

How important is dramatic reconstruction to the success of Touching the Void (2003)? What other approaches might Kevin Macdonald have taken to tell this story? Do you consider that they would have been as successful?

Achieved: 1st

In 2003, Kevin Macdonald directed 'Touching the Void', employing dramatic reconstruction and interview snippets to create a suspenseful and authentic documentary that told the story of 'a disastrous attempt by two British mountaineers to climb Siula Grande in the Peruvian Andes' (Kevin Macdonald in Quinn, 2013,p.148). Dramatic reconstruction usually involves actors retelling a past event; it is usually employed 'to make the account more persuasive or to illustrate things which could not be depicted using traditional documentary means'(Kilborn, 1994, p.4). In MacDonald's interview with James Quinn (2013,p.163) he explains how the core theme of his film 'was about the existential crisis that we all face when we realise the emptiness of the universe', he wanted it to almost be a 'thriller' and so by inserting acting throughout it added to this thrill and suspense. Arguably, without dramatic reconstruction, the audience would not have been able to fathom the landscape and scale of the mountain. As a result the theme of 'emptiness' would have struggled to present itself and so the film would have been less suspenseful. Ultimately, by authentically reconstructing true events when telling the story of Joe Simpson and Simon Yates, Macdonald is able to achieve his goals and themes for the documentary; which arguably could not have been completed using other approaches.

The success of a film cannot be solely attributed to its techniques, however, it does indicate that the technique played a significant role. 'Touching the Void' received an overwhelming amount of positive feedback from the public as it 'grossed £1.5 million in two months in the UK and \$4.5 million in four months in the US' (Austin, 2008,p.61). As of 2007, it was 'the second top-grossing documentary in the UK of all time' (Bruzzi, 2006, p.222) which highlights its great success. Furthermore, in a questionnaire conducted by Austin (2008, pp.65-66), all responses received were positive, with some even congratulating the use of dramatic reconstruction. In regards to whether the interviews and re-enactment were an effective combination one wrote ' it allowed the film to be both poetical and down to earth', and another response read ' when Joe broke his leg you almost felt it... I thought the acting was superb'. All of these personal responses from cinemagoers at the time highlight the importance of dramatic reconstruction withing 'Touching the Void'.

In certain scenes of 'Touching the Void', dramatic reconstruction is crucial to displaying events and building up suspense for the audience. For example, after the first thirty minutes of the documentary, Joe Simpson is left dangling from his rope and from this point onwards Simon is left with the dilemma of what do as he in danger and whether he can cut the rope. This entire segment is extremely captivating for the audience as they are aware that Joe is practically free falling and at risk of dying if the rope is cut. This scene in particular is reliant on dramatic reconstruction as it visualises the scenario that Joe and Simon are describing to the audience and it is key to building suspense as the pen knife hitting the rope was all the audience could see and hear which was accompanied by the sound effect by Simon who exclaimed 'boom' (Touching the void, 2004). Another crucial scene that is heightened with

dramatic reconstruction is when Joe wakes up in the crevasse, no narration or storytelling from Joe could have enabled the audience to fathom how empty and daunting the crevasse was. This segment of the documentary depicts how Joe escaped the crevasse with a broken leg which by using dramatic reconstruction helps to convey the gravity of the task, thus inducing the audience's emotions by visualising the scenario. This is an effective technique used by Macdonald as the audience become invested as the dramatic reconstruction of the events is more authentic as opposed to simply an act.

When questioning the importance of a specific technique and considering if another technique should have been employed, it is worth analysing the risks already taken and whether this would be necessary. Kevin Macdonald has expressed in multiple interviews his disinterest for dramatic reconstruction, he believes 'almost all dramatisation feels sort of cheesy and lightweight and inauthentic' (Macdonald in Quinn, 2013,p.159) so for Macdonald to employ this technique it must have been completely necessary as he would have avoided it otherwise. Macdonald (in Quinn, 2013,p.159) argued that to tell a compelling story to the audience, dramatic reconstruction was needed as 'it could not be done without actors'. Austin and Wilma De Jong (2009, p.164) further supports this, he states that 'In Touching the Void dramatization was a necessity because there was no other way... there was no archive film'. Furthermore, Macdonald expressed his concern surrounding other techniques, he believes that there is 'far too much narration' in documentary today and it is 'treating the audience like idiots' (Macdonald in Quinn, 2013,p.155) so perhaps if 'talking heads' or reconstruction was not used, the film would have had to insert narrators which arguably would not have been successful in the eyes of the director.

