

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Biggest Sundance Winners? Millennials

Adam Leipzig · Wednesday, January 22nd, 2014

The Sundance Film Festival still has days to go; dealmaking is quickening and awards will be bestowed this weekend. But already we can declare the winners: the Millennial audience.

Millennials—aged roughly 18 to 30—have, at last, become a viable target for distributors. A year ago, a seasoned distribution exec told me that the audience for art-house movies is “female, over 50, liberal, in the top 12 markets and, frequently, Jewish. Young people,” he continued, “don’t have a tradition of going to movies.”

That’s not true anymore. While the older audience is still here, we are at a pivot point, as we’re now seeing the Millennial generation embrace films made just for them, largely because of the Netflix/iTunes revolution. That’s good news for filmmakers, many of whom come from and speak to this generation, and for all of us who love movies, because the brightest cinematic voices are emerging from this cohort.

Poster child for this new wave: Distributor [A24 Films](#), a company you may not have heard of unless you are in the movie biz. A24 launched just over a year ago, and had their first significant outing with Harmony Korine’s *Spring Breakers* in March, 2013. They followed up with Sofia Coppola’s *The Bling Ring* and James Ponsoldt’s *The Spectacular Now*.

At Sundance, A24 has picked up two romantic comedies: *Laggies* and *Obvious Child*. Both are wonderful movies.

Laggies stars Kiera Knightley as Megan, a twenty-something who has never grown up. When her longtime boyfriend proposes to her, and she catches her dad cheating on her mom, it throws her into a tailspin, which she resolves by spending a week in hiding at the house of 16-year-old Annika (Chloë Grace Moretz, whose sensitive performance holds the heart of the film). Despite its first 20 minutes, which are beat-for-beat predictable, *Laggies* wins you over with its humor and honesty.



Jenny Slate in ‘Obvious Child.’ Photo by Chris Teague, courtesy Sundance Institute.

As I was waiting for *Laggies* to start, I spoke with a veteran agent about *Obvious Child*, the laugh-out-loud, raw, truthful story of Donna Stern (Jenny Slate, in a breakout performance), a stand-up comic who has a one night stand, gets pregnant, and schedules an abortion on Valentine’s Day. Despite being line-for-line the funniest movie at Sundance, the agent I was talking to didn’t think *Obvious Child* would get picked up. “You can’t play it in the Red States,” he argued, because

abortion is too controversial.

I had been thrilled that writer/director Gillian Robespierre didn't wimp out or genuflect to the religious right (tiny spoiler alert): in the third act Donna goes through with the abortion. Which, of course, is what most Millennials would do, given the circumstances. By the time the *Laggies* screening was over, A24 had concluded their deal for *Obvious Child*. I look forward to their marketing campaign for what's probably the first abortion-romantic-comedy.

Here is what distributors need to understand about Millennials:

- They care more about constructive co-existence than ideological divides. (When members of the Millennial generation are elected to political office, the Red State/Blue State animosity will give way to we're-all-in-this-together compromise.)
- Geography doesn't matter in the same way, so it isn't important if a theatre in Mississippi won't play *Obvious Child*. Millennials in Mississippi will be watching it on their laptops and tablets.
- Millennials have many entertainment options, and *still* love movies.

A24 understands all of this. As a young, lean company, with only about 20 people on staff, they largely represent the audience they serve. They have also discovered efficient ways to use social media to sell tickets, because they target their audience more closely.

If you take a look at social media numbers, however, you may be in for a surprise. A24 has less than 10,000 Twitter followers, compared to much larger indie film distributors Focus Features (212,000) and Fox Searchlight (426,000). But A24 has the *right* followers. Social media, it turns out, isn't only about quantity. It's also about quality, and A24's followers, on Twitter and elsewhere, are a precisely honed group of Millennials who are smart, often cynical, movie-lovers.

On the first day of Sundance, A24 tweeted: "Critics, pls come to agreement on WoWS. Half of reviews say Leo is blowing the cocaine IN, half say he's snorting it OUT. It can't be both." It's a reference to the early scene in *Wolf of Wall Street*, where Leonardo diCaprio's character is either blowing cocaine into, or snorting cocaine out of, a hooker's moon-shaped ass. This is a case of the tweet being better than the scene, and of a distributor knowing precisely who its audience is.

As other distributors follow A24's example and more films by and for Millennials get greater play, the Sundance winners will be all of us. We will benefit from the opportunity to see more good movies the old guard would have cast aside.



A24's Sundance opening-day tweet.

Top image: Chloë Grace Moretz (left) and Kiera Knightley in 'Laggies,' directed by Lynn Shelton. Photo by Barbara Kinney, courtesy of Sundance Institute.

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