Sundance Film Festival 2012 Report

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Sundance Film Festival 2012 Report

Abstract
This is the report of our editors from the Sundance Film Festival, held in Park City, Utah from January 19-29, 2012.

Author Notes
William Blizek is the founding editor of the Journal of Religion and Film, and is Professor of Philosophy and Religion at University of Nebraska at Omaha. John Lyden became Editor of the Journal of Religion and Film in 2011. He is Director of the Liberal Arts Core at Grand View University. Dereck Daschke is Associate Professor and Chair of the Philosophy and Religion Department at Truman State University. Kutter Callaway is Director of Church Relations and Adjunct Assistant Professor of Theology and Culture at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California. Jeanette Reedy Solano is Assistant Professor of Comparative Religion at California State University at Fullerton, California.

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When Robert Redford founded the Sundance Institute thirty years ago to promote the work of independent filmmakers, he could not have foreseen how this phenomenon would develop into a full-fledged international film festival that takes over the small town of Park City, Utah, every year for ten days in January. If there is anyone reading this who still doubts whether film-going is like a religious experience, you should attend the Sundance Film Festival. Seldom does one see so many people single-mindedly devoted to promoting films, seeing films, talking about films, and generally celebrating the creativity and diversity that this unique art form offers.

There were 4042 feature length films submitted to this year’s festival, out of which there were 110 feature length films selected, representing 31 countries; 88 of the films were world premieres. There were 46 first-time filmmakers represented, 26 of which were in competition. The reviewers for the *Journal of Religion and Film* saw a fine selection of these films, which came from a wide range of genres and styles.

A number of the films had obvious religious content, such as *Love Free or Die*, Macky Alston’s documentary about Gene Robinson, the first openly gay non-celibate Bishop in the history of Christianity. I had a chance to talk to Alston and Robinson at the festival, and my review of this powerful film is below. Spike Lee’s first feature film in four years, *Red Hook Summer*, continues his Chronicles of Brooklyn with a story that explicitly focuses on the role of the Church in African American communities. The Grand Jury Prize for Dramatic film went to the much anticipated *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, reviewed here by Dereck Daschke; this film reworks apocalyptic notions of judgment and survival through the eyes of a young girl living through a flood in the Louisiana Delta. Teenage girls struggle with coming of age, their sexuality, and tensions with their religious communities (in very different ways) in the films *Corpo Celeste*, *Young and Wild*, and *Excision*. Documentaries like *Payback*, *How to Survive a Plague*, *½ Revolution*, and *5 Broken Cameras* deal with troubling social realities that include a religious dimension and a struggle for justice and liberation. Quirky comedies like *My Best Day*, *Hello I must be going*, and *Safety Not Guaranteed* may not appear to be very religious, but even these have notions of redemption and forgiveness that give depth to the stories and characters. And personal redemption also plays a role in dramas like *My Brother the Devil* and *Monsieur Lazhar*.

Readers will find much that is of interest in these reviews, and we hope you will have a chance to see some of these films yourselves. The Sundance Film Festival, in the end, is not about profits or films with glitzy special effects, but about promoting the story-telling capacities of film. Films can tell us who we are and who we can be; they challenge us to live differently, to discover the better dimensions of ourselves, and to make our world one that is more beautiful, compassionate, and just. When films affect us in these ways, we see their religious power. There is no better place than Sundance to experience the transformation that this art form can bring.
As always, we want to thank the Sundance Film Festival Press Office for all of the help that they provide throughout the Festival. The Press Office not only assigns press credentials to thousands of journalists, including those from the Journal of Religion & Film, but they also help us connect with filmmakers and publicists, get to interviews and special events, attend red carpet opportunities, utilize the screening room, and get the information we need to do our job. Those tasks are always done, often under difficult circumstances, with professionalism and a big smile. We especially want to thank Elizabeth Latenser, Manager of Media Relations (seen below with Bill Blizek). We also want to thank Kelly Frey, who helped us through the chaos of the red carpet lines, and Katy Hogan, also seen below, who helped us get screeners for movies that we were not able to see at a Press and Industry Screening.

Thanks also go to Monica Blizek, for serving as our photographer at the Red Carpet events, at interviews, and throughout the Festival. We couldn't have done it without you!

Showing before many feature films this year was a cute and clever short film featuring Kenneth Cole designed to thank the almost 2,000 people who volunteer their time and energy to help make the Sundance Film Festival the great success it is every year. Kenneth Cole designs and provides ski jackets to all of the volunteers, both making them easily identifiable and keeping them warm.

We want to join those thanking the volunteers. They get us on the right buses, to the right theaters, and into the theaters in time for the films. Representing all of the volunteers are Alex Bua, a student at
Central Michigan University volunteering for the first time. Also volunteering for the first time is George Caine of Northampton, Massachusetts, seen with Neleigh Olson, a third year volunteer from Louisville, Kentucky.

Volunteer Alex Bua and Bill Blizek, Founding Editor of the Journal of Religion & Film

Bill Blizek, founding Editor of the Journal of Religion & Film with volunteers George Caine and Neleigh Olson

— John Lyden

Red Carpet Photos from Sundance 2012

Laura Prepon on the Red Carpet for Lay the Favorite

Bruce Willis on the Red Carpet for Lay the Favorite
Like the recent storm-bred apocalyptic drama *Take Shelter*, the protagonist of *Beasts of the Southern Wild* experiences multiple cataclysmic threats, some from the weather, some from within (and to) her family. Yet while *Take Shelter* posits two mutually exclusive realities in which these events may transpire, *Beasts of the Southern Wild* plays out like a lush parable where everything in the world is interconnected and infused with meaning for the young narrator, a six-year-old Louisiana Delta girl named Hushpuppy (Quvenzhané Wallis). The unsentimental necessity of survival is the clear theme that is both stated and demonstrated throughout the film, yet this outlook, which could be unrelentingly grim, is infused with wit, joy, and exuberance when seen through Hushpuppy’s eyes. “I see that I’m a little piece of a big, big universe, and that makes it all right,” she says.

This juxtaposition of the joy in life and the brutal reality of death is set up in the opening scenes of the film. The audience gets a glimpse into the celebrations of the community who live around “The Bathtub,” a remote section of the Delta that for all intents and purposes is its own world, physically cut off from the rest of the country by a levee, but culturally by just about everything else. Hushpuppy claims that the people of “The Bathtub” have more holidays than anyone else in the world over vibrant night scenes of crab feasting and fireworks. Yet the scene concludes with the warning, “One day the
storm’s gonna blow, the water’s gonna rise up, and there ain’t gonna be no Bathtub. Just a whole bunch of water.” This is immediately followed by a surreal “school lesson” for the community’s children on the precariousness of life, from the cavemen to global warming. “Everything is part of the buffet of the universe” says the local woman preparing the children of the The Bathtub for the harsh realities of life, asserting that the “cavebaby’s parents” didn’t cry when the “cavebabies got eaten.” “Any day now, the fabric of the universe is coming undone. The ice caps will melt. You all need to learn to survive.”

Hushpuppy is already thrust into survival mode. Her mother left years earlier; her father, Wink (Dwight Henry), lives apart from her in his own trailer. Then, after going missing for some time, Wink returns home dressed in a hospital gown. When Hushpuppy rushes to greet him, he pushes her away. In retaliation, she burns her own trailer down and tells him she hopes he dies, punching him in the chest for emphasis. As he keels over, his heart sounds dominate the soundtrack and images of glaciers collapsing are cut into the film. It is clear that his hospital stay involved a potentially fatal heart condition, and though he doesn’t die then, his death hangs over the rest of the film, reinforcing the need for Hushpuppy to survive without him – that is, to “Be a man!” as Wink demands on several occasions.

The rest of the film is dominated by the effects and aftermath of a hurricane, the prophesied storm that will wipe out The Bathtub, that turns rest of the film into a version of the archetypal Flood Story. As the rains pound Wink’s shack, he instructs Hushpuppy to sleep in a boat so that when the water’s rise, they will burst through the roof of the shack and float away. The image not only echoes Noah’s Ark and Moses saved in a basket on the Nile, but offers a clear suggestion of rebirth as well. So when the hurricane floods the whole area as Hushpuppy warned in the opening segment, she recognizes her re-emergence into the world as not just survival but an opportunity to bring about salvation for her father and, perhaps, the residents of The Bathtub. “For the animals that didn’t have a dad to put ‘em in the boat, the end of the world already happened,” she explains. Hushpuppy and Wink float around reconnecting the surviving members of the The Bathtub with each other, and as the community reconvenes, Wink is clearly preparing his daughter to lead this community, and tells her at one point that she will be “the king of The Bathtub,” where perhaps she can be the “dad” who make sure everyone is in the boat after he’s gone.

But two weeks into the post-apocalyptic world of the Flood, everything starts dying, apparently because of being cut off from the Delta’s flow by the levee. “Everything beautiful is gone,” mourns Hushpuppy, and later she laments that “sometimes things are so broken that they can’t be put back together again.” As Wink struggles to stay alive and fix the deadly waters of the bayou, he sets off a chain reaction of events that both end his world as he knows it and restores it. The film becomes increasingly surreal as it seems to give over to Hushpuppy’s need to take on the role she has been prepared for. This journey includes a magical trip out to sea where she finds her mother once again, who fries up alligator, just as she did for Wink on the night Hushpuppy was conceived. Hushpuppy returns to The Bathtub with this sacrament in hand to feed to her father on his deathbed, her own version of last rites. But as she approaches his shack, the wild beasts of title, enormous boars that have been glimpsed through the film, stampede her. She turns to face them, and they kneel down before her, apparently recognizing her as their “king,” as the animals in the manger at Jesus’s birth are said to have done.

*Beasts of the Southern Wild* is a beast fable suffused with layer upon layer of mythological narrative, messianic and apocalyptic imagery, Southern magical realism, and a hardnosed point of view that is at the same time incredibly hopeful. Hushpuppy states several times that the whole universe works when
all the parts work together, and when one piece is broken, nothing works, but if you fix that one piece, everything comes together again. In her messianic role, she absolves her mother and father of their sins against each other at Wink’s deathbed, and thereby seems to bring the natural world and the human world back in sync again.

