

The Austin Indie Film Examiner's top five films of SXSW 2016

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A couple of weeks rest does the body good.

Well, at least that's what I needed after [South by Southwest \(SXSW\)](#) 2016 concluded this year. Even with a separate day job causing a reduction in my total number of films this year, [SXSW](#) 2016 was one of the best festivals I've had the privilege of enjoying. An easy way to determine whether a festival was strong is asking yourself two questions: Did you hate any films? Nope. Did any films pleasantly surprise you? Yes. SXSW 2016 hit both marks.

As always, I try to enjoy both narrative and documentary films at the festival and this year was no exception. In fact, the SXSW documentaries sometimes outshine the narratives in terms of their sheer innovation and force. This year was one of those years with a documentary taking my top spot for the festival. That being said, the narratives held their own and packed plenty of wonderful surprises that left myself and other festival attendees smiling.

Without further ado, here are my top five favorite films from SXSW 2016:

- 1 "Under the Sun"** - An extremely rare extended look into the isolated culture of North Korea, this enthralling yet heartbreaking documentary stole the show at this year's festival. Originally commissioned as a propaganda [film](#) produced by the North Korean (DPRK) government, writer/director Vitaliy Manskiy instead turned the film into an expose on the manipulation and abuse the DPRK people face every day. A strange and unsettling tour-de-force from beginning to end, "Under the Sun" is unlike any film we may see again. Here's to hoping some awards season success is in its future.
- 2 "Hardcore Henry"** - Few films have made me throw my arms up in the air and cheer as the credits roll but "Hardcore Henry" earned that honor with its one-of-a-kind thrill ride experience. Shot almost entirely on GoPro cameras and with a first-person point-of-view, "Hardcore Henry" takes little time showcasing why it was the winner of the prestigious [Midnight Madness People's Choice award](#) at the 2015 Toronto International Film Festival. Sure to make those in the first few rows a little bit queasy, writer/director Ilya Naishuller's fever dream of unrelenting pace of silliness and hyper-violence will surely make my year-end top 10.
- 3 "Pet"** - The midnighters portion of SXSW film often produces big hits or misses and this intense thriller is easily the former. An opening night standout, "Pet" uses the familiar face of [Dominic Monaghan](#) ("Lord of the Rings") to create a

disturbing thriller to produce a story about a lonely animal caretaker going to extremes for affection. The fast paced plot along with the many twists will keep all of those looking for thrills and gore highly satisfied when the film hits theaters later this year.

- 4 **"American Fable"** - Making a fairy tale film with an indie budget should be difficult, but that wasn't the case for first-time writer/director Anne Hamilton. Led by a stunning performance from the young **Peyton Kennedy**, "American Fable" uses lush cinematography to tell a captivating story with a strong dose of Americana mixed in. The fantastical elements are few in number but the lack of over-the-top fantasy actually makes this film even more special. The characters are lovable, relatable and the story has a clever ending...what else could you ask for?

- 5 **"Starving the Beast"** - This documentary about the systematic and deliberate destruction of the public university system deserved more buzz and acclaim at this year's festival. Anyone who has earned a degree from a major public university will surely feel the emotional power as well as the frustration this doc provides. Documentaries are meant to shine a light on topics that are important to the world yet are often overlooked and "Starving the Beast" does exactly that. The world needs a strong public university system in the United States and this documentary supports that claim and will hopefully inspire many people to rise up to stop the erosion of higher education.

Look out for my full review of "Hardcore Henry" next week when the film hits theaters April 8th!



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