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## Report from Sundance 1999: Religion in Independent Film

### **Abstract**

The following essay is a report on eleven of the movies recently shown at the Sundance Film Festival. Each of these movies is related in one way or another to religion or to one of the many religious themes found frequently in film. Many of these movies will not be widely distributed and those interested in religion and film might never know about them. The main reason for my trip to Sundance, and this essay, is to bring to the attention of our *JR & F* readers some of the independent movies that might otherwise escape their attention. I have put information on possible distributors and release dates for some of these films at the end of the essay.

I recently had an opportunity to attend the 1999 Sundance Film Festival in the small mountain community of Park City, Utah. Sponsored by Robert Redford's Sundance Institute, the Sundance Film Festival is one of the largest film festivals devoted to independent films. Make no mistake, "independent" does not mean "amateur." Among directors with films at this year's Festival were Robert Altman (*M\*A\*S\*H*; *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*; *Nashville*; *The Player*; *Short Cuts*; and *The Gingerbread Man*); Mike Figgis (*Leaving Las Vegas*; *The House*; *Stormy Monday*; *Mr. Jones*; and *One Night Stand*); and Errol Morris (*The Thin Blue Line*; *Gates of Heaven*; *Vernon Florida*; *Fast, Cheap, and Out of Control*; and *A Brief History of Time*).

Among the actors and actresses appearing in Festival movies were Glen Close (*Cookie's Fortune*); Helen Mirren, Eric Stoltz, and Peter Fonda (*The Passion of Ayn Rand*); Rosanna Arquette and Ally Sheedy (*Sugar Town*); Steve Zahn, William H. Macy, and Ally Walker (*Happy Texas*); and Alec Baldwin, Andre Braugher, Janeane Garofalo, and Rebecca de Mornay (*Thick As Thieves*). Indeed, even the movies without famous directors or stars were first rate, professional, and well worth seeing.

The independent movies of Sundance are those that are not produced by or under the control of the big Hollywood studios. They are primarily films under the control of the director, although some directors have greater involvement than

others in the entire process of production. I thought that such independence might give directors an opportunity to address religion or religious themes in ways that would not otherwise be possible. Generally speaking, studio movies have to be acceptable to many people so they can attract large audiences and subsequently make large amounts of money. I think from the discussions below you will agree that these independent movies, while making interesting statements about religion, are not the kind that would be produced by Hollywood.

Independent movies, it seems to me, are likely to be a rich source for those interested in religion and film. Unfortunately, many of these movies will not be widely distributed and those interested in religion and film might never know about them. The main reason for my trip to Sundance, and this essay, is to bring to the attention of our readers some of the independent movies that might otherwise escape their attention.

There are two special circumstances connected with viewing movies at the Sundance Film Festival. First, at many of the screenings, the director and/or writer is available for questions and answers after the showing of the movie. For someone interested in interpreting movies this is an especially delightful opportunity. Second, viewing a movie at Sundance inevitably means viewing it with a very appreciative audience. Since most of the movies that I see, I see at the least expensive opportunity, I often find myself in a large theater with few people in the

audience. In such circumstances, the audience seldom responds with the kind of enthusiasm that virtually every audience exhibited at the Festival. For me, this was a real treat.

Finally, I selected the movies noted above from the Sundance catalogue because they seemed to be connected in one way or another with religion. (I saw *Bajo California* because it was recommended to me by someone on the shuttle. I also saw *Singing Our Stories* and *Hidden Medicine* because they were shown as part of the Native Forum prior to movies I had selected.) There may have been other movies related to religion that I missed because that relationship was not clear in the catalogue description. There were several movies that dealt with evil that I simply refused to see because I did not have the emotional energy such viewing requires. Because of scheduling, I was able to see each movie only once and that single viewing and notes written in the dark limit the discussions below.

### ***AFTER LIFE***

**(Directed, written, and edited by Kore-eda Hirokazu.**

**In Japanese, with English subtitles.)**

The first movie that I saw was *After Life*. Although it is a movie that deals in one sense with life after death, Mr. Hirokazu said in the Q & A that the movie was more about life than death. He saw its message as a positive one. Hirokazu is

asking the viewer of this movie to assess or evaluate his or her life from the perspective of "after life."

