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Report from Sundance 2008: Religion in Independent Film

William L. Blizek

University of Nebraska at Omaha, wblizek@unomaha.edu

Michele M. Desmarais

University of Nebraska at Omaha, mdesmarais@unomaha.edu

Rubina Ramji

Cape Breton University, ruby_ramji@cbu.ca

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Report from Sundance 2008: Religion in Independent Film

Abstract

This is the report from Sundance Film Festival 2008.

“The Power of Film”



Robert Redford talks with media members at a press conference.

The awesome power of film is not often felt when I sit down to watch a movie at my local multiplex – there’s a lot of whispering, interruptions, groans, flying popcorn and the customary teenagers having fun in the back row. But the Sundance Film Festival brings that power into perspective. This was my first time attending the Sundance Film Festival and for that I would thank

the *Journal of Religion and Film* for the opportunity. As the new Film Review Editor for the *Journal* I thought it would be good to get my feet wet by seeing a slew of movies and writing scores of reviews. Little did I know how many movies I would get to see, and how those movies would affect me.

The weather has always been reported on in the Sundance introductions. Being a Canadian, and perhaps being hardier than the average American, I found the weather quite delightful. When the sun came out during the day, it felt balmy. The evenings were crisp and the snow fell lightly



Bill Blizek and Geoffrey Gilmore, Sundance Film Festival director

every once in a while making Park City enchanting. What I didn't expect was the vast demographics of the films but also the variety of types of filmmakers and the

issues they explore through this form of media. For the 2008 Sundance Film Festival, 121 feature-length films were selected including 87 World premieres, 14 North American premieres, and 12 U.S. premieres representing 25 countries with 55 first-time filmmakers, including 32 in competition. These films were selected from 3,624 feature film submissions composed of 2,021 U.S. and 1,603 international feature-length films.

What I enjoyed most was the breadth of the program – a majority of these films were funny, spirited, human, and at times uncharacteristically positive about the world in we live. And the breadth of the program did not disappoint my delight



Ruby Ramji, Film Editor for the *Journal of Religion and Film* and Irene Cho, Manager, Media Relations.

in watching the horror/thriller genre. “*Park City at Midnight*” offered up thrills from Sundance 2008 and terrors galore in such movies as *George A. Romero’s Diary of the Dead* (Director: George A. Romero) and *Donkey Punch* (Director: Olly Blackburn).

I was also very excited that the Sundance Film Festival strived to draw more attention to international screenwriters, cinematographers, and editors by expanding the number of awards given to films screened in the World Cinema Competitions. I truly believe that the Sundance Institute is a key organization in supporting independent filmmakers while at the same time taking creative risks at encouraging and supporting diversity in the arts. And even though Sundance can act as a boost to launch a career in Hollywood, it’s nice to know that’s not

what Sundance is about –proving that low-budget, grassroots films can have a lot to say that the mainstream doesn't want to hear. Interestingly, it was in 1992 that Quentin Tarantino screened his heist movie, *Reservoir Dogs*, guaranteeing him Hollywood fame. Now he's back at Sundance as a jury member for the Dramatic Competition, and also will be honored at the Festival with the 2008 Ray-Ban Visionary Award, presented by Ray-Ban and The Creative Coalition.



Maren Hintz, Media Credentials Coordinator, and Ruby Ramji, Film Editor for the *Journal of Religion and Film*.

In each year's "Report From Sundance," Bill Blizek has thanked the staff of the press office for their help. After having to maneuver through the press listings and crowds, I now know why he does that. The staff is terrific and they work hard so that we can do our job

and report on the movies in a timely manner. Thanks especially to Maren Hintz and Irene Cho. Without their help, our job would be much more difficult and you, the reader, would not have so many wonderful films to read about. Enjoy.

— R. Ramji

Be Like Others

(World Cinema Documentary Competition)

The late Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini had been known to issue radical fatwas, but one particular fatwa would change the Islamic Republic of Iran dramatically in



comparison to the majority of other Muslim countries – he made it legal for a person to get a sex change. In a country filled with religious intolerance toward the unorthodox, Khomeini has offered religious authorization that cannot be disputed. Homosexuality still remains a crime punishable by death.

In this documentary, director and screenwriter Tanaz Eshaghian delves into the theocratic culture and mindset of Iranians who wish to undergo gender reassignment through surgery in order to create an identity that is acceptable under Islamic law, the shame and desire to be different, and the sometimes dire consequences of such a dramatic decision.

Eshaghian spent her time at Dr. Bahram Mir-Jalali's Mirdamad Surgical Centre in Tehran where young men and women came seeking an operation to diffuse the sexuality identity confusion with which they were living. The cost of the surgery is \$4500 and Mir-Jalali claims to have performed over 460 surgeries,

many of them complex and physically painful where he transforms men into women by creating female genitals using the intestines (his own technique). The majority of those who were willing to speak to Eshaghain about their decision to undertake the surgery, the rejection and persecution they were experiencing being trapped in the wrong body, were men.

The viewer is introduced to various men at different stages of sex reassignment (thinking about it, passing the psychological tests, ready to undergo surgery, and those who have already had the surgery). Anoush is a twenty year old male, whose boyfriend Ali is pressuring him to get a sex change because it's easier to walk down the street "with a woman." Ali Askhar, a twenty four year old male, has already undergone the psychological evaluation that attests that he is suffering from a separation of body and soul, rather than from homosexuality (which one can be rescued from, according to Mir-Jalali). Vida, who is helping Ali Askar with his impending surgery and recovery as his family has abandoned him, has already undergone a sex change from male to female. Vida explains how she does not like gay men because they are male and "feel" male, and yet choose to perform alternative sexual activities. Vida sees the surgery as a legitimate and acceptable choice, stating "if surgery was wrong, the government wouldn't approve it. We are an Islamic Republic. Religion is stamped right on it."

Interspersed throughout the film are those who are trying to reconcile the fatwa with their own religious beliefs. At a transsexual support group, theologians explain that Khomeini issued the fatwa because the surgery is not changing God's natural order, but just the characteristics of the person (wood can be made into a chair, flour can be made into bread, thus men's bodies can be made into women's bodies). Yet these transsexuals are surrounded by those who are still intolerant, by their parents, by their communities, by the Morality Police, Revolutionary Guards and the state police.

Further along in the film, we meet Farhad, a friend of Ali Askhar's, who watches him undergo his sex reassignment surgery, become disowned by his family, and end up as a prostitute. Farhad, after seeing first-hand the complications of the surgery, the fact that sexual satisfaction cannot be gained by those who have had a sex change and the suicidal tendencies of many who do have the surgery, changes his mind about the surgery. Farhad states that "God really loves me for letting me see these things – it goes from bad to worse with surgery."

Ali Askar, the night before his sex reassignment surgery, plainly puts into perspective the message of *Be Like Others*: "if you want to find your identity, you have to do this. My identity will be defined after surgery, there will be clarity." In a world that is defined by family, tradition and religion, these men have decided

who they are and have undergone considerable hurdles to overcome archetypal expectations – to live with clarity.

— RR

Interview with Tanaz Eshaghian, director of *Be Like Others*

Sundance Film Festival, Park City, Utah

Thursday January 24, 2008

In 2004, Tanaz Eshaghian was reading the New York Times and read a story about sex change operations taking place in Iran, legally. This article and her surprise about such a phenomenon taking place in her country of birth, which she had left when she was six years old, led to the making of *Be Like Others*.

She went to Iran and spent a week in the waiting room of Dr. Bahram Mir-Jalali's Mirdamad Surgical Centre in Tehran, where young men and women would show up on Tuesdays and Wednesdays for the open clinic. She had no problem whatsoever from the government about exploring this issue and filming footage in Iran.