As dramatic reconstruction was used, this rules out other approaches that Macdonald could have taken. For example, archival footage could not have been used for the vast majority of the documentary as the events that unfolded were not documented on camera, hence Macdonald's requirement for dramatic reconstruction to replace what was missing from the story. However, there was a snippet of archival footage in 'Touching the Void' at the end with three photos depicting Joe and Simons time on the mountain, they are in black and white and show the men riding a donkey, so they do not offer much information about the story. Macdonald (in Quinn, 2013,p.167) explains that he inserted these images 'to bring it back to reality...I always love that in movies actually, in fiction films'. In Quinn (2013), Macdonald also talks about his previous documentary, 'One Day in September' and explains that 'it felt like telling the story through the archive would take a lot longer and I was very keen that the film should move along at a good pace', so even when archive was available, Macdonald preferred the story without it.

Throughout 'Touching the Void', other documentary techniques are employed , such as interviews and wide panoramic shots of the mountains to fit Macdonald's objectives. All of these stylistic decisions were made by Macdonald purposely to keep the process simple and so that the documentary was kept 'completely chronological and clear where you are in the story' (Macdonald in Quinn, 2013, p.165). The style of interview is also important to focus on as it could perhaps show that other approaches are successful in achieving the directors aims. Errol Morris had an influence on Touching the Void's interview style as the interrotron

device was used to create this 'alienating environment' for the interviewees. The interrotron can be defined as 'a series of modified teleprompters...[which] bounces a live image of Morris onto a glass plate in front of the interviewee'; the interviewee 'respond[s] to an image of Morris that floats directly in line with the camera' (Rosenheim, 1996, p.221, as cited in Gerbaz, 2008,p.2) and it creates a 'sense of intimacy and confrontation'(Gerbaz, 2008,p.2) which is undoubtedly beneficial when an interviewer is trying to get a lot of honest and raw data. Furthermore, this also helps Macdonald with his aim of building the suspense as the audience is being told the story directly 'where you want people to be very involved in the story... they're telling you the story. You're the audience it's aimed at' (|Macdonald in Quinn, 2013, p.164). It is also important to note that all interviews were carried out before any dramatic reconstruction took place and once the interview material had been cut together there was a 'two-and-a-half-hour barebones movie: just interviewees telling the story... we potentially had a really compelling film'(Macdonald In Quinn,2013, p.161). From this, one could argue that the documentary could have centred its approach around Joe and Simons personal story if it was 'compelling' even without dramatic reconstruction. Perhaps hearing the raw, unedited story would have reached success as it is rich with information and emotion. However, it would not have been as visually aesthetic so it might not have reached theatrical success in cinemas.

To oppose the idea that interviews could have been used alone, research shows how interviews are 'mutually supportive' with dramatic reconstruction in 'Touching the Void', as said by Austin (2008,p.63). The interviews give the viewers 'a sense of interiority' whereas the climbing footage 'offers the familiar hooks of narrative action and engagement with characters along with mountain scenery'(Austin, 2008,p.63). Macdonald(In Quinn,2013, p.165) also hints at this idea of 'show -and- tell' meaning there should be a balance between what an audience witnesses and what an audience hears from the survivors. This helps to construct the whole story as you can get the survivors feelings about what you just witnessed. Furthermore, the dramatic reconstruction helps non mountaineers to visualise what is happening as the average viewer may not be familiar with Siula grande. Without the visual aspect, the theme of 'emptiness' would have been ineffective. In summary, both techniques work well together. The interviews are beneficial to Touching the Void as they provide a lot of extra background information however, Touching the Void may not have reached its success without the acting scenes for support.

