

Touching the void

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Touching the Void produced by Kevin Macdonald(2004) is the thrilling story of two young adventurers, Simon Yates and Joe Simpson as they climbed the previously unscaled 21, 000ft Siula Grande in the Peruvian Andes. This ??? docudrama??™ explores the notions of the fragility of life and the challenge of danger and fate through a number of perspectives. The key viewpoints of Joe, Simon and Macdonald are offered chiefly through the exciting reconstruction of events played by actors juxtaposed with a series of studio interviews.

Two key scenes which demonstrate these perspectives by utilising a range of film techniques are those where Simon cuts the rope and where Joe is stuck in the crevasse. The audience is positioned in a number of ways to empathise with, question and consider both the physical and inner battle that both men endure. The challenge of the mountain and the fragility of life is demonstrated on Day 4 during the descent when Simon makes the heartbreaking , life and death decision to cut the rope connecting him to Joe. This action, seen as the ultimate mountain climbing taboo, for which Simon has attracted much subsequent criticism , is revealed through the dramatisation (the Producer??™s perspective) and the viewpoints of Joe and Simon in the studio. The tense re-enactment serves to draw the viewer in and to constantly re-evaluate their own opinion.

The gravity of the situation and of Simon??™s decision is presented to the responder by way of contrast, diegetic and non-diegetic sound as well as a range of camera shots and angles ??“ all of which contribute to the perspectives offered. Simon??™s studio mid close-up shot declaring, ??? I took the decision pretty quickly really???, is contrasted with several

overhead shots of Joe's face and hard hat shortly before the cutting occurs. The camera tracks the penknife as it moves down towards the rope. The diegetic mountain sounds of the high wind to show its strength and power and the non-diegetic intensifying music are mixed to build suspense. The main perspective offered through the re-enactment is that of an extraordinary human battle, both internally and externally. The music reaches a climax, the rope is cut and Simon is shown in the studio describing the loud and final sound the rope made as it broke away. No time is given to the responder to ponder as the camera cuts back to the mountainside and one sees an overhead shot of Joe and loose rope falling into the huge void. The Producer manages to position the audience to feel panic and tension even though we know that Joe survives.

We feel the concerns about life, death and fate all crystallise as Joe falls through the ice into the crevasse with a huge crashing sound. This is filmed at first through an overhead shot and then an undershot to make the responder feel part of the action and despair at Joe's demise. Shocked, the viewer is confronted now with a black screen followed by a low angle shot of Simon leaning back in the snow, knife in hand and mission accomplished- thus arousing a range of confused emotions in us. Similarly, the scene following shortly after, when Joe is in the crevasse is one of heightened feeling and the perspective of the Producer is contrasted with that of Joe in the studio and with voice-over. Here, Joe is shown through the dramatisation, as being in a vast, icy world and the lighting is a mixture of grey and bluish tones as well as black to show the size of the crevasse and the impossible situation that Joe is in. The desperation and fragility of life is

omnipresent although it is somewhat settled by the fact that we see a living Joe in the studio.

This brings relief to the audience although a sense of mystery too at how he could have survived such an ordeal . The medium close up of Joe??™s face with plain blue backdrop focuses the attention on his words. The audience is able to feel the raw emotion that Joe offers . Juxtaposed with this is a close up of Joe holding the end of rope which ??? just kept coming???, thus emphasising his bewilderment and isolation in his icy world. The voice-over, ??? I knew it had been cut???, followed by quick contrasting shots ??“ undershot of the hole he had fallen through, high angle shot of the end of the rope and zoom in/extreme close-up of the cut end- all add impact to the seemingly slow pace of his thoughts as he realises what has taken place.

Once again the audience is offered an unexpected perspective by the Producer who sought to exonerate Simon in his film. Joe is not angry or even really surprised but says, ??? I had a??? pleased feeling.. it meant Simon was alive???, a statement which seems somewhat strange to the audience. The enormity of his position is highlighted by an aerial shot of the crevasse with an extremely small bright light of Joe??™s head torch shining from far below to remind us of his impossible situation. A further contextual perspective is offered with a mid shot of the Siula grande in all its majesty and power, thus demonstrating the Producer??™s viewpoint regarding the indomitable aspect of nature and its ability to mete out its punishment for those who are intrepid. As the peaceful shot of a clear night sky with moon ends the scene, Joe??™s final comment for this section is conveyed through his voice-over.

The delicate divide between life and death, fate and fortune is brought to mind with his chilling comment, ??? Looking at where I was ...it was an awful prospect.??? This moment of significance highlights the smallness of man both literally and metaphorically as he comes to learn that he is ??? touching the void.??™ Thus Touching the Void is an effective film which has great impact through the combined use of various perspectives revealed through interviews and re-enactments. The film-maker provides an engaging and suspenseful atmosphere that allows the audience to feel they are witnessing the events through their dramatisation and scrutinise and ponder upon the thoughts and emotions of Joe and Simon as they are interviewed in the studio.

This authentic combination along with the many film techniques used provides an edge of the seat film which takes us into an exhilarating, gruelling climb by two remarkable men.