chance.

Rhonda Williams has done something very bad, something for which she is imprisoned for four years. Once a promising MIT student, Rhonda is now a janitor at a local high school trying to figure out what to do with her life and how to find redemption for the bad thing she has done. Because she is very smart and writes...
well, and oddly enough, because she is a felon, Rhonda wins a seat on the first private space flight to the other earth. Her hope is that by traveling to the other earth she can in some way change the events of her life that got her in trouble. In the end, she sacrifices her seat on the shuttle to the man she harmed in the hopes that he can have a second chance and in an effort to find redemption. In a surprise ending, Rhonda is more successful than she might have imagined.

— WLB

_The Catechism Cataclysm_

_Park City at Midnight_

Father Billy’s catechism class is not going well – rather than teaching the principles of Christianity to his group of parishioners, he regales them with jokes (bad jokes at that). His superior decides that it’s time for Father Billy to explore the reasons for why he has joined the seminary. So Father Billy sets out to find his sister’s ex-boyfriend, who Billy reveres because he believes he has become a rock star, and spends the day with him canoeing.
In his own way, Father Billy is undertaking his own catechism, spending time with Robbie, questioning and examining Robbie’s life because he believes it’s much more thrilling than his own.

As the title of the movie suggests, *The Catechism Cataclysm* involves a violent tragedy that both brings about fundamental change in Father Billy and serves to bring meaning back to him about his desire to be in the seminary.

*The Catechism Cataclysm* is a bizarre and surreal movie, taking the viewer on a fantastical trip through an examination of two different life paths. Filled with storytelling, strangers and death, this movie illustrates the weird and wonderful ways people can find god. The movie ends with the lyrics “God will fuck you up so you better do some praying while you can.” Billy heeds these words carefully, and God comes through for him.

— RR
Circumstance

US Dramatic Competition

The Audience Award: Dramatic Competition Award Winner

Circumstance gives us a glimpse into the lives of two teenage girls growing up in the Islamic ruled country of Tehran, Iran and how they cope with their experiences of rebellion, sexuality and friendship. It sounds like a simple story but the idea of teenage rebellion in post-revolution Iran is an oxymoron. Teenagers, especially girls, cannot express themselves in any way, for fear of the morality police who constantly monitor people’s activities, openly and discreetly. Atafeh and Shireen are best friends and find that the intimacy they are only permitted to have in Iranian society is with each other.

The film gives us an insider-outsider perspective on how Iran has changed and become “alien”. Parties, alcohol, drugs and expressions of sexuality have all been driven underground and yet we are able to catch a glimpse of this alternative life because of the filmmaker. The director and screenwriter, Maryam Keshavarz, based this story on her own life experiences as she shuttled back and forth between New York for school and Iran for the summers with family.
Having to navigate through the laws and regulations of Islamic life in Iran comprises the outer layer of the story. What lies beneath is the relationship between two girls, who are from different parts of Iranian society – one rich and the other ostracized for her parents’ role against the revolution – who fall in love with each other as all other avenues of relationships are restricted. Girls cannot interact with boys in public; they are socially segregated and can only find happiness in their fantasies of escaping Iran to live together “freely” in Dubai, and support each other when the outside world imposes its rules on them.

*Circumstance* also offers insight into how “liberal” Iranians are drawn to Islamic fundamentalism, often as a way of escape from the country’s impositions on their freedoms and a way to belong to the larger society that has power. Mehran, Atafeh’s older brother changes throughout the movie from a drug addict returned from rehab to an informer for the morality police. His salvation is found in the mosque, where he is used to betray his own family for their liberal way of living. Rather than struggle with his son, the father realizes that there is no way to fight the fundamentalist regime in Iran and follows his son down the road to “faith”.

The film is a reflection of the way Iranians now live under the control of the mullahs. Monitored by closed circuit television outside the home, Iranians are constantly watched for any indiscretions that may occur in public. But this threat enters into Atafeh’s house, when her brother Mehran brings the practices and
impositions of the morality police into the sanctuary of the home. With no safe
harbour left, what will happen to the youth of Iran? They are left with little or no
refuge, making us wonder when Iran will explode from this oppression. 
*Circumstance* offers the fantasy of escape to Dubai, and in the end, this is all that
is left for Atafeh, leaving behind her family, her friends and her love. Unfortunately,
the repressive Islamic regime maintains a stranglehold on Iranians, young and old,
and we the viewers are left sympathizing for the youth growing up in Iran and
wondering how it can change for the better.

— RR

*Connected: An Autoblogography about Love, Death and Technology*

US Documentary Competition

Tiffany Shlain wanted to make a film about how we are all now connected
through various forms of technology. In her fashion, she chose to make a documentary
film. This is an important topic because even our individual actions now can have
wide ranging consequences, because an entire economy can change in a matter of
minutes, because watching world events as they happen brings the world together
or tears it apart. Consider, for example, the images of the planes crashing into the
twin towers or the hurricane in Haiti. Consider the consequences of Wikileaks or
the rumors about John McCain in the South Carolina primary. Or consider the connectedness of the citizens of Tunisia who overthrew their government and as I write this review I hear that Egypt has cut off all cell phone usage. And it is important to remind ourselves that the rate of technological growth will increase and so too our connectedness.

Before Shlain got very far in the process of exploring our technological connectedness, however, her father developed cancer and she was required to focus most of her attention on the connectedness of family, friends, and community. What Shlain learned from this movie and what she shares with her audience, in her inimitable style of film making, is that there are really two quite different ways to be connected. One is the connectedness that technology makes possible, a connectedness that enables us to do business and communicate with people around the world. Moving money out of the bond market for a particular country with the push of a button when it appears that the government of that country might collapse or when deep corruption is unearthed are examples.

William L. Blizek connects with Tiffany Shlain.
But, so is sending ten dollars to Haitian relief by texting a particular number.

The other kind of connectedness is the kind of connectedness that we experience in our interpersonal relationships. Since Shlain's father is a psychologist, she makes much of brain chemistry (dopamine, norepinephrine, oxytocin, serotonin, etc.), showing, for example, that a hug that lasts more than six seconds stimulates levels of oxytocin that make us feel this kind of connectedness. The question is whether our connections to the rest of the world can produce the kind of connectedness that we have when we hold our father's hand, when we walk hand in hand with our significant other, or when we tickle our children.

