Sundance London 2014

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Abstract
This report on the Sundance Film Festival in London in April 2014 includes seven film reviews and observations on the religious themes in them, as well as how the films connect to the notion of place.

Author Notes
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In one of many striking turns of phrase in *The Unintended Reformation*, Brad S. Gregory observes how “all Westerners now live in the Kingdom of Whatever.” Against this perception it was interesting to note how several of the movies shown at this year’s Sundance London were conveying a powerful impression of place and time – the antithesis of ‘whatever.’ This came into focus for me during the Q and A after the showing of *Drunktown’s Finest*, which is director Sydney Freeland’s feature film debut. The story follows three contrasting characters from the Navajo Nation in Freeland’s response to a news story which described her hometown of Gallup, New Mexico as “Drunktown, USA.” The director was asked about her approach to the movie’s soundscape and she responded that her instructions to composer, Mark Orton, were that there should be no flutes or drums which had been done to death in films about Native Americans. Nevertheless, she said, it was important that he incorporate a strong sense of place in the soundtrack.

In this review article I shall explore the appreciation of place in seven movies from Sundance London (*Drunktown’s Finest; Dinosaur 13; Finding Fela; Kumiko, The Treasure Hunter; The Case Against 8; Obvious Child and Blue Ruin*) and how that interacts with some themes and tropes from the world of religion and faith which are also present in these films.

*Drunktown’s Finest (dir. Sydney Freeland)*

Staying with *Drunktown’s Finest*, there is a sense in which this is a story about growing up and coming of age. The three central characters are exploring who they are and where they might be going in life: Nizhoni was adopted by a white family, raised as a Christian and is planning to
Picture 1: The Place – entrance to London Sundance 2014 venue

go to Calvin College and eventually to be a missionary; transsexual Felixxia aspires to be a model and has the opportunity to go to New York; Sickboy is planning to join the army so that he can provide for his family. For all three there is a tension between staying at the reservation and leaving for what they hope might be a better life. Their stories revolve around a girl who is about to undertake a Navajo rite of passage and it is not a spoiler to say that the movie closes with that part of the ceremony when the girl/woman runs towards the deities who are calling to
her. In other words, it concludes with a strong statement about traditional religious rituals undertaken on tribal lands, giving a powerful sense of place as home.

Picture 2: The Time – welcome to Sundance
**Dinosaur 13 (dir. Todd Douglas Miller)**

By contrast *Dinosaur 13* is a documentary about the discovery of the world’s largest and most complete fossil of a Tyrannosaurus Rex in the Badlands of South Dakota, and the subsequent legal battle over its ownership. The film opens with one member of the fossil-hunting team looking up to the heavens and musing about starlight from millions of years ago falling upon the remains of a creature that had itself lived in a different era of earth’s history. It is incongruous that against this opening *cosmic* backdrop, the narrative which then unfolds is a *localised* fight between individuals, townsfolk, federal authorities and the US legal system. This fascinating story involves an enthusiasm for fossils, political ambition, jail terms, an auction for millions of dollars and a real tension between small-town America and major institutions. However for me, part of the untold story was what did people – in a location where towns were called ‘Faith’ and ‘Mission’ and who were shown wanting to keep the fossil locally – make of any potential conflict between their religious beliefs and the desire to keep the Tyrannosaurus Rex in their town? Does everyone in South Dakota take evolution for granted or were there some for whom this incredible discovery raised troubling questions of faith and religion? Once again this excellent movie was imbued with a strong sense of place, although not all of the community seemed to be represented.

**The Case Against 8 (dir. Ryan White and Ben Cotner)**

A similar omission is to be found in another documentary, *The Case Against 8*, recounting the legal case to overturn California’s ban on same-sex marriage which had been passed in 2008 under Proposition 8. The movie’s narrative concentrated on three ‘couples’ – the plaintiffs Jeff
and Paul, Kris and Sandy; plus the two leading lawyers making their case – the unlikely partnership of conservative Ted Olson and liberal David Boies (who had faced off against each other during the legal battle over the election of George W. Bush versus Al Gore). For the most part religion was kept out of the story. Exceptions were the inevitable images of protestors’ placards with biblical quotes and a brief reference to how this case related to Martin Luther King, Jr. and an earlier civil rights battle. There were also some intriguing references to personal intimations of faith – one plaintiff referred to the religious habits of his mother and another concluded a litany of recent developments in her life with the phrase, ‘Amen to that.’ Viewing this film in England, there was a notable similarity between Ted Olsen’s explanation of why a conservative US lawyer felt same-sex marriage was important and that of a Conservative UK Prime Minister who has steered similar legal changes through the British Parliament. Although outside the scope of this absorbing documentary, it raised significant questions for me about separation of Church and state. Given the USA’s commitment to a division between these institutions, whereas England has an Established Church – what does separation/establishment mean in 21st century Western culture and legal practices? The issue of same sex marriage is one that churches on both sides of the Atlantic have engaged with across the diverse views of all church communities. Yet separation of church and state seems to having relatively little impact on this disputed matter in either locality. *The Case Against 8* is a documentary about California within the context of early 21st century United States, yet it raises significant questions about the extent to which place and context are important in the contemporary world.
Kumiko, The Treasure Hunter (dir. David Zellner)

The contrast between urban Japan and rural Minnesota, as well as between factual documentaries and imaginary stories is explored in Kumiko, The Treasure Hunter. The film opens with a grainy declaration that this is a true story, which some will recognise from the Coen brothers’ Fargo (1996). Then the action shifts to the central character, Kumiko, holding a map whilst walking along a beach in her Japanese homeland. She enters a cave and discovers a VHS tape where the treasure map indicates. Kumiko takes this home and plays the damaged tape which does indeed turn out to be a copy of Fargo. She works out where Steve Buscemi’s character has buried a case of money in the snow and sets out for Minnesota to find the hidden cash. In the course of her journey to Fargo she encounters a number of quirky characters in the style of the Coen brothers. These include well-meaning but ineffectual evangelists from an unnamed church and a sympathetic police officer (not unlike Frances McDormand’s character in the original) who tries to explain the difference between a documentary and a movie. The conclusion of Kumiko, The Treasure Hunter remains faithful to spirit of Fargo and the opening statement about the veracity of the story. In other words, the question of what is true and what is fiction is not resolved.