— Dereck Daschke

California Solo

A film directed by Marshall Lewy

There are some films one can only recommended because the lead performance is so gripping and layered that surrounding story inadequacies fade away. California Solo is one such film and Robert Carlyle is that actor. The Scottish actor who perhaps first made Hollywood’s radar as the amateur male stripper in The Full Monty or his role in Trainspotting, is perhaps now best known as the devilish Mr. Gold/Rumplestiltskin in ABC’s fairy tale-inspired drama Once Upon A Time. Writer/director Marshall Lewy (dir. Blue State) admitted he wrote the drama with Carlyle in mind as Lachlan MacAldonich, a former rock star drinking his life away while working on an organic farm north of Los Angeles.

Lachlan MacAldonich, who played guitar for a ’90s British pop band called the Cranks, seems content with his bucolic farm life and wastes his nights away in a local dive bar. The inciting event happens when he leaves the bar having a few too many and is arrested for a DUI. Here the narrative shifts from simply being a burned-out-rocker chronicle to an immigrant's story. His ability to remain in the country is complicated by a long-ago drug conviction case and he is threatened with deportation unless he can prove his absence will cause undue hardship on someone. It raises the question for all of us: to whom do we matter? He has spent his life in self-imposed exile, pushing everyone away except his bottle of whiskey. Even the title of the film (a former hit song by the Cranks) lauds the solitary life, but in Lachlan we sense a deep need to belong to someone. Part of his self-imposed punishment for killing his brother is this severing of human contact. He pushes away all who try to befriend him and the lesson he learns is that the road to redemption begins with allowing a modicum of human connection. In his case this possibility of connection is hinted at in the closing scene as his estranged daughter Arianwen promises to visit him in Scotland.

California Solo is a slow-paced character study profiling a middle-aged rocker wallowing in regret. As in P.T. Anderson’s Magnolia, viewers are forced to focus on the cancer of regret. Lachlan’s creative life ends with the death of his more-talented brother who he inadvertently murdered by giving bad drugs. The only joy in his life and hint of his old creative spark comes from his podcast series “Flame-Outs: “where we consider the tragic and sometimes spectacular deaths of the world’s greatest musicians.” These dead and oft-forgotten rockers are his only community. The lack of any type of spiritual resource or response is striking in this portrait. His only comfort is music and strong liqueur.

The women in the film: Alexia Rasmussen, a pretty actress and amateur chef who buys produce from Lachlan at the Silver Lake farmers’ market, Kathleen Wilhoite his disdainful yet, likable ex-wife, and
Savannah Lathem, his abandoned daughter who shares his rebellious spirit, are a breath of fresh air in the a self-destructive drama.

In sum, Robert Carlye’s performance is the most compelling reason to see California Solo. A secondary rationale may be that California Solo offers us a non-Latino immigrant tale. For those of us who grapple with religious/spiritual themes in film, fundamental human questions are clearly raised: are we created for community? Once we err, should we wallow in regret or are forgiveness and redemption a possibility? And finally: do our lives matter? If so, to whom do we matter?

— Jeanette Reedy Solano

The Comedy

a film directed by Rick Alverson
U.S. Dramatic

The Comedy is anything but. The audience does laugh at first. There is lots of "humor." But as the movie progresses, what at first seemed funny, begins to seem only cruel and the laughter ends. Tim Heidecker gives a spot on performance of a man who has been so insulated from the rest of the world by his privileged position, so pampered, so spoiled, that there is nothing for him to do. To fill the void he participates in a kind of recreational cruelty—a cruelty that amuses him and his friends.

Along the way, Heidecker's character is given one opportunity after another for redemption. At any point in the film he is in a position to make a change, to take his life in a different direction, to do something useful. But, the message of the movie is that while redemption is free — it is always available — it must be chosen. You must reach out and accept redemption. No one else will redeem you. It is something you have to do for yourself.

The message of the film is important, but there is an awful lot of very unpleasant cruelty you have to sit through to get the message. This is not a movie for everyone.

— William L. Blizek
Corpo Celeste

a film directed by Alice Rohrwacher

Marta is a thirteen year old Roman Catholic who has been living in Switzerland but has recently returned to Italy with her family. As she enters catechism class in preparation for the sacrament of Confirmation, she finds her knowledge of the faith lacking. More significantly, she sees superficiality in the church, as the catechumens are asked to memorize information that seems irrelevant to her life. Marta is experiencing the changes in her body that come with puberty, and is given no resources to deal with her discomfort about her physicality. Her mother, while loving, is distracted and overworked, and her sister is unsympathetic and jealous of their mother’s attentions. Her catechism teacher tells her students that the body of Jesus, even when naked, is “holy,” suggesting that his physicality has no connection to the body of a pubescent girl. She is humiliated when her first period occurs in the presence of the priest, who refers to her as “dirty,” reinforcing the notion that her body has no connection to God.

The church is depicted as out of touch with the lives of its parishioners. The priest is more interested in his cell phone than in reading the Bible, and seems to have no interest in helping his members deal with the problems of their own lives. He would like to leave this church for a bigger one, and he focuses more on being promoted in this way than on helping others. The institutional church is also depicted as more concerned with influencing politics by controlling how parishioners vote in an upcoming election, than in anything that would actually deal with people’s life problems.

Much of the story revolves around Marta’s encounter with bodies, her own and others, in their ordinary physicality. She joy at finding some stray kittens is cut short when she sees them discarded as garbage; she hears of “dead bodies” in the ocean, and refuses to eat fish as a result. Scenes of garbage dumps and refuse fill the movie, and this seems to be her environment, one of death and decay.

But the body she discovers that changes her world view is a life-size wooden Christ figure; the priest is retrieving this crucifix from a remote mountain village to be installed in the church at the Confirmation ceremony. By happenstance, Marta accompanies him, and by seeing and touching this image of the suffering Christ she realizes that, just like herself, Jesus felt anger, frustration, and pain. His ordinary physicality is revealed to her, especially when she learns that a phrase she has been asked to memorize for Confirmation, Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani, are the words of Jesus from the cross, “My God, My God, Why have you forsaken me?” The “heavenly body” (corpo celeste) of Jesus was an ordinary human body that suffered just as she did. In the end, Marta finds the miracle of life in ordinary living things, echoing the idea that God has taken a bodily nature that partakes of all the dirt and refuse of our existence; the body of God is not in heaven, but with us in our suffering. This is not revealed to her by the institutional church, but through this epiphany of the body in all its physicality. In this way, the film beautifully demonstrates the central idea of the Incarnation, that God fully shares our human nature.

— John Lyden
When the reverend is played by John Waters, and the conservative Christian mother is played by former porn star Traci Lords, you have a pretty good idea of the slightly demented take on religion in *Excision*. The film centers on Pauline (AnnaLynne McCord), who might be best described as Wednesday Addams if she were a teen raised in a Christian household. Pauline has grotesque psychosexual dreams that tie her dream of being a surgeon to her burgeoning sexual desires, resulting in fantasies of make out sessions with headless corpses, topless nurses excising Pauline’s own head from a dead body, crawling over naked stiff to bathe in a bathtub of blood, putting an aborted fetus in an oven until it explodes, or having an orgasm while her own *Doppelgänger* erupts in blood from her orifices. In fact, while not a particularly violent movie, *Excision* is a bloody one. Though the blood mostly occurs in these surgical fantasies, it also appears in menstrual form, during a home dissection of a dead bird, and in a school fistfight. (The *Grand Guignol* ending the film builds to almost goes without saying.) But infused as this blood is with Pauline’s sex drive, the copious amounts on display in film are less morbid and more celebratory, even cathartic – or sacramental. The bathtub scene looks a lot like a baptism, and Pauline “takes of the blood” of her dissected bird. Blood as a metaphor for the life urge has never been more literal.

Still, it is sex, not death, that first brings her directly into contact with the religious world of her Virginia suburb (though at one point she does pray for her mother’s painful death – noting that God can just blame the suffering on Satan). Her mother Phyllis (Lords) is a strict, humorless moralist who brings Pauline to “Reverend William” (Waters) for counseling on her anti-social tendencies because, she claims, the family cannot afford a real psychiatrist. (The upscale comfort with which Pauline’s family lives seems to belie this claim, suggesting that Pauline’s visits with Reverend William are more about Christianizing her daughter than helping her.) But Phyllis’s religiosity does seems to have had some impact on Pauline, who conducts her own religious therapy by praying to God about the matters closest to her: her wish to lose her virginity, the declining health of her sister Grace (Ariel Winter) who has cystic fibrosis (and who is clearly in need of the act of mercy her name invokes), killing her mother…. She begins these prayer sessions by confessing to God that she hasn’t “read his book,” but there’s so much good stuff out there, she doesn’t want to waste her time with something that got such “mixed reviews.” Yet by the final session, he has connected to this divine figure in such a real way that she admits, “It’s getting harder and harder for me not to believe in you.” Despite rejecting most everything her mother stands for and pursuing a medical career where “science and religion don’t mix,” Pauline – like her apostolic Biblical namesake – seeks the guiding hand of God to make her way in a hostile and uncomprehending world.
Unfortunately, that guidance begins to go massively and tragically awry, as Pauline’s sex drive and death instinct lead her, in a desperate act of redemption, to try to perform her own miracle of salvation and resurrection. Three forces drive Pauline toward this horrifying conclusion: sex, death, and the need to connect with some kind of divine transcendence. —Dereck Daschke

Finding North
A film directed by Kristi Jacobson and Lori Silverbush
U.S. Documentary

The most compelling segment of Finding North occurs in the first three minutes of the film. During an aerial flyover of America’s heartland, we are presented with sweeping vistas of beautiful countrysides and breathtaking cityscapes. We also hear a poignant yet wistful song performed by The Civil Wars, which colors the film with a markedly folksy feel. Given these opening credits, the audience quickly realizes that this documentary intends to tell a thoroughly American story – a story of the people, by the people, and most certainly for the people.

