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FILM

In the Snows of Sundance, a Marked Chill in the Air

By [MANOHLA DARGIS](#)

The 2009 [Sundance Film Festival](#) opened with a whisper that grew more hushed with each passing day. It should have been a time for rowdy celebration: this year, after all, marked the festival's 25th anniversary, a milestone that was largely eclipsed by the grim economic climate that thinned the crowds and fueled the nervous chatter on the icy streets. Only the presidential inauguration, a few sales deals and a couple of punches thrown by a critic (not me!) who had felt hassled by a film representative disturbed the low-key vibe.

These are, as one distributor blurted out to me seconds after saying hello, "tumultuous times" in the movie business. No kidding. On the eve of Sundance three more movie critics joined the ranks of the unemployed, including Ella Taylor, a longtime and well-respected critic for The LA Weekly in Los Angeles. And earlier this week [Warner Brothers](#) Entertainment — which last year dismantled three of its specialty divisions, Warner Independent Pictures, Picturehouse and New Line Cinema — announced that it was laying off an additional 800 workers.

For independent cinema, which relies on reviewers to get the word out because they don't have money to buy their opening weekends, the thinning of the critical ranks is no small thing. The specter of the big studios getting out of the indie business presents a more ambivalent problem, one put into relief by the festival's silver anniversary and the presence of [Steven Soderbergh](#) at this year's event.

In 1989, Mr. Soderbergh helped put Sundance on the world cinema map with his debut feature, "sex, lies and videotape." That spring the movie was at Cannes, where it won the Palme d'Or (beating out "[Do the Right Thing](#)," among other titles). A hungry little outfit called Miramax Films swooped down and grabbed it.

Three years later, Miramax was bought by Disney. Soon every big studio that did not have a boutique division opened one. Prices for independently financed movies skyrocketed. [Harvey Weinstein](#) became a media fixture, [Quentin Tarantino](#) became a rock star, and [Parker Posey](#) and [Zooey Deschanel](#) became Indie It Girls, while character actors like [Sam Rockwell](#) and [Paul Giamatti](#) became headliners. Sundance veterans like [Bryan Singer](#), [Christopher Nolan](#) and Mr. Soderbergh signed on for blockbuster duty. Sponsors like Entertainment Weekly (and The New York Times) slapped their brand on the event, and the crowds poured in as the festival chatter shifted from questions of art to matters of industry. For 10 days a year, Sundance turned into Hollywood in the snow, and real independent spirit seemed on the wane.

The industry was still in attendance this year, but the high-roller fever that has gripped the festival for the last decade has cooled. Although this made for the most pleasant Sundance in memory, it also presents a host of unknowns. If the studios don't buy independent films, fewer investors in turn may be inclined to bankroll

projects, particularly those with bigger budgets. Yet it is precisely those movies with heftier budgets, and the glossier production values and marquee-ready performers that can come with those budgets — like the ready-made entertainment and 2006 Sundance success story [“Little Miss Sunshine”](#) — that distributors believe can help bring in the increasingly finicky audience. If the investors don’t invest and the buyers don’t buy, will the movies still be made, and what kind?

Films with no-name actors are a tough sell, as is anything considered too arty, brainy, bleak or dark, which is why much of the best work produced today either goes without American distribution or is released by smaller companies that don’t require huge returns. This was true when “sex, lies and videotape” hit, and it may be even truer now. That doesn’t mean that you won’t see some of the best work from this year’s Sundance, including [“Unmade Beds,”](#) [“Big Fan,”](#) [“Big River Man”](#) and [“In the Loop.”](#) but it might mean that you’ll see these titles only if you live in a large city, or when (if) they’re released on DVD. That is, if someone picks them up for American distribution.

The scathingly funny “In the Loop” stars a clutch of familiar and somewhat familiar actors, including a very good [James Gandolfini](#) and a barely recognizable Steve Coogan, in a political satire about the behind-the-scene power plays in Washington and in London that preceded the Iraq war. Directed at a breakneck pace by Armando Iannucci, the movie essentially restages this tragic chapter as a screwball comedy: I haven’t heard dialogue this fast since [Rosalind Russell](#) and [Cary Grant](#) traded zingers in [“His Girl Friday.”](#) Although “In the Loop” brought down the packed house during at least one screening, it remained up for grabs by Thursday, because these days even a smart, sophisticated (English-language!) comedy isn’t a sure bet.

All the pretty bodies rolling around, under and over the sheets in “Unmade Beds,” an intimate, tender feature about two young Europeans adrift in and out of a London squat, similarly failed to rouse interest among American buyers. The second feature from the Argentine writer and director Alexis Dos Santos (his first was [“Glue”](#)), this beautifully shot movie has a level of formal ambition — the narrative is as elliptical as the lives it concerns, and even seemingly throwaway moments catch your eye — which was generally absent from most of the American fiction films I saw. Though he has clearly watched his share of French New Wave movies, Mr. Dos Santos has absorbed rather than merely parroted his inspirations.

