

Films Explore Race and the Environment

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I found “**American Factory**” interesting but a little unsatisfying. The film follows what happens when a Chinese auto glass manufacturer, Fuyao, opens a plant at the location of a closed GM plant in Dayton, Ohio. (Directors Julie Reichart and Steven Bognar previously were nominated for an Academy Award for their short film, “The Last Truck: The Closing of a GM Plant,” which told the story of the closing of that plant.) The Chinese-American venture, however outwardly successful, devolves into successive misunderstandings and culture clashes; the Chinese bring in some of their own workers to bring their way of doing business to Ohio, and the U.S. work-



Ethan Rice is a young artist dying of cystic fibrosis who navigates an end of life journey in the new documentary “Exit Music.”

force of former autoworkers have entirely different ideas of what a functioning and viable workplace looks like. It’s an American film, so I suppose it’s not surprising to sense a bit of American bias in this film’s depiction of the attitude of the Chinese toward employees and toward American environmental and labor laws, as if a similar disregard is not also evident among American manufacturers. That said, this is an interesting window into the current dilemmas facing American and global industry, one that doesn’t fill one with confidence in the quality of communications and decisions that will drive whatever changes come next. As of February, a Netflix release was in negotiations, so the film should be accessible to a broader audience soon.

A broad audience will be harder to come by for “**Exit Music**,” a sensitive exploration of the life and death of Ethan Rice, a young artist suffering with cystic fibrosis—but that’s only because death is so hard to sit with. Director Cameron Mullenieux set out to make a film about the difficulty of dying, and what she has assembled here reflects months of patient trust-building and ministry of presence, as 28-year-old Rice and his devoted parents struggle with what it means to affirm him and his life as the pain and struggle that attends his life become more and more difficult. Rice far surpassed all predictions for his life span, in part because his father (a Vietnam vet-



Offering a take on racial injustice, “Where the Pavement Ends,” explores the relationship between the historically all-black town of Kinloch, Mo., and its formerly all-white neighbor Ferguson, where the police killing of Michael Brown sparked protests and national outrage in 2014.

eran suffering from PTSD) made it his personal mission to keep his son alive. So how does one let go, when the body does not ease the process? What does it mean to love and care for someone who is suffering? What is a good death? This compassionate film sits with those questions, buoyed by the music and animation which Rice created to express what he had to say within the parameters that his physical limitations afforded him. You can look for screenings and follow the film’s progress at exitmusicfilm.com.

With the backing of distributor National Geographic, “**Sea of Shadows**” won’t be hard to find in the near term. It’s a well-shot and slickly produced eco-thriller about endangered animals off the Mexican coast. A complicated story told well begins with the totoaba fish in the Sea of Cortez, whose bladder is a highly prized commodity in China; black-market poachers have decimated the population of not only that fish but a rare porpoise, the vaquita, that

is very near extinction, caught in the gill-nets aiming for the totoaba. Mexican cartels and institutional corruption make the urgent efforts to prevent extinction of the vaquita complicated, dangerous, and quite possibly futile. The filmmaker juggles all these elements well for a compelling and ongoing story that likely mirrors other greed-driven crises across the globe. The film garnered an audience award at the Sundance Film Festival

Finally, “**Grit**” is another environmental story that has caught attention on the festival circuit, including at the Ashland Independent Film Festival, where it won Special Mention. It’s the devastating story of a tsunami of mud that destroyed an Indonesian village in 2006. The disaster resulted when an oil company, Lapindo, struck an underground mud volcano. A decade later, despite abundant evidence establishing the cause of the disaster, villagers whose jobs and homes

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