Ever the optimist, Shlain does think that we can find the deep connection we all seek even through the technology that connects us to people around the world. Shlain believes that all of the religions of the world (at least most of those religions) have in common our connection to something greater than ourselves, to something universal. And this is what technology is making possible. One might even claim here that technology makes religion (connectedness with the cosmos) more likely and this connection is just the kind of deep connection that satisfies the soul in a way that simply doing business does not.

It is interesting, then, that one of the other films showing at Sundance this year was Kevin MacDonald's Life in a Day. Life in a Day is a movie constructed
from over 80,000 submissions, over 5,000 hours of footage, from all over the world, from Australia to Zambia, from our most famous cities and from some of the most remote reaches of the planet. People around the world were invited to capture a moment in their day— that day being July 24, 2010. From all of those submissions MacDonald and his team created a remarkably intimate portrayal of — all of us. Without any voice-over narration, the way is cleared to allow people (and some goats doing a star turn) to reveal moments in their own lives that day. The movie begins at night when we see the moon, elephants bathing in the darkness, a mother nursing her baby and a Buddhist full moon ceremony. It then moves through the day, through people eating, drinking, coping, celebrating. It is impossible to describe a movie that, though being filmed by so many people, in so many places, in so many circumstances, remains unhurried and engaging throughout. Largely eschewing the quick clips that have become commonplace, each moment and person unfolds and we are allowed, as humans, to experience some of the emotions and insights of the people in the film who are making that film. It is an incredible achievement and one that reminds us of how truly connected we are.

— WLB/MMD

*Ebony Society*

Native Showcase/Indigenous Shorts
Two teenage guys break into a house to steal some money. The burglary goes wrong while the film, *Ebony Society*, goes delightfully right.

It’s Christmas Eve in the tough neighborhoods of South Auckland. Vinnie, having already angered a security guard by riding his bike through a mall, meets up with his friend Jonah. Jonah is the more threatening and dominant of the two. He pressures Vinnie into going with him to break into the house of a couple he knows are away at a party. Once inside, they find the house in disarray, the Christmas tree lying knocked over on the floor. The guys score $97 from a change jar and are about to leave when they hear a baby cry. Jonah just wants to go, but Vinnie says that they can’t leave a baby alone. The burglary turns into a baby-sitting gig for the two.

When a second little boy wakes up and finds Vinnie and Jonah, the situation becomes even more complicated. “Who are you?” the boy asks. “Santa Claus,” Vinnie responds. “Then who’s he?” “That’s Rudolph,” Vinnie tells him. “But Rudolph’s a reindeer!” “Only when he’s on the roof,” Vinnie says. The two guys then take care of the two little children. One feeds the baby and the other plays a card game with the boy. Finally, when the baby is asleep, Vinnie tucks the little boy into bed. “Santa,” the little boy asks wistfully, “am I going to get a present?”
Vinnie and Jonah return the money to the jar. They put the Christmas tree back up again and Vinnie leaves his bike by the tree. It’s a story of redemption, belief, hope—and yes there is a Santa Claus—all in thirteen wonderful minutes.

— MMD

Grab

Indigenous Showcase

The Native Showcase was back at the Sundance Film Festival this year and that’s a good thing. Growing up, director Billy Luther (Navajo, Hopi, Laguna Pueblo) never saw a contemporary native film. In school he watched outdated government-made films. “These are the Pueblos,” announced the God-like voice of a narrator. But the Pueblo portrayed on the black and white films bore little resemblance to Luther, his family, or community. Such films also gave the impression that Native Americans belong to the past, not the present.

These films and portrayals of Native Americans were a catalyst for Billy Luther to become a filmmaker whose films show that “traditions remain intact, despite everything.” The other catalyst? A grandfather who loved stories—
particularly Dallas and Dynasty—and who was a staunch supporter of Luther’s filmmaking projects.

Eleven years ago, Luther volunteered at the Sundance Film Festival. In 2007 his film *Miss Navajo* was a great success at the festival. *Miss Navajo* is a portrayal of a community who, despite decades of assimilationist policy, retains its cultural values—in this case through a pageant in which young women display their proficiency in the language, history and activities of the tribe.

*Grab* continues the exploration of the expression of cultural values in modern times. With no voice of God narration, the film provides us with an intimate look at three families of the Laguna Pueblo as they prepare to honor family members by hosting a throw. A throw is an ancient give-away tradition in which the host family distributes food and gifts to members of the surrounding community on “grab day,” which is viewed as a community-wide celebration of thanks and renewal. In modern times, families climb onto the roof with the groceries and gifts they have collected or made for months. A special gift is a traditional hand-made pot, which is thrown at the end.

Luther worked closely with all the families in the film and the result is remarkable openness and authenticity. We gain a sense of each family, their struggles, sacrifices, hopes and deep ties to the community as they prepare for grab
day. Particularly moving are the parts of the film that show the elders preparing for their own grab day. The Laguna Pueblo are extremely reticent about letting themselves be filmed, but the elders in the film participated in Luther’s film knowing that their young people could learn from this about the origins of grab day. Beyond that, as Luther said, they realized that “their lives and stories are there for future generations.” It is a tremendous gift.

One of the key characters in the film is a traditional hand-made pot crafted by one of the participants. We follow that pot throughout the film, from wet casting to the kiln and then to the big day itself. At the end of the film, children and adults gather at each house for the throw. Their arms lift to the air, they are sprinkled with blessings of water, gifts, food and finally—the pot itself is thrown. Hands reach up to grab it. Will it be taken home as a prized gift? Will it fall to the ground and break? Luther’s film holds us in its joyous, beautiful grasp right to the very end.

— MMD

*The Green Wave*

World Cinema Documentary Competition

*The Green Wave* is an emotional and provocative snapshot of the events leading up to, during and
after the 2009 Iranian presidential elections that spilled into the streets of Tehran by people searching for change.

