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## The 41st Toronto International Film Festival

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## The 41st Toronto International Film Festival

### Abstract

Introduction to the 41st Toronto International Film Festival

### Author Notes

Ken Derry is Associate Professor, Teaching Stream, in the Department of Historical Studies at the University of Toronto Mississauga (UTM). Since 2011 he has been a member of the editorial board of the *Journal of Religion and Film*, and since 2012 he has been the Co-chair of the Religion, Film, and Visual Culture Group for the American Academy of Religion. Aside from religion and film his teaching and research interests include considerations of religion in relation to literature, violence, popular culture, pedagogy, and Indigenous traditions. He is the recipient of the 2013 UTM Teaching Excellence Award.

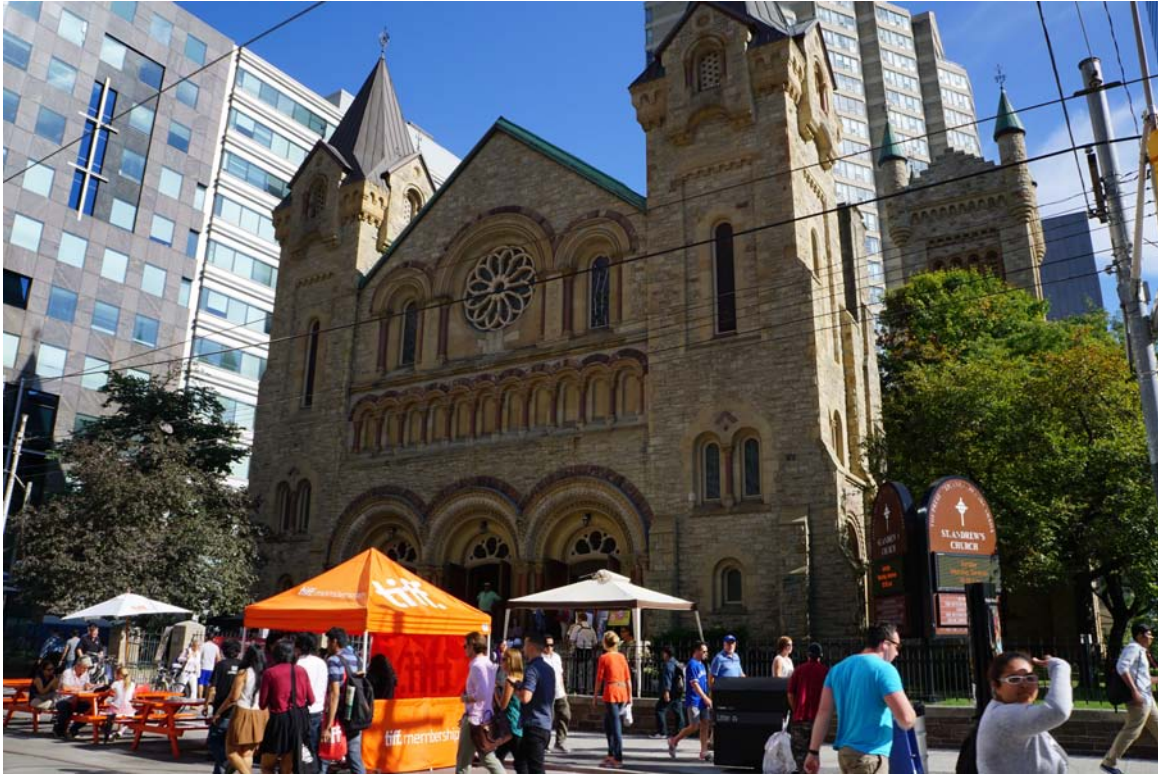


Photo: Ken Derry.

## **The 41<sup>st</sup> Toronto International Film Festival**

September 8-18, 2016

<http://www.tiff.net/tiff/>

The closest subway station to the heart of the Toronto International Film Festival is St. Andrew, at the intersection of King Street and University Avenue. The station is named for the nearby historic Presbyterian church, which for 11 days in September each year is very much eclipsed by TIFF as a site of worship. As with many other communal rituals, regular daily operations are suspended and transformed during the festival. One of the most prominent – and, for non festival-goers, disruptive – changes is that King Street itself, a key east-west thoroughfare, is closed to traffic for several blocks during TIFF's opening weekend, and filled with unfamiliar sights and activities.



