

Augmented truths

EYE CULTURE

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In 2023, after one of the wires carrying their cable car snapped, eight young boys were trapped 900 feet above a ravine in northern Pakistan. For 14 hours, the world had followed their entrapment and rescue. So *Hanging by a Wire*, a new documentary film looking back on that episode, had plenty to draw from: News bits, TikTok videos, amateur drone footage. But to make sense of things, the film's makers chose to go beyond the archive. They invited the survivors and rescuers to perform the day in a studio, and shot some of the action again. *Indiana Jones*-style.

Time and time again at the recent Sundance Film Festival, there were examples of non-fiction filmmakers using forms and techniques of fiction to make meaning. At a moment when machines are rapidly altering our understanding of what is real, this — augmented reality by humans — was particularly refreshing to see. Re-enactments are among the most controversial tools in documentaries. But they need not be, when handled with creativity and discernment.

After their screening, director Mohammad Ali Naqvi and co-writer Bilal Sami told the audience in Utah the boys' ordeal was watched live so it was, in a way, a performance. The survivors said reliving the memory in a safe, controlled environment actually helped them remember the lighter aspects of that day. What was

merely the spectacle of tragedy improved with elements of plot, character, thought, and song. For instance, cinematographer Brandon McGuinty's work glowed, particularly in scenes where the dead-of-night rescues were acted out. Through questions, the director coaxed out the vulnerability of men (survivors, their fathers, and rescuers), and the strength of women (a journalist and a cop). Sven Falconer's score swelled to build tension and softened to recreate relief. On William Grayburn's editing table, the re-enactments were seamlessly stitched with old footage.

It all goes to show how documentaries are carefully constructed realities. In Felipe Bustos Sierra's *Everybody to Kenmure Street*, actor Emma Thompson is featured not as a talking head but in the role of one of the subjects. The film is about a successful act of civil resistance from 2021: In Scotland's most diverse neighborhood, hundreds of residents had rushed to the streets to prevent the deportation of their neighbors. "Van Man" had crawled under the police van and refused to budge. Like Thompson, Scottish actress Kate Dickie lends her face to the words of "the nurse", who stayed by the van's side, ensuring the man had medical and moral support. The abruptness of professional actors entering a documentary served to mirror the spontaneity of people's actions that day. Their dramatic narrations brought home how intensely

moving the incident was. What is more, it also felt like an acknowledgement of the long history shared by protest and theatre.

Another major actor's presence convinced many to walk into the screening of *Broken English*. Though it had debuted at last year's Venice Film Festival, few knew it was a documentary about singer-songwriter Marianne Faithfull. Tilda Swinton plays a researcher in the "Ministry of Not Forgetting", and George Mackay her fellow investigator. Together, in this world built by directors Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard, they try to assemble a fuller picture of Faithfull, who despite a 60-year career in music was often unfairly remembered as just "Mick Jagger's girlfriend".

It is another matter that most Sundance-goers referred to *Broken English* as the "Tilda Swinton movie", at least initially. The film's poster was deceptive but everyone left knowing more about Marianne Faithfull's humour and struggles. Her music got another chance to take centre stage, as Courtney Love covered 'Times Square', and Nick Cave accompanied Faithfull herself in performing *Misunderstanding*. The artist, rather than talking into the camera, was interviewed by Mackay in a set full of archival materials: A reflection of the earnest search involved in documentaries.

Humans will remain meaning-makers, all three films showed. In human interpretation, people and events are sometimes reduced to a spectacle, a nickname, a headline. But it is also a deeply human instinct to reinterpret.