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The Incredible Journey of Freddy Reddy

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3. DOCUMENTARY FILM & HISTORY

3.1. HISTORY ON THE SCREEN

A major consideration in the history of Reddy's journey is the medium of representation – the documentary film. An inevitable tension arises between traditional and academic notions of history and the historical documentary programme as history. In his essay 'History on the Public Screen'[28] Jerry Kuehl, a producer of historical documentaries suggests that a 'traditional' academic approach usually tends to point to instances of incompleteness in historical documentary programmes, such as where historical facts have been omitted. This approach hopes to communicate all of the relevant facts pertaining to a history, while documentaries seem to fall short in this regard.

Kuehl indicates that this is due to the very nature of audio-visual media, which allow for alternative models of uncovering and apprehending history. Where traditional history writing is governed by literary models of articulation in accordance with the conventions of writing and the expectations of a reading audience, a historical documentary made for a television audience, similarly, cannot flaunt the conventions of the medium for which it is made.

In a visual age, the histories uncovered and communicated in the media of film, video and television less frequently resemble earlier modes of literary historical articulation. The tension to which Kuehl refers, alludes to a symbolic disjuncture between an 'actual' historical representation, which is to say, a written history, and the visual medium version of that written history which is usually thought to be merely based on the original (written) form. In the case of *The Incredible Journey of Freddy Reddy*, it is a history that is transmitted and apprehended through a visual medium.

[28] J. Kuehl, *History on the Public Screen*, in P. Smith, *The Historian and Film*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978.

Whereas it may be accurate that, as Kuehl remarks[29], a television or film documentary does not offer its audience the same kind of time for reflection that a reader might have in a written history to perhaps stop and ponder, reflect and re-read a particular portion, a documentary instead is sequential, thus lending itself to the telling of anecdotes and stories rather than detailed analyses of complex events. In fact the medium is ideally suited for the purpose of the narrative, as opposed to the analytic or literary.

The history of Freddy Reddy's journey is a narrative within a general recognition of the conventions of film or television programming. This does not detract from its situation as a history in its own right.

The documentary must seek to communicate to a large audience. This audience won't be homogenous, they won't be under any obligations to watch, and their ages and levels of education will differ. The historian-producer cannot assume that this audience has a specialised knowledge of the particular history, but neither can he or she underestimate their intelligence. Kuehl is reminded too that the mass audience's usual mode of apprehending history is not a literary one either, but more likely primarily through the film or television programme, especially in this visual age.

Where Kuehl emphasises the need to convey not merely all the information[30] – that would be a dull documentary – but to have in the conveying of the history a strong sense of enthusiasm, I would concur. This would further allow for occasional and judicious use of creative and reflexive devices which not only draw attention to the film as construction but that accentuate the *raison d'etre* of the film construction.

[29] J. Kuehl, *History on the Public Screen.* p.177-185.
[30] J. Kuehl, *History on the Public Screen*.

3.2. THE FILMMAKER AS HISTORIAN

Historian and proponent of history and film, Robert Rosenstone's 'Visions of the Past – the Challenge of film to our idea of History,[31] takes up many similar arguments, though Rosenstone's primary concern is for the historical dramatic film that comes out of Hollywood, such as *JFK*, *Platoon* and *Nixon*. He argues that it is the very nature of the visual media that compel us to broaden our conception of history.

> *Those films that try most literally to render the past lose the power of the medium. The rules to evaluate historical film cannot come solely from written history. They must come from the medium itself.*[32]

This is an articulation of the same idea alluded to above. Although he refers particularly to a vaguely defined category of fiction film that is either set against a significant historical event (*Pearl Harbor*) or that is a relatively accurate rendition of an autobiography in history (*Born on the Fourth of July*), Rosenstone's assertions often relate well to the documentary form.

A visual medium, film or television is subject to its own conventions. As Kuehl points out, the medium lends itself to the telling of stories. Rosenstone emphasises this convention of the dramatic, even going on to assert that increasing experimenting with dramatic forms in historical films have come about as the result of a recognition that traditional forms of history had their own limitations – not least of which is the "epistemological and literary limitations of traditional history".[33]

Rosenstone's suggestion that history itself is a series of conventions about how we think about the past is a remarkably similar enunciation of history as a construction of the past

[31] R. Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past – the Challenge of Film to our idea of History.* Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995.
[32] R. Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past*, p. 15.
[33] R. Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past*, p. 6.

rather than an objective reflection.[34] In addition, the notion of history as an ideological and cultural construct finds resonance with the historical film's use of creative elements, or, in this scenario, of the non-fiction film's employment of 'fictional' elements.

Historians work for the living, not the dead.[35] Rosenstone argues that the best historical films interrogate the past for the sake of the present and seek to show not just what happened in the past, but how what happened has meaning in the 'now'. What history will give us is no more than an arbitrary selection of data that is drawn together by an ideology. There is a moral, as it were. So too, the 'moral' or 'ideology' to the *Incredible Journey of Freddy Reddy* as a historical documentary can be found in the emphasis I sought to place on an individual's response to various obstacles: instances of poverty and institutional oppression, vast geographic distances, and barriers of culture and language in a foreign environment.