Photo: [http://www.blogto.com/film/2016/09/this\\_is\\_what\\_the\\_huge\\_tiff\\_festival\\_on\\_king\\_st\\_looks\\_like](http://www.blogto.com/film/2016/09/this_is_what_the_huge_tiff_festival_on_king_st_looks_like).

People from around the world take part in the annual pilgrimage to TIFF. They agonize over which specific films to watch and then agonize again as they try to get tickets to those films, or to take their chances in a rush line. They form bonds with fellow pilgrims also standing in lines, also excited about movies. They help create new rituals in the theatres, beyond watching the films themselves. Before each movie a few brief notices and advertisements appear, and within days of the festival's start audiences have developed liturgical responses to them. During a Royal Bank commercial about funding movie ideas, we see a screenplay being typed out – and people shout the lines just before they appear. At the end of a reminder/request to turn off electronic devices, everyone says “Aaaarrgggh” in a kind of low grumble, reminiscent of the sound played over Joss Whedon’s “Mutant Enemy” logo.

Another ritual is of course the pursuit of heavily sought after icons, Hollywood celebrities, who show up to red carpet galas and hundreds and hundreds of fans. Icons also appear in one of the other short videos that played before each screening. This 18-second ad encouraged audience members to cast their vote for the Grolsch People's Choice Award by pointing to the hallowed history of film.<sup>1</sup> The narrative simply involves a young man walking up to a vending machine and making a selection from a host of holy film relics. These items include ruby slippers (*The Wizard of Oz*); a cup of ominously vibrating water (*Jurassic Park*); mirrored sunglasses (*Cool Hand Luke*); an old clock radio turning over to 6:00 (*Groundhog Day*); a red stapler (*Office Space*); pink soap (*Fight Club*); a hand-imprinted volleyball (*Castaway*); and, of course, a showerhead (*Psycho*).



The full video is available at <http://www.meehanlewis.com/work/grolsch-tiff-peoples-choice-award>.

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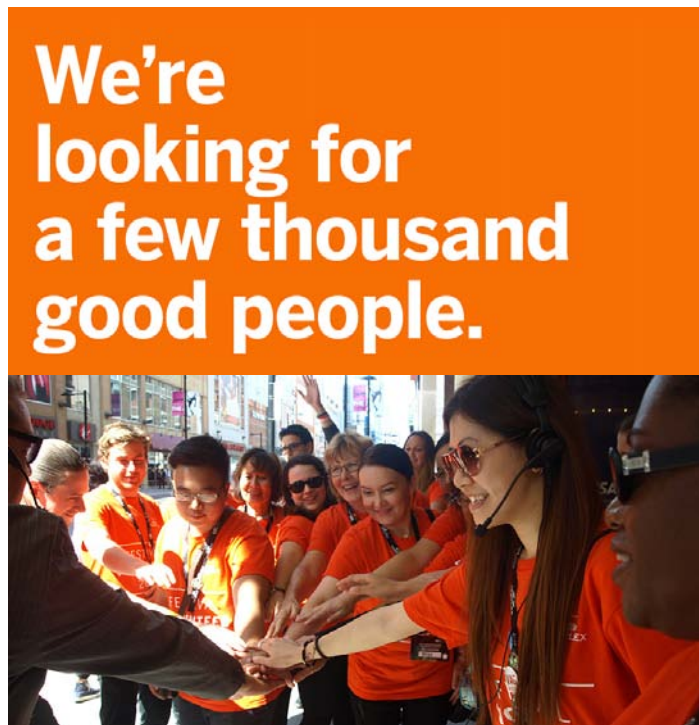
<sup>1</sup> The award, based entirely on popular vote by TIFF attendees, has become known as a strong predictor of success in prestigious year-end competitions like the Oscars. Past recipients include *Slumdog Millionaire*, *The King's Speech*, *Silver Linings Playbook*, *Argo*, *Dallas Buyers Club*, *The Imitation Game*, *Room*, and *12 Years a Slave*. This year's winner was *La La Land*, Damien Chazelle's romantic musical comedy drama.

