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# In Defense of Sundance: Examining the Film Festival's Place in American Independent Cinema in the Age of Netflix and Amazon

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Claremont McKenna College

In Defense of Sundance:  
Examining the Film Festival's Place in American Independent Cinema  
in the Age of Netflix and Amazon

submitted to  
Professor James Morrison

by  
Adam Soll

for  
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**Abstract**

For more than 30 years, the Sundance Film Festival has served as the preeminent venue for exhibiting and selling American independent films. Since the festival's inception, however, the distinction between Hollywood and indie films has become increasingly unclear, and Sundance has been accused of selling out to the mainstream. On one hand, the Sundance Institute continues to support and incubate truly independent artists who otherwise may never get their films made; on the other hand, the festival that the institute puts on every year is full of A-list stars, corporate sponsors, and countless other examples of Hollywood elitism. The American independent cinema is as vibrant in 2017 as ever, and new powerful players such as Netflix and Amazon who seemed to enter the scene overnight are now investing a great deal of money in the production and acquisition of Sundance films. Though it may seem counterintuitive, 2017's edition of the festival proves that the presence of these massive corporations and Hollywood stars fosters and facilitates the creation and celebration of American independent film.

## Introduction

In her article “Against Hollywood: American Independent Film as a Critical Cultural Movement,” UCLA’s Distinguished Professor of Anthropology Sherry B. Ortner argues that independent film and festival culture are fundamentally in constant opposition to the hegemony of Hollywood. “Not all indie film people are literally angry about Hollywood,” she writes, “but all by definition are in some sense against what Hollywood is and stands for.”<sup>1</sup> The term independent denotes a filmmaker or film that operates and exists separately from the Hollywood studio system - perhaps the most influential cultural institution of the 20th and 21st centuries. However, as Ortner notes, the discourse and various connotations surrounding independent film have become increasingly ambiguous. Independence implies isolation, and although this is true in the sense that independent filmmakers are often removed from studio board rooms and Los Angeles investor meetings, these artists are in no way alone.

In the Hollywood studio establishment, producers, filmmakers, and businesspeople are brought together through an interconnected network of monolithic economic and industrial institutions. In contrast, the American independent cinema is a community of like-minded people working in various areas of the entertainment industry, all of whom aim to tell cinematic stories without creative interference from the studios. In her article, Ortner names the Sundance Film Festival as one of the most important and vibrant communities in independent cinema, in large part due to its “balance between celebrating the artistic independence of the filmmaker and situating the filmmaker in a

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<sup>1</sup> Ortner, Sherry B. “Against Hollywood.” *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 2.2 (2012): 1-21. Web.

collaborative community.”<sup>2</sup> In striking this balance, this community functions as a space in which socially conscious and artistically critical individuals can reflect, learn, grow, and create art together.

Today, the Sundance Film Festival is synonymous with American independent cinema. Among young moviegoers, the word “Sundance” conjures images of low budget, quirky crossover hits such as *Napoleon Dynamite* (2004), *Garden State* (2004), and *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006). Sundance also has been responsible for making names out of some of the 21st century’s most popular and acclaimed directors, including The Coen Brothers with 1984’s *Blood Simple*, Bryan Singer with 1995’s *The Usual Suspects*, and Quentin Tarantino, whose debut *Reservoir Dogs* premiered at the festival in 1992. In 2017, many of the biggest names in American independent cinema are a part of the Sundance network, and several of these filmmakers such as Damien Chazelle, Kenneth Lonergan, and Ava DuVernay have garnered substantial mainstream appeal as well.

These filmmakers are gradually emerging as trailblazers in modern American cinema as a whole beyond the indie sphere -- just as Tarantino and The Coen Brothers grew from their humble Sundance roots to eventually define the American cinema of the 1990’s and 2000’s. Los Angeles Times film critic Kenneth Turan emphasizes the Sundance Film Festival’s close relationship with the American independent cinema in his book *Sundance to Sarajevo: Film Festivals and the World They Made*. He writes that “because the festival and the independent scene grew up together, because they nurtured

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<sup>2</sup> Ortner, p. 8.

each other and made each other strong, Sundance has become America's preeminent film event."<sup>3</sup>

Turan also claims that Sundance's paramount status in American cinema is largely due to the involvement and influence of Robert Redford. Redford, a highly successful businessman with personal, economic, and cinematic ties to Utah, has unsurprisingly managed the festival like a business. Through his non-profit organization The Sundance Institute, he has grown the fledgling US/Utah Film Festival from a small exhibition of regional film to a cultural behemoth and global phenomenon. Redford's involvement with the festival, however, has proven to be a double-edged sword in the eyes of the festival's critics. Turan argues that "ever since Redford's Sundance Institute had taken over the festival [in 1985,] the putative specter of the evil empire of Hollywood and the movie establishment had hung over the event."<sup>4</sup>

If Redford's goal in developing the festival was to bring attention, talent, and investment to Park City, then the past 33 installments of the festival indicate a resounding success. As the festival's economic and cinematic impact continue to grow, it inadvertently draws in massive corporate sponsors, a flood of paparazzi, and many of the Hollywood firms and institutions that, according to Ortner, are the antagonists of the American independent cinema narrative. Caryn James, writing for *The New York Times* in 1997, explains the difficulty of simply walking around Park City "without being mowed down by a camera crew . . . trying to mint new celebrities."<sup>5</sup> James addresses the

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<sup>3</sup> Turan, Kenneth. *Sundance to Sarajevo: Film Festivals and the World they Made*. Berkeley: U of California Press, 2003. Web. p. 35.

<sup>4</sup> Turan, p. 40.

<sup>5</sup> James, Caryn. "Hollywood Breathes In The Spirit of Sundance." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 01 Feb. 1997. Web.



question of whether Sundance had succumbed to Hollywood's influence, or conversely if Hollywood had sold out to Sundance, and 20 years later the nature of this relationship remains equally ambiguous. 2017's Sundance Film Festival continues to raise questions regarding corporate and studio influence, what it means to be independent, and whether or not the festival has lost touch with its original vision.

These questions about "selling out" are indeed subjective, and people on both sides of the arguments will continue to debate them as they have for decades. One key element of the festival, however, has undergone clear and substantial changes over the past few years: distribution. The most disruptive recent trend at the festival is the rise of two players who grew out of massive, billion dollar companies to break into film and TV, and are now venturing into independent distribution and production. Streaming giants Netflix and Amazon were far and away the most active buyers at the 2017 festival, both in terms of the number of films purchased and the amount of money spent on acquisitions. According to Slashfilm, a blog that keeps a yearly record of all of the films sold at each edition of the festival, Netflix picked up at least partial distribution rights to 10 films.<sup>6</sup> The streaming service led all distributors -- the next most active buyer, Amazon, acquired only five films.<sup>7</sup> These figures are even more astounding given Netflix and Amazon's history of activity at Sundance.

In 2015, Amazon did not acquire a single film at Sundance, while Netflix tested the waters with its first film, *Hot Girls Wanted*. Just one year later, Netflix and Amazon shared the title of most active buyer at the festival, with each company picking up seven

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<sup>6</sup> Sciretta, Peter. "Movies Sold at Sundance 2017." *Slashfilm*. N.p., 07 Feb. 2017. Web.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

films.<sup>8</sup> Most of the films that Netflix acquired were not released in theaters, so it is difficult to gauge the “success” of these films since the company does not release ratings for any of their streaming media -- even content that the company produced itself. Amazon, on the other hand, has released many of their acquisitions in theaters, and as a result they have experienced a great deal of concrete critical and commercial success. *Manchester by the Sea*, which at \$10 million was Amazon’s biggest buy at the 2016 festival, was nominated for 6 Academy Awards, winning for Best Actor (Casey Affleck) and Best Original Screenplay (Kenneth Lonergan).<sup>9</sup> While Netflix received its fifth Oscar nomination for Best Documentary at the 89th Oscars, *Manchester by the Sea* led Amazon to become the first streaming service to be nominated for Best Picture.<sup>10</sup>

At Sundance 2017, Netflix was back with a vengeance. Amazon’s *Manchester* won Best Actor at the Golden Globes just a few weeks before the festival, and the announcement for Oscar nominees took place midway through the festival. There was certainly chatter surrounding what Amazon’s award season success may mean at Sundance, but Netflix successfully managed to direct all media attention to themselves. They struck quickly by acquiring the first film out of the festival, the documentary *Casting JonBenet*, roughly three weeks before the festival opened.<sup>11</sup> Sustaining this momentum, Netflix released the trailer for the Robert Redford-starring *The Discovery* the day before the festival began. Another original Netflix film, the morbidly funny *I Don’t Feel at Home in This World Anymore*, bookended the festival by kicking off the U.S.

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<sup>8</sup> Sciretta, Peter. "Movies Sold At Sundance 2016." *Slashfilm*. N.p., 22 Feb. 2016. Web.

<sup>9</sup> "Manchester by the Sea Awards." *IMDb*. IMDb.com, n.d. Web. 07 Mar. 2017.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Galuppo, Mia. "First Sundance 2017 Acquisition: Netflix Takes Doc 'Casting JonBenet'" *The Hollywood Reporter*. N.p., 04 Jan. 2017. Web. 14 Apr. 2017.

Dramatic competition on the first night of the festival and ultimately taking home the Grand Jury prize on the final night. Along with these two remarkable accomplishments, Netflix remained in the headlines by making the most lucrative deal at the festival with potential Oscar-contender *Mudbound*, and by acquiring several other high-profile features.<sup>12</sup>

On the surface, the 2017 edition of Sundance hardly resembles the festival that brought Kevin Smith and Steven Soderbergh to the forefront of the American independent cinema. 20 years ago, it would have seemed unthinkable for Sundance to fall into the lap of one of two of the most popular consumer brands in the country. Before the establishment of their streaming services in 2011, these companies dealt primarily in mail order goods -- Netflix with DVD's, and Amazon with everything else. Less than six years passed before the Leichtman Research Group reported that more American households have a Netflix subscription than have a DVR.<sup>13</sup> Just as they have grown into legitimate competitors with cable and premium television, Netflix and Amazon are rivaling longtime indie power players such as Fox Searchlight or Sony Pictures Classics just as quickly as they arrived on the scene. Many will condemn these billion-dollar companies for corrupting the spirit of Sundance, driving up the prices of films at the festival, and ultimately crowding out smaller independent distribution companies that focus entirely on film.<sup>14</sup> Although the data indicates that there is some truth to the latter claim, Sundance ultimately remains true to its vision of supporting and promoting the best of

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<sup>12</sup> Sciretta, Peter. "Movies Sold at Sundance 2017."

<sup>13</sup> Spangler, Todd. "More U.S. Households Now Have Netflix Than a DVR." *Variety*. N.p., 06 Mar. 2017. Web.

<sup>14</sup> Hamedy, Saba. "Amazon and Netflix are Spending Money like Drunken Sailors at Sundance." *Mashable*. Mashable, 28 Jan. 2017. Web.

American independent film. Netflix and Amazon, with their unique blends of theatrical and streaming releasing are simply adding a new dimension to the festival in response to the changing entertainment landscape.

It is not Sundance's job to respond to the abundant present changes in production, distribution, and consumption, but it is indeed Sundance's job to support the forward-thinking, marginal, underground, artists who themselves are adapting to this changing environment. Therefore, so long as Sundance continues to do so, the differences that set the 2017 festival apart from the days of *Clerks* and *Sex, Lies, and Videotape* should be welcomed and embraced by artists, attendees, distributors, and critics alike. In 2003, Kenneth Turan wrote that "for all this carping and borderline sniveling, for all the people who insist Sundance has become a twin to Los Angeles, the core feeling of the festival, its fundamental nature, has remained surprisingly unchanged albeit a bit harder to find under all the accoutrements of success," and his assessment is just as accurate in 2017 as it was then.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Turan, p. 44.

## **The Sundance Institute**

The organization responsible for preserving and enriching the Sundance community (and perhaps by extension the American independent cinema as a whole) is The Sundance Institute, a nonprofit group whose work extends far beyond putting on the festival each year. Through its various programs, labs, and public exhibition events, the institute works to realize its vision, which is as follows:

We believe that a story driven by an individual, authentic voice can awaken new ideas that have the power to delight and entertain, push creative boundaries, spark new levels of empathy and understanding, and even lead to social change. We support independent storytellers and advance the impact of their work in the world.<sup>16</sup>

The Institute pursues this vision with a mantra that reflects the organization's core efforts, broken down into three stages: "The story within the artist ignites his/her work and is shared with audiences awakening new ideas with the power to transform culture."<sup>17</sup>

First, the institute seeks to realize the artist's passion and stories, and it does so by offering various forms of support. One of the most crippling disadvantages that independent artists face is a lack of funds; therefore, one of the most vital forms of support that the Sundance Institute provides is grants. Some of these grants include the Alfred P. Sloan Commissioning Grant & Fellowship, given to filmmakers telling stories that feature scientific themes grounded in reality, along with the Documentary Fund,

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<sup>16</sup> "Annual Report Fiscal Year 2016." The Sundance Institute, p. 6.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p. 7.

which focuses in particular on films with “higher stakes and contemporary relevance.”<sup>18</sup>

In 2016 alone, The Sundance Institute granted over \$1 million to the production and development of documentary films, including festival and theatrical hits such as  *Casting JonBenet*  and  *I Am Not Your Negro* .<sup>19</sup>

Along with grants, the Institute provides direct support to qualifying artists through mentorship and advisory panels. When 2017 festival alum Jeremy Jasper ( *Patti Cake\$* ) earned an invitation to the Sundance Writing Lab, little did he know that his personal advisor would be the same man who drove Jasper to become a filmmaker in the first place -- Quentin Tarantino.<sup>20</sup> With Tarantino’s guidance and the Institute’s support, Jasper turned a rough cut of his first-ever screenplay into a smash hit at the 2017 festival, eventually earning a \$9.5 million distribution deal from Fox Searchlight.<sup>21</sup>

The Sundance Labs are competitive, residential programs that develop individual storytelling through community experience. In fact, these programs predate the Sundance Film Festival as we know it today, dating back to their founding by Robert Redford in 1981.<sup>22</sup> They include the Screenwriters Lab, Music and Sound Design Labs, the Native Filmmaker Lab Fellowship for Native American and Indigenous Artists, and the Episodic Story Lab. Many of these programs, such as the Screenwriters Lab, the Asian/American Feature Film Fellowship, and the Latino Feature Film Fellowship are only offered to filmmakers working on their first or second feature, and the FilmTwo Initiative is

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<sup>18</sup> "Documentary Film."  *Documentary Film | Sundance Institute* . The Sundance Institute, n.d. Web. 14 Apr. 2017.