Soon thereafter the film presents a series of shocking and overwhelming statistics about the American people. One in six Americans do not have enough to eat. Thirty-three percent are “food insecure,” which means that they are uncertain where their next meal will come from or how they will pay for it. Eighty-five percent of those families who are food insecure also have at least one working adult holding down a full-time job. What is more, one out of every two children in the United States (half!) will find themselves on food assistance at some point in their lives. Yet, even though this hunger epidemic is spreading across our land, there are still more children suffering today from obesity than ever before – a seeming paradox that underscores the fact that the problems we face are not simply about food quantity, but also food quality.

As the filmmakers make explicit through voiceover narration, these numbers suggest that we have lost our moral compass with regards to the weakest members of American society. And so they make a fundamental plea: we must “find north” when it comes to hunger in our country.

However, even with the incredibly persuasive nature of these statistics, the film itself founders upon the rocks of the documentary genre. That is, rather than telling a gripping story, the filmmakers of Finding North have attempted to create a story. Instead of narrating a series of events, the film offers a prescription for how we might correct the issue of hunger in America. In other words, these filmmakers have set out to persuade the viewer to act, and the best course of action in their minds is for us to convince our elected officials to reroute USDA funds. This plan does make sense on a certain level. Because the USDA apparently subsidizes only a few kinds of agri-business, the price of processed food
has dropped nearly forty percent the in the past thirty years. During that same time, the cost of fruits and vegetables has risen forty percent. Thus, by convincing the USDA to subsidize local farms that grow healthier produce, we could potentially create a food supply chain that is not only more sustainable, but also more wholesome. Or so the argument goes.

Of course, one questions the wisdom of expecting the very politicians who have created this broken system to do much of anything about actually correcting the situation. Yet, the film’s real failure is not its politics, but its inability to recognize the protagonists of its own story: local religious communities. For example, the film follows the pastor of a church in a small, impoverished town in Colorado as he drives to a distant food bank twice per week to restock the food pantry that he operates out of his church’s facilities. Yet, rather than highlighting the ways that local efforts such as these might supplement and even lead the charge in the fight to end hunger in America, these efforts are brushed aside as inadequate and ultimately unhelpful. Thus, the film perhaps unintentionally overlooks a ready-made group of allies and advocates – the religious communities and religious leaders who see it as their mission to meet the most basic human needs of the lost and forgotten members of our society.

To be sure, the problem of hunger in our country is complex. However, by disregarding the individuals and communities that are already working to end hunger on a local level, the film not only fails to deal with the core complexities of the epidemic, it also fails to represent the invaluable role that religion plays in our public life. For, in the end, hunger is more than a political reality. It is a human one.

— Kutter Callaway

5 Broken Cameras

a film directed by Emad Burnat, Guy Davidi
World Documentary
World Cinema Direction Award: Documentary

Neither Judaism nor Islam are mentioned directly in this documentary film that represents a collaboration by a Palestinian and an Israeli filmmaker, and religious practices of either faith are only glimpsed briefly. Yet the battle depicted between the villagers of Bil’in, Palestine, and the Israeli military over the encroachment of Orthodox Jewish settlements onto Arab farmland is certainly a snapshot of the conflict that has bred international distrust and hatred between Jews and Muslims. The Orthodox settlers’ conviction that they possess a sacred right to the traditional Israelite lands from the Mediterranean to the Jordan River explains the aggressive – and, at times, illegal – nature of the settlers’ land grab, while the long history of terrorism and the recent Intifada uprisings by the Palestinian Arabs in response to the Israeli occupation has remained a persistent spark for other Muslim religious violence directed at the West.
Yet none of this context is mentioned in the film, allowing the viewer, like Emad Burnat, the Palestinian filmmaker, to focus directly on the immediate matter at hand: the taking of the village’s land by the Israelis, first for a security fence, then for the settlement. Emad’s technique for conveying this immediacy is ingenious and compelling. Each section of the film shows the footage of the building of the fence and the settlement, and the villagers’ resistance to them, as recorded by one of Burnat’s cameras that is eventually destroyed in the conflict. At the same time, Emad records the life of his family over the same period, especially the birth and growth of his son Gibreel, as well as the experiences of his friends Phil and Adeeb in the resistance movement. But for Emad, the cameras are not merely pieces of equipment, but the very means by which he can deal with the trauma done to his village, his friends, and the land itself. The film he takes substitutes for his memory, which is also broken by the conflict. It cannot protect him from what he is witnessing, but it is a means to heal himself.

The theme of wounds runs throughout *5 Broken Cameras*, beginning with the wounds inflicted upon the land in the construction of the fence and settlement. One of the opening scenes documents the arrival of the Israeli backhoe, which proceeds to cut a gash into the verdant olive fields. Latter, the settlers inflict revenge on the villagers for their sustained non-violent resistance to the construction of the settlement by setting the olive trees on fire, leading one elder to gasp, “This olive tree prays to God. What did it do?” Between the construction, the resistance measures and counter-measures, and finally the military’s armed attacks on the villagers with bullets and gas grenades, it becomes clear that even in trying to save the land, the people of Bil’in are participating in its destruction. Of course, once the military course of action escalates, the villagers suffer the wounds directly, even fatally, including Emad and his friends. Even when the village achieves a small but real victory in its fight to save its land, the damage has been done – to the land, to its people, and to the memory of both. *5 Broken Cameras* does not tackle its subject as a religious issue, but at its heart is something central to most of the religious traditions of the world, including Judaism and Islam: needing a touchstone to the past, a sacred memory, to bind a community up again after being broken by life. For this reason Emad concludes, “If you are wounded you will always remember your wound, even after it’s healed. But what if you are injured again and again? You forget your scars. But the camera remembers, and so I film to heal.”

— Dereck Daschke
Interview with Emad Burnat and Guy Davidi, makers of 5 Broken Cameras

**JRF:** I’m curious about the background of the religion in this film. In the US and other parts of the world, the conflict is often portrayed as a religious one, but in this film it’s clearly not central but there are some glimpses of it. So can you talk about how you thought about the religious aspect as you made the film? Did it come up?

**Guy Davidi (G):** I want to say something, because one of the things that happened is that Modin Elit, the city that is confiscating the land, is a religious city. In fact it’s not important that it’s religious. There are many different kinds of settlements in the West Bank. There are what we call ideological settlements. These are people who are going to the West Bank because they believe in conquering the land and having a great *Eretz Israel*, the Land of Israel, from the sea to the Jordan. These are a minority in the West Bank, but they are a very violent minority, like these are the settlers of Hebron who are settling in the middle of the city and reclaiming all of the city. So a very extreme minority, but it is a minority.

But Modin Elit is a kind of settlement which is more of the second kind, which is an economical settlement. These are people that went to the West Bank, the first reason is that housing there is much cheaper. So the government subsidized the cost of the apartment, the cost of all their expenses, it’s placed in a very good location between Jerusalem and B’naï Brak, which is a religious suburb of Tel Aviv. And as Tel Aviv’s real estate is getting expensive, they need to find other solutions. And religious people in Israel, they are generally, most of the time, in the lowest social status for many reasons. One of the reasons is that they participate less as workers, in general; many of them decide not to work and just learn religious studies. The women are working more than the men. This is a population with many kids, also, and they’re normally in a very low social status. So for them to have a good house, a cheap house is very important. So they discover this new city. Of course they don’t care about the occupation. It’s not that they, ideologically, are against taking all the land, but it’s not the main reason for them. And actually some of them, I don’t want to say a lot of them, but some them, the young ones, they are completely denying where they are located. For them, West Bank is already Israel, all the view was already shaped and reconstructed, the roads, the planting, everything, the signs on the roads. So you feel that Modin Elit is already part of Israel, you don’t feel that is in the West Bank surrounded by Palestinian villages.

But in the film we see some of the settlers coming to Modin, harassing them. That’s not because of religion, that’s just because there are still ideological people, even planted in this economical settlement, but I think that because they’re guarding the land, guarding their new ghetto. Modin Elit, that’s the main reason for it to be created. Modin Elit is now the biggest colony, it’s the biggest settlement. If you look at it, it’s very different from other settlements, because it’s not built with big houses that are spreading all around the hills, which is the more ideological reason, you take as much land as you can. These are big apartment houses, so you feel that this is made first for economical reasons. The first reason is not ideological, the first reason is greed.
Emad Burnat (E): I want to say something about this. I think in my experience with the Israelis, with the religious people in Israel, I know that like there are many kinds of villages, you can separate many kinds of settlers who want to live in the West Bank. There are Israeli settlers who want to come to the West Bank and live in settlements. They think this is their land, this is Israel. And we have tried to be in this place, [but] they try to throw us out of our homes, our land. And they are very violent, they are very violent. And if you read the stories and if you see the news, you can see every day they cut the trees, all those trees, and they beat people and they shoot people in the West Bank and they make a lot of problems for the people who live there every day. And there’s another kind of Jews, the religious, it’s the same kind of people who live in Modin Elit or in Zohn Racha, part of the Modin Elit annex, but Zohn Racha was built in B’lin land, they started the construction in 2000, when the last Intifada started, so the situation was very difficult. The military closed all the roads, so nobody could go out and see what’s happening. The Israelis started to build a new settlement in this place, even without permission from the Israeli government, it’s illegal. So I thought with my experience, I went to this place, and I had a discussion with these people who come to live there and buy a new house there. There are many reasons why they came here. Some of them came because the Israeli government pushed them to go to this place, and it’s cheap. So they got a new house, a cheap house. But most of them, they came from outside, they came from the United States or they came from Europe, from Russia, and they cannot speak Hebrew, they speak English or another language. So they don’t know why they came here.

G: They don’t know even where they are. [Laughter]

JRF: They know where they think they are.

E: Yeah. Some of them wanted to come here, to live in this place, because they think they have the right to take this land and to live here. But I feel that they don’t like the land. They are not connected to the land. They are not connected to the trees. For example, if you have a child and you love him, you protect him, and you want to give him the best. But if you don’t love something, you just want to throw it away, you want to destroy it. So they destroy the land, and they destroy the trees. They are not connected to the land.