At the screening of *Gimme Danger*, Jim Jarmusch's documentary on Iggy and the Stooges, TIFF documentary programmer Thom Powers made the film/religion link explicit when he said that, if there were a shrine to independent filmmakers, Jarmusch would have a place of honor there with the largest votive candle. Iggy Pop, who was also on hand to help promote the film, concurred. He said further that Jarmusch is great because he understands that what is sacred in both film and in music is to follow your own vision, to never let someone else tell you what to do in order to make more money. This point echoes a famous Iggy quote, which appears at the very end of *Gimme Danger*: "Music is life, and life is not a business."



Powers, Jarmusch, and Pop at the North American premiere of *Gimme Danger*. Photo: Ken Derry.

During TIFF, for an enormous number of people, film also is life. These are people who simply love movies. In fact, it is largely due to the breadth and depth of this passion in Toronto audiences that the festival has become what it is today. TIFF initially appeared on the scene in 1976 as the Festival of Festivals, showing movies selected from other festivals. That first year, an estimated 35,000 people saw 127 films from 30 countries. TIFF now draws close to half a million people a year, showing almost 400 films from over 70 countries at more than two dozen theatres in Toronto. And then of course there are the 3200 orange-clad and incredibly helpful volunteers. TIFF is now considered by just about every commentator to be, with Cannes, one of the two most important film festivals in the world. And in 2007, *TIME* in fact asserted that TIFF had “grown from its place as the most influential fall film festival to the most influential film festival, period.”<sup>2</sup>



The TIFF ad for volunteers — and some of the fabulous volunteers themselves! Photo: <http://www.tiff.net>.

All of this size and importance means of course that, for many *other* people at TIFF, film is very much a business. About 5000 film industry professionals attend each year. Just hanging around the festival it is impossible not to overhear conversations about

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<sup>2</sup> Rebecca Winters Keegan, “Big-Screen Romance,” *TIME*, August 2007.

buying and selling films, about which ones are turning out to be surprisingly hot properties and which ones have disappointed potential investors. Over half of the films I watched were at “Press and Industry” screenings. The energy at these was significantly more subdued than at the public screenings. There was no evidence of the ritualized, impassioned viewings the festival is known for. No pre-film notices played so there was no liturgical call-and-response. There was also no silent reverence during the film itself: many people whispered their thoughts to one another throughout, while others had their phones out to take notes or respond to what I assume were Very Important Business Messages. Their screens were typically dimmed, but it still felt like a violation of sacred space to me.

However not even the detached, hardened, industry film audiences could detract from my own joy at being more fully immersed in the festival than ever before. Having lived in Toronto since 1985 I have been to TIFF many times, but I usually don’t see more than one or two films in total. This in part because, again, the festival is overwhelmingly huge, and also because it coincides with the start of the academic school year in Canada. I’ve known many people who would schedule two weeks of vacation just to properly enjoy TIFF. But this year was different: I was on a mission from *JRF* to cover the festival for the first time in the journal’s history. TIFF’s Media Accreditation office was quite accommodating, given that the *JRF* was nowhere on their radar, and offered me passes for five films. I ended up seeing nine in total, more movies than I’d ever watched in 11 days before – even though of course this barely scratched the surface of an event that included 397 features and shorts.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> For the 2016 list of films see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2016\\_Toronto\\_International\\_Film\\_Festival](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2016_Toronto_International_Film_Festival).



One important feature of this year's festival was the inclusion of an especially high number of movies by women. A record seven films directed by women were among the twenty slots that comprised TIFF's high profile Gala presentations. Women directed almost thirty per cent of all movies in the 2016 festival, an increase of about ten per cent from just two years ago. TIFF also hosted a Dialogues panel focused on creating more opportunities for women to direct.<sup>4</sup> I did not specifically pay attention to gender when selecting the films I saw, but directorial diversity was still apparent: two were directed by women (*The Bad Batch*, *Toni Erdmann*); three by Indigenous men (*Goldstone*, *Maliglutit*, *The Patriarch*); one by a Chinese-American man (*Leehom Wang's Open Fire Concert Film*); and the remaining three by white men (*Arrival*, *Gimme Danger*, *Colossal*).