People who recently have died are asked by a team of guides to select one and only one memory, which they then can take with them into the next life. The director selected this device because he had recently lived through his own grandfather's experience with Alzheimer's disease. To Hirokazu, it seemed that we live our lives and then forget them before we die. What would it be like, he asked, if we could take with us into the next world one memory, but only one? Which memory would be most important to us?

The movie follows the memory selection process of several people. One man continually talks about his sexual conquests until the final moment when he selects his daughter's wedding as the memory he wishes to keep. A young girl gushes about her experience at Disneyland, but in the end selects a memory of lying with her head in her mother's lap—especially the smell and texture of the experience. A middle aged man wants to remember what it was like to fly through the clouds and an older man wants to remember riding the trolley car as a youth—with the window open and the breeze blowing in his face.

Several of the characters in the film are not actors, but ordinary people who were among over 500 interviewed by the director. Their memories are in fact the

memories that these ordinary people would like to take with them. Several of the professional actors abandoned the script in favor of memories that were really important to them as persons. Hirokazu joked about how these actors ignored the fine script that he had written, but it was clear that he was very pleased that the actors chose their own memories.

After the newly dead have selected their memories—not an easy task—those memories are put on film. After the dead watch the filmic recreation of their memories, they pass on to the next world. This process is important for two reasons. First, putting the memories on film gives the audience a better understanding of the memories. One woman, for example, wanted to remember herself dancing in a red dress as a young child. The audience then sees a little girl dancing in a red dress, just as the woman remembered it. Second, I found the process to be a clever comment on film making. The guides are actually people who are dead but have not yet been able to select a memory. These guides are also the ones who put the memories of others on film. In Japan, movie makers are considered neither entertainers nor artists, but something in between. Thus, the status of film makers in Japan mirrors the status of the guides: they make "films" of the memories but are themselves neither alive nor passed on to the next world.

The joy of this movie is watching the selection of memories by the various characters. We are invited to consider our own lives and the memory that we would

take with us if we could take only one. The invitation to consider the meaning of our own lives in the face of death is not a new one. Tolstoy invites us to do this in *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, as does May Sarton in *As We Are Now*. The same invitation comes to us in the recent Martin Brest film, *Meet Joe Black*, and proffered in the popular Christmas movies, *It's A Wonderful Life*. In *After Life*, however, it is proffered again in an unusual and powerful way that cannot but leave the viewer accepting the invitation.

### ***THE LOSS OF SEXUAL INNOCENCE***

**(Directed by Mike Figgis)**

There is an oft-repeated story in aesthetics that goes like this. A famous pianist performs a new composition at the music hall. After the performance, a patron of the arts approaches the pianist to express her appreciation and admiration. "That is a marvelous composition and you played it beautifully," she says, "but tell me, what does it mean?" The pianist responds by sitting down at the piano and playing the entire composition again.

Immediately after the premiere screening of *The Loss of Sexual Innocence*, a young man in the audience rose and asked the director, Mike Figgis, if he could say in a few words "what the movie is about." To this Figgis responded by saying: "I don't mean to be flip, but no." He then said, "You've had two hours . . ." and he

let the phrase dangle as though what he wanted to do was to show the young man the movie again.

I might have taken Figgis' response to be a cruel one to an unsophisticated movie viewer, except for the fact that Figgis had already said something similar before the screening. Someone asked Figgis if it was easier for him to find funding for his movies after the success of *Leaving Las Vegas*. Figgis said that it was not easy to find funding for *The Loss of Sexual Innocence*, because no matter what he said about the movie, no one would be able to understand it without seeing it. Since it was not already made, he found himself in a bind—no movie to show and nothing to say that would explain it.

It is, then, with significant trepidation that I will try to say "what the movie is about." The film portrays various formative incidents and sexual awakenings in the life of Nic. Some of these incidents occur during Nic's boyhood in Kenya, others during his teens in sixties London, and yet others during his adult life where he pursues a career as a film ethnographer. Interspersed in between these various events is the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. All of this is about human sexuality, but it is not just about our first sexual encounters. The loss of sexual innocence is about our becoming aware of the complexity of human sexuality. Sex is not just heterosexuality. Marital sex is not what we think it will be. Sex outside of marriage is not what we expect, and so on. Since the narrative

covers childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, the message is that losing our sexual innocence is an ongoing project.

