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Report from Sundance 2009: Religion in Independent Film - "Twenty-Five Years of Where the Next Begins "

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Abstract

This is the report from Sundance Film Festival 2009.



Graphic courtesy of The Sundance Film Festival 2009

The weather is mild. The stars shine brightly. You find an earnest young filmmaker around every corner. And, there are a lot of great movies. This is the Sundance Film Festival.

This year's festival was unusual in that it seemed to have two parts - the preinaugural and the postinaugural. On Tuesday at 10:00 a.m. Park City came to a



standstill while its fifty thousand or so guests watched the inauguration of Barack Obama. As we rushed to see a 10:00 a.m. movie, there was not even one car moving on Main Street and not another person in sight. We were told that the movie, scheduled for 12:00 noon Washington, D.C. time, would not begin until after the swearing in, no matter how long that took. There were watch parties all over town,

so no matter where you were or what you were doing, you could see the swearing in ceremony. At our watch party my wife passed out almost an entire box of tissues to strangers who cried and cheered throughout the ceremony. After the ceremony, things got back to normal and we were off to see more movies.

The reason we attend the Sundance Film Festival is to find movies that will be of interest to our readers, movies related in one way or another to religion, but that are not likely to appear at your local multiplex. Alicia Conway's short film, *Rite*, is a good example. (See film review below.) We almost missed this one ourselves because the catalogue description was very brief. But we got to see the



movie and even had an opportunity to talk about the film with director Conway (see photo of Conway and Bill left). Since this is a short film, it is unlikely that you will see

the movie at a local theater, but fortunately you can go on line and find it and you can find most of the films that we review. So, while the films we review often will not show up in your town, they are available.

We want to thank again everyone in the SFF Press Office, especially Meren Hintz. Meren is in charge of credentials and approximately 1,500 representatives of the press received credentials this year. The Press Office is



essential since this year's Festival screened 218 films. Ninety-six 96 of these were short films. The movies that are screened at Sundance were selected from a total of 9,293 submissions. There is no way we could navigate seeing the films we do without the enthusiastic support of the people in the SFF Press Office and to you we say: THANKS.



This year the editors of JR&F were joined in reviewing movies by Jeanette Solano. Jeanette is an associate professor of Comparative Religion at California State University, Fullerton. She has made one documentary, *Transnational Savior: How a Salvadoran Jesus Reunited with His People in the U.S.* (2004) and was associate producer on an award winning dramatic short, *Unbound* (2008). Given the number of films we would like to review and the

difficulty of scheduling a screening of all of those movies, we were delighted to have Jeanette helping us out.

— WLB

Amreeka

(US Narrative Feature Films)

This is the story of a Palestinian woman struggling with life on the West Bank. What used to take her fifteen minutes to get to work, now takes two hours because



she has to drive around the wall. She has to pass through Israeli check points and her teenage son is now at that surly stage where each checkpoint becomes a challenge and the possibility that her son will say something to get him arrested. In the midst of this life of struggle, Muna gets an opportunity to go to America and start life over.

Muna and her son, Fadi, end up living with relatives in Illinois. But they find that life in America is often as difficult as life back home. There is no work. They are discriminated against by people in the community. And Fadi's behavior gets him in as much trouble in their new home as it was likely to get them back

home. The interesting religious twist in the film is that Muna is not Muslim, but rather Christian. (Early in the movie we see her working in the bank without a headscarf, while her fellow employees are seen wearing head scarves.) So, this Palestinian Christian ends up in a Christian community, but finds herself rejected and excluded, not on the basis of religion, but on the basis of ethnicity. Not what one might expect from a Christian community. Maybe there are things more important than one's religion when it comes to discrimination.

In the end, family and friends provide the support that Muna and Fadi need to stay in their new country and to make a good life for themselves. In this case, family and friends, whatever their religion, are the most important things in our lives.

— WLB

Arlen Faber

(U.S. Dramatic Competition)

Arlen Faber is a delightful, smart romantic comedy which follows a reclusive fraud, international best-selling author Arlen Faber, from his safe, cushy, peculiar hermitage to the messy level of the street where he discovers the



complicated delights of human relationships. Jeff Daniels plays Arlen Faber, whose career-making spiritual best seller, *Me and God**, revolutionized pop spirituality for a generation. The film begins with Faber as a phobic, house-bound curmudgeon who refuses to communicate with a world that desperately wants him to. A wrecked lower back forces him to seek the healing hands of Elizabeth (Lauren Graham), a new chiropractor in town, who begins to heal more than his spine. The typical romantic dyad is infiltrated by a newly sober and spiritually-searching struggling bookstore owner, Chris (Lou Taylor Pucci). This unusual triad and the life lessons they teach each other, propel the comedy through the typical and not-so-typical turns of the genre.

