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Representations of Agency for Female Documentary Subjects in Selected Films on Netflix

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Abstract

Communication design for documentaries is changing with online distribution through global platforms like Netflix. Actuality and entertainment are increasingly often elided in a single program, which confuses the genre categories that tend to underpin the scholarship of documentary as a field of study distinct to that of entertainment. Certain programs are marketed as documentary/docu-series alongside fictional 'based on real events' stories and fiction but are constructed as much through significations used in pure entertainment as through those associated with informational and educational media. The paper explores the relationship between factual information and tools of fictional mediation through an analysis of three Netflix films that use documentary styles and forms to focus on issues of gender, while also creating the narrative tension usually characteristic of fiction films.

'Mercury 13' is about female pilots tested in the 1960s to be astronauts but not sent into space due to political issues. The docu-series 'The Keepers' is about the 1969 unsolved murder of Sister Cathy Cesnik, a Catholic nun and high-school teacher possibly killed by a sexual predator. 'The Staircase' is about the trial of Michael Peterson, an author accused of murdering his wife, Kathleen. The paper interrogates to what extent and in what ways the women around whom the films revolve are signified as active, subjectified agents rather than as passive, objectified victims. 'Agency' is approached from the perspective of psychology: through the lens of 'conation' as mental process, which stands alongside the psychodynamic constructs of 'cognition' (intellectual understanding) and 'affects' (emotion). From this perspective, the paper explores whether and how the docu-subjects are represented through discrete visual and aural significations and narrative construction as people who engage or focus behaviour and action, and exhibit intrinsic motivation, goal-orientation, volition, will, self-direction, and self-regulation in ways that countermand assumptions that the women were merely the passive victims of a sexist society.

Keywords: Interaction design, media, gender, documentary, agency, conation

Introduction: Representations of agency

'Agency' as a political notion plays a central role both in discourse-based scholarship and in media studies curricula, especially in courses that deal with equality. As Cole (2019) asserts, such agency lies in tension with social structures, and healthy social order requires all individuals to co-operate, which in turn gives meaning to all individuals in the social system while still allowing them the ability to make decisions and express themselves in unique ways. Scholars of the politics of media and lecturers of media studies often argue in somewhat skewed terms that circumstances seem irredeemable to deny agency to impoverished and oppressed groups, that may appear forced to submit to the rules of social systems because of lack of access to resources or freedoms known by the more privileged groups. Unfortunately, approaches that focus on the *fact* of social inequality more than on how individuals and groups respond *dialogically* to it fail to acknowledge that agency exists in many forms among disempowered people. These people are not irrevocably enslaved by dominant power dynamics but can continue to either legitimise or deny the existing social system or can create new meaning to the social order and relationships by changing the system for themselves or their group. Examples include civil rights movements all over the world to legitimise and recognise same-sex marriages (Cole 2019) and the rise of the #metoo and #pussyhat movements that demand women's equal place in society.

Agency as the ability of individuals to marshal their thoughts and actions with the intention to shape their own experience and bring meaning to life is aligned with rather than subservient to social change, and depends both on the ability of individuals and groups to 'do' and on the shared understanding of their ability based on public visibility. This visibility is expressed through political rallies reported in the news media and through social media that allows people who feel marginalised to report circumstances and express opinions directly, thereby expressing their views in both political and personal terms. An exclusive scholarly and pedagogical focus on politicised fact-based media, however, ignores how entertainment allows audiences to experience the lives of others, both real and fictional people, vicariously in immersive and potentially powerfully socially transformative ways.

Albeit subject to socio-economic limitations that deny access to the most marginalised groups, global online entertainment platforms like Netflix arguably open a wider range of audiences to a broader range of experiences. By contrast to the more overtly and often militant stories around ethnicity, sexuality, sex and gender found in prescriptive political news media and social media's 'echo chamber', which are often accused of reflecting voices primarily back to their own interest groups without changing the recognition of people's worth in a broader sphere. More focus is necessary by scholars and media studies teachers on the communication design mechanisms through which new entertainment consumption platforms serve up powerful democratising tools for a more systemic naturalising of new and positive norms that influence the constituencies of both those seeking political validation