

SXSW Film Festival: Whatever Floats Your Bloat



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REARVIEW: Although absent a single standout like last year's 'Short Term 12,' this year's festival offered up its fair share of off-the-beaten-path discoveries.

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Variety film critics Justin Chang and Andrew Barker circle back to discuss this year's SXSW Film Festival, which recently wrapped in Austin.

JUSTIN CHANG: Well, Andrew, another SXSW has passed us by — although it's not entirely accurate to say "another," in my case, since this was my first time attending this gargantuan three-headed hydra of a media conference, which draws thousands of film, music, digital and BBQ aficionados to Austin every March. In all honesty I can't say it was the most auspicious introduction, and for reasons that have little to do with any of the movies I saw over the past week. It's scarcely the festival's fault that one man's reckless, foolish actions ended up killing three people and injuring 22 others, but the presence of real-life tragedy couldn't help but cast a lingering pall over the proceedings — one that no amount of worthy content could possibly hope to obliterate.

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Certainly there was worthy content to be found in the SXSW film program, even if, by all accounts, there was no standout entry that enraptured audiences the way "Short Term 12" did last year. I didn't see the top prizewinner, "[Fort Tilden](http://variety.com/t/fort-tilden/)," Andrew, but your review and others haven't exactly primed me for the second coming of Lena Dunham (and I say that as someone with a fair number of reservations about the first coming of Lena Dunham). I do wish there had been more buzz for my favorite entry in the narrative conversation, "Long Distance," a predominantly Spanish-language love story of subdued formal intelligence and honest, forthright emotion that richly deserved its acting awards for lead thespians Natalia Tena and David Verdaguer.

Still, for me the discovery of the festival fell outside the competition slate: Joel Potrykus' "[Buzzard](http://variety.com/t/buzzard/)," a hilarious, startling portrait of a sociopathic scam artist (played by Potrykus' regular muse, Joshua Burge), who goes about sticking it to the Man in the most dishonest and ineffectual ways imaginable. Like so many films deemed too edgy for major prizes, "Buzzard" was relegated to a sidebar reserved for fringier work (Visions), but nonetheless upstaged some of the, er, buzzier titles with an Oscilloscope Laboratories pickup deal that was announced a few days before the festival began. I'm glad I came to Austin to see it, and I'm even more glad that other audiences will have the chance, too.

ANDREW BARKER: I love talking SXSW with you, Justin, if only because it presents one of my rare chances to sound like a grizzled veteran without actually being one. (“I still remember those innocent days of SXSW 2011, when the line outside Stubb’s was only two hours, and we had to make do with a humble Kanye West concert, instead of a Kanye West and Jay Z concert.”)

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I was indeed quite impressed by jury winner “Fort Tilden,” although timing may have played a part: it was one of three narrative competition films I saw within a 12-hour period that concerned jaded, irritable, young white New

Yorkers with nothing but self-created First World problems. (And I didn’t even catch the other two young-Gothamite films in the category, “Before I Disappear” and “Wild Canaries.”) This isn’t to say that I have a problem with these kinds of characters — hey, some of my *best friends* are jaded young New Yorkers with nothing but First World problems — and perhaps this can be attributed to the admirably large number of debut features the festival selected for competition. (“Write what you know,” and all.) But there’s a huge, strange, fascinating world out there, and I’d love to see more first-timers with a greater demonstrable interest in the parts of it that fall outside of their daily commute.

Perhaps it’s no surprise that the films that struck me the strongest were the ones that throbbed with real commitment and passion. (Zachary Wigon’s arresting “The Heart Machine,” which certainly falls into the “jaded young New Yorkers” category, at least chose to treat its central First World problem with deadly seriousness and engagement, and stood out all the more for it.) The audience award winner for documentary, “Vessel,” might have even been engaged to a fault, and witnessing an extended standing ovation for an abortion-rights film within shouting distance of the Texas capital building was a special moment.

Like you, I found a lot to love in the Visions section, most notably the lovely “Yakona,” a narrativeless film that seeks out the incidental beauties of nature with a keenness that would make Terrence Malick proud, and my personal festival favorite, the Edwyn Collins docu “The Possibilities Are Endless.” In keeping with Austin’s rep as a geek haven, did you see anything worth recommending among the Midnight offerings? And absent any smash hit of the “Short Term 12” magnitude, what do you see traveling furthest outside the comfortable festival confines?

CHANG: The only movie I saw in Midnighters (not Midnight, bud — what kind of grizzled veteran are you?) was Daniel Stamm’s “13 Sins,” a moderately creepy little number that was outbuzzed by titles like Adam Wingard’s “The Guest” (already a big hit at Sundance) and, to partially answer your question about post-festival travel, Eduardo Sanchez’s found-footage Bigfoot thriller, “Exists,” which Lionsgate snapped up early in the festival. And I’m certain there will be an appreciative audience for Nacho Vigalondo’s engrossing, hysterically over-complicated “Open Windows,” a thriller that unfolds entirely on a laptop screen.

