

The Experimental Film – By Lydia Pejovic

“It’s a pleasant cold,” Abby said to me as we treaded carefully down the sidewalk.

“Yeah, it’s a great one-day experience type of thing. It was better when my toes weren’t frozen.” I retorted, nearly slipping on an unsalted ice patch. “I’m not built for this weather, dude. I’m not coming here again unless it’s festival time.”

Abby was my college roommate and best friend that I met in Theatre our Freshman year. We had agreed to do the school-run Sundance Intersession trip together and share a hotel room. We figured that since we were already good at living together in cramped spaces for long periods of time, a 300 square-foot room for two weeks would be a cakewalk. We had somehow convinced our parents that the cost of the trip was worth the three academic credits we’d get, and were jazzed about having time to fully devote to watching and critiquing movies. Our film professors had made room arrangements for the sixteen students on the trip and promptly sent us out to attend a minimum of twelve film screenings in ten days.

“Three more days and five more films left. . . Then we’ll be warm again. But it’s really not that bad.” Abby said, looking into the strip mall parking lot. “God, this is the furthest theater we’ve been to yet. I didn’t even know the buses came out here. I thought all the theaters were by the Downtown area.”

The “best” films were shown Downtown where our hotel was, but they were notoriously hard to get tickets for. The tickets to the A-list films at the Sundance Film Festival had been bought up first by Hollywood executives, actors, family and friends, and whoever else had enough influence to snag a seat. It was a pretty harsh truth that the indie industry was not-so-covertly overrun by mainstream actors and producers. This meant that lowly film students on a two-week-long trip like us had to fight tooth and nail for an opportunity to see the big name flicks. I wasn’t really sure why these films were so appealing to me, especially because I was here to see movies I would otherwise never hear about from the typical film giants like MGM or 21st Century Fox. But, even though we were in an indie environment, one of the biggest discussions at Sundance was whether or not a film would get picked up by a streaming service or, in rare cases, a major Hollywood studio. If you see the right screenings, you get the ability to tell all your friends that you saw that one popular film six months before it dropped in national theaters. It was too appealing to ignore.

Abby and I were still buzzing from the night before: we got seats to the premiere of *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile*, the Ted Bundy film starring Zac Efron, after subverting the festival-wide controversy about the broken waitlist. For all the commoners who didn’t get first access to premiere tickets, there was an online waitlist with very specific conditions. Abby and I got 101 and 102 out of 300 in the waitlist line by logging on the first second that we could. The app started crashing, so we took screenshots of our line positions and closed out of the app, hoping we didn’t lose our coveted spots. Once we opened it back up, the line was non-existent, and there was an Error 404 message. With screenshots and a primal need to see Zac Efron at the ready, Abby and I went to try to confirm our waitlist spots in-person despite the broken app.

In order to actually confirm waitlist seats, you have to be in line for the film an hour before the venue opens seating, and you must have twenty dollars cash in hand to pay for your ticket. *No credit cards allowed.* Abby and I spent the bus ride to the theatre refreshing our apps and trying to re-enter the line, but it was thoroughly broken. When we reached the venue, the line snaked around the building. The crowd was filled with hundreds of young girls who were more than willing to bear ten-degree weather to see their childhood crush play a charismatic serial killer for an hour and a half. We got in line and commiserated with the girls about the busted waitlist and prayed that our screenshots would suffice. I checked my wallet a few times to make sure I had cash.

When we reached the ticket taker, we confidently shoved our screenshots towards her. We knew she would smell our fear if we showed any disbelief in the legitimacy of our 101 and 102 placements. She had already turned away a few girls ahead of us who didn't have any evidence, just the faint memory of the line position they once held.

“The queue worked for you two?” She asked incredulously, scanning the barcode on our screenshot. “A lot of people were having trouble with the app... Well, looks like it worked for you! Move into your numbered spot in the line there.”

We ran away from her as fast as we could and waited in the second, shorter half of the line. We watched the clock as large groups of people ahead of us were let out of the line and into the theater... 9:45... 9:50... 9:53... The movie was supposed to start at 10. I started getting nervous and jumped up and down in line to release some adrenaline. Then, two girls in front of us were admitted, leaving Abby and I at the helm of the line. I smirked at the young film attendant who held the red rope, hoping he'd take pity on us or think we were cute enough to make room in the packed screening for us.

“Stop flirting with him, he has no power.” Abby whispered.

At 9:58, the film attendant got a buzz on his walkie-talkie, listened for a moment, and unlatched the red rope.

“Ladies! It's your lucky day!” He said, grinning warmly. “That'll be twenty dollars cash.”

