

Directors Describe Their Key Scenes in the Past Year's Top Documentary Films

By [RANDEE DAWN](#)



CREDIT: APOLLO 11: NEON; THE EDGE OF DEMOCRACY; FRANCISCO VAN STEEN PRONER RAMOS/NETFLIX; KNOCK DOWN THE HOUSE: NETFLIX

The directors of this awards season's documentary hopefuls explain the ticking hearts at the center of their shortlisted films.

Apollo 11, Director: Todd Douglas Miller

Setting the Scene: The pre-launch sequence for the first mission in which humans landed on the moon, featuring NASA workers and regular citizens alike.

"It encapsulates everything and highlights a lost time — a hot day in 1969 in a fidelity that hasn't been captured before," says Miller. "It's the bridge between what is coming and what's come before. It's kind of the pinnacle of human evolution."

American Factory, Directors: Steven Bognar and Julia Reichert

Setting the Scene: Chinese billionaire and factory owner Cao Dewang reveals doubt in his life's purpose.

“He says, ‘I’m not sure if I’m a contributor or a sinner,’” says Reichert. Adds Bogner: “He’s been a hard-charging entrepreneur, and now he’s questioning his whole life’s journey. It’s a turning point in how you feel about these guys, and it complicates your feelings about what he’s doing.”

The Edge of Democracy, Director: Petra Costa

Popular on Variety



Setting the Scene: Former Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva makes a dramatic speech protesting his innocence in the Petrobras scandal before turning himself in to authorities.

“He was the favorite for the election [term limits, which had denied him a third consecutive term, had passed], but he decided to follow the rule of law because he believes in the process, despite the fact that there’s evidence that the other side is corrupt,” says Costa. “The rule of law is the only thing that separates a dictatorship from a democracy, and he turned himself in with that in mind.”

The Great Hack, Directors: Karim Amer and Jehane Noujaim

Setting the Scene: Journalist Carole Cadwalladr, who broke the Facebook-Cambridge Analytica data scandal, sees her credibility assailed online and in the courts.

“She says, ‘I wish this wouldn’t get to me, but the reality is this stuff works — trolling, fake news,’” recalls Noujaim. “She breaks down and explains why and how on a personal level she’s been attacked and her life destroyed because of the message she’s trying to get out into the world.”

One Child Nation, Directors: Nanfu Wang and Jialing Zhang

Setting the Scene: While illuminating the decades-long one-child policy in China, Wang speaks with an 84-year-old midwife who reveals she performed nearly 60,000 sterilizations and abortions while the law was in effect.

“The conversation with her changed the direction of the film,” says Wang. “I thought the film would be as simple as perpetrators and victims, but meeting her I realized she suffered trauma and guilt and pain and was one of the victims too. That’s how effective the propaganda [about the one-child policy] was.”

Knock Down the House, Director: Rachel Lears

Setting the Scene: On the night of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s congressional victory, Lears’ cameras capture an election-returns watch event that flips into a victory party.

“It’s lucky that we were there, but it took years of work to get to that point,” says Lears. “Shooting vérité is like performing improvisational music in a group. I and the other camera-person really needed to be on at that moment — and we ended up shooting it like a well-oiled machine.”



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ALEXANDRIA OCASIO-CORTEZ

AMERICAN FACTORY

APOLLO 11

ARTISANS

KNOCK DOWN THE HOUSE

ONE CHILD NATION

THE EDGE OF DEMOCRACY

THE GREAT HACK

