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The Outriders

By

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in

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and

Film

Thesis Advisor

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Introduction

The Outriders is a portrait documentary filmed in Saudi Arabia. The film follows David, the head outrider, at the King Abdulaziz Racetrack in Riyadh. An Outrider is a mounted horseman who assists racehorses to facilitate and maintain safety on the track. The primary duties highlighted in the film are that of catching loose horses and escorting non-compliant horses to various stations along the track. The documentary delves into David's history, starting in the US, and the journey that led him across the world to Saudi Arabia. It offers a window into what it takes to be an Outrider in terms of their mental approach, and it examines the outriders' relationships with the very horses they ride in both technical and emotional detail. From the thrills of high-speed horse chases to the shaking worries of injury, this documentary is a gallop into the world of The Outriders.

Industry Contextualization – The Solo Documentarians

This essay is an accompaniment work through which I will contextualize, explain, dissect, and reflect on my documentary. I will start by explaining what I see as the overarching framework through which I analyze my work on this specific documentary. There are a lot of theories, techniques, and analysis strategies through which we can extrapolate a reading of a film. The framework I have chosen as the lens through which I interpret my documentary was achieved by asking myself this simple question: which factors uniquely stand out for the influence and impact they had on the film? This simple question often leads me to the primary driving forces behind a film. Most of the time this question is somewhat related to my fundamental beliefs and my motivation for becoming a filmmaker, but with this documentary, something completely different stood out: I was tackling this project alone; I was a Solo Documentarian.

A Solo Documentarian is a documentary filmmaker who fulfills all, or most, of a documentary film's technical and creative roles on their own. My first encounter with the concept was from reading Michael Rabiger's book *Directing The Documentary*. He did not refer to it within the same framework as I define the term, nor did he acknowledge it as a way of categorizing a documentary or documentarian, he just mentioned that "[...]for a fast learning curve when you begin, it is fine to shoot and edit solo. You can certainly acquire high-quality imagery with a small camera and little else" (Rabiger 173). In no way was he encouraging young filmmakers to take this approach—beyond its usage in accelerating learning for beginners. At first, I started following his advice simply as a convenient way to shoot more documentaries. But very quickly I realized that making a film alone has major benefits beyond its simple application in a beginner's growth phase. Three of my earliest documentary shorts were around the subjects of homelessness and mental health within the Muslim community. Within all three of those communities, I was interacting with vulnerable people who faced varying levels of abuse and persecution. Especially in the cases of intersectionality between the groups. What I discovered slowly over these three projects was how much easier it was to earn trust when I was working alone instead of with a crew. That trust yielded more intimate conversations with the documentary participants and resulted in capturing stories with greater emotional depth. It was also easier to uphold that trust when I was the only person accountable. That trust was tested when a primary participant in one of those documentary shorts asked for it to be withheld right before it was going public, it was a lot easier to make the decision to pull the documentary since I didn't have any backers or crew to account for. These experiences led me to see several advantages in working solo. Over the past few years I've worked on both narrative and documentary films—solo and with various crew sizes—I see solo documentary work as a

specialized tool in a filmmaker's kit. It has the potential to be the optimal method of documentary production in specific situations. Factors such as project scale, audience market size, budget restrictions, controversial subjects, vulnerable people, travel destinations, and many more are all important when deciding to pursue a project as a solo documentarian. The reason why working solo stood out as the primary factor influencing *The Outriders* was mostly due to the project scale being far beyond my comfort zone. But I was able to draw on the wisdom of other solo documentarians for both techniques and motivation.