Very little is known about these events as foreign correspondents were kicked out of Iran and electronic jamming sporadically cut off access to the internet and cell phones. This documentary tells the stories of the people who were there, who were in the streets, who were arrested and who continue to live in the aftermath of this movement. Using real testimonials and postings from personal blogs of Iranians telling their stories to anyone who would read them, *The Green Wave* uses animation overlapped with real footage taken from cell phones in the streets to truly bring forth to the world, the courage and bravery required by these individuals, who were then arrested and tortured as dissidents in the aftermath of resistance.

Ahmadinejad, the current president of Iran, was running for his second term on June 12, 2009 against Mir-Hossein Mousavi (Mohammad Khatami, former president, endorsed Mousavi). *The Green Wave* illustrates how both political leaders used religion to propel their candidacies. Ahmadinejad used religion to condone violence and torture during and after the elections. Friday prayers in mosques were utilized as soapboxes for the ruling party. Mousavi used the Islamic colour green to represent his campaign. When the youth of Iran, both male and female, went out into the streets to show their support for Mousavi, the streets
turned green. Bloggers wrote of the peoples’ excitement and willpower to bring change to Iran.

On Election Day, campaign offices were broken into, cell phone service was disrupted, and election organizers were arrested. Mousavi was placed under house arrest. Ahmadinejad was proclaimed the victor of the elections, even though there was evidence of false ballot papers being counted. Iranians protested in the streets, a green wave of cloth snaked down the main streets of Tehran as people came out to support Mousavi. Then the shootings began. By June 19th the city had turned into a military zone. Protestors were arrested in the streets and tortured in prison – they were called non-believers. The militia, who were beating and killing protestors, called themselves soldiers of Imam Hussein – it was their duty to defend their country against non-believers. Interrogators searched the residences of protestors and Mousavi campaigners for their computers to make sure that no information was being broadcast out of Iran. Ahmadinejad claimed that the government response to the Islamic green movement was to protect the religion of Islam. Government sanctioned violence, in the name of religion, continues today in Iran, but so does the movement for resistance and change.

— RR

*Higher Ground*
US Dramatic Competition

The most anticipated movie on religion at this year's Festival was Vera Farmiga's *Higher Ground*. Farmiga stars in the film and it also is her directorial debut. The movie gives us a remarkable look at a particular way of practicing the Christian faith. Using terms like "evangelical" or "fundamentalist," or "charismatic" does not seem to capture well this practice. The best way to understand the practice is to see as many examples as you can, and this is what the story provides, without labels or stereotyping.

Practicing the Christian faith in this way means using particular linguistic phrases, referring to particular Bible verses as explanations of various situations, behaving in particular ways (dressing modestly and giving authority to men, for example). To get a fuller picture, you have to see the movie. But, let me give just two examples so that I can say something about the message of the movie. In one scene, Corrine, the main character of the film, is telling her husband of many years, Ethan, why she is leaving him. She is sitting in the driver's seat, ready to leave. He is sitting in the back seat behind her. When she tells him what more she wants out of life--including adult conversation--he is hurt and angry and he reaches around the seat and tries to strangle Corrine. When he finally lets go and she escapes the
car, Ethan goes through a typical routine of telling Satan to get behind him. It is as though when you have done something bad all you have to do is to tell Satan to get behind you and/or ask Jesus to help you and everything is alright with the world again. As viewers of the film, we know that this strategy for dealing with one's bad behavior doesn't work, so telling Satan to get behind him seems to be disconnected from the real world--or it may even be an excuse for not dealing with one's problems. And this is the message of the movie.

In another situation, one of Corrine's friends, Kathleen, has gotten a brain tumor and while the doctors will perform surgery, the prognosis is not good. Everyone in the circle of friends prays that Kathleen will live. When the doctor comes out of the operating room and tells them that she will live, they all believe that their prayers have been answered and their faith confirmed--everyone but Corrine. When they subsequently learn that Kathleen is paralyzed and unable to communicate, this condition is ignored as evidence that their prayers have not been answered. It would be remarkably bizarre if the believers said of the situation: "Well, we just prayed for her to live. We didn't ask God to leave her as she was, so we can't complain that she is crippled and unable to communicate." Again, a real disconnect from reality. Again, the message of the movie is that practicing Christianity in some ways is indeed disconnected from reality.
Toward the end of the film, Corrine has moved into a boarding house. One of her neighbors stops by to welcome her. Her neighbor warns her about some religious nuts in the boarding house--Jehovah's Witnesses or Mormons--people not unlike Corrine in important ways. He mother is visiting at this time and she warns Corrine about "those Catholics." Clearly there are different ways to practice Christianity and it is not clear that one is right or that one is blessed by God while practitioners of the others are damned to hell.

At the end of the movie, Corrine gives a brief sermon to the members of her former church. In that sermon, she expands the various religious practices that people adopt to include Judaism, Islam, and others. Again, the idea is that there is a noxious kind of arrogance--what might be called "self-righteousness"--in claiming that you and only you have the truth. After the sermon, Corrine says to her former pastor that she envies him his faith--she means that she wishes that she could be as sure of her beliefs as he is, but she cannot in a world filled with ambiguity and uncertainty. Clearly Corrine is looking for "higher ground"--the song is played in the background--but she is now sure that her former practice of Christianity is not higher ground.

Of note, the teenage Corrine is played by Vera Farmiga's real life daughter, Taissa, and she is spectacular in the role.
Kinyarwanda

World Cinema Dramatic Competition

The World Cinema Audience Award: Dramatic competition Award Winner

Kinyarwanda is the language used throughout Rwanda. As the title of this film, it suggests that what is important now is the unification of the various segments of Rwandan society into some kind of whole that serves to improve the lives of everyone in the country.

The movie weaves six different stories together. These stories have as their background, the 1994 Rwandan Genocide. While little violence is actually shown in the film, we are continually reminded of the horrors of the Genocide by gunfire in the background or the tapping of machetes on the ground, or the fear in the eyes of those who are telling their stories. We quickly are drawn into the story by the charming characters we meet and we are willing to endure the background of the film because we have come to like the characters so much. Courage, perseverance, and forgiveness are themes that run throughout the film. Toward the end of the film you could hear people in the audience crying. It was an appropriate response to the courage of the characters and the horrors of the Genocide.
The stories we follow serve to highlight a feature of the Genocide that is mentioned only infrequently; namely, that some mosques served as places of refuge for both Muslims and Christians, for both Hutus and Tutsis. Having already watched several movies in which religion is the source of conflict and suffering, it was a pleasure, even an inspiration, to see two quite different religions – through the priest and the Imam – working together to minister to the needy and persecuted. The religious cooperation we witness in this movie sets a good example for other religions.