G: Even religious people, the Orthodox people, the non-Zionist kind, they would say the Land of Israel was always meant to be an abstract idea. This is really one of the most [important] things in Judaism, that there is no sacred in any element, any land, any object. And so the new Hasidic movements are the ones that are more giving importance to the actual land of Israel and the actual elements, and for some Orthodox this is already a blasphemy, this is already very far. And Jews in general, they were never a land-working people, they were always writers, doctors, free occupations, not connected to a place. So that’s a kind of contradiction.

E: I was there since the beginning of the new settlement. When the new people came to live there, I had a discussion with them. They are new people, they don’t know nothing. I asked them, “You are a religion. And in the religion, you are not allowed to steal land, or to steal another thing. So why do this?” Sometimes the answer was, “This is our land,” and sometimes, “We came here and we don’t know where we are and we want to buy a cheap house, so this is the place.” I went inside the settlement and I spoke with them with my friends, always, but you feel after this that they learned how to deal with Palestinians. So they learned how to be violent or how to speak with the Palestinians. After this they used to use violence against us, to push us out. “Don’t come here or we’ll attack you.” I had a story with one of them there – actually, I have a lot of footage there with the settlers . . . . We have olive trees near
the settlement, and inside the settlement, we have land and olive trees. One time one of the settlers asked, “I don’t know why you don’t sell these trees. We would come buy it.” Because if you have money in Israel, rich people, they just can buy all the trees to plant in their houses, just rich people. So he told me, “You can sell it for maybe 10,000 shekels, if not you lose it. The people here will steal it or cut it.” So I told him, it’s not money, it’s not business. Maybe for you it’s business, the land is business, or the trees are business. But for me, it’s five hundred or one thousand years of history.

**JRF:** That was actually my next question. The land almost plays a character in this film, and you see so many of the wounds you talk about over and over again transpire on the land first, and then the people, and then really in the way you talk about the film, in your mind and in your life there. Your voice-over narration, talking about all these things – you sound exhausted, certainly wounded. But you talk about the film as a way to heal. Having completed the film, showing the film, has the film brought healing for you?

**E:** No, it’s not like healing for me. I believe that the film was made to reach the people, to tell my story for other people, for other countries, who don’t know what’s happening here in my country and how I live. So this is the idea, to put my story everywhere.

**JRF:** And what do you hope people seeing this story might do?

**E:** I know that people don’t know enough about our life in Palestine. They know we are fighting with the Israelis, and there’s a fight and there is a war and there’s a conflict all the time, and people get killed on both sides. But the Israeli people, I think, most of them, they don’t care. They live their life and they have everything. But for the Palestinian people, it’s very hard. They live under occupation, they are the victims. But the Israeli government wants to show that the Israelis are the victims, not the Palestinians. So I hope [to] reach the people, the Jewish people and the Americans, everybody, to reach their minds, and tell them the reality of how the Palestinian people live.

**G:** For me it was important in that film – it may be a bit different from what Emad is saying – not to get into this discussion of who is a victim and who is not a victim. There are years when Israelis and Palestinians are fighting over who is going to be presented as the victim. This is the mediatized fighting. Israelis keep on saying they are the victim, even though in reality it’s quite far from the truth, but they have this feeling because of their history. And Palestinians have this feeling of victims because they live as victims, without a lot of control of their life, because of the occupation. But what I like so much in Emad’s story and the way I helped to shape it is, Emad is not a victim. Emad is someone who took responsibility in his life to do something, and he’s fixing his life by shooting with the camera, so I think that he’s healing himself. He’s not in the position, you know, “Feel pity for me. I’m poor, you should help me” – I’m not incompetent. I can change my own future. I have my cameras, I have my ideas, I’m a fighter, I want to change reality. I’m not a victim.” That’s the way I see him. I don’t want him to be presented as “feel sorry for me and help me” – I just want to have my rights, so I can flourish.”

**JRF:** If we want to ask the really big question, what do you see as the future of Israel-Palestine? Do they work out a two-state solution, do they work out one country, where everybody participates, or is it something else? Or does it go on like this indefinitely?

**E:** We have always our hope for change, for the best to us and to the Israelis, for everybody to live in...
peace. But I don’t think it’s possible to live in one state, because the Israelis, they want their own state, the Israeli state, they didn’t want other people living in their state. They want the Israeli state –

**G:** Jewish –

**E:** Jewish state, not the Israeli-Palestine state. And the solution, two states. . . . We want a solution for this, everybody wants a solution for this, but I don’t know how we’re going to do this because the Israelis’ politics for the last twenty years, they don’t want to give land or they don’t want to give a state, a Palestinian state. So we don’t know what’s going to happen in the future.

**G:** The settlers are the right-wing movement that is progressing with the settlement initiative, and they’re making the talk about a two-state solution seem less and less relevant, are making a greater challenge for Israelis, for Jews, for everyone.

**E:** If you want negotiation for my freedom, for peace, and you want to sit at the same table and negotiate, why will we negotiate if you [keep] building more settlements on my land? So you are playing with me. You don’t want solutions.

**JRF:** That’s obvious even from this side. And the right-wing movement has now started creating many problems even for secular Jews.

**G:** Yeah. The future will be, as we look at what’s happening, the two-state solution will become less and less relevant if we continue in that road, and then living together will force Jews and Israelis to decide if they’re going toward a very religious ghetto, Jewish ghetto, that is becoming more and more a kind of apartheid country, or that this challenge at the end will force us to find after many, many, many years a way to live together. It’s going to take a long, long time.

**E:** My opinion, if you ask me, if I want to live in one state or two states as a Palestinian, my answer is going to be, I live in one state with the Israelis. Like many Palestinians, I want to live in one state. But we need justice and peace for everybody, not just for one [side] and not for me.

— Dereck Daschke

**Four Suns**

a film directed by Bohdan Sláma

World Dramatic

*Four Suns* would be something of a standard, if well-made, domestic drama set in the modern Czech Republic except for Karel (Karel Roden), a New Age spiritualist who conducts himself like a shaman. He believes that although
all things, including people, were once part of the matter of the sun, we have lost our connection with its energy, the source of life. Thus Karel helps people to reconnect with the sun through becoming sensitive to the “vibe” emanating from rocks held in their hands. The audience meets Karel in the first scene, where he advises his friend Jára (Jaroslav Plesl) not to plant a tree in a certain spot, as he is certain that it will die there. He spends the rest of the scene wandering the yard, looking for a location with the right feel.

Karel weaves in and out of Jára’s life as it becomes increasingly chaotic. Jára has a rebellious teen son Véna, a pot habit that costs him his job, and a wife, Jana, who strays into an affair. It is not clear at first what Karel’s friend thinks of his abilities or spiritual nature. When Jára loses his job, he proposes to Karel that they offer spiritual enlightenment workshop, where strangers would pay to have the holy man guide them. Karel refuses angrily at first, but later takes Jára up on his offer, likely due to his wife’s own financially-motivated pleadings. The workshop is a disaster, though, as it has to compete with the rowdy crowd watching a televised sport of some kind. Karel storms in to shut off the television and gets his lip bloodied for his troubles. It seems that the power of the sun is no match for fandom, and certainly no one walks away from this workshop any more spiritual or connected.

Yet, even as Jára’s life is spiraling downward, when Karel appears suddenly to ask him to join him on a trip to see “The Master,” who has called in some unexplained way, Jára feels compelled to make the journey. This endeavor is an even bigger disaster than the workshop, however. Karel is sent to deliver a special stone to The Master, but he finds only an old couple gardening (inside a gate marked with four suns). Dejected, he picks up an ordinary stone to deliver to Karel, who is ecstatic to receive it. Clearly, Karel is at best a fraud, at worst, crazy, which Jára tells him during an impromptu ceremony in a torrential rainstorm meant to mend Jára’s broken marriage. But as the tragedies pile up in the final act, Karel makes an unexpected appearance that confirms his shamanic bona fides: he crosses over to the “other side” (represented by the couple’s “four suns” garden) to find one of the characters who is lingering between life and death and send him back to the world of the living.

Four Suns treats Karel’s mysticism as an oddball quirk for much of the movie, one of the minor annoyances in Jára’s life and certainly not one that is likely to change his life on the order of his deteriorating relationships with his wife or son. But the perfectly-played grace note at the film’s end changes how the audience must think of Karel and all that had happened previously. Perhaps we all know someone whose oddities are the very things that keep us connected with the world around us.

— Dereck Daschke

1/2 Revolution

a film directed by Omar Shargawi, Karim El Hakim

World Documentary

The documentary 1/2 Revolution compiles the footage taken by a group of friends in Cairo over eleven days of the uprising against Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. It captures in an incredibly raw and visceral way the
excitement and elation as the protests grew and forced Mubarak to declare he would not seek re-election, and then the disillusionment and eventual terror as the initial success met the brutal response of the entrenched governmental powers. As this was pointedly a secular political revolution, not a religious one, overt religious elements appear only briefly – Egyptian men practicing salat (one of the daily prayers) on the street they are occupying; regular shouts of “God is greater!” in celebration or encouragement.

Yet when viewing the non-violent struggle against an unjust ruler in the name of freedom, one cannot help but call to mind the religious underpinnings of Gandhi’s movement that led to the end of British rule of over India or of Martin Luther King’s civil rights marches that ended legal segregation in the U.S. There are direct evocations of a religious force that unifies and drives the protesters; one declares, “God united us in this movement. I know he did.” Unfortunately, one of the dark sides of Islam in the modern world, a tendency toward anti-Semitism and anti-Israeli sentiments, also appears: Mubarak is depicted with a Star of David on his forehead and is decried as a “Jew”; rumors spread that the Israelis are supplying the Egyptian government with weapons and are massing troops along the border.