I asked Eshaghian why there were so few females in the documentary (we are introduced to a woman at the beginning of the film seeking a sex change but then it focuses on males) and she informed me that women in general are more successful with the sex reassignment surgeries. They are able to conform to the male gender identity much more easily than the men. They get jobs, they get married and therefore, to a large extent, they have more to lose by "outing" themselves in a film.

In trying to better understand the role of Islam in the lives of these men seeking sex reassignment surgeries, it is clear that religion is just one part of their culture. The relationships people have with their families are the strongest bonds that they have. Life in Iran is not about individualism, it is about humans helping humans and relying upon each other to meet religious and cultural expectations, and therefore such decisions cannot be made lightly. They are complex relationships and therefore there are complex consequences. In a world where expectations are clear, it is difficult for someone to not be like the others.

Eshaghian became interested in the power dynamics that were brought forward within the families of these men seeking surgeries. Therefore the relationships between mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters were significantly displayed behind and within the stories of these men throughout the film. The fact

that these young men were willing to disrupt and sometimes sever these deep relationships exposed the depth of the lack of clarity with which they were living. Eshaghian stated that "there is nothing worse than a lack of clarity – it triggers deep anxiety." And so her documentary tried to offer a sense of clarity and intelligibility about these strong, courageous and at the same time anxious, persecuted and desperate men.

Eshaghian and I also discussed the role of language in the film. As Iran has begun to openly promote the concept of sex changes (in an attempt to prove they are a modern theocracy), it has also adopted the language of the West. "Its discourse has become Americanized," argues Eshaghian. We both wondered how such questions and notions were discussed before the Americanization of gender identity entered Iran. What culture existed to permit men and women to exist in the "wrong" body before the phenomenon of surgery came about to allow for a change in identity? We ended the interview with no answers, only more questions.

— RR

Death in Love

(Premieres)



This is a remarkably difficult, unpleasant movie to watch. *Death in Love* is the story of a dysfunctional family, but while dysfunctional families are the staple of comedic film, there is no humor in this film — only ugliness. So, why would one want to watch a movie that is so filled with behavior we find abhorrent?

The answer lies in the fact that the family dysfunction is the result of a choice made by the mother when she was a young girl in a concentration camp during the Shoah. The young girl chooses to have sex with and become a partner to one of the Nazi doctors performing experiments on Jews. The sexual scenes are interspersed with scenes of experimentation and the experiments are gruesome. This experience sets the stage for the rest of her life and that of her family.

Given the ugliness of its dysfunction, the family represents a more realistic account of the consequences of trying to rid Europe of its Jews. The very unpleasantness of the movie attests to the destructive nature of the attempted genocide we call The Holocaust. We are accustomed to seeing what happened to

people during the Shoah as horrible. In this movie we are reminded that the consequences of the Shoah go well beyond its immediate effects.

— WLB

Dinner with the President: A Nation's Journey

(Spectrum: Documentary Spotlight)

Army General Pervez Musharraf staged a military coup in Pakistan in 1999 to become president of the country in 2001. Since then, he has been described as a military dictator and as a progressive leader. But Musharraf was not democratically elected.



Directors Sabiha Sumar and Sachithanandam Sathanathan find themselves in the home of President Pervez Musharraf, having a personal conversation with him over dinner. Musharraf seems willing to discuss his idea of bringing democracy to Pakistan, and how his role as a military leader impacts the idea of a modern democratic country.

This documentary then travels across Pakistan to understand how "democracy" works within an Islamic country. The filmmakers travel to remote areas and talk to the Mullahs in charge of the tribes in the north-west frontier

provinces – the Mullahs desire a theocratic state and do not like that Musharraf has allied himself with the United States. They then interview local people who say that they intend to vote for the Islamic Party because they are from the same tribe, although they do not agree with the Islamic impositions the Party wishes to impose. They claim that the Mullahs want to ban music, the radio and television, and they also do not permit their women to venture outside or to school. Then the directors take us to the other extreme of Pakistan – a beach resort filled with the liberally-minded young and wealthy. They support Musharraf because he is against the Mullahs.

The filmmakers interview diverse peoples, from the labourer to the intellectual, from the party members and journalists to the street vendors to find out what democracy in Pakistan means to them. We become aware that the country is split between the wealthy literate and the poor ruled by tribal and religious law. Musharraf states that he is protecting the country from extremism but we also see how the religious party, the MMA, has gained power in the past few years.

The documentary tries to touch upon the various constraints Musharraf has had to deal with in governing Pakistan – the roles of religious extremists, the military and the American war on terror. Musharraf's goal for democracy in Pakistan is put to the test when Benazir Bhutto returns to lead the Pakistan Peoples Party after eight years of self-imposed exile. Musharraf states that the power of

democracy will defeat her in the upcoming elections. Then Musharraf contradicts himself by calling a state of emergency in Pakistan, stating it is "to protect the democratic transition I put in place eight years ago." Unfortunately, the documentary comes to an end in November 2007 when Musharraf stepped down as the head of Pakistan's military. The recent and tragic event of Bhutto's death is not included in the documentary and we are left wondering what democracy really means in Pakistan and the ramifications the democratic process will have in Pakistan as the country emerges from its elections.

— RR

Durakovo: Village of Fools

(Durakovo: Le village des fous)

(World Documentary)



This seems to be a movie about the misuse of religion or the misuse of God. The village of Durakovo is more like a small compound than a village. It is something like a "tough love" camp for youth run by a self-important, dictatorial boss, Mikhail Fyodorovich. The basic principle of the camp is that you follow the rules and obey the boss. By doing this the young people are supposed to straighten out their lives. Oddly enough, the camp is run as though it is ordained by God. God has selected

the boss, the rules, and even the young people who come or are brought to the camp by their parents. Fyodorovich does what he wants to do to make money and create for himself a comfortable life, but he claims that this is God's will. God is misused in this scheme because there is no real connection between God and the life Fyodorovich creates for himself.

There is a parallel political story in the movie. Fyodorovich and his political acquaintances talk about how the new Russia has been chosen by God. Putin has been selected by God and all Russians need to do is to obey the rules and things will work out for them. But there is an underlying current of dissatisfaction with the turn Russia took under Gorbachev and Yeltsin. Fyodorovich longs for a return to the old days where everything was ordered and determined by the leaders. Democracy has diminished the stature of Russia and Fyodorovich believes that Putin can return Russia to a place of prominence in world politics. Again, oddly enough, God is now invoked as approving of Putin and the new anti-democratic political system of Russia. God is misused both in politics and in the running of the work camp. What makes the references to God so unusual is that in the pre-democratic days of the Soviet Union no reference would have been made to God. Now Fyodorovich wants to return to those pre-democracy days, but he claims that such a return is blessed by the God that became available with the very democracy Fyodorovich now deplores.

The question for the audience is, of course: "If Durakovo is a Village of Fools, then who are the fools?" Are they the young people who come to the village expecting to be helped? Are they the staff of the compound who think that they are helping young people by providing "tough love," or maybe, more appropriately, demanding obedience? Are the fools those who seek a return to the politics of the old Russia? Are the fools those who misuse God and therefore fail to make any real spiritual connection? It is possible that the answer is: "All of the Above."

— WLB

Eat, for This Is My Body

(New Frontier Feature)

When Jesus invites his disciples to "eat, for this is my body," he is inviting them to become symbolically a part of him - that is, to become a part of his mission and vision. In this



experimental film, an elderly white woman literally invites the Haitian natives to "eat, for this is my body," and to "drink, for this is my blood." Symbolically, her daughter also asks the natives to "eat, for this is my body."