— WLB

_The Ledge_

US Dramatic Competition

The basic question asked in _The Ledge_ is: Would you give up your own life to save the life of someone you love? Gavin, the main character of the film, decides that he is willing to die to save the one he loves, and so he jumps to his death from a "ledge."

Religion plays a large part in this film. Gavin and an evangelical Christian who lives down the hall have a series of arguments or discussions about the existence of God, salvation, reality, morality, truth, and forgiveness. Gavin is living
with the guilt of having driven the car in which his daughter is killed. The evangelical Christian is living with the guilt of having been a drug and sex addict and of having lost his wife and family. Most of the discussion about God and religion is so superficial and trite that it does not move the audience to consider the important questions of life in any meaningful way. More importantly, all of the arguments about God and religion do not in the end influence the answer that Gavin gives to the question above. With regard to religion, the movie shows the viewer that religion, whether you have it or not, is pretty much irrelevant to our more fundamental beliefs or to our basic personality. That is, religion that is superficial and non-religion that is also superficial are not important to life's most important moments.

— WLB
Lost Kisses

World Cinema Dramatic competition

Lost Kisses is the story of 13 year old Manuela and her disfunctional family. When the head of a large Virgin Mary statue goes missing, Manuela tells her mother that she has spoken to the Madonna and that the Madonna has told Manuela where the head is to be found. Mom is skeptical, but finally takes Manuela to the priest who then goes to a storage area at the direction of Manuela and indeed does find the missing head of the Virgin Mary.

This event marks Manuela as a Saint or a visionary or an angel and people from all over the community come to visit Manuela in hopes that she will help them with their problems. Mom manages these visits, taking money in exchange for time spent with Manuela. Finally, Manuela confesses that she has lied. In truth, she saw three neighbor boys knock the head off the statue with a soccer ball and then hide the pieces of the head in the storage area. The confession brings mother and daughter closer together and ready to live a more normal life.

But, one of the people who came to see Saint Manuela was a very skeptical blind girl, whose mother was hoping that Manuela could restore her daughters sight. When Manuela and her mother return home, after Manuela's confession, they find
the house filled with people, among them the blind girl who can now see. It is clear from the story that Manuela has had nothing to do with this restoration of sight, except that Manuela gave the blind girl hope.

The message of the movie that pertains to religion is that human beings are much better off with hope than without it. In our modern scientific Western culture, however, hope is disparaged as irrational or unreasonable. And, hope is an unreasonable expectation. Hope does fly in the face of the odds. But, even scientists and biologists are beginning to think that hope, this unreasonable expectation, may be evolutionarily valuable, because many of the actions that help us survive are the product of hope and not the product of reason. It is an interesting question for the viewer to ask: "How much of what I do that is good is based on hope and not reason?"

— WLB
*Martha Marcy May Marlene*

US Dramatic Competition

The Directing Award: Dramatic Competition Award Winner

*Martha Marcy May Marlene* is a horror film through and through. But it's not a slasher film. Its horror is exposed slowly. It sneaks up on the audience. And when you finally recognize the horror, it's too late. You can't escape it. And when you feel the full effect of the movie, it ends without resolution, so the horror continues. Martha wasn't happy at home, so she joins a group of people living on a farm in communal fashion. There is a leader who instructs the others and whose mind twisting is so subtle that even the audience is almost ready to buy it. Since the audience does not need a safe place to live where they feel loved, however, the audience can smell a rat in a way that those who follow the leader cannot. The group (cult doesn't seem to be quite the right term here) does have characteristics of a family and talk about themselves as a family – a loving family and a safe home. But we still smell a rat. When Martha is told about her special night, her first time
with the leader, we understand that this cannot be a good thing, but the other girls in the group talk about their special night in glowing terms. Mind control, sex, longing for love, all of those cultish elements are in the film, but they come along so gently that you don't realize it until it's too late.

Martha, who has been given a new name, Marcy May, finally sees the light and escapes to the home of her older sister. In some ways this is a new family--the family theme runs both in the group and after the escape – so much of the group’s talk of family has its own application to Martha's new situation. But the new family doesn't provide the safe haven for the traumatized Martha that we would like, and so Martha suffers the results of the trauma she experienced in the group. This means, that she is not sure of what she remembers and what she's dreamt, leaving her in a state of dis-ease. It is what we might expect of trauma victims, but it is remarkably unsettling and especially unsettling for Martha's sister, Lucy, and her new husband. That the movie does not bring everything together in a happy ending, means that what has made us uncomfortable, even frightened, throughout the movie, still makes us feel creepy long after the movie is over, adding another layer of horror to the film.

What makes this movie so interesting for people who are interested in religion and film is the fact that the horror of the movie parallels the horror of living with a group like the one Martha chose. The mind twisting, the coercion, the sex,
the lies, the self-indulgence, the obedience of the group is horrifying and the viewer of the film feels some of that same horror. We not only understand that the things the group does are wrong, we feel that wrongness as well.

Since this is the kind of movie that could go wrong in so many ways, it is to the credit of the director, Sean Durkin, that his firm hand keeps the film from getting away from him. The subtlety of the director and of the cast makes this film a real success as a horror film, a real horror film and not a manipulation of the feelings of the audience.

— WLB

Martha Marcy May Marlene cast members Brady Corbet, Sarah Paulson, Elizabeth Olsen, John Hawkes, Hugh Dancy, and Louisa Krause were available for questions at a Sundance Press Conference.
On the Ice

U.S. Dramatic Competition

Native Showcase

On the Ice begins with shots of a graveyard, snow, crosses, graffiti, traditional drumming and dancing, partying and hip hop music. Inupiat director and screenwriter MacLean gives this glimpse of life for young Inupiaq in Barrow, Alaska, while telling a story of three friends who venture out on to the ice. When only two return, their version of what happened there begins to crack and shift much like the summer ice itself.

