

2013 Sundance Diary, Day 2: Porn, Cannibalism & Drugs From the Frontlines of Indie Film

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on January 19, 2013 - 8:26pm

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PARK CITY, Utah – Battling the thousands who have descended upon Park City, Utah for a small portion of their Wi-Fi bandwidth, I’m back with my second report from the frontlines of independent cinema. As expected, the first few days of Sundance Film Festival 2013 have produced a mixed bag of quality with a few films I absolutely loved, a few of the best performances you’ll see this year in any theater, a few notable mistakes in storytelling, and a few all-out misfires. Let’s start with the good stuff.

Jeff Nichols returned to the fest this year with his stellar “**Mud**,” a coming-of-age story that plays like part noir, part fairy tale, and part thriller. Matthew McConaughey (continuing his amazing streak following the great work he did in 2012) stars as the title character, a drifter that two young boys named Ellis and Neckbone stumble upon living in a boat in a tree on a deserted island. Mud weaves a fascinating tale for the impressionable lads about a girl named Juniper (Reese Witherspoon), who will soon come to meet him and the two will live happily ever after. Ellis, who is dealing with a disintegrating family on the verge of divorce, is enraptured by Mud’s sense of old-fashioned chivalry. When a police officer shows him a mug shot of Mud, he begins to learn the truth about his past. Sam Shepard, Sarah Paulson, and Michael Shannon co-star in a film that works best when viewed as a brilliant metaphor for how a child deals with divorce. He wishes his dad would go to illegal means to keep his Juniper from leaving him. McConaughey is simply mesmerizing. It’s one of his best performances to date. And the film looks amazing as Nichols displays an incredible touch for setting and visual composition. I can’t wait to see it again.



Kill Your Darlings
Photo credit: Sundance

Just as remarkable (maybe even more so) is John Krokida’s “**Kill Your Darlings**,” an incredibly engrossing true story about a murder that involved Allen Ginsberg (Daniel Radcliffe), Jack Kerouac (Jack Huston of “Boardwalk Empire”), and William S. Burroughs (Ben Foster). The fascinating tale is told from Ginsberg’s perspective, as a young future “Howl” writer arrives at Columbia and immediately falls under the spell of the charismatic Lucien Carr (Dane Dehaan of “Chronicle”). Lucien encourages Allen (and Jack and William) to start a new vision of writing. Tear down the rules being taught in class and start anew. However, Lucien himself can’t fully start anew as an old boyfriend named David (Michael C. Hall) continues to haunt him, even following him around the world. Jennifer Jason Leigh, Kyra Sedgwick, and David Cross co-star. “Darlings” is a multi-tiered accomplishment. Not only is Krokidas’ script smart, funny, and fully engaging but the ensemble performance is spectacular. And his directorial choices (such as including a modern band like TV on the Radio prominently on the soundtrack) are consistently refreshing. Radcliffe has never been better and I’m convinced more every day that Jack Huston is going to be a giant star but the film belongs to Dehaan, who gives one of those breakout Sundance performances a la Elizabeth Olsen in “Martha Marcy May Marlene” or Jennifer Lawrence in “Winter’s Bone.”





Emanuel and the Truth About Fishes
Photo credit: Sundance

Dehaan gives the most breakout performance I've seen at the fest so far (although many are raving about Miles Teller's work in "The Spectacular Now") but Kaya Scodelario challenges him for "who is THAT?" status as the lead in "**Emanuel and the Truth About Fishes**," a film that really works for awhile but stumbles down the line as melodrama overtakes the more interesting tones of the first half. It's a film that's almost impossible to write about without giving away a major plot point and so I'm going to be purposefully and annoyingly vague (even if I imagine most critics are going to spoil it since it happens so early and is so essential to a full review of the film...I didn't know it, so I won't ruin it). Scodelario (who was great in Andrea Arnold's "Wuthering Heights") plays the unique (the most common descriptor for Sundance characters) Emanuel, a woman haunted by the fact that her mother died in childbirth with her. It has defined her life. When a single mother named Linda (Jessica Biel) moves in next door, Emanuel becomes drawn to her, clearly looking for a maternal connection. She finds that Linda is far-more-damaged than she could imagine. "Emanuel" features a drastic plot point that will instantly push some out of the film but I found the approach interesting and the thematic work engrossing...for about an hour. Then "Fishes" loses its way, making some serious narrative mistakes in the final act. Scodelario is good throughout. I really look forward to what she does next.

Let's stay positive for now and move to another creative voice here at Sundance who brought a work that provokes viewers to immediately want to see his next work as soon as it's over — Jim Mickle, director of "Mulberry Street" and "Stake Land," at the 2013 fest with "**We Are What We Are**," a midnight horror movie that connected with the Sundance audience like only a great scare flick can when it premiered last night. "We Are What We Are" doesn't feature any stunning narrative twists (itself a rarity in horror...which seems based almost solely on the gotcha plot twist in recent years), which allows Mickle to play with the uncomfortable facts we know about the Parker family — they eat people. Following a self-defined religion that dictates they must consume flesh to be cleansed of sin, the Parkers are starting to go crazy and they really unravel after the death of the matriarch brings a medical examiner (the great Michael Parks) and local police sniffing around their door. Mickle shows an amazing eye for composition, shooting large chunks of "We Are" with no dialogue, allowing visual storytelling to, pardon the pun, set the table for what's to come. And when "We Are What We Are" does get to the inevitable chaos, Mickle pulls no punches, staging a climax that Sundance will never forget. This will, without question, be one of the best horror films of 2013.



