

## 2014 Sundance Diary, Day 1: The Truth is in the Journey

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on January 17, 2014 - 6:54pm

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I'm back in Park City for another week of premieres, interviews, and screenings of at least a few films that the community will be talking about all year. Last year's Sundance produced "The Spectacular Now," "Stories We Tell," "Mud," "Upstream Color," "Before Midnight," "Ain't Them Bodies Saints," and more. What will impact this year? Nothing that I've seen yet although the buzz on "Whiplash" has been deafening. As the festival unfolds, I'll pop in here once a day and just let you know what I've seen and what I thought. Of course, come back to the site for longer reviews throughout the year but consider a great 2014 movie preview.

As is often the case, Sundance starts slowly. Some of the films I've seen, I can't write about yet, and I didn't make anything Opening Night. So we're just getting started. And so we're left with a few foreign films, a few docs, and a Tom Hardy drama to serve as our appetizers for this year's fest.



Blind

*Photo credit: Sundance*

Let's start with the best narrative feature of the bunch, Eskil Vogt's daring, unique "**Blind**". The writer of "Reprise" and "Oslo, August 31" brings this directorial effort to Park City this year and it's one of the most unique films at the fest. The striking Ellen Dorrit Petersen plays Ingrid, a woman who has slowly lost her ability to see. She's newly blind, and home alone with nothing but wine and her imagination. She's losing the power to visualize that which she knew before she lost her sight and she questions everything around her. Has her husband (Henrik Rafaelsen) snuck in to watch her? How would she know? Vogt's film intercuts Ingrid's increasing depression with stories of a lonely man longing for connection and his neighbor, who may be having an affair with Ingrid's husband. If she exists. "Blind" begins to play with a very unreliable narrator, a woman who may be writing the stories of everyone around her.

I'm sure that I'll write about "Blind" more in the future but I know that it's one of the most daring films I'll see all year, not just at Sundance.

How does a visual medium represent someone losing their sight? Sound design. Focus on touch. Close-ups of faces, arms, fingers, chests. It becomes a very sensual film and then it becomes a fantastical one. It is a work about loneliness, longing, lust, passion. A few of the beats seem a bit on-the-nose and the symbolism can be hit a little too bluntly at times but the performances are daring and the narrative fascinating. I'll be happy if I can say that about more films at Sundance 2014.



Private Violence  
Photo credit: Sundance

The best Sundance 2014 film I've seen to date is Cynthia Hill's **"Private Violence"**, an important documentary about domestic abuse. Yes, important. Hill's film truly feels like it has the power to make change. She chronicles two people — a victim's rights advocate named Kit and a victim named Deanna. The former has been working with women to protect them more than our broken legal system is capable of doing and the latter has gone through horrors you don't even want to imagine. Beaten nearly to death, thrown into the back of a truck, and taken across state lines as a kidnapping victim, Deanna's story is one of the most harrowing I've heard in a film. And her telling it is heroic. "Private Violence" is a tough watch but it's about a subject that demands toughness. Hill brilliantly allows the stories of her subjects to unfold organically, refusing to give us the distance that comes with documentarian tricks like narration or title cards full of statistics. Many years after I have shaken off a large portion of my Sundance 2014 schedule, "Private Violence" will still haunt me.

So will **"Ida"**. Pawel Pawlikowski, the director of "Last Resort" and "My Summer of Love," has already taken this striking drama to international film festivals, drawing the attention of Music Box Films who will release it later this year. It is 1960s Poland and Anna (the stunning Agata Trzebuchowska) is about to take her final vows at the convent in which she was raised. Before she does so, her superior believes she should meet her family. The only connection she has back to the real world, after being left as a baby on the steps of the church, is her aunt, Wanda Gruz (Agata Kulesza), who has ignored her existence for years. Anna finds Wanda and learns that not only is she Jewish but that her parents were killed in the war. The two go to try and find their bodies.

