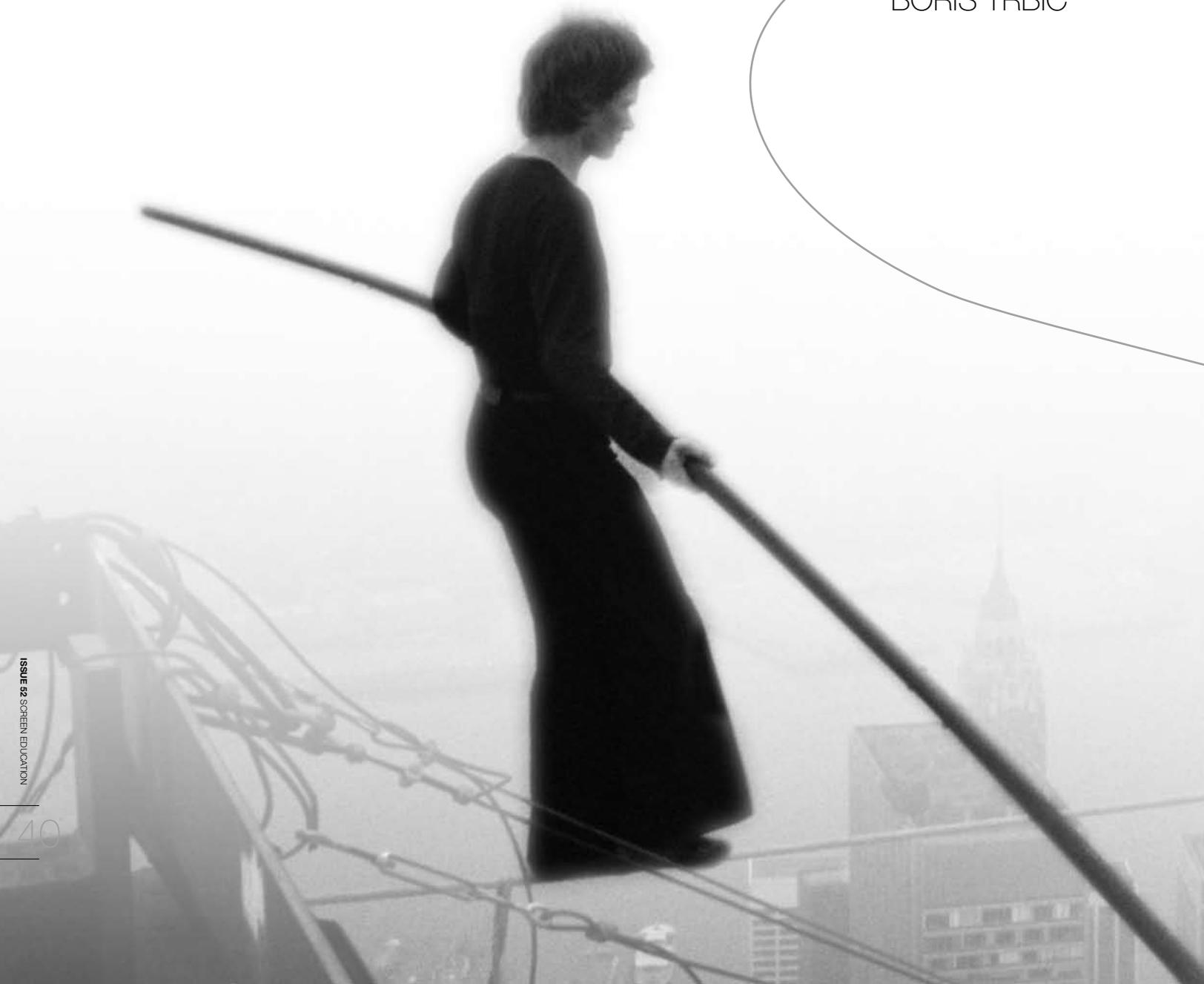


# A Heist Film 110

STOREYS ABOVE MANHATTAN:

# Man on Wire

BORIS TRBIC



**O**N the morning of 7 August 1974, 25-year-old French high-wire artist Philippe Petit infiltrated New York's World Trade Center, strung a sixty-metre tightrope between the Twin Towers and, to the amazement of spectators, street crowds and security guards, spent the following hour dancing in the sky, 110 storeys above Lower Manhattan. This incredible event is the central concern of UK director James Marsh's documentary *Man on Wire* (2008), which won the Grand Jury Prize: World Cinema Documentary and the World Cinema Audience Award: Documentary at the 2008 Sundance Film Festival. The film is based on Petit's book, *To Reach the Clouds*, and focuses on the preparation, execution and postscript to the most spectacular of his performances.