Like Arlen, I will begin with caustic and critical reflection and move on to the more redemptive aspects of the film. Arlen Faber is all too neatly packaged and formulaic; including a sweet ending were the hopeful lovers are given a second chance and the recovering alcoholic falls in love at first sight with Elizabeth's secretary. My deeper critique is related to writer/director John Hindman's apparent message: that when it comes to true spirituality and answers to life's most perplexing theological/philosophical questions, religious institutions, or even religious figures, are bankrupt and empty. One could even argue that religious folks

are mocked in the film: the mailman, who is a Faber devotee, arrives with his zealous family, sings a reworked hymn and is doused with a bucket of cold water. The failure of Christianity to provide answers is poignantly highlighted in a scene in which Arlen enters a church in hopes of hearing God's voice. He inches closer, pew by pew, only to be met with God's silence – a fact that so infuriates him that he steals back his five dollar donation! With thousands of years of history and figures to choose from, no honest insight is gleaned from traditional figures or religions. His earnest meditation gets him nowhere. To be sure traditional world religions are presented as no better or worse than pop, new age religiosity, which is gleefully skewered as well. Hindman's story counters that true wisdom, healing, and spiritual connection are found in human relationships.

John Hindman, who did standup comedy for a decade, both wrote and directed the film. The dialogue is witty, the satire at acerbic, and the situations often hilarious. What distinguished this romantic comedy for me were the quieter scenes, moments, messages. For example, one theme throughout the film is the deep human need to communicate: there are Arlen's bags of unopened mail, editors who beg for new word, requests to tell your story at an AA meeting. The film also strongly champions the power of the written word and plight of the independent bookstore today.

One of the main themes of the film is the relationship between fathers and sons: absent fathers who abandon their sons by dying of Alzheimer's, alcoholism, or simply abandoning sons for selfish reasons. These less-than-perfect fathers are replaced by Arlen who is transformed by his new role as father-figure. In one scene he is helping Elizabeth's son Alex (Max Antisell) live a bit more fearlessly (a lesson he needs to learn as well) by eating a real cheeseburger. In one of several Wisdom-on-the-Stoop scenes Arlen sits with Chris, sharing a cup of strong, black coffee and philosophizing. During these scenes the pair grapple with all the classic Big questions religion deals with: theodicy (problem of evil), the afterlife, free will, destiny, etc. It is not often such queries are found in a feature romantic comedy.

Two visions of God are hinted at in the film: God the Monster who is just playing with us and God the invested Lover who is intimately involved with human beings. During a Q & A with director/writer Hindman at the Windrider Forum, I asked him which God Arlen believed in. "God the monster!" was his response. Yet another portrait of God is presented in the film. During their first date scene, Arlen, whose claim to fame is his direct dialogue with God, tells Elizabeth: "God can't wait to see what you do! Through you, God falls in love with the world. You are his muse! You are enough." While Arlen is lying to get the girl, Hindman inadvertently paints a portrait of the wildly interactive God who emerges in several

contemporary Christian theologies: namely, Process theology and Liberation theology.

Arlen Faber, in the end, might amend his title to read: *Me and the God found through other people*. In short, the spiritual message of the film is both theistic and humanistic: God works through people. Hindman and Arlen don't have the answers to life's most perplexing questions, but they discover that a partial answer is: people need each other. The reality of God and the ultimate answers are up for grabs. Arlen's final speech leaves the door open for the possibility that God exists and works in mysterious ways – including flawed human beings we just may fall in love with.

*John Hindman writer/director of the film, told us to note the order in the title (*Me and God*): a clue about the self-absorption or ego of the obsessive author.

— JRS



Bill Blizek (center) with *Barking Waters* stars, Casey Camp-Horinek and Richard Ray Whitman.

Barking Water

(Spectrum)



Barking Water is a gentle but moving film, not about religion, but about the spirit – not the human spirit, but the Great Spirit. The Great Spirit is that force that permeates the universe and binds us all together. The Great Spirit is a part of Native religion and stands in contrast to what we ordinarily think of as Western religion.

Frankie is dying. He had an on again, off again relationship with Irene for over twenty years, a relationship that finally ended and ended badly. But now Irene comes to the hospital to steal Frankie from the doctors and to take Frankie home.

It turns out, of course, that “home” is not a place, but rather a connection to family and friends, to those who have played an important role in the stories that have been our lives. This means that Frankie and Irene stop along the way to visit family and friends as they move toward the home of Frankie’s estranged daughter. At each stop Frankie is returning home, even when he merely stops to hear Native songs sung by a congregation that he has never met.

Along the way, Frankie finds forgiveness from Irene and Irene finds forgiveness from Frankie. Frankie tells Irene that when he “goes” he wants to be holding her hand. And so he does.

In the end, Frankie comes home, he arrives at the home of his daughter and his new grandbaby. But the final connection, the final homecoming is symbolic because Frankie has died on his journey home.

— WLB

Before Tomorrow

(International Narrative Feature Film)

Storytelling is the way we get informed from an early age and also the way we connect to each other as humans... Film and all types of art – can show us the truth beneath and within the human experience

— Robert Redford
(quoted in *Daily Insider* Friday, Jan. 16, 2009)



This year at Sundance Film

Festival, industry insiders are speculating about the effects of the economic downturn on film, while the media discusses the reasons

behind the lack of a big breakout hit movie from the previous year's festival. Will there be a breakout movie this year? Are the multi-million dollar Sundance deals history? Redford and his team though, insist that the Sundance Film Festival is about – and always has been about – telling stories through film. *Before Tomorrow* not only fulfills this mandate, but reflects on the sacred nature of story-telling itself.