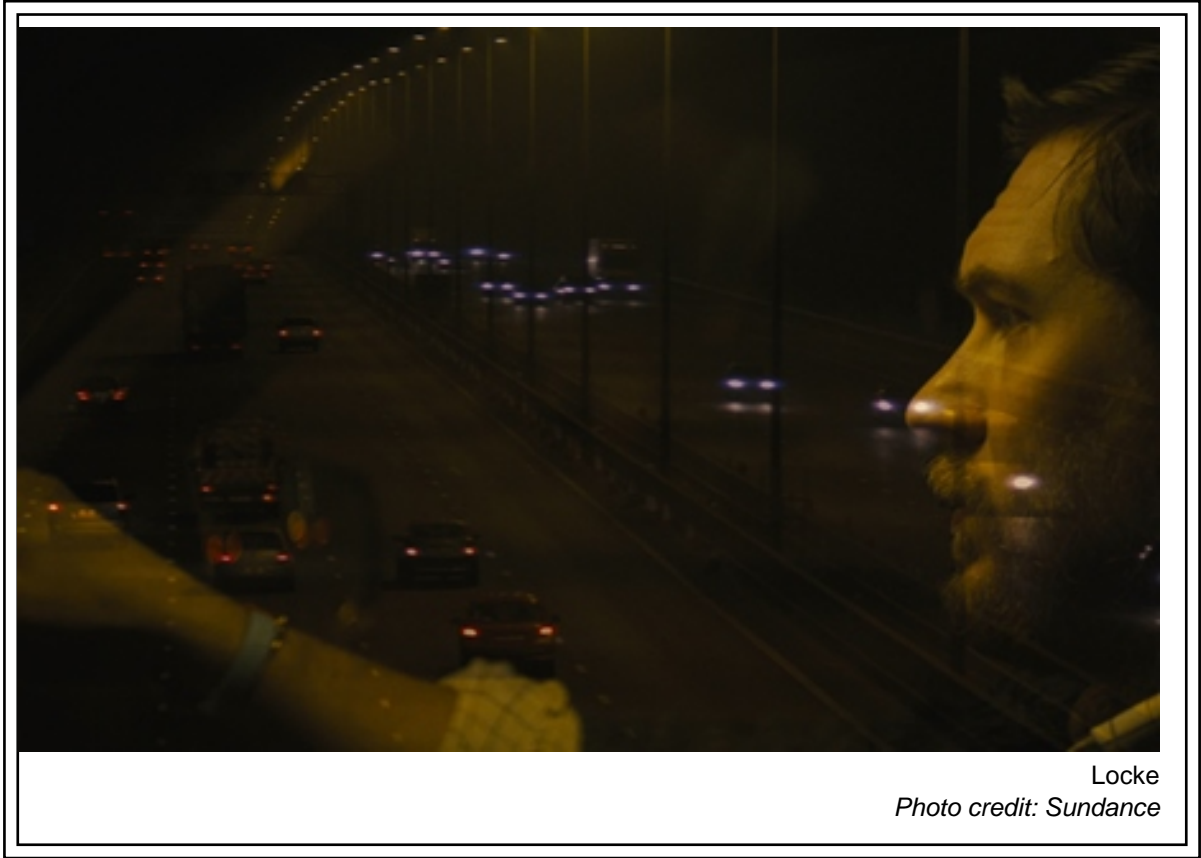


Ida  
Photo credit: Sundance

"Ida" contains some of the most remarkable cinematography I'll see all year, photographed in full-frame black & white with a painter's eye. You could frame shots of this film and sell them for a fortune. It's gorgeous. And it's thematically framed as our characters are so often at the bottom of what feels like a giant image, so much space above them, from us to the heavens. "Ida" took a little while to work on me. It's a very slow film. But it got under my skin and is sure to haunt me.

While Ida's journey is one into his own past, the trip of **"Locke"** is to a brand new future. The amazing Tom Hardy plays the title character, a Construction Director who has to make a choice. He has the biggest concrete pour of his career the next morning and he's expected to be there to coordinate. He'll be fired if he's not. And yet he leaves town. He doesn't go home. He has to go to London. Why? The affair he had

seven months ago is about to result in a baby.



The entirety of “Locke” takes place behind the wheel of that car on that journey to London. Locke calls his boss, employee, wife, and mistress, and it allows for an actor’s showcase for Hardy, who may have never been better. Those of you who thought he disappeared into Bane in “The Dark Knight Rises” get nothing but the actor here, fully enunciating every word. He’s amazing but the conceit of the film feels like something of a cheat. There are a few too many times when the narrative trick of the real-time journey reminded me I was watching a movie. See it for Hardy but I wish I loved it more.

Finally, there are a pair of documentaries premiering at the fest that I was lucky enough to see early. Rory Kennedy’s “**Last Days in Vietnam**” seems remarkably important viewing given our President’s claim that we will be out of Afghanistan by the end of this year. When a conflict like Vietnam ends, people don’t just pack up their war games and go home. When Nixon got out of Vietnam, it was the opportunity for the North Vietnamese to invade. Not only were there still Americans there but we had South Vietnamese allies and even war materials that we wouldn’t want stolen. How do you LEAVE a war? Kennedy’s film has some fascinating archival material, especially the footage of waves of helicopters trying to leave the country, and should make for informative viewing when it premieres on PBS. It’s an interesting piece of history that hasn’t really been told.

And then there’s “**This May Be the Last Time**”. If you’re like me, you started humming The Rolling Stones when you read that title and it’s relevant. That song was based on a Native American hymn and Sterlin Harjo’s film focuses on how hymnals, religious, passionate music, have played such a role in the Native American experience, making it personal by relating it to the 1962 disappearance of his grandfather. As people searched for him, they sang these songs, music that brings them closer to both the spirits of this world and the land in which they still roam. It’s an interesting work, the kind of film that I think festivals can highlight.

Back tomorrow with thoughts on “Laggies,” “Hellion,” “The Guest,” “Blue Ruin,” and “God’s Pocket.” We’re just getting started.



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