

Man on Wire

Man on Wire tells the story of a French tightrope walker, Philippe Petit, who walked and danced on a tightrope strung between the Twin Towers in New York City in 1974. This documentary includes footage that was taken during Philippe's younger days as he learned to tightrope walk as well as actual footage from his famous walk between the towers. This documentary's filmmaker utilized one of the four fundamental tendencies of documentary as his motivation for the creation of this movie – specifically, to record, reveal, and preserve. Also, the effective use of the elements of documentary – observation, exposition, interview, mise en scène, and dramatization – give this film more significant meaning rather than just repeating a man's story verbatim. *Man on Wire* is a meaningful documentary because it gives the viewers a behind-the-scenes look at the level of dedication and commitment that went into the successful achievement of something that initially seemed completely impossible.

The fundamental tendency that was the most prevalent throughout this documentary was the first, which is to record, reveal, and preserve. This hour and a half long movie is devoted solely to the exposition and explanation of how a man's dream of walking on a wire strung between the Twin Towers became a reality. Filmmaker James Marsh used a combination of old footage, new interview footage, and reenactments to illustrate and record the events that occurred leading up to the world-famous walk. The way that all of the information was compiled together created a story line that excellently revealed the trials and tribulations that Philippe had to go through in order to prep himself for this monumental task. He started out tightrope walking at a relatively young age and as he grew, he strived to challenge himself and test his limits more and more. One day, he saw a photo of the unfinished Twin Towers while he was at the dentist and decided right then and there that he was going to walk on a wire between them. He spent

countless hours practicing and figuring out the exact logistics as to how he would pull off such a stunt. He planned and practiced for every possible scenario; he would have his friends shake the wire he was walking on as hard as they could in order to replicate the wind that would undoubtedly be shaking the wire on the top of the towers. His devotion to this feat was showcased through the documentary, *Man on Wire*; the film showed Philippe with a gaze that garnered immense respect for him, for someone who essentially achieved the impossible. This documentary preserves the story of Philippe Petit and the road that he traveled as he worked to achieve his dream. Without it, people would have never been able to fully appreciate everything he did and why he did it.

The effective use of the elements of documentary in *Man on Wire* is what helps to give it significance. As viewers, we are able to observe a few things in this film. We witness the long journey this Frenchman goes on in order to succeed in the dream he's had for many years. We get to see the steps he takes in order to prepare for a feat as colossal as walking on a wire strung between the Twin Towers. It is important that the viewers actually see how much time and effort it took for Philippe to pull this off, because in witnessing all of the preparation, you see how dedicated and passionate he is about it. His passion radiates from him in every interview with him and in every second of the original footage that depicted the events leading up to the wire walk between the Twin Towers. His passion is truly contagious and this, in turn, makes the viewer feel more passionately about his journey. The viewer's appreciation for how much preparation he put into achieving his dream continues to grow throughout the entire documentary.

The interviews conducted do a phenomenal job of setting up a powerful storyline for this documentary. All of the players in Philippe's scheme to walk on the wire and all of the people

who had spent years with him as he accomplished other impressive feats were interviewed, as well as Philippe himself. All of these characters provide crucial exposition for this story, since there is no narration otherwise. They assist the viewer in understanding why Philippe wanted to do what he did, how he accomplished it, and what emotions those involved were feeling during every minute of it. You are able to see how terrified his then-girlfriend was when he began walking between the towers, but her description of how beautiful and powerful those moments were alleviates your nervousness. Instead, you are left speechless and amazed. The lack of any other source of narration makes the interviews even more crucial for the viewer, and their successful compilation provides the viewer with a sound understanding of the chain of events that led up to Philippe's walk of fame. The story is not presented in chronological order, but instead it jumps around a little. It does this in a way that builds hype for the walk, so when you finally get to watch it, you are excited and ready. You have been waiting to see it for an hour, and when it finally happens near the end of the film, you are blown away by how awe-inspiring it was.