When we teach students about Native American/First Nations world views, we commonly tell the students that these indigenous peoples tend not to separate the sacred and the profane in the way that Western traditions do. Instead, everything is sacred and we are in a kinship relationship with all things. While it may be easy

to say, read or write about such a perspective, directors Madeline Piujuq Ivalu and Marie-Helene Cousineau show through story, image and sound, the ways in which this worldview is embodied in each aspect of traditional Inuit life.

Adapted from the novel *For Morgendagen* by Danish writer Jørn Riel, *Before Tomorrow* is the final chapter in the Inuit trilogy of *The Fast Runner* and *The Journals Of Knud Rasmussen*. Filmed in locations near Puvirnituk, Nunavik (northern Quebec), with all dialogue in Inuktitut (with English subtitles), the film is set in 1840 and explores the liminal moments between life and death; between first contact with Europeans and what, for some, came next.

In the film, stories of strange new people are told during a community feast. Metal knives and needles are a source of wonder to the people, and the stories of the white men some claim to have met provide opportunity to joke and tease. As summer begins, a grandmother, Ninioq (Madeline Ivalu) and her grandson, Maniq (Paul-Dylan Ivalu) leave the village and go to an isolated island in order to dry fish over the summer. At first they have an old friend accompanying them, but when she passes away, grandmother and grandson are left alone. As summer draws to an end, they await the canoes that will take them home, but no one comes. Together, grandmother and grandson, with difficulty, return to their village where they find that all have perished due to smallpox. They flee back to their island, where they take refuge in a cave and try to survive winter, wolf attacks and isolation.

This is a linear-retelling of the basic plot; however, the film itself is non-linear and reflects traditional Inuit storytelling traditions, moving easily between past and present through story and experience. *Before Tomorrow* begins in darkness, in the cave, with Ninioq telling her grandson a story about raven, darkness and light. In the cave, when Maniq has a bad dream, his grandmother tells him not to be afraid, that darkness and light are friends. This statement, which to some might sound merely like a comforting platitude, rather represents the core of a worldview that does not pit good against evil, body against mind, or light against darkness. Even when suffering the severe consequences of first contact, when Maniq asks his grandmother "Why did those strangers hurt our family?" she does not reply out of anger or enmity, but responds, "I don't know. I didn't know any of them. Perhaps you'll find out when you're grown up." Similarly death is not separated from life. The joy of long friendship and marriage end with death, but this does not sever the kinship ties. Ninioq speaks frequently to her deceased husband and draws strength from his presence. While eating, Ninioq says to her grandson, "Eat this. This is for my dear friend, so she can be happy." It is not that suffering is denied, but rather it is lived and experienced as part of life, just as darkness and light are intimately connected. Ultimately then, the greatest suffering would be incurred through isolation, the severing of all kinship. It is for this reason that Ninioq, knowing that she is close to death and her grandson would be left alone without hope for rescue or escape, makes the difficult decision to put out the light – to extinguish the life-

giving fire and open the cave up to the cold. In the last scene, Ninioq lies down beside her sleeping grandson. That they are together is most important, for, as Ninioq knows "no child can live alone."

Before Tomorrow is beautifully filmed by a largely Inuit crew. The scenes of traditional life are a joy to watch. Sound is also an integral element of the film. The crunch of snow under foot, the howl of the wind, the snarl of wolves, laughter of the people and especially the sound of breath, all tell stories of joy, suffering, kinship, life and death. This makes for an incredibly intimate portrait of the characters and their way of life.

Throughout the film, Ninioq tells her grandson stories – stories about raven; stories about a grandmother and grandson. In the village, the men tell the women and children stories of the strangers they have encountered. When Maniq kills his first seal, his grandmother asks him to tell the story so that one day she can tell his father. Stories are sacred. They don't merely tell about incidents in life, they are life. Stories don't just connect people, people are stories. *Before Tomorrow* deserves to be told and re-told. Thank goodness there are people who can tell these stories and a place to tell them.

— MMD

Cold Souls

(U.S. Dramatic Competition: Narrative Feature Films)



Have you considered the state of your soul lately? Sophie Barthes, novice screenwriter/director, asks us to do just this with her "metaphysical tragic-comedy" *Cold Souls*. The basic premise of the film involves an angst-ridden actor, Paul Giamatti (playing himself), who decides to de-soul himself and then spends the rest of the film trying to regain his lost soul. This idea, as a literary trope, is as old as Doctor Faustus and has been recently explored in *The Simpsons* as well (in the episode where Bart sells his soul to Millhouse and desperately seeks to regain it).

While the plot is not original – except for the later twist when Giamatti returns to the high-tech company to rent a soul of Russian poet – the acting is pitch perfect. Giamatti and his perplexed wife, played by Emily Watson, are as solid as ever, and Dina Korzon's haunting portrayal of the soul-trafficking mule is spellbinding. Her tragic fate raises important questions regarding how others' souls affect us.

Cold Souls succeeds as comedy: the gut-driven explosions of laughter are many and welcome. It falters, however, in its ontological or theological exploration.