The community of solo documentarians is still quite small; however, there are still many actionable lessons that I took from the community. One of the tallest figures in the solo documentarian world is Jonny von Wallström. For his documentary *The Pearl of Africa* (2016), he lists himself as crew for the roles of director, editor, music by, cinematographer, sound editor, and animator (IMDB). While the list is impressive on its own, especially for a feature-length documentary, it becomes much more impressive after knowing he sold his documentary to Netflix. (Creative North). Wallström's achievement is a major source of motivation for me. I see it as proof of the excellence a solo documentarian can achieve. Additionally, Wallström publishes tutorial content on his workflow and offers insight into the techniques he uses to drastically increase his speed throughout the production. His tutorials differentiate themselves by being somewhat focused on large-scale projects without requiring expensive software or specialty training (Creative North). Two other solo documentarians, Michael Atkinson and Iohan Gueorguiev push the boundaries on working solo while simultaneously pushing up against the very limits of human capabilities. Atkinson's film *Surviving the Outback* (2019) is a survival documentary that stemmed from his curiosity about what true survival in complete solitude would look like on film (thefilmmakerspodcast). Gueorguiev's journey might have been even

more extreme though. He rode his bike from the Canadian arctic to the southern reaches of Chile. It took him 5 years to complete. His docuseries contain 36 episodes (Bikewanderer). I have far too much love for my own life to draw direct inspiration from those two, but I do see them as being exemplary in terms of how solo documentaries can be utilized. Atkinson distributes his film for sale on Amazon Video while Gueorguiev uses YouTube, and relies on a crowdfunding model to fully support his biking adventures. The variety in terms of distribution methods available to solo filmmakers is a key enabler towards expanding this category.

Advancements in cameras and camera support systems are another major factor enabling a documentarian to work alone. One of the major elements that once set higher budget films apart from lower budget productions is camera movement. A dolly camera movement, which is to move the camera forwards or backward, used to require large metal tracks set in a specific way, a wheeled mechanism, usually a cart, and it could only be used on evenly leveled ground. Alternatively, one could use a full-body camera stabilization system. These are expensive and require specialized training. In recent years, a dolly-like movement can be easily replicated by using a relatively low-cost gimbal. This small piece of equipment can also take the place of a jib for boom shots, a tripod for pan and tilt, a crane for an arc shot, a full body steady-cam for a tracking shot. This allows for a single camera operator to gain access to complex movements that were once prohibitively expensive. While there is still an obvious difference in picture quality, and cinematography, between a solo made documentary in comparison with a studio-backed documentary, the advancements in stabilization, 360-degree cameras, and other camera support systems, have made the contrast a little less stark. I think it's also useful to consider near-future advancements in this area, and how they could cause a shift in team sizes towards smaller crews. Two rapidly developing areas that I expect to become available to solo, and small crew,

filmmakers within the next 5 years is the wide adoption of game engines in cinematography. The other potential advancement is greater access to Machine Learning integrated assets in VFX and 3D. Both advancements work in conjunction with each other and could bring down the cost of VFX to a solo documentarian level. Game engines in cinematography are already being used in the narrative and animation sectors of the industry, and several Artificial Intelligence animation companies have demonstrated the ability to model and texture highly realistic humans generated from images (Saito). Others have showcased movement in dynamic environments with both humanoid and Animal models (Starke). All of this was done without any traditional animation commands. There is a myth that VFX has no relation to documentary filmmaking. This is simply false. VFX capabilities are already used quite extensively in documentary post-production. Most commonly for removing unwanted elements, but adding in, factually true, elements that weren't caught on camera is also quite common. Giving participatory documentary filmmakers broader access to these powerful tools could enable a low-budget documentarian, for example, to make a documentary on ancient Rome—without most of the shots consisting of ruins and tourists. The creative possibilities are endless, and the disruption it could have on the film industry is worth paying attention to. Being a solo documentarian is a good place to position myself to be an early adopter of these tools. Working on solo projects forces me to constantly search for shortcuts in my workflow, and a lot of those shortcuts tend to come from cutting-edge technologies in unfamiliar programs. Often these tools were designed for a different industry. This helps with rapidly diversifying my skillsets which could help if the right kind of major technological shift occurs within the industry. Regardless whether or not my speculations on rapidly changing technology plays out or not, the recent changes alone in terms of hardware and non-AI software

has been quite dramatic for the solo filmmaker. The tools available for anyone wanting to pursue a project alone are user friendly and well optimized to assisting a one man crew.

