

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

2017 Sundance Film Festival – More Relevant Than Ever!

Sophia Stein · Wednesday, January 18th, 2017

Sundance is upon us, and I feel as excited as a child awaiting the arrival of Christmas morning for a chance to peek under the tree. What devilish delights will the festival unveil in 2017? Time to buckle up and head out into the snowy hinterland, to enter the mother-ship of cinematic sustenance. What better place to take refuge from the impending coronation than in the Church of Cinematic Arts at the 2017 Sundance Film Festival.

In that the 120 feature-length films that made the cut from some 4,068 submissions were, for the most part, crafted and selected prior to the outcome of this election, I found myself wondering if they would feel relevant to the present climate. It is possible that these films will feel more reflective of the final days of the Obama era, than this brave new world (*1984*, retrograde) ...

Sometimes a film benefits from a jolt of vitality in the timing of its release. Things should heat right up on opening night of the festival with the documentary premiere of *An Inconvenient Sequel: Truth to Power*, the 10th+ anniversary report on the state of the planet regarding the climate change crisis. The film promises to “show how close we are to a real solution.” I am hoping that the sequel will inoculate us all to better withstand the threatened assault from the openly hostile, incredulously insensible, incoming administration. I remember well the powerful change in the zeitgeist in the aftermath of the debut of the original documentary film back in 2006, and I am banking on this sequel to pack a knock-out punch.

The three additional opening night documentaries are equally hard-hitting: *Whose Streets* (US Documentary Competition) provides an accounting from members of the Ferguson community in fomenting an uprising that sparked a global movement in the wake of Michael Brown’s killing. *The Workers Cup* (World Documentary Competition) leads us into the labor camps of Qatar, where African and Asian migrant workers busy constructing stadiums for the 2022 World Cup, compete in a football tournament of their own. *Dayveon* (Documentary Premiere) takes on the lure of gang violence upon a vulnerable adolescent boy in a small Arkansas town.

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By contrast, the three opening night narrative features, seem to strike a lighter cord: *I Don’t Feel at Home in This World Anymore* (US Dramatic Competition) may deserve the award for most emotionally resonant title in the festival! Melanie Lynskey plays a depressed woman who is burglarized and finds a new sense of purpose in tracking down the thieves with her obnoxious neighbor, played by Elijah Wood. In *The Little Hours* (Midnight), a young servant takes flight

from his master and seeks refuge in a dysfunctional medieval Tuscan convent; it features an all star cast that includes: Alison Brie, Dave Franco, Kate Micucci, Aubrey Plaza, John C. Reilly, Molly Shannon. And ***Pop Aye*** (World Cinema Dramatic Competition) concerns the reunion of a man and his long-lost elephant as they embark on a journey across Thailand in search of the farm where they grew up together.



Zoe Kazan and Kumail Nanjiani, *The Big Sick*, Michael Showalter, Director.

An official selection of the Premieres program at the 2017 Sundance Film Festival.

Courtesy of Sundance Institute, photo by Nicole Rivelli.

Among the nineteen narrative feature premieres, some highlights include:

The Polka King: featuring Jack Black as Jan Lewan, King of the Polka Ponzi scheme; from writer-director Maya Forbes (*Infinitely Polar Bear*) and co-writer Wolly Wolodarsky.

The Big Sick: Zoe Kazan across from writer and co-star Kumail Nanjiani, with Holly Hunter, Ray Romano, and Anupam Kher in a romantic comedy of clashing cultures.

Marjorie Prime: John Hamm, Geena Davis, Lois Smith, and Tim Robbins: 86-year old Marjorie has a handsome new companion who looks like her deceased husband and is programmed to feed the story of her life back to her.

Manifesto: Cate Blanchett, in a solo performance, an homage to the twentieth century's most impassioned artistic statements and innovations, from Futurists to Dadaists to Pop Art.

The Discovery: Jason Segel, Rooney Mara, Robert Redford, Jesse Plemons, Riley Keough, and Ron Canada, in a love story set in the "afterlife."

Rebel in the Rye: A portrait of the reclusive author of *Catcher in the Rye*, J.D. Salinger; featuring Kevin Spacey and Sarah Paulson.



Rooney Mara and Casey Affleck, *A Ghost Story*, David Lowery, Director.

An official selection of the NEXT program at the 2017 Sundance Film Festival.

Courtesy of Sundance Institute, photo by Andrew Droz Palermo.