Of course the festival – like almost all religious communities – still has a long way to go to achieve gender equity.<sup>5</sup> Even more unfortunately, the positive steps taken towards that end this year were overshadowed by a serious error of judgement at the closing party, which featured young women in TIFF-branded cheerleaders' outfits. The gaffe gained attention primarily because of a lengthy, widely shared critique posted on Facebook by Alison Zimmer, a former TIFF staff member. Zimmer also noted a similar problem at the opening night event involving young women in sexy purple tops and thigh-high boots. In her post, Zimmer asked: "What does it say to the women who work

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<sup>4</sup> The session was called "Women At The Helm: 'Because it's 2016!'" This title includes a shout out to Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau who, after being elected last year, created a cabinet comprised for the first time in history of an equal number of men and women. When asked why he did this he simply responded, "Because it's 2015."

<sup>5</sup> This is also true of the entire Canadian film industry. For a recent discussion of the issue (which includes comments at TIFF from several women in the industry) see Radheyen Simonpillai, "Because it's 2016: The Canadian film industry's gender gap," *NOW*, October 5, 2016, <https://nowtoronto.com/movies/because-it-s-2016-the-gender-gap-in-canadian-film>.

for TIFF, the female filmmakers and industry guests and the general public when they walk into an official TIFF event to see women treated as objects?”<sup>6</sup>



Opening and closing TIFF events. Photos: <https://twitter.com/CotCanEvents/status/774339935285444608> and <https://twitter.com/CotCanEvents/status/777330303199285248>.

The official response to Zimmer’s critique was helpful in a few ways and distressing in others. On the plus side TIFF expressed gratitude for the critique and arranged to meet with Zimmer to discuss her concerns, adding that, because of what she posted, they “will be reviewing a number of different processes.” On the other hand they did not actually admit that there was a problem with the opening and closing parties or issue a clear apology that took responsibility for what happened. They instead put forth a classic non-apology regarding the events in question, stating that, “we understand how they have been *perceived* as inappropriate” (emphasis added).<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Zimmer’s full post is available here: <https://www.facebook.com/alisonzimmer/posts/10104501695133942>.

<sup>7</sup> TIFF’s full response can be found here: <https://www.facebook.com/TIFF/posts/1459489574067755>.

Gender was also very much a concern in the seven fictional films that I saw. Women had critical roles in the three Indigenous features (*Goldstone*, *Maliglutit*, *The Patriarch*), and were protagonists in the other four (*Arrival*, *The Bad Batch*, *Colossal*, *Toni Erdmann*). The film whose title most explicitly raises the issue of gender is of course *The Patriarch*, which not only presents the problems of the patriarch(y) but the contrasting strength and wisdom of the matriarch. *Goldstone* also features a powerful matriarch, but in this case one whose stereotypically “feminine” characteristics – nurturing, baking pies – hide her true, patriarchal, nature: she is selfish, violent, and cold-hearted, more than willing to engage in trafficking women to attain her goals. *Maliglutit*, an Inuk remake of John Ford’s *The Searchers*, is similarly about men taking women from their homes, and the ways in which such actions destabilize a community.



The matriarch in *The Patriarch*.

The four non-Indigenous fictional films are in many ways about the roles that women find themselves playing in male-dominated spaces, about the tension between the personas they feel they must adopt, often for self-preservation, and the people they are or

want to be. Self-preservation is the literal theme of *The Bad Batch*, a Grindhouse horror-comedy-romance that has been described as a “cannibal fairy tale.”<sup>8</sup> The film centers on Arlen, who escapes a dystopic community dominated by several men (*after* two of her limbs have been eaten) only to find herself being asked to submit in other ways to a community dominated by *one* man. The title of *Toni Erdmann* refers to a wonderfully ridiculous persona that the male protagonist, Winfried, adopts in an attempt to find some connection with the female protagonist, his daughter Ines. For her part, Ines has been playing the role of hatchet consultant in a patriarchal corporate environment for so long, recommending that companies cut staff in order to maximize their profits, that she appears to have forgotten who else she might be. Gloria in the uniquely imaginative *Colossal* ends up trapped by a man enraged and emasculated by his own existential impotence, forced to soothe and placate him until she finds the resources to fight back and reclaim her life. And in *Arrival*, linguist Dr. Louise Banks finds herself having to constantly, passively, push back against male military aggression in attempting the overwhelmingly complex task of trying to understand actual space aliens.



