Sundance Diary, Part 3: Documentaries That Don't Despair

Given a choice between fiction and reality, the festival's fact-based films provide a surprising sense of escapism.

"President" follows Nelson Chamisa during the 2018 Zimbabwean elections. Sundance Institute

By A.O. Scott

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A.O. Scott, our critic at large, is keeping a diary as he "attends" the virtual Sundance Film Festival, which runs through Wednesday. Read Part 1 and Part 2.

Saturday, 12 p.m.: It is currently two degrees warmer in Brooklyn than in Park City. In theory that might make the stay-at-home Sundance experience seem more authentic, but on the other hand I haven't left the house since the festival started. It isn't an entirely solitary undertaking. My wife is a stalwart screening companion until sleep overtakes her. Occasionally our daughter joins us. The dogs doze through everything. The cat hates movies.

Every film festival is to some extent self-curated. Nobody can see everything, and the sweeping judgments and thematic statements that characterize coverage of these events is always based on partial information. Maybe it's the absence of audible buzz, the familiar domestic setting or the technology, but this version of Sundance feels especially subjective.

For whatever reason, I've spent most of the last 24 hours watching documentaries. It wasn't exactly the plan, but a path seemed to open up Friday, from Zimbabwe to Sweden to California and from politics to celebrity to fire. And every time I had a choice between fiction and reality, a window onto the world as it is felt curiously like the more appealing form of escapism.

I started with Camilla Nielsson's "President," about the Zimbabwean presidential election of 2018, the first since the fall of Robert Mugabe, who had ruled the southern African nation since 1980. Mugabe's party, ZANU-PF, remained in control of both the government and the electoral commission. Nielsson and her crew embedded with the opposition MDC party, the subject of her earlier film, "Democrats," following its 40-year-old candidate, Nelson Chamisa, through meetings, rallies and an intensifying crisis. The way this film confronts the fragility of democracy and the ever-looming possibility of violence hit home for this American viewer in a way that was both harrowing and humbling.

I found "The Most Beautiful Boy in the World" haunting, and also puzzling. Directed by Kristina Lindstrom and Kristian Petri, it's a psychologically probing portrait of Bjorn Andresen, who as a teenager was cast in "Death in Venice," Luchino Visconti's 1971 adaptation of the Thomas Mann novella. The film presents a somber chronicle of drift and disaster, much of which is attributed — provocatively, if not always persuasively — to the trauma of Andresen's early fame. In exploring how he was exploited and objectified in the name of art, the filmmakers venture into ethically troubling territory, testing the boundary between intimacy and invasiveness.

Friday's watching ended with "Bring Your Own Brigade," Lucy Walker's relentless forensic examination of some of California's most horrific recent wildfires. The movie's first section is an almost unbearable immersion in terror, including 911 calls and cellphone videos that capture death and destruction in real time. Walker, a British transplant sensitive to her outsider status, is driven by an effective mixture of empathy and intellectual curiosity as she tries to understand the ecology, economics and politics of fire.

As the narrative shifts from disaster to its aftermath — which is also, inevitably, the prelude to the next round of catastrophe — the scope broadens, even as the camera remains focused on local events and individual stories. In a way that I can't quite explain but that I think will be clear when you see it, "Bring Your Own Brigade" strikes me as one of the early, definitive films about the current pandemic, a subject that Walker barely mentions.

As such, the film isn't entirely without hope. This is partly because there is something inherently optimistic, or at least non-despairing, in the act of making a documentary. It's a form that often gravitates toward stories of struggle and perseverance, like the one that started my day: Pedro Kos's "Rebel Hearts," about a group of nuns in the 1960s who defied the archbishop of Los Angeles and the Vatican hierarchy in their determination to link religious commitment to the challenges of the times. Before this film, I had never heard of the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, and now I can't stop thinking about them. That's why I may keep going with the documentaries for a while.