Abby and I giggled like two middle schoolers, threw the cash at the attendant, and frolicked up the stairs. We settled into our seats in the very back row of the theatre as the lights dimmed. The excitement I had watching the film was surpassed by Zac Efron's surprise visit after the screening. The entire venue erupted in high-pitched screams and cries. Not the typical Sundance crowd. After his brief Q&A and thank you's, the girl squad followed Zac outside of the venue and asked for pictures. He was ushered into a car before I could get him to pose with me and Abby, so we sulked about it and promised we'd try to find him in Downtown Park City. We still hadn't found him yet.

Our admittance to *Extremely Wicked* had been a total one-off, and we were now schlepping ourselves across town to see an experimental nature film, one that was in the “New Frontier”

category. My professor had warned us that “New Frontier” either meant that we were going to see the coolest or worst movie of our lives. I was banking on the film being cool, but still harbored some weariness. The brief synopsis that I was able to find said something about a felled tree and continuous 360-degree camera shots. I was suspicious because this was a late-addition ticket purchase. It was usually hard to find open tickets for almost any film at the festival. However, we were so exhausted from chasing down celebrities and critically watching at least two films every day that we were more than willing to sit peacefully and mindlessly in front of something about a tree. My nerves were stretched pretty thin from the Zac Efron antics, anyways. Plus, reviewing a nature film for class would probably be pretty easy.

We crossed into the large parking lot and stepped over piles of snow to reach the movie theater. It was an AMC, which was surprising, as other showings had been in The Egyptian Theatre, repurposed school gyms, and other, more local venues. This was shockingly commercial for a Sundance screening. The crowd was also very different. There were large Suburbans scattered throughout the parking lot, and Mormon families populated the various shops and chain restaurants. I was starting to miss the weird artsy crowd.

We walked into the AMC and were hit with the scent of fake butter. There was a sign that said **SUNDANCE** with a red arrow pointing to the back of the venue. Abby and I shrugged and followed it slowly, glancing around for someone who looked strange enough to be seeing this film with us. I finally saw someone wearing a purple beret and knew we were heading in the right direction. After hitting the end of the hall and going up a set of escalators, we made it to the Sundance-sanctioned section of the AMC. I was happy that we had tickets to this film, not just waitlist spots. I was tired of forking over all my cash. I showed my badge to the ticket taker and we made our way to Theatre 17, around the corner and further towards the back. This AMC was like the Panopticon. Abby and I walked in and noticed the somewhat sparse crowd. We picked the very last row so that we could settle in for the two-and-a-half-hour runtime.

Once we picked our seats, we shed our heavy scarves, gloves, hats, and coats, and I zipped down my snow boots to grab my toes and warm them up. Abby had bought both of us all of the Park City clothes when she was back home in Connecticut for Christmas. I was very grateful that she had the foresight to pick me up a pack of long underwear pants and shirts. The usual extent of my winter clothes included a USD sweatshirt that had gotten mixed up with my laundry and a pair of Ugg boots. Since I had been splitting my time in between my parent’s house in Vegas and my dorm in San Diego, I was pretty sure that there were no stores in either city that had even heard of long underwear. I was now very aware that wearing layers was a pretty solid strategy (go figure)!

I rolled up my sleeves and felt the heat blowing on the bare parts of my arms. I handed Abby a Luna bar from my purse as the lights began to dim. The regular pre-film Sundance credits started playing. It was a black background with a lot of meaningless white words that flashed across it. We had seen it seven times already, so I ignored it entirely and checked the film’s runtime again, just to confirm how long we’d have ‘til dinnertime.

“Can we go to that diner again once this is done?” I asked Abby.

“The sidewalk there is always icy. I don’t want to slip again, but if they salt around it, then maybe.” She replied as she played some game where you water virtual plants.

After the credits ended, a white haired, semi-bald man in a black turtleneck sweater came to the front of the theatre. He introduced himself as a Swiss screenwriter and as the creator of the film we were about to see. He explained that he wanted to capture the life of a tree from being chopped down to being processed into paper and other “wasteful” products. The film was inspired by Thoreau’s *Walden* and was intended to prove that humans should be kinder to nature. I was getting pretentious vibes from this whole situation, but didn’t want to judge too much. I was also a little confused about how this would take almost three hours to accomplish, but I had learned to trust the process after watching other Sundance films.

“Now may you, uh... Enjoy the art we create.” The director said, bowing sharply and exiting the theatre.

And so it began.

The film opened on a large, beautiful Swiss forest, filled with impressively tall trees. It was sunny and peaceful. The opening shot took about five minutes, in which the camera circled a single tree with one continuous shot. The cinematography was gorgeous, but it wasn’t hard to find beauty in that setting. The circular shots were a bit nausea-inducing, and the film had no dialogue or music. Just soft nature sounds. I watched as the camera painstakingly followed its chosen tree from its top leaves to the bottom of its trunk. Once we reached the roots, the slow ring around the tree continued.