<sup>19</sup>  *Ibid* .

<sup>20</sup> O’Falt, Chris. "How ‘Patti Cake\$’ Director Jeremy Jasper Went from Indie Rocker to Breakout Filmmaker - Sundance 2017."  *IndieWire* . N.p., 24 Jan. 2017. Web.

<sup>21</sup> Setoodeh, Ramin, and Brent Lang. "Sundance: Fox Searchlight Lands ‘Patti Cake\$’ in \$9.5 Million Deal."  *Variety* . N.p., 25 Jan. 2017.

<sup>22</sup> "Feature Film."  *Feature Film | Sundance Institute* . The Sundance Institute, n.d. Web. 14 Apr. 2017.

directed specifically at those producing their sophomore efforts.<sup>23</sup> Along with the residential programs and fellowship, the Institute offers day labs and workshops for composers, alternative media artists in the New Frontier program, and short filmmakers. These are just a few of the countless programs that the Institute offers, and the number will only continue to grow as underrepresented communities and alternative storytelling technologies emerge and flourish in the world of film.

The second stage of the Institute's support ensures that independent artists' stories are "shared with audiences awakening new ideas."<sup>24</sup> Although developing a film from an idea to a completed work is a monumental and costly task, it is only half the battle in the filmmaker's journey. The rise of YouTube, Vimeo, and social media has made it easier than ever for artists to put their work in a public space, but it remains just as difficult as ever for these artists to actually reach audiences and get people to see their films. The Sundance Film Festival is the Institute's best-known and most influential mechanism for getting artists' work seen: roughly 45,000 attendees flock to Park City to watch and potentially buy these films each year.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, for filmmakers who do indeed land distribution deals, many more will see their work in theatres or online.

The success of January's festival in Park City has spawned smaller additional iterations of the Sundance Film Festival around the world. The first international edition of the festival took place in London in 2012, and in 2014 Sundance began bringing a yearly program of features, shorts, and panels to Hong Kong. Sundance brings highlights from the Park City festival to London and Hong Kong in order to facilitate and grow the

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<sup>23</sup> "Feature Film."

<sup>24</sup> "Annual Report Fiscal Year 2016." p. 8.

<sup>25</sup> "33 Years of Sundance Film Festival." *Festival History*. The Sundance Institute, n.d. Web. 14 Apr. 2017.

local independent film scenes in these areas; however, the main goal of expanding outside of the United States was to give independent American filmmakers visibility and exposure on a global scale. Redford has stated that these international festivals will “deliver the very best in current American independent cinema, to introduce the artists responsible for it, and in essence help build a picture of our country that is broadly reflective of the diversity of voices not always seen in our cultural exports.”<sup>26</sup>

The third point that Redford mentions is indicative of the Sundance Institute’s third and final means of achieving its vision: “awakening new ideas with the power to transform culture.”<sup>27</sup> Although this goal does indeed apply to the arts themselves, given the Institute’s efforts to promote new technologies and media forms through the New Frontier initiative, it is a clear reference to the Sundance Institute’s social and political values. Independent film and storytelling have the power to “create empathy, challenge our beliefs, deepen our understanding,” and ultimately, “lead to social change.”<sup>28</sup> Independent cinemas all around the world act as spaces for artistic, social, and political discourses to work together in accomplishing their collective goals. While many independent narrative features and documentaries often address social and political issues explicitly, the act of independent filmmaking in itself can be radically political, especially with the support of the indie community.

The national new waves of cinema of the 20th century such as the French New Wave, New German Cinema, Korean New Wave, and even the New Hollywood all began as communities of filmmakers who had something to say about their nation’s

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<sup>26</sup> McClintock, Pamela. "Sundance London Film Fest to Kick Off in 2012." *The Hollywood Reporter*. N.p., 15 Mar. 2011. Web. 04 Mar. 2017.

<sup>27</sup> “Annual Report Fiscal Year 2016.” p. 8.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, p. 8.



political and social structures. The Sundance Institute is doing something similar in that it is fostering a national community of American filmmakers from all kinds of diverse backgrounds who can use the institute and their peers' resources and support to make a difference in the world.

Recent Sundance films have demonstrated incredible potential to lead to real, tangible change. In her book *The \$11 Billion Year*, film critic and IndieWire editor Anne Thompson discusses *The Invisible War*, an official selection of the 2012 Sundance festival that exposes cases of rape in the U.S. military.<sup>29</sup> After the film's success at Sundance, the filmmakers began a large-scale awareness campaign, particularly targeting Washington D.C. institutions and policymakers. Eventually, Defense Secretary Leon Panetta saw the film, then soon after laid out organizational and bureaucratic changes to combat sexual assault and ensure that the perpetrators are properly prosecuted. *The Invisible War* was discussed at the White House Correspondents' Dinner, and in hearings between several House committees.<sup>30</sup> According to director Kirby Dick, there was no backlash from the military, and the film was seen as an effective tool with which they could make change. Thompson recognizes the inherent change-making potential in cinema, writing that "seeing the film, in other words, hits you in the gut in a way that reading clinical reports could not."<sup>31</sup> Sundance films have also had significant impact in the private sector, most notably the 2013 selection *Blackfish*, a micro-budget documentary centered around a SeaWorld orca that killed a trainer, thus exposing the horrors of orca confinement. SeaWorld's visitor numbers and revenue took a nosedive

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<sup>29</sup> Thompson, Anne. *The \$11 Billion Year: From Sundance to the Oscars, an Inside Look at the Changing Hollywood System*. New York: HarperCollins, 2014. Print. p. 34.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, p. 34.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*.

following the film's premiere and acquisition by CNN, and soon after, the theme park put an end to its orca programs.<sup>32</sup> The social and political progress that *The Invisible War* and *Blackfish* have inspired is a testament to the influence of the American independent cinema and the Sundance Institute's central role in bringing these change-making films to the world.

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<sup>32</sup> O'Hara, Helen. "SeaWorld vs Blackfish: the film that introduced the world to the plight of Tilikum." *The Telegraph*. Telegraph Media Group, 06 Jan. 2017. Web. 12 Apr. 2017.

## The Rise of Sundance and Parallels to the Present

In 1978, Sterling Van Wagenen, a cousin of Robert Redford's, founded the Utah/U.S. Film Festival, dedicated to the promotion of new regional filmmaking and the preservation of classic American film of the past. Only 25 films were submitted to the small inaugural festival, and the number of entries dropped to 21 in 1979.<sup>33</sup> Hoping to attract a larger (and wealthier) audience with the prospect of skiing, the festival's organizers changed its location to the humble, charming former mining town of Park City. This change in scenery proved to be a defining moment for the festival's legacy, but the success that Sundance found in Park City did not arrive instantly. In his book *Down and Dirty Pictures: Miramax, Sundance, and the Rise of Independent Film*, film critic and historian Peter Biskind described the festival as "a sleepy gathering . . . no agents showed up, few publicists, and fewer press."<sup>34</sup> Biskind blames the festival's lack of a strong identity for a series of mediocre, watered-down programs. An uninspired focus on regionalism yielded slates of films that "were content-driven, not director-driven," and the term "art-house" was a sort of backhanded compliment, designating films that were neither conventionally entertaining nor commercially viable.<sup>35</sup>

Robert Redford's Sundance Institute assumed control of the Utah/U.S. Film Festival in 1985, but according to Biskind, Van Wagenen and Redford's unreliable and inconsistent leadership widened the gap between the Hollywood elite and indie figures

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<sup>33</sup> Jacobson, Brooke. "Regional Film: A Strategic Discourse in the Global Marketplace." *Journal of Film and Video* 43.4 (1991): 18-32. *Jstor*. Web.

<sup>34</sup> Biskind, Peter. *Down and Dirty Pictures: Miramax, Sundance, and the Rise of Independent Film*. London: Bloomsbury, 2007. Print. p. 28-29.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, p. 37.

involved in the institute and the festival.<sup>36</sup> Towards the end of the 1988 festival, Redford conceded that Sundance was “a place with no luck, where the birds refuse to nest, where there is no local support beyond lip service,” but only one year later the festival began to mount a massive comeback.<sup>37</sup> *Sex, Lies, and Videotape*, the first feature from director Steven Soderbergh, sent a shockwave through the American independent cinema with its breakaway success at Sundance, Cannes, and in movie theaters throughout the world. The film captured a deeply personal sort of Generation X zeitgeist, and as acclaim for the film spread like wildfire, Sundance was able to ride on Soderbergh’s coattails after providing the initial momentum for his small debut film.<sup>38</sup>

As it began to make names out of Steven Soderbergh, Kevin Smith, and Quentin Tarantino, Sundance developed a distinct identity both for itself and for the American independent cinema as a whole. In her book *Indie Inc.*, University of Texas Professor Alisa Perren credits Sundance’s newfound identity and relevance to a greater focus on the “cinema of cool” that the aforementioned auteurs propagated, compared to the 1980’s “cinema of quality” filmmakers such as Jim Jarmusch or John Sayles.<sup>39</sup> In order to capitalize upon and continue the success of the new Sundance-driven indie scene, new players on the business end began making their way into the fold. The 1990’s gave rise to “independent” specialty distribution subsidiaries such as Sony Pictures Classics and 20th Century Fox, both of which are still active in the Sundance scene albeit less so compared to previous decades.

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<sup>36</sup> Biskind, p. 37.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, p. 43.

<sup>39</sup> Perren, Alisa. *Indie, Inc.: Miramax and the transformation of Hollywood in the 1990s*. Austin, TX: U of Texas Press, 2013. Print.

One truly independent company, Miramax, managed to capture the same sort of zeitgeist and relevance within the American independent cinema as Sundance. Founded by Harvey and Bob Weinstein, Miramax initially specialized in international concert films, erotica, and other films for which domestic distribution came at a low price tag. They became increasingly active in the American independent film market throughout the 1980's, and with *Sex, Lies, and Videotape* they became both the premier specialty distributor and the most exciting player at Sundance. Miramax continued their success streak throughout the 1990's with the acquisition of *Clerks*, which appeared at 1994's Sundance Film Festival, along with the production of *Pulp Fiction* (1994) and Best Picture winner *Shakespeare in Love* (1998).

While the Weinstein brothers remain a ubiquitous presence at Sundance, Miramax has faded into the periphery of American cinema. In 1993 Disney acquired Miramax, but the Weinsteins retained a great deal of control over the company and continued to spend millions of dollars on controversial, cutting-edge films such as *Kids* and *Priest*.<sup>40 41</sup> It was clear from early on in their relationship that the complex dynamic between the cutthroat, maverick Weinsteins' vision and the greater economic and cultural interests of Miramax's holding company was going to get messy. This conflict came to a head in 2004, when Miramax and Disney clashed over their distribution strategy for Michael Moore's controversial documentary *Fahrenheit 9/11*. Perren refers to this battle as the straw that broke the camel's back, after "a range of personal, financial, and creative"

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<sup>40</sup> Ebert, Roger. "Interview with Harmony Korine | Interviews | Roger Ebert." *RogerEbert.com*. N.p., 4 June 1995. Web.

<sup>41</sup> Errico, Marcus. "Miramax, Disney Dogged by Dogma." *E! Online*. E! News, 8 Apr. 1999. Web. 25 Mar. 2017.

tensions that had been brewing for quite some time.<sup>42</sup> The Weinsteins grew Miramax from a tiny specialty distributor to one of the most disruptive and hawkish players in the indie scene, and as Disney CEO Michael Eisner faced pressure from shareholders to scale back the subsidiary's increasingly gargantuan budget, the Weinsteins began making their exit.<sup>43</sup> They left to form The Weinstein Company in 2005, which has been responsible for massive "indie" films such as *Django Unchained* (2012) and *Silver Linings Playbook* (2012), along with smaller Sundance hits including *It Follows* (2014), *The One I Love* (2014), and *20 Feet from Stardom* (2013).

