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Report from Sundance 2000: Religion in Independent Films

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Abstract

This is the report from the Sundance Film Festival 2000.

Blessed Art Thou

(Directed by Tim Disney, 2000, 90 min., color)

This film is described as "the account of a monastery in the heart of California wine country which, with its centuries-old tradition of ritual, discipline, and solitude, has for the most part maintained a degree of insularity from the intrusions of the secular world. . . And so when the member of the order experiences a miraculous encounter, the implications are significant and surprisingly fractious. A community customarily full of serenity and piety must grapple with the fundamental tension between faith and reason, but the results for us are sublime."

Directed by Tim Disney, a graduate of Harvard and formerly of the animation department at Walt Disney Studios.

The Tao of Steve

(Directed by Jenniphr Goodman, 2000, 88 min., color)

I enter this one just by way of warning. Although the film is very entertaining and includes characters quoting Lao-tzu, Kierkegaard, and Heidegger, the film is at bottom a relationship story in which a womanizing slacker brings himself to commit to the love of a single woman.

Directed by Jenniphr [not a typo] Goodman, a graduate of NYU's film program.

The Eyes of Tammy Faye

(Directed by Fenton Bailey and Randy Barbato, 2000, 79 min., color)

This documentary chronicles Tammy Faye's life and therefore may be of some interest to those who work on religion and the media in American or American Christian evangelicals. The film as a whole, however, works at getting Tammy Faye to open up to the camera so that the audience can get to know her better.

Directed by Fenton Bailey and Randy Barbato.

Long Night's Journey into Day

(Directed by Frances Reid and Deborah Hoffman, 2000, 90 min., color)

This extraordinary film (and jury award winner) documents the work of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission which was formed after the end of apartheid as a way of dealing with calls for amnesty and justice. In addition to the role Bishop Desmond Tutu plays in the Commission, the film includes many scenes that reveal the role of religion both under apartheid and in the process of coming to terms with the truth of South Africa's past.

Directed by Frances Reid and Deborah Hoffman. Hoffmann directed the Oscar-nominated *Complaints of a Dutiful Daughter*.

Groove

(Directed by Greg Harrison (III), 2000, 86 min., color)

For those interested in West coast 'spirituality' and new religious movements, Groove professes to provide insight into the San Francisco rave scene. The film is described as a Nashville-like portrayal of this San Francisco subculture. Directed by Greg Harrison, a longtime film editor, this film was purchased at Sundance and should get some kind of theatrical and video release.

A Sign from God

(Directed by Greg Watkins, 2000, 72 min., color)

My own film, *A Sign from God*, is first and foremost a relationship comedy. However, one of its narrative threads consists of a debate between the two main characters on how to interpret the things that have been happening to them. Caveh, the male lead, maintains that everything comes from God and is ultimately for the best. Laura, his girlfriend, thinks that the events of the day portend something more ominous--namely, that their relationship is ending. This on-going tension culminates in an experience for the two of them which I hope has the effect of taking the audience suddenly outside of the relationship drama and to an encounter with something other, mysterious, beautiful, and cinematic.

The Cup

(Directed by Khyentse Norbu, 2000, 93 min., color)

This film has been getting a lot of attention and has been picked up by Fine Line (which means that it should be available soon). It is set in a Tibetan refugee settlement in India and is cast mostly with monks from Chokling Monastery. It reenacts the World Cup soccer fever that swept through the monastery and an escape to watch the semifinals at a local shop. I've heard that the film's insights into daily monastery life are a refreshing counterpoint to the pristine image of Tibetan monks built up in the eye of the American public.

Directed by Khyentse Norbu, incarnation of the 19th century Tibetan saint, Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo.

Chasing Buddha

(Directed by Amiel Courtin-Wilson, 2000, 52 min., color)

This is a documentary film from Australia that offers insight into the life of the Buddhist nun, Robina Courtin. Her nephew, Amiel Courtin-Wilson, directs the film.

Simon Magus

(Directed by Ben Hopkins, 2000, 100 min., color)

This British film tells the story of a faltering nineteenth century, central European Talmudic community. The prospect of a newly constructed railway sets the plot in action as everyone reacts to the potential changes.

Directed by Ben Hopkins.

King of the Jews

(Directed by Jay Rosenblatt, 2000, 18 min., Black and White/Color)

I saw very few shorts, but one I did see is well worth mentioning. Jay Rosenblatt's *King of the Jews* uses archival footage to tell the autobiographical story of the dramatic and disorienting moment in his young life in a Jewish family in which he learned that Jesus was, in fact, a Jew himself. The third part in this tripartite film re-edits footage from various Hollywood versions of the Crucifixion. The result is pure cinema.

Via Dolorosa

(Directed by John Bailey (I), 2000, 99 min., color)

This is a filmed version of David Hare's play of the same name. Having always seen his subject matter as faith and belief, David Hare has created this one-man show to tell of his journey to Israel. Describing his visits to Tel Aviv, Hebron, Gaza, and Jerusalem, Hare brings to life the inner struggles of the various participants in the many dramas of the Middle East. I think this film has great potential for classroom use in particular precisely because of the power with which Hare conveys the deep confusions which abound in Israel, confusions which Hare has no trouble bringing home and handing to his audience.