Some of my favorite film and television makers return to Sundance Film Festival, in other categories:

A Ghost Story (NEXT) – A ghost and the house he haunts, from director David Lowry, in collaboration once more with Casey Affleck and Rooney Mara, who were so affecting in Lowry's earlier film, *Ain't Them Bodies Saints*.

City of Ghosts (US Documentary Competition) – Academy-award nominated documentary director Matthew Heineman follows a group of citizen journalists who banded together after their homeland was overtaken by ISIS.

I Love Dick (Special Events) – the first three episodes from the latest Amazon Original series from Jill Soloway (*Transparent*); the unraveling of a marriage, the deification of a reluctant messiah, and the awakening of the female gaze.

Anticipation is a little like political polling. There is only so much you can accurately predict. I hope to have some specifics for you in short time. In my experience, the real merit of a film becomes apparent over time. Does the film stay with you? Does it inhabit your dreams? Or does it vanish into the ether shortly after consumption.

Among the experiences that made the strongest impression upon me from last year were the Virtual Reality experiences that literally BLEW MY MIND!

I had a chance to test drive several of the VR experiences. In *DeFrost*, I was rolled in a wheelchair down a corridor to reunite with the family that I hadn't seen since the time of my freezing, thirty years prior. It was a surprisingly emotional. When in the end, the family members held up a mirror to reveal my appearance, I had given over so completely to the experience, that I was expecting to see my own reflection in the mirror, and I felt a jolt of shock when the face reflected back was the face of an elderly woman – that of a character! The character that I had been assigned by the filmmaker.

My Oculus Rift flight in *The Martian VR Experience* felt akin to a ride in an amusement park, with sensor-round shaking and rumbling. I got to step in the shoes of astronaut Mark Watney to fly the spaceship on the surface of Mars and to reenact the final sequence in Ridley Scott's film, whirling through space to my tethered target.

The epiphany for me last year, however, was *Job Simulator*. Putting on the goggles and gloves, I was dropped into an alternate universe, a cartoon-like office environment, where I was free to “work” or “play” at will. I could pour myself a cup of coffee, eat a donut, fly a paper airplane, or photocopy my head! What really ignited my imagination was the possibility of crafting a story in which you, the protagonist of the story, are free to move through an environment, improvising as you go. You could be invited to solve a mystery, for example. It was a demonstration of the potential of the medium to evolve one day into a full-fledged Star Trek Holodeck. Shari Frilot, Sundance Film Festival Senior Programmer and Chief Curator of New Frontier, put it best: “Through Virtual Reality, Augmented Reality and various crafted immersive experiences, New Frontier ... challenges the very nature of perception and what we consider to be ‘reality.’”



Chasing Coral: The VR Experience, Jeff Orlowski, Director.

An official selection of the New Frontier VR Experiences program, the 2017 Sundance Film Festival. Courtesy of Sundance Institute.

From 346 submissions, Sundance programmers have curated 26 installations for the 2017 festival – 15 Virtual Reality experiences and 11 immersive installations. I am curious to see how filmmakers and technologists are pushing the boundaries of the new medium, advancing the lexicon and introducing innovations.

Three of the Virtual Reality experiences in 2017 form part of The New Climate initiative. In *Tree*, you are transformed into a rainforest tree; *Chasing Coral: The VR Experience* takes you underwater to experience the 2016 coral bleaching even at Lizard Island on the Great Barrier Reef; and in *Melting Ice*, Al Gore takes viewers on an exploration of the consequences of climate change on Greenland's ice sheet. Along with the 26 installations, New Frontier will feature a number of panels with provocative titles, such as, **Mind Meld: Our Biodigital Future** and **Step Right Up: Live VR and Multi-User VR**.

Even if you are not able to make the trek to Park City yourself to experience all the festival promises this year, do not despair. Play along at home.

First off, Sundance is offering an abundance of content online:

13 panels, 3 short films and 1 special event, to be specific.