Qalli and Aivaaq live in a small isolated community in which closeness and claustrophobia coexist, just as traditional ways and modern life do. Aivaaq is from a troubled home. His friend Qalli has strong, supportive parents and a loving, traditional grandmother. The two friends share a love of hip hop and seal hunting, but Aivaaq’s drinking and drug use begin to strain the friendship, just as they reflect stressors for the community as a whole. When Aivaaq and their friend James head out early on a seal hunt, Qalli later catches up and finds them fighting. As the violence escalates, James is killed and Qalli and Aivaaq attempt to cover up what happened. They come back to town and tell a story of James’ snowmobile falling
through the ice, but here Qalli’s father shows both his principled nature and his expertise as a tracker. Qalli and Aivaaq are tormented by guilt as Qalli’s father gradually uncovers the truth and confronts the two. “I can’t tell you what kind of person to be,” he says in the end, “It’s your decision.”

While this is not an overtly religious storyline, MacLean’s film does focus on universal themes of truth, guilt, life, death, friendship, love and responsibility. His reputation as an award-winning short film maker meant that well over a hundred members of the press and film industry lined up for an hour waiting to view On the Ice. The film premiered not as part of the Indigenous Showcase, but as one of the feature-length films in the U.S. Dramatic Competition.

— MMD

Check out the film at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F0d1UCsaZ0g.

Position Among The Stars

World Documentary Competition/International Premiere

World Cinema Special Jury Prize: Documentary Competition Award Winner
Position Among The Stars is director Leonard Retel Helmrich’s third film chronicling three generations of the Shamsuddin family in Indonesia. Rumidjah Shamsuddin is the grandmother of Tari and mother of Bakti. She is a long-time convert to Christianity and as the film opens she is visiting her ancestral village. Her son, Bakti, who was raised as a Christian but who—along with his brother—converted to Islam, returns from the slums of Jakarta in order to bring his mother back to the city to help take care of his niece, Tari, and other family members.

Throughout the film, Helmrich’s acclaimed and proprietary ‘Single Shot Cinema’ method gives the viewer intimate and intense footage of politico-religious tensions in Jakarta. These tensions also exist at a familial level. We watch Rumidjah try to expose her grandchildren to Christianity. She takes her young grandson, Bagus, to a cathedral and tries to teach him the Lord’s Prayer. The other adults, however, are trying to raise this next generation (at least nominally) as Muslims. Meanwhile the 17 year old Tari seems to have abandoned religion altogether. She is reluctant to take her grandmother to church and feigns ignorance of—or perhaps honestly does not know or care about—the basic practices of Islam.
All this makes for interesting and beautiful viewing. Position though also examines the influence of globalization and particularly consumerism. Tari, despite being from a poor family, demands and somehow receives items such as a cell phone with a camera in it. The effects and ethics of the film-maker’s presence however—undoubtedly part of that process of globalization—remain troublingly unseen and unaddressed.

— MMD

*Rebirth*

Documentary Premieres

*Rebirth* is an emotional survivor story of five people forever touched by the events of 9/11 at the World Trade Center: a woman who survived being burned while working in one of the twin towers; a son who lost his mother in a twin tower; a fire fighter who lost his friend in a twin tower; a man who lost his brother in a twin tower; and a woman who lost her fiancé in a twin tower.

The documentary follows these five individuals over ten years, as they first realize how their lives are permanently changed, the grief they endure and the different paths they follow.
to deal with, and overcome their losses. As viewers, we are given the rare opportunity to understand how the events of 9/11 were so much different than a tragic accident: there were no bodies to bury, there was no person to prosecute and there was no one to tell them that their loved ones were never coming home.

*Rebirth* is more than just a story of anger and grief; it is a spiritual journey that takes us into the lives of those directly impacted by such a tragic event. It brings the viewer back to the essential struggle that America has endured – to continue on with hope. It gives meaning to a meaningless disaster. Interspersed with radio and television coverage, the stories of the survivor, son, brother, friend and fiancée demonstrate how faith, determination and love can help individuals build new lives out of devastation. New York City rebuilds itself up from ground zero in the same way.

— RR

*The Redemption of General Butt Naked*

US Documentary Competition

The Excellence in Cinematography Award: Documentary Winner
General Butt Naked was a cruel warlord who murdered thousands of innocent people during Liberia’s civil war – usually entering villages only with a cutlass or AK-47 and a pair of shoes – butt naked. Now, re-emerged as Joshua Milton Blahyi, he wishes to preach the word of God, offer forgiveness to his victims and their families and help the men who were once young boys when he recruited them to become his fighters and butcher at large.

*The Redemption of General Butt Naked* tells the story of Joshua after his return to Liberia, where he is given an opportunity to explain why he committed the atrocities he did and why he eventually laid down his weapons and disappeared for a decade. He explains to the viewer that through powers given to him from the deities, he was able to withstand bullets and killed people with a cutlass in order to dedicate their deaths to the [non-Christian] gods. He found these killings fulfilling. As their “priest”, he kidnapped and lured young boys into his “tribe” in order to kill and maim as many people as possible. He conditioned the boys to believe that their deaths were not permanent: like actors who died in Hollywood movies, they would be resurrected again. General Butt Naked admits that he enjoyed the pain of others. But in 1996 Butt Naked says that he had a religious conversion to Christianity. He
fled, leaving the boys to fend for themselves. The civil war ended in 2003, and 250,000 people were dead.

Now reborn as Joshua, he returns to Liberia ten years later, evangelizing the word of God and Christ. He claims that Christianity is the only religion that demands one to love their enemies, and love is what disarmed him. God has turned his life around. Although he does not believe that religion equates justice, when he is not prosecuted for his crimes in Liberia, he believes it is because it is God’s will. He killed out of madness: now he seeks forgiveness.

This documentary offers two points of view about General Butt Naked a.k.a. Joshua. Some believe that he was “once a general, and therefore always a general” – he has not changed. Others, such as his wife, see who he is now: a calm and loving man. As Joshua searches out his victims for forgiveness, preaches the message of God and helps his “boys”, we are left wondering whether such a man can truly be redeemed. Is it possible to forgive a man such atrocities because he has found God? As the filmmakers intended, this movie does indeed challenge audiences to examine their own levels of tolerance and forgiveness. Joshua knows that he has been forgiven by Jesus, because Jesus died for his sins. Can you forgive General Butt Naked and love Joshua?