Another important element of documentary that was used was dramatization. This works in tandem with the other elements in order to provide this documentary with a sense of meaning. Throughout this movie, I found it amazing how few reenactments there were. Philippe's friends filmed him very frequently, so there was a very large amount of footage available for use that documented the majority of his life as a wirewalker. Since that particular footage was authentic, you are able to witness Philippe as a young man interacting with his friends, sorting out the logistics for different complications, and actually walking on high-wires set up at various locations. The only instance that utilized reenactments was the actual events on the day of the famous Twin Tower walk. The reenactments were used in order to further clarify what was

happening on both towers while the team worked their way to the top (illegally) and while they were stringing up the wire. The fact that so little reenactments were used makes the film more compelling because almost everything is entirely real. As a viewer, you are able to witness the majority of the actual events that happened, which was truly powerful. The reenactments gave the viewers further insight to the actual setup for the wire, which also helped to illustrate how strenuous of a task it was for them to sneak up to the top of the building and string the wire across such a huge space. Since most of the footage was appropriated, there were also no special effects used at any point, although musical elements were incorporated in a few different places. Its presence was subtle, but altogether beneficial for the documentary as a whole. It was primarily used in order to create more suspense in a scene. For example, when Philippe was about to try something new, there would typically be music leading up to the event. The combination of both reenactments and musical additions add to the dramatization of the events *Man on Wire* shows us.

The last element of documentary that was used was *mise en scène*. This element was one that I found to have been used least frequently throughout this film. Due to the fact that the majority of the footage was appropriated, the filmmaker did not really get to have much of an artistic opinion in what was included in those shots. He had to make-do with what was available from the found footage. The reenactments, on the other hand, were a little different. Despite the fact that this documentary was made in 2008, the footage shot for the reenactments was presented in black and white and appears to have been shot on film, even though I find that very unlikely. These stylistic choices make these reenactments look and feel more real to the viewer because they more closely resemble the original footage that is used elsewhere in the film. The lack of color in these shots also assists in creating a certain mood. There is more black than

white, in that the lighting is very dim. This depiction makes the characters seem like they are sneaking around more, as it should, since that was exactly what they were doing. This, along with the grainy, film-like appearance of this footage creates more realism within the story being narrated by the characters. The last type of footage used was interviews, and these were set up fairly typically. The characters are all dressed in what appears to be their own day-to-day clothing, and their faces are softly lit. The background is black, but there are some shots in which you can see the white wall to the side of the black screen. The interviews' mise en scène does not appear to be of utmost importance to the filmmaker, but it could have also been strategically constructed to convey just that. The setting seems pretty laid back, and those being interviewed seem laid back as well. That nonchalant interview setting might be crucial in getting the characters to truly open up and talk about what happened without any reservations.

The fundamental tendency that is used alongside the elements of documentary result in a successful documentary about a man who achieves his dream, regardless of the fact that it seemed impossible to just about everyone else out there. His passion, determination, and intelligence are shown clearly throughout this film, and the viewers gain a massive sense of respect for everything he did. The elements of documentary work together to create a narrative that has meaning. It shows people how much more there is to Philippe Petit than just meets the eye; he's much more than the kid who succeeded in his death-defying stunt. It shows how much help and support he had every step of the way to achieving his dreams, and it shows that with patience and hard work, you can do whatever you set your mind to. This documentary is inspirational in every way. From watching Phillip's joy as he walked on the wire, to seeing his passion in his descriptions of the events that occurred, you can't help but be inspired by him. I think that the purpose of this documentary was more than just showing people this man's

amazing story, but rather it's meant to be an inspiration to others. Every obstacle Phillip and his friends encountered, they hurdled. They did not give up and that is something that this film shows constantly, making it one of the most important aspects of this film as a whole. With passion, motivation, teamwork, and hard work, even the impossible can be made possible.