



## Sundance Is Online's Big Chance

Jason Silverman | 01.18.01

PARK CITY, Utah -- The future of online film viewing never looked as bright as at last January's Sundance Film Festival.

Internet film channels, vying for content, started bidding wars over Sundance's short films. Reporters turned their focus from Miramax and Fine Line to Atom and iFilm. Dot-coms were everywhere -- logos emblazoned on ski hats, hosting the huge parties, and especially, on the lips of industry insiders.

But 12 months later, the hype is gone. The raucous battle royale of Web cinema has given way to a much more sedate scene. Gone are high-profile sites such as AntEye, Digital Entertainment Net, Scour and Pseudo, along with Steven Spielberg's never-to-be Pop.

Skeptics thus may raise eyebrows when hearing that the 2001 Sundance Film Festival is setting up shop online. But ongoing doubts about the current viability of Web cinema haven't deterred festival organizers from presenting the first Sundance Online Film Festival, which launches Thursday.

As part of the festival, Sundance will post 17 works, along with a 12-film collection of shorts titled *Untitled001: Darkness*. The program is comprised of animated, live-action and interactive works, from companies including Mondo Media and Wild Brain. Some of the films are already available online at other sites.

What Sundance is attempting differs from the standard Internet film channel model, at least in one way: Sundance will have the site up for just six weeks. Still, with the Online Festival already hinting at expansion into a regular event, there are plenty of questions about the site's intent.

"I'm sure Sundance planned their Online Festival pre-crash (of the dot-coms), but after the crash, the whole business model changed," says Jonathan Wells, festival and editorial director of the Res Media Group.

"The companies that failed were seeking to be destination sites, and it is not clear if Sundance hopes to do that. Is this just a separate program of work for them, or do they hope this to grow into a business? We'll have to wait and see."

Festival organizers acknowledge that the Web may not yet be the ideal place for film viewership. The festival even features a panel titled "Movies on the Web: Is Anybody Watching?" But Ian Calderon, Sundance's director of digital initiatives, is confident that Web cinema will continue to grow.

"Regardless of how you and I feel about movies on the Internet, the truth is that the Internet is the off-off-Broadway of filmmaking today," he says. "There is a lot of content out there in the ether, and I thought it would be interesting to see what new talent we could bring to the public, what new discoveries we could make."

Shari Frilot, one of the Online Festival's programmers, says the made-for-the-Internet movies showcased at the Sundance site demonstrate a purity of vision. The same, she adds, can't always be said about independent films.

"I think these digital filmmakers can take us back to exploring the potential of what independent cinema can do," she says. "With the commercialization of independent filmmaking, it has become more and more important for films to have stars and bigger budgets. But online, you don't need to worry about any of that. It's you, your computer, and your ideas."

Frilot hopes the bricks-and-mortar festival will help bring attention to the virtual one, through daily spotlights on films and live chats with filmmakers, and that made-for-Web movies can be recognized as an art form onto themselves. She holds up one entry, Nina Menkes' *The Crazy Bloody Female Center*, as an example.

Menkes' film combines the multiple pathways that interactive media allow with the bold visuals and challenging narrative structures that generally define experimental film. Menkes, a fixture in the art-film scene, was attracted by the possibilities of new forms of storytelling.

"The only thing happening on the Internet are games, advertisements and educational and informational activities," Menkes says. "There hasn't been much exploration at all of this medium from a purely artistic point of view."

The idea of the online film festival is not new; Slamdance's Anarchy site precedes the Sundance Online Festival by a year.

And viewers who want to find short films online still have plenty of places to go. Will people want a virtual Sundance experience? Can the Online Festival compete with established sites including Atom Films and iFilm for the all-too-scarce viewers?

One weapon that Sundance does have is brand-name power -- it's the Coca-Cola of American festivals. That's one reason Menkes agreed to participate.

"Sundance brings this unbelievable stature as a premier festival to the table," she says. "If they are presenting online, it is a big endorsement. They are saying, 'We think this is important.' All of a sudden, I'm getting calls from CNN, not because I've been making independent films for 15 years, but because this project is at Sundance."