— RR
The Salesman (Le Vendeur)

World Cinema Dramatic Competition

*Le Vendeur* is the story of a car salesman, Marcel Lévesque, who is the best salesman at the dealership, as well as an adoring father and grandfather. It is a simple and charming story, and its very simplicity gives it a power that will never be matched in the usual film where everything is made obvious. Everything is so ordinary and everything proceeds just as we might imagine, until two events change Marcel's life. One is the death of his daughter and grandson in an automobile accident--hitting a moose on the highway. But his daughter was on the highway because she volunteered to pick up a car in Quebec for her father. And the fact that he let his daughter pick up the car brings a level of guilt into the life of Marcel that he has never before experienced in his rather ordinary life. As though this were not enough, one of the villagers to whom Marcel sold a truck finds himself unable to manage financially after the plant closes and he is without a job. He asks Marcel to take the truck back, but in true salesman fashion Marcel declines. When the truck owner attempts suicide, Marcel is plagued with another wave of guilt – never before experienced in his rather ordinary life – even though Marcel saves his life.
Marcel is both a car salesman and a practitioner of religion, but he participates in both activities in the same manner – without thinking much about them and with a sense of alienation. He is, as is the priest, everyone's friend, and yet not really anyone's friend. He tells his grandson that praying for a car sale is good luck – religion as a lucky charm. The name, Levesque, means bishop in French and Marcel treats his clients as though they were his flock. Both Marcel and the priest use the words, "My friend," in addressing their respective flocks, but neither makes a genuine connection with real people. Marcel remembers the names of all of the people to whom he has sold a vehicle, but there is little beyond this formality. All of this performance seems to work for Marcel until he finds himself facing genuine guilt. It is here that religion should intervene in Marcel's life. Religion should comfort Marcel in the dark hours of guilt. Religion should help Marcel to find forgiveness. Since religion always has been nothing more than a pose for Marcel, at the very moment religion can help him, it is unavailable to him. He does not know how to deal with his guilt or even turn to religion. The tragedy for Marcel is that he must now turn to the only thing he knows – being a car salesman, pretending to be religious. It is heartbreaking. It is also what we might expect, having watched Marcel live his rather ordinary life.

*Le Vendeur* gives us the portrait of a man for whom religion is nothing more than a set of rituals from which he is alienated. This picture of Marcel sneaks up on
Because of the way the film is created – not just the story itself, but the way in which the story is filmed – we like Marcel. We wish him well. We are drawn into his life without recognizing the deep alienation he feels. When tragedy occurs and guilt sets in, we are as taken aback as Marcel by these life changing events. It is then that we realize that there is nothing left for Marcel to do but sell cars. Marcel and the movie call upon us to reconsider the way in which we live our own lives and they challenge us to take up more than the mere ritual of religion. The director wanted to express something very complex with very simple ideas. In doing so he wanted his movie to be poetic, rather than philosophical. His efforts were a great success.

— WLB

_Salvation Boulevard_

Premiere Competition

_Salvation Boulevard_ is probably the name of a street in the new real estate development called City on a Hill that is the brain child of Pastor Dan Day. Pastor Dan is the minister in a small college town mega-church. Pastor Dan and his followers exhibit all the qualities we expect of a mega-congregation, especially the supernatural explanation for everyday events.
Pastor Dan is doing well until he shoots his atheist debate partner by accident. At that point Pastor Dan has to do what Pastor Dan has to do. He covers up his crime because of the damage his criminal behavior will have on his ministry and especially the new real estate development. The director suggests that Pastor Dan covers up the crime in order to prevent damage to God's project, but it seems obvious that the purpose of Pastor Dan's cover up is the continuation of his own career.

The movie is supposed to be fun, it's supposed to be funny, yet not make fun of a particular evangelical way of participating in the world. But, it is hard to see how the movie is not making fun of that particular evangelical life style. It may be that the movie accomplishes its purpose--not offending anyone--but, the result is a movie that won't excite anyone either.

— WLB/MMD
Senna

World Cinema Documentary Competition

The World Cinema Audience Award: Documentary Competition Award Winner

BAFTA Awards Best Documentary and Best Editing Winner

Austin Film Critics Award Best Documentary Winner

British Independent Film Awards Best Documentary Winner

Audience Award Winner at the Sundance, Adelaide and Los Angeles Film Festivals as well as a People's Choice prize in Melbourne.

London Film Critics Award Best Documentary Winner

Cinema Eye Award for Outstanding Achievement in Editing Winner

British Independent Film Award for Best Documentary Winner

National Board of Review Award Winner for One of the Top Five Documentaries of 2011

Knowing how this ends doesn’t make it any easier to bear. Brazilian Ayrton Senna was arguably one of the greatest Formula 1 (F1) racing drivers of all time. While his accomplishments are well-known and, of course, are a focus of this film, Senna was a deeply religious man. This excellent film, using solely archival footage, acknowledges that faith and its role in Senna’s life.
Senna came into the soap-opera-on-steroids-and-speed world of Formula 1 (F1) as a young man whose parents raised him to be truthful, a good son, and someone with a strong faith in God. “I think God has given me this chance,” Senna said as he began his career in F1. Although Senna quickly rose to become a top driver, the tense and epic rivalry between himself and French driver Alain Prost led to conflict and controversy on and off the race course. Prost once claimed that Senna was dangerous because of his faith in God, saying Senna “thinks he’s immortal.” Others noted that Senna with his “love of truth” was at a disadvantage in all the political machinations of F1.

For his part, Senna remained largely true to his principles. He spoke of feeling the presence of God in his last lap when winning the championship. He also spoke of drawing closer to God during the darker moments—after mistakes, a crash, and questionable calls by racing officials. Senna won the F1 World Championship three times, becoming a source of pride—and generosity—for Brazil during difficult years.