But the movie is much more than this. Sexual innocence is a metaphor for innocence or naiveté in general. And this is, I believe, what makes it so difficult to say what the movie is about. Among the things that we lose our innocence about are our human cruelty, our relationship to the environment, our trust in others, our trust in ourselves, and our arrogance in thinking that we really do understand (that we are not innocent). A particular scene or part of a scene suggests each of these losses of innocence. The culmination is a remarkably powerful scene at the end of the movie where Nic realizes that he has misunderstood the situation in which he finds himself with tragic consequences. Such realization will be ours to experience as long as we live. We will continually be banished from the garden, always to our shame.

***MR. DEATH: THE RISE AND FALL OF FRED A. LEUCHTER, JR.***

**(Directed by Errol Morris)**

***TRAIN DE VIE (TRAIN OF LIFE)***

**(Directed by Radu Mihaileanu. In French with English subtitles)**

There were two movies with Holocaust themes. The first, *Mr. Death*, is a documentary on the life and career of Fred Leuchter. Leuchter discovered that the

mechanisms we use to put people to death are often defective and inefficient. This caused our system of capital punishment to be inhumane. Leuchter takes it upon himself to rectify this situation by building death machines that work. He creates for himself a very successful career (the rise) as a builder of death machines and as a consultant on killing humanely.

At the peak of his career, Leuchter becomes interested in the question of whether or not there were gas chambers in the concentration camps. He travels to several of the camps, takes samples of what remains, and concludes that no gas was present, since none of the expected residue exists. Based on this conclusion, Leuchter becomes a darling of the movement to deny the Holocaust. He travels to various conferences, sharing with appreciative audiences the findings of his samples. Leuchter is welcomed into the world of Holocaust denial and enthusiastically takes up his role in denying the Holocaust. As a denier of the Holocaust, of course, Leuchter compounds the very evil of the Holocaust. In the end, Leuchter's participation in the denial movement costs him his career in the building of death machines (the fall).

What is particularly interesting about this film is that we, the audience, like Fred Leuchter (as does Errol Morris). Leuchter is kind of goofy, but pleasant. He does not give the appearance of a representative of evil. The question of the movie is: How can we reconcile the seemingly benign character of Leuchter with the evil

he promotes in denying the Holocaust? One of the messages of the movie is that we do not need to meet the Devil face-to-face in order to be in the presence of evil.

(I watched this movie with my friend, Francisco Menendez, from the film program at the University of Nevada Las Vegas. Afterward we had an interesting discussion about what made the movie work. For more about this film, see the essay coming to the *JR&F* by Francisco Menendez.)

The funniest movie I saw at the Festival was *Train de vie*. The people of the village decide to deport themselves and thereby escape the invading Germans. They build their own train. Some of them dress in German uniforms made by the village tailor. They take off for Russia from where they expect to escape to Israel.

This plan runs into one absolutely hilarious difficulty after another. The first unexpected difficulty, for example, is that the French underground tries to stop the train, believing it to be a real German deportation train. At another moment, the train is stopped by a group of German soldiers. The leader of the Germans asks the villager playing a German soldier whether his accent is from the north or the south. We think that the villagers have been caught, only to learn that the German soldiers are really Gypsies disguised as Germans, trying to escape by pretending to be Germans, just as the villagers are trying to escape. Throughout the movie we are surprised at every turn of events.

At the beginning of the movie we see the face of Shlomo, the village idiot, telling us the story of the train of life. At the end of the movie, the camera moves back and we see that Shlomo is a prisoner of a concentration camp. The humorous story of the train has been told by Shlomo to help the prisoners to laugh and thereby to survive. This movie is no *Hogan's Heroes*, where nothing bad happens and we get to laugh without ever having to face the horror of the Holocaust.

The director, Radu Mihaileanu, raised the question of why we should laugh at such a serious topic as the Holocaust. His answer is that it is a Jewish tradition to laugh at things that are serious in order to survive them. The film's press kit includes the line, "Our humor has become a shield against madness, the bad madness, against death and the barbarians." I was immediately reminded of Deb Filler's father telling her that he and his colleagues laughed the whole first night they spent in Auschwitz. (See Tanya Oldenbake's "Holocaust Laughter," *JR & F*, vol. 1, no. 2, Fall 1997.)

Finally, this movie is very similar to the current Oscar nominee for best picture, Roberto Benigni's *Life is Beautiful*. I thought that *Train of Life* is an even funnier movie. This is probably because we do not find out that Shlomo is a prisoner until the very end of the movie. That ending, however, is an excellent device for getting us to laugh and for getting us to understand the great evil and madness of the Holocaust.

