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The Incredible Journey of Freddy Reddy

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4. UNCOVERING & VISUALISING THE PAST

4.1. HIS NAME IS A RHYME, HIS LIFE A SAGA

> *"...in 1957, with little education and no money, he set out from South Africa to walk six thousand miles to England."*[39]

Freddy Reddy's journey in the telling or narrating of it, seems to possess an epic or potentially mythical quality. From Bernstein's introductory statement to the catchphrases that appeal to broadcasters and documentary production funders, Reddy's history draws attention because of the audacious parameters of his journey, the indefatigable nature of his character or quite simply the rhyming words of his name. Within a popular historical, indeed a political *zeitgeist* calling for South African heroes or role models, the danger surfaces that the elements of this appeal combine to effect a mythologising of history, with Freddy Reddy as a type of superhero icon.

A history, even a 'popular' rendering to a television audience, should not be, or be seen to be an exercise in blatant myth making, as it were. This is a highly politicised avenue that leads to propaganda rather than history. This said, I am aware of the power of a title, particularly one that seeks to appeal to a mass audience. The range of rhetorical devices at the disposal of the historian-filmmaker includes non-filmic or *extra* cinematic strategies, such as the employment of a catchy phrase as a title. This is the reason for the title, *The Incredible Journey of Freddy Reddy*, rather than any attempt to make a myth, as it were.

Perhaps the appeal of the history of Reddy's journey is the 'rags to riches' element, the use of which underscores Rosenstone's point that history is written for the living not the dead. Within a climate of research into the biographical histories of ordinary though inspiring South Africans, this history emerges, though without the purposes, as outlined

[39] H. Bernstein, *The Rift*, p.46.

above, of being overtly political. The documentary's title lends a sense of fascination intended to appeal to a large South African audience.

The title reveals the centrality in this history of a journey that is considered remarkable, tremendous and particularly noteworthy. It is not an irrefutable claim that denies contestation. Rather, it is presented as an 'incredible' journey from the outset – noteworthy, interesting, inspiring, historical. It is a representation comfortable in the situation of its subjectivity.

In addition, the prominence of his name serves to indicate a personal history – a specific story pertaining to this named individual. The veracity or 'historicality' of the film is not compromised by the employment of creative devices, just as the documentary film's pre-eminent non-fiction characteristic is not hampered, but very likely enhanced by the employment of elements one would usually associate with other, (fictive) forms of film narrative.

4.2. SOURCES AND DOCUMENTARY STRATEGIES

The documentary accesses the history of the journey primarily through the memory, and act of remembering through retelling, of the protagonist. In addition, use is made of some of his personal documents – archival remnants which corroborate his testimony; of general archive material from the period of the mid to late 1950s in Durban, South Africa from where he came; and of archival footage from parts of Africa in the year of his journey, 1957. The general archive sources of photographs and film clips do not pertain to Reddy personally but rather to the environment from which he emerged to make his journey and to specific locations on the journey's route.

These last mentioned visual remnants were sourced from various archives. There are film clips from newsreels showing Nyasaland, Tanganyika and East Africa (most likely Uganda or Kenya) that were taken in 1957. In the absence of any real images of the

journey itself, these are authentic representations of the specified time and location as depicted in the African Mirror series.[40]

I located these at the National Film, Video and Sound Archives in Pretoria, had them transferred from film or negative (16mm or 35 mm) to a digital video format, and cleared the use of these in the documentary from the SABC, which holds the copyright to the African Mirror newsreels.

Other relevant old film footage I found were of the experience and history of Indians in South Africa. These two films, entitled *Home is Where the Light is* and *The History of the Indian South African* serve to provide visual evidence of an historical and socio-cultural context of Indians in South Africa and of certain events pertaining to discriminatory legislation in apartheid South Africa. A general observation about the latter film is that it contains historical and contemporary information in parallel visual narratives. The contemporary footage is of the type that seems to legitimise separate development and government policies pertaining to the Indians, while the historical narrative would probably conform to 'received' perceptions of the history of Indians in South Africa. I use the footage to portray the social and historical milieu of a broadly defined cultural group and to offer a subtle comment on the systemic divisions of the old South Africa.