Despite quotes by Nietzsche and sincere soul-searching by Giamatti, religious resources are almost completely silent and individuals in this late modern world seem to relate to their souls only on an emotional level: the mule feels no compassion when she is soulless and Giamatti cannot feel anything during sex although he loves his wife.

The introspective viewer, however, can come away from the narrative asking many questions regarding human souls: How does our soul create or influence our personality? What are we without it? What shapes our soul? How is it connected to our emotional memories and experiences? Can we truly wonder without our souls? What would my soul look like: would it be as tiny as a chickpea like Giamatti's? Do I treat my soul as something precious or dispensable?

The film, which will be released nationwide by Samuel Goldwyn in late summer, succeeds in hilariously reintroducing a dialogue about the human soul to a secular movie-going audience, but stops short of its filmic potential. A scene in a wonderful Sundance International documentary, *Afghan Star*, relates to this failure to move our souls; a man is describing the state of the Afghani soul after decades of war and Taliban rule: "Our souls were dead and we want to wake them up with art and music" he explains. *Cold Souls* fails to live up to its own potential, to fully wake up our souls or minds, the best it can do is playfully nudge us from slumber.

— JRS

Crude

(US Documentary Feature Films)



This Joe Berlinger documentary focuses upon the battle between people in the Ecuadorian Amazon and the Chevron Oil Company. The movie chronicles this

David and Goliath story, including the legal wranglings and the public relations efforts on both sides. In the sixties, Texaco began exploring for oil in Ecuador. When it found oil it began drilling, but the production of oil was done in the most profitable fashion and this also was the most damaging way to produce oil, damaging to the environment and damaging to the people of the region.

Over time Texaco sells out to PetroEcuador and then Texaco is purchased by Chevron, making Chevron the company liable for the original damage done by Texaco and continued by PetroEcuador. With all of these complications, the original lawsuit has taken many years and it is expected that the resolution will take many more years, given the resources of Chevron and the lack of resources of the indigenous people. All the while the people continue to suffer.

When it comes to indigenous peoples, this is not a new story. But it is an excellent story about how badly corporations and governments treat indigenous

peoples. It is not only foreign companies that behave badly. More importantly, it is an excellent example of how little respect there is for the way of life, including religion, of indigenous peoples. The assumption is always that progress and profit are more important than the lives of indigenous peoples. But there is a real arrogance in saying that what we do is progress.

— WLB

Dirt! The Movie

(U.S. Documentary Competition)

Dirt is a documentary with a dirty mission: to reconnect humans to the soil beneath their feet. Although the filmmakers' shared a similar goal



with other environmental documentaries such as *An Inconvenient Truth*, i.e. demonstrating how human action can deplete and destroy nature which, in turn, can have deleterious effects on the dependent human population, the film is much more playful and positive in tone.

Directors Bill Benneson and Gene Roscow were inspired by urban arborist and writer William Bryant Logan's book: *Dirt: The Ecstatic Skin of the Earth*. I met Logan at Sundance and he was pleased with the form of the film, feeling that

the director had captured the heart of his message. And heart is something this 90 minute documentary is full of. The film was shot over three years and in more than 20 locations: Argentina, France, India, Kenya, and several regions in the U.S.

From dirt (or clay, mud, or dust), many sacred mythologies tell us, we are formed and to dust we shall return. It seems, however, that even religious folks fail to ruminate on this connection much. The film definitely speaks to our material and spiritual connection to soil; however, it is also replete with scientific data with accompanying animation (blobs that bear an uncanny resemblance to the molecules in *What the Bleep Do We Know*).

Their journey to explore the connection between dirt and humans takes them all over the world - to expected places like the Catholic pilgrimage site of Chimayo in New Mexico and The Land Institute in Kansas and to unexpected places like the infamous Rikers Island prison and their Greenhouse project. The latter example was one of the more compelling illustrations of the power of dirt to heal and transform us. We watch violent inmates heal themselves through horticultural work and then train to join a Green Team once released from prison. Finally you view these ex-gangbangers planting trees in the inner city with real pride.

The film was overly ambitious in trying to include every international voice from Andy Lipkus of Tree People in Los Angeles to the inspirational Dr. Vandana

Shiva, Physicist and Environmental Activist in India. It also could have been woven together with a tighter narrative arc.

Despite these shortcomings, *Dirt!* is an intriguing film for those concerned with the connection between religion and spirituality and the earth. You are left thinking about your connection or disconnection to the earth and how that may affect your soul and our sustainable future. I left the theater with a strong urge to plunge my hands into deep, rich soil and consider my own mortality.

— JRS

Earth Days

(Premieres)



Earth Days is the closing film for this year's Sundance Film Festival, taking its place as one of the most important films of the Festival.

The movie begins with a clip from John F. Kennedy talking about the importance of the environment. This clip is followed by a similar clip from almost every president to follow Kennedy. The one glaring exception is George W. Bush, who is shown saying that Americans are addicted to oil, an ambiguous statement he made very late in his administration.

The movie tells the story of the environmental movement, using the voices of Stuart Udall, former Secretary of the Interior; Hunter Lovins, a renewable energy pioneer; Paul Ehrlich, biologist; Pete McCloskey, former Republican congressman; Denis Hayes, organizer of Earth Day, and Rusty Schweickart, former Apollo Nine astronaut, among others. The film is both a history of the environmental movement and an explanation of what's wrong and what needs to be done.