Throughout the 1990's and early 2000's, Miramax was one of the most exciting and impactful players not only in the American independent scene, but in the mainstream Hollywood and international film worlds as well. This period was also one of increasing prestige for Sundance, and while the festival and Miramax nurtured each other throughout this time of growth, the former has drifted into the margins of independent cinema after shuffling through parent companies since 2010. Naturally, Miramax's rapid rise to indie and eventually mainstream prominence may seem analogous to the disruptive paths that Amazon and Netflix have taken. In reality, the nature of Miramax's trajectory reflects that of an independent filmmaker or film. It was a small startup-esque entity seeking to distinguish itself (and make up for a lack of experience) through cutting edge artistic or business prowess, then ultimately secure financial and public awareness backing through a larger, more established firm.

Netflix and Amazon, on the other hand, *are* the large, financially independent companies that aim to acquire, rather than become acquired. "Large" and "financially

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<sup>42</sup> Perren, p. 228.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, p. 229.

independent” are gross understatements of these companies’ monolithic statuses -- Amazon is the single largest internet company in the world based on revenue and market capitalization, and Netflix is ranked 9th, while being the only company in the top 25 that focuses primarily on entertainment.<sup>44</sup> What sets Miramax apart from Netflix and Amazon is that the latter two firms do not “need” Sundance in any way, and the converse applies just as well. At the end of the day, the streaming giants could theoretically remove their acquisition, distribution, perhaps even their original production divisions, and still remain global leaders in the fields of streaming or online retail.

I spoke with writer-director Andrew Ahn about what sets Netflix and Amazon apart in the independent film world, and he argues that these firms’ tremendous resources and prestige enabled them to enter the Sundance festival market, capitalize upon it, and ultimately disrupt the business of American indie film so astoundingly quickly. He refers to their aggressive ambitions in acquisition as a sort of “old school throwback,” but on the other hand their vast resources allow them previously unseen levels of agility, and “that kind of flexibility to grow or adapt is something that a lot of studios are struggling with.”<sup>45</sup> He believes their presence should not and must not deter independent filmmakers from making the passionate, personal films that they genuinely want to make. It can be massively beneficial to individual filmmakers and the indie community as a whole if their films happen to be “in line with that [Netflix and Amazon] are doing at the right time . . . because they’re on everybody’s laptops and TV’s at home.”<sup>46</sup> However, a diversified monolithic corporation could potentially shift its focus away from independent cinema

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<sup>44</sup> "The 25 Largest Internet Companies In The World." *WorldAtlas*. N.p., 13 Feb. 2017. Web. 25 Mar. 2017.

<sup>45</sup> Ahn, Andrew. Personal interview. 20 Feb. 2017.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

just as quickly as it entered the scene. With this volatility in mind, Ahn concludes that “as an independent filmmaker, yes you have to be aware of what’s going on in the industry, but your main priority has to be making work that fulfills you and is meaningful, and so I think a lot of the independent film community is going to continue with that.”<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Ahn.



## 2017 Festival: Sections and Selections

Every film festival is defined first and foremost by the films exhibited therein; therefore, the application and selection processes must reflect and facilitate the vision and goals of the festival. Just as the festival's attendance, investment, and prestige have scaled upwards over the years, these two key formative processes have done the same. The number of submissions that the festival programming team received and reviewed for the 2017 festival stands at a staggering 13,053; 4,068 features and 8,985 shorts.<sup>48</sup> In 1995, Sundance received 375 feature film submissions, 1,650 in 2000, and 3,048 in 2006.<sup>49</sup> Over the past five years the feature and short film submissions have settled around the low 4,000's and mid-8,000's, but the overall number of submissions continued to grow as the festival introduced new categories such as Episodic Content and Virtual Reality projects. More than 200 projects were chosen for the 2017 festival in total, consisting of "118-125 Feature Films, 60-80 Short Films, 5-10 Episodic projects, and 20-40 Virtual Reality projects."<sup>50</sup>

The growing number of submitted and accepted films has given rise to an increase in categories, spanning a wide range of genres and themes. In 2017, there were 15 programs within the festival, six of which were in competition and nine out of competition. The competition programs are not only the most prestigious sections for

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<sup>48</sup> "33 Years of Sundance Film Festival."

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> "Sundance Film Festival Submission FAQ." The Sundance Institute, n.d. Web.

exhibition -- they also represent the “core” of each year’s festival.<sup>51</sup> Filmmakers are unable to submit their projects to the competition programs, or any programs for that matter; therefore, Sundance’s festival programming team is tasked with determining what they want the “core” of the festival to be. Each year, the American independent cinema operates in a different context based on audience consumption, mainstream cinema, technology, politics, and various other inputs. All of these factors in turn determine the field of projects submitted to the Sundance staff, who then produce their idea of a cross section of the American cinema based on these submissions.

Little light is shed on this consequential process beyond the vague, buzzword-filled descriptions of each of the festival’s sections. The U.S. Dramatic competition gives “a first look at groundbreaking new voices in American independent film, guaranteed to leave a lasting impact on the next generation of cinema,” and films in the U.S. Documentary competition “illuminate the ideas, people, and events that shape the present day.”<sup>52</sup> Films exhibited in the World Cinema Dramatic competition “offer fresh perspectives and innovative styles . . . as a way to honor the independent spirit in filmmakers everywhere,” while World Cinema Documentary competition films “poignantly examine issues that range from the personal to the universal.”<sup>53</sup> The two U.S. competitions each feature 16 films whereas the World competitions feature 12, indicating greater prestige and priority for American filmmaking despite Sundance’s growing international focus.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> “Sundance Film Festival Submission FAQ.”

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

Awards granted to films in these sections are determined by both an audience voting tally and a Grand Jury of Sundance alumni ranging from elite A-listers to young up and comers with little to no name recognition. One category that is technically in competition, however, lacks a Grand Jury and remains on the periphery of the prestigious main competition categories. This section, known as NEXT, exhibits 8-10 “pure, bold works distinguished by an innovative approach to storytelling . . . they embody the spirit of indie filmmaking.” NEXT films must be world premieres, and U.S.-based financiers must have been responsible for at least half of each film’s funding. The NEXT Audience Award is granted to one film in the category at the end of the festival, and this is the only award reserved for this section. This section also shares its name with Sundance’s small but growing auxiliary film and music festival that takes place in Los Angeles every summer.

Few films that premiere in the NEXT section cross over into the mainstream; however, many indie filmmakers who are garnering crossover appeal in 2017 such as Alex Ross Perry, Matt Stone, Mike Birbiglia, and Zal Batmanglij jump-started their careers with NEXT films. According to the Sundance website, the festival team is so confident in the NEXT category that they believe it “shapes the next wave in American cinema.”<sup>55</sup> Only time will tell if the filmmakers who premiered films in NEXT truly have such influence on American cinema overall, but within the scope of independent cinema, the career trajectories of the aforementioned NEXT alumni indicate at least some level of truth to Sundance’s tastefully arrogant claim.

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<sup>55</sup> “Sundance Film Festival Submission FAQ.”

Whereas films appearing in competition must be making their world premiere at Sundance, many of the out-of-competition sections allow films that have screened at other festivals. One section in particular, Spotlight, “is a tribute to the cinema [the Sundance programmers] love . . . regardless of where these impressive films have played throughout the world.”<sup>56</sup> Spotlight films in the past have ranged from low-budget American films such as *Blue Ruin* (2013) and *Mud* (2012) to acclaimed international hits *The Lobster* (2015) and *Cemetery of Splendor* (2015). Films accepted into the Midnight section similarly may have played at up to two festivals prior to Sundance. Typically screening at their section’s namesake hour, Midnight films are “an eclectic mix of horror, sci-fi, over-the-top comedy, explicit animation, and bizarre stories that defy categorization.”<sup>57</sup> The out-of-competition field also includes categories for premieres that the Sundance programmers want to exhibit at the festival, but for whatever reason were not accepted into the competition programs. The Premieres and Documentary Premieres sections show 14-18 and 8-10 films, and although they lack the prestige of their in-competition counterparts, they remain exclusive as invite-only programs.

The Special Events section at the festival is a mixed bag of projects in terms of length, nation of origin, and platform for distribution or consumption. The vast majority of these projects, however, are episodic in nature and either set to air on or best fit for digital platforms such as Netflix, Amazon, Vimeo, or even YouTube. Projects from higher-profile producers such as Netflix, Amazon, Starz tend to get a whole theater all to themselves in order to exhibit the first two or three episodes in the series. This privilege is not extended to all accepted episodic projects as many are combined into a single bill

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<sup>56</sup> “Sundance Film Festival Submission FAQ.”

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

such as the Independent Pilot Showcase, the Midnight Episodic Showcase, the Docuseries Showcase, the Short Form Episodic Showcase, and 2017's Made in Cuba series.

Interestingly enough, Sundance's selection process has proven its impact upon the indie film community in part because of the films that get rejected from festival. The 2009 documentary *Official Rejection* follows independent filmmakers Paul Osborne and Scott Storm as they deal with the reality of getting rejected from 29 film festivals, including Sundance.<sup>58</sup> Storm and Osborne explore the politics, risks, and rewards associated with applying to a festival like Sundance, and although it chronicles just one film out of the tens of thousands that have gone through the Sundance application process, rejection is nonetheless a crucial element of film festivals and one that is rarely discussed in such detail. Furthermore, as Sundance continues to grow increasingly prestigious and competitive, more films will be rejected every year. Kevin Smith, who is interviewed in the film, draws a grim connection between Sundance's growth and the chances of finding success there as a truly independent filmmaker. He says that "suddenly you can't be the film from nowhere that just explodes . . . if we made *Clerks* today and submitted it to Sundance, I don't think it would get in, I really don't."<sup>59</sup>

This necessary evil that Sundance faces -- rejecting quality films -- has inadvertently led filmmakers to found additional independent festivals that piggyback on Sundance's prestige, including Dances with Films, Nodance, and Slumdance.<sup>60</sup> Slumdance, which initially bore the subtitle "Anarchy in Utah: The First Annual Guerilla

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<sup>58</sup> "REJECTIONS: Official Rejection Film Festival Submission Page ." Shut Up & Shoot Pictures, n.d. Web. 14 Apr. 2017.

<sup>59</sup> *Official Rejection* Film.

<sup>60</sup> Turan, p. 34.

International Film Festival,” is the best known and most successful of these festivals founded upon rejection.<sup>61</sup> Running at the same time and place as Sundance, Slamdance has grown from a fledgling parasite (according to Robert Redford)<sup>62</sup> to a legitimate indie film powerhouse that exemplifies the mantra “By Filmmakers For Filmmakers.”<sup>63</sup> Slamdance alumni include eventual Sundance darlings Jared Hess and Benh Zeitlin, along with mainstream crossovers such as Lena Dunham and Christopher Nolan. Critically acclaimed films such as *The King of Kong: A Fistful of Quarters* (2007), *Mad Hot Ballroom* (2005) and *Paranormal Activity* (2007) secured major distribution deals after their Slamdance premieres, thus enabling their cult and crossover potential.<sup>64</sup> According to Kenneth Turan, these festivals are proof that “Sundance has become more than just the mother ship for the American independent movement, more than the premier showcase for films that don’t march to Hollywood’s drum.”<sup>65</sup> Even though Sundance rejects claim that the festival is no longer welcoming of first-time directors with minimal capital or connections, the fact that these peripheral festivals have emerged and thrived indicates Sundance’s creative influence and value in the indie community.

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<sup>61</sup> Turan, p. 33.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> "About - Slamdance." Slamdance, Inc., n.d. Web. 14 Apr. 2017.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Turan, p. 34-35.

## The Films: Opening Night

On Thursday, January 19th, the 2017 edition of the Sundance Film Festival officially kicked off. The opening night programming was limited, with only 7 feature films screened in total. Excluding the final day of the festival, in which the award winners are shown, every day features between 40 and 50 films across Park City's 13 screens.<sup>66</sup> The few films that premiere on the first Thursday get a whole night's worth of buzz and media coverage to themselves, and this focused attention gives these films the opportunity to make their marks on the festival before getting crowded out by the 100 or so films yet to screen. The opening films throughout the past decade could generally be considered safe bets; essentially, they consist of either high-profile documentaries or crowd-pleasing features from Sundance Institute-affiliated artists. Many of these films went on to win awards at the festival and beyond. 2012's *Searching for Sugar Man* won the Academy Award for Best Documentary, 2014's *Whiplash* earned an Academy Award nomination for Best Picture and won in three other categories, and 2015's *What Happened Miss Simone* was nominated for 6 Primetime Emmy's, winning the award for Outstanding Documentary or Nonfiction Special.

2017's opening night debuted four films in competition -- one in each main category -- along with one Documentary Premiere, one NEXT film, and one film that began at 8:30 PM but nevertheless opened the Midnight category. The Eccles Theater at Park City High School, the biggest and perhaps most prestigious and central venue at the

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<sup>66</sup> "Schedule | Sundance Institute." *Sundance Institute*. N.p., n.d. Web. 14 Apr. 2017.

festival, screened the U.S. Documentary Premiere *An Inconvenient Sequel: Truth to Power*, along with *I Don't Feel at Home in this World Anymore*, which opened up the U.S. Dramatic competition. The Egyptian Theatre, a small yet historic theater integral to both the film festival and Park City's arts and culture year round, screened the two world competition openers: Singaporean/Thai drama *Pop Aye*, and UK documentary *The Workers Cup*. The U.S. Documentary competition opened with *Whose Streets?* while the NEXT and Midnight sections opened with *Dayveon* and *The Little Hours*.

