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*Iron Redemption: A Biographical Documentary with Ethnographic Elements*

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Under the parameters defined by Patricia Aufderheide in *Documentary: A Very Short Introduction*, *Iron Redemption* is categorized as a biographical documentary that expresses and dramatizes Ariel Parker's powerlifting career. What I intend to do in this paper is demonstrate where this documentary fits in relation to the larger body of documentary film. I will do so by first defining established documentary conventions, then comparing and contrasting my techniques with these conventions. Ultimately I would like to show that *Iron Redemption* draws on many styles of documentary film, and should be classified as a biographical documentary with elements of ethnographic documentary.

*Iron Redemption* first and foremost is a film that falls within the documentary genre. Documentaries are difficult to define because of the very medium of film. Though documentaries strive to show audiences the truth, they are creations of filmmakers and in being so do not capture reality. Instead this genre of film represents reality, one presented to audiences through the filmmaker's perspective. As Michael Rabiger states in *Directing the Documentary*, "There are no rules in this young art form, only decisions about where to draw the line and how to remain consistent to the contract you will set up with your audience" (79). Documentaries, then, are works of film that are understood by the audience to be a filmmaker's representation of the reality.

This genre's form adapts to changing audience expectations over the years, establishing conventions along the way, some of which can be found in fiction films. In fact, documentary filmmakers are faced with the same choices as filmmakers of any genre. Therefore, certain conventions used to dramatize events overlap between films

of “truth” and fiction films, which rarely make such claims to truthfulness. As Jean Rouch, a noted anthropologist and ethnographic documentarian said, “(...) there is almost no boundary between documentary films and films of fiction. The cinema (...) is already the transition from the real world to the imaginary world (...)” (Aufderheide 112).

*Iron Redemption* uses many of these conventions as “shortcuts to register truthfulness” and “make the presentation of the particular facts and scenes seem both inevitable and complete” (Aufderheide 12). The conventions applied in my short film are more modern, and were influenced by recent documentary-style films such as Kathryn Bigelow’s *Zero Dark Thirty*. Her film employs the similar use of white text over black title cards with diegetic sound that are seen in *Iron Redemption*. Inspired by the dramatic effect of this filmmaker’s choice, I decided to incorporate that into my film to heighten the drama for audiences, though incorporating the tool differently. Working with the challenge of having limited footage from past powerlifting meets, I used the title cards to explain and inform the audience of the situation and powerlifting rules. This choice also cues audiences on how to feel as well as maintains their interest.

Due to the nature of films being created under the filmmaker’s influence, all documentaries are manipulated through the use of tools, and therefore the same is true of *Iron Redemption*. Aufderheide defines three basic tools available to portray reality, namely sound, images, and pacing (10). The use of all of these tools can be found in my film to draw in an audience and hopefully keep their interest. Yet these tools are all manipulations of the audience, and it is up to the filmmaker to control where and how these tools are implemented. Yet “the problem of deciding how much to manipulate is as old as the form,” a true observation by Aufderheide (1).

Sound includes everything from diegetic sound, or sound within the world of the film, to the music being played over the action. Consistently present music, such as the score of a fiction film, can sometimes take away from the realistic effect. An audience may notice that they are being manipulated to feel a certain way and call out a filmmaker on influencing the “truth”. However, such music can be very useful when used sparingly to emphasize a serious event or add drama to a scene, such as the scene involving 2012 Collegiate Nationals in *Iron Redemption*.

Images constitute the film, ranging from the material specifically shot for the film to relevant photographs from the past used in the film, which will be discussed later in my paper. The mise-en-scène, or arrangement of everything seen within the film, is, to a degree, the filmmaker’s choice. This differs slightly in documentary film because the aim is to catch “the real” on film, so there are no set designers for on-location filming. Yet the angles and shot choices (close-up, medium close-up, high angle, etc.) are decided by the filmmaker. I filmed Ariel eye-level in several shots partly to show the audience the weight she was lifting in a straightforward manner. But I also incorporated several low angle shots, where the camera is positioned lower than the subject. This convention, used often in fiction films to give the subject a sense of importance or power, I used to help audiences apply those adjectives to Ariel to express her toughness.

Pacing, which describes anything from the scene length to narrative structure, comprises a large part of documentary filmmaking. Documentaries often consist of longer takes than fiction films, again a convention to emphasize realism (Aufderheide 11). Too much editing within scenes can alert audiences to the fact that they are being

told how to feel about characters or events, which may or may not be what the filmmaker wants. *Iron Redemption* has many long takes of Ariel in the gym for the very reason of letting the audience feel that they are in control. When I cut too frequently within a scene between different camera angles, the product had a bit of a forced, fictional quality. I chose instead to allow audiences to observe what they wish within a shot so that they feel they are witnessing an event with their own eyes.