This is not a movie directly related to religion, but we offer this brief review because there is a strong existing ecological movement among liberal Christians and Buddhists and now some evangelical Christian communities are taking up the environment as a serious cause. There is some irony here, since the evangelical Christian community was part of the Republican base that supported a president who dismissed the importance of the environment and claimed that there was no scientific support for warnings about the environment, contrary to the evidence.

This turn, however, is likely to continue and so the environment is likely to become more and more a religious issue – not just a political issue – and most movies about the environment will be of interest to those religious groups that have taken up the cause of the environment. You might consider this to be a predictive review.

— WLB

Five Minutes of Heaven

(International Narrative Feature)

World Cinema Directing Award : Dramatic

World Cinema Screenwriting Award



In *Five Minutes of Heaven* (*Five Minutes*), politico-religious violence fuels hatred, conflict and suffering, while salvation comes not

through religion or faith, but ultimately through the strength of the human spirit.

The film cuts between the present and past of two men whose lives are intimately, brutally linked as a result of the Troubles in Northern Ireland.

As a young man, Alistair Little joins the UVF (Ulster Volunteer Force) a loyalist Protestant group in Northern Ireland. Raised in a culture of urban violence and sectarian hatred, Little embraces the opportunity to kill an IRA member, “We’ll be walking in the bar ten feet tall,” he says to his friends. Little and his companions carry out the hit with all the swagger and insecurity of young men coming of age through blind murder. However, Joe Griffen, the young brother of the victim, witnesses the shooting. Terrified and later blamed by his mother for not yelling a warning to his brother about the danger, Griffen grows up traumatized, guilt-ridden and obsessed with killing his brother’s murderer.

As grown men three decades later, both Little (Liam Neeson) and Griffen (James Nesbitt) are living ghosts. Little is an internationally known peace advocate who is active on Truth and Reconciliation committees in Northern Ireland and other countries. Although a repentant and well-known success on the surface, Little remains haunted by the murder he committed as a young man. His life, apart from social activism, is completely barren. Griffen, while watching Little's international profile with a combination of scorn, jealousy and hatred, nonetheless has succeeded in building a healthy personal life with a loving wife and daughters.

Both Little and Griffen have a chance to meet for an interview on a reality-style TV show. Griffen seizes this as an opportunity to finally redeem himself – to experience five minutes of heaven – by murdering Little. Little, for his part, is cognizant of this risk, as well as the emotional extremes to which a meeting will push Griffen. Little also knows that reconciliation and forgiveness are “not on the agenda,” yet he cannot begin to move on with his life until such a meeting occurs. Through their struggles to cope with the past and the present situations, Little and Griffen come to know themselves and each other. Salvation comes in the form of survival itself – learning to live despite each other and the past.

The intelligence of *Five Minutes* is that it does not, in the end, offer easy, if any, resolutions other than survival. Little and Griffen do not eventually embrace, forgive, and head off to the pub for a shot each of Bushmills and Jameson. In many

ways, there is no reconciliation, except perhaps with the past as past and part of life. This itself is an extraordinary feat for each man.

Truth and Reconciliation committees are currently at work not only in Northern Ireland, but in places such as South Africa (Apartheid); Bosnia (ethnic violence); and Canada (native residential schools). Through an intelligent script, sensitive direction and tremendous acting, *Five Minutes of Heaven* gives us a glimpse of the worth of such committees and the courage that it takes to confront and survive the past.

— MMD

Johnny Mad Dog

(International Narrative Feature Films)

Johnny is not the only mad dog in this movie. In fact, he leads a band of rebel soldiers in an unnamed African country – the movie was shot in Liberia. At the



age of fifteen, Johnny is the oldest of this band of children, all of whom are merciless killers, mad dogs.

Johnny Mad Dog is the portrayal of evil. There may be a story in this film. There may be a political comment on the United Nations peace keeping forces in Africa. There may be a struggle between people of different religions. There even may be some remarkable film making, but all of this is overshadowed by the portrait of evil that the movie paints. The sadism, brutality, cruelty, and viciousness of the rebel soldiers – the children – come at you so fast that it numbs the soul.

I have seen movies that portray evil before (*Schindler's List*, *The Grey Zone*, *Se7en*, or *Hotel Rawanda*, for example), and in each case I was left with feelings, usually feelings of pain or sadness. After viewing *Johnny Mad Dog*, however, I simply felt numb. It might be that I began numbing myself early in the film as a way of being able to watch the entire film. The numbness may have covered up fear, pain, anger, repulsion, allowing me to continue viewing the film.

You might ask why we would review such a horrific film. The answer is in part that evil is horrific and that evil is seen as being in combat with goodness. But it is also true that *Johnny Mad Dog* is one in a growing list of Sundance films that deal with evil in Africa. *Shake Hands With the Devil* (2007) was a movie about the 1994 genocide in Rawanda. *The Devil Came on Horseback* (2007) was a film about the genocide in Darfur. In the next year or two we can expect a similar movie about Congo or Somalia, the most recent places where evil has reared its ugly head. Movies like this do give us access to the evil that surrounds us, but they are not

going to be popular – it is too difficult to face such evil. But movies of this kind can be found at Sundance, where the movie matters more than the box office.