“Is this the 360 thing that they mentioned in the synopsis?” Abby whispered to me.

“I think so. It’s probably going to be interspersed throughout.” I replied, nodding.

A whirring noise assaulted the senses. The tree was then cut down by an unforgiving man with a handsaw. The cutting was slow and we didn’t see much of it, as the camera kept going around the tree in circles, showing us the other, un-cut trees in the vicinity. Finally, the tree fell and disrupted the silent nature around it. This was supposed to be a powerful message about destroying the environment, I guessed. The mysterious tree-chopper used heavy machinery to pick up the fallen trunk. Our tree-cutting villain, who began to remind me of the Onceler, hauled the dead trunk out of the forest on a large truck. From what I could gather (as the camera was still circling around the area where the tree was cut), the truck was carrying at least fifteen other previously felled trunks.

We then left the forest and entered a more human-centric environment, though no named or significant characters had been introduced. The camera panned to our tree-cutter driving his truck of doom down a road in Switzerland. And he kept driving. And driving. And the truck was gone. Okay, scene switch, right? Right? No scene switch. The camera spun, showing more roadways that connected to the first roadway we saw. And the camera kept circling. And circling. And circling. The driving shot must have been twenty minutes. Where the hell did the truck go? We were just looking at random people’s cars. I could see their license plates. Did they

sign a release form for this? Did they know they were being filmed? And why were we spinning 360 degrees still? Was the *entire* movie going to be a continuous 360 shot?!

“Lydia, I feel so dizzy right now,” Abby said, closing her eyes tightly. “I feel like I’m getting motion sick from the 360 shot!”

“Alright, hang in there. Maybe the 360 will stop once we get off this weird driving scene.” I said, but I didn’t really sense any future improvements.

Finally, after about ten more minutes of watching Swiss people drive, the film took us to what I could only assume was a processing plant. There were no signs or words to help us understand where exactly we were, but I tried to use the very few context clues I received. It was now raining outside. Putting myself in the mind of our artsy director, I tried to imagine that we were experiencing the tree’s journey of not knowing where we were, where our body was being taken, what “they” were going to do with us... Except the tree was now dead and never had thoughts to begin with. Seemed like a weak metaphor.

We were circling the pile of tree trunks that sat atop the death truck. Was I supposed to be in horror and interpret them as corpses that were unceremoniously stacked? I had never felt good about the fact that humans harmed nature, but I also hadn’t developed any feelings for this specific tree just because we circled it for a long time. I had no stakes in its death. There was still no music, dialogue, narration, or characters (besides the silent, tree-chopping Onceler and Swiss drivers who didn’t know they were involved). The camera continued to give us a 360 view of stacked tree trunks. They were getting rained on, and no one seemed to be around the processing plant.

Abby poked me. “What is this movie about?”

I shrugged. “I have no idea. Destruction? I don’t know what I’m going to write for the film review...”

I began to realize that the rest of the audience was just as disenchanted as we were. A man three rows down from us yawned loudly. A couple whispered to each other fervently towards the bottom row, frowning. Then, to my horror, a man in the second row *got up and left*.

“Did he just LEAVE?” Abby asked, her mouth wide open.

“Dude...” I said, giggling and putting my head in my hands, “This movie *sucks*. We can’t leave, though... Right?”

Our professor had made it very clear to us: you do not, under any circumstances, leave a Sundance film screening until after the credits are completely finished. If he found out that we were leaving films early, he had promised that he would give us a stern talking-to. It was a taboo, much less a gigantic sign of disrespect, to leave a screening before the lights came up. The last name listed on the credits better fly up into the sky before your butt is off your seat. This was the

first time in the entire festival that I had seen someone get up and *leave* a screening! I hadn't even left a film to go to the bathroom!

There was an awkward tension inside the theatre. The brave soul that left first definitely seemed to have the right idea, but I wanted to be sure that this film was *truly* bad enough to justify leaving. I had already withstood some uncomfortable moments at the festival. Abby and I had even stayed the full runtime for some Brazilian film two nights prior that contained fifty minutes of graphic, full-frontal sex. Every time a sex scene ended, I swore there wouldn't be another one, and yet there it would be, ten minutes after the last. I still wasn't sure if the actors were actually having sex or not. It sure looked like they were...

I embraced that I was zoning out from the film and decided it would be more entertaining to watch the audience's reactions. It felt like watching a really bad performance of a high school play – not a single genuine smile to be seen, and the director had walked out before it started. I watched as pairs discussed in whispers, as single patrons took quick glances at their cell phones, likely checking the film's runtime again, hoping that they somehow misread the two-and-a-half-hour ETA. I glanced over at Abby, who was now completely asleep. Lucky her. I think the rain sound at the processing plant was soothing for her. Maybe I'd download this movie once it got released and use it as a relaxing nature soundtrack for studying.