In the end, though, 1/2 Revolution is a thrilling and harrowing portrayal of very ordinary people achieving something extraordinary as people, demanding their right to control their own lives in all their facets, but then facing the all-to-ordinary result: the reassertion of power by the powerful at the expense of the freedom, dignity, and often lives of the people they should be protecting. Although Mubarak is finally ousted in a great victory of the revolution, the group of friends is already disillusioned; one couple even flees the country. The final tag and voiceover of the film states that the Egyptian army has taken total control of the country, and that many are left wondering if the revolution had not merely “exchanged one regime for another.”

— Dereck Daschke

**Hello I Must Be Going**

a film directed by Todd Louiso

U.S. Dramatic

Amy Minsky is a recently divorced 35 year old living at home with her wealthy parents. She feels she is a failure at everything in life; her marriage, her career, her unfinished Master’s degree in photography. When she begins a covert affair with the 19 year old son of a client of her father, audiences will find it hard not to think of this as The Graduate with a twist. In this case, it is the older woman who is aimless and searching for purpose, and it is the young man who seduces her. However, this story differs in that both characters feel trapped by their parents, unable to be themselves. Jeremy hates acting, but has been forced into that career by his mother, who has also convinced herself that he is gay; she obviously cannot see him as he actually is. Amy’s mother views
her as unable to finish anything, even blaming her for her failed marriage. Amy and Jeremy, in spite of
their age difference, are drawn together by a need to share their vulnerability, and this creates genuine
intimacy and love between them.

More than a romantic comedy, this is a coming of age film, as both characters need to assert themselves
in the stifling and superficial atmosphere of rich society in which they live. Both learn how to love and
how to be loved, without concern for social convention, even though that comes with some cost. As
Amy realizes, love is not a prize to be won, but a gift to be received, and it is this sense of love as
unearned with offers a poignancy to the film that is a welcome surprise in a light comedy. This film
could have been a bitter cautionary tale, or an exercise in unrealistic sentimentalism, but instead it offers
an experience of grace as the characters learn to care more for others as they care for themselves.

— John Lyden

_How to Survive a Plague_

a film directed by David France

U.S. Documentary

One of the inescapable facets of the eruption of the AIDS

crisis in the 1980’s and the U.S. government’s slow
response to it was the ever-present moral unease with the
entire population affected by the virus. Few Americans
knew (or knew they knew) a gay man personally, so it was
easy for many to demonize both the individuals and the
sexual acts that exposed them to the infection, and the
moral language of traditional Christianity very quickly
gave voice to the way people sought to understand this
terrifying plague. In many religions sin and disease are intimately connected, a state of bodily

corruption being the outward sign of spiritual corruption. It is a form of theodicy, making meaning of
evil or suffering. This is also a form of “blaming the victim,” reinforcing the belief in a just universe. If
the Bible says that “If a man lies with a man as one lies with a woman, both of them have done what is
detestable. They must be put to death; their blood will be on their own heads” (Lev 20:13), anyone who
uses the scripture as an ethical guide could not escape the moral conclusion of this passage:
homosexuals brought their deaths on themselves.

The powerful documentary _How to Survive a Plague_ is fairly tightly focused on the pragmatic steps the
ACT UP protest group took to pressure both governmental agencies and private drug companies to
accelerate their delivery of potentially life-saving AIDS drugs to the market. Still, the group’s actions
inevitably had to come up hard against prejudices of individuals and institutions that were perpetuating
the very obstacles they were confronting. We see footage of Southern Baptist Senator Jesse Helms
fulminating against sodomy, presumably by way of objecting to tax money being spent on AIDS
research and treatment. We witness the coverage of the “die-in” at New York City’s St. Patrick’s
Cathedral to protest the Catholic Church’s official opposition to the use of condoms to prevent the
spread of HIV. “Prayers won’t save people with HIV,” the protestors cry. “You’re killing us.” Both
Patrick Buchanan and George H.W. Bush insist that gay men should simply “change their behavior”
(read: be celibate) if they want to stop the epidemic – a stance that, while at least devoid of the overt moral chastisement of the religious, still tacitly equates the responsibility for the disease with engaging in socially unacceptable sexual practices. “They shouldn’t be taking it up the butt!” in the words of one archival sound bite early in the film.

Interestingly, in the film the outrage of the ACT UP protestors mirrors in its own way the moral absoluteness of their religious accusers, with their condemnation directed at the federal government, its policy, and its personification in the form of the president. Like prophets of the Hebrew Bible in their oracles against the nations, they cast the government and its leader as the embodiment of injustice and the bringers of death. Those same prophets would sometimes disrupt the complacent workings of society with symbolic performances or “sign acts.” Especially as enacted by such animated personalities as Bob Rafsky, Ray Navarro, Spencer Cox, Mark Harrington, Garance Franke-Ruta, and Peter Staley, the public protests, corporate sit-ins, and petitioning of federal agencies used the protestors’ bodies to alter the culture’s narrative of homosexuality, the disease, and the urgency of treatment.

In one gripping scene, Rafsky presides over a funeral for a friend lost to AIDS on the steps of George Bush’s 1992 re-election headquarters; in his eulogy, he casts a curse onto Bush and declares that the spirit of his fallen friend will haunt him. But in perhaps the film’s most stirring scene, at the 1990 International AIDS Conference in San Francisco, Peter Staley performs a remarkable mass conversion on the auditorium of scientists and medical researchers. In a remarkable speech, he manages to get this group of professionals, whose lives likely could not be more different from his, to identify with him in their shared goals on AIDS research; then forces them to take a stand, literally, on the discriminatory INS policy that prevented people with AIDS from entering the U.S.; and finally, while they are on their feet, gets them to join in a chant directed at the absent President Bush – who is attending a fundraiser for Jesse Helms: “300,000 dead from AIDS: Where is George?” He concludes the chant by telling the audience, “Congratulations, you are all now members of ACT UP.”

Moral condemnation is not the exclusive purview of the powerful or religious in a country, it turns out, nor is ostracization its only goal. When combined with a pragmatic desire to change bad policy in the name of saving lives, public stands for morality can be used in the service of justice and the flourishing of life. Because of the success of ACT UP in making AIDS treatment a priority in the U.S., How to Survive a Plague is a rare documentary about a terrible tragedy that has a happy ending, one that millions of people alive today continue to enjoy due to their efforts.

— Dereck Daschke
In 2009, Destin Cretton won the grand jury prize at Sundance for his short film *Short Term 12*. Building upon this past success, he returns this year with his first feature length film, *I Am Not A Hipster*. A decidedly musical film, *Hipster* tells the story of Brooke, a marginally successful musician in San Diego’s indie-rock scene. Much like *Canine* – the not-quite-fictional album that he wrote and released in the wake of his mother’s death – Brooke is a complicated mixture of generational angst, existential fear, and profound grief. He loathes the fixed-gear bikes and the seemingly flippant art created by his “hipster” community. He is also terror-stricken by videos of the recent tsunami that overwhelmed Japan. And for reasons that the film does not directly address, he refuses to restore the strained relationship with his father.

It is music, though, that not only gives voice to the Brooke’s inner turmoil, but also drives this film narratively. At times the music functions as a means for expressing Brooke’s rage against the seeming absurdity and randomness of life. This music is therapeutic, cathartic even. But in other instances, it actually works to isolate Brooke, driving him deeper into his insular life of loneliness and despair. Early in the film we watch Brooke record a newly written song on his computer. At first the soundtrack features the full slate of accompanying instrumentation that one would expect from a well-crafted song. Yet, as the camera pulls back from the musician who at first glance appears to be caught up in a moment of inspiration, the underscoring drops out entirely. What is left is a man alone in his room screaming intermittent back-up vocals into a microphone – a fitting picture of the hipster who has become unmoored from the very sub-culture his music celebrates and embodies.

However, in addition to highlighting Brooke’s pervasive sense of isolation, the music also functions in the film as the avenue through which he is brought back into the fold of his community and, in an important sense, the means by which he is moved from dis-integration to integration, from an isolated individual to a person-in-relation. Indeed, the music both anticipates and charts this redemptive trajectory. In doing so, it provides us with a glimpse of the communal and perhaps even religious undertones of the film as a whole. For example, Brooke’s three sisters, who function almost like a single character, arrive at his doorstep in order to compel him to join them for the ceremonial spreading of their mother’s ashes. Although he coldly resists their loving advances at first, he reaches a breaking point when they show up unexpectedly at the kindergarten class where he serves as a substitute teacher. Prodded by his sisters and his young students, the entire group sings a song that Brooke wrote following his mother’s death. It is in this moment that the tone of the narrative makes a decided shift. Brooke is no longer alone with his music or his grief. Rather, he is surrounded by a group of people who desire
nothing more than to be a part of his life – a life marked by a deep and abiding loss.

Thus, at the heart of I Am Not A Hipster is a longing for a communal identity. It suggests that our deep-lived experiences of life and death are simply too profound for a single individual to endure alone. For, even though his grief presses him further and further toward an existence of unrestricted autonomy, Brooke cannot help but make sense of his life and the world in and through the network of humanity that constantly envelops him. In other words, whether he likes it or not, he is a hipster. And so too are we.

— Kutter Callaway

The Law in These Parts

a film directed by Ra’anan Alexandrowicz
World Documentary
World Cinema Jury Prize: Documentary

This Israeli documentary examines the creation and evolution of Israeli law governing the Palestinian occupied territories since 1967, and it manages to be a scathing indictment without ever doing more than asking reasonable questions of some of the dozens of lawmakers, judges, and officers responsible for the “laws in those part.” While nothing in the film addresses religion directly – there are no prohibitions on Islamic practices, nor favoritism given to Jewish practice, per se – the meaning of “law over the land of Israel” has inescapable Biblical force, the same force that is at the root of the Zionist hope for a Jewish homeland within the traditional boundaries presented in the Torah. The very idea of the Jews having a covenant with God that separates them from the other peoples and gives them a “land flowing with milk and honey” is a legal concept; the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy are full of laws regarding the conduct of the Chosen People once they occupy the land, including the benevolent ways they are to treat the land itself and any “strangers” who might live among them. Unfortunately for the Palestinian people along the banks of the Jordan and the Gaza region on the Mediterranean, the Israelis in the modern state seem to take literally God’s declaration in Leviticus 20:22: “Ye shall inherit their land, and I will give it unto you to possess.”