But, what are we to make of this? The white women seem to represent those whites who colonize nations of color. They (the colonists) invite the natives to

become a part of the white colonialist world. By doing so, the natives will find salvation, in a way similar to Jesus providing salvation to those who "follow him."

Unfortunately, the colonialists are not able to provide the sought after salvation and their invitation becomes an arrogant and false promise to the natives.

— WLB

George A. Romero's Diary of the Dead

(Midnight)



October 24, 11:00 pm – Jason Creed (Joshua Close) is out in the woods with his cast of film students, filming a horror movie entitled *The Death of Death* for a school project at the University of Pittsburgh. While shooting, the news informs the crew that the dead, incredibly, are coming back to life. Welcome to *George A. Romero's Diary of the Dead*.

Romero's new film takes the viewer back to the first day when corpses began to reanimate and attack living humans. It's a story of apocalyptic horror and how the living humans, not the zombies, become the source of the terror in the world.

Shot as a "true" story, rather than the biased and manipulated news we get through mass media, Jason now takes the camera and offers us a "documentary" of the events of the realities that unfold as the dead come back to life. *Diary of the Dead*, like many of Romero's other zombie films, is a platform for social commentaries, delving into issues of racism, immigration, materialism, consumerism, and the new phenomenon of "truth telling" through the Internet. Intertwined amongst these observations, the role of religion finds its place.

As the surviving students and professor, Andrew Maxwell (who had the cheesiest lines in the film), make their way back "home" in a Winnebago, we find that the driver, Mary Dexter (Tatiana Maslany), has a medallion of St. Christopher hanging on the rearview mirror to guide her way. Unfortunately, St. Chris cannot stop the onslaught of the living dead, and Mary ends up running over three people. Not understanding how one can rise from the dead, Mary becomes distraught at having "killed" three people and tries to take her own life. In the end, she herself becomes a zombie and must be killed by a crew mate.

Amongst the many gory scenes of killing zombies in new and exciting ways (which Romero is well known for), the story is narrated by one of the few living cast members, Debra (Michelle Morgan). Debra explains to us that "God has changed the rules on us, and surprisingly we were playing along." It is not just that

the dead have become reanimated, but that the living themselves have become cruel and vicious, living in a world already filled with human-made threats.

Many explanations are offered for the rise of the dead. Radio reports (often told by Masters of Horror such as Stephen King, Wes Craven and Quentin Tarantino) offer a landscape of paranoia ("don't trust your family members"), chaos and lack of control. Eventually the only radio voice left is that of a Christian evangelical, shouting that the hunger of the dead will not be satisfied because of "our" sins and so you must "get on your knees" and repent to God. The one helpful religious character in the movie is Samuel, a deaf Amish man, who uses dynamite as his weapon of choice to kill the zombies, and when he is bitten by a zombie, instead of let himself turn into one, he uses a sythe (through the brain, making sure he won't reanimate) to kill the zombie and himself.

Debra, the narrator, finally makes it to her home, along with the rest of the crew. She searches her home for her parents and brother. Fearing they will all be zombies, she instead enters her home in search of "Michael, like the archangel," seeing him as a figure of strength and power in the face of unknown fears. Unfortunately, her entire family has become zombies, and they are eventually killed. At this point, Debra loses her naivety, realizing that eventually we all become immune from the death and horror, we become part of 24/7, taking it all in stride, the horror becoming just another day to survive. The narrator then poignantly

points out, when referring to the zombies, that "it used to be us against us, now it's us against them...except they are us". The fear and horror of the zombies is actually a part of all humanity and it is us that must rise above our own human shortcomings.

By the end of the "documentary" all of mainstream media has disappeared, and we are left only with the overwhelmingly countless voices and images of other bloggers and hackers. But there is no one truth to be found in these voices, as it all has just become "noise." Debra, invoking the name of Michael, the archangel once again, finds herself in the impossible position of having to shoot Jason, her boyfriend, literally in the head while shooting him with his camera. Debra, seeing the true source of horror as those of us who have been left alive, finally realizes the truth – that maybe humanity is not worth saving. Perhaps that is why God has changed the rules.

— RR

Interview with George A. Romero, director of *Diary of the Dead*

Sundance Film Festival, Park City, Utah

Monday January 21, 2008

After viewing George A. Romero's *Diary of the Dead* I was given the opportunity to interview the director himself. I was more than thrilled to know that he was willing to be interviewed by the



Journal of Religion & Film, as I am a fan of Romero's work and have always found his social critiques illuminating, amidst the zombies, death and laughs. The reason I wanted to talk to him was to understand how and why he uses religion, usually in the Christian and Catholic context, within his films.

George A. Romero grew up in the Bronx. His father's family was from Spain – Castilian. He found that his father sometimes expressed prejudice towards Puerto Ricans. Although he greatly respects his father and looks up to him, every once in a while a comment would slip and Romero would have to question it and call him on it. This perhaps is the reason why Romero includes immigrant issues in his movies to some extent. Also, growing up in the Bronx, he found that he himself was discriminated against, by the Italians. But in his family, he got to experience

different religions – he had a Mormon uncle and a Jewish uncle. These issues of race and ethnicity are raised from the outset of Romero's "zombie" film career.

His grandparents on his mother's side were Lithuanian. His grandfather used to work for the New York subway authority, and would come home with strange and bizarre stories. One story that captivated Romero was the day that his grandfather found a body in the tunnels, which had been chopped up by the train running it over. He was struck with awe, and perhaps a little fear.

When Romero was a child, he was raised Catholic, and believed it all – including holy communion. But then he found out that you could basically be saint all your life, steal an apple, and if you died, you would be sent to hell!

His Lithuanian grandmother passed away shortly after this revelation, and at the funeral everyone was saying that grandma had gone to heaven. But Romero questioned that, asking what if grandma had done something wrong just before she died? Then she would be in hell right now. He also stated that basically he had his butt kicked all the way home up 60th Street by his father for saying such a thing. This could be considered a pivotal moment in Romero's life, where religion would become less powerful.

He attended parochial school all the way to high school, and the brothers were quite cruel. They often hit students with a rubber scimitar, and picked on the

students that were somehow different, usually students that displayed "gay" characteristics. This experience also had an impact on Romero's religious beliefs and their decline in his life. Furthermore, it is the reason why priests and nuns often appear in his movies, who often experience unfortunate and tragic endings.

When he left home for university, things in the world were heavily influenced by pot, bongo drums and reading poetry in coffee shops. Religion did not stay with Romero. But this is when Romero made his break in film, and in 1968 directed his first zombie movie, *Night of the Living Dead*, making Romero the father of the modern zombie movie.

In terms of Romero's own career, he got his break from the Mr. Rogers Neighborhood show – a lot of people did. George considers him a wonderful man, a very upstanding human being.

Romero now lives in Canada. He likes using Canadian casts because there's less emphasis on being a star (*Diary of the Dead* has a strong Canadian cast). Instead it's about acting, and he appreciates that. Casting in Canada is also much easier. He films his movies in Canada these days. He has been living in Toronto for the past three and a half years.

Getting back to the movie at hand, I asked Romero about certain scenes in the movie that heavily referenced religion. In the movie George A. Romero's *Diary*

of the Dead, Debra (the narrator) finds herself in need of a protector when searching her house to see if any of her family members have become zombies, so she searches for "Michael," as in the archangel. Romero explains that she searches through her mind for such a protector, and chooses an angel to help her out of pure innocence and a sense of naivety, but by the end of the movie she is driven to faithlessness. The next time Debra says the words "Archangel Michael," she finds herself having to shoot her boyfriend Jason, literally and by camera.