Of the seven aforementioned films, five were made by first-time directors, and this is both an impressive and encouraging figure for the independent film community. The Sundance programming team felt so confident in these unknown and inexperienced filmmakers that they wanted them to open and consequently define the festival. This is not to say that these films are the best films in each category, but they encapsulate the spirit of independent filmmaking that the Sundance Institute aims to foster, coupled with the cultural zeitgeist of 2017. Sundance 2017's opening films, for better or for worse, accurately present a cross section of this year's slate of films and the social and political questions that the festival and its films tackle.

*Whose Streets?* is the first film from St. Louis-based Damon Davis and South Central Los Angeles native Sabaah Folayan, and it was developed with the help of the Sundance Institute's Documentary Edit and Story Lab, and Music and Sound Design Lab.<sup>67</sup> *Whose Streets?* examines the context and aftermath of Michael Brown's murder in 2014. This tragedy prompted protests throughout the city of Ferguson that eventually escalated into violent civil unrest with constant attention from the media. Davis and

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<sup>67</sup> O'Falt, Chris. "How These 20 Sundance Festival Films Got Their Start in the Sundance Labs." *IndieWire*. N.p., 22 Jan. 2017. Web. 11 Apr. 2017.



Folayan took to the streets to immerse themselves in and ultimately tell the stories of the activists who risked everything to fight against police brutality and racism. At a 2015 panel on privilege and filmmaking, Folayan spoke about the perspective that she and Davis can offer to the world with their film. “When stories of communities are told by outsiders you are limited to how well you can tell that story,” she argues, “and so a lot of the information that we get is from the media . . . relying on iconic imagery and what’s going to build ratings.”<sup>68</sup> Magnolia Pictures purchased distribution rights to the film, and they are planning a summer release around the third anniversary of Michael Brown’s death.<sup>69</sup>

*Dayveon* tells the story of an African-American teenager who is torn between his faltering familial support and his intimidating yet alluring group of gang-affiliated friends. Amman Abbasi, a young Pakistani-American filmmaker, made his debut film with the help of Sundance alumni James Schamus and David Gordon Green, both of whom served as executive producers on *Dayveon*. Abbasi approached the film as a documentarian instead of a typical director of fiction by casting non-professional child actors and “work-shopping the story with [actual gang members] to find out why kids join gangs and learn firsthand from their stories.”<sup>70</sup> This approach echoes the sentiment of immersion and authenticity that Folayan spoke about with *Whose Streets?*, a quality that sets both the production and impact of independent films apart from their major

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<sup>68</sup> Sheldon, Elaine McMillion. "Why Do Only 'The Privileged' Make Films?" *The Huffington Post*. TheHuffingtonPost.com, 29 Sept. 2015. Web. 09 Apr. 2017.

<sup>69</sup> Lang, Brent. "Magnolia Buys Sundance Documentary 'Whose Streets?'" *Variety*. N.p., 07 Feb. 2017. Web. 09 Apr. 2017.

<sup>70</sup> Holisky, Adam, and Russell Goldman. "Amman Abbasi Debut Film 'Dayveon,' Fostered By Independent Film Vets, Completes Production – Exclusive." *IndieWire*. N.p., 27 July 2016. Web. 09 Apr. 2017.

Hollywood counterparts. FilmRise, a rising former startup that distributed controversial Sundance 2016 films *White Girl* and *The Greasy Strangler*, acquired the rights to *Dayveon*.<sup>71</sup>

World Documentary opener *The Workers Cup*, from first-time director Adam Sobel, chronicles a friendly but competitive soccer tournament between the various migrant workers tasked with constructing the stadiums in which Qatar will host the 2022 FIFA World Cup. By placing a riveting “triumph of the human spirit” story within the bleak context of human rights violations (and the media’s ignorance towards them), Sobel creates a thematic hybrid that is a perfect fit for Sundance. *Pop Aye*, the World Dramatic competition opener, is a comparatively tame film by Sundance’s standards, especially in this politically-charged year. Singaporean writer-director Kirsten Tan’s charming, down-to-earth debut follows a disillusioned Thai architect who reunites with his long-lost childhood pet elephant through a chance encounter. The film offers an element of warmth, something that was physically and metaphorically lacking among Sundance 2017’s more cynical and political films. Kino Lorber picked up *Pop Aye* after its premiere, and they will handle both theatrical and VOD distribution for the film.<sup>72</sup>

The highest-profile opening day release was undoubtedly *An Inconvenient Sequel*, Al Gore’s follow up to his 2006 documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*. The latter also premiered at Sundance, and it earned two Academy Awards on its way to becoming one of the highest-grossing American documentary films of all time.<sup>73</sup> *An Inconvenient*

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<sup>71</sup>Winfrey, Graham. "FilmRise acquires Amman Abbasi Debut ‘Dayveon’ — Sundance 2017." *IndieWire*. N.p., 25 Jan. 2017. Web. 09 Apr. 2017.

<sup>72</sup>McNary, Dave. "Sundance: Elephant Dramey ‘Pop Aye’ Sells for North America (EXCLUSIVE)." *Variety*. N.p., 23 Jan. 2017. Web. 10 Apr. 2017.

<sup>73</sup>"Documentary Movies at the Box Office." *Box Office Mojo*. N.p., n.d. Web. 14 Apr. 2017.

*Sequel* was directed by Jon Shenk and Bonni Cohen, an independent documentary filmmaking duo who made a splash at Sundance 2016 with *Audrie and Daisy*, a film about cyberbullying and sexual assault. Their involvement with the Sundance Institute dates back to a \$25,000 “Sustainability Award” for Shenk’s 2011 Maldives documentary *The Island President*, and the progression of their careers over the past few years in tandem with Sundance is an example of the way Sundance nurtures independent filmmakers and helps to expand their films’ visibility and impact.<sup>74</sup>

Beyond the presence of directors Shenk and Cohen, however, *An Inconvenient Sequel* bears few if any marks of an American independent film. It was produced by Participant Media, a company that has found success in small quality films such as *Spotlight* (2015) and *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* (2012), along with major blockbusters that “inspire and compel social change” such as *Lincoln* (2012), *Deepwater Horizon* (2016), and *Bridge of Spies* (2015).<sup>75</sup> Participant Media was founded by Jeff Skoll, who acted as a producer for *An Inconvenient Sequel* and appeared onstage for the film’s premiere and Q&A. Skoll, who is best known for turning eBay from a small start-up to a massive global corporation, is one of the wealthiest people in the world, with a net worth of roughly \$4.3 billion.<sup>76</sup> *An Inconvenient Sequel* also secured a distribution deal with Paramount Pictures before it premiered, and the Hollywood giant is planning a mid-summer theatrical release.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Brooks, Brian. "The Island President', 'Solar Mamas' Take \$25K Environmental Award: Sundance." *Deadline*. N.p., 22 Jan. 2012. Web. 14 Apr. 2017.

<sup>75</sup>"About Us." *Participant Media*. N.p., 24 Jan. 2017. Web. 14 Apr. 2017.

<sup>76</sup> "Jeffrey Skoll." *Forbes*. Forbes Magazine, 14 Apr. 2017. Web. 14 Apr. 2017.

<sup>77</sup> Pedersen, Erik. "'An Inconvenient Sequel' Gets Midsummer Release From Paramount." *Deadline*. N.p., 19 Jan. 2017. Web. 15 Apr. 2017.

The other big name associated with the film is Al Gore - the former Vice President turned popular climate advocate and public speaker. Gore's work in climate change advocacy has been undeniably successful, earning him a Nobel Peace Prize in 2007, and turning what was essentially a feature-length PowerPoint presentation into a global film phenomenon with *An Inconvenient Truth* - a stunning feat for any documentary. Unfortunately, *An Inconvenient Sequel* is as derivative as its title, consisting mostly of scenes of Gore lecturing audiences, teaching people how to properly educate others on climate change, and participating in various global summits and conferences with world leaders. This is a shame because the message is just as timely now as ever, but the delivery feels indulgent and redundant. The film is not an unnecessary sequel, just an underwhelming one. It is an understandably safe bet to open the festival with such a high-profile film, but it begs the question of how many documentaries of higher quality were rejected in favor of such a headline-friendly film.

While *An Inconvenient Truth* serves as an indicator of the questionable and problematic elements of Sundance's programming and planning, the film that graced the same screen directly after is an excellent case study in how the changes that Sundance is facing may be for the better. The violent and darkly comic *I Don't Feel at Home in this World Anymore* opened the U.S. Dramatic competition with a bang, and it rode that momentum all the way to the Grand Jury prize. This film is the debut from actor-turned-writer-director Macon Blair, however it is not the first time Sundance audiences have encountered him at the festival. Blair is best known for his collaborations with Jeremy Saulnier, a Slamdance and Sundance alum who has taken the independent film scene by storm with his uniquely American genre films. Saulnier's *Murder Party* won the

Audience Award for Best Feature at Slamdance 2007, and *Blue Ruin* and *Green Room* played in the Spotlight section of Sundance's 2014 and 2016 festivals.<sup>78</sup> All three films featured Blair in major roles, and *I Don't Feel at Home in this World Anymore* shows how Saulnier's writing and directing style clearly influenced Blair's. Blair continues Saulnier's focus on the bizarre and sinister underbelly lurking within small town middle class life in the Pacific Northwest, but instead of maintaining Saulnier's bleak approach to crime and violence, he infuses this darkness with a blend of gallows humor and slapstick physical comedy.

While Blair's script is indeed full of witty dialogue, the film's two leads are responsible for most of the film's comedy and energy. Melanie Lynskey perfectly plays Ruth, a dejected, frumpy nurse whose frustration with society and the world in general reach a boiling point when her house is burglarized. The police are of no help whatsoever to Ruth, and she turns to her equally awkward new friend Tony to team up with her and take matters into her own hands. Elijah Wood brings the scrawny, rat-tail sporting heavy metal fan to life, and his chemistry with Lynskey is undeniable. Interestingly enough, Wood and Lynskey both became internationally recognized figures after starring in acclaimed films from director Peter Jackson. Both are poster children for the modern era of Sundance: they still appear in the occasional mainstream film or television series, but now mostly work in the independent sphere. Lynskey appeared in the 2012 Sundance selection *Hello I Must Be Going* and she won the U.S. Dramatic Special Jury Award for Individual Performance in 2016 for *The Intervention*. Wood produced NEXT and Midnight selections *Bitch* (2017), *The Greasy Strangler* (2016), and *A Girl Walks Home*

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<sup>78</sup> Sahiouni, Mijoe. "7 Scares of Slamdance." *7 Scares of Slamdance - Slamdance*. N.p., n.d. Web. 15 Apr. 2017.

*Alone at Night* (2014), and he appeared in 2014 selection *Cooties* and 2012 selection *Celeste and Jesse Forever*.

The audience at *I Don't Feel at Home in this World Anymore's* premiere responded rapturously to the film's dry one-liners and shocking, Tarantino-esque violence; however, the moment in the film that elicited the most notable and fascinating response came before the film even began. After the lights went down and the introduction reel thanking all of Sundance's sponsors played, Netflix's name came across the screen accompanied by the company's ubiquitous *da-dum*. For many viewers, this one included, it was the first time that they had seen Netflix's vanity logo precede a feature film on the big screen, and it prompted a mix of confused chatter, laughter, and applause throughout the theater. The logo and sound may not be quite as iconic as Universal's globe or Paramount's mountain and stars, perhaps because it plays before each episode of Netflix's original series and many viewers prefer to skip the intros as they binge watch multiple episodes at a time. Nevertheless, it has become as synonymous with quality television as HBO's iconic black and white static and *ahhhh*. Expect plenty of coverage in social media and entertainment news on the surrealness of seeing the logo on the big screen as Netflix grows increasingly active in theatrical exhibition.

Since the film's premiere, Wood, Lynskey, and Blair have raved about the experience of working with Netflix. In an interview with Business Insider, Wood said that "there was a time in the '90s that this would have been a title that would have gone direct-to-video, which would have been some certain kind of death. But that's not the

case anymore . . . [Netflix] has created this equal opportunity for filmmakers.”<sup>79</sup> Netflix’s vast wealth and influence have given the company the freedom to invest in independent, international, cult, and genre projects that otherwise may never have seen the light of day. Their vast resources give them plenty of room for error, for if one Netflix Original film or series turns out to be a flop, it might only be a week before they release their next slate of original content.

