

SUNDANCE FILM FESTIVAL 2009

WORLD CINEMA STANDOUTS:



211: ANNA

International Documentary Feature Films
Italy, 2008, 89 mins., color

Russia is the second-most-dangerous country in the world for journalists, after Iraq. The Russian Union of Journalists has recorded the names of its members killed in Russia since 1991. Anna Politkovskaya was number 211. Her assassination in 2006 was stunning in its simplicity: she was shot point blank in her apartment building in Moscow. Her murderer has never been identified, and it is widely assumed that her continuing coverage of the Russian government's brutality toward its own people, particularly in Chechnya, resulted in her death. 211: Anna weaves a story of modern Russia and a woman who passionately believed that the untold stories of everyday people were an unheralded history. As a journalist, she followed events heartbreaking in their cruelty, from the war in Chechnya to the siege of the Russian Parliament building to the death of hundreds of children during the Beslan school-hostage crisis. Her stark coverage brought her international recognition, as well as anonymous threats, poisoning attempts, and government reprisal. In the end, it brought death to her doorstep. Combining interviews with her husband of many years, Russian TV anchor Alexander Politkovski, her children, and her newspaper colleagues with the writings of Politovskaya herself, Italian directors Paolo Serbandini and Giovanna Massimetti create an impressionistic portrait of a woman, a nation, and a people under siege.



500 DAYS OF SUMMER

US Narrative Feature Films

U.S.A., 2009, 95 mins., color

The freshness of Marc Webb's love-me/love-me-not love story is epitomized by its perfectly framed tag lines...Boy meets Girl—Boy falls in love—Girl doesn't. What else can you say about a postmodern love story? Not only is this delightfully surprising dissection of a romance structured so that it catches us continually off guard, but the classic tale of love unrequited is turned as topsy-turvy as a Shakespearian farce. Directed with verve, pace, and confidence by first-time filmmaker Webb and replete with Los Angeles settings that are distinctive and interesting, 500 Days of Summer never descends into ordinary romance. The typical premise of the love story—that we want what we can't have—is fueled by a role reversal (it's the woman who doesn't want to commit) and energized by dance numbers, split screens, and two dynamic performances from Joseph Gordon-Levitt and Zooey Deschanel. That Tom, a hapless greeting-card copywriter, and the alluring Summer, his temporary office mate, fluctuate between the highs and lows of infatuation, dating, sex, and separation is the conventional aspect of an unconventional tale of self-discovery and relationships. For a new generation of storytellers, 500 Days of Summer is destined to be a template for the future of romantic inspiration.



AFGHAN STAR

International Documentary Feature Films
Afghanistan/United Kingdom, 2008, 87 mins., color

After 30 years of Taliban and wartime rule, pop culture is creeping back into Afghanistan. Director Havana Marking has captured it in this inspired documentary, *Afghan Star*. An *American Idol*-type contest set in Afghanistan? What more intriguing inroad into a region usually represented in our news media by death and violence? To understand the magnitude of this film, we must look at the facts—2,000 contestants compete for a chance to be the next Afghan pop idol. Three of them are women. In an unheard-of precedent, all genders, ethnic groups, and age sectors are equal. More than one-third of the country watches the show and votes with text messages. For many this represents their first encounter with any kind of democratic process. Marking follows the dramatic stories of four of the contestants over three months, from regional auditions to the finals in Kabul. All is not safe for her subjects because they must actually risk their lives to sing. In a larger sense, we get a glimpse into the ongoing struggle of a country trying to segue into the modern world and the dangerous underpinnings its citizens must navigate. Though moving and inspiring, what is really brilliant about *Afghan Star* is that by observing a people's relationship to pop culture, we get a different, if not more human, look at this troubled part of the world.



AMREEKA

US Narrative Feature Films

U.S.A./Canada/Kuwait, 2009, 96 mins., color

Director Cherien Dabis's auspicious debut feature, *Amreeka*, is a warm and lighthearted film about one Palestinian family's tumultuous journey into Diaspora amidst the cultural fallout of America's war in Iraq. Muna Farah, a Palestinian single mom, struggles to maintain her optimistic spirit in the daily grind of intimidating West Bank checkpoints, the constant nagging of a controlling mother, and the haunting shadows of a failed marriage. Everything changes one day when she receives a letter informing her that her family has been granted a U.S. green card. Reluctant to leave her homeland, but realizing it may be the only way to secure a future for Fadi, her teenage son, Muna decides to quit her job at the bank and visit her relatives in Illinois to see about a new life in a land that gives newcomers a run for their money. Dabis weaves an abundance of humor and levity into this tale of struggle, displacement, and nostalgia and draws an absorbing and irresistibly charming performance from actress Nisreen Faour as Muna, who stands at the heart of this tale. *Amreeka* glows with the truth and magic of everyday life and signals the arrival of an exciting, new directorial talent.