This “long takes” convention emerged after 16mm equipment was developed, allowing cameras to be lighter and hand-held (Aufderheide 11). As Aufderheide points out, “using very long ‘takes’ or scenes made viewers feel that they were watching unvarnished reality; the jerkiness of handheld cameras was testimony to the you-are-there immediacy, and it implied urgency” (11). Much of my own footage was hand-held, such as all the scenes of Ariel lifting in the Louisiana State University Recreation Center. This convention, coupled with my choice to not have a third person narrator, helps to engross the audience in Ariel’s world without drawing attention to the fact that the audience is observing someone else’s life. Aufderheide reinforces this belief by stating that not having narration “allowed viewers to believe that they were being allowed to decide for themselves the meaning of what they saw”, but is careful to point out that this is an illusion because editing controls the outcome (11).

Filmmaking is storytelling, and filmmakers decide the narrative structure by deciding which subjects in the film are of importance, whose stories to tell, and how the events in the film are resolved (Aufderheide 10). For documentaries, this storytelling is a convention used to make the viewer care about and empathize with the subject (Aufderheide 12). My film takes the classic inspirational path-to-victory story by

introducing Ariel's failure and ending with Ariel's success. Though straying from the use of certain "formal elements" such as a bodiless narrator, expert interviews, and stock images to make a point, I felt that the classic narrative structure I chose works to have an emotional impact on audiences.

*Iron Redemption's* narrative structure does vary from its classic form in the opening because I chose to thrust audiences into the world of powerlifting without first explaining anything about the sport. Powerlifting is an abrasive sport to view, with the crowd howling cheers and commands at the lifter, the weights clanging on the bar, the strain of the weight visible on the lifter's face. By introducing it this way, it echoes what Kody states later in the film: "It's a scary sport to watch. It's a scary spectator sport." The audience knows they are in for an exciting ride, even if they do not yet know what exactly that ride entails.

To invest the viewers in Ariel's character, I showed footage of her working with fierce determination in the gym, critiquing and helping her fellow lifters. Kody's interviews made her easy to identify with, as someone with a perspective outside of powerlifting. I wanted *Iron Redemption* to mimic the sport it displays by being short and explosive. The audience trains with Ariel, then goes to Nationals 2012 with her, and then it's all over when she fails. The entire film echoes the three attempt set-up at a meet: she fails in the introduction, she fails in the middle, and she succeeds in the end, adding a different element to the classic narrative structure.

The footage from the meets and the footage of Ariel in the gym bring different elements to the table. Aufderheide says of the documentary *Dogtown and Z-Boys* (2001), "(the film) interweaves home movies with reminiscence and contrasts both with

verité material from the fast-paced and commercialized world of competitive skateboarding” (104). If one simply replaces one sport (competitive skateboarding) for another (powerlifting), this statement easily applies to *Iron Redemption* as well. Interviews of Ariel show the reminiscence Aufderheide describes when contrasted with the footage of Ariel lifting at meets from personal cameras. Such practices are recognized now as conventions of documentary film, having been used so frequently and helping shape the genre.

After classifying *Iron Redemption* as a documentary, it is important to note that it is a historical documentary because of the conventions it shares with the subgenre, however recent the events in history may have taken place. Historical documentary conventions arise out of the challenges filmmakers face in telling a story. One major challenge is the depiction of events that were not captured on film, a problem I encountered in my own film. Though I was fortunate to find Ariel’s three attempts from 2012 Nationals, I only had one attempt on film from 2013 Nationals, and therefore had to employ a different method of giving the audience the information than I had done with 2012 Nationals.

This lack of information pushed me to state on title cards an explanation of the attempt and its importance. I encountered the same issue when I wanted to show Ariel at the beginning of her lifting career before anyone had filmed her. As found in many historical documentaries, photographs were used to give a sense that the audience is following the subject through her journey (Aufderheide 92). Photographs are frequently used in historical documentaries when the filmmaker encounters difficulty in accessing data (Aufderheide 92).



Within the subgenre of historical documentaries is the “immensely popular” biographical documentary. Popular is a description of which I am in agreement as it was the first type of documentary that came to mind when creating my own film (Aufderheide 94-95). This popularity is possibly due to its similarity with many fiction films in identifying with a main character rather than being about politics, for example, or many characters within a culture. Biographical documentaries focus “on a particular person, promising viewers that they will learn about someone who is recognized as important” (Aufderheide 94-95).