On the one hand, I want to say that everyone should see this movie. It shows us real evil and lets us know that real evil is a significant part of our world. Everyone should come face to face with real evil at least once, even if that evil is merely portrayed on film. On the other hand, I find it difficult to tell anyone that they should see this film – because it is so difficult to watch.

As I walked home from the movie I thought about the difference between a bad dog and a mad dog. A bad dog is dangerous, but can be trained to be a good dog, or at least a better dog. A mad dog, however, is dangerous and cannot be changed. There is nothing you can do about a mad dog, but shoot it.

— WLB

La Mission

(US Narrative Feature Film)

La Mission is the story of Che Rivera, hyper masculine bus driver, who is the toughest guy in the neighborhood. Che resorts to violence and intimidation to get what he wants. But Che's world comes crumbling down around him when he

learns that his son is gay. Violence and intimidation will not work in this situation, even though Che uses them because they are all he knows. He also begins a



relationship with his very attractive neighbor, but she will have none of his violence either, so he no longer knows how to get the things that he wants because the things that he wants – mutual relationships with his son and his neighbor – are not things you can get through violence. Just the opposite. In an important sense, Che becomes a fish out of water. The world he knows is no longer the world he wants, but he has no idea how to function effectively in the world he wants. But the new world in which Che finds himself is a world that offers him an opportunity to heal the wounds of his past and an opportunity to redeem himself. This opportunity requires a new Che.

Peter Bratt wanted to make a complex film. And that he did. There is no simple story here. The message of the movie is like a woven tapestry – you have to have every thread in place to see the picture. One of threads in this story is religion. Actually, several of the threads are religious. One of these is the Catholicism of the characters and the condemnation of homosexuality by the Catholic Church. Another thread is the female religious imagery of the film. The Catholicism of the characters is expressed in the various female images that the characters utilize.

These images bring a feminine spirit and energy to the characters and to the film. But the worship of the female images stands in direct contradiction to the treatment of women in this hyper masculine culture. It is just this kind of contradiction that gives the movie its complexity and its power. Finally, the mother of Peter and Benjamin Bratt is a Peruvian Indian and Native American Rights activist. So there is an Qechua element to the story as well – the religion of the characters is mixed – and this element of the story is an element that plays a role in the healing experienced by Che.

In *La Mission*, religious elements are interwoven into the fabric of the story in a way that gives both our understanding of religion and the story itself a complexity that is rare in film.

— WLB



Thanks to the Queer Lounge for hosting a panel discussion of *La Mission* that included Benjamin and Peter Bratt along with other actors from the film.

Moon

(Premieres)



Moon (dir. Duncan Jones) is a sci-fi film with a difference. Unlike most films in the genre, its focus is not on technology, or even the alien

landscape. *Moon* is a reflection on human nature, illusion and the difficulty of gaining self-knowledge and an accurate, liberating, view of reality.

In the film, Sam Bell (Sam Rockwell) is the sole worker on a lunar mining base. His only ‘companion,’ is Gerty (voice of Kevin Spacey), a helpful and kind robot/computer. Completely isolated and nearing the end of his three year contract on the base, Sam looks forward to being reunited on earth with his wife and daughter, who by now is a toddler. With two weeks to go, periodic messages from his wife are not quite enough to keep Sam’s psyche intact. Sam begins to suffer increasingly severe bouts of illness, nightmares and hallucinations.

When Sam crashes the lunar rover and wakes up in the infirmary, he finds himself completely well, but confined by Gerty and the company to inside the base until a recovery crew comes to take him home. Suspicious and impatient, Sam manages to get outside of the base and makes his way to the crashed lunar rover. In it he finds an astronaut, barely alive, and brings him back to the base to save him.

Soon after this, the injured astronaut – the original Sam (Sam 1) – awakens to find an angry Sam 2 who wants nothing to do with Sam 1. At first Sam 1 tries to befriend Sam 2, dismissing all the similarities between them as coincidence. Only gradually, and with great anguish, does he come to accept Sam 2's view that not only their environment, but their memories and previous life on earth are all largely a construction of the company. Sick, Sam 1, with Sam 2's help, manages a live link to contact home and speaks briefly to his daughter, who is now a teenager. He finds out that his wife died a number of years before and, even more shockingly, that the original Sam is still living with his daughter on earth.

Both Sam 1 and Sam 2 still want to return to earth and avoid the rescue crew that they know is coming to kill them and awaken a new Sam for a “three year contract.” Sam 2, overcoming his anger and disillusionment, finds a way for Sam 1 to return home, then risks his life to comfort the fatally ill Sam 1, who is too sick to make the journey. While Sam 1 never gets his wish to go home, he dies with the knowledge that Sam 2 has escaped and is returning to earth.

Sam Rockwell is key to the film's successful portrayal of Sam 1, 2 and even 3. *Moon* never loses site of the humanity of these characters. Although Sam 1 would prefer to believe the illusions, Sam 2 insists that he “wake up.” In return, Sam 1 helps to teach Sam 2 about compassion and altruism. The awakening and development of these characters makes *Moon* a thoughtful reflection on the ethics

of cloning. Beyond this, the themes of awakening from illusion and striving for truth, compassion and liberation have parallels with practices and doctrines found in Hinduism and Buddhism. The Sams, through their difficult quest, ease each other's suffering, overcome ignorance, and ultimately open a path for the other Sams to understand reality and be released from the samsara created by the actions of an uncaring and unethical corporation.