Another religious element that arises in the movie is the concept that "everyone blames God" when things go wrong, states Romero – this is the reason why Romero usually throws in a line about God causing the situation of an apocalyptic horror.

A further major theme that runs through *Diary of the Dead* is society's instant access to information. In an *NPR* Interview in 1988, Romero had strong concerns about electronic media and the fast pace in which the news was being fired at us. Romero still thinks that we are getting our information too fast, especially through Internet sites such as MySpace and YouTube where people can instantly post their versions of the "truth" (for instance, there is a scene in the movie where the crew gets to the university residence just 25 minutes after hearing the first news reports of the dead being animated, and they find the residence empty) – now there is no filter to decipher what is real or not. Anyone can put anything on

the web and make it accessible. Hitler could survive today on the internet and spread his message of hate.

Today Romero exclaims that he wishes he could believe in religion – that he would like something to hang onto. He would like to have Spencer Tracy as a friend, so that he could ask him if he could "just talk to God."

Romero does not practice any religion anymore, but it does inform his films in fundamental ways. I look forward to his next film.

— RR

Guitar

(Premieres)



One reason people turn to religion is to deal with the issue of death. What can we expect after death? How do we live in the face of death? And so on. Religions, of course, give different answers to these questions (Karma, resurrection, streets paved with gold, fire and brimstone, etc.) but religion and death do seem to go hand in hand.

In *Guitar*, Amy Redford's first feature film, Redford takes up the issue of dealing with death. The story's main character, Melody Wilder, learns in the

opening scenes that she has cancer and has only two months to live. After learning this she is fired from her job and her jerk of a boyfriend dumps her. She is not only facing death, but she is doing so all alone. One of the best features of this film is that the panic and loneliness felt by Melody are palpable--the audience feels her panic and loneliness. This is great film making.

Melody's way of dealing with death is to prepare a kind of nest in which to die. What she does is quite out of the ordinary, but given the circumstances we understand her behavior is believable, even if unusual. As she prepares her death nest, she has dreams and recollections of her childhood—she remembers wanting a red guitar. Her parents would not buy one for her and when she stole one from a music store, she is caught and unable to keep it and learn to play.

The guitar is the symbol of what has been missing from Melody's life. As Melody lives her remaining days, she buys a red guitar and learns to play. The purchase of the guitar is one of many things that Melody changes in her life, but it is symbolic of what she wanted to do that she didn't do in life. Death has a way of changing our priorities and death surely does this for Melody.

The message of the movie is that the best way to deal with death is to live well. When Melody learns that she is to die in a short time, panic sets in because she has not lived well. As she creates her nest, she learns to live well and in the end

she is able to accept death. There is nothing in the film about what happens to us after we die, so the message focuses on how we live life rather than how we live after life. This is not a new message (consider Buddhism or Judaism or Leo Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilych*), but the film sends the message in an interesting way through a strong performance by Saffron Burrows.

— WLB

Half-Life

(New Frontier Feature)

The world as we know it is falling apart – set in the hills of Northern California, we see on the news that the quality of life on



earth has descended to intolerable depths. There are water shortages, the air quality keeps people from venturing outside, natural disasters and armed conflicts are commonplace and the sun is on its way to exploding – it too has reached its half-life. Although the movie is set in the future, we are in fact living on the edge of such a scenario and so it does not seem impossible to imagine.

The movie tells the story of a mother, Saura Wu (Julia Nixon), trying to raise her two children – a daughter, Pamela (Sanoë Lake), who has finished high

school and has a job cleaning airplane hangars, and Timothy (Alexander Agate), just eight years old. Their father has abandoned them to make their own way through this despondent world.

As the story unfolds, we are introduced to a host of characters that are intertwined amongst the Wu family. Wendell (Ben Redgrave), a younger man, is a freeloading user in a relationship with the aging, yet beautiful, Saura. Pam's best friend is Scott (Leonardo Nam): he's gay and Pam is in love with him. Scott's parents (James Eckhouse and Susan Ruttan) are Seventh Day Adventists who are unwilling to see their son as gay, but rather going through a phase of rebellion against God. Jonah (Lee Marks) is Scott's lover and Timothy's teacher. All these characters are unfulfilled, grasping onto each other in order to give their lives some sort of meaning or direction – perhaps even just to maintain some sort of status quo. Timothy, the young son, is the only character that seems to see the whole picture.

Cinematically intriguing, the film incorporates stunning views of the hills and horizons of Walnut Creek and Diablo Valley, interspersed with visually striking scenes of animation which take us into the mind of Timothy, and how he sees the world around him.

As hope fades (Pam jumps off the roof of her house) and relationships crumble (Wendell pursues Pam), we see how the various characters try to cling onto

their own beacons in the dark. Scott's father, a pastor in the church, practices baptisms on his son in the hot tub in their backyard. Saura, faced with being abandoned again, lets Wendell stay in her house even though her daughter has accused him of rape. Pam, having no one else to turn to, has sex with Scott and then is rebuffed by him. Jonah loses his job for having a relationship with Scott, and then finds out that Scott had concocted the entire scenario to "out" himself in front of his parents. Amongst the morally decrepit Wendell and Scott, we see how the others try and fight their way to the surface for light.

Timothy, in what will become a moment of revelation, asks Wendell how the world will end. Wendell, a non-religious man, offers up a variety of scenarios – perhaps the apocalypse will occur, or a messiah will save them all, but most likely, the sun will explode and everyone will die. Remarkably, this scene will expose Timothy as a hope for the future. As the film progresses, Timothy demonstrates the ability to perform miracles. He heals himself when he is cut, he can make objects move, he can travel through space, and in order to protect his family, he makes Wendell disappear.

In the final scene of the film, as Timothy and Pam watch the sun – the impending source of humanity's destruction – slowly descend beyond the horizon, Timothy informs his sister that it, the sun, is coming back – and it rises again. She turns to him, and says: "That's never happened before. Did you do that?" And we,

the viewers, are left wondering if indeed this young boy, whose mother and sister are broken because their father got in a plane and flew west and never came back, can indeed heal his family, heal the sun, and heal the world. Perhaps he is the Messiah the world has been waiting for. You will have to watch the film and decide for yourself.

— RR

**Interview with Jennifer Phang, director
and Reuben Lim, producer of *Half-Life*
Sundance Film Festival, Park City, Utah
Sunday January 20, 2008**



Jennifer Phang and Ruby Ramji talk.

Jennifer Phang, the director of *Half-Life* has not made just another apocalyptic movie – she uses the impending apocalypse to "get people to think." Phang needs people to make a choice about their futures. And she does not want to give the viewers any ideas about the ending: she leaves it to us to decide what will be our fate.

Half-Life was nurtured by Rodrigo García, director of various hit television shows such as *Six Feet Under*, and *Carnivàle* at the Film Director's Independent

Lab. The project took 35 days to film, one year to cut, and one year to add the dramatic animation that fills the film with despair and hope.

Phang is a graduate of the M.F.A. Directing Program at the American Film Institute, where she received the Holleigh Bernson Memorial Award and the Dreamworks World Studio Foundation Scholarship. Not afraid to take the viewer into uncomfortable and painful places, she has created a film that must be "experienced with an open mindset". Phang sees the film itself as a meditation, with deep under-layers, cross connections of emotion, while at the same time offering up moments of humour.