As it happens, Vigalondo’s film was hardly the only one at SXSW to focus so intently on its characters’ computers. “Long Distance” plays out primarily as a series of Skype conversations, and in that respect it has some obvious points of overlap with “The Heart Machine,” another movie structured around a transatlantic relationship. Attend just about any film festival for a few days and these sorts of visual/structural/thematic parallels between otherwise completely unrelated films will start to jump out at you, but at SXSW it often seemed to be more than mere coincidence: Watching “Wild Canaries” and “Veronica Mars” within a few days of each other was almost enough to convince me that old-fashioned, puzzle-style detective stories were making some sort of genre comeback. Two movies, the mystery-romance “Arlo & Julie” and the documentary “Wicker Kittens,” revolved around individuals with an overwhelming obsession with jigsaw puzzles. And seeing “The Infinite Man” just a few days after “Predestination,” another insanely convoluted time-travel saga, induced a particularly unsettling form of *deja vu*.

Long-distance relationships, alienation by way of technology, jigsaw puzzles, time travel — First World problems all. For that reason alone, it was bracing to encounter a film as dense and morally probing as “The Great Invisible,” Margaret Brown’s prize-winning documentary about the fallout from the 2010 BP oil spill, which becomes a prism for a larger, more complex conversation about issues of poverty, class disparity and political hypocrisy in America. I’ve never subscribed to the view that the importance of a documentary’s subject matter should have any bearing on its quality, but in a lineup that offered mostly flashes of style and the occasional glimmer of substance, Brown’s film was a hard-hitting standout.

BARKER: Of course, even as we try to draw out these coincidental parallels between films on our personal schedules, it's easy to miss the ones that the festival has explicitly laid out for us. Before arriving in Austin, I was particularly intrigued by the fest's brand new SXsports component, which sought to combine panels and films to "touch on all aspects of sports through the SXSW lens," as the official literature puts it. Once I was on the ground, however, I was hardly even aware it was happening, and only managed to catch two films from the program: the breezily formulaic tennis comedy "Break Point," and "Manny," a very watchable yet surface-level treatment of boxer Manny Pacquiao.

I saw "Manny" fresh off the plane, and for the next few days I couldn't help thinking about Pacquiao's industrious if foolhardy attempts to maintain simultaneous careers as an actor, a recording artist, a congressman and an entrepreneur while still scheduling the occasional prizefight as an apt metaphor for SXSW itself. Granted, complaints about SXSW bloat are almost as old as the festival. (A quick Google search for "SXSW is too big" brings up 384 million results.) And despite its elephantine film slate, a truly outstanding work like "Short Term 12" will always rise above the rabble. But the bigger the festival gets, the more segregated it becomes, with fewer and fewer of its disparate elements converging, and everyone so busy rushing off to the next thing that there's little time left to process what one has just seen, let alone share a recommendation or simply stumble upon something revelatory.

For example, we haven't even touched upon the festival's original *raison d'être*: music. I didn't get a chance to see many bands, but the best set I saw was well off the beaten path, at a roadhouse a few blocks north of the U. of Texas campus. The performer was a very young, scraggily bearded one-man band from Denton, Texas, who crafted oddly melodic, hypnotic guitar-and-drum loops from scratch. He made the kind of music one could easily imagine scoring a number of the scrappy indie films screening a few miles south, and SXSW would seem to be the perfect place for him to make a connection. I tried to approach him after the set to ask his name and maybe buy an album, but no sooner had I settled my bill than he was off, no doubt scrambling to make his next gig downtown. I asked around at the bar. No one knew his name there, either.

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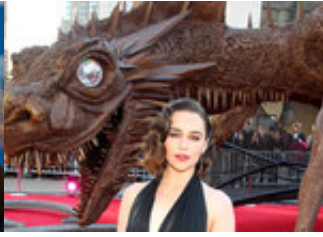
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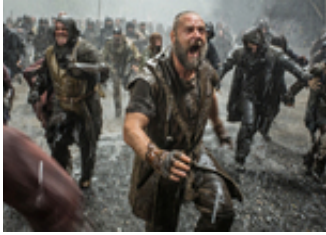


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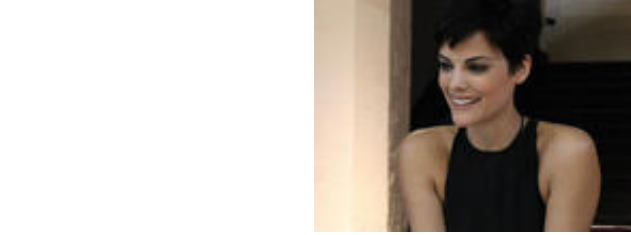


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