Straight out of Staten Island comes the aggressively grubby, often darkly funny [“Big Fan,”](#) the very fine feature directing debut from Robert Siegel, who wrote [“The Wrestler”](#) and was an editor at [The Onion](#). A cautionary tale about the limits and perils of love, “Big Fan” centers on Paul (Patton Oswalt, terrific and fearless), a 35-year-old parking lot attendant who lives with his mother and whose every waking hour is devoted to his beloved New York Giants. That love takes an unexpectedly dramatic turn when Paul and his closest (only) friend, Sal (the Sundance fixture Kevin Corrigan, priceless), have an unexpected late-night encounter with Paul’s favorite Giants player, who does not return his fan’s love in gentle kind. Unlike many hapless American movie characters, Paul comes with a personality rather than a character arc.

The pivotal figure in the excellent American documentary [“Big River Man,”](#) from the resourceful young director John Maringouin (his only other feature is [“Running Stumbled”](#)), has so much personality it’s a wonder he fits on the screen. The big man in question is the Slovenian long-distance swimmer Martin Strel, an extraordinarily larger-than-life, stranger-than-fiction member of the species who, for murky reasons, had decided to promote environmental awareness by swimming some of the world’s longest rivers, including the Mississippi and the hideously polluted Yangtze. The movie tracks Mr. Strel — who is accompanied by a small

entourage that includes his son, who also narrates the movie — as he attempts to swim and survive the Amazon while trying to dodge parasites, piranhas and madness.

The documentary veteran [Joe Berlinger](#) ("[Brother's Keeper](#)") adopts a straightforward reportorial approach for "[Crude](#)," a forceful, often infuriating story about Big Oil and little people. The story here involves the protracted legal battle between 30,000 Ecuadorean plaintiffs and Chevron, one of the largest oil producers in the world. Mr. Berlinger traces this story from the jungle to the concert stage, as the lawyers representing the Ecuadoreans employ every conceivable tactic — ground-level protests, news stories about victims that verge on the exploitative, a feature in Vanity Fair magazine and even [Sting](#) and his wife, Trudie Styler — to fight their multinational opponent. Among other things, the movie makes clear that while it's easy to laugh at celebrity do-gooders, they have access to real power unavailable to the merely mortal.

Other high points include "[Cold Souls](#)," the keenly intelligent, gravely humorous English-language feature debut from the French writer and director Sophie Barthes, about an actor (Mr. Giamatti as an actor also named Paul Giamatti) who decides to put his troubled soul in cold storage. Just as appealing is [Oskar Roehler](#)'s visually flamboyant "[Lulu and Jimi](#)," a period romance set in Germany during the 1950s. An outstanding Jennifer Decker, in a star-making turn, plays Lulu, the rebellious daughter of a proper bourgeois family, who falls in love with Jimi (Ray Fearon), an American who's a one-man advertisement for black cool. Though Mr. Roehler borrows heavily from [David Lynch](#)'s "Wild at Heart" and [Francis Ford Coppola](#)'s "[One From the Heart](#)," he makes this freaky joy ride his own.

I wish I could be enthusiastic about "[The Girlfriend Experience](#)," the latest nonstudio venture from Mr. Soderbergh. The movie, a work in progress that was shown as a sneak preview on Tuesday, is the second in a series (the first was "[Bubble](#)") of high-definition digital features he is making for 2929 Entertainment, which will be simultaneously released on different platforms. This newest addition to what is shaping up as a rather joyless experiment from Mr. Soderbergh involves a high-end Manhattan escort called both Christine and Chelsea (Sasha Grey, a porn actress), who lives with her boyfriend, a trainer with muscles and no personality, Chris (Chris Santos), and sells her body, and perhaps her soul, to whoever can afford her price.

Shot by the director himself, the movie looks as beautiful as its star and comes across just as cold and flat as she does. Though Mr. Soderbergh name-dropped [Michelangelo Antonioni](#) during the question-and-answer session after the movie, "The Girlfriend Experience" is very much under the thematic influence of [Jean-Luc Godard](#).

Mr. Soderbergh, who is clearly far more interested in the metaphoric usage of flesh peddling than its impact on real bodies, turns prostitution into an allegory about moviemaking in which the whore is the filmmaker, her clients are the producers and the scum of the earth is — you guessed it — the critic who reviews her work (negatively). He shot the movie in October, which suggests that he still wasn't over the bad notices he received for "[Che](#)" when it played at Cannes last May.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: January 28, 2009

A film notebook on Friday about the Sundance Festival referred incorrectly to a character in the movie "Big Fan," which was shown at the festival. While often called "QB" in the film, the character, Quantrell Bishop, is a linebacker for the New York Giants, not a quarterback.

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