Netflix’s financial and creative assets have also enabled them to take a laissez-faire approach to production that is drastically different from major Hollywood studio conventions - perhaps aside from the auteur-driven New Hollywood era. Wood says that Netflix is “making choices based on the filmmakers and material without really wanting to get in the way. They did not come to set. They saw our dailies and we were getting thumbs up. That’s a really remarkable thing for a first time director to have that kind of faith.”<sup>80</sup> Certainly not every independent filmmaker will be as lucky as Blair, to have Netflix love their script so much that they essentially cut a check with no strings attached. However, the fact that Netflix is investing their money in independent films at early stages in production is great news for the independent filmmaking community, and even better news for the viewers that support both Netflix and the indie community. Furthermore, since it takes just a few million dollars to make an independent film, even one with A-list stars, Netflix will most likely continue to do so with an increased rate of frequency. After all, according to chief content officer Ted Sarandos, Netflix plans to spend upwards of \$6 billion on original content in 2017, and they could completely

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<sup>79</sup> Guerrasio, Jason. "Sundance vets Elijah Wood and Melanie Lynskey explain why they seek out unique stories." *Business Insider*. Business Insider, 22 Jan. 2017. Web. 11 Apr. 2017.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

disrupt the businesses of independent production and finance -- just as they have done with distribution -- by investing even one percent of their budget in those fields.<sup>81</sup>

Although these opening day films are just a small sample from a large population, they serve as preliminary answers to the major questions surrounding Sundance's status as a major artistic and financial force within an independent community that seems to get less independent as time goes on. On one hand, high-profile and relevant but cinematically middling films such as *An Inconvenient Sequel* seem to find their way into Sundance's lineup each year. But on the other hand, the Sundance programming team still manages to accept plenty of first-time directors from all walks of life into the festival. *I Don't Feel at Home in this World Anymore* in particular proves that Netflix and by extension Amazon, despite their size, wealth, and prominence in the mainstream, should be welcomed into the world of independent film production, and not just distribution.

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<sup>81</sup> Jarvey, Natalie, and Lesley Goldberg. "Ted Sarandos on Netflix Programming Budget: 'It'll Go Up' From \$6 Billion." *The Hollywood Reporter*. N.p., 27 July 2016. Web. 15 Apr. 2017.



## The Films: Out of Competition and NEXT

Along with the competitions, Premieres categories, and left-field NEXT and Midnight sections, the 2017 edition of Sundance showed features in three slightly less prestigious categories: Kids, Spotlight, and Special Events. The Kids section is presented in tandem with the Utah Film Center, which runs a yearly film festival dedicated to showing films for children.<sup>82</sup> *The Mars Generation*, a documentary about young astronaut hopefuls' time at space camp, was executive produced by Ben Cotner, the director of original documentary programming at Netflix, and the documentary will get an exclusive release through his company.<sup>83</sup> The Kids section also yielded the U.S. premiere of *My Life as a Zucchini*, a French/Swiss claymation film that went on to earn an Academy Award nomination for Best Animated Feature Film.

Since all films appearing in the Spotlight category have screened at other festivals around the world, and because many are preparing for imminent theatrical releases, it almost feels unfair to call them official Sundance selections. However, many of these films fit the Sundance's thematic and stylistic molds so well that viewers indulge the Sundance programming staff in their favorite films from around the world anyways. *Colossal* is a charming, bizarre film that blends introspective character drama with *kaiju* monster action, producing uneven but often hilarious and emotional results. Director Nacho Vigalondo debuted his first film *Timecrimes* at Sundance in 2007, a low-budget

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<sup>82</sup> "2017 Sundance Film Festival "Kids" Section." *Utah Film Center*. N.p., n.d. Web. 18 Apr. 2017.

<sup>83</sup> Warren, Matt. "Film Independent Members Take Their Projects to Park City." *Film Independent*. N.p., 24 Jan. 2017. Web. 11 Apr. 2017.

Spanish-language thriller, and he made his 2017 Sundance selection with international stars Anne Hathaway, Dan Stevens, and Jason Sudeikis on a budget of \$15 million.<sup>84</sup>

Although the director and stars are no newcomers, *Colossal's* distribution company Neon is making their first venture with this film, which they acquired anonymously out of the Toronto International Film Festival.<sup>85</sup> Founders Tom Quinn and Tim League, formerly of RADiUS and Alamo Drafthouse, officially announced Neon just a few days before Sundance 2017 kicked off, and they quickly made their mark upon the festival by acquiring three notable films: *Beach Rats*, *Ingrid Goes West*, and *Roxanne Roxanne*.<sup>86 87</sup> Given Netflix and Amazon's recent entries into the Sundance buying pool, it should be very difficult for a new entertainment startup to have a shot at making any real impact at Sundance. Still, somehow, Neon managed to scoop up three well-received films at the festival, and although quantity is not a definite indicator of success, they acquired more films than established distributors Magnolia, Focus Features, and Fox Searchlight.<sup>88</sup> Other major films screened in the Spotlight section include coming of age/cannibal horror film *Raw*, which was acquired by Focus World after its premiere at Cannes, and *Frantz*, a French black and white drama that was bought by Music Box Films out of Venice.<sup>89 90</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Brooks, Brian. "Anne Hathaway & Jason Sudeikis Star In Genre-Defying 'Colossal' From Newcomer Neon – Specialty B.O. Preview." *Deadline*. N.p., 06 Apr. 2017. Web. 15 Apr. 2017.

<sup>85</sup> Fleming, Mike, Jr. "Tom Quinn & Tim League Launch Distribution Shingle Neon For Sundance." *Deadline*. N.p., 13 Jan. 2017. Web. 11 Apr. 2017.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> Sciretta, Peter. "Movies Sold at Sundance 2017."

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> Evry, Max. "French Cannibalism Thriller Raw Acquired by Focus World." *ComingSoon.net*. N.p., 05 July 2016. Web. 13 Apr. 2017.

<sup>90</sup> Keslassy, Elsa. "Music Box Films Nabs Venice Competition Movie 'Frantz'" *Variety*. N.p., 02 Sept. 2016. Web. 13 Apr. 2017.

One of the most intriguing categories at Sundance 2017 was the Special Events section - both in terms of the purpose of the category itself and the content screened therein. The Special Events section consisted almost entirely of short-form episodic material in 2017, which begs the question as to why it is not simply known as the Television or Streaming Video section. Although the language surrounding network television, premium cable, and Netflix and Amazon's original content grows increasingly unclear as time passes, the Special Events section makes it absolutely clear that Sundance is getting ready to embrace this episodic content as they have with features, documentaries, and standalone shorts. Sundance's openness towards this new media should hardly come as a surprise, given the recent rise in platforms for consumption, diversity of genres and styles to fit varying tastes, the quantity of content, and the quality of the material that makes up this so-called "Golden Age of Television."

If Sundance wants to remain at the forefront of the American independent cinema, then it should be praised for incorporating episodic content under the umbrella of cinema; however, a quick glance at 2017's Special Events slate reveals an imperfect approach to uniting the independent film and television worlds. On one hand, this section had several showcases of independent and underground projects, such as the Independent Pilot Showcase (which sold out the Egyptian Theater and left a hundred or so waitlisters in the cold), the Midnight Episodic Showcase, and the Made in Cuba series, which is the culmination of a new Sundance Institute-led "multifaceted program in Havana to support artists working across several disciplines."<sup>91</sup> On the other hand, the rest of the Special Events section indicate that Sundance 2017's efforts to incorporate episodic content into

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<sup>91</sup> "Made in Cuba." *Made-in-cuba / Sundance Institute*. N.p., n.d. Web. 15 Apr. 2017.

the American independent cinema resulted in one step forward and two steps back. The Docuseries Showcase, for example, could have included independent voices in episodic documentary media that have found internet audiences through YouTube, Vimeo, etc. Instead, both of the series exhibited in the showcase were high-profile Netflix Original documentary programs.

When Sundance did exhibit truly independent episodic content, the projects were all billed together under a collective “showcase” label; however, the mainstream series that screened at Sundance 2017 all did so individually, so that the series’ names would get more attention and recognition. These programs included CNN’s *The History of Comedy* documentary series, FOX’s “event series” *Shots Fired*, Spike TV’s Jay-Z-produced *Time: The Kalief Browder Story*, VICE’s *Rise*, Amazon’s new Jill Soloway series *I Love Dick*, and ABC’s *Downward Dog*. *Time* tells the story of its real-life titular figure, an African-American New York teenager who committed suicide following several years of solitary confinement for stealing a backpack -- without ever being convicted.<sup>92</sup> Although Jay-Z, one of the most successful and influential figures in modern American music, serves as an executive producer and main spokesperson for the series, it still bears the marks of a quality Sundance selection. Its observations on police brutality and race issues are timely, and Jenner Furst and Julia Willoughby Nason, the main creative forces behind the series, are bonafide Sundance Institute-affiliated independent documentarians.<sup>93</sup> It makes sense from a thematic perspective why Sundance would accept *Shots Fired*, which also addresses racial tensions and problems with police in

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<sup>92</sup> Genzlinger, Neil. "Review: A Shameful Story Gets Its Due in ‘Time: The Kalief Browder Story’." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 29 Mar. 2017. Web. 15 Apr. 2017.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

America; however, mixed reviews from the festival and following the film's March premier on FOX note that the series does little to distinguish itself from the countless other broadcast network dramas.<sup>94</sup>

Despite its shortcomings, *Shots Fired* is not the most out of place selection in Sundance's Special Events section. That title unquestionably belongs to the ABC comedy *Downward Dog*, which according to *Variety* "manages to make a dog into one of the most annoying sitcom characters of the 2016-2017 season."<sup>95</sup> The titular canine muses on his owner's relationship drama with a CGI-animated mouth, which one would expect to find in "the loopy realities of children's programming or dream sequences (or, worst of all, insurance commercials);" essentially, anywhere but Sundance.<sup>96</sup> When Sundance uses its precious festival time and space to screen prestige television such as Jill Soloway's *Transparent* and *I Love Dick* or Starz's *The Girlfriend Experience*, it becomes difficult to fault the programming team for acknowledging the quality of modern TV series and their importance in the current discourse of American cinema, independent or otherwise. When Sundance uses their immense influence and power to give dime-a-dozen network sitcoms and crime dramas a major exhibition platform while countless worthy independent and underground projects still face rejection, the programming team only legitimizes the accusations that Sundance has lost touch with its vision.

On a more optimistic note, some of Sundance's most encouraging and influential support for challenging, independent film comes from one out-of-competition section in particular: Midnight. This section is one of the few that is defined by the films' themes

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<sup>94</sup> "Critic Reviews for Shots Fired." *Metacritic*. N.p., n.d. Web. 15 Apr. 2017.

<sup>95</sup> Saraiya, Sonia. "TV Review: ABC's 'Downward Dog,' Starring Allison Tolman." *Variety*. N.p., 22 Jan. 2017. Web. 15 Apr. 2017.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

and content, as opposed to form or nation of origin; however, despite the section's generic specificity, Sundance 2017 exhibited a wide range of styles within Midnight. Most of these films would fall under the general definition of horror, with a blend of psychological, surreal, and body horror films typically on display each year. 2017's Midnight section contained two notable non-horror exceptions: *The Little Hours* and *78/52*.

*The Little Hours* is the third feature from Jeff Baena, whose previous films *Life After Beth* (2014) and *Joshy* (2016) both premiered in the U.S. Dramatic competition; however, both received mixed reviews and fizzled in limited releases.<sup>97 98</sup> *The Little Hours* continues Baena's streak of Sundance films that show a great deal of potential, both in Baena's dialogue and his outstanding casts' excellent performances, but ultimately fall back on quirkiness over substance. Baena's latest is a raunchy high-concept comedy that feels like a retread of Judd Apatow's late 2000's/early 2010's fare: three foul-mouthed and oversexed nuns fight over the convent's newest groundskeeper, played by Dave Franco. *The Little Hours* may find an audience due to its talented ensemble cast, but it is baffling as to why distribution startup Gunpowder & Sky would pay seven figures for the film's rights, why Sundance would screen the film in the Midnight section, and why they would accept the film into the festival in the first place.<sup>99</sup>

The inclusion of *78/52* marks Sundance's continued effort to unite documentary and horror - two genres that may seem completely incompatible but are both driven by

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<sup>97</sup> Berkshire, Geoff. "Sundance Film Review: 'Joshy'" *Variety*. N.p., 24 Jan. 2016. Web.

<sup>98</sup> Hornaday, Ann. "Aubrey Plaza and Dane DeHaan enliven the otherwise listless zombie rom-com 'Life After Beth.'" *The Washington Post*. WP Company, 21 Aug. 2014. Web. 16 Apr. 2017.

<sup>99</sup> Fleming, Mike, Jr. "Gunpowder & Sky Acquires Sundance Pic 'The Little Hours'." *Deadline*. N.p., 26 Jan. 2017. Web. 16 Apr. 2017.

actively cinephilic audiences. Perhaps the most notable figure in this recent Sundance trend is Rodney Ascher, whose acclaimed works include *Room 237* (2012), which discusses the various conspiracy theories surrounding Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining*, and *The Nightmare* (2015), which explores the causes and simulates the experience of sleep paralysis. *78/52* refers to the number of camera setups and cuts that Alfred Hitchcock used to film the infamous shower scene in his 1960 masterpiece *Psycho*. Writer-director Alexandre O. Philippe uses interviews and archival footage to deconstruct the production and analyze the impact of that scene, one of the most influential in all of film history. The film earned rave reviews on its way to obtaining distribution from IFC Midnight, and it is further proof of Sundance's continued celebration of cinephilia in the Midnight section.<sup>100</sup>

If there is any truth in the notion that no publicity is bad publicity, then writer-director Steven Ellison and the folks behind Midnight selection *Kuso* must be thrilled. Ellison is better known in the arts world as Flying Lotus, a trailblazing DJ/musician who blends live jazz and world instruments with various forms of hip hop and electronic music. As a producer, he has worked with some of the biggest names in modern rap and jazz, such as Kendrick Lamar, Kamasi Washington, and Chance the Rapper, and he has recently ventured into film production and scoring as well. Ellison's previous forays into Sundance include Kahlil Joseph's 2013 Short Film Special Jury Award Winner *Until the Quiet Comes*, and Eddie Alcazar's 2016 Midnight Short *FUCKKKYOUUUU*, both of which he scored. Ellison collaborated with Alcazar on 2017's *Kuso*, along with British video artist David Firth, who achieved early-2000's internet fame with his *Salad Fingers*

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<sup>100</sup> Fleming, Mike, Jr. "IFC Midnight Grabs '78/52', Dissection Of 'Psycho' Shower Scene – Sundance." *Deadline*. N.p., 27 Jan. 2017. Web. 16 Apr. 2017.

series. *Kuso* was the first feature for each of the three boundary-pushing artists, and the fact that Sundance so strongly supported such a risky, experimental film is truly remarkable.