Reuben Lim, the producer of *Half-Life* has known Phang since 2000 and he believes that she has inspired him through her approach to life and film. Lim states that "Jennifer can take meaningful ideas and translate them into film." Lim also was influential in terms of the religious undertones that resonate in the film. The portrayal of Scott (Leonardo Nam) is, in a way, an echo of Lim. He grew up in a very strict Seventh Day Adventist home, and was the youngest Deacon in his church. Although he has moved away from his religious roots, they still remain in his consciousness and are revealed in the film *Half-Life*. The character of Scott is trying to find his identity in a decaying world, while his parents refuse to acknowledge his direction in life. As Scott tries to assert his independence, his father (James Eckhouse) sees his behaviour as a form of boredom, which in turn

has led to restlessness. The more Scott tries to take control of his individuality and path in life, the harder his parents resist it. Scott's father states that, rather than fighting for control, "at a certain point you have to give up control, you have to give control to God". Scott angrily replies that he does not believe in God. In a moment of art imitating life, we can perhaps understand the path that Lim has taken to become a producer of film.

Together, Phang (in her directorial debut) and Lim have created an in depth drama about family dysfunction, perseverance and hope in a disintegrating world. It's a movie that makes you think, just as Phang hoped.

— RR

Incendiary

(Premieres)

Sharon Maguire's *Incendiary* probably counts as an anti-religion film. The movie is more about the human spirit than the Holy Spirit and in the end, the human spirit triumphs over radical religion, represented by Osama Bin Laden's Islamic Holy War.



The plot of the film takes place against the background of a young mother and wife who is writing a letter to Osama Bin Laden. The letter is conveyed by voice over and it explains how the young woman understands the terrorism perpetuated by Bin Laden and other radical religionists and how that terrorism affects the daily lives of individual human beings, human beings who are by all intents and purposes innocent. The letter adds a layer of meaning to the film that would not be available from the plot itself.

The young woman is married to a member of the London bomb squad, so she is intimately familiar with terrorist bombings in London. Each time her husband comes home from work, she asks him how his day was and he always answers by saying: "I'm here aren't I?" The young woman's life is threatened every day by every bomb discovered as a part of the terrorism inflicted on London.

On the day of a big soccer match, the young woman's husband takes her son to the soccer stadium where both are killed by terrorist bombs. The rest of the movie deals with the young woman's grief. In dealing with her grief, the young woman establishes a relationship with the son of the bomber whose identity she has learned from a local journalist. She also establishes a relationship with the journalist and with her husband's boss, the head of the London bomb squad.

At the end of the film she lets go of these relationships, relationships that had been useful to her grieving, but she now discovers that she is pregnant by one of the men she had been seeing. At the very end of the movie she gives birth and we hear the newborn screaming as newborns do. In the letter to Osama she explains that the scream of her baby (representing mankind) will drown out the sound of Osama's bombs, no matter how many bombs he explodes. The human spirit will triumph over the terrorism that is wrought in the name of religion.

— WLB

The Linguists

(Spectrum)

(Seth Kramer, Daniel A. Miller, and Jeremy Newberger of Ironbound Films received a nomination for an Emmy Award for Outstanding Science and Technology Programming for their documentary *The Linguists*. The awards ceremony is September 27, 2010.)



Linguists is the story of two linguists who travel the world trying to save dying languages. There are approximately 7,000 languages in use around the world, but one language becomes extinct about

every two weeks. That languages are dying off rapidly gives a certain urgency to the work of the linguists.

While most of the movie is about language, when the linguists travel to a small village in Bolivia to learn more about Kallowaya, they are required to participate in an indigenous healing ritual before beginning to "talk language."

This is a rare opportunity to see an indigenous ritual on film, a ritual that included blood sacrifice, fire, and a priest-like character. Here we discover that the language of the healer is mumbled so as to give the healer a privileged place in the village. We also learn about the connection between language and culture and then between language and religion.

— WLB

Mermaid

(World Dramatic)

Mermaid is the story of a young girl, Alisa, who grows up and falls in love. She has a gift for making wishes come true. Throughout the movie Alisa seems to be in control, even in the face of many obstacles.



When she moves to Moscow she sees advertisements that indicate that people must take control of their own lives, they make things happen, they are in charge. In one sense this is a story about people seizing the moment, taking advantage of opportunity, and so on. In the end, fate intervenes, contradicting the message of the movie up to that point. We may think that we are in control of our lives. We may think that things are to be determined by us. In the end, we are all at the mercy of fate.

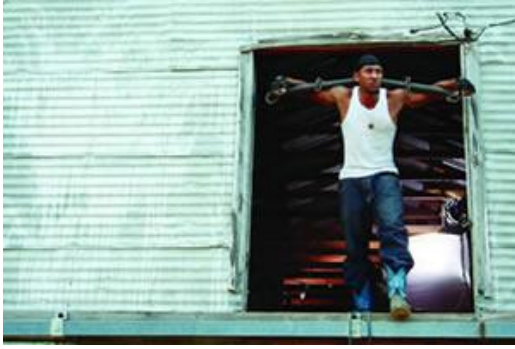
I haven't said much about the plot of the movie because the plot is remarkably complex and the story is told as a life narrative. The story telling, however, is charming and we fall in love with Alisa, cheering for her success and sharing in her disappointments. How can you not love a young woman whose job is to walk the streets as a telephone or a beer stein.

The message of the movie, however, remains the same. For all of the control we think we have over our lives, fate will always win out.

— WLB

North Starr

(Dramatic Competition)



North Starr begins as a hard luck story about an aspiring rapper named Demetrious, living in Houston, Texas, who has dreams that foreshadow his future. By the end of the film it unravels into a murder mystery, replete with fleeting elements of spiritual development and mystical elements.

The film begins with a dream sequence that plays itself out through the life experiences of Demetrious, aka D-Man. Demetrious witnesses the murder of his friend, Justice, and flees Houston and the trappings of his life. He ends up in the middle of nowhere. As Demetrious stops to enjoy the shade of a tree, he writes in his journal, "What means have I to find meaning here? The eyes of my soul seek to be free. I am blinded, not a sign to be seen." Lo and behold, he finds a crudely-made cross planted in the dirt behind the tree and he leaves Justice's diamond incrustrated cross on top of it. A jeep comes by and pulls over, and Darring (the only other black man in the area), clad in a cowboy hat and dusty jeans, offers Demetrious a ride. Blaring from his radio we hear the lyrics "send down your

heavenly power, send down your heavenly grace” and we realize that perhaps Darring is another sign sent to Demetrious to help him on his journey to be free.

As the film progresses, scenes are filled with racial tension and friendship in a small Texas town called Trublin, as Demetrious finds himself bunking with Darring at the North Starr Ranch, which is "a clean and moral establishment," so the sign by the front door proclaims. As the two men bond, the stories of their very different lives unfold and we realize that both men are on a path of some sort, to liberate themselves from the ghosts of their pasts. Darring is trying to overcome the death of his wife. Eventually we learn that Demetrious is searching for his brother, who disappeared years ago.

This is when the spiritual elements of the movie come to the forefront. Demetrious, in his dreams, encounters an aboriginal boy, clad in a peace-sign t-shirt, and wearing Justice's diamond cross. He tells Demetrious that he knows why he has come to this small town: to find his brother. Darring explains to Demetrious that the dream is in fact a prophecy of truth.

It turns out that Darring and Demetrious were meant to meet: Darring witnessed the murder of Demetrious' brother by three locals who have filled previous scenes with racial hatred towards both men. Darring tells Demetrious that he's never been the same since witnessing the horrible crime.