Apparently the name Kumiko in Japanese can mean a number of different things depending on how it is written. One shared meaning according to Wikipedia is ‘child’ and there is certainly something very childlike about Kumiko in this film and in her understanding of story and reality. Once again there is a strong sense of place and yet the central character remains child-like in both Japan and the US, and in whatever befalls her in those different places.
Finding Fela (dir. Alex Gibney)

The interaction of US culture with that of a different continent can also be found in Alex Gibney’s documentary about Fela Kuti (1938-1997), the Nigerian musician and pioneer of Afrobeat. Early on in Finding Fela we are challenged with the question: is he a saint or a crazy man? There are times when he seems to live up to both categories. Religion in various forms was clearly significant in his life. He was brought up in a Christian family and some of those interviewed testify to the importance of church music in his development as an artist. As the film maps out Kuti’s life-journey other forms of African spirituality clearly shape his beliefs and his music. He had his own personal magician or adviser known as “Professor Hindu,” whose influence in Kuti’s life was not seen by all to be beneficial. As one commented: You stroke a sacred monster, you get your hand bitten off! In the early 1960s Kuti spent time in London where jazz made a big impact upon him and then in Los Angeles during the late 1960s where he was influenced by the Black Power movement. He took these cultural and political inspirations back to Nigeria where he became involved in the social unrest of his time, particularly critiquing the military government. Gibney’s film includes interviews with Kuti’s family and friends, together with excerpts from Bill T. Jones and Jim Lewis’ stage musical about his life. It shows people struggling openly and honestly with an important cultural icon whose views about women, AIDS and religion are located in a very specific time and place.
That contrast is put into sharp relief by Gillian Robespierre’s movie *Obvious Child*, which is the story of a Brooklyn bookstore employee and aspiring stand-up comedian wrestling with her parents, her life and art, her Jewish background and (during the course of the film) her unexpected pregnancy. At one level *Obvious Child* has elements of *Juno* (2007) meets Lena Dunham’s *Girls* (2012–) but, speaking personally, I warmed to the central and supporting characters who I found realistic and believable. There are some wonderfully wicked observations, such as: ‘he’s so Christian, he’s a Christmas tree’ and ‘the church is full of weird, old white men in robes who legislate our c**ts’. It is impossible to escape the sense of place (New York) and time (now).
Finally, Jeremy Saulnier’s *Blue Ruin* tells of a vagrant called Dwight who eats out of dumpsters and lives quietly in a battered Pontiac until he is picked up by the police to be told that someone who he fears has been released from jail. He returns out of the blue to his home town to warn his sister that the killer of their parents is now free. Who is Dwight and what is his measure? The cop who gives Dwight the news feels in some way protective of him. His sister is clearly disdainful of his character and life decisions. “You’re weak,” she tells him at one point. His high school friend is scornful of how Dwight deals with the killer’s family. To most he is a man of no account and yet we are given clues throughout the film that he is also someone of hidden resources and capabilities. We are warned not to judge but instead leave ourselves open to what is weakness and what is strength. It is by returning to his ‘home’ that he engages fully with who and what he is. In that respect, *Blue Ruin* shares common ground with *Drunktown’s Finest* regarding a sense of *place*. It is in the habitus where we have grown up, have been given our values and where our roots are that we can truly discover our worth.

**Conclusion**

In his book *The Politics of Discipleship*, Graham Ward argues that “People do not belong to communities anymore but inhabit various cultures.” However he goes onto say that the “interrelationality within which the subject comes to an understanding of himself or herself cannot be separated from the practices in which this interrelationality takes place.” There is common ground here with Gregory’s observation about the “Kingdom of Whatever.” Culture is clearly an important part of forming contemporary western minds and lives but is that all? This
Theological trajectory has been picked up by James K. A. Smith in his work on cultural liturgy and particularly his understanding of habitus in *Imagining the Kingdom.*

Drawing also upon Pierre Bordieu, Smith notes that habitus is “embodied history” and that:

“The ‘I’ that perceives is already a ‘we.’ My perception is communal, a debt I owe.” This embodied understanding of cultural context, place or habitus permeates all seven of these movies in one way or another. Ironically we can bring together the fictional documentary dialectic of *Kumiko, The Treasure Hunter* with the character of Nizhoni from *Drunktown’s Finest.* If this movie character from the New Mexico tribal lands did go to study at real-life Calvin College,
Michigan, she would in all likelihood encounter the ideas of James K. A. Smith and Graham Ward and have returned to the reservation with an enhanced understanding of the inter-relationality of her place and context. London Sundance 2014 suggests strongly to me that we have not yet reached the “Kingdom of Whatever” and that a sense of time and place remains vital to human art, culture and religion.


3 Ward, 189.


5 Smith, 83.

6 Smith, 84.

References