— MMD

The Only Good Indian

(Spectrum)

The Only Good Indian is the story of a young boy, Nachwihiata, who is taken from his parents and the reservation and sent to one of the many boarding schools established



by the U.S. government for the official purpose of "assimilating" Natives into the dominant culture. But "assimilation" really meant "ethnocide" or the killing of Indian culture, including their Native religion. The premise was that an Indian who was no longer looked or talked like an Indian was a "dead Indian."

Nachwihata is given the name, "Charley." His hair is cut and he is dressed like everyone else, in a manner considered civilized. He is not allowed to speak his native Kickapoo language or to practice the religion of his people. The children of the boarding schools were forced to attend Christian religious services and required to participate in back-breaking labor. Corporal punishment was an essential part of the system of transforming the Indian into someone not Indian.

In some important sense, the cruelty of changing Indians into non-Indians is worse than physically killing them because they must continue to live with the pain of the change they have undergone. Forcing Christianity and English on the children is for them a devastating experience, one that changes them forever.

Fortunately for Nachwihaita, he escapes the hell that is the boarding school and, after a long a perilous journey, returns home.

— WLB

Over the Hills and Far Away

(US Documentary Feature Films)

Over the Hills and Far Away (OHFA) is a documentary about a family's journey from their home in Texas to Mongolia. This is no mere travelogue though.



Rupert Isaacson and his wife Kristin Neff, a psychology professor, are a couple whose young son Rowan has autism. Seeing their child suffering from isolation, incontinence and tantrums, the couple decides to fly Rowan to Mongolia in the hope that some of Mongolia's traditional shamanic healers might help him when both conventional western medicine along with some alternative treatments have not.

The decision to take Rowan to Mongolia came, in part, as a result of Isaacson noticing that Rowan often became calmer when he was around or riding horses. Aware of some traditional indigenous healing practices, Isaacson did some research and found that Mongolia, likely the birthplace of horseback riding, still had some nomadic tribes with shamanic healers. This seemed to be a good fit, except for the challenges of finding one of Mongolia's most respected shaman, called Ghoste, and taking a child with autism all the way to Mongolia.

OHFA is remarkably balanced and compelling. Isaacson is a believer in traditional healing practices and a born optimist. Neff, while skeptical and intellectual, is still willing to undertake the journey almost as a last resort. Interviews with experts on autism—professors, doctors and specialists (including Dr. Temple Grandin)—are interspersed throughout the film and highlight the

mysteries and challenges of this disorder. Their reflections on the meaningful role (or lack thereof) for many in Western society diagnosed with autism, developmental disorders, or mental illness are particularly striking given the contrast with other traditional cultures, which have often provided meaningful and inclusive places within society for such people.

The climax of the film occurs when the family finally, after an arduous journey, meets Ghoste. This shaman gently yet powerfully bridges the traditional and the modern. While the film-maker (and viewers) may share surprise and even some chagrin at the view of Ghoste's yurt replete with a satellite dish outside, the scenes of Ghoste and Rowan are both inexplicable and yet somehow, given the context, normal. There is a ceremony and then, during the next morning's meeting, Ghoste predicts that from that time forward Rowan will not be cured, but will suffer less and less from the problems plaguing him. And this is what happens. After the encounter with Ghoste, Rowan becomes immediately more socially outgoing, largely ceases to have tantrums and, much to the family's relief, within a day or two ceases to be incontinent. The family returns to Texas with a child who, while still having autism, suffers much less because of it.

So what happens here? Isaccson believes that Ghoste and the other shamans they met have brought about this change. Neff admits that she doesn't know what caused the change, but wonders if part of the reason for the success is the journey

they took to Mongolia and through healing ceremonies together, intensely, as a family.

Whatever the reasons may be, Ghoste's ability to interact with Rowan, his recognition that Rowan, while remaining autistic, may yet have an important role to play in society as a shaman, and the inspiring commitment of loving parents for their child, all make for an insightful, moving and ultimately thought-provoking film.

— MMD

A book written by the father in the film *Over the Hills and Far Away* (about the family's experiences that are portrayed in the film) has just been published. It is called "*The Horse Boy: A Father's Quest to Heal His Son*" (Little, Brown and Company).

Quest for Honor

(US Documentary Feature Film)

This film raises the question: How tolerant should we be of the religious and cultural practices of others when those practices result in the death of women?

The film explores the activities of the Women's Media Center of Suleymaniyah, Iraq as it investigates the honor killings of



women in the region. The Center documents the killings and tries to educate women regarding their rights. Educating the people of northern Iraq is a difficult task, since women are seen as not having rights by the tribal leaders. Women can be bought and sold. They are killed for even the suspicion of behavior that would bring dishonor to the men of the tribe. The men of the tribe are in control. They make the decisions. They feel dishonored by the behavior of women. They see the killing of women as appropriate. One man is interviewed and expresses the view that honor killing is appropriate, although he does not admit to participating in such killing because he knows that for such an admission he might be prosecuted. The dishonor for which women are killed is the dishonor of the tribal males and this makes them all co-conspirators in the continuing practice of honor killing. The conspiracy against women is difficult to defeat. Steps toward equality and justice are difficult to take in this context. Even when police arrest someone, they go un-prosecuted.