Petit was born in 1948. A tightrope walker, pantomime artist, unicyclist and magician, he was a street performer on the Boulevard Saint-Germain in Paris in the late 1960s, and in the early 1970s started working with a slack rope in Washington Square Park in New York. During almost four decades on the wire, he performed at the Sydney Harbour Bridge, the Hennepin County Government Center, the Louisiana Superdome and many other world landmarks. In Paris in 1989, he celebrated the 200th anniversary of the Republic by walking a 700-metre-long tightrope strung between the Palais de Chaillot and the Eiffel Tower. In 1994, he celebrated the 1200th anniversary of Frankfurt by walking the skies above the city in front of half a million spectators. Petit's plans to walk a quarter of a mile across the Grand Canyon spectacularly failed in 1988 and 1999 for various reasons, including sponsorship withdrawal, making his meticulously planned yet entirely illegal New York performance his most daring act to date.

In James Marsh's documentary Petit is portrayed as a combination of con artist, vagabond and modern-day hero. His passion for high-wire artistry, circus acts and magic is illuminated by some exploration of his early escapades at Notre Dame and the Sydney Harbour



ABOVE: PHILIPPE PETIT TODAY LEFT: PETIT WALKING BETWEEN THE TWIN TOWERS, © 2008 JEAN-LOUIS BLONDEAU/POLARIS IMAGES

Bridge. Captivating, self-centred and immature, Petit is a charismatic performer, a master of acrobatic skill and a person with a criminal mind – and record. In his early years he was a pickpocket, and during his career he has been arrested more than 500 times. It is not surprising that Petit, obsessive and unflinchingly self-confident, guards his privacy with an unusual sense of rigour and, perhaps, paranoia. Petit's initial meetings with the filmmaker were imbued with a nervous tension that ultimately might have influenced Marsh's approach to his material and subject and his style of narration. The interviews with Petit are fast-paced and almost manic as he recalls the most fascinating moment in his life; some would attribute this to the intensity of the experience, others to his having the personality of a naughty boy who refuses to grow up.

### Background to a heist

The film's tight narrative structure, characterization and visual style remind one of a well-paced crime flick. The introduction of central characters, in police-style face and profile snapshots, opens a reconstruction of the 'coup'. The interviews and voice-over reminiscences of the protagonist connect the key points in a sequence of events presented through archival materials and re-enactments. The character development, visual style and editing of the narrative, as well as the musical accompaniment, suggest a number of parallels with the crime genre. The re-enactments, which give a slight nod to the work of renowned documentary filmmaker Errol Morris, also contribute to this impression. *The New York Times* reviewer A.O. Scott points out that:

*Man on Wire is structured like a heist movie, in the manner of Rififi or the revived Ocean's Eleven franchise. Though Mr. Petit was alone on the cable that August morning, his walk in the sky was the result of a conspiracy of true believers and casual adventurers.*<sup>1</sup>

The target of a heist flick is commonly a public structure – a museum, a jewellery store, a financial institution – or a prominent individual. The motives – greed, revenge, peaceful or humanitarian endeavour – are regularly overshadowed by the main characters' impulse for fame and/or notoriety. In *Man on Wire*, Petit

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and his crew visit and inspect the newly built World Trade Center, with its awe-inspiring architecture, surveillance, security and police procedures, to measure the immensity of their task. Petit had visited the World Trade Center in January 1974 before the building was formally dedicated. He rode elevators, evaded security guards and sneaked through the corridors to get to the roof. The following day, he brought along photographer Jim Moore. When he showed Moore the drop, his friend said: 'You're insane.' In April, Petit returned to the buildings to continue with the preparation. This time, a number of his French, American and Australian friends and acquaintances who were already involved in the plan also took part in preparation procedures. Petit made sketches, identified access routes and mapped out the security flaws. He discovered that on windy days the building swayed and the wind was strong enough to snap the tensioned cable connecting the towers. A number of contingency plans were made and almost a tonne of equipment prepared for the 'coup' day.

On the afternoon of 6 August 1974, Petit, accompanied by six accomplices, arrived at the World

Trade Center. They dressed as delivery men, drove an unmarked van and carried forged IDs. They rode freight elevators and remained hidden until nightfall, when they could start setting up. At 6.45am, just a quarter of an hour before the arrival of the first shift workers, they had still not managed to tighten the cable. At 7am, simultaneously with the beginning of the first shift, Petit started his walk on the wire connecting the Twin Towers.

### Playing with genre

Documentaries rarely feature complex organization of time, parallel action or protagonists and antagonists in a classical sense. Even when they explore themes and subjects featuring dramatic conflicts (murder investigation, war, conspiracy, political or financial scandal), documentarists seldom delve into genre territory nor create the concomitant building of suspense; rather, they opt for an investigative approach. One of the recent attempts to merge documentary and drama techniques was *Touching the Void* (Kevin Macdonald, 2003), which traced mountaineer Simon Yates' fascinating struggle for survival following his horrific accident and abandonment by a friend in the Peruvian Andes.

*Man on Wire* uses generic conventions to expand on the narrative and create tension. A smart, charismatic, daring (and often promiscuous and commitment-wary) male (anti) hero gathers a group of 'experts' to assist him in successfully completing a monumental, seemingly impossible

task. Together, they plan and execute the mission, overcoming a series of obstacles in the race against time and in the form of adversaries who could thwart their attempt. They display audacity and technical expertise, but also other human qualities or feelings that could bring about audience identification with them: a sense of potential failure because of unsuccessful attempts in the past, a sense of humour, people skills, networking ability, sexual drive and a street-smart, savvy attitude. Their experience is marked by a series of twists triggered by small but significant flaws in the plan, the ingenuity of their pursuers, greed, old debts, divided loyalties or, simply, chance.