'Return to Siula Grande' by Kevin Macdonald is an appropriate comparison for Touching the Void as it covers the same topic without implementing dramatic reconstruction. Alongside the documentary, Macdonald released a 'making of' film that portrayed Joe and Simon going back to the mountain where it all happened to watch it be filmed and to even take part as stunt doubles for themselves. To summarise, 'It's about what happened to both of them when they went back, and what happened psychologically' (Macdonald in Quinn, 2013, p.163). Arguably, this approach could have been taken instead to create an entirely different documentary, watching their return may have been interesting to audiences and perhaps it would have reached success. However, Macdonald had no intention of doing this and he even turned down adding this footage to 'Touching the Void' as he says 'for me it was always the 'making of' (Macdonald in Quinn, 2013, p.164). One could argue that if Macdonald

diverted the theme of the documentary from the emptiness of the universe and an account of what happened in 1985 to a documentary about their 'Return to Siula Grande' and the effects this had then a different approach could have been taken and dramatic reconstruction would not have been necessary. However, this approach may not have been successful as 'return to Siula grande' relies on the audience to know who Joe and Simon are, what their story is and why this mountain is significant to them. Without this, people would not be effected by their return and it would have had less impact. Arguably, if 'Return to Siula Grande' was produced as a stand alone documentary, it may not have been as successful in the film industry as less people would be aware of the story and who Joe and Simon are. Nevertheless, it may still have been successful with those who are familiar with the story and mountaineers. Ultimately, changing the narrative automatically changes the audience and 'Return to Siula Grande' was filmed as a making of for this reason, it is simply interesting.

In the field of documentary, 'truth is habitually required' (Ellis, 2021) and presenting the audience with facts should be a priority for a director. In fact, one of the main definitions of documentary is 'the absence of fiction and the dominance of fact or truth'. Arguably, this cannot always be achieved, for example with the rise of reality tv, however scholars may be critical if it is not. This links to issues with dramatic reconstruction as it is not reality but instead a reflection of past events. Research by Cabeza San Deogracias and Mateos-Pérez(2013,p.13) explains how 'viewers are entitled to ask themselves 'am I being deceived?' when watching a reconstruction of events and if a reconstruction is to be deemed acceptable, 'it must be judged according to the fact/fiction dichotomy, and fulfil the ethical imperative of offering the public (true) stories, despite having used codes from fiction to make the finished product more attractive' (Roscoe, 2001, p.23, as cited in Cabeza San Deogracias and Mateos-Pérez, 2013,p.13). Ultimately, to be deemed a good documentary, dramatic reconstruction must be completed successfully and still present the public with the truth. In 'Touching the Void', the dramatic construction employed by Macdonald was successful (as seen from the public's reviews) and with the use of interviews, this documentary enabled the audience to get the full authentic story.

Research conducted by Ellis(2011) conveys the importance of dramatic reconstruction and its links to the cinema industry. She explains how cinema documentaries 'in the 1950s made extensive use of reconstruction'(p.19) although attitudes surrounding reconstruction have since changed. Ellis(2011,p.21) also states how 'documentary films are rare in the cinema... where they exist, they involve a considerable amount of reconstruction, and are concerned with sensationalist topics that would ensure an audience' this has a direct link to 'Touching the Void' and can explain why it reached cinemas and became so successful. Arguably, 'Touching the Void' has a sensationalist topic that aims to reach an audience as its centred around a tragedy where Joe Simpson had a near death experience. In terms of cinema, theatrical elements such as sound also have an effect on the documentary and how audiences perceive a text and in 'Touching the Void' it is not just dramatic reconstruction that needs to be considered. For example, in 'Touching the Void', Macdonald used music that he described as 'very Hitchcockian' (Macdonald in Quinn, 2013,p.166), which is synonymous with being suspenseful and 'dramatic'. This may have been important to the

audience in building suspense and thrill. Another link from Ellis' book to MacDonald is that she refers to documentaries as 'an organised activity of creation' which is what Macdonald expressed when he wanted to make thought out, 'stylistic decisions'(Macdonald in Quinn, 2013, p.165).

To conclude, the use of dramatic reconstruction is imperative to the success of 'Touching the Void'. Although other techniques work well alongside dramatic construction they could not have successfully replaced dramatic reconstruction. Arguably, dramatic reconstruction is vital for conveying suspense and thrill across to the audience and provoking an emotional response out of them which was Macdonald's main objective. Furthermore, it would have almost been impossible to achieve Macdonald's themes without dramatic reconstruction, for example to achieve a sense of emptiness, visual aspects and wide shots of the camera are crucial; if only interviews had been employed then the landscapes would not have been shown. While other approaches and theatrical elements help to construct the documentary and build suspense, dramatic construction can be seen as the most important to its great success.

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