BRONSON

International Narrative Feature Films
United Kingdom, 2008, 92 mins., color

Charlie Bronson, Britain's most violent prisoner and the antihero of Nicolas Winding Refn's tour de force, is a man with a calling. He just needed jail time to find it. In 1974, Charlie robs a post office and draws a seven-year sentence. But stone walls do not a prison make. His "hotel room" becomes an incubator for his art, which is violence. Taking a perverse glee in fighting, he's sent to a mental institution, where, drugged and drooling, he still musters defiance. His eventual release is short lived, and he returns to jail. Placed in an art class, Charlie creates his masterpiece. It is not a painting. Though based on a real person, Bronson is less a biopic than a virtuosic explosion of style. With twisted imagery, the music of Wagner and Pet Shop Boys, and a stunning performance by Tom Hardy, Refn creates an aesthetic that is both complicit in Charlie's violence but also theatrical. Charlie narrates his own story before an audience, and the movie is just an extension of this burlesque staging. Our moral compass reeling, we're tempted to see him as an animal, but violence is simply the fullest expression of his identity. Overjoyed by his fame and ever-increasing capacity for harm, Charlie walks the cellblock beaming with pride. He has become somebody. He is—quite terrifyingly—the hero of his own story.



BURMA VJ

International Documentary Feature Films

Denmark, 2008, 85 mins., color

Armed with pocket-sized video cameras, a tenacious band of Burmese reporters face down death to expose the repressive regime controlling their country. In 2007, after decades of self-imposed silence, Burma became headline news across the globe when peaceful Buddhist monks led a massive rebellion. More than 100,000 people took to the streets protesting a cruel dictatorship that has held the country hostage for more than 40 years. Foreign news crews were banned, the Internet was shut down, and Burma was closed to the outside world. So how did we witness these events? Enter the Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB), aka the Burma VJs. Compiled from the shaky handheld footage of the DVB, acclaimed filmmaker Anders Ostergaard's *Burma VJ* pulls us into the heat of the moment as the VJs themselves become the target of the Burmese government. Their tactical leader, code-named Joshua, oversees operations from a safe hiding place in Thailand. Via clandestine phone calls, Joshua dispenses his posse of video warriors, who covertly film the abuses in their country, then smuggle their footage across the border into Thailand. Joshua ships the footage to Norway, where it is broadcast back to Burma and the world via satellite. *Burma VJ* plays like a thriller, all the more scary because it is true.



CARMO, HIT THE ROAD

International Narrative Feature Films
Spain, 2008, 100 mins., color

No shrinking violet, Carmo, the freewheeling lead of this energetic film, packs a wallop of sass. Feeling suffocated by her small town, she hits the road on her mile-long legs, traipsing through untamed Brazilian border country. Barely dodging the minefield of sleazy thugs at her heels, she is rescued by an unlikely knight in shining armor, who comes out of nowhere. Unfortunately, the uncouth Marco, bound only by his wheelchair, is reluctant to include her in his own getaway plans. Carmo is determined to prove they can be partners in crime, and they set out together in Marco's dilapidated truck, over treacherous terrain, to find the desperadoes who have hijacked Marco's loot. It's hard to tell what's more sizzling in this saucy adventure—the clashing chemistry between the two deliciously feisty leads or the dusty, but dazzling, South American landscape. With a comical and scandalous motley crew of characters, and an array of livewire cinematic gestures, Murilo Pasta's high-octane filmmaking refuels the classic road-trip genre. The thrill of taking a fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants ride through jagged paradise is accelerated by the explosive pairing of two strangers who have found their match and together will continue to fight destiny tooth and nail.



COVE

US Documentary Feature Films
U.S.A., 2008, 90 mins., color

Flipper was one of the most beloved television characters of all time. But ironically, the fascination with dolphins that he caused created a tragic epidemic that has threatened their existence and become a multibillion dollar industry. The largest supplier of dolphins in the world is located in the picturesque town of Taijii, Japan. But the town has a dark, horrifying secret that it doesn't want the rest of the world to know. There are guards patrolling the cove, where the dolphin capturing takes place, who prevent any photography. The only way to stop the evil acts of this company and the town that protects it is to expose them....and that's exactly what the brave group of activists in *The Cove* intend to do. Armed with state-of-the-art surveillance equipment, the members of the small group, led by the most famous dolphin trainer in the world, devise a covert plan to infiltrate the cove to document the horrifying events that happen there. Along the way, they uncover what may be the largest health crisis facing our planet—the poisoning of our seas. Part environmental documentary, part horror film, part spy thriller, *The Cove* is as suspenseful as it is enlightening. The final result is a heart-wrenching, but inspirational, story that shows the true power of film in the hands of people who aren't afraid to risk everything for a vital cause.