3.3. HISTORY, DOCUMENTARY KNOWLEDGE & FICTION

Documentary film has, since the very outset, been a rather broad category incorporating a wide variety of 'non-fiction' genres. The term has been used to include everything from the travelogue and ethnographic film to 'educationals', 'corporates', newsreels, and propaganda, while including a variety of 'modes' or styles, among them direct cinema and *cinema verite,* and the more pervasive contemporary counterpart, reality television.

From its genesis, the documentary has utilised, knowingly or unknowingly, devices or elements of the 'fictional' – from the romanticism of Flaherty's *Nanook of the North*, to the staging and re-enactments of many of the newsreel films, to the social persuasion messages of Dziga Vertov's *Kino Pravda* and Frank Capra's *Why We Fight* series.

More recently, documentary theorists have pointed to these 'fictions' within the non-fiction film. Renov alludes to the 'meshing' of fictional and non-fictional forms,

[34] R. Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past.*
[35] R. Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past,* p. 238.

including the element of narrativity, which exists as an "expository option for the documentary film that has at times been forcefully exercised."[36] The documentary form has employed many elements of the fictive, including construction of character, the use of poetic language as narration, musical sound-track cues, 'embedded narratives' (which refer to the anecdotes and stories of interviewees) and a variety of technical devices like camera angle or focal length.

To reiterate, notwithstanding the unique characteristics of the documentary as 'non-fiction' it borrows from a range of rhetorical, creative or fictive elements that exist in the expressions of narrative film and television programmes. These are conventions through which the documentary-maker must navigate a meaning to the viewer.

History itself is not a reflection but a recording of the past. It is not an objective all-knowing rendering of everything that actually happened in the past, as in the Rankean conception.[37] Rather it is the construction of a narrative or analysis – history is itself a construction. This is not to say that no extra-textual reality exists from which historians gather data for constructing history, as some theorists lead us to understand. It is merely to recognise the limitations of the process of recording, researching, communicating and apprehending history. These are limitations which pertain equally to visual representations of a history as to written modes.

The limitations of a visual-historical construction are therefore as much of an epistemological nature, in other words, what can be known of the events and experiences of the particular subject – which it shares with written histories – as they are limitations of a technical or practical nature indicative of the medium of construction and apprehension. Which is to say, the historian-as-filmmaker is confronted not only with the limits of historical knowledge but also with the limits of the conventions of the medium

[36] M. Renov, *Theorizing Documentary*. New York and London. Routledge, 1993.
[37] The great nineteenth century historian and founder of the modern academic discipline of history Leopold von Ranke explained the historian's role as showing how the past 'actually was' (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*). J. Tosh, *The Pursuit of History*, *Aims, Methods and New Directions in the Study of Modern History*. London: Longman, 1994. pp. 14, 31, 39.

itself and particularly with *which,* existing moving image remnants can be found, particularly in reference to topics relying on archival evidence.
The notion of access to a knowledge of the past goes to the very nature of knowledge itself, including, but not limited to, historical knowledge, and certainly not to historical documentary film. It is merely that the process of the documentary throws these questions into a sharp relief.

The relationship between what the history documentary is able to convey within the context of these limitations is therefore an index of the very relationship between historian and 'unprocessed', unrecollected past. For example, the film can only contain archive footage that is available from the given period and locations. In the case of *Freddy Reddy*, no actual visual evidence exists of his particular journey through southern and eastern Africa in 1957, apart from a few documents from his collection.

Of course, there are other methods to access the past in a visual communication but within these constraints the historian must operate to construct a documentary cinematic expression. It is in this recollection that history, literally, is made. This documentary is not based on existing written histories as such. It is itself a *writing* of history – a vision of Reddy's history, an *envisioning* of a history.

Kuehl concurs with the assertion that the content of the visual 'archive' material shown in a documentary is determined by what existing footage can be found. Because it is such a visual medium, the historian-as-filmmaker cannot merely fill in the gaps like the writer of history can, but if 'actual' footage is required this would have to be sourced to function as actual visual evidence. This impacts on more than the mere style or approach of the documentary but on the very content itself.

However, this does not take into account various other visual options. These include re-enactments, non-literal visual compositions, the commentary arising out of the testimony of a witness cut to alternative visual expressions pertaining to the person's body and movement itself, the use of archive footage in a non-historically specific manner, or as

with filmmaker Trinh T Minh-ha, various aesthetic renderings of the so-called 'objective' interview situation[38] – an artistic staging of the 'objective' if you will.

Additionally, the documentary is a construction with a beginning, middle and ending. The 'realities' depicted in the most objectively scrutinised renditions are equally, just that: constructions. In addition to the exigency to conform to the medium of the audio-visual film or television programme as these differ from a traditional, literary and academic history, or to the demand of communicating its history to a large, heterogonous audience, the documentary film is likewise an expression of the historical narrative as a construction that is produced by a multiplicity of factors.

[38] Trinh explains how she aesthetically 'staged' interview sequences with 'actors' standing in for interview subjects, though narrating their testimony. T. Minh-ha, "The Totalizing Quest of Meaning" in *When the Moon Waxes Red.* New York: Routledge, 1991.