Of course, this divine legitimization is never stated outright by any of the architects of the legal system governing the occupied territories. But their efforts in the film to avoid acknowledging the clear contradictions in their application of the principles of justice to Palestinians, or in finessing international legal standards and the Gevena convention’s codes of conduct regarding occupation, these representatives of Israel’s governmental and military authorities belie the skewed justice that any four decade occupation will bring about. One judge admits that he believes all accusations against Palestinian defendants outright, despite the fact that the accused never knows what the accusations are or who made them, nor is any evidence presented to support the charges. Moreover, he dismisses any pleas by the defendant of his innocence because the accused “has an agenda.” Another official says, somewhat wearily, that despite how independent he is supposed to use the facts at hand to achieve just
rulings, be they for the Palestinians or the Israelis, in reality he knows he belongs to a system that has
certain expectations about who is trying to kill whom and who needs to be protected, and thus will rule
to support the wishes of that system. One of the filmmaker’s interviewees tells him simply, “These laws
are about them, but made for you.”

Despite the deep understanding of law and legal precedents articulated by the subjects of this
documentary, they vitiate even the bedrock law of Judaism, the Ten Commandments, as land is coveted
and stolen, and false witness allows the legal system to justify it. Any viewer of The Law in These Parts
familiar with the symbol if Israel, both ancient and modern, as a beacon of justice in the world cannot
help but be aghast as the injustices against the occupied Palestinians pile up over four decades.

— Dereck Daschke

Love Free or Die

a film directed by Macky Alston

U.S. Documentary: U.S. Documentary Special Jury Prize
for an Agent of Change

In 2003, Gene Robinson became the first openly gay non-
celibate person in the history of Christianity to become a
bishop. In 2007, Dan Karslake’s film For the Bible Tells
Me So premiered at Sundance (read the review in our
archives), which dealt with four Christian families learning
that one of their children was gay or lesbian, and their
journeys towards acceptance. One of the families was the
Robinsons, and Karslake tells the story of how Gene
discovered that he was gay and eventually accepted that identity. That film also chronicles the journey
of his parents towards acceptance, the story of how Gene met his life partner Mark Andrew, and how
Gene became a bishop in 2003 in an historic election within the Episcopal Church USA.

Alston’s film takes up the story in 2008, when Robinson was forbidden to attend the Lambeth
Conference, a meeting of Anglican bishops worldwide that occurs every ten years in Canterbury,
England. Alston follows Robinson as he goes to England to meet with those who will receive him,
including an Anglican priest who (in defiance of the Archbishop of Canterbury) agreed to let Robinson
preach in his church. When a heckler interrupts his sermon, Robinson is shaken, but asks the
congregation to “pray for that man” as he calls them to overcome the fear of homophobia. The film
continues with Gene and Mark’s civil union ceremony in New Hampshire, including touching
interviews with Gene’s parents; Gene is then asked to speak at President Obama’s inauguration in early
2009, and the film chronicles the tensions surrounding the additional inclusion of Pastor Rick Warren in
the inauguration, as Warren had condemned gay marriage and compared it to incest and polygamy.
Later that year, however, the film follows how the General Convention of the Episcopal Church USA
voted for the acceptance of non-celibate homosexual clergy and allowed for the blessing of same-sex
unions within the church. This landmark decision led to the consecration of the first non-celibate lesbian
bishop in the Episcopal Church USA, Mary Glasspool, and the film ends with that event in May of
Alston’s film is a very personal one, including a large number of interviews with Gene Robinson and others, and in this way it conveys the bishop’s passion for justice and truth. “The church has gotten this wrong,” Robinson says, just as the church was wrong on issues like slavery and the exclusion of women, but the church can and will change. In my interview with Robinson, he stated, “I believe that the full inclusion of LGBT people in the church is inevitable.” He pointed out that the number of churches leaving the Episcopal Church USA has been smaller than expected, that the worldwide Anglican Communion has not split as was predicted, and that the rights of LGBT people continue to expand in the church and in American society. He views his work on behalf of this cause as a “work of justice in progress,” and stated that “I want to be the best steward of this opportunity that God has given me.”

I also asked Alston about his own relationship to this project, and he stated that the fate of his own family is wrapped up in this. As a gay man who is married and has children, he is also fighting for the full acceptance of LGBT people as a Christian who views this as a work of faith. Alston comes from a long line of ministers, and has a theological degree from Union Theological Seminary; he is currently the director of Media at Auburn Theological Seminary in New York City, and in that role works to encourage the use of media as an educational tool for justice and social change. Alston and Robinson are working to bring this film to as many churches as possible to help encourage discussion on the issues it raises. Their optimism is contagious; after seeing the film and speaking with them personally, it is easy to believe that their faith in the triumph of justice over fear is not displaced.

— John Lyden

*Monsieur Lazhar* *

a film directed by Philippe Falardeau
Spotlight

When a teacher commits suicide by hanging herself in her Montreal classroom, her students are wracked by grief, pain, and guilt. The principal has difficulties finding a substitute willing to take her place until Bachir Lazhar appears and offers to take the job. While he represents himself as an Algerian immigrant with permanent resident status, he is actually seeking political asylum in Canada.
after a personal tragedy of his own, which he shares with no one. He also has no experience teaching 13
year olds, having been a restauranteur in Algeria, but he masquerades as a teacher with credentials in
order to get the job. He finds the task challenging, and his academic standards challenge the students,
but they come to accept and like him as he is committed to their learning and cares for them personally.
They become his surrogate family to replace the one he has lost.

The pain of the students, however, is unresolved. The school psychologist deals with the issue of the
suicide at a superficial level and believes all is well and has returned to normal. Bachir, however, knows
from his own experience that “the dead stay in our heads, because we loved them, and they loved us,
too,” and he tells the students as much.

The film demonstrates how Bachir guides them through the process of grief, even as he deals with his
own. He breaks school rules by showing physical affection to the students and by letting them share
their anger at their dead teacher. When one girl writes a composition about the suicide which he wants
to share with the school, the principal vetoes this idea as inappropriate. But Bashir refuses to abandon
them; he assigns a composition on the injustice of death, which they have all experienced, and writes
one himself for the students. The metaphor of a chrysalis waiting to become a butterfly runs through the
film; this applies to the young students who need to mature through dealing with their loss, but he is
also one who must deal with his own grief in order to grow beyond it. Shepherding them becomes his
own method of survival, and the genuine love he has for his students gives him some peace. This is a
beautiful film that presents with elegant simplicity the possibility of hope in the midst of tragedy
through love, kindness, and the grace of reconciliation and acceptance.

*The film has been nominated for an Academy Award in the Best Foreign Language film category.

— John Lyden

My Best Day

a film directed by Erin Greenwell

NEXT

“The journey you take earns your name, and you can
choose that name any day.” So concludes Karen at the end
of one Fourth of July which begins when she receives a
phone call from a man who may be the father she cannot
remember. Her father took her sister and her mother took
her, so she has been told, and the two sisters have not seen
each other since they parted in infancy.

Karen’s job is answering the phone for a shop that repairs
refrigerators, and when a Sebastian Weinberg calls requesting service, she is certain that it must be the
father she never knew. This sets in motion a chain of events that leads to revelations, as Karen meets her
sister Staci, who has a gambling addiction; her younger half-brother Ray, who wants to learn to wrestle
to beat back the bullies; and her father’s lover Sebastian, a young man who spends most of the day going to stores looking for “meatless meat” for the holiday barbeque. Meagan, who comes to repair the refrigerator (but finds it simply unplugged), also rekindles romance with her lover Amy, and Karen meets and shares confidences with Neil, a young policeman, when she ends up in jail for breaking the police station’s window. In all the quirky encounters of these flawed yet sincere characters, they learn to reconcile and forgive each other for truths hidden and relationships denied. The journey referenced by Karen is one to identity, as she and Neil finally choose how to name themselves and so choose who they are and who their families are—by ritually giving themselves fingerprint tattoos. It is a rite of passage to understanding and acceptance that they choose, and that shows how such a quest for identity can come in unusual forms. This offbeat comedy expresses a joy for life found from unexpected sources, and shows us we should be open to everyday epiphanies.

— John Lyden

**My Brother the Devil**

a film directed by Sally El Hosaini

World Dramatic

World Cinema Cinematography Award: Dramatic

Mo (Mohammed) and Rash (Rashid) are brothers whose family has immigrated to England from Egypt, and they are struggling to survive in a new society. Rash has chosen to join a gang, the DMG (“Drugs, Money, Guns”) to make money for his family, and he shares what he gains from selling drugs with his mother and his younger brother Mo, who idolizes him and the gangster lifestyle. But Rash does not idolize the power of the life, nor does he wish it for his brother; rather, he hopes to make enough money for Mo to go to college and escape their poverty.

This might have become a conventional gangster film about trying to protect the younger brother from the temptations of mob involvement (think Michael Corleone) but the narrative moves in more interesting directions. After Rash’s friend Izzy is killed in a gang fight, he is ready to do a revenge killing, but changes his mind at the last second and tells his boss he wants out. Meanwhile, Mo begins working as a delivery boy for the DMG, unbeknownst to Rash. Ironically, Rash now looks for legitimate work, and finds it working with his Arab friend Sayyid, a successful photographer.

The characters are all Muslims, whether observant or not, so references to Islam abound. Sayyid counsels Rash to give up his desire for revenge, quoting a hadith of the prophet Mohammed that “the strong man controls his anger.” In response, Rash believes he is quoting the Quran in his belief that all is fated, and there is nothing you can do about it. But Rash is not well informed about Islam, as he begins reading Kahlil Gibran’s *The Prophet* and believes that it is about Mohammed the Prophet. Meanwhile, Mo becomes friends with an observant Muslim girl who wears a hijab and will not drink beer, smoke, or eat pork. Although he does not follow all these rules, her influence on him is clear, as when she tells him that Rashid is his real family, not the gangsters who say he is part of their “fam.”
The plot turns in an unexpected direction when Rash and Sayyid become lovers, and when Mo finds out that his brother is gay he is horrified. Rash wants to get Mo away from the gangsters, and is willing to do the revenge killing for the DMG to guarantee that they will cut Mo out of their business. In spite of their differences, each brother is willing to sacrifice for the other, so that it is the love they have for each other that reconciles them in the end. The film demonstrates that with faith and love, the family can survive poverty, violence, and even the revelation of Rashid’s homosexuality. Islam is not the only basis for the faith and hope that sustains them, but it is part of the landscape of these immigrants who struggle to maintain their identities and moral values while seeking success in a new land.