Documentary Style

The Outriders is a participatory portrait documentary with an informational tone. The primary focus is on David. He is present in most scenes throughout the film, but in certain sense, the film is also looking at the outrider program through the eyes of David. There is a heavy emphasis on conveying information about the program within the documentary. Aside from the B-roll scene while David is telling his story, every other scene takes place in the work environment. In a way, David can be viewed partially as the main character and partially as a conduit, or host, through which we learn more about the outrider program. Some of that tone can be attributed to my participation in the events taking place. A lot of the substantial content is conveyed via a talking head. I also asked film participants to conduct certain events. One example is a hands-free segment where the main character demonstrates his ability to control a horse without using his hands. I specifically requested that we go out to a certain location and shoot this scene. Most of the interview locations were all chosen by me, and the B-roll for some of those scenes was also heavily directed. As a documentary filmmaker, I believe in controlling every aspect of a documentary that you can. That is to offset the huge number of things that I have absolutely no control over. The appropriateness of a filmmaker's participation in events often has to do with the film's subject matter and the film's intended goals. Michael Moore is a classic example of a participatory documentarian. Events are often driven by his actions, and his films tend to have a sociopolitical subject matter. This is very different from my film which is a portrait documentary in which I am trying to accurately represent the life and work of two outriders. Although I influenced events, I had to make sure that my influence would not

misrepresent my characters. My criteria for this was simply to not put my subjects in any situations that I have not already observed them, or heard about them, doing. For example, I did not have any issues with asking my main character to run his horse at a specific location on the racetrack so that I could obtain a visually appealing drone shot, but I would never ask him to use a lasso while riding his horse just because it would make an interesting shot. Being a participatory documentarian allows me to craft a more compelling story, but I have to balance that with ensuring that I am being authentic and accurate to the lives of the characters I am bringing to screen.

Production Process

One of the limitations when filming this documentary was the difficulty of filming fast-moving horses as a person on foot. It simply wasn't possible to follow my subjects around as they did their jobs since they moved far too fast. It also wasn't possible to move freely around racehorses on a heavily regulated racetrack. One of the primary methods of compensating for this was to use the footage from the outrider's own helmet-mounted cameras in the documentary. Not only does this give viewers direct access to the material as the subject sees it, but it's also a good way of compensating for the difficulties of capturing the job on film.

When I would shoot an interview, I would often ask that the subject be either on a horse or in a visually interesting location. I'd usually film using a gimbal stabilizer. While filming I would have to focus on what the subject was saying in order to ask the right questions; I would change the camera framing depending on the emotion the subject was expressing; Simultaneously, I was also monitoring audio levels and quality. Thankfully my camera's audio auto levels did most of the adjustments on its own. In addition to all of that, I was manually adjusting exposure settings. The only issues I encountered were on partially cloudy days.

Overcast light and direct sunlight require vastly different camera settings, so in interviews where the sun constantly came in and out, I did struggle. Portions of some important interviews ended up being overexposed.

Editing Process

Throughout my time at Portland State University's film program I was exposed to a lot of different theories on editing. I remember one class specifically that broadened my perspective on the importance of the theoretical approach when editing different projects. It was an assignment where 22 students were all given the same pool of footage, and each of us had to edit together a one-minute advertisement out of it. It meant a lot to us since our professor had partnered with an excellent non-profit organization. I watched every single edit on presentation day, and then I went home and watched it all again while taking extensive notes. The variety in terms of energy, pacing, mood, and even atmosphere were remarkable to me. Some edits felt otherworldly, mesmerizing, and slow, while a different classmate caused the same footage to evoke a sense of rushing excitement filling the viewer with raw energy. I wanted to understand why all these edits were so different from each other, and how I could alter my style depending on the project I was working on. The conclusion I came to is that by altering my theoretical approach I could fundamentally change my editing style and align it to the type of project I was working on. There were a few theoretical decisions that I made that influenced the overall tone and structure of the edit.