***BAJO CALIFORNIA. EL LIMITE DEL TIEMPO***

***(UNDER CALIFORNIA: THE LIMITS OF TIME)***

**(Directed by Carlos Bolado. In Spanish with English subtitles)**

***HEART OF LIGHT***

**(Directed by Jacob Gronlykke. English subtitles)**

***SANTITOS***

**(Directed by Alejandro Springall. In Spanish with English subtitles; and  
from the Native Forum)**

***CITY OF DREAMS***

**(Directed by Jorge Manzano)**

There were four films that seemed to fit the category of "spiritual journey/redemption" films. In *Bajo California*, Damian accidentally hits and kills a pregnant woman with his truck. He then flees to his ancestral homeland, Baja, California, seeking his indigenous grandmother's gravesite and leaving behind his own pregnant wife. (Although he is going literally to "Baja," or "lower" California, Damian is going metaphorically to a deeper understanding of himself and the world. Hence the title of the movie is "Bajo," or "under" California.)

When Damian reaches Baja, California, he sets his truck on fire and proceeds on foot. I was immediately struck by the parallel with Robert Duvall's *The Apostle*, where Sonny drives his car into the river and continues his journey on foot or by bus. Both the car and the truck are symbolic of the death of one person and the rebirth of another. By the time Damian's journey is complete he has found forgiveness and a revived passion for his own existence, which enable him to return to his wife and child.

In *Heart of Light*, the colonization of Greenland by Denmark has taken its psychological and social toll on the natives of Greenland, including one Rasmus Lynge. Rasmus has become the town buffoon and a hopeless alcoholic, unable to be a real father to his children or husband to his wife. When his older son goes on a shooting spree in desperation, Rasmus's world collapses and his shame causes him to venture out into Greenland's snowy interior.

On this journey, Rasmus encounters a qivittog, a mythical creature whose special powers come from surviving the wilderness to which he was banished. Although the qivittog is usually feared, in this movie he assists Rasmus on his journey of discovery. Rasmus discovers his past and in doing so discovers himself.

*Santitos* is the story of Esperanza, whose daughter has recently died. A saint who appears in the window of her oven tells Esperanza that she can be with her

daughter. Following the saint's advice, Esperanza seeks her daughter in the brothel known as the Pink House. After many travails, Esperanza returns home to a house which is now pink, where she finds that she will always be with her daughter in spirit.

While "santitos" is usually translated as "little saints," both the director and writer insisted that it meant something like a talisman that people would hold onto and that would give them power. Although Esperanza encounters many difficulties and is thought foolish by her friends and family (as well as the local priest), her persistence brings her journey to a satisfactory end in which she not only finds her daughter but also a man to love.

*City of Dreams* is the story of a young man who is taken off the reservation by his mother. She is escaping an abusive relationship and seeks a new life in the city -- her city of dreams. Instead of finding his dreams coming true, however, her son finds poverty, alcoholism, discrimination, and disillusionment. Eventually he lands in prison.

While in prison, the young man meets members of the American Indian Movement. He is reintroduced to his native heritage, from which he finds the strength to endure prison and make a new life for himself. Salvation comes from being himself rather than pretending to be a part of the city of dreams.

One of the most interesting features of this story, however, is its contrast with real life. Marcel Commanda, the star of the movie, was awarded a grant to produce a film. For several years he was unable to identify the movie he wanted to make. After meeting Jorge Manzano, the film's director, Manzano suggested that together they make a movie about Commanda's life. Commanda had come to the city of dreams and, just as the character in the movie, had lost his way.

Eventually he ended up in prison, where he met people who helped him return to his Native roots. With the help of his Native heritage, Commanda was able to get out of prison and for four months before filming began he had stopped drinking. The sad ending to the real life story is that Marcel Commanda died before the movie was complete, dying of the hepatitis he had contracted during his sojourn in the city of dreams. At the end of the premiere, Jorge Manzano dedicated the movie to Marcel and the positive steps he had taken before his life was cut short.

***HIDDEN MEDICINE***

**(Directed by Robby Romero)**

***SINGING OUR STORIES***

**(Directed by Annie Frazier Henry)**

***THE GIFT***

**(Directed by Gary Farmer)**

The Sundance Institute is committed to supporting Native American writers and filmmakers. As a part of the Institute's activities, a section of the Sundance Film Festival is devoted annually to Native cinema under the title, "The Native Forum." The Native Forum included twelve films by Native artists, of which I was able to see four, including *City of Dreams* (see above).

