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Rebuilding Paradise

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Rebuilding Paradise

Abstract

This is a film review of *Rebuilding Paradise* (2020), directed by Ron Howard.

Author Notes

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Rebuilding Paradise (2020) dir. Ron Howard

In November 2018, a fire started in Paradise, California, leaving 86 dead. This film traces the initial devastation and follows the townspeople as they struggle to put their lives back together in the face of tragedy and bureaucracy.

The epicenter of the fire in Paradise is called Camp Fire, a fire created due to a number of factors, embers and winds from a nearby fire, faulty equipment from the electric company, global warming and unsustainable logging practices which began in the late 1800s. Paradise was started as a town without many ordinances in the late 1800s, and in subsequent years many families made it their home. It had a strong inter-generational presence with extended families living in close proximity to each other. It had its own customs and practices and a unique sense of community and small town life for the 26,000 people that lived there.

The film opens with dash cam footage from police, families and individuals as they are forced to quickly flee from their homes. This portion quickly communicates the speed of the fire

and the widespread confusion and lack of communication. As cars drive away from flames they drive into dark skies, reminiscent of a nighttime thunderstorm, around midday. In the background of the footage, you can hear people calling out to God, and children asking their parents if they are going to die. Flames and smoke are so high that it is nearly impossible to determine the way out, and only a small percentage of the buildings in the town survived.

The film really takes two different tacks, considering the personal stories of the community, and the unique factors that caused the fire to begin. The central thread of the film, though, is the experience of the community and their responses to the disaster. Without narration, the viewer is forced to connect some of these dots themselves, but we see that the community very quickly tries to reestablish its traditions and get its community members back home. One interesting omission in the film is the role of the church. Although God is invoked several times throughout by the victims of the fire, there's not much inclusion of religious life in the film. The town of 26,000 had 24 churches, about half of which were destroyed. Howard also depicts the numerous traditions of a more secular nature (town days, graduation, egg hunts). He does examine the community surrounding other institutions, like the town council, schools and the police force.

By the end of the film, you do get a sense of what community leaders have gone through, not just in the tragedy itself, but in the year after, as they consider what they have lost. Due to FEMA regulations on cleaning, rebuilding and compensation, many people will never move back to Paradise. It takes one determined past mayor several months to get a new building permit. A policeman at the centre of the film has lost his marriage by the end (a contributing factor was his 13 hour shifts with no days off, but another was his deep sense of responsibility to find bodies and help his neighbours, while his wife was clearly struggling with her own response). The school principal has lost her husband, as he died of a heart attack (possibly induced by the stress). A young

woman must delay her attempts to start a family because of the pollution in the aftermath of the fire.

It is essential that we try to understand how to respond to these climate change tragedies in a useful and kind way, reducing bureaucracy and helping people be a part of the decisions that will impact their communities. Beyond the monetary impact, there are ongoing issues like PTSD, and lack of community supports and networks. From an academic perspective, this film is useful in exploring topics like community, grief, and climate change.