I juxtapose these images with footage from the present, and with interview scenes of Reddy remembering some of his origins.[41] I omitted all images which were not produced in Reddy's lifetime – he was born in 1931. The earliest image I use is a still photo of the Durban Town Hall ca. 1940.

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[40] *African Mirror* editions 699 and 761, 1957. Produced by Killarney Studios (copyright SABC). These both appeared as general newsreel films.

[41] *Home is Where the Light is* , ca. 1960 and *The History of the Indian South African*, 1980. Department of National Education (copyright Government Communications and Information System). Unlike the *African Mirror* footage or the photographic stills, the film footage pertaining to the Indians in South Africa does not correspond with the chronological parameters as I had initially hoped. *Home is Where the Light is* appears to have been produced in the early 1960s while *The History of the Indian South African* was completed as late as 1980. In the case of the latter, most of the footage I used was clearly of a period meant to be around the late 1950s when the Group Areas Act was being enforced through forced removals, and as such relevant to the general time of Reddy's departure – 1957. Otherwise the footage is of a 'cultural' nature, in which case, though some two decades later, the visual evidence of 'traditional' attire, dance (and music) apply in a general sense to the period of the 1950s.

Photographic stills come from the collection of the Old Courthouse Museum, which is one of Durban's Local History Museums. The photographs were selected from the time period of Reddy's early years in Durban, i.e. from the time of his birth, youth and early adulthood. The photos give a visual context from where Reddy emerged. During my research I also accessed the photographic archives of the Durban Cultural Centre although none of these images made the selection for the final cut of the documentary.

Essential to the telling of the history is Freddy Reddy himself. Over a period stretching from January 2004 to January 2005 I conducted several interviews with him. Initially, in January 2004 when I first met him, the interview was informal and unrecorded. Between then and July 2004 when he was back in Oslo, I was in regular correspondence with him, the informal questions and answers of this correspondence constituting an ongoing discourse that informed my understanding and piecing together of the history as portrayed in the documentary. The recorded interviews were done on two subsequent visits to South Africa. In July 2004 I interviewed him, operating the camera and sound myself. In January 2005, over a period of two days, I interviewed him at various locations around Durban with a cameraman operating the camera.

In addition, in the early research phase Reddy provided me with portions of his unpublished memoirs which allowed simultaneously for a glimpse into his memory of the journey and a foundation for further questioning and probing. Having explained to him the parameters of the documentary, he agreed to make available the portions pertaining to that period only.

In December 2004, Reddy provided me with some very useful and relevant documents that he had kept from the journey. These included two official government documents of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland through which he passed along his route, a battered old notebook in which he had recorded diary entries, dates and places along the journey, as well as a photograph taken in London, 1958 – a few months after his arrival there.

The first document is a 'Notice to Prohibited Immigrant.' It states that Reddy had been declined permission to enter or remain within Nyasaland, current day Malawi. The stamp on the document is from Immigration Headquarters, Blantyre and is dated 17 August 1957. The notice is made out, in type, to Ganasen Veerasamy Reddy, c/o Mr L.A. Gomes, Nyasaland Railway, Limbe. The document is somewhat tattered and falling to pieces along the folds.

The second official document is a 'Temporary Permit' with a stamp indicating the same date and place as above. The permit was issued to Reddy for the purpose of "obtaining funds from South Africa." A period of five days is stipulated, ending on 21st of August 1957, whereby the recipient is instructed to leave the federation without expense to the government. At the back of this document, two further extension 'stamps' are given, the first extending the validity of the permit to 25th of August, the second extending to 10th September. Beneath this is written in ink "Not to be granted further extension."

In the documentary, Reddy relates the events surrounding this episode, during which I show him holding the actual documents as the camera show them in his hands, zooming in to reveal certain key words. He looks at the particular document, recollecting the events of those weeks and explains how this issue came to be resolved. I added some archival footage of Nyasaland in 1957, which happened to be of an old car travelling along a country road. As Reddy explains what happened, the archival film serves two purposes; the first an actual visual offering of Nyasaland in 1957, the second a narrative cue linking the moving car with Reddy's voice describing the arrival of a certain gentleman who 'bailed him out'.