When thinking about the structure of the film, the first question I asked myself was how this film was likely going to be viewed. According to my distribution plan, it was most likely to be seen on an online equine blog/magazine. Based on these assumptions about the audience's psychographics and viewing platform, I came up with a theoretical framework. The fundamental

approach behind this kind of viewer orientation is heavily influenced by reception theory and reception analysis. Reception analysis is “[...] essentially oriented towards the qualitative exploration of audiences' sense-making of media content in context” (Schroder). An essential component of reception theory is that people of similar cultural backgrounds will interpret a text similarly. While it would be impossible to apply reception analysis on a film that hadn't even been edited yet, I used the underlining methodology of focusing on a viewer's culture and context to drive editing decisions. This was based on predictions of context and culture, and it was an attempt to guide a certain reading of this film based on those predictions. This framework shaped the structure of my documentary in several ways. Firstly, is the aforementioned focus on the context in which a viewer would see the film—an online equine space. The assumption that the viewer would be watching the documentary online shaped the beginning sequence of the film. I decided that I must place the most riveting sequence of the whole documentary at the beginning to hook viewers in. I was initially taught this front-loading approach in a Branded Media course by Professor Courtney Hermann, and I found out, rather painfully, that it's an approach that works well for most online videos. I discovered the effectiveness of front-loading by trying to do the exact opposite of it when I first started uploading content to YouTube. The old saying of saving the best for last most certainly does not apply to most online video consumption. This brings me to the second aspect of reception theory which is that audiences of a similar cultural background will understand a film in a similar way; therefore, I could use horsemanship and equine culture to shape my editing decisions. This was a major consideration when I asked myself the question of whether an edit would make sense to a viewer. For example, I have a scene where David controls a horse without touching the reins. When I thought about this scene's fit in relation to the overall story arc, I looked at it from the perspective of a viewer

who'd be familiar with horse training. To a horseman, this scene conveys a remarkably high level of expertise. From that perspective, the scene is establishing trust in the main character's abilities. Making it an ideal setup for a later sequence about training horses. If I looked at the same scene with a much broader audience in mind, then I'd likely conclude that the scene offers little aside from subjective humor and minor intrigue. Contextualizing how my predicted audience would view this film, and taking the culture of their community into account made it a lot easier to tailor the documentary to that specific niche. Of course, there are also major drawbacks to this approach. I did not have the resources to conduct a proper reception analysis study, using a proven model, on previous films tailored to the horse community. Without having that kind of information to systematically make decisions, my predictions and assumptions about the equestrian community could be wildly inaccurate. Despite being incomplete, using some aspects of the methodology as a reference to build a theoretical framework, through which I could make my editing decisions, did result in a simpler, more streamlined, postproduction process. The other point to consider is that the post-production stage is not necessarily static. A part of my editing workflow was to build an extensive editing organizational system. It consisted of meticulous tags, meta-data, markers, color-coded clips, and dozens of organizational timelines. This makes it easy to change the entire structure, theme, and length of the documentary. In a certain sense, I set up the project with the expectation of making major mistakes and thus requiring drastic changes. As an evolving student documentarian, this flexibility also gives me the opportunity to capitalize on constructive feedback in a highly actionable way.

Throughout this essay, I make a lot of references to working solo. It's a description that suited my journey on this film. I was able to edit this film using an array of tools that were

developed largely to enable a single editor to perform specialized tasks. I am extremely optimistic about the future of these kinds of tools, and how they could transform the film industry; however, while I was working solo in a technical sense, I was definitely not working solo in a theoretical sense. Not only did I have a thesis advisor who offered a lot of direct guidance, but if I applied the core methodology which I used throughout my editing process to analyze myself and my work, then one factor I would have to look at is the context in which I find myself: that of a film student, surrounded by a community of other film students, with all of us regularly accepting guidance from educators while also imbuing ourselves with years of exposure to literature and cinema from those at the pinnacle of the film world. In that context, my claim to working as a solo documentarian holds little weight. I think it's important to acknowledge the limitations of the description. In the upcoming decade's, advancements in filmmaking technology will likely allow almost anyone to work solo, and yet in a certain sense filmmakers can never work alone since we will always draw on the people around us, those who came before us, and the context in which we find ourselves to shape our films.

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