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Entertainment Weekly

MONDAY, August 1, 2005

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Missing Link

Richard Linklater's new movie animates the Sundance crowd. But "American Astronaut" and "The Deep End" also score points by Jeff Gordinier



'DEEP' THOUGHTS Siegel, Swinton, and McGehee emote in "Deep End"

Ever since I got to this year's Sundance Film Festival, I've sensed a nagging communal hunger for something new. Of course, that's why film festivals exist: They're fox hunts in which a bloodthirsty pack of hounds goes

galloping off in pursuit of newness. But this year the craving for something fresh is more palpable than ever. Maybe it's got something to do with the whole "new administration, new decade" vibe, but I think it's just because everybody's become weary to the point of impatience with all the old indie film clichés -- the cute gangster caper, the gloomy suburban exposé, and the screwball depressive comedy about flirty bohemians in Greenwich Village.

Enough already. My own patience reached

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MOVIE GRADE
 EW Grade: A

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VIDEO GRADE
 *A

LEAD PERFORMANCE
 ▶ [Ethan Hawke](#)
 ▶ [Julie Delpy](#)
 ▶ [Wiley Wiggins](#)

DIRECTOR
 ▶ [Richard Linklater](#)

WRITER
 ▶ [Richard Linklater](#)

ILLUSTRATOR
 ▶ [Bob Sabiston](#)

RELEASE DATE (LIMITED)
 * Oct 19 2001

RELEASE DATE
 * 2001

RATING
 *R

GENRE
 * Animation

RUN TIME
 * 99 Minutes



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its snapping point with "L.I.E.," a joyless, dysfunction junction drama that's not just about sullen adolescents -- it actually feels like it was directed by one. This week, I've found myself in a lot of conversations that could be summed up like this: "There are hundreds of movies here, honey. You wanna get noticed, you're gonna have to work a little harder."

As a result, there is an ongoing theological skirmish at Sundance 2001 between tradition and innovation. Take "The American Astronaut," which must be one of the strangest movies ever to unspool in the festival's competition. If you've got an appetite for newness, or at least for new twists on old genres, "The American Astronaut" delivers it in smorgasbord size heaps. It's (hold on to your ski caps) a black and white sci fi western musical with curious homoerotic undertones and dialogue that occasionally verges on pure dada freakishness. (You can hear a few people walking around Park City regurgitating some of the more memorable lines. For example: "My father taught me to kill the sunflower.")

Imagine a long Laurel & Hardy skit directed by Salvador Dali, or maybe a mutant celluloid fusion of Buck Rogers, Tom Waits, and David Lynch. It's bizarre, and bizarre is good, but some people have found "The American Astronaut" pretty darn difficult to watch. I stayed in my seat, dumbstruck by this extended aria of insanity, but plenty of folks in my row dashed out of the theater long before the finale. (The guy next to me actually had his head in his hands, as if he were in pain.) A few days later, I had an opportunity to chat with the director and star of "The American Astronaut," Cory McAbee, a bright and charming fellow who's seemingly immune to criticism. "One woman hated it so much that she was furious," McAbee told me, grinning. "She was like, 'I hate this! I hate this movie!' When I heard that, I was like, 'All right!' Another person told me it was the best movie she had ever seen in her life."

If there are those who consider "The American Astronaut" a kind of lunatic triumph, it's a testament to the festival's

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- ▶ [Waking Life](#)

collective yearning for surprise. One of the unquestionable hits of Sundance 2001 is "The Deep End," a clever, polished, haunting film noir written and directed by San Francisco's Scott McGehee and David Siegel. Clearly these guys are pros. Sumptuous imagery. A tight, knotty script. And the British actress Tilda Swinton, always a bracing screen presence with her scarlet hair, alabaster skin, and piercing eyes, delivers a searing performance as a Lake Tahoe mother who suddenly finds herself in a nasty fix. As far as I can tell, nobody dislikes "The Deep End" -- it's nearly guaranteed to come out of Sundance with a nice distribution deal -- but I've overheard one sporadic quibble: "The Deep End" is a good classic melodrama, but it doesn't really satisfy that jones for a NEW new thing.

The quest for something that's both innovative and entertaining reached a climax on Tuesday evening. I spoke with director Richard Linklater in the lobby of the Eccles Theater just minutes before the premiere of "Waking Life," his new animated movie. Linklater was anxious. Superficial spinmeisters might be tempted to call "Waking Life" a cartoon, but that easy terminology doesn't do justice to its mesmerizing liquid poetry animation (which is like nothing you've ever seen) or its wild narrative journey.

For the entire movie, actor Wiley Wiggins -- best known as the kid from Linklater's "Dazed and Confused" -- wanders through a whirling, floating, color drenched dreamworld, listening to cosmic testimonials from various philosophers, poets, seekers, demons, and visionaries. It shouldn't work, but it does; it ventures into heavy territory but it never comes off as pretentious, just welcoming and thrilling and fun. I suppose you could say it's like an ethereal variation on "Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory," one in which our hero gets to nibble on ideas and identities instead of Everlasting Gobstoppers and Fizzy Lifting Drink, but "Waking Life" almost feels like a genre unto itself.

Linklater had no way to predict whether the audience would clap or storm out, but

five minutes into the premiere, a lot of people were starting to lean forward in their seats, transfixed, enthralled. Laughter and cheers broke out. You could pick up a telepathic rumble in the room: Now this is a new thing! When the house lights came back on, the crowd gave Linklater a standing ovation.

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