Reddy's notebook contains several dated entries, starting on 23 September 1957, two weeks after the Nyasaland immigration incident. It indicates the starting date of the journey as being 10 July 1957 and the date of arrival in London as 22 November 1957, concluding with the words, "I left Jinja (Uganda) on 21/11/57, arrived London airport 22/11/57. End of journey & most exciting trip…"

In the documentary, Reddy comments on the notebook and he is seen paging through it while remembering the events described in his own writing. I use this while he speaks in 'voice-over' of certain of the events. These particular voice-over sequences weren't all recorded while he was paging through the notebook of course, but they are edited to indicate that what he says has a foundation in his recording of the events at the time in which they happened, not merely as the recollections of an old man many years later.

Early on, as part of the title sequence, I show the notebook, open at the page describing his 'most exciting trip.' A superimposed image of the map of Africa appears, then fades away. I return to this image later in the film as a visual device which links a simple animated map sequence indicating the route of his journey. The map and animated sequences were done by myself, however should additional funds become available for the documentary these portions will be enhanced with a more detailed map and more professional animation.

The personal photograph was taken in London in 1958. It shows a smiling Reddy in the uniform of the London Underground, where he worked for several months. I use the photograph to show how he looked in those years, and to trigger certain memories from him which link with the narrative of the documentary. It is also significant because Reddy comments on the photograph itself and offers an explanation why it was taken. The film shows this evidence of him from almost half a century ago, juxtaposed with images of him in the present, and of him looking at this image of himself. During the scenes where he pages through his notebook, the photograph is amongst the pages through which he turns. At an earlier point in the film, it is also used as a visual 'cue card' reading, "Freddy goes to London" prior to the interviews dealing with the phase of his departure.

The two core interview sessions are framed and shot in a conventional style. I chose a 'medium close' range of focal lengths, resisting the temptation of zooming in too close to his face, as many recent documentary interview scenes seem to do. I wanted to respect

his personal space and avoid a sense of intrusion, while attempting a polite informality in the visual distance.

During the scenes showing Reddy at various locations around Durban, there are a few occasions where I am in the frame, either listening to him or driving the car through some spaces of his past. The interview with George Naidoo is done in the storeroom behind his shop, mostly focusing on Naidoo but at other times revealing Reddy in the picture and at one point myself. Several 'cut-away' type shots also feature myself, mostly in conversation with Reddy, though the intention is not to make myself a character in the documentary but merely to assert that it was a process of remembering, uncovering, mediating and indeed 'writing', or visualising history.

At two points in the documentary, written information is given over a black background. The first of these is to describe how Reddy arrived in London from Uganda. Probably a better alternative than the text would have been to hear Reddy tell this while relevant visuals are seen. Or perhaps to have a third-person narrator summarise the events. Unfortunately, time and technical considerations in the edit suite compelled me to make this choice. Similarly, near the conclusion of the documentary, written information tells that Reddy applied to study at a university in Norway. Budget constraints prevented any archival evidence of the Oslo university at that time.

I chose not to have any omniscient narrator in the film. At an earlier sequence from one of the archive films, a portion has a male voice-over explaining about the Group Areas Act, though in this case I felt there were ample visual clues to indicate that this was an archival sequence imported as a whole in to the documentary. Reddy's voice is the primary narrative vehicle, interspersed with other devices, such as the Naidoo interview, the abovementioned voice-over, and text slides. As mentioned, by not hiding my own presence I make admission for the subjectivity of the selections and omissions.

I had initially hoped to visit some of the locations along his journey and get visual footage of these places, possibly even with Reddy while retracing his steps, though the

budget did not allow for this. I had managed to secure development funding for the research and writing of a script, a portion of which I decided to allocate to the production of this documentary. In making the documentary one has to constantly balance what one would hope to show in an ideal scenario (with sufficient time and resources) against what is practical and affordable.