At the same time, these films driven by the main subject are still a representation of reality in that they are the filmmaker’s interpretation of the main character. My goal for a viewer interpretation of Ariel is to see her as a hard-working individual, strong both mentally and physically, and at the same time show vulnerability. Choices I made in editing the film support this, such as the majority of the footage of Ariel being her lifting and helping her teammates. For an audience to relate to the subject they have to care about the subject, and in order to achieve this I show her fear of failure, a common worry all people share, and then show her triumph over it.

In biographical documentaries, there is the use of a “reflexive approach to familiar objects or images, forcing a reanalysis of them: collages, blank images, text that startles or asks questions, and repetition – all of which forces viewers to reflect upon or reinterpret the meaning of a sound or image” (Aufderheide 100). *Iron Redemption* in particular contains a good deal of text, some of which can be startling such as the text that reads “if she misses this lift, she will be disqualified from the meet.” This adds tension to the story and due to the repetition of the failed attempt (being shown first out

of context in the beginning and then in context in the middle of the film) the audience can indeed reinterpret the information now given the context to understand the importance of the lift.

Now that *Iron Redemption* has been explained to some extent to be a biographical documentary, it is also a documentary featuring a culture, and therefore contains ethnographic documentary elements. Many of the conventions found in *Iron Redemption* and other documentaries were established by filmmakers that emphasized ethnographic elements in their work, such as Robert Flaherty, Jean Rouch, and the Maysles brothers. *Iron Redemption* contains several similarities to these filmmakers' works, each of whom are remembered for certain styles.

The American filmmaker Flaherty often filmed lesser known cultures and romanticized his films with convincing, but reenacted narratives. His film *Nanook of the North*, for example, shows the Inuit conducting traditional Inuit practices that had in fact long been discontinued in their culture (Aufderheide 2). Though my film does not involve describing a culture of people to the audience, it could be said that it romanticizes powerlifting. Powerlifting is glorified here, as my main character is a person who excels at the sport. The loudness of the cheers and support at meets adds to the grandeur, and the lower camera quality of the "home movies" gives a sense of gritty realism.

*Iron Redemption* certainly has a romantic storyline, though I did not create the story myself but rather pieced it together and present it how I wish audiences to view it. My film is about Ariel because when searching for a subject on the powerlifting team to create a biography about, her story was the most compelling. This means my hand in altering the story to add drama and intrigue could be much less than if I had to invent

drama, which would call ethics into question the ethics involved in my “truth-telling.”

Referring back to Rabiger, I felt that inventing events would breach the contract I established with the audience to tell represent reality (79).

My film draws perhaps the most similarities to Jean Rouch, the ethnographic filmmaker, particularly concerning the shooting of footage for the documentary. When viewing the powerlifting weight room and its inhabitants as a culture, the ethnographer alone possesses the knowledge of where to “direct” the camera (Rouch 36). Thus, Rouch states that “the director can only be the cameraman,” unless of course the roles of directing and having the ethnographic knowledge to understand what to shoot is being achieved by one person (36). As someone “violently opposed to crews” because they lack the understanding of the culture, Rouch would approve of my approach to the filming of the weight room culture (36). I chose to do the filming myself because of my familiarity with the weight room culture as a member of the team for 3 years, and therefore also fulfilled the directing role by knowing what shots to capture to express such a culture to an audience (36).

Research on Jean Rouch often appears alongside information about the Maysles brothers, as Stephen Mamber states that both “were instrumental in creating the conventions of observational and participatory cinema” (cited in Ruby 118). Both incorporated direct cinema by using smaller hand-held cameras, as I used to film *Iron Redemption*. Direct cinema focuses on being a “fly-on-the-wall” and is a technique frequently found in the Maysles brothers Albert and David’s work. They appear to capture “real life” in their films and ignore the presence of the camera as an interference, leading the audience to do the same (35). For *Iron Redemption*, I wanted

to achieve this same quality of an uninterrupted, unchanged feeling of documenting Ariel and other powerlifters' real lives in the gym. Though the presence of the camera always affects the "norm," I believe my personal relationships with the lifters in the gym allowed them to feel comfortable enough to act naturally in my presence, or at least as naturally as possible.

All of these different techniques add to the list of conventions I drew from to create *Iron Redemption*, and ultimately to convince the audience of the realism of Ariel's journey. After careful analysis under Aufderheide's guidance, *Iron Redemption* falls under the biographical documentary classification of films, with an emphasis on ethnographic elements. The film's focus of Ariel Parker, powerlifting champion, promises an exciting look into a real story.

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