The fateful weekend of the San Marino Grand Prix at Imola in 1994 changed F1 racing forever. Senna’s (then young) countryman Rubens Barrichello was in a serious crash and driver Roland Ratzenberger was killed in another qualifying session. The terrible weekend continued as Senna ploughed at high speed into a wall during the race. He suffered a fatal head injury.
Senna was a devout Catholic—a man of faith in a ruthless and extremely dangerous profession. After Senna’s death, F1 doctor Prof. Sid Watkins was appointed to improve driver safety in the sport. To this day, Senna remains the last driver killed at an F1 race. Senna’s legacy of generosity lives on. Although it was not generally known while he was alive, Senna donated millions of dollars to charity and drafted the beginnings of a children’s charity. The Instituto Ayrton Senna continues to fund and support education and other opportunities for children and teenagers from disadvantaged backgrounds in Brazil.

The film is a riveting, moving account of Senna’s remarkable talent and spirit.

— MMD

*Septien*

Park City at Midnight

*Septien* is the story of three brothers, reunited after eighteen years. But all is not right in the Rawlings household. Oldest brother Ezra has lost himself in the role of mother and housekeeper to the boys. Amos, through his paintings, displays his obsession with Satan and penises. Cornelius, the long lost brother, returns from an
absence of eighteen years with no word for his return, and more puzzling still, no
reason for his quick departure all those years ago. Cornelius also seems to have his
own demons: although a natural at any sport he puts his hands to (such as tennis,
basketball and soccer) something torments him so much so that he spends all his
money remaining intoxicated out of his mind or sleeping.

Eventually a scenario is drawn for the viewer: the Red Rooster, a football
ccoach from Cornelius’ and Amos’ past enters the picture and we realize that a
connection needs to be made. The Red Rooster is the root cause of Cornelius’
problems, as we find out that he had molested Cornelius in his youth. Adding to
this, Amos comes to terms with his own demon: his homosexual feelings that arose
as a teenager but were stifled due to a homophobic father. With both parents dead,
Ezra, the oldest sibling, has taken on his on his own burden by trying to replace
himself as a mother to the boys.

An omen comes forth in Septien: it seems that the pictures that Amos has
been painting lately are coming true. He paints a picture of Cornelius and he returns
home. He also paints a stranger rescuing Cornelius from his demon, the Red
Rooster. But when this cross wearing, bible wielding stranger/preacher arrives on
the scene, he expunges all the demons the three brothers have shouldered for the
past two decades. His exorcisms liberate them to be who they want to be. Life on
the family farm doesn’t change in any dramatic way, but their outlooks on life are fresher and cleaner.

The filmmaker Michael Tully states that, following the preacher’s arrival an exorcisms, the characters are able to just live a little easier than the day before. But the message seems to be a bit more optimistic from my perspective. The "preacher", by purging each brother of his demons, allows them to live as a family again, take part in a community again, and just be brothers: they have been healed.

What is left unclear is the meaning of the movie title. The first thing I thought of when seeing the title Septien was to remember Rafael Septien, a famous place kicker and leading scorer for the Dallas Cowboys for nine years. Interestingly he pled guilty to charges of mishandling a minor after leaving the Cowboys. He was also a professional soccer player before turning his hand to football. Perhaps this film is an homage to Rafael and his natural athletics and his illustrious past, perhaps not.

— RR
Two young people, Peter and Lorna, want to make a documentary film. So, they decide to infiltrate a cult in order to expose it as a scam. The cult is lead by a mysterious woman, Maggie, who claims that she has returned from the future and that her followers will be able when they were ready to participate in time travel.

The cult seems to be similar to many New Age groups. Much of what they say is true, but not if you take those ideas too far. There is some line that when crossed moves the believer from learning something important about him or her self to becoming a thoughtless and obedient follower. When you cross the line, you surrender yourself to someone else instead of finding your true nature.

Things seem to be going well. Whether they are or not is an open question. Then Maggie asks Peter to bring her one of the children from the school at which he teaches. Maggie claims that the eight year old girl is her mother—which could be possible if Maggie really has returned from the future. But Lorna has been approached by the Department of Justice who wants to arrest Maggie for criminal behavior prior to her establishing the cult. Maggie finally does meet her supposed
mother and the movie asks us to consider the possibility that some cults might be real, might have the truth in spite of how unreasonable their views might be.

— WLB

*The Troll Hunter (Trolljergeren)*

Park City at Midnight

World Cinema Directing Award for Drama

*The Troll Hunter* blends fact with fiction – perhaps. It has long been known that trolls make their home in Norway, living in the high mountains near the Fjords. Norse legends of trolls stretch back in history. Legend tells us that trolls like to dwell in isolated mountains, don’t see very well, don’t like the lightening and will turn to stone when touched by sunlight. Trolls also don’t like people to be happy. Some Scandinavian landmarks, usually very large stones, are credited as once being trolls. This film assumes the existence of trolls today. Interestingly *The Troll Hunter* includes one other item that trolls dislike: Christians.

The film is about Hans, a hunter living in modern Norway. Three film students are making a documentary about bear poaching and decide that Hans is the
best lead they have. They believe that he’s an illegal bear hunter, because he seems to always show up wherever a bear has been killed. Filmed in the style of The Blair Witch Project, these three film students stalk the hunter, hoping to catch him in the act of killing bears. It turns out that he hunts trolls.

It turns out that trolls have always existed in Norway, but the government keeps the information from leaking out by blaming bears for attacks on farms and peasants living in the mountains. In fact, entire zones have been cordoned off in the mountains so that trolls won’t be bothered by human beings.

As the film crew follow Hans, he asks if any are “believers of God or Christ” as trolls can smell them. Unfortunately the cameraman is a believer, and the trolls attack the crew, eating the cameraman. When they replace the cameraman with another person, she’s asked if she’s a believer. It turns out she’s Muslim – Hans has no clue if trolls eat Muslims or not. This leads to a larger question: are the demons and monsters of legend afraid of all Gods or just the Christian God? Fortunately, the new camerawoman is not eaten by a troll. But Hans sees that he has given his life in the pursuit of hunting these poor and unfortunate creatures, and can take it no more. He quits the business, leaving Norway, and perhaps the world, to find out the truth about the existence of trolls.
The Legend of Peer Gynt tells how trolls, when hearing the ringing of church bells, melt the trolls into non-existence. In The Troll Hunter, any Christian music is anathema to trolls, and only further enrages them. Hans uses the music to lure trolls towards him so that he can exterminate them using UV lights. But as multiculturalism diversifies Western countries, we are left wondering if the non-Christians will be safer than Christians in the end…that is, if trolls exist.