The answer to the question, how tolerant should we be, given by the film is obviously that we should not tolerate such treatment of women. But given the cultural and religious traditions of the tribes, bringing an end to honor killings will

be very difficult. The quest for honor of the movie's title is, of course, a quest for honor for both men and women.

— WLB

Note: Allison Conway's short film, *Rite*, also raises the question about which rites are beneficial to us and which rites are harmful.

Rite

(Shorts with Features)

Rite is the story of a young girl who participates in a rite of passage – moving from childhood to adulthood. Her mother brushes her hair. Grandma cooks all day for the meal that follows the rite. The girl is dressed in the kind of fancy dress that girls wear for communion or confirmation. The adults all dress up for the occasion – the women wear necklaces.



But in a powerful twist the rite doesn't turn out to be what the viewer expects and now we must ask about the purpose of rites and rituals. This is a question to be asked of all rites and rituals, but religions include many rites and rituals, so the question is especially pertinent to religion. Why should we participate

in rites and rituals? What benefits follow from such participation? What risks do we take when we participate in the rites and rituals we choose?

This short film was produced in response to a conversation director Alicia Conway had with a friend. Her friend said that he would go along with a particular ritual because that is what his wife wanted. In other words he would agree to a rite without asking whether it made sense or not. Conway thinks that we should consider carefully the consequences, both good and bad, of the rituals we choose. There is nothing wrong with rites per se. Some can be quite beneficial. But others can be harmful and so considering the consequences of our rituals is an important step in the process of selecting the rituals in which we will participate. The surprise of the plot makes the point.

— WLB

Tibet in Song

(World Cinema Documentary)

A World Cinema Special Jury Prize: Documentary



Ngawang Choephel is a young filmmaker who is interested in the folk music of his Tibetan homeland. He believes that culture is transmitted through music and wants to record as much of the Tibetan folk music as he can in order to preserve his cultural heritage. This is usually what we say about stories – that culture is transmitted through stories – but Choephel is applying this model to music as well. The music of Tibet is associated with daily life in Tibet. There are songs for milking, for sheep herding, for butter churning, and for drinking. But Choephel has to go to the countryside to record folk music because the music heard in the city is now Chinese.

The Chinese military has taken over Tibet and the Chinese government has moved many Chinese into Tibet in an effort to make Tibet more like China. As part of the takeover, Chinese music (often Chinese military songs) is now played over loud speakers in Lhasa. Chinese entertainers do sing Tibetan folk songs, but they give them a Chinese flavor. Tibetan music is discouraged, if not forbidden. Someone in the movie makes the claim that ten performers are worth 1,000 soldiers

in the effort to change Tibetan culture, to make Tibet Chinese instead of Tibetan. This is clearly a case of "ethnocide," the destruction of a culture by another culture.

Choephel is determined to record as much of the Tibetan music as he can in an effort to save as much of Tibetan culture as he can. Saving one's culture, however, turns out to be a difficult task. Choephel is arrested and imprisoned by the Chinese. He has become not only a voice for Tibetan music, dance, and culture, but also the voice of resistance.

— WLB

Wounded Knee

(Spectrum)

This is an excellent documentary film about the takeover of Wounded Knee, South Dakota, in February of 1973. The town of Wounded



Knee is only a short distance from the actual location of the massacre of Native Americans in 1890. About 200 Sioux, led by activists from the American Indian Movement, took over the town, at one point declaring that Wounded Knee was a

sovereign nation. Shortly after the Indians took control of the town, it was surrounded by federal agents and a siege of 71 days ensued.

The movie uses archival film footage as well as interviews with people who were present at the siege, both Natives and government agents. It captures both the complexity of the issues involved and the tragedy that followed. One of the main complaints of the Indians of the Pine Ridge Reservation, for example, was not about broken treaties or the indifference of the U.S. Government, but about the control of the reservation by tribal leader, Dick Wilson, and a group of thugs who worked for and with him. This intra-tribal feud made the situation much more complex than it otherwise would have been. Broken treaties and government indifference were, of course, part of the grievance and these seemed to get lost in the siege. And, part of the tragedy that followed was that more promises were broken and neglect and indifference remained the strategy of the government.

One comes away from the movie with the clear picture of what it is like to be Indian in a country that has broken its promises, slaughtered Indians, destroyed Indian culture, and neglected the needs of the people the government is supposed to protect. The film also shows us what it means to "want to be Indian" – to want to maintain one's culture and way of life, even in the face of oppression and brutal suppression.

The siege at Wounded Knee is one of the most shameful moments in American history. The siege is clearly unnecessary. The violence is unnecessary. The political and moral grandstanding by government officials is unnecessary and unhelpful. Even the arrests at the end of the siege are unnecessary. And yet there it all is – on film. The important question is, of course: How have things changed since the siege at Wounded Knee?

— WLB