CRUDE

US Documentary Feature Films

U.S.A., 2009, 100 mins., color

Can 30,000 plaintiffs from five Indigenous Ecuadoran tribes find justice from Chevron, one of the world's largest oil producers? Who is responsible for the unconscionable dumping of 18 billion gallons of toxic oil waste in the Ecuadoran Amazon, poisoning the most biodiverse place on the planet? Filmmaker Joe Berlinger's latest documentary picks up the thread of the infamous ""Amazon Chernobyl"" case, a 13-year-old battle between communities nearly destroyed by oil drilling and development and one of the biggest companies on earth. In a sophisticated take on the classic David and Goliath story, Berlinger took three years to craft a cinema vérité portrait centering on the charismatic lawyers in the U.S. and Ecuador who have doggedly pursued the case against all of the forces a corporation can bring into courts of law. Though the Ecuadorans and their perspective receive the lion's share of screen time, the film makes a concerted effort to show the case from all sides: from the scientists and lawyers employed by Chevron, to Ecuadoran judges, to celebrity activists and humanitarian organizers, to the role of the media, to the dramatic intervention of Rafael Correa himself, the first Ecuadoran president to sympathize with the Indigenous perspective. In a tale that spans the globe, *Crude* looks beyond compassion for the disenfranchised and the corruption of those in power to ask how justice itself is being defined in the twenty-first century.



DADA'S DANCE

International Narrative Feature Films
China, 2008, 92 mins., color

Dada is the neighborhood coquette. She lives with her divorced mother, works at a pool hall, and is a tease to the local men, including the boy next door, Zhoa, who has a crush on her. One morning she catches him spying on her as she dances, but she continues to flirt with him. Her mother's lecherous new boyfriend also has eyes for her. But when she spurns his advances, he reveals that she's adopted. Hastily packing her bag, Dada heads out of town with Zhoa in search of her birth mother. Picking up on many of the themes that have fascinated him over the course of his career, Zhang Yuan (Little Red Flowers screened at the 2006 Sundance Film Festival) returns with a stylized rite-of-passage story that reflects broadly on contemporary love, disaffected youth, and existential malaise. As always, Zhang's stylization is distinctive—here most notably in the sensual imagery, eclectic music, and nocturnal motif that seems to swallow his characters even in the daytime. Dada inhabits a world of obscurity and ambivalence, where life has no gravity. Though Zhoa takes her to the adoption center, she laughs and runs off. She's unable to take anything seriously, even Zhoa who truly loves her. Although she shows outward signs of maturity, we're left to wonder whether the dance has really changed.



GLASS HOUSE

International Documentary Feature

U.S.A./Iran, 2008, 92 mins., color

The Glass House skillfully examines the mostly hidden lives of young women, teetering on the fringes of Iranian society in modern Tehran. Marginalized by their families, these women have found a saving grace in a day center formed by an Iranian expatriate. Marjaneh Halati opened the center to give downtrodden young women a voice, thus empowering them with the life skills they need to succeed on their own. Many of these teens previously spent time in a jail, hospital, or state home because they had no other options. Sussan is 20 years old and suffers from memory loss and a stutter as a result of a blow to the head either from her sigheh (temporary husband) or her abusive brother. Mitra is learning how to avoid confrontation with her father, who takes out his frustration on his 16-year-old daughter. Nazila, 19, finds an outlet for her anguish by recording as a rap singer, which is forbidden by law. The young women see Marjaneh as both a mother figure and a mentor and cherish her frequent visits from London. In superb cinema vérité style spanning 18 months, The Glass House deftly portrays a spirit of hopefulness. These former victims are given the chance to express themselves and transform their difficult circumstances into new beginnings.