—RR

Tyrannosaur

World Cinema Dramatic Competition

The World Cinema Directing Award: Dramatic Winner

Two World Cinema Special Jury Prizes: Dramatic for Breakout Performances

Winners (Olivia Colman and Peter Mullan)

Tyrannosaur is a movie that makes you question whether a cruel man can change himself. Joseph is a racist, violent man who cannot treat anyone with civility. He reaches out to Hannah, a woman he meets in a thrift shop, who offers to pray for him when he comes in seeking shelter. Hannah is a woman of faith, but her life is controlled by an abusive husband. Together, they find a second chance at happiness.
Through the telling of the relationship that flourishes between Joseph and Hannah, we realize that faith cannot always help relieve one’s pain. Hannah turns to Joseph to help her, and even though Joseph has in the past been an abusive man himself, he transforms himself by helping Hannah heal. He is capable of seeing how he was a mean person: he thought his wife was dumb because she was a kind and loving person. Hannah, on the other hand, forgives her husband his abusive behaviour and sees only the best in Joseph. Perhaps it is the belief Hannah carries about Joseph that redeems him.

In the end, the man without faith becomes a better man, and the woman with faith commits murder. In this case, *Tyrannosaur* is a story about the futility of faith in terms of salvation.

— RR

*Vampire*

World Cinematic Dramatic Competition

Simon is a biology teacher by day, who takes good care of his mom who has Alzheimer’s, and drains the blood of young women who want to commit suicide because he has a need to drink blood. Not one of the usual run-of-
the-mill blood sucker stories, *Vampire* offers views a glimpse of what it means to be morally against murder yet driven to satisfy the need to ingest blood.

Simon meets women on a Christian oriented website called “SidebyCide” where people can post their desires to commit suicide and perhaps find a like-minded partner with which to commit the deed. Simon does not want to kill women to satisfy his urges, but he misrepresents himself to these women because he doesn’t want to die either – he just wants their blood. In order to get it from them, he devises a plan that allows him to drain them of their blood, and at the same time, aids them in committing suicide as they allow him to do this to them, assuming he will do the same to himself. Unfortunately the women’s corpses are found, devoid of blood, and the media dub him the “Vampire” killer. What we find out in this movie is that the drinking of blood does not make a person a vampire: in fact, it is Simon who is surrounded by many types of vampires, people who want his infamy and love and attention, to the point that they leech off of him against his will.

In his search for blood, we see moments in his life where Simon confronts a young girl who displays suicidal tendencies but he talks her out of committing the act. In fact, he finds himself in a situation where he donates his own blood to help her recover from her suicidal attempt. Simon also meets a young woman, who at first wanted to commit suicide, but changes her mind. She then searches him out because she’s ready to do the deed – in the process of meeting this woman, he learns
about her life and realizes that he must stop himself from helping her take her life. In a way, this woman brings forth Simon’s humanity, as he saves himself by saving her. Underlying this story of blood and death is the idea that religion may not have a role in preventing people from taking their own lives: only other people can help such individuals.

A movie about human dignity and empathy, *Vampire* intertwines an artistic film style with music to display the grittiness of death, the true meaning of vampirism and the depth of human caring and compassion that can be found within all of us – blood drinkers or not.

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An Essay on E-Cinema

During the Sundance Film Festival, GLAAD (The Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) sponsored a number of panel discussions at the Filmmakers Lodge for both filmmakers and press. One of these panels focused upon e-Cinema – receiving and watching movies on your computer, instead of seeing them in the theater. At the moment, it looks as though there will be a significant increase in movie distribution over the Internet. YouTube® and other sites have begun showing movies and this trend is likely to continue into the foreseeable future. How long the trend lasts has yet to be determined. It took a number of years for the digital
distribution of movies to catch on, but this was largely due to the problem of who would make the first move. Would distributors start distributing movies digitally, even when few theaters had the equipment to show digital films, or would theaters buy expensive digital projection systems when they couldn't be sure that there would be enough digital distribution to make it worth their while? In the case of e-Cinema, there is no such difficulty, so there is nothing to hold back the flood of films that we can expect to see via the Internet.

There are actually two issues to be considered. One is distribution; the other is viewing. The basic idea is that distributing film over the Internet is much easier than garnering theatrical distribution and you probably get a much larger audience. One panelist claimed that more people saw his movie online within the first hour that it was posted than had seen both of his previous theatrical releases over the entire time of their showing in theaters. So, e-Cinema offers a much wider audience than theatrical release. This is especially true for short films. But, will film makers be able to make money distributing their movies online? The answer is that we do not yet know whether this is a source of revenue. This is not a question of getting rich, but of making a living and having some money for a filmmaker's next project. What this means for those interested in religion and film is that there will be a large number of films coming out online that will not have a theatrical release and will not be advertised in the same way that movies showing in the theaters are promoted.
So, religion and film scholars will now have to keep an eye out for new movies online.

The second issue is viewing. Will movie fans be willing to watch movies on a tiny screen, whether that is a computer screen or some kind of pad or even some kind of phone? The consensus seems to be that many people will hook up their computer (or have already done so) to the big screen television set and watch the movie on a big screen. This is not quite the theater experience, but it is not watching a movie on a handheld device or a small computer screen either. Given the popularity of pay-per-view and outlets like Netflix®, it is likely that people will be very willing to see e-Cinema, but on the larger television screens they have at home. For religion and film scholars this means more opportunity to view movies and to view a wider variety of movies.

There is a downside to the viewing of movies on computers and hand held devices. More movies will be seen in the privacy and convenience of our homes, even more movies than are now seen at home because of pay-per-view and movie rentals. This means that we will miss the group experience – sharing with a theater audience the laughter, the tension, in general, the feelings associated with a movie. We may be able to see more movies, but the movie experience may be diminished.
My prediction is that e-Cinema will become popular for short films. Whether it becomes a popular way to view feature-length films remains to be seen.

— WLB