A couple to the right of me started to shift. I soon heard the sound of silky coats being shuffled, of scarves and hats being haphazardly re-adjusted, of zippers being fastened. And then, I watched the happy couple run down the stairs and out of the theatre.

Before I could process that three people had already left, it happened. The mass exodus.

A group of five people got up and left. Then three. Then a single man who had been sitting next to me and Abby. I looked back at the film and realized that we were *still* at the processing plant! Still spinning 360 degrees! I checked my phone... A little under two hours of runtime left. Hell no. I nudged Abby to wake her up.

"Get your coat, dude." I whispered.

Abby looked around. "Where the hell is everyone?"

"They all left!" I said. "We're some of the only idiots still here! I'm just going to pretend like I'm getting a phone call so we don't look rude..."

"Okay, just give it one more minute." Abby said, weighing our options. "We'll see if the next scene gets any better. If it doesn't, we leave. Okay?"

"Okay." I agreed.

We spent about five more minutes at the processing plant. The Onceler came back and started taking the trunks down and moving them onto a different vehicle. Then the scene shifted, and we were at a dock at nighttime. A giant cargo ship stacked with tree trunks slipped from the dock,

and we were staring at the other, unpopulated boats next to it. The 360 shot began again, and we circled around the dock to more vessels. There were no people in the shot. No music. Nothing.

“You’re right, let’s go.” Abby said, groaning.

Abby and I began our unnecessary charade of pretending like we had an emergency to attend to. We tried to put on our winter clothing as quietly as possible, but it didn’t really matter. In the silent theatre, the sound of pulling up our zippers was like pulsing ice cubes in a blender. A few other audience members looked at us longingly, seemingly wishing that they, too, could escape from experimental film prison. I held my phone to my ear and pretended like I was taking a serious call. Once we loudly slipped out of Theatre 17, we sprinted around the corner, down the escalators, through the hallway, and out of the AMC, catching our breath on the icy sidewalk. I watched as clouds of my breath ebbed and flowed in the air as I gasped.

“What *was* that?” Abby asked in pure shock, smiling at me in disbelief.

I shook my head and laughed between breaths. “That was so bad! I need a coffee or something because my head is killing me from the stress of pretending like it was watchable!”

Abby checked her Maps app and found that there was a Starbucks on the other side of the strip mall, which we trekked to giddily. On our way through the Park City tundra, we discussed the funniest moments of the film, barely noticing that the tips of our noses were bright red and numb. Nothing could be worse than seeing that movie, not even the oppressive, below-zero temperature outside. We made our way inside the store and ordered some hot coffees. I wanted iced, but my bones were freezing. I had learned to soak in any warmth I could get, as our hotel room heating wasn’t all that great and my toes had felt frozen the whole week.

“I gotta call my mom and tell her about this.” Abby said, still grinning as she palmed her hot caramel macchiato. “I feel like someone else needs to share in our misery.”

Abby dialed the phone as I sat and enjoyed my cappuccino in a large leather armchair. I closed my eyes, trying to relieve the tension headache that had developed from watching the weird 360 shots. Who the hell green-lighted that movie, anyway?

“It was horrible. It was *so bad*. It made no sense! There was no dialogue and no music! There was just driving, nature, and nothing! There weren’t even characters! And don’t even get me *started* on the 360 shot that never ended!” Abby said, going off on a long tirade about the film.

I looked around the coffee shop a bit more. A man sat at a table about ten feet away from us, talking to a thin blonde woman. He kept glancing over at me and Abby with a strange look on his face. I squinted my eyes and stared back at him. I noticed that he had semi-balding white hair. A black turtleneck. A Swiss accent... Oh my god. Oh my *god*. Oh my god! I kicked Abby in the shin.

“Shut up! Shut up!” I whispered to her. “Stop talking!”

“What???” She said in pure confusion.

“He’s sitting... Right there...” I said, trying to dart my eyes in his direction inconspicuously.

“Who? Who is sitting right there?” She asked frantically.

I watched as Abby realized that she had been trashing the experimental film right in front of its creator.

“Uh... Mom... I think the director of the film just heard me...” She whispered awkwardly. “I’m gonna run away. I’ll, uh, call you later.”

Abby hung up the phone and stared at me with wide eyes. I smirked at her and held in laughter.

“Wanna go try to catch the next bus back to our hotel?” I asked, trying to sound as casual as possible.

“Yes, please!” Abby cried as we grabbed our things and dashed out of the Starbucks.