2016's Sundance NEXT Fest in Los Angeles screened Ellison's short film *Royal*, which turned out to be just one scene from *Kuso*, and Ellison was introduced as "basically the artist closest to this festival," a testament to Sundance's dedication to experimentation and avant-garde art. Ellison and the Sundance team then proceeded to hand out barf bags to audience members, as they got their first taste of the depravity to come.<sup>101</sup> *Kuso* is an anthology of revolting, filthy, and surreal live-action and mixed-media shorts that all revolve around the fallout after a devastating Los Angeles earthquake. Sundance attendees packed the Egyptian Theater at midnight, and before the film started, the audience was warned that the film would "melt their minds," and that "there will be no survivors." Minutes later, a steady stream of disgusted viewers began leaving the theater. For better or for worse, *Kuso* instantly gained infamy for being the most walked-out-of film at the festival.<sup>102</sup>

Those who were brave enough to stay in their seats witnessed numerous examples of brilliant camerawork and avant-garde animation, albeit drenched in bodily fluids and grime. Unsurprisingly, reviews were polarizing, with some praising it as "eminently watchable . . . something that demands attention,"<sup>103</sup> while others encourage "a wide

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<sup>101</sup> Edelman, Julia. "Flying Lotus Is a True Gentleman, Gives Out Barf Bags at Short-Film Premiere." *Vulture*. N.p., 15 Aug. 2016. Web. 16 Apr. 2017.

<sup>102</sup> O'Connor, Roisin. "Kuso: Flying Lotus' Sundance premiere of 'grossest movie ever made' prompts 'mass walkouts'" *The Independent*. Independent Digital News and Media, 26 Jan. 2017. Web. 16 Apr. 2017.

<sup>103</sup> Suzanne-Mayer, Dominick. "Sundance Film Review: Kuso." *Consequence of Sound*. N.p., 24 Jan. 2017. Web. 16 Apr. 2017.



detour around this insufferable mishmash of interwoven segments -- aimless in themselves, even more so as a whole.”<sup>104</sup> Criticism towards the Sundance team for supporting such an offensive film is certainly valid, but these critics should at least acknowledge *Kuso*'s merits aside from its content. In an interview with Ellison, Firth, and lead actor/co-writer Zack Fox, Fox states that the film was “literally made from Tweets and texts.”<sup>105</sup> *Kuso* doubles as a postmodern culmination of African-American subculture, and many of the comedians, actors, and musicians involved with the film found fame and success primarily through internet platforms such as Twitter, SoundCloud, and YouTube. *Kuso*'s financing came almost entirely from Ellison himself, and it was produced by his production company Brainfeeder Films, an offshoot of his highly successful and influential Brainfeeder label.<sup>106</sup>

The one thing that sets the makers of *Kuso* apart from other underground filmmakers is capital, both in terms of industry connections and financial resources. However, on all other fronts, the production of *Kuso* was truly independent, and it serves as a testament to the internet's power in facilitating collective artistic innovation by connecting individual artists. Even though no distributor was brave enough to purchase *Kuso* out of the festival, the film demonstrates Sundance's penchant for taking risks and support “do-it-yourself” filmmaking, especially amidst accusations of selling out to the mainstream.

Although genre and cult films are generally the first to be dismissed by critics, they embody the spirit of cinephilia that birthed a community of cult film and perhaps

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<sup>104</sup>Harvey, Dennis. "Sundance Film Review: 'Kuso'" *Variety*. N.p., 27 Jan. 2017. Web.

<sup>105</sup>“Sundance 2017: Pillow Talk with Kuso -- Full Interview.” YouTube video. Posted by “Adobe,” uploaded January 22, 2017.

<sup>106</sup>Ibid.

even film festival culture as a whole. Films appearing in the Midnight section have also been responsible for some of Sundance's most influential activity in the American independent cinema. Recent low-budget and international genre films from the Midnight section such as *The Babadook* (2014), *It Follows* (2014), *The Witch* (2015), and *The Raid* (2011) have quickly attained modern classic status, not to mention nearly universal critical acclaim and solid performances at the box office. Netflix and Amazon's exclusive content libraries cover nearly all genres, but neither company has produced nor acquired a bonafide horror hit; a natural generic fit for late-night home viewing. Iranian thriller *Under the Shadow* earned praise at Sundance 2016's Midnight section, but it failed to receive the same acclaim and attention from audiences as it did from critics. Over the next few years, the Midnight section should continue to produce crossover hits out of hidden genre gems as it has in the past, and Netflix and Amazon will likely set their sights on and extend their influence into this field.

As previously discussed, the NEXT section is a space for new and bold directors to show films that experiment with and challenge stylistic and formal norms. The Sundance Institute holds this section in such high regard that they believe it "shapes the next wave in American cinema," but this confidence ends up being a sort of double-edged sword.<sup>107</sup> Some films that do indeed attempt to push the boundaries of cinema, such as 2015's *Tangerine*, have found success in the NEXT section and beyond. Many of the films that do end up in NEXT, however, are simply quirky for the sake of being quirky, or perhaps there was just no better categorical fit for them at the festival. Sundance inadvertently creates expectations for films in this section to be a cut above the

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<sup>107</sup> "Sundance Film Festival Submission FAQ."

rest, at least from a cinematic perspective, and many films simply cannot live up to those lofty heights.

Credit is certainly due to Sundance for keeping true to their idea of making NEXT a showcase for first time directors and filmmakers who represent marginalized identities. Seven out of the ten films in 2017's NEXT section were directed by first time filmmakers. Transgender, Native American, Asian-American, and African-American identities are just a few of those represented among the diverse NEXT filmmakers. Los Angeles-based director Justin Chon's second film *Gook* premiered at the 2017 festival, and it quickly emerged as one of the most acclaimed films of this year's NEXT section. *Gook* examines the lives and experiences of Los Angeles' Korean-American youth, and their relationships with their African-American neighbors, set against the backdrop of the 1992 Rodney King riots. Chon shot his film entirely in black and white, and its off-the-cuff, naturalistic style has warranted comparisons to Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* and Kevin Smith's *Clerks*.<sup>108</sup> Chon financed *Gook* through a successful Kickstarter campaign that nearly doubled his initial goal, and although no distributors picked up the film (perhaps due to its provocative title), the film went on to win the NEXT Audience Award.<sup>109</sup>

Along with *Gook*, which is immediately recognizable due to its black-and-white 90's aesthetic, *Menashe* and *A Ghost Story* stuck out among NEXT films with distinctive stylistic and thematic elements. *Menashe* is the feature film debut of Joshua Z. Weinstein, and it is one of the first American films since the Second World War to be performed

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<sup>108</sup>Pickett, Leah. "Gook." *Chicago Reader*. N.p., n.d. Web. 17 Apr. 2017.

<sup>109</sup>"GOOK - A Korean American LA Riots Film." *Kickstarter*. N.p., n.d. Web. 18 Apr. 2017.

entirely in Yiddish.<sup>110</sup> The film follows a fictionalized version of real-life Hasidic YouTube comedian Menashe Lustig, and Lustig makes his film acting debut in the title role. Lustig lives in the New Square neighborhood of New York, a cultural, spiritual, and linguistic enclave in which residents, especially youth, have little to no interaction with the secular world. Although Lustig may face backlash or even excommunication from his community for participating in the film, the director and star both understood that without Lustig's participation the film would not have been a genuine, accurate depiction of his culture.<sup>111</sup> Menashe received rave reviews, and indie distribution powerhouse A24 acquired the film, their first foreign language release.<sup>112</sup>

*A Ghost Story* was directed by David Lowery, who has rapidly risen among the ranks of Sundance royalty since premiering his Rooney Mara and Casey Affleck-starring breakthrough *Ain't Them Bodies Saints* at 2013's festival. Since then, he has gone on to direct Disney's *Pete's Dragon*, write the 2017 Sundance U.S. Dramatic competition film *The Yellow Birds*, and participate in festival panels with Robert Redford and other Sundance elite. In *A Ghost Story*, a deceased Casey Affleck repeatedly visits his widow, played by Mara, but he appears to her covered in a white bed sheet. *A Ghost Story* was one of the best received films of the festival, earning praise for the genuine human emotions on display underneath its supernatural framing device. It also contains one of

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<sup>110</sup> Fleming Jr, Mike. "A24 Lands Sundance Film 'Menashe;' First Foreign Language Film For 'Moonlight' Distributor." *Deadline*. N.p., 31 Jan. 2017. Web. 17 Apr. 2017.

<sup>111</sup> Kohn, Eric. "The Sundance Rebel: How Hasidic Actor Menashe Lustig Defied His Community to Become a Festival Star." *IndieWire*. N.p., 31 Jan. 2017. Web. 17 Apr. 2017.

<sup>112</sup> Fleming Jr. "A24 Lands Sundance Film 'Menashe;' First Foreign Language Film For 'Moonlight' Distributor."

the most buzzed-about scenes at the entire festival -- one in which Mara copes with her grief by eating an entire pie in one sitting, all shot in one long take.<sup>113</sup>

A24 was just a few months out from a Best Picture win with *Moonlight* when it acquired *A Ghost Story* and *Menashe*. Their activity in the NEXT section indicates not only a desire to stay ahead on top of the next wave of American independent filmmakers, but also the level of confidence that production and distribution companies have in this dynamic section of Sundance.<sup>114</sup>

The Premieres and Documentary Premieres sections are curious outliers at the Sundance Film Festival. The Premieres section showcases “some of the most highly anticipated dramatic films of the coming year . . . allowing audiences to catch the latest work from established directors at the Sundance Film Festival before they create a splash at theaters around the globe.”<sup>115</sup> Similarly, the Documentary Premieres section is “composed of films about far-reaching subjects made by renowned documentarians.”<sup>116</sup> It may seem strange that at a festival dedicated to discovering and supporting new and independent filmmakers has two major sections that almost exclusively show films from “established” or “renowned” directors. The dramatic Premieres section also gets priority access to the festival’s biggest theater, along with the films screening in the U.S. Dramatic competition. Aside from the award winners presented at the end of the festival, only two films from any other sections played at Eccles - one was *Reservoir Dogs*, which

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<sup>113</sup> Plante, Chris. "A Ghost Story has it all: romance, metaphysics, and Rooney Mara eating pie for five minutes." *The Verge*. The Verge, 24 Jan. 2017. Web. 17 Apr. 2017.

<sup>114</sup> Setoodeh, Ramin. "Sundance: Casey Affleck's 'A Ghost Story' Sells to A24 (EXCLUSIVE)." *Variety*. N.p., 08 Jan. 2017. Web. 17 Apr. 2017.

<sup>115</sup> "Sundance Film Festival Submission FAQ."

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

was one of two classic films screened “From The Collection,” and the other film was the highest-profile Documentary Premiere, *An Inconvenient Sequel*.

The increased prestige and priority for films appearing in the Premieres and Documentary Premieres section should not be mistaken for indicators of quality. Neither should the films’ casts; given the higher renown and recognition of these directors, many films screening in Premieres boast star-studded ensembles, or serve as vehicles for A-list talent. 2017’s dramatic Premieres included *Wilson*, starring Woody Harrelson and Laura Dern; *Rememory*, led by Peter Dinklage; and *Rebel in the Rye*, starring Nicholas Hoult, Kevin Spacey, and Sarah Paulson. All three films received overwhelmingly negative reviews from critics, and none was picked up for distribution out of the festival.

(Interestingly enough, Fox Searchlight acquired the rights to *Wilson* in 2010 when Alexander Payne was slated to direct.<sup>117</sup> Sundance alum Craig Johnson stepped in and failed to achieve the same success as he did with 2014’s *The Skeleton Twins* -- *Wilson* only managed to recoup roughly one tenth of its \$5 million budget at the box office.)<sup>118</sup>

Although the Premieres section may have screened the most duds of all the sections in 2017, it also was home to several of the most acclaimed and sought-after films of the festival. The previous year’s Premieres section included eventual Academy Award for Best Picture nominee *Manchester by the Sea*, along with critical hits and awards contenders *Captain Fantastic*, *Certain Women*, *Hunt for the Wilderpeople*, *Love and Friendship*, and *Sing Street*. Amazon acquired their most successful film yet out of this section with *Manchester*, and in 2017 it seems as though Netflix attempted to find the

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<sup>117</sup> "Wilson (2017)." *Box Office Mojo*. N.p., n.d. Web. 18 Apr. 2017.

