**Headline:** Three Mind-Blowing Indie Film Festivals That Show Actual Good Movies

**Teaser:** Truly independent cinema is alive and well in North America. Here’s why it matters.

By Damon Orion

**Author Bio:** Damon Orion is a writer, journalist, musician, artist, and teacher in Santa Cruz, California. His work has appeared in Revolver, Guitar World, Spirituality + Health, Classic Rock, and other publications. Read more of his work at [DamonOrion.com](https://damonorion.com/).

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**[Article Body:]**

A 2020 [study](https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7288198/) by the [Institute of Psychology, Russian Academy of Sciences](https://colab.ws/organizations/05kvjc571) researcher Tina Kubrak is one of many [reports](https://www.psychetal.com/post/the-influence-movies-have-on-us) showing that movies can powerfully influence attitudes on factors like sexual orientation, transgenderism, gender roles, ethnicity, and mental illness.

Cinema’s capacity to broaden awareness can lead to social change. For example, [according](https://www.soompi.com/article/368206wpp/legislation-in-response-to-the-crucible-passed) to the Korean pop culture website Soompi, the film [*Dogani*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Silenced_%28film%29), released in 2011, directly inspired the National Assembly of South Korea to impose stricter penalties for sexual abuse and led to the closure of a [school](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gwangju_Inhwa_School) where minors were being abused.

Meanwhile, in 2016, the Guardian [pointed out](https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/mar/17/seaworld-to-stop-breeding-killer-whales-orcas-blackfish) that one year after the 2013 Sundance Film Festival premiere of [*Blackfish*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackfish_%28film%29)—a documentary that brought SeaWorld’s problematic orca breeding program into public awareness—attendance at the theme park’s San Diego branch plummeted by 17 percent, the company’s shares dropped by more than 50 percent, and CEO Jim Atchison stepped down. “The film’s effect on the park was staggering: [profits dropped 84 percent between 2014 and 2015](https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/aug/06/seaworld-profits-plunge-customers) as sales and attendance collapsed,” the Guardian stated. Slightly more than three years after the film’s premiere, SeaWorld discontinued its breeding program.

Other filmmakers have, however, used their influence for destructive means. Loyola University of Chicago’s Mary F. Brown has [cited](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/016059769501900108) the 1935 pro-Nazi film *Triumph of the Will* as an example of “the powerful effect media can have in creating and reinforcing attitudes and belief systems.” Meanwhile, the global education network Facing History and Ourselves has [noted](https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/influence-birth-nation) that the 1915 movie *The Birth of a Nation* “did ‘incalculable harm’ to Black Americans by creating a justification for prejudice, racism, and discrimination for decades to follow,” adding that during the year of the film’s release, “the Ku Klux Klan, inactive since the trials of 1872, reemerged across the country to terrorize African Americans and immigrants.”

Given this medium’s ability to disseminate information, shape consciousness, sway opinions, and lead the populace, it’s hard to overstate the importance of filmmakers whose intent is unclouded by outside influences and commercial interests.

“True freedom in filmmaking is still rare,” says Bryan Wendorf, co-founder and artistic director of the world’s longest-running underground film festival, the [Chicago Underground Film Festival](https://cuff.org/) (CUFF). Founded in 1993, this Chicago, Illinois, nonprofit showcases films that “aren’t chasing algorithms, prestige platforms, or distributor-approved aesthetics,” but that “exist because someone *needed* to make them,” Wendorf says.

Because it is not affiliated with any other organization, the festival is free to set its own criteria for programming. “In a culture of relentless branding and cinematic sandpapering, CUFF is a place where films can still be weird, handmade, personal, loud, broken, hilarious, and heartbreaking, all in the same reel,” Wendorf says. “We’re not here to calm audiences down. We’re here to wake them up.”

Wendorf defines “underground” as “work made without asking permission—often with whatever tools are on hand and driven by personal urgency, political resistance, or artistic obsession. It’s rough-edged, hybrid, [and] genre-fluid. It rejects polish for its own sake. These are films that break rules—or, better yet, ignore them entirely—and they often come from communities that exist outside of dominant narratives, told from within, not as tourists. The underground has always been a haven for the unheard, the unruly, and the uncategorizable. That’s where the most urgent, exciting work comes from.”

Wendorf attributes CUFF’s longevity to its staff’s stubbornness and clarity of purpose. He says the festival’s programming voice has been consistent throughout [changes](https://screenmag.com/the-30th-chicago-underground-film-festival-is-here) in venues, partnerships, and nonprofit status. “We’re not trying to grow for the sake of growth. We’re not pivoting to industry panels and red carpets. CUFF exists for filmmakers and audiences who care about film as an art form and a cultural irritant. That keeps us going.”