Falling in love with a cannibal in *The Bad Batch*.

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<sup>8</sup> <http://deadline.com/2016/09/the-bad-batch-netflix-venice-film-festival-ana-lily-amirpour-1201813827>.

There were many movies at TIFF this year about specific religions. Most of the films I selected, however, turned out to contain just a few explicitly religious references, typically to Christianity: some Protestant funerals (*Goldstone*, *The Patriarch*, *Toni Erdmann*); the occasional biblical name (Hannah in *Arrival*, Joshua in both *Goldstone* and *The Patriarch*); one Easter egg decorating scene (*Toni Erdmann*); and the brief mention of a “Pentecostal cult” (*Arrival*). On the other hand, the three Indigenous films (*Goldstone*, *Maliglutit*, *The Patriarch*) include significant details from Australian Aboriginal, Inuk, and Maori traditions. These films do an excellent job of showing a range of Indigenous identities and experiences, and how these are tied to religion. They also highlight the common importance of *place* in Indigenous traditions and communities, and the common value put on treating both people and the world in which we live with care and respect. Finally, each of these films presents Indigenous traditions in modern contexts, making the point that while they have changed since contact with Europeans, they are still very much vital and alive. In *Maliglutit*, for example, Kuanana sets out with his son to rescue his wife and daughter from the men who took them. In his quest he is aided both by his rifle *and* by his father's spirit helper, the loon Kallulik.



Kuanana searches in *Maliglutit*.

Perhaps the most common element in the nine films I saw that could arguably be considered *implicitly* religious is a symbolic rite of passage. In a fashion much like the three-part scheme detailed by Arnold van Gennep, at least one person in each film embarks on a journey, experiences some kind of transformation along the way, and ends



Gloria being carelessly *Colossal*.

up with a new understanding of their world and their role in it. In most cases this transformation involves an important death, possibly to signify — and certainly to help initiate — the end of the old self and the birth of the new. In *Colossal*, for example, Gloria is forced to leave her life in New York City because of the damage she has caused with her drinking. She returns to the town where she grew up to discover that, when she is in a certain place at a particular

time, she manifests in Seoul as a huge and incredibly destructive monster, a cinematic *kaijū* brought to life. When she learns what is happening Gloria must face the horrifying repercussions of her actions for the first time. She also learns that there are worse monsters in the world than her, and that she can (and must) stand up to them.

The insights that Gloria gains are echoed in some way in all of the other eight films, despite the fact that these films span many different genres and cultures. Characters learn the value of community, of sharing resources, of thinking of others before oneself. At the same time they learn some measure of genuine independence, refusing to do what

others say simply because they may be in a position of power, in part because this power can be – and often is – used to hurt people. For three movies (*Arrival*, *Goldstone*, *Patriarch*) all of these points about community, thoughtfulness, power, and violence, are tied to the colonial abuse of Indigenous people. These films highlight the inherent selfishness of colonialism, the valuing of individual gain at the expense of others, which is reprehensible on its own and also in the end often leads to the downfall of the abusers themselves.

One last, self-referential, point that is raised by many of the films is the power of art itself to help actually *create* genuine, non-abusive communities:

- The consequences of Gloria’s selfishness are made fully apparent to her in *Colossal* through television and computer displays that show her as a movie monster rampaging in South Korea.
- In *Arrival*, Dr. Banks is able to forge a connection with the aliens through a glass window shaped very much like a movie screen.
- Both Iggy Pop in *Gimme Danger* and Leehom Wang in his *Open Fire* concert film assert their belief in the potential of music to connect people with one another in ways that could have a positive impact on society as a whole.
- A discussion about movies in *The Patriarch* precipitates the crisis that ultimately leads to truths and reconciliations.
- It is specifically through a kind of theatrical performance, as Toni Erdmann, that Winfried is able to overcome the barriers between him and Ines. For her part, Ines helps to create a small sense of community at a family’s Easter celebrations by performing Whitney Houston’s “The Greatest Love of All.”

This point about art and community is made explicitly by director Ivan Sen. Speaking about *Goldstone*'s protagonist in the movie's press kit, he remarks: "The power of film is similar to the power of Detective Jay Swan, to bring cultures together, the world together."



Ines in *Toni Erdmann* brings people together with "The Greatest Love of All."