*Man on Wire* uses a number of these conventions in presenting a sequence of events that lead to Petit's World Trade Center performance. The filmmaker is most convincing introducing the 'crime', maintaining and building tension, and introducing the characters' testimonies. Marsh's portrayal of the main protagonist's expert assistants, characteristic of the heist genre, is parodic and entertaining; it also serves as a comic relief at the moments of high tension. A group of friends, insiders and adventurers, who recall the moments on the roof of the World Trade Center, create a series of slapstick situations including accidental encounters with security guards, using a bow and arrow to get the cable to the other tower, gaps in communication between English and French speakers, and Petit's provocations of the New York policemen who came to arrest him but who were too scared to step on the wire. This series of anecdotes presented in interviews with and a voice-over by Petit may occasionally sound apocryphal and almost contrived, yet they are engaging and well-paced and do not lead the audience to question their authenticity.

The sublime, surreal moment of Petit's triumph is recalled using a combination of moving images, photographs and reminiscences from the main characters, who observed him from the street, 400 metres below. His former girlfriend and his closest friends cry as they recall this experience in which they all participated. The archival footage and photographs of the artist balancing on a wire strung high above Manhattan are moving, almost

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poetic. It is interesting that Marsh does not idealize his hero, and that in true documentary style he evokes the moments of 'waking up to reality' following the memorable experience. Once released from police custody, Petit seems somewhat lost in the public frenzy and intoxicated by his celebrity status. He speaks to hundreds of journalists, sleeps with the first person who congratulates him on his success and then goes to see his friends, some of whom are eagerly awaiting him only to be later deported from the United States. The interviewees recall a profound change in his personality and, without too much elaboration, mention that their friendships and relationships subsequently broke down. The passion, however, remains. Three and a half decades later, all of them recall the moment as an inspirational experience that they will cherish as long as they live.

### Studying *Man on Wire*

*Man on Wire* provides a number of opportunities for teachers and students of Media Studies and English. The narrative adheres to the conventions of the heist film, while elaborating on the themes of art and artistic skill, passion, right and wrong, freedom, expression, loyalty, courage, exhibitionism and, ultimately, fame and notoriety. The characterization is equally intriguing. The central protagonists – Philippe Petit and his team – are obsessed by their foolishly daring yet somewhat superficial mission, and are presented as (anti)heroes, whose aim (to gain celebrity by committing 'the artistic crime of the century') triggers their detailed preparations to execute

their plan without hindrance or police intervention. For some of them, this will be their fifteen minutes of fame. For Petit, it means a green card for eternity, and is also an (unarticulated) belated coming-of-age experience.

Teachers of English and Media Studies could also look into the place of setting in the wider construction of the narrative. By omitting explicit references to the terrorist attacks of 1993 and 2001, the filmmaker suggests that this symbol of the triumph of urbanization and corporate power has long been attracting all sorts of plans, with colossal public relations effects and catastrophic consequences. The unspoken, historical postscript to *Man on Wire* thus becomes a part of the subtext that enhances the themes, issues and characters developed in the plot. Viewing this film, senior secondary students of Media could explore the various documentary modes discussed by Warren Buckland<sup>2</sup> and examine the place of re-enactments and voice-over within a documentary narrative. They could also discuss Bill Nichols' fascinating attempt to dissect ethical issues with regard to documentaries.<sup>3</sup> Students could look closely into the portrayal of documentary subjects, and the use of interviewing techniques, archival material, visual composition and framing, editing, sound and music in structuring the narrative as 'creative treatment of actuality'.

Students of Drama and Theatre Studies could also benefit from aspects of this documentary film, especially those that convey the importance of inspiration,

preparation and teamwork as well as the character of a live performance. Petit's 'heroic' (and some would argue foolish) attempt, his mastery (perhaps unrivalled in the history of circus skills) and his love of performance are all testimonies to his passion and organization. His fascinating act, walking the distance between the Twin Towers eight times on a foggy New York morning, makes one think about the distance between life and death that, according to the artist, should be inherent in every performance. As Petit recalls the moment of looking at the small figures on the pavement from 110 storeys above, he points out that he knew he would never see the same scene again. Neither would his followers. For, ultimately, every performance is unrepeatable.

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#### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> A.O. Scott, 'Walking on Air Between the Towers', *The New York Times*, 25 July 2008, <<http://movies.nytimes.com/2008/07/25/movies/25wire.html>>, accessed 25 October 2008.
- <sup>2</sup> Warren Buckland, 'The Non-Fiction Film: Five Types of Documentary' in *Film Studies*, Hodder & Staughton, Oxford, 1998, pp.103–123
- <sup>3</sup> Bill Nichols, 'Why are Ethical Issues Central to Documentary Filmmaking?' in *Introduction to Documentary*, Indiana UP, Bloomington, 2001, pp.1–20.