*Hidden Medicine* is the story of a young girl who dreams that a traditional runner is taking a message from her people to the United Nations. The message is about the environment. We must learn to live with the earth rather than against it. The runner is turned away from the UN building and never does get to deliver the message of his people. This is part of the film's message.

I am reminded here of the United Nations (UN) Earth Summit held in Brazil in 1992, where indigenous peoples were given five minutes to address the Summit.

(See *Yakoana: The Voice of Indigenous Peoples*, directed by Anh D. Crutcher, 1997. [www.yakoana.com] See the interview of Anh Crutcher in this issue of *JR&F*.)

*Singing our Stories* documents the songs and stories of Native American women across the United States and Canada. For Native women, selecting one's own song is a requirement of one's spirituality. The movie includes music by the renowned a capella trio, Ulali, and by singer/songwriter, Rita Coolidge.

*The Gift* is the story of corn (actually, corn, squash, and beans). Corn is the gift to Native peoples from Mother Earth. Corn is revered because it provides so much of the nourishment for Native peoples and because it can be planted. Corn is not something that you are lucky to find, like animals in the hunt. It is something that you can take with you and pass on to future generations. But corn is not only a gift to Native peoples, it is also a gift from Native peoples to the rest of the world, thereby connecting Native peoples and the other people of the world.

The Sundance Film Festival turned out to be exactly what Ron (co-editor of the Journal, Ron Burke) and I had expected. It was an opportunity to see a variety of independent films that present religious themes. The directors did have the opportunity to address religion or religious themes in ways that might not otherwise be possible. These films will not gain wide circulation and will not otherwise or

easily come to the attention of our readers. For those interested in religion and film, there are many more movies related to religion than just blockbuster hits like *Contact*, *Cocoon*, the *Rocky* or the *Star Wars* series. There are more than even those foreign or independent films that attain moderate financial successes like *The Apostle* or *Breaking the Waves*. Our hope is that readers of this journal will keep their eyes open for the variety of films related to religion, and perhaps summarize and analyze some of those films for the rest of us.

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One problem with reporting on movies from the Sundance Film Festival is that many of these movies are so recently completed that they have not yet found distributors and may not be available to the public for another six months to a year. Nevertheless, we hope that our readers will keep an eye open for these and other independent movies related to religion. For further information about the availability of films from Sundance see the following:

*The Loss of Sexual Innocence* will open in selected theaters on May 21, 1999. For information about rental or video, contact Sony Pictures Classics, 550 Madison Avenue, 8th Floor, New York, New York, 10022. Telephone: 212-833-8840. Fax: 212-833-7911.

*Train de Vie* will be distributed by Paramount Classics. No release date has been set. For more information, contact Mrs. Georgian Theodoris at Paramount Classics. Telephone: 323-956-2320. Fax: 323-862-1103.

*Mr. Death* was shown at Sundance as a "work in progress". It should be completed in April or May of 1999 and we will provide more information about how it can be seen at that time.

For information about *City of Dreams* contact Neplanta Films, #1 Corby Avenue, Toronto, ON, CANADA, M6E 1T7. Telephone: 416-651-6263. Fax: 416-651-9423.

*Santitos* is presently being considered by several possible distributors. Its publicist promises more information as soon as possible.

*Heart of Light* will be released in major cities in July by PHAEDRA CINEMA. It will be released in smaller cities after that, depending upon its reception in the larger cities. For more information (and for information about Canadian distribution) contact Roseann Cherenson at PHAEDRA CINEMA , 5455 Wilshire Blvd., Suite 2012, Los Angeles, CA 90036. Telephone: 323-938-9610. Fax: 323-938-9731.

*After Life* will open at the Film Forum (209 West Houston, New York City) on Wednesday, May 12, 1999. For further information about *After Life* and its availability, see [HTTP://www.ArtLic.com](http://www.ArtLic.com). *After Life* will be available on video after January 1st, 2000, from Artistic License Films, 250 West 57th Street, Suite 606, New York, NY 10012. Telephone: 212/265-9124. Fax: 212/262-9299. E-mail: [ArtLic@aol.com](mailto:ArtLic@aol.com).

*Hidden Medicine* will show on the Sundance movie Channel, starting in October 1999.