CUFF is part of an [extensive list](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_film_festivals_in_the_United_States) of independent film festivals in the United States. Besides big-name festivals like [Tribeca](https://www.tribecafilm.com/), [Sundance](https://festival.sundance.org/), [Telluride](https://www.telluridefilmfestival.org/), the [Austin Film Festival](https://austinfilmfestival.com/), the [SXSW Film and TV Festival](https://www.sxsw.com/festivals/film/), the [Santa Fe International Film Festival](https://santafe.film/2022-iff-01), and the [Chicago International Film Festival](https://www.chicagofilmfestival.com/), the U.S. is home to events such as [San Francisco IndieFest](https://sfindie.com/), [Bushwick Film Festival](https://www.bushwickfilmfestival.com/), [Citizen Jane Film Festival](https://www.instagram.com/citizenjanefilmfestival/), and [Twin Cities Film Fest](https://twincitiesfilmfest.org/).

[Slamdance](https://slamdance.com/) is a festival founded in 1995 in Park City, Utah, by filmmakers whose works were rejected for inclusion in that city’s most prestigious film festival, Sundance. “At Slamdance, we’ve recognized an inherent need for a viable platform for these fiercely independent filmmakers who might not have the connections to get coveted spots in industry labs and financing along the more traditional development roads,” the festival’s website [states](https://slamdance.com/festival-submit/).

In a 2022 [interview](https://www.backstage.com/magazine/article/behind-slamdance-film-festival-peter-baxter-interview-74587/) for Backstage, Slamdance president and co-founder Peter Baxter said the festival has “proven that when it comes to discovering talent and launching careers, independent and grassroots communities can do it themselves.”

A 2020 [blog](https://tongal.com/blog/community-guest-post/in-the-shadow-of-sundance-slamdance-is-warmer) from the content creation platform Tongal contrasted Slamdance with Sundance. “Sundance remains the king of the American film festivals, and for good reason,” the piece noted. “But in a year when HBO, Hulu, Disney+, and Searchlight all premiered films under that prized Sundance glow and Netflix alone owned 11 Sundance films before the festival even began, one begins to suspect that we cannot simply call the festival ‘indie.’”

Describing Slamdance as “a worthy antidote” to “the ambivalence” of Sundance, the blog explained that the former festival “invites its filmmakers to program the festival the following year (a tradition which contributes enormously to the program’s indie integrity).”

In 2025, Slamdance [moved to Hollywood](https://deadline.com/2024/04/slamdance-film-festival-moves-from-park-city-to-los-angeles-2025-1235900300/). The same year, Sundance [announced](https://www.sundance.org/blogs/sundance-institute-announces-boulder-colorado-as-the-new-home-for-the-sundance-film-festival-beginning-in-2027) that Boulder, Colorado, would be its new home beginning in 2027. [Sundance](https://www.sundance.org/blogs/sundance-institute-announces-boulder-colorado-as-the-new-home-for-the-sundance-film-festival-beginning-in-2027) and [Slamdance](https://slamdance.com/slamdance-film-festival-to-move-to-los-angeles-in-2025) have both issued statements that these relocations will expand their ability to support independent filmmakers.

According to a study by Tallinn University researchers, [published](https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0297404) in PLOS One journal in 2024, a growing “gender equity” is taking place in festivals worldwide. “[F]estival programming has become more thematically diverse, and the inclusion of films by women creatives has increased between 2012–2021,” [stated](https://phys.org/news/2024-03-festivals-diverse-ways.html) a Phys.org article about the study. The research further pointed to the importance of these independent festivals in “fostering cultural exchange and representation [and] aligning with the public interest in supporting a diverse cultural sphere.”

Like the U.S., [Canada](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_film_festivals_in_Canada) is rich with indie film showcases. Besides the [Toronto International Film Festival](https://www.tiff.net/help/tiff-2025) (TIFF), which Wikipedia has [cited](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Film_festival#:~:text) as North America’s most popular festival, there are events like the [Victoria Film Festival](https://www.victoriafilmfestival.com/), [Reelworld](https://www.reelworld.ca/), [Calgary Underground Film Festival](https://www.calgaryundergroundfilm.org/), [ImagineNATIVE Film + Media Arts Festival](https://imaginenative.org/about/) (“the world’s largest presenter of Indigenous screen content”), [St. John’s International Women’s Film Festival](https://www.womensfilmfestival.com/), the [Canadian Independent Film Festival](https://ciffofficial.com/) (CIFF), and the [Montreal Independent Film Festival](https://filmfreeway.com/Montrealindependentfilmfestival) (MIFF).

Another independent film festival held in Montréal, Québec, is the [Festival du Nouveau Cinéma](https://nouveaucinema.ca/en) (FNC). Seventh Row, a platform for movie lovers and filmmakers, [calls FNC](https://seventh-row.com/2022/10/20/festival-du-nouveau-cinema-2022-a-haven-for-cinephiles/) “a great ground zero if you’re looking for off-the-beaten-path films that might have been overlooked by more populist film festivals.”

“Unlike other star-driven film festivals like Toronto’s TIFF, the FNC is more director-driven,” the Montréal Gazette [noted](https://www.montrealgazette.com/opinion/columnists/article85731.html) in 2023. “With movie theaters struggling for survival in the wake of the pandemic, emphasis has been placed on stocking cinemas with commercial fare to get bums back into seats. Not to take away from the merits of Paw Patrol or the latest Indiana Jones escapade, but cinephiles would be left in the lurch without the FNC, not to mention the city’s myriad other film fests.”