<sup>118</sup> Fleming Jr, Mike. "'Wilson' Lands At Fox Searchlight With Alexander Payne." *Deadline*. N.p., 18 Nov. 2010. Web. 18 Apr. 2017.

same success in the same section. *Mudbound*, a post-WWII saga about race starring Carey Mulligan, Garrett Hedlund, and rising star Jason Mitchell, proved to be the most sought-after and expensive film at the festival. Netflix paid \$12.5 million for the rights to the critically-acclaimed film, and it will likely be the central film in Netflix's impending awards campaign.<sup>119</sup> Dee Rees, who burst onto the Sundance scene with 2011's semi-autobiographical *Pariah*, has an excellent shot at becoming the first Black woman to earn an Academy Award nomination for Best Director with *Mudbound*. Netflix will also likely push the film for consideration in other categories as well, such as Best Actress for Carey Mulligan or Mary J. Blige, Best Actor for Garrett Hedlund or Jason Mitchell, and Best Picture.

The \$12.5 million price tag for *Mudbound* is not only significant because it was the most expensive acquisition at the festival this year -- it also shows how Netflix has been trying to one-up its rival Amazon. The *Manchester* distributor scored a major deal with one of 2017's Premiere films as well in the hilarious, crowd-pleasing *The Big Sick*. The deal was finalized before *Mudbound*'s, however, so when Amazon paid \$12 million for *The Big Sick*, Netflix only needed to spend \$12.5 million on film in order to secure the coveted "biggest deal" of the festival.

*The Big Sick*, like *Mudbound* and *Manchester by the Sea*, represents the best of the higher-profile end of the indie spectrum. The film was financed by FilmNation, an independent production company that has been responsible for films from prestigious and world-renowned directors which attract A-list talent, strong box office returns, and plenty

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<sup>119</sup> "Current Awards Season Affecting "Mudbound" Bidding War, Which Includes A24, Annapurna (Exclusive)." *The Tracking Board*. N.p., 30 Jan. 2017. Web. 18 Apr. 2017.

of awards consideration.<sup>120</sup> Recent hits from FilmNation include *Room* (2015), *The Imitation Game* (2014), *The King's Speech* (2010), and several films from auteurs Terrence Malick, Pedro Almodovar, and Woody Allen. *The Big Sick* boasts scene-stealing performances from Ray Romano and Holly Hunter, along with a production credit from Judd Apatow; however, the film's writer and star is the relatively-unknown Kumail Nanjiani. Nanjiani wrote the film with his wife Emily V. Gordon, and it tells the real-life story of their relationship, the reality of being Pakistani in post-9/11 America, and the challenges of interracial and interfaith marriage.

Despite these timely and challenging themes, *The Big Sick* looks and feels like a fairly straightforward romantic comedy -- albeit an unusually good one. Director Michael Showalter, a Sundance alum best known for absurdist screwball comedies such as *Wet Hot American Summer* (2001) and *They Came Together* (2014), gives the film a warm, down-to-earth quality with his uncharacteristically restrained direction. Although *The Big Sick* bears few stereotypical marks of an indie film, it still feels right at home at Sundance. The film gives Kumail Nanjiani, a relative outsider to Hollywood save for his supporting role on HBO's *Silicon Valley*, a platform in which he can confidently demonstrate his talents as both a writer and an actor. Unlike Nanjiani, Emily V. Gordon does not play herself on-screen. Zoe Kazan gives a fine performance as Nanjiani's wife, but the film truly belongs to Nanjiani. Amazon has teamed up with Lionsgate for

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<sup>120</sup> Jaafar, Ali. "FilmNation To Fully Finance And Sell Judd Apatow-Produced 'The Big Sick'." *Deadline*. N.p., 04 Dec. 2015. Web. 18 Apr. 2017.



theatrical distribution, and with a nationwide summer release planned, *The Big Sick* will likely set Nanjiani on a quick path to becoming a household name in comedy.<sup>121</sup>

The NEXT and Premiere sections act as complements to each other, in that they each represent opposite ends of the indie prestige spectrum. With NEXT, Sundance can specifically focus on discovering and supporting new talent, and while films in this section may become popular among cult and indie audiences, very few cross over into the mainstream. Future films from directors who debut their films in NEXT, however, are more likely to attract widely-recognized actors, and therefore, greater financial investment.

Films in the Premieres sections, on the other hand, already tend to have popular actors on screen and established directors behind the camera. These films also tend to be much more accessible for mainstream audiences, whether due to the presence of these actors or simply the content and style of the films, and this accessibility should not be confused for a lack of quality or integrity. Although the Premieres sections, like all others, will continue to produce a few bombs here and there each year, Kenneth Turan writes that “commercial vitality is not an enemy or a danger sign; it’s something to be embraced,” and these sections are proof that Sundance is doing exactly that.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Lee, Ashley. "Sundance Hit 'The Big Sick' Gets June Release Date." *The Hollywood Reporter*. N.p., 14 Feb. 2017. Web. 18 Apr. 2017.

<sup>122</sup> Turan, p. 48.

## The Films: Four Main Competitions

Whereas mainstream filmmaking is often seen as a form of escapism, with its roots in visual spectacle and “the cinema of attraction,” independent cinema engages and often challenges the viewer to reexamine reality. Although this social and political consciousness may be a bit obscured in certain areas of Sundance, such as the Midnight or Kids sections, the four main competitions are filled with political films that echo the Sundance Institute’s vision both implicitly and explicitly. It is no coincidence that Sundance 2017 put political issues such as climate change, the war in Syria, and its resulting refugee crisis front and center, given that President Donald Trump’s inauguration took place over the first weekend of the festival. Filmmakers and attendees alike vocally and passionately expressed their disdain for the new president throughout the festival, culminating in a massive protest march on Park City’s Main Street led by Chelsea Handler, Aisha Tyler, Dolores Huerta, and several other celebrities.<sup>123</sup>

While many of the films appearing in the dramatic competitions, such as *I Don’t Feel at Home in this World*, implicitly addressed the current state of politics and society with disillusioned characters and dialogue, the documentary competitions were filled with films that directly discuss the problems that the United States and the world as a whole are facing. The World Documentary competition primarily focused on Syria, and the films in this competition approach this conflict in diverse ways. *The Good Postman*, a Finnish/Bulgarian co-production, documents a mayoral election in a tiny, poor Bulgarian village through which many Syrian refugees pass as they seek safety and prosperity in

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<sup>123</sup> Rainey, James, and Brent Lang. "Chelsea Handler at Sundance Film Festival Women’s March: ‘Don’t Lose Hope’." *Variety*. N.p., 21 Jan. 2017. Web. 21 Apr. 2017.

Western Europe. The film is beautifully shot, and director Tonislav Hristov frames the titular village postman and dark horse mayoral candidate as a gentle, progressive figure willing to welcome Syrian refugees into the village. The postman is challenged by a loud, alcoholic reactionary whose inflammatory statements against the refugees earn him a small following that parallels the alt-right in America. *The Good Postman* is a low-key, immersive proxy approach to documenting the Syrian refugee crisis, and roughly a month after Sundance concluded, FilmRise picked up the rights to the film.<sup>124</sup>

Although *The Good Postman* received positive reviews at the festival, it failed to generate the same level of buzz and acclaim as the films that directly examined the conflict in Syria. The Grand Jury Prize in the World Documentary competition went to the Danish/Syrian co-production *Last Men in Aleppo*, which documents the experiences of several first responders in the titular war-torn city. *Last Men in Aleppo* earned rave reviews, and it will receive a May theatrical and VOD release from indie distributor Grasshopper Films.<sup>125</sup> However, the film's impact may be slightly dampened by the success of 2017 Academy Award winner for Best Documentary Short *The White Helmets*, a Netflix exclusive that chronicles the same volunteer organization. Although Netflix was far more active in the U.S. Documentary competition than the World section, it had one major acquisition with *Joshua: Teenager vs. Superpower*, a film about student

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<sup>124</sup> Chignall, Selina. "FilmRise acquires rights to "Free and Easy" and "The Good Postman"." *Realscreen* . N.p., 1 Mar. 2017. Web. 21 Apr. 2017.

<sup>125</sup> Hipes, Patrick. "Sundance Winner 'Last Men In Aleppo' Lands At Grasshopper Film For May Release." *Deadline*. N.p., 30 Mar. 2017. Web. 21 Apr. 2017.

protests in Hong Kong and China that won the World Cinema Documentary Audience Award.<sup>126</sup>

Documentary films have played a vital role in Netflix's growth since the early days of their original content production and distribution efforts. Documentaries have also been the main source of Netflix's film awards consideration, earning eight Academy Award nominations and one win. Netflix's activity in the U.S. Documentary competition began more than two weeks before the festival's opening day with the acquisition of *Casting JonBenet*, the first acquisition at the 2017 festival. The film focuses on the sensationalization of the 1996 JonBenet Ramsey homicide case, and its planned theatrical release should give the film a greater impact than recent television specials on the case from CBS, A&E, and Lifetime.

*Casting JonBenet* is the only film out of Netflix's four acquisitions from the U.S. Documentary competition that does not deal with politics and current events. *Chasing Coral* received strong reviews from critics and even stronger buzz and word of mouth from audiences, as it went on to win the U.S. Documentary Audience Award. Director Jeff Orlowski documents the dying coral reefs around the world in this film, and it acts as a spiritual sequel to his 2012 Sundance hit *Chasing Ice*. *Chasing Ice*, like *The Invisible War*, was also screened at political venues such as the White House and the U.N., and although Netflix has not yet revealed their distribution strategy, perhaps they will make a similar push for action with *Chasing Coral*.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Winfrey, Graham. "Netflix Acquires Documentary 'Joshua: Teenager vs. Superpower' — Sundance 2017." *IndieWire*. N.p., 23 Jan. 2017. Web. 21 Apr. 2017.

<sup>127</sup> Grobar, Matt. "'Chasing Coral' Director Jeff Orlowski On 'Very Real' Dangers Of Climate Change — Sundance Studio." *Deadline*. N.p., 25 Jan. 2017. Web. 21 Apr. 2017.

The 2017 festival saw the addition of the Orwell Award to the U.S. Documentary competition, and the Netflix acquisition *Icarus*, directed by Bryan Fogel, was the inaugural recipient. According to the festival's website, "in a world of post-truth, doublespeak, and alternative facts, the jury decided to create the Orwell Award to recognize a film that reveals the truth at a time when the truth is no longer a commodity."<sup>128</sup> *Icarus* was one of the most buzzed-about documentaries at this year's festival, and it earned praise from critics and audiences alike for its fascinating premise. Fogel, an avid biker, was curious about the effects of doping in competitive cycling, and in order to study them first hand he contacted a Russian scientist who administered the drugs to him. The film "kicks off in the mold of Morgan Spurlock (*Super Size Me*), but ends up in the tradition of Laura Poitras (*Citizenfour*)," as Fogel's exploits led him to uncover Russia's nationally-sanctioned doping rings.<sup>129</sup> *Icarus* could not have arrived at a better time, given the Trump administration's precarious relationship with Russia. The film ignited a bidding war between various high-profile parties, and the \$5 million that Netflix paid marks one of the highest price tags for a documentary film acquired out of Sundance.<sup>130</sup>

One of the Sundance Film Festival's most notable achievements since its inception is the popularization of documentary film. Documentaries of various budgets, subjects, and levels of prestige, such as *Blackfish*, *Hoop Dreams*, and *An Inconvenient Truth*, have become popular cultural reference points since first achieving fame at

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<sup>128</sup> Hynes, Eric, Jeremy Kinser, and Nate Von Zumwalt. "2017 Sundance Film Festival Awards Ceremony." *Sundance Institute*. N.p., 28 Jan. 2017. Web. 22 Apr. 2017.

<sup>129</sup> Lang, Brent, and Ramin Setoodeh. "Sundance: Netflix Lands Russian Doping Documentary 'Icarus' (EXCLUSIVE)." *Variety*. N.p., 24 Jan. 2017. Web. 22 Apr. 2017.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*

Sundance. Furthermore, the awareness and change that these films have inspired reflect the Sundance Institute's mission of making a difference through film, particularly in the field of climate change with U.S. documentaries, and the Syrian conflict with world documentaries. As Netflix and Amazon continue to invest vast sums of money in documentary distribution and production, films from the documentary competitions will continue to be some of the most impactful and definitive works to come out of Sundance.

2017's World Dramatic competition featured several well-reviewed films that received modest distribution deals, but there were hardly any standouts or clear critical favorites from the competition. In fact, despite its relative prestige, this section felt peripheral and less definitive of the year's festival compared to not only the U.S. Documentary competition, but the World Documentary competition as well. This is perhaps due to the immediacy with which documentaries can address the issues facing the world today, as films such as *Last Men in Aleppo* and *Cries from Syria* offer direct, unmediated perspectives into real world events.

The Grand Jury Prize winner in the World Dramatic competition was *The Nile Hilton Incident*, a Swedish/German/Danish co-production set in Egypt and spoken in Arabic.<sup>131</sup> The film takes place in the days leading up to the Arab Spring revolution in Egypt, but instead of taking the expected political thriller route, writer-director Tarik Saleh addresses problems of corruption, police brutality, and immigration through the framework of a noir murder mystery. Featuring femme fatales, migrant workers pushed to their breaking points, and semi-crooked cops discovering the joys of Facebook, *The*

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<sup>131</sup> "The Nile Hilton Incident." *The-nile-hilton-incident* / Sundance Institute. N.p., n.d. Web. 22 Apr. 2017.

*Nile Hilton* is too torn between a nostalgic yearning for 2011 and a desire for current relevance to have any sort of emotional or political resonance.