— John Lyden

*Payback*

a film directed by Jennifer Baichwal

World Documentary

The documentary film “Payback,” based on Margaret Atwood’s book *Payback: Debt and the Shadow Side of Wealth*, explores the many meanings that debt has in our culture, and what our culture understands to be appropriate repayment of these debts. As soon as one examines this issue apart from its purely monetary context, the many words this film investigates very quickly ring with Biblical and religious significance: vengeance, atonement, expiation, forgiveness, justice, redemption. From an Albanian blood feud to a felon regretting the home invasion of a Holocaust survivor to the fight to guarantee basic rights and protections to migrant farm workers, these forms of debt represent some of the trickiest aspects of human relationships, ones that religious systems throughout human history have sought to clarify and simplify for the benefit of the social order and the individual sense of fairness. From the balance of karma in individual lives – sometimes referred to as a cosmic “debt” – to the contrasting Biblical models of “an eye for an eye” and “turn the other cheek,” the managing of the social and emotional sides of owing and being owed things large and small has been an a consistent aim of religious systems. Even the concept of sin has evolved in the Judeo-Christian tradition from a ritual failing to a moral one that places the sinner in need of redemption and forgiveness. Hence debt itself has a moral dimension, and debtors take on the cast of sinners in such a culture. But if the debt cannot be paid back in any recognizable way, can the sinners ever be absolved? Can the cosmos be brought back in order?

Atwood herself appears throughout the film giving a lecture based on her book (or revising the written text of it), linking the interlocking episodes together around some of the themes and aspects of debt she finds especially significant in the modern context. In a panel discussion the day prior to the press screening, Atwood underscored the fact that she wrote this book in a world where the true satisfaction of debt is increasingly impossible, and this fact alone is throwing our world off-kilter. She referenced the nineteenth century fusion of social Darwinism and capitalism that created the modern economic
morality that “greed is good,” that the wealthy deserve their wealth because they have earned it in a competitive environment – that is to say, they are owed it by virtue of their personal qualities and choices. But today few people become rich as the result of their own personal achievements that others then value enough to compensate them for; rather they become rich by disguising the source of their riches, which in many, often invisible, ways comes from the rest of us, from the community. Thus their debt to others is disguised from themselves and us, thus remains unpaid, creating a cycle of injustice that cannot be corrected. Today, too often, nobody knows who owes what to whom, and the scales are never balanced.

The episodes illustrated in Jennifer Baichwal’s film mostly probe the lingering effects of having a debt, or being owed one, but not being able to pay it or be paid. Attwood reexamines our assumptions about the prison system, where convicts are supposed to “repent” in a “penitentiary,” thinking through what they have done and why in order to “pay back their debt to society.” Yet more and more, a criminal record stigmatizes the convict indefinitely, so there is never any ability to satisfy that debt and move forward. Yet even where the prison system achieves the effect of legal justice, often the sense of personal payback and thus reconciliation is not achieved, as is the case with Paul Mohammed. In the film, Paul weeps over a statement by the victim of his home robbery, a Holocaust survivor who has lost her ability to feel safe in her own home. Paul recognizes that no amount of time in jail will allow him to restore that which he took from this woman. This sense of helplessness and futility is illustrated exponentially in the film’s examination of the environmental losses from the BP oil spill.

However, two more concrete resolutions are also explored, to opposite ends. First, an attempted murder in Albania is dealt with via the centuries-old code of kanun, the rules of a blood feud. Under this code, the victimized and his family have the right to kill the perpetrator of the violence or any member of his family if any of them step off their property. Hence, they are confined to their home in perpetuity. Though this resolves the issue for social purposes, but it leaves the shooter and his family in a more and more desperate state of limbo, a living death – and with dwindling food supplies, maybe more – that forces him to grasp for a forgiveness that may never come. In the other case, the abuses of migrant tomato pickers in Immokalee, Florida, that led to several convictions for modern slavery in the U.S. brought about a bill of farm worker’s rights that actually rights the wrongs and builds the foundation for better relationships between workers and bosses than had ever existed previously.

In monetary debt, both parties know when payback has been achieved. But the Albanian blood feud, despite its social clarity, does not allow for this resolution unless someone almost willingly goes to his death, a psychologically and spiritually crushing situation. As the Immokalee example shows, it is only when the system of payback restores social harmony and perhaps even strengthens the interconnected bonds between people that the true emotional and even spiritual goals of settling a debt is achieved. Until more of the debts we all owe each other are acknowledged and our investments in each other reciprocated, we will live with the distinctly unsettling sense of a world out of order, with no mechanism to right it.

— Dereck Daschke
Red Hook Summer

a film directed by Spike Lee

Premieres

Spike Lee’s first feature film in four years returns him to his ongoing “Chronicles of Brooklyn,” which includes She’s Gotta Have it (1986), Do the Right Thing (1989), Crooklyn (1994), Clockers (1995), and He Got Game (1997). It is his first film to premier at Sundance, and it is also his most explicitly religious film to date. In a press conference at Sundance, Lee told me that he was not “raised in the church,” but his co-screenwriter James McBride was, and it is McBride’s home church in Brooklyn that is featured in the film. Lee, however, noted that during the summers of his youth he went south to family in Georgia or Alabama where church-going was expected and was a regular part of African-American culture. This film reverses this scenario, as 13 year old Flik lives in Atlanta during the year but is left by his mother to spend the summer with his minister grandfather, “Bishop Enoch” of the “Li’l Peace of Heaven Baptist Church” located in the Red Hook projects of Brooklyn. Flik has not been raised in the church, however, and says he does not believe in God because he sees too much in the world that he cannot reconcile with the existence of a just God—including the poverty and injustice of Red Hook. Through Flik’s eyes, Lee presents the ambiguous nature of the African American church as that which can both blind people to the need for change as well as empower them to make it.

Enoch and Flik find immediate conflicts, as Enoch rejects popular culture as the devil while Flik carries an iPod 2 to film everything around him, and this becomes his means for telling the stories of Red Hook. “I don’t want you looking at me through that thing,” Enoch tells him, and Flik soon learns that his grandfather does not even have a television. In a later sermon, Enoch says that the Bible is “his internet” and he needs nothing else. It is clear that they do not have much in common.

Flik soon finds a friend, however, in a girl his age named Chazz who is the daughter of a prominent member of the church. She suffers from asthma due to the pollution, and she also has her doubts about religion. Flik also sees the despair of Deacon Z, a church leader who is an alcoholic and who spends a lot of time lamenting the fact that his community did not invest in the right stocks so that they might now be wealthy. While Enoch’s sermons tell them to trust in God, the people there find that God has not delivered them from poverty and death. Chazz’s mother Shirley tells Enoch that you can’t trust God to do everything; you have to take responsibility for making things better, and she applies that to her parenting of Chazz. She also tells Enoch he needs to give Flik more than God—he needs to have his grandfather’s love. Enoch does try to show more love to Flik and less judgment of him, but he also tells Flik he needs his history, which includes the church and the hope it provides. There is much in the world that “should not be,” but God intends not to destroy the world but to save it.
Lee does an excellent job of conveying the nature of the church as that which can conceal as well as reveal sin, as that which can convey hope that empowers or which paralyzes. Revelations at the end of the film only increase this ambiguity, allowing us neither easy judgments nor simple resolutions of problems. Lee’s films have always done this, as they exhibit tensions within African American communities as they struggle with the poverty and violence inflicted on them, always trying to “do the right thing” but unsure of what that is. In this film, religion is the ambiguous presence in African American communities that has value and tradition, but which must be joined with a will to survive and change reality, so that it is not simply “pie in the sky” for another life. It is a wonderful addition to the Lee canon, filled with much that will benefit from repeated viewings, especially for those who look for the religious in film. It is hoped that it will be generally distributed by the summer of 2012; don’t miss this when it appears, as it offers a subtlety and grace that is all too rare in film.

— John Lyden

 viện Safety Not Guaranteed

a film directed by Colin Trevorrow

U.S. Dramatic

Waldo Salt Screenwriting Award

“Wanted: Someone to go back in time with me. This is not a joke. P.O. Box 91, Ocean View, WA. You’ll get paid after we get back. Must bring your own weapons. SAFETY NOT GUARANTEED. I have only done this once before.”

This was an actual advertisement from a survivalist magazine in the 1990s, and it provides the inspiration for this offbeat comedy. Darius is an isolated young woman who gets a job as an intern at Seattle Magazine, and when a staff member (Jeff) suggests they investigate the man behind the ad, he takes two interns, college student Arnau, and Darius. In a few days on the story, each of them discovers more about themselves than they expected.

Jeff approaches Kenneth, the man behind the ad, to pretend to volunteer as his time travel partner, but Kenneth sees through his pretense. He asks Jeff, “Have you ever stared fear and danger in the eye and said yes?” Kenneth quickly dismisses Jeff because “you don’t know pain and regret.” In fact, Jeff has only taken the story to find an old girlfriend from twenty years ago who now lives in Ocean View. In a way, Jeff wants to time travel as well, and he does know something about regret and the loss of the past. At first, he finds Liz much older, but then he is able to rekindle a spark with her. When he asks her to come back to Seattle, however, he finds that times have changed more than he would like. To deal with

https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol16/iss1/8
this loss, he takes it upon himself to help the introverted Arnau lose his virginity.