A sampling of panels and performances that will livestream includes:

Power of Story: The New Climate: to convene former Vice President of the United States Al Gore, global entrepreneur and philanthropist Jeff Skoll, scientist and broadcaster Dr. David Suzuki, former President of the Maldives Mohamed Nasheed, filmmaker Heather Rae, and moderator Amy Goodman. **Sunday, January 22** (1:30 p.m. PT, 2:30 p.m. MT, 4:30 p.m. ET)

Power of Story: Art of Episodic Writing: to gather Gina Prince-Bythewood and Reggie Rock Bythewood (*Shots Fired*), Larry Karaszewski (*The People v. O.J. Simpson*), Marti Noxon (*To the Bone*), Issa Rae (*Insecure*), Jill Soloway (*Transparent*), and moderator Michelle Satter (Founding Director, Sundance Institute Feature Film Program) in conversation about creating and navigating the future of episodic storytelling. **Thursday, January 26** (1:30 p.m. PT, 2:30 p.m. MT, 4:30 p.m. ET)

The Cinema Cafe Conversation Between Jon Hamm and Sam Elliott. Saturday, January 21 (10:30 a.m. PT, 11:30 a.m. MT, 1:30 p.m. ET)

A Celebration of Music and Film: Centered on the theme “There is a Crack in Everything / That’s How the Light Gets In,” based on lyrics by Leonard Cohen. An evening of music and readings celebrating free speech, diverse voices, and the power of art to unite us and propel us forward, including musical performances from Common, Andra Day, Hunter Hayes, Jim James (My Morning Jacket) and Rotana Tarazbouni, and with speakers including Gael Garcia Bernal, Ava DuVernay, Jenny Slate, Rory Kennedy, Nick Offerman and more. **Saturday, January 21** (6:00-9:00 p.m. PT, 7:00-10:00 p.m. MT, 9:00 p.m.-midnight ET)

Here are links to three short films from this year’s festival that are already available online:

Dear Mr Shakespeare

Deer Squad: The Movie

Project X

And from the Special Events section, the pilot of *I Love Dick* is available on [Amazon](#).

There are a couple of applications that you may want to check out with trial subscriptions:

Sundance Now

Sundance TV

There is always an opportunity to sample standouts from past years of Sundance Film Festival:

If you are looking for a way to commemorate the legacy of President Obama, I would suggest the

highly original and seamlessly executed *Southside with You*. Writer-director Richard Tanne has ingeniously imagined the first date ever between Barack and Michelle. Casting of Parker Sawyers and Tika Sumpter are spot on, hitting all the right notes. The score by Stephen James Taylor is lyrical as a summer's day. *Southside With You* is comfort food for the soul.

If you want to plug into the redemptive power of comedy as an agent of political and social change, you couldn't do better than the documentary that opened Sundance 2016, *Norman Lear: Just Another Version of You*. If you are of a certain age, it is nostalgic in all the right ways. And if you are too young to remember Lear's legacy, the clips will provide a genuine awakening. Lear is a master at navigating that fine tension that the crafting of truly significant art demands. You might also be interested to check out Norman Lear's remake of *One Day at a Time*, on Netflix.



Hooligan Sparrow, Nanfu Wang, Director.

An official selection of the 2016 Sundance Film Festival, short-listed for the Academy Award.

Photo courtesy of Sundance Institute.

If you are planning on joining the Women's March in Washington on Saturday, January 21, and you want to prepare yourself psychologically, perhaps you would do well to screen the documentary film, *Hooligan Sparrow*, which has been short-listed for the Oscar. With perseverance, creativity, strength, humor and indomitable spirit, protestor Hooligan Sparrow wages a war for the prosecution of government and school officials who have raped their minor students. "I can bear discomfort. I cannot bear injustice," Sparrow explains. Director Nanfu Wang never thought of herself as an activist in the traditional sense, as someone who would shout slogans on the street. "It all depends on how you define an activist," she explains. "To be a witness and to not be passive. I am an activist," she freely admits.

In solidarity with our feminist sisters and feminist brothers at the Women's March on Washington, Chelsea Handler meanwhile will be leading the charge in Park City with the **Women's March on Main**, Saturday January 21, 9am – 11 am, starting location Wasatch Brew Pub, 220 Main Street.

I will close with a quote from President Barak Obama on the salve of reading fiction while in the White House:

"I found myself better able to imagine what's going on in the lives of people throughout my presidency because of ... the act of reading fiction ... At a time when events move so quickly and so much information is transmitted, the ability to slow down and get perspective, along with the ability to get in somebody else's shoes — those two things have been invaluable to me ... When so much of our politics is trying to manage this clash of cultures brought about by globalization, and technology, and migration, the role of stories to unify — as opposed to divide, to engage — rather than to marginalize, is more important than ever."

This is precisely why I feel blessed to spend the next twelve days at the **2017 Sundance Film Festival**.

Top Image: Melanie Lynskey and Elijah Wood, *I Don't Feel at Home In This World Anymore*.
Courtesy of Sundance Institute.

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