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Sasquatch Sunset

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Sasquatch Sunset

Abstract

This is a film review of *Sasquatch Sunset* (2024), directed by David Zellner and Nathan Zellner.

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Author Notes

Dereck Daschke is a professor of Philosophy & Religion at Truman State University and holds a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago Divinity School. Particularly interested in the intersection among religion, psychology, and wellness, his academic work over more than two decades has analyzed the transformational breakdowns and creative buildups in the form of apocalypses, mysticism, new religious movements, psychedelics, the Bible, Bob Dylan, and, of course, film. He regularly teaches “Religion and Film” at Truman and has overseen a number of student research theses that have contributed to the conversation about just why it is that movies capture our meaning-making imaginations in the way they do.



Sasquatch Sunset (2024), dir. David Zellner and Nathan Zellner

The American fascination with the legend of Bigfoot—or the Yeti, or Sasquatch—is both a punchline for a type of conspiracy minded “crazy talk” as well as a home-grown example of the human love of cryptids, semi-mythological animals appearing in folk cultures around the world and across the centuries, from the phoenix to the Loch Ness monster to El Chupacabra. But whereas those as of yet “unreal” creatures are a kind of fun-house mirror version of real animals (birds, dinosaurs, and goats, respectively), the Sasquatch is an uncanny version of *ourselves*, as humans.

Sasquatch Sunset, the new feature from Sundance regulars David and Nathan Zellner, imagines a year in the life of a Sasquatch family, consisting of an older and younger male and female pair, until either personal tragedy or the natural circle of life, depending on your perspective, intervenes along the way. Played out entirely in inhuman grunts, with no people in sight (only their artifacts, like campsites and logging roads), arguably this film is of a piece with the opening of *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), *Quest for Fire* (1981), and—least charitably—the untranslated Wookiee-speak of *The Star Wars Holiday Special* (1978). That is to say, it sets for

itself the unenviable challenge of sustaining an audience's interest for 89 minutes without any recognizable dialogue or even a fully-formed language of any sort. Any yet, somewhat astonishingly, once a viewer allows themselves to be immersed into the world of *la famille Bigfoot*, largely consisting of the day-to-day tasks of foraging, eating, grooming, and mating, one comes to care about these furry freaks as they endure everything from family squabbles to psilocybin mushrooms to death to birth over the course of four seasons.

In fact, *Sasquatch Sunset* in many ways resembles nothing less than a fine nature documentary with stunning cinematography and enhanced by a remarkable score (by Austin “indietronica” band The Octopus Project); imagine *March of the Penguins* (2005), but minus Morgan Freeman and plus Sasquatches. But around the halfway mark, the film takes on a different, more humorous yet more unsettling tone, when the family starts to encounter evidence that they are not alone: there is another creature out there, making inroads (sometimes literally) into their territory, which leaves them baffled and unnerved. This creature is, of course, us, and the viewer begins to realize that if Sasquatches are real, they may view humans in exactly the same way as we view them, as beings they may catch glimpses of but that are too strange to possibly exist.

The Zellners present this species as lying on the boundary between human and animal, literally and figuratively. While mostly acting like our ape cousins in the wild—performances evocatively and unrecognizably portrayed by Riley Keough and Jesse Eisenberg, no less—they also exhibit forms of human behavior; coordinated communication through vocalization and drumming, counting, play, and even ritual burial. Recent studies in evolutionary anthropology and psychology note that many forms of human ritual behavior, including aspects of shamanism and other types of religion, have specific roots in our evolutionary predecessors and can be found among other primates. By the time *Sasquatch Sunset* reaches its richly comic final shot, it forces the audience to contend with a dual perspective: how much animal is still in us, but also how much we might find of ourselves in the animal.