The three locals, fearing that the truth will eventually come forth, plan to kill Demetrious and eventually bring it to fruition. All of the symbols that were given to us in Demetrious' opening dream sequence have played themselves out throughout the movie, and there is nowhere else left to go. Demetrious is stabbed, and as he lies dying on the beach, he realizes that he is no longer blind. Although not the justice we expect to be served, we realize that Demetrious has found his own sense of justice. He states that he is finally "headed home," and through his own death, he has found salvation. Demetrious, and Darring to a lesser extent, tells the story of finding redemption through the healing of wounds, through their trust of each other.

— RR

Order of Myths

(Documentary Competition)



The carnival of Mardi Gras in Mobile, Alabama, celebrated since 1703 has a very strong symbolic value - it has passed down the traditions of two separate communities, segregated by race. Both private and public space is devoted to this tradition, and it takes place before specific people. Although Mardi Gras is celebrated by the entire city of Mobile, the celebrations are in a sense restricted to a certain subset of that

community - these two subsets coexist together in Mobile, but at the same time, Mardi Gras continues to mark the passage of time and to mark the ways in which this ritual is held in specific regard.

There is in essence a white Mardi Gras, run by the Mobile Carnival Association (MCA) and a black Mardi Gras, run by the Mobile Area Mardi Gras Association (MAMGA) which takes place annually in Mobile. The ritual of this celebration includes certain sacraments that are held in high regard (the coronation of the king and queen of Mardi Gras, the choosing of the royal court, the parade and the ball). These activities are filled with symbolic actions mandated by tradition and heritage. Those taking part in the rituals express the fact that there is some external element that has been carried down through time and must be honoured for its significance of tradition.

Although the rituals that take place in this documentary do not include a reverence for a deity per se, they do express an idealized notion of perspective that each side carries within their hearts and cultures — tradition above all else is held in highest regard. Although both sides are reinforcing shared values and beliefs, the end result is that the sense of identity created by the celebration of Mardi Gras keeps the two sides from fully integrating with each other. The political exploitation of these rituals becomes visible and at the same time complex as the story unfolds.

Underlying the exploration of the celebration, there is a historical interrelationship that is brought forth — the Queen of the MCA, Helen Meaher, had slave-trading ancestors and Stefannie Lucas, the MAMGA Queen's heritage is linked to the slaves brought over to Mobile by the Meaher family. Her family also owns much of the land that once belonged to the slaves who settled there. As this historical narrative is unwound, we find out that the MAMGA King and Queen have been invited to the coronation of the MCA King and Queen for the first time, a historic event where the two mirrored rituals intertwine ever so slightly.

The director's grandfather, Dwane Luce, is a member of the two oldest secret orders in Mobile, the Order of Myths and the Strikers. Although highly secretive, he is willing to share his perspective about the rituals that take place around the Mardi Gras celebration.

The film is disturbing, given the fact that the KKK still has a strong hold in Mobile and the secret organizations there continue to thrive and multiply. But the film also offers a glimmer of hope, in the fact that the queen and king of both Mardi Gras celebrations were able to share their glory with the other, if only for a few hours. Mardi Gras in Mobile continues to be a long held tradition based on maintaining heritage and tradition — unfortunately one of those traditions that continues to have an iron grip in Mobile is that of segregation, and the ritual of Mardi Gras continues to be cherished as a sacred ceremony by both sides. Ritual,

in many communities, brings people together, through the sharing of sacraments and symbolic actions. For instance, the ritual of Mardi Gras in New Orleans brings together the two communities for one day, to be celebrated by all — everyone is equal and the tradition is upheld as the most important aspect. But in Mobile, Alabama, ritual has become a polarizing force of tradition.

— RR

Phoebe in Wonderland
(Dramatic Competition)

Director/screenwriter Daniel Barnz creates an enlightening tale about parenting, morality and growth. This film, filled with an all-star cast (Felicity Huffman, Bill Pullman and Patricia Clarkson), revolves around



Phoebe, a young girl who is different, talented, imaginative, and yet problematic to her parents and her teachers. Phoebe retreats into fantasy, specifically the world of *Alice in Wonderland*, in order to deal with her problems. She acknowledges her appeal for this fantasy world to her therapist because in Wonderland "things aren't so fixed."

Phoebe's mother is an aspiring academic, but feels like a failure because she cannot complete her thesis and cannot connect with her daughter. In trying to nurture her daughter's imagination, Phoebe's mother tries to remove any boundaries that may restrict her daughter and make her boringly "normal." Her father, on the other hand, feels that stronger rules are required to reign in his daughter. Phoebe's gifted drama teacher, Miss Dodger, nurtures Phoebe's talent and capacity for learning, but the film is filled with frustration as this young promising student slowly slips further away from reality.

Phoebe's inability to conform to the rules around her brings into the question the notion of morality and the demand for children to obey conventional rules. Phoebe, in a revelatory moment, watches the princess in the "Nutcracker" and exclaims that if she were able to wear a costume, like the princess, long enough, then maybe one day she'd be able to wake up and be that person. The notion of who we become when we grow up is called into question – is it conformity to traditional values that makes us who we are, or are we just costumes of the ideals and values that have been imposed upon us from childhood?

As Phoebe ventures into the real world of theatre, the school play of "Alice in Wonderland," she befriends a gutsy young boy named Jamie who helps her navigate this rule-obsessed world in order to fulfill one's own desires. He explains to Phoebe that his ability to get the parts he wants in plays is to "pray or do

something you hate and God will give it to you.” Although both agree that they do not believe in God, the young boy admits to having prayed for a month to get the part he coveted (The Queen in *Alice in Wonderland*). Jamie is the character that learns to play by his own rules. Unfortunately, Phoebe devolves into obsessive compulsiveness in order to get into the play – she continues this behaviour even after she gets the part of Alice out of a fear of “being fired.” It is this behaviour, as opposed to the rule-breaking behaviour of spitting and mocking, that is the most disturbing for her mother.

Phoebe in *Wonderland* culminates in the production of the play, with Phoebe as Alice. Miss Dodger, who has offered Phoebe enlightenment about herself throughout the movie, appears one last time on opening night with the imaginary Alice, and together they disappear, leading the viewer to realize that Phoebe has figured out where she fits in this world of conventions and values – she is free to be who she wants. Phoebe leaves us with the line, “You? Who are you?,” making us think about our own costumes and behaviours in accordance with the morals, ideals and values that have been instilled in us since childhood.

— RR

Recycle

(World Documentary)

This Jordanian film follows the life of Abu Ammar. Ammar makes what living he can by finding cardboard throughout the city of Zarqa, Jordan and selling it for recycling — thus the title of the film.



Zarqa is the birthplace of Abu Musa al Zaraqawi (one time leader of Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia) and this raises the question of how religion, terrorism, politics, and poverty work together to create an atmosphere in which hatred and lawlessness are nourished.

Ammar tries to be a good Muslim. But he is not sure what that means in terms of politics and so he finds himself talking about the world in a way that gets him arrested as a suspected terrorist. An ordinary man now finds himself a part of the world-wide war on terrorism and he feels that he must leave his homeland where his life will be one of continually looking over his shoulder.

As a part of Ammar's story we discover that the war of the terrorists against the West is also a war of some Islamic factions against other Islamic factions. There is as much a Jihad within Islam as there is a Jihad against the West. We also

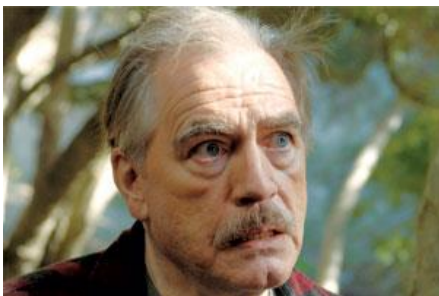
discover that Zarqawi, who grew up in Ammar's neighborhood, was not a religious person until the time of his acceptance of the Jihad. This raises the question of whether Zarqawi became religious and then took up the Jihad of his religion or whether he took up Jihad and then used religion as the justification for Jihad. What the question shows is that it is possible to use religion for purposes other than those espoused by religion.

