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THE HIDDEN STARS OF THIS YEAR'S SUNDANCE: HOAXES, HUCKSTERS, AND GLAMOROUS FRAUDS

BY BRANDON HARRIS



From Penny Lane's "NUTS!" (pictured) to Bernardo Britto's "Jacqueline (Argentine)," this year's Sundance Film Festival was a showcase for stories about charismatic con men.

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As the 2016 Sundance Film Festival fades into memory, a few of this year's most noteworthy developments seem clear: the ongoing emergence of Amazon and Netflix as central players in the film-acquisition and hybrid-distribution market; the christening of Kenneth Lonergan's "Manchester by the Sea" and Nate Parker's "The Birth of a Nation" as this year's first award-season contenders; and the ongoing dismay in some quarters over another set of resoundingly pale Oscar acting nominees. On the margins of the festival, however, among the various documentary sections that Sundance and its rival, the concurrently running Slamdance Film Festival, had to offer, a little-discussed micro-trend could be glimpsed: stories of glamorous frauds.

From Penny Lane's "NUTS!," an animated film about a renegade early-twentieth-century surgeon who claimed that goat-testicle implants could cure impotence in men, to Jeff Feuerzeig's "Author: The JT LeRoy Story," about an H.I.V.-positive, transgender literary sensation of the early aughts who turned out to be the invention of a woman from Brooklyn, a whole subsection of the festival's films dealt with hoaxes that will have you struggling to suspend your disbelief, yet were remarkably effective in their time. One film at Slamdance, Andrea Marini's "Art of the Prank," devotes itself to the career of the fraud artist Joey Skaggs, the so-called godfather of the media hoax, who in the course of his career created fake institutions like the Celebrity Sperm Bank and Portofess, a mobile Catholic confessional booth that drew media attention when Skaggs stationed it outside the 1992 Democratic National Convention. Perhaps the most formally playful and delightfully outrageous of these films is "Jacqueline (Argentine)," the first feature from Bernardo Britto, whose animated short "Yearbook" won a prize at the festival two years ago. (It was later featured on this Web site as part of the Screening Room series.) It is also the only one that, despite its rough-hewn vérité aesthetic, is a work of complete fiction.

A fake documentary starring the comedian Wyatt Cenac ("The Daily Show," "Medicine for Melancholy"), "Jacqueline (Argentine)" follows an experimental filmmaker of some note who hopes to cross over with a more commercially minded feature. The film is at once a playful, low-fi travelogue; a sendup of the

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Edward Snowden affair; and a portrait of an artist in crisis. In a brisk and cheery expository montage, which, like much of the film, is dominated by remarkably self-conscious voice-over narration, Cynac's "director" recalls, in a monotonous deadpan delivered at a breathless pace, how he received a text message from an anonymous French woman claiming to have sensitive information she would like to share. She follows up with an e-mail, two weeks later, explaining that she has "highly confidential government information," obtained by working with the French government's internal-security service, in the form of "leaked documents detailing one of the most hideous covert operations in recent memory." The woman, Jacqueline Dumont (Camille Rutherford), stresses that the information she has will topple governments, and that she would like Cynac's "director" to come to Argentina, where she is hiding, to help reveal her discoveries.

For anyone who followed the news two summers ago this will all seem terribly familiar. The filmmaker and a bare-bones crew journey from Miami to La Falda, a small town in central Argentina, to meet Dumont, who turns out to be charming, pretty, and likely full of it, despite the fact that strange men are seemingly following her and even stranger occurrences, and decaying dog carcasses, are waiting at every turn. We never see the director after we leave Miami, ostensibly because he is holding the camera through which we are viewing these events. But we see plenty of his small crew, and his increasingly sardonic voice dominates the proceedings as it becomes increasingly difficult to decipher just what, in fact, this woman is hiding.

Willfully refusing to become a proper thriller or love story, or anything else one could possibly expect it to be, the project, like much of the work that has come out of the Borscht Corp., the Sundance- and Knight Foundation-supported Miami film collective that produced the film, wears its postmodernism on its sleeve. Britto throws the kitchen sink at the problems of modern cinema, blending fiction and documentary and piling on in-jokes and tonal shifts. By the film's end, Jacqueline has disappeared, the flash drives she was carrying with her are proven empty, and our director has grown even more philosophical. "Everything winds up loose threads and dead ends—T's remain uncrossed, I's remain undotted, words remain unsaid, and pictures remain unfinished," he says, after catching a glimpse of Dumont years later, during the film's epilogue. "And so it goes, and so do we, from recitals to reunions to anniversaries, round and round and round again, and so we all move on as it all crumbles away like sand."

"Anytime you're trying to present your narrative to the world, it's immediately a lie," Britto, who is twenty-six, said when I asked him about the similarities between con men and filmmakers, a few days after his latest Sundance premiere. (Another of his films, "Glove," also premiered at this year's festival.) "Jacqueline (Argentina)" is, in the end, an investigation into the shifting nature of the truth, and into how filmmakers, like frauds, must seduce and deceive themselves into believing their own stories. "I wanted the audience to want to make sense of these things," Britto told me, adding that he ultimately made it impossible for them to do so. "The director's truth is different from Jacqueline's. We're all living in our own constructed realities."

Penny Lane's "NUTS!," which won the prize for best documentary editing at the festival's awards show, on Saturday, puts its audience in an equally unsettled position in regard to its fraudulent anti-hero, but rewards viewers for their investment by showing, in chilling and unvarnished detail, the wages of his various sins. A high-wire mix of animated sequences, archival interludes, and occasional interviews, the film recounts the story of Dr. John Romulus Brinkley, originally from North Carolina, who made millions as a goat-testicle-transplant and radio-broadcast pioneer, and may have had a Kansas gubernatorial bid stolen from him by the Depression-era Democratic Party machine, despite having never attended medical school or held smaller elective office.

"I couldn't believe a movie hadn't already been made of his life," Lane told me from her Park City hotel room as she readied herself for the movie's premiere, adding that the film makes you want to root for Brinkley as a sort of maverick populist class warrior, fighting the establishment, only to uncover a monstrousness beneath. "NUTS!" also makes you wish, against your better judgment, that his impotence-curing transplants, which actually left scores of

men maimea and aying, or the incan skin cream ne claimea could improve vision, did indeed work. In Lane's telling, Brinkley remains charismatic and persuasive enough to keep you thinking maybe you've just missed these incredible ninety-year-old medical breakthroughs. This is the great skill of the huckster through the ages, from the era of Brinkley and Charles Ponzi to that of Bernie Madoff, or nearly anyone running for the G.O.P. Presidential nomination today. In an increasingly complex world, they tell simple stories that allow us to mistake their seemingly effortless bluster for assurance—for a confidence that is often built no sturdier than a house of cards but that, in the moment, is impossible to cast aside. John Brinkley "knew how to sell people on stuff," Lane told me. "I think he would do really well on reality TV."

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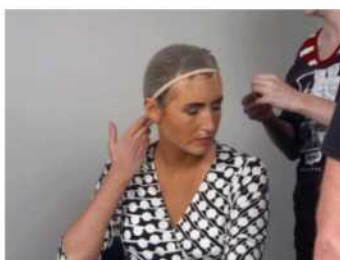
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