



The documentary *Project Nim* charts an effort by Laura-Ann Petitto and others in the 1970s to teach sign language to a chimpanzee.

## FILM

# Science shines at Sundance

Relationships and behaviour are highlighted in this year's clutch of science films at the agenda-setting festival, notes **Jascha Hoffman**.

The Sundance Film Festival is known for giving Quentin Tarantino his big break as a director, and for discovering low-budget box-office hits such as *The Blair Witch Project* (1999). This year, the stars will share the screen with a Charles Darwin impersonator and an expressive chimpanzee.

The annual film festival in Park City, Utah, which this year runs 20–30 January, sets the agenda for independent cinema worldwide. Established to promote US film-makers working outside Hollywood, its popularity has grown and it now attracts big names. As in recent years, several of them have turned their cameras on scientific themes.

One point of focus is the relationship between humans and animals. James Marsh, the Oscar-winning director of *Man on Wire* (2008), presents his new documentary *Project Nim*, which charts the training of a chimpanzee in the 1970s to use hand signals. Nim Chimpsky, as the ape was called after linguist Noam Chomsky, was thought by some to have used its own syntax. The film lays scientific controversy bare by revealing how others, including the study's leader Herbert Terrace, were more sceptical.

Animal behaviour gets a comic twist in a short film by actor Isabella Rossellini. *Animals Distract Me* tracks a day in the life of Rossellini, best known for her role in David Lynch's film *Blue Velvet* (1986), as she encounters urban beasts across New York. The film follows on from her popular 2008 series *Green Porno* and its 2010 sequel *Seduce Me*, in which she plays out the mating habits of insects and sea creatures. Further insights

## Sundance Film Festival

Park City, Utah.  
Until 30 January.

into evolution come from a figure playing Charles Darwin, who pops up throughout.

Technology forms another theme. Ridley Scott, who directed *Bladerunner* (1982), and Kevin McDonald, director of *The Last King of Scotland* (2006), will reveal at the festival the result of their project to generate a film entirely from amateur YouTube footage. *Life in a Day* is crafted from video clips of people's lives that were gathered on 24 July 2010.

In *Connected*, award-winning film-maker Tiffany Shlain, also the founder of the Webby Awards for Internet excellence, explores the global connections that have been created between people thanks to the Internet. Against the backdrop of the death during filming of her father, Leonard Shlain — surgeon and author of *Art and Physics* (William Morrow, 1993) — she asks how texts and tweets are changing our lives and relationships.

Twenty-first-century film technology is applied to dramatic visual effect in the fantastical Polish-Swedish film *The Mill and the Cross*, starring Rutger Hauer, Charlotte Rampling and Michael York. Sophisticated digital layering and colouring techniques bring to life scenes based on an oil painting of an old master, Pieter Bruegel's 1564 *The Procession to Calvary*. The artist and other period characters appear on screen as if they have stepped off the canvas.

Scientific lives lie at the heart of other poignant films. *The Music Never Stopped*, based on a case study by neurologist Oliver Sacks, depicts a young man with

amnesia who recovers some of his capacity for memory when exposed to music. In *Letters from the Big Man*, a hydrologist is faced with a dilemma about whether to report her sighting of an ape-like creature in the Pacific Northwest. And in *HERE*, a US cartographer confronts uncertainty, in both map-making and love, as he works on a satellite survey of Armenia.

Two noteworthy films, co-written by and starring newcomer Brit Marling, bring out the subtle side of science fiction. In *Another Earth*, a duplicate planet to our own appears in the sky, offering a pair of strangers the chance to rewrite history on that parallel world. In *Sound of My Voice*, a couple infiltrates a cult surrounding a woman who claims to have travelled from the future. Marling's films recall another nuanced work, *Obselidia* (2010), about a man compiling an encyclopedia of the obsolete, which won last year's Alfred P. Sloan prize for feature films about science and technology at the festival.

With such variety on show, this year's Sloan award judging panel — which includes anthropologist Helen Fisher, astrophysicist Sean Carroll and neuroscientist David Poeppel — will have to pool their experience to pick a winner. "There is no all-encompassing theme," says festival panel organizer John Nein of the science and nature films. "The strongest commonality is that they offer reflections on what it means to be human." ■

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