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Sundance Film Festival 2017

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Sundance Film Festival 2017

Abstract

Introduction to our coverage of the Sundance Film Festival 2017.

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Author Notes

John Lyden became Editor of the Journal of Religion & Film in 2011. He was Professor of Religion at Dana College from 1991-2010 and is now the Director of the Liberal Arts Core at Grand View University. He is the author of *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals* (NYU Press, 2003), and the editor of the *Routledge Companion to Religion and Film* (2009) and co-editor (with Eric Michael Mazur) of the *Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture* (2015). He was the 2008 recipient of the Spiritus Award for Outstanding Contributions to the study of Religion and Film.

It had been four years since I walked the streets of Park City, Utah, in late January to attend the Sundance Film Festival. I had not forgotten the snowdrifts, although they were larger than usual this year; I had also not forgotten the high quality of the films, and those I saw certainly came up to my own standards for excellent films. Sundance still sets the bar for independent filmmaking, worldwide.

The program was diverse as ever, but many films included a focus on environmental concerns; most notably, *An Inconvenient Sequel: Truth to Power* premiered, and Al Gore was on hand to talk about his continuing efforts. There were also a number of films with strong female characters, and as art mimics life (and vice versa), we also had the Women's March in Park City on Saturday January 21. This event, mirrored in cities around the world that day, featured prominent speakers on women's rights and self-determination.



Crowds gather to hear speakers at the close of the Women's March in Park City on Jan. 21.
Photo by John Lyden.

The many fine films we reviewed included *I Love Dick*, featuring Kevin Bacon and Kathryn Hahn (red carpet pictures, below), about a New Religious Movement.



Photos by Monica Blizek

Veteran actress Shirley MacLaine and Thomas Sadoski were also on hand, for the premier of *The Last Word* (see below), in which a retired businesswoman (MacLaine) sets out to write her own obituary.



Photos by Monica Blizek

Jeremy Renner and Elisabeth Olsen (below) star in *Wind River*, a film about a murder on a Native American reservation, which also premiered at the Festival.



As usual, we were not able to see and review everything, but we managed to see a selection of documentaries, comedies, and dramas that represent some of the best films being made today. Their stories were sometimes heartbreaking, sometimes hilarious, but always related to the issues that shape human life and the quest for values and purpose in this world. *Last Men in Aleppo* and *Cries from Syria* document the devastating war in Syria and the evils of genocide as well as the self-sacrifice of the good; encounters with an afterlife are dramatized in *The Discovery*, *Before I Fall*, and *I Dream in Another Language*; and Al Gore speaks of the religious faith that sustains him in *An Inconvenient Sequel: Truth to Power*. And these are just a few examples. As religion scholars who are granted the privilege to share these stories, we constantly found connections to the concerns and concepts we identify as religious—about death and afterlife, justice and mercy, evil and redemption. If anyone still doubts that films are full of religious content, and that film going is a religious practice, you should really attend the Sundance Film Festival. These films are made with love and pregnant with meaning, and we were lucky to be witnesses to that.

Our heartfelt thanks go to Grace Larsen and the Sundance Press Office for all their assistance. Without their help, none of this would be possible.