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## Introduction to Sundance Film Festival 2020

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### Abstract

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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), and the editor of the Routledge Companion to Religion and Film and co-editor (with Eric Michael Mazur) of the Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture. He was the 2008 recipient of the Spiritus Award for Outstanding Contributions to the study of Religion and Film.



### **Sundance Film Festival 2020**

This year, the Sundance Film Festival had 15,100 submissions and 244 accepted projects, including 79 narrative features and 49 documentary features. 44 countries were represented, 47 first time feature filmmakers, and 114 world premieres. 42% of features were from women filmmakers, and 34% from filmmakers of color: a considerably higher average than the film industry standard.

Diversity was also well represented in the content of the films. Many films dealt with women's experiences of disempowerment, harassment, or endangerment at the hands of powerful men, from the fictional but highly realistic story of *The Assistant* to the documentaries *On the Record*, *Saudi Runaway*, and *Into the Deep*. Even horror films dealt with issues raised by the #MeToo movement, including *Run Sweetheart Run*, *Scare Me*, and *The Night House*. Women fighting for power over their own lives and that of their families also are found in the strong central characters of *Yalda*, *A Night for Forgiveness* (from Iran, the World Cinema Grand Jury Prize

Winner) and *This Is Not a Burial, It's a Resurrection* (from Lesotho, World Cinema Dramatic Special Jury Award for Visionary Filmmaking).

Immigrant stories are found in films such as *Minari* (The US Grand Jury Prize Winner for Dramatic), *Exil*, and *Farewell Amor*. Stories of LGBTQ people are found in *Uncle Frank* and *I Carry You With Me* (the NEXT innovator prize). Central characters played by persons of color are found in many of the films, whether they are set in the US or in other countries, or in an alternate dimension like the astounding *Nine Days* (Waldo Salt Screenwriting Award, US Dramatic). It is impossible to list here all the films representing diversity or the ways in which they do so—but it is worth noting that *religious* diversity is also in these films, even when it goes unrecognized. Christianity is central to *Uncle Frank*, as it is in *Farewell Amor*, *Minari*, and *This Is Not a Burial, It's a Resurrection*. Islam is at the heart of *Yalda*, *A Night for Forgiveness* and *Saudi Runaway*, and is also found in *Uncle Frank* and in *Luxor*, which also references ancient Egyptian religion. Religious themes such as redemption, salvation, damnation, afterlife, pre-existence, judgment, gods, forgiveness, faith and justice are found in so many of the films that it would behoove the Sundance Institute to have a panel on religious ideas and diversity at the Festival: it's already in the films, in powerful and significant ways.

And once again, we must thank all the volunteers who make the Festival possible. We couldn't do it without you! In particular, we would thank Doreen Kalfus, for all her help.