British drama *God's Own Country*, for which director Francis Lee won the World Dramatic Directing Award, deals with immigration and ideology on a subtextual level while focusing on personal relationships and emotions on the surface. Set in present-day rural England, a young 20-something sheep farmer finds himself disillusioned and depressed with his simple life as his childhood friends enjoy metropolitan lives as university students and young professionals. He struggles with his identity as a gay man, and this inner conflict manifests itself in the form of xenophobia and racism towards the young Romanian immigrant hired to help on the farm. The two men develop a passionate relationship with each other, but with that passion comes resentment on both sides, as they come to live with their insecurities as marginalized identities in a rural, socially conservative environment. *God's Own Country* received financial backing from the British Film Institute, along with the government-sponsored Creative England, and it was acquired by Picturehouse Entertainment.<sup>132</sup>

Although Kenneth Turan approaches Sundance with a critical voice in his survey of the world's film festivals, he remains positive and optimistic towards the festival as a whole. He does, however, single out one key element at Sundance as an area in need of revamping and improvement: the U.S. Dramatic competition. In his 2003 book, Turan argues that the U.S. Dramatic competition, which supposedly represents the core of the festival, is "a counterproductive exercise in artistic elitism that does the independent

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<sup>132</sup> Grater, Tom. "Picturehouse takes Sundance hit 'God's Own Country' for UK." *Publication Name*. N.p., 6 Feb. 2017. Web. 22 Apr. 2017.

movement no good at all.”<sup>133</sup> He writes that “what viewers often see is a string of earnest, well-meaning films that are as sensitive and artistic in intent as anyone could want, but have zero chance of pleasing audiences outside of a festival’s rarefied atmosphere -- and frequently not much of one even there . . . just being noncommercial doesn’t automatically confer worthiness either.”<sup>134</sup>

One U.S. Dramatic competition film in particular exemplifies Turan’s sentiment: writer-director Alex Ross Perry’s *Golden Exits*. Perry is one of the most exciting and acclaimed up-and-coming directors currently working in the American independent cinema. His 2011 micro-budget film *The Color Wheel* received rave reviews out of smaller festivals, and his next film, the Jason Schwartzman-starring *Listen Up Philip*, was a hit at Sundance 2014. Perry’s return to Sundance in 2017 boasted an A-list ensemble cast, including Schwartzman, Chloë Sevigny, Mary-Louise Parker, and Beastie Boys founding member Adam Horowitz. *Golden Exits* has few distinguishing features in terms of plot, cinematography, or character development. Essentially, it follows several bored, self-destructive New Yorkers who grow increasingly passive-aggressive and depressed as their lives become intertwined. Perry brilliantly employed various cinematic techniques to create an unnerving and tension-filled atmosphere in his 2015 low-budget thriller *Queen of Earth*, but he does very little with the camera in *Golden Exits*, and the talented cast fails to add energy to Perry’s drab script.

In an interview with IndieWire, Perry remarks that “it would be hard to make a third movie as commercially worthless as my last two,” but with *Golden Exits*, he hit a

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<sup>133</sup> Turan, p. 46.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid, p. 47.



new low for mainstream appeal, failing to pick up any sort of distribution deal.<sup>135</sup> The Sundance programmers must have chosen to include *Golden Exits* in the main competition due to Perry and his cast's prominence and relevance in the indie film world, and this speaks to the problems of elitism and non-commerciality that Turan discusses.

Fortunately, aside from *Golden Exits* and just a few other dead-on-arrival films, the U.S. Dramatic competition included plenty of exciting independent films that will likely cross over into the mainstream, especially with the help of the major distributors who were so active in this section. Amazon spent a combined \$5 million on its two acquisitions from this section: *Crown Heights* and *Landline*. *Crown Heights* tells the true story of Colin Warner, an African-American resident of the titular neighborhood who spent 20 years in prison for a crime he did not commit.<sup>136</sup> Warner is played by indie darling/mainstream up-and-comer Lakeith Stanfield, best known for scene-stealing performances in *Short Term 12* (2013), *Straight Outta Compton* (2015), and the FX series *Atlanta* (2016). *Crown Heights* won the Audience Award: U.S. Dramatic, and given the film's plentiful festival buzz and mainstream potential, Amazon's \$2 million deal should prove to be a steal.<sup>137</sup> Amazon also purchased *Landline*, a comedy from writer-director Gillian Robespierre and star Jenny Slate, and the distributor will attempt to replicate the success that Robespierre and Slate achieved with their 2014 Sundance hit *Obvious Child*.

Fox Searchlight and Sony Pictures Classics, two of the biggest players in indie distribution and at Sundance post-Miramax and pre-Netflix and Amazon, concentrated

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<sup>135</sup> Winfrey, Graham. "Why 'Golden Exits' Director Alex Ross Perry Doesn't Fear The 'Commercially Worthless' Movie - Sundance 2017." *IndieWire*. N.p., 27 Jan. 2017. Web. 22 Apr. 2017.

<sup>136</sup> Newman, Andy. "Murder Conviction Overturned for Man Behind Bars 20 Years." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 31 Jan. 2001. Web. 22 Apr. 2017.

<sup>137</sup> Sciretta, Peter. "Movies Sold at Sundance 2017."

their efforts in the U.S. Dramatic competition at the 2017 festival. Fox Searchlight ended up scoring the rights to the feel-good story of the festival: Jeremy Jasper's breakthrough debut *Patti Cake\$*. Danielle MacDonald plays the titular character, a white, overweight rapper from a low-income neighborhood of New Jersey. The energetic, uplifting film was one of the best-reviewed of the festival, with particular praise directed towards MacDonald's potentially star-making performance. Peter Debruge, in a review for *Variety*, writes that "every few years, an indie character comes along who so perfectly captures what it's like to be mocked and marginalized, even as she refuses to let the bullies and abusers have the last word. . . . [Patti Cake\$] stands to become one of the year's most endearing discoveries, via a film that launches an equally compelling new directing talent."<sup>138</sup> Although *Patti Cake\$* features not a single household name behind nor in front of the camera, the film prompted an all-night auction before landing at Fox Searchlight with a price tag of \$9.5 million -- roughly 10 times the film's budget.<sup>139</sup>

Sony Pictures Classics, the other Hollywood specialty distribution subsidiary, acquired two films that screened in the U.S. Dramatic competition but stand on polar opposites of the generic spectrum: *Brigsby Bear* and *Novitiate*. *Brigsby Bear* is a quirky comedy that follows a dopey man-child as he sets out on a quest to bring his favorite childhood television show (which shares the film's title) back on the air. The film's cast includes Greg Kinnear, Mark Hamill, Claire Danes, and star/writer Kyle Mooney, and it was produced by modern comedy legends Andy Samberg, Jorma Taccone, and Akiva Schaffer of *The Lonely Island*. Sony Pictures Classics picked up the rights to the

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<sup>138</sup> Debruge, Peter. "Sundance Film Review: 'Patti Cake\$'." *Variety*. N.p., 24 Jan. 2017. Web. 22 Apr. 2017.

<sup>139</sup> Fleming, Mike, Jr. "'Patti Cake\$' Near Deal To Fox Searchlight For \$10.5M – Sundance." *Deadline*. N.p., 27 Jan. 2017. Web. 22 Apr. 2017.

critically acclaimed film for \$5 million, and it seems as though they might have another Sundance comedy hit in the vein of *Little Miss Sunshine* on their hands.<sup>140</sup>

Sony Pictures Classics' other acquisition out of the U.S. Dramatic competition, *Novitiate*, is a dark coming-of-age drama about a young prospective nun living in the 1950's. Margaret Qualley, best known for her work in Gia Coppola's 2013 film *Palo Alto* and HBO's *The Leftovers* stars as Cathleen, the titular figure. Writer-director Maggie Betts earned critical praise (along with the U.S. Dramatic Special Jury Award for Breakthrough Director) for her confident, evocative depiction of Cathleen's various crises of faith.<sup>141</sup> Sony Pictures Classics purchased the film, a potential awards candidate for Betts and Qualley, for an undisclosed sum that reportedly lies in the mid-seven figures.<sup>142</sup>

Like most other sections, Netflix was a major force in the U.S. Dramatic competition, but more as a production company than as a distributor. Netflix acquired only one film out of this section: *To the Bone*. The film stars Lily Collins as a young woman who struggles with anorexia and finds comfort and assistance from her doctor, played by Keanu Reeves, along with other patients battling the same disease. Marti Noxon, best known for her writing work on TV series such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *UnREAL*, and *Girlfriends' Guide to Divorce*, makes her feature directorial debut with *To the Bone*. The film received positive reviews, with critics remarking that its challenging

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<sup>140</sup> Sciretta, Peter. "Movies Sold at Sundance 2017."

<sup>141</sup> Felperin, Leslie. "'Novitiate': Film Review | Sundance 2017." *The Hollywood Reporter*. N.p., 21 Jan. 2017. Web. 22 Apr. 2017.

<sup>142</sup> Sciretta, Peter. "Movies Sold at Sundance 2017."

and important subject matter make up for its hokey sentimentality.<sup>143</sup> Netflix purchased worldwide rights to *To the Bone* for roughly \$8 million.<sup>144</sup>

Two films appearing in the U.S. Dramatic competition were produced by Netflix: *Burning Sands*, and *I Don't Feel at Home in this World Anymore*. *Burning Sands* is the feature debut of Gerard McMurray, who previously produced the 2013 Sundance hit *Fruitvale Station*, which won both the Audience Award and Grand Jury Prize in the U.S. Dramatic competition. The film takes a gritty, uncompromising look at the underground hazing that occurs at Black fraternities around the country. McMurray's dizzying direction gives the otherwise-repulsive hazing scenes an immersive and energetic quality. Although he certainly condemns hazing, McMurray intersperses touching moments of brotherhood and character among the brutality, forcing the viewer to examine the pros and cons of this controversial tradition. Netflix took a considerable risk in financing a film from a first-time director with few, if any recognizable stars, and the critical acclaim that the film has received indicates that the gamble paid off. In the weeks after the festival, Netflix proudly advertised on various websites that "The best of Sundance is on Netflix," and they placed *Burning Sands*' promotional artwork front and center.

Netflix's other entry in the U.S. Dramatic competition was one of the biggest stories at Sundance 2017. *I Don't Feel at Home in this World Anymore* is far from a perfect film, and it may not have been the best film in the competition; however, it represents everything that a film at the "core" of Sundance should be. Despite this being his first film, director Macon Blair demonstrates complete confidence in each zany action

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<sup>143</sup> Allen, Nick. "Sundance 2017: "To the Bone," "Before I Fall" | Sundance | Roger Ebert." *RogerEbert.com*. N.p., n.d. Web. 23 Apr. 2017.

<sup>144</sup> Setoodeh, Ramin. "Sundance: Netflix Buys Global Rights for 'To the Bone'." *Variety*. N.p., 25 Jan. 2017. Web. 23 Apr. 2017.

sequence, pratfall, and narrative turn. He has a clear understanding of the present-day social milieu in which his film takes place, and his vivid characters are perfectly brought to life by Lynskey, Wood, and several scene-stealing unknown actors. With *I Don't Feel at Home in this World Anymore*, Blair finds the elusive sweet spot between a quirky and unmistakably-indie film, and a fun, energetic, and accessible genre film. The fact that the Grand Jury Prize for the U.S. Dramatic category went to such a likable film should quell Kenneth Turan and other critics' doubts toward this competition and its perceived elitism.

One drawback of Sundance screening Netflix Original productions in the major competitions stems from the fact that these films already have guaranteed worldwide distribution through their production company. The potential for obtaining a distribution deal is perhaps the biggest advantage that getting into Sundance offers independent filmmakers. The U.S. Dramatic competition gives films a powerful platform and a chance to get noticed by potential buyers; therefore, as Sundance gives this platform to Netflix productions that already have distribution, smaller films that need distribution deals in order to find any sort of success outside Sundance are denied that opportunity.

## Conclusion

In 2017, the American independent cinema exists and operates in a state of unprecedented flux. The rise of quality television and internet streaming platforms, coupled with billion-dollar corporations Netflix and Amazon's entries into the distribution and production spheres, call for a re-examination of what it means to be independent, or even what it means to be cinema. The Sundance Film Festival has served as one of the most influential institutions in the independent filmmaking community for decades, but the festival's growth and the aforementioned changes in the entertainment landscape have prompted many to accuse Sundance of losing its way.

On the surface, the 2017 edition of the festival was filled with paparazzi, glamorous parties, and in-your-face advertising from corporate sponsors such as YouTube, Acura, and Facebook. However, underneath the Hollywood-esque glitz, the Sundance Institute continues to support and exhibit a diverse range of independent filmmakers, while fostering an enriching community of artists and businesspeople who can help these filmmakers realize their storytelling potential. The films that screened at 2017's festival introduced plenty of fresh new voices to the American independent cinema, and the distributions companies that support these artists will help their films get seen around the world. Despite a few hiccups, including vapid, overly quirky films and out-of-place, failed vehicles for various A-list actors, Sundance's programming team once again curated a wide range of notable films that represent a cross section of American and international independent cinema.

As long as Sundance continues to discover new talent and show outstanding independent films, elements of the Hollywood establishment and the mainstream will continue to flock to the festival. Year after year the Sundance Institute and the festival's programming staff will be tested, and so far, they have continued to demonstrate their integrity, value, and significance within the world of independent film.

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