

Slate of Documentaries

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positive notice the film is winning at film festivals will help it snag a distributor; for now you can follow it on its website (kikimovie.com).

6. **"Hooligan Sparrow"** tells a story of political awakening with remarkable parallels to "Two Trains Runnin'." After coming to NYU for school, filmmaker Nanfu Wang returned to her native China intent on making a film about a maverick activist, Ye Haiyan (known as Hooligan Sparrow), who had made a name for herself on the internet advocating for sex workers' rights. In the post-show screening that I attended, Wang explained how, like most Chinese, she had not been particularly awake to the oppressive tactics employed by her own government—but soon she found herself a target of government surveillance and intimidation along with Sparrow and her band of activist colleagues as they pleaded for justice for six elementary school girls who were sexually abused by their school principal. All the activists' actions (including Wang's actions in filming) are technically legal—but the response of police and hired thugs who intimidate them, assault them, arrest Sparrow and others, and hold them for days without due process reveals a government absolutely intent on preventing any real accountability for official actions, even deplorable ones. The struggle of Wang and her subjects to document their experience—including using secret recording devices and hidden-camera glasses—and even to find places to shelter them in the face of black-listing and relentless surveillance is an important window into the stakes for the struggle for human rights in China—and, to my mind, a perhaps more visible look at the tactics used by the powerful everywhere to silence dissent. You can follow the film on its website (hooligansparrow.com) and on Facebook; it's currently making the festival circuit and hopefully will find a distributor.

7. **"Life, Animated"** won the audience award at Full Frame and its director, Roger Ross Williams (who also directed the terrific "God Loves Uganda"), won a documentary directing award for this film at Sundance. It's a beautiful and moving depiction of a particular family's journey with autism. Owen Susskind was an apparently happy and normal child until, at age three, he stopped talking and began regressing in other ways. After years of unsuccessful attempts to reach him, Owen's parents discovered that they could converse with him through the Disney characters that he loved so well—and indeed, eventually

they discovered that Owen had the entire Disney catalog memorized and, to a large degree, experienced life through the lessons he had learned from his beloved Disney films. Through a skillful blend of interviews and beautifully animated sequences, this inspiring film tells the Susskinds' story and illustrates an important breakthrough in recognizing that the passions of kids with autism can provide an important pathway to helping them make connections and build satisfying lives. The film will receive a theatrical release in July and, until then, you can follow it on its website (lifeanimateddoc.com) or on Facebook.

8. **"Kate Plays Christine"** is a particularly fascinating Rubik's Cube of a film that wrestles with the complexity of finding a truthful vantage point for story investigation. Its writer-director, Robert Greene, who won a screenwriting award for the film at Sundance, builds it around actress Kate Lyn Sheil's preparation to play Christine Chubbok, a young news anchor who notoriously shot herself on the air in 1974, in a dramatic film about her life. We follow Sheil's attempts to transform her physical appearance and to learn more about Chubbok's life and relationships in order to try to understand her dramatic and inscrutable actions. As the film unfolds, both Chubbok's and Sheil's motivations remain elusive—even more so when you realize that there is no film actually being made except the one you are watching; the entire project is an inquiry into story-telling itself. We are being had—but, in a sense, we are always being had when someone tells us a story, including a true one. And what is a true point of view for telling a personal story, especially one like this one about a sensational act by a depressed person angry about, among other things, the sensational vantage point that makes television news inherently false? And how real are Sheil's struggles with playing her? This quirky film grapples productively with the craft of acting, the quandary of suicide, and the challenge of understanding another person's story.

9. **"The Bad Kids"** is a moving cinema verite' examination of a Mojave Desert High School that serves "at risk" kids. The film, which won a special jury prize at Sundance, invites you to sit with the experience of these kids and the adults who try to help them—and without directly giving you much history, you get a sense of the social, emotional, and economic pressures that have pushed these kids to the edge. Indeed, their struggles often seem to be the fall-out from the struggles of their parents. The approach of this school and its principal is a

moving example of love in action—of really dealing with these kids where they are, making genuine and concrete offers of help which sometimes can be accepted and sometimes, heartbreakingly, can't be. With these kids, a rigid approach just won't work—but loving limits and real investment in them as people offers hope that inspires. The film recently acquired a distributor and can be followed on its website (thebadkidsmovie.com) and on Facebook.

10. **"Trapped"** explores the alarming effects of "TRAP" laws (targeted regulation of abortion providers), which since 2010 have achieved their aim of shutting down the majority of abortion clinics in southern states and have taken hold in other states as well. The regulations impose unworkable restrictions on abortion providers that have nothing to do with safe performance of the procedure and everything to do with forcing the shutdown of clinics and making abortions practically impossible for women by requiring them to travel expensive and unworkable distances, often for statutorily required extra visits. The film illustrates how a constitutional right has been essentially regulated out of existence in large swathes of the country, increasingly leading to an alarming return of dangerous attempts by women to end unwanted pregnancies. The treatment here is reasoned and comprehensive and focuses needed attention on a trend about which most people are not well-informed. It won a special jury prize at Sundance and is currently in limited release. It will also air on public broadcasting in June. You can follow it on its website (trappeddocumentary.com).

11. **"Starless Dreams"** won the Grand Jury Prize and an Inspiration Award, and invites you to sit with the experience of young women living in an Iranian juvenile detention center. These teenagers have committed serious crimes like theft, drug trafficking, and even murder, but filmmaker Mehrdad Oskouei (himself the father of a teenage girl) builds the space and trust necessary to gently coax from his subjects the stories of abuse and deprivation that appropriately broaden the picture of their actions. My own experience leads me to expect that one might hear similar stories from girls in detention here in the U.S; the filmmaker subtly raises questions about the world these girls can expect and the societal failures that have brought them to this place. I'm not sure it will get a U.S. theatrical release, but it is worth keeping an eye out for an opportunity to give these girls your ear.

12. **"Sonita"** won a filmmaker award at Full Frame and an audience award at the Portland International Film Festival. It follows

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