Don Jon's Addiction
Photo credit: Sundance

Shifting gears entirely, which is what you have to do several times a day at Sundance, I'm not done with docs at this year's fest and "**After Tiller**" is one of the most emotionally wrenching and powerful non-fiction pieces this year. The film seeks to re-humanize those who have been turned into demons by those who oppose what they do or pioneering heroes by those who support it. In fact, the two men and two women who comprise the only four doctors who still do third-trimester abortions after the shooting death of George Tiller are real people. They have real concerns about what they do. They have real questions. And they have come to real conclusions. "Tiller" details their pasts and spends time with them as they listen to women speak of fetal abnormalities that will kill their baby in a matter of days. It doesn't focus nearly any energy on the opposition (seen almost entirely on the sidewalk in front of clinics) or alternate viewpoints, choosing to de-politicize the practice as much as possible. These people are doing what they think is right and the filmmakers don't really take into account the argument that it's not. They're fighting for a legal practice. I agree with that fight but might have done so even more with a more fully-rounded examination of the issue. However, that's not *this* movie. It's a hard one to shake because it's so human, so real. I've actually seen four films since it at this writing and I can't shake it. I have a feeling it will take many more films for me to do so.

Sounds like I loved everything this year, right? "Mud," "Kill Your Darlings," "We Are What We Are," and "After Tiller" are among the tops of the fest and I look forward to writing about them more when they're released but, no, I don't love everything. Even as much as I adore Joseph Gordon-Levitt and consider him one of the best actors of his generation, I can't get behind his directorial debut, the sitcomish "**Don Jon's Addiction**," a comedy about porn addiction with some definite laughs but a first hour so flawed on multiple levels that the strong final act can't really save the flick. Jon (Gordon-Levitt) is a "Jersey Shore"-esque meathead who goes to the gym, goes to his lackluster job, and goes to the

club. In between, he has family dinners (with a very funny Tony Danza as his dad) and goes to church to confess his sins. Oh yeah, he also masturbates 20-30 times a week to internet porn. He doesn't think it's a problem. It's "Saturday Night Shame." "Jerking Off Shore." OK, I'll stop now. Two women (played by Scarlett Johansson & Julianne Moore) challenge Jon's thoughts about porn and his whole life in very different ways. Everyone here is good but "Addiction" spins its wheels for an hour with sitcom set-ups (it even resembles one at times with a really lackluster sense of design) and failure to ground its characters. When Moore gets an enhanced role in the final act, one can more clearly see the movie JGL was trying to make all along and she's nearly reason to see the comedy on her own but not quite. JGL has made so many great films in his short career. He's allowed a misstep like this every once in awhile.



Crystal Fairy
Photo credit: Sundance

Speaking of missteps, while Sebastian Silva & Michael Cera were making "Magic Magic," which is also playing at this year's fest and I "might" see, they ran out of money and decided to make another flick while financing was coming through to continue their first one. The shot-in-12-days result is the loose "**Crystal Fairy**," a road trip flick about an American (Cera) who travels with three Chilean brothers and a true hippie chick named Crystal Fairy (Gaby Hoffman) across the country to find a rare cactus that they can cook, get high on, and watch the sunrise. Cera allows himself to be a true jerk, pushing everyone socially to do what he wants to do and doing copious amounts of drugs. And there are some funny moments in "Crystal Fairy," but like an all-night bender in which you come down before everyone else, it gets tired long before it ends. There's a stronger, 20-minutes-shorter version of "Fairy," and considering how often films are cut from Utah to the rest of the world, hopefully that's the movie you'll see.

The final movie for this diary is "**Who is Dayani Cristal?**," a quasi-documentary from the great Gael Garcia Bernal. In the Arizona desert in 2010 a body of a migrant trying to make his way from Honduras to the United States was found. He had no identification other than a tattoo across his chest that read "Dayani Cristal." Bernal uses this case as a springboard for an on-the-ground examination of how men are dying trying to get the States for a better life and what we can do about it. He travels himself along the path that "Cristal" must have followed, riding the train full of immigrants, stopping at the stations along the way, and even jumping the wall. He blurs truth and fiction as it's unclear how he explained the camera to other migrants or if any of his interactions were scripted or directed. The result is a film that feel blurry overall. The plight of the immigrant and how further restrictions are only leading to more deaths is well known and "Cristal" doesn't add enough to the conversation to stand out at a crowded fest. It's loud here. I'll keep shouting over the crowd tomorrow. If I can find some damn WiFi that works.

[Read all of Brian Tallerico's coverage from Sundance 2013!](#) [11]



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