KIMJONGILIA

US Documentary Feature Films

France/U.S.A./South Korea, 2008, 75 mins., color

North Korea is one of the world's most isolated nations. For almost 60 years, North Koreans have been governed by a totalitarian regime that controls almost all information entering and leaving the country. A cult of personality surrounds its two recent leaders: first, Kim Il Sung, and now his son, Kim Jong Il. For Kim Jong Il's 46th birthday, a hybrid red begonia named kimjongilia was created, symbolizing wisdom, love, justice, and peace. This film draws its name from the rarefied flower and reveals the extraordinary stories told by survivors of North Korea's vast and largely hidden prison camps. Interviewed in South Korea, where they now live, their experiences are interspersed with archival footage of North Korean propaganda films and original scenes that illuminate the contours of daily life for a people whose every action is monitored and whose every thought could bring official retribution. It's a world where justice and peace are impossible. First-time documentarian NC Heikin's background as a dancer and performance artist has influenced her approach to this stylish and deeply moving rendition of modern-day torture and the search for recovery. Far from being a litany of travails or a simple indictment of a government's actions, Kimjongilia is a totally original and ultimately inspiring consideration of the extremes human beings can suffer, and yet still hold out hope for a better future.



POMEGRANATES AND MYRRH

International Narrative Feature Films

Palestinian Territories, 2008, 95 mins., color

Dancer Kamar's joyful wedding to Zaid is followed almost immediately by Zaid's imprisonment in an Israeli jail for refusing to give up his land. Free-spirited Kamar wants to support her husband and be a dutiful wife but struggles with the idea of giving up dance and her own dreams. Matters are complicated when a new dance instructor, Kais, returns to the studio after many years in Lebanon and takes a special interest in Kamar. She struggles to deal with the weight of Kais's attention, which brings to the surface her attempts to balance her own desires with her duties as the wife of a prisoner. Like the character of Kamar herself, Najwa Najjar's filmmaking (in her debut feature) is matter-of-fact about Kamar's situation. Instead of manufacturing melodrama, Najjar stays focused on her protagonist's insistence on seeing her life, like anyone else's, as an opportunity for joy. The constant interference of the external conflict—her husband's arrest, the squatters on her land, and the soldiers filling the streets—is an unavoidable aspect of Kamar's existence but one that she will not allow to deter her. Najjar's intimate storytelling and Yasmine Al Massri's sensitive portrayal of Kamar create a film that addresses honestly the way a woman might face the realities of life in modern-day Palestine while refusing to be defined by them.



SIN NOMBRE

US Narrative Feature Films

U.S.A./Mexico, 2008, 96 mins., color

It's almost impossible to believe that *Sin Nombre* is Cary Joji Fukunaga's feature debut; its storytelling is so accomplished, its visual style so crisp, and its heightened naturalism and performances so textured. A social-political thriller in the tradition of American film noir, *Sin Nombre* is set on the border, where Mexico becomes the crucible and the fearsome gangs of today's Mexican countryside, the gauntlet, to freedom. The stories of Sayra, a teenager living in Honduras and hungering for a brighter future, and teen gang members Smiley and Casper, for whom the Mara Salvatrucha is nearly their entire universe, become interlaced on the train to the border, a journey that will determine the future of their lives. Young Casper is already a wary veteran of the "Mara," and his new recruit is the 12-year-old Smiley, full of bravado and looking for status. The two run afoul of the everyday violence that penetrates their world and find themselves fellow passengers with Sayra on a States-bound freight, hugging the rooftop as their precarious journey unfolds. At once a love story and a chase film, a thrill ride and a vision of an apocalyptic hell, *Sin Nombre* demonstrates Fukunaga's skill; he envelops us in a nightmare that is all too real for its inhabitants. *Sin Nombre* is a portrait of hope and desperation and announces the launching of a shining new filmmaking career.



Wounded Knee

US Documentary Feature Films
U.S.A., 2008, 74 mins., color

On the night of February 27, 1973, a caravan of cars carrying 200 armed Oglala Lakota—led by American Indian Movement (AIM) activists—entered Wounded Knee on the Pine Ridge Reservation and quickly occupied buildings, cut off access, and took up defensive positions. When federal agents arrived, they declared, “The Indians are in charge of the town,” and a 71-day standoff ensued. Compiling an astonishing amount of archival film footage (notable for the key moments it captures) and firsthand accounts from participants, Stanley Nelson creates an immersive, comprehensive account of the occupation and its fascinating complexity. The Sioux sought redress of old grievances and broken treaties (just miles from the massacre of 1890) but also demanded the ouster of Pine Ridge tribal leader Dick Wilson, who governed through corruption and intimidation as he pursued deeply divisive policies of assimilation. Nelson also explores the climate of racism in border towns; the broad political context that shaped the AIM—its tactics, organization and ability to exploit the national media; and ultimately the role armed protest played in Native American self-conception. With its iconic images of Indians holding the government at bay, *Wounded Knee* not only brought national attention to an invisible community and its desperate conditions but contributed to the tribe's awakened sense of dignity and connection with their proud heritage.

Sincerely,

David L. "Money Train" Watts

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