After Jeff’s failure with Kenneth, Darius approaches him to express interest in being his time travel partner, and this time he buys it. This may be because Darius is genuinely drawn to him and his quest, because she also has regrets about the past and things she would like to fix. Kenneth wants to travel back in time to deal with the loss of an old girlfriend; Darius, the loss of her mother.

As the story progresses, Darius identifies with Kenneth’s pain and vulnerability and forms a bond that goes beyond the question of whether Kenneth is crazy, or whether he can in fact time travel—or could it be both? More important than the answers to these questions is the fact that they share a desire to correct their mistakes and fix the past, and each recognizes that you need a partner to “get your back.” The desire to change the past is a desire for forgiveness and reconciliation, and even without a time machine, this film suggests we can get those through love and trust. Safety Not Guaranteed is refreshing in the way it offers this message, packaged in a way that is funny, quirky, and upbeat.

— John Lyden

Valley of Saints

a film directed by Musa Syeed
World Cinema
World Cinema Audience Award
Alfred P. Sloan Feature Film Award (co-winner)

Set on the lovely, yet polluted Dal Lake in the Valley of the Saints in Kashmir, this debut feature is a gentle ride through some not-so-still waters. Gulzar (Gulzar Ahmad Bhat), a poor boatman with a poet's heart and dreams of escaping his small town, finds his plan of escape with best friend Afzal (Mohammed Afzal Sofi) thwarted by a weeklong military curfew. They are figuratively and literally trapped in their village. Also trapped is graduate student, Asifa (the only professional actor Neelofar Hamid), who is renting a houseboat on the lake in order to conduct research on the level of pollution in the once-pristine lake. The film follows the developing friendships and feelings between these characters: the serious scientific student Asifa, the jokester Afal, and the reticent Gulzar. The young men aid Asifa in her research but the class and educational differences create an ever-present tension.

The Alfred P. Sloan jury presented the Sundance feature film award for its “brave, poetic and visually arresting evocation of a beautiful but troubled region, and for its moving, nuanced and accurate depiction of the relationship between a local boatman and a young woman scientist whose research challenges the status quo and offers hope for a restored ecosystem.” Sundance began as a champion of independent film. Valley of Saints, Musa Sayeed's first screenplay and narrative feature, is precisely the type of brave filmmaking Sundance should support. When
political violence broke out in the Kashmir region, Sayeed had a decision to make: abort the project or continue with a skeleton crew of 3: himself, his producer and a DP. Amidst real riots in which 100 young protestors lost their lives, Sayeed created a lyrical, soothing film. The director lived on Dal Lake for three months before the shoot developing relationships with locals. It suffers from many first-time filmmaker faux pas: too painstaking a pace, knock-you-over-the-head close-ups, awkward dialogue at times; however its strengths overcome these flaws. The viewer should sit back in the boat and enjoy the slow ride.

The cinematography (captured on a Canon 5D) was gorgeous. Textures and colors pop and the lake's mist envelop the viewer. Music is a powerful and consistent thread tying the story together: whether Gulzar is singing a mournful local tune: "Take the pain from my heart" or a song of hope and love as he paddles away from Asifa's houseboat.

For those who relish religion and religious themes in film, Valley of Saints, provides some interesting material. While both of the young men are Muslim, you are keenly aware that this used to be a Hindu town. This loss of the Hindu gods and saints parallels Gulzar's sense of loss of his own parents. The problem, according to Gulzar, is "there are no more saints" to save the valley from its own demise. On an excursion to a neighboring village along the lake, Gulzar takes Asifa to a haunted place: an ancient Hindu temple, which, despite being chained shut, defaced and abandoned, still holds a mystical beauty. He then relates the Hindu creation story of lake and the deva in the water.

Another recurring symbol with religious connotations is water: they live on the water, Gulzar is an award-winning paddleman, the daily downpours invade Gulzar's leaky home, the young men play in the water. Water is both life-giving and life-destroying as it has become horrifically polluted with sewage, chemicals, and human waste: when Asifa is doused with it she becomes gravely ill. The film is clearly advancing an environmental challenge within a very human story.

Valley of Saints offers lush story-telling, environmental warnings, a politically tumultuous context, and a gentle romance, however I found Gulzar's transformation from timid servant to clear-headed young man with a new sense of place the most powerful after effect of the film. He begins the story as an obedient nephew, second-fiddle friend to bombastic Afzal, and fearful beau. In the end, he repairs his rotting home, establishes his manhood and peer equality, and confidently chooses to remain in the small town he loves. Gulzar, with the help of Aisha, discovers not only his own worth, but the fragile beauty and value of home.

— Jeanette Reedy Solano
Wrong

a film directed by Quentin Dupieux
World Dramatic

The title of this film is aptly chosen, as one has a profound sense of dis-ease as soon as the ominous music begins, and we see a van burning while a fireman defecates unconcernedly in the street. When the main character’s alarm clock switches from 7:59 to 7:60, we know we aren’t in Kansas anymore.

Dolph Springer finds his beloved dog Paul is inexplicably missing, and his own sense of uneasiness progresses from there. He cannot understand why the flier for “Jesus Organic Pizza” has a logo featuring a rabbit on a motorcycle, and he calls the restaurant to find out why. He does not get a satisfactory answer, but the person he talks to sends him a pizza along with a sexual proposition. He never learns about this, however, as his gardener finds the pizza and calls the woman, masquerading as Dolph and collecting on the proposition. This is the same gardener who cannot explain why Dolph’s palm tree has turned into a pine tree, and who later seems to be both dead and alive, more or less at the same time. Don’t ask for a logical explanation of this.

Dupieux has a knack for absurdist, surrealist comedy, seen in his previous film Rubber (2010), about a killer tire with telepathic powers. In this film, telepathy again plays a role. Dolph learns that a “Master Chang” has kidnapped his dog in order to help him appreciate it more, but when the dog disappears in the aforementioned van accident, Master Chang encourages Dolph to develop a telepathic link with his dog in order to find him. Dolph learns how to do this by reading Chang’s book, My Dog, My Life, My Strength (Volume II).

Everyone seems to be crazy in this movie; Dolph is surrounded by strange behavior such as co-workers who work while the office sprinkler system drenches them day after day, but he is equally strange, going to a job at which he was fired three months ago in order to pretend to work at a computer that is not turned on. Dolph’s neighbor Mike denies that he jogs every day, and drives off into the distance to “see what’s after.” Emma, the pizza woman, moves into his house to live with him, not realizing he is a different person from the one with whom she had sex.

One may wonder whether there is a message or a point to this movie, or if Dupieux is just messing with the audience to see how disorienting he can be. What is refreshing is the use of humor; overly serious movies can also ignore logic and continuity in order to appear “deep,” but with Dupieux you feel more like you are watching a film that Marchel Duchamp and Ed Wood might have made together. Dolph does get his dog back, and that is apparently all that he wants out of life. Mike is still driving across the desert, and that may be all that he wants as well. The message, if there is one, is consonant with an absurdist existentialist philosophy; life makes no sense, but you may still get to love your dog. I have to admit that I enjoyed this film for approaching the inexplicable aspects of life (with which religions also deal) not with tragic seriousness, but with a happy-go-lucky acceptance of the world as it is.

— John Lyden
Daniela is a member of a strict Evangelical group in Santiago, Chile, that believes in the rapture and seeks to bring souls to Christ. But Daniela has a secret; she has already had a very active sex life, and thinks about sex all the time. In order to find an outlet for her private thoughts, she creates her own blog in which she can express all her intimate desires and confusion to an audience of equally confused and sexually charged teenagers. The film depicts her online life and the responses she receives, which include random obscene comments that do not really respond to her views, as well as a few who seem interested enough to keep her writing—although it is clear that she really blogs for herself, as a means of expressing her confusions and frustrations.

Her life changes when her parents learn that she has been having sex, a lot of sex, and they remove her from her Christian school before graduation. As punishment, she is given a job at the local Christian television station, with the threat that if she messes up again, she will be sent to Ecuador as a missionary. Daniela imagines this as akin to life as a galley slave, humorously depicted through clips from the 1925 silent version of *Ben Hur*. She barely tolerates her parents, viewing her mother as someone who does not really love her but only spies on her and tries to control her. On the other hand, her aunt is someone who accepts and loves Daniela unconditionally—which makes it all the more difficult for Daniela to understand why God has given her aunt terminal cancer.

Her parents, however, do not find out about her blog, and in this way she can continue her self-reflections, shared with the film audience. She has been told by her Christian community to “crucify her ego,” meaning to put Christ before her sexual desires, but she finds this extremely difficult. Daniela is attracted to Antonia, a young lesbian who works at the station but who does not seem to live by Evangelical Christianity, and to Tomas, a sincere young Christian man. Ultimately, she begins sexual relationships with both of them which are passionate and fulfilling, but her two lovers do not know about each other. Tomas resists her overtures until she accuses him of not being “into her,” and he consents to sex in order to be sure of her love—which turns out to be very sexually fulfilling for him, as well.

Ironically, it is not Daniela’s “fornication” that she sees as her real sin so much as her dishonesty towards Antonia and Tomas. She decides that she genuinely loves both of them, and that the only solution is to “crucify her ego” and accept Christ. She announces that she is going to be baptized, and perhaps believes that she can overcome her desires in this way, but the lovers find out about each other, and feel understandably angry and betrayed. In the end, Daniela’s concern for them undermines her ability to be with either of her lovers, or with Jesus; she has grown up, but remains confused and without answers to her questions about how she can properly love all the people in her life.
The film avoids easy stereotypes of Evangelicals as demonic hypocrites, depicting them more realistically as well-meaning but imperfect; it also avoid simplistic resolution or messages such as, “love is more true than religion” (from the secular side) or “religious commitment will resolve your problems with your sexual desires” (from the Evangelical Christian side). The director claims the film is really about herself, and as autobiography, it depicts sex, love, and religion in their actual state, as often unclear and confused, just as life itself can be. Perhaps Daniela should have controlled her desires, but the film never offers such clear-cut judgments. It is an honest film, humorously told, which will offend conservatives for its frank sexuality but will speak truth to those who have ears to hear.

— John Lyden