If you are interested in a more mundane and more realistic account of terrorism and religion, this is a movie that will show you how to raise the right questions.

— WLB

Red

(Spectrum)



its message about vengeance.

I thought that this would be a movie about vengeance. And it is that, but it is also about evil and the movie's presentation of evil may be as important an element of the film as

An elderly gentleman, Avery, is fishing with his fourteen year old dog, Red. The movie gets its name from the dog, but "red" represents the blood of various

characters in the story as well and red is used to cover the screen at particular moments of transition in the story. Avery and Red are accosted by three young teenage boys who want money. Avery gives them what he has, but it's not enough to satisfy the teens and so in a fit of sheer meanness, the teen with the shotgun shoots and kills Red.

From this point forward, Avery seeks justice, not vengeance. His reasonableness, rather than anger, guides his pursuit. He wants the boys to admit what they have done and to apologize. We, the audience, are sympathetic with his cause. Avery's pursuit of justice is blocked at every turn by the father of two of the boys. The third boy's family is paid off to keep quiet. The DA refuses to prosecute the case--we are led to believe that this is the result of the power of the boys' father. The television station that starts an investigation calls it off and when the reporter continues to pursue it she is transferred to another city and state.

Avery must pursue his quest for justice all on his own. The end result is that two of the boys are killed after attacking Avery--it's clearly self defense. But Avery understands, and tells the reporter, that because he could not "let it go" his quest for justice turned into a quest for vengeance. And the result of his quest for vengeance. is the death of two young men. Vengeance. really is "mine, sayeth the Lord." Avery learns the lesson too late and even though we are sympathetic to Avery, we learn in the end that his quest has gone wrong.

The young boy who shoots Red and the father that protects him are the epitome of evil. This is one of the best portrayals of evil I have ever seen on film. It rivals the Kevin Spacey character in "Seven" and the molesting father in "Priest." There may be some message about good and evil in this movie, but the experience of evil that it gives us seems to me to be the most important element in the film. Letting us see evil face to face, eye to eye, seems to me to be more important than telling us something theoretical about evil. One requirement of dealing with evil is recognizing it and Red makes it possible for us to recognize evil.

— WLB

Slingshot Hip Hop

(Documentary)

Rap music has always had various associations, depending on the singer. For young Palestinians living in Israel, Gaza and the West Bank, hip hop has begun to emerge slowly and the youth who discover it start as many musicians do - with the desire for success and bling.



Tamer, known as the first official Arab rapper, was moved by Tupak's song "Holla if you Hear Me" and realized that Tupak was talking about his own 'hood. He, Suhell and Joker put together a group known as DAM, the first known Palestinian rap group.

After September 20, 2000, Occupation began in the West Bank and politics began to inform everyone's perspective. Tamer then wrote his first political song, "Who's the Terrorist" in Arabic. He believes that he can help the kids trapped through Occupation by using rap, not violence.

The theme that art is stronger than violence resonates throughout this documentary. Young rappers, separated by walls and checkpoints, find ways through their lyrics to connect with each other and they begin to take on the roles of community activists. Young girls also start to speak out on behalf of their gender through rap.

Behind the story of these rappers is the account of the Palestinians who are trapped by Occupation, trapped by walls, trapped by politics and sometimes religious traditions. For instance, female rapper Abeer Zinati and her family are threatened by other family members because they do not believe it appropriate for a girl to sing and dance on stage.

Language also has a powerful function in this documentary. When Tamer, the first Arab rapper began singing, he sang in English because he thought rap had to be in English to be popular. But when he wrote his first political song, it was in Arabic. All the rappers who have followed in his footsteps have all maintained the use of Arabic in writing their lyrics as a way to maintain their Palestinian identity. Interestingly, in the subtitles of the documentary the name of God does not show up, but the words "Inshah Allah" were used quite often in the songs as we North Americans use God in the vernacular — "God willing," things will change.

This documentary demonstrates how rappers, facing discrimination, military attacks and severe poverty, are able to expose their anger and desire for peace through their songs and give hope to a new generation of children who are struggling. During the making of this film two rappers were arrested on charges related to the throwing of stones at Israeli jeeps two years earlier. Standing by the immense walls put up by the Israelis, one rapper exclaims "every wall in the world has fallen and this wall will fall too." They have found a way to fight back through words, not stones.

— RR

Strangers

(World Dramatic)



This is a film that is charming, smart, subtle, and painful, all at the same time. Eyal meets Rana by accident (strangers) on a train they are both taking to Berlin where they will watch the World Cup finals. Eyal is an Israeli kibbutznik and Rana is a Palestinian from Ramahla, now living in Paris (strangers). They end up sharing an apartment and over a period of three days they fall in love. If you think this is a bit hokey, the movie makes their falling in love absolutely believable--not only do the characters fall in love, but we, the audience, fall in love with Eyal and Rana.

But Rana gets a call and must leave Germany--she tells Eyal not to call her. He, of course, cannot let her go and he follows her to Paris where he discovers that she has a young son named Rashid (strangers). The scene that best shows Eyal and Rana as strangers is one in which Eyal is on the phone with his father and Rana is on the phone with a friend. Eyal's father is telling him about the rockets bombarding Israel from Lebanon and the Israeli response, and Rana's friend is providing Rana with the same information from the exactly opposite point of view. How could two people whose worlds are so different ever find love together--become more than

strangers? Nothing more can be said about the story-line without giving the plot away.

The important question here is, as far as the Journal is concerned, "What is the relation of the film to religion?" In one sense we have an Israeli Jew and a Palestinian Muslim falling in love. How can this not be a movie with something to say about religion. We are reminded here of *Romeo and Juliet* or *West Side Story* or even *West Bank Story*, where some aspect of their culture separates lovers from each other. We expect that religion will keep them apart.

But, oddly enough, religion is never an issue. Its exclusion seems intentional. We are not getting what we expect in the film. The issues that make Eyal and Rana strangers are tribal, national, historical, personal, political, even ethical--everything but religious. In America we are told that the war on terror is a battle between radical Islam and the West. Fundamentalist Christians (as well as George Bush and Osama Bin Laden) have suggested that this is a battle between Islam and Christianity and many American Christians have taken up the cause of Israel against its Islamic enemy. But *Strangers* is a movie that shows how unimportant religion is to the turmoil in the Middle East. Of course Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad calls for ridding the Middle East of the Jews and of course Sunni and Shiite Muslims are at war with each other in Iraq. But how much of the turmoil and bitter animosity is really about religion and how much of it is a product

of one's tribal connection, one's historical treatment by others, one's concern for a safe homeland, one's sense of vengeance and so on? *Strangers* is a movie that shows the complexities of the relations between enemies in the Middle East and how much more is at stake than simply one religion at war with another.

Can the lovers overcome the complexities that make them strangers?

— WLB

Towelhead

(Premiere)

The need to be loved can take an individual to perilous places. When you are a thirteen year old girl, shuttled between parents who are too self-absorbed to notice that the one thing they can't or won't offer is love, you



begin to look for love in other places. Herein lies the danger of love.

Towelhead, directed by Alan Ball, is based on Alicia Erian's debut novel of the same name. The movie is set during the first Gulf War, amidst rising anti-Arab sentiments. Jasira, a young beautiful and "exotic" looking girl lives in Syracuse with her Irish-American mother. Her mother, Gail, punishes her because her

boyfriend Barry is attracted to Jasira. So her mother sends her to Houston to live with her Lebanese Christian father, Rifat whose behaviour vacillates between making the sign of the cross and beating his daughter for being immoral – not following the rules and guidelines he believes are essential for a girl to follow. The concept of morals in this movie is much like Nietzsche's views in his *Genealogy of Morals*. Nietzsche describes "slave" morality as Christian morality – vengeful, bitter, unable to distinguish differences, and assumes that whatever is not good is evil. Although not a film specifically about religion, the essential concept of morality stems from the Judeo-Christian society in which we live and the political climate that surrounds us.

Towelhead is filled with sexual, political, racial and ethnic tensions. As we watch Jasira sexually awaken, we realize that the men who surround her are conflicted by it. Her father does not want to acknowledge that his daughter is growing up and becoming sexual (he locks her out of the house for using a tampon). Her neighbour Mr. Vouso responds to her sexuality and preys on her vulnerabilities. Her boyfriend Thomas manipulates Jasira into having sex with him then wants to withhold it when he finds out her first sexual experience was with Mr. Vouso (even though it was against her will).

Throughout the movie, Jasira's behaviour can be considered passive, in that she allows the others around her to decide what is appropriate and moral behaviour

for her. Her mother tells her she is bad because of her boyfriend's behaviour towards Jasira. Her father tells her she cannot date a black boy because no one will respect her. Her neighbour tells her not to want to grow up and be a "playmate" because people will consider her a slut. Her boyfriend, Thomas, calls her a sand nigger but then warns her to not let people call her names. Each adult male in her life tries to maintain a sense of self-control and pride, while at the same time wishing to keep out the "foreign element" invading their lives. In the case of the father, it is Thomas and his blackness. For Vouso, it is the "raghead" living next door and threat they pose to the US with war.

Another Nietzschean element of "slave" morality that arises in the movie is that of the "clean man." He is a man "who washes himself, who abstains from certain foods which are conducive to skin diseases, who does not sleep with the unclean women of the lower classes, who has a horror of blood." This horror of uncleanliness reverberates throughout the movie. When Jasira first gets her period, she is devastated and does not want to tell her father. When she asks her father why she can't use tampons, he exclaims it is only permitted for married women. When Mr. Vouso sexually penetrates Jasira, he finds blood on his fingers and in horror realizes that she was a virgin. The opposing values of pride and virtue expected from Jasira finally come to a head, and Jasira finds it within herself to finally

vocalize what she wants – she does not want to be beaten or manipulated, she wants to be accepted for who she is. And she wants to be loved.

Towelhead is not a subtle movie. It makes you uncomfortable. It also makes you question who decides what morality is, and the contradictory nature in which we are raising children in suburban America to understand what morality is and isn't – especially when you are different from the status quo.

— RR

Where in the World is Osama Bin Laden?

(World Documentary)



Morgan Spurlock returns to Sundance with yet another hit documentary – four years ago he took on McDonalds with "Super Size Me" and now he's hunting for Osama Bin Laden. Although the film sometimes tries to oversell itself as an action thriller, what Spurlock has done is to bring back a little reality into the video-game like attitude towards terrorism and war.

Spurlock travels throughout the Middle East, stopping in places such as Egypt, Morocco, Israel, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, as well as Afghanistan and Pakistan in search of Bin Laden in order to capture him. What Spurlock finds

instead of Bin Laden are a lot of ordinary people, the majority of whom he interviews are Muslim, living out their existences, striving for the same things he desires – to keep his family safe and healthy. Some people welcome him into their homes, others offer intriguing insights about the American war on terrorism. Along his journey, Spurlock offers the viewer a brief history on US foreign relations with other countries and how it is implicated in creating extremist regimes. But what stands out in this documentary is not the history lesson but the perceptive viewpoints of the people he meets in these various countries. Spurlock actually brings us closer to understanding the "Muslim" mindset by allowing them to talk about their own lives and their own views on Osama Bin Laden.

Beginning in Egypt, we hear how people feel trapped between their own corrupt government, which is backed by the US government, and terrorism. In Morocco, we see how poverty and unemployment has led to the rise of extremism. A young Islamist activist explains that violence is bred by money and the promise of paradise. In Israel, Spurlock first goes to the West Bank and we encounter a different view on the war there – for many it is not a fight for religion but for land being occupied. Palestine has become a strategic tool to justify terrorist behaviour. This view is further heightened in Israel when Spurlock is pushed around by Orthodox Jews, telling him to "go away, this is not your land." In Jordan, an Orthodox priest, Father Nabil Haddad, tells Spurlock that religion is used to hide

the ugliness of extremism. In fact, Al Qaeda has become an intercontinental idea, much like globalization. The idea has been exported but the truth of it is that nobody really wants it.

In this depiction of a showdown between good and evil, Spurlock leaves us empty handed – he does not capture Osama Bin Laden, but he does much more. Spurlock makes us realize that there are many things that create an Osama Bin Laden, not just religious ideology. And the fact that these elements exist out there means that there will be many more of them. But the rest of the world is busy just trying to get by.

— RR

Yasukuni

(World Documentary)



"One sword embodies 2.46 million souls" – the film begins with ninety-year old sword-maker Naoharu Kariya, the last sword maker left alive at the Japan Forgers Association, that forged the steel-bladed weapons traditionally used by Japanese military officers.

The Yasukuni shrine, built in 1869, honours the 2.46 million who died in war for Japan, including some who are now considered war criminals. Worshippers

who come to the shrine believe that the blades house the souls of the dead memorialized there. This documentary, directed by Chinese-born Li Yingl, explores the controversy surrounding the shrine and the swords that were used to kill the Chinese in the "Great East War" which ended sixty years ago. The Yasukuni shrine is seen as both a unifying force for Japan's far right and an appalling symbol of Japan's ugly past.

The documentary uses the icon of the sword, referred to as the "body of Shinto," to trace its past in Japanese history, which included the Nanjing Massacre of 1937 and a widely reported "100-Man beheading contest" carried out by two officers who were later executed for war crimes. That fact that the names of these criminals, who were put to death for their acts of violence, are now included at the shrine has become a focal point for international protests over the site.

Yasukuni also examines the controversial annual visit of the former Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi to the shrine in juxtaposition to the Taiwanese and Korean families whose relatives died fighting for Japan, but who want their names removed from the shrine. Religious belief also plays a role in this opposition. Those who do not follow Shintoism and were forced to fight for Japan want the "spirits" of their ancestors returned to them so their families can worship the dead in their own religious traditions. Others who protest the shrine see it as a violation of "church and state" because the Yasukuni shrine is a private religious

institution. The monastery that controls the shrine will not remove the names of those who died because they are viewed as "martyrs" and belong to the state.

Kariya, the sword maker, is used as a bridge throughout the film to try and understand the role of the sword in Japan's tumultuous history. Even though Kariya acknowledges Japan's historic culpability, he is at the same time disconnected from the atrocities carried out by the swords he crafts, consumed rather with the art of swordmaking. The film also shows people who refute the Rape of Nanking or that officers used the sword to behead prisoners for sport. They see the controversy over the shrine as a manipulation of history. Li Ying lets the sword and rapid images of the atrocities play out to its uncomfortable conclusion.

Although the film is jumpy and choppy at times, could use a bit more editing (it is 123 minutes long) and is a touch judgmental, it is an educational film, not just about Japan's history but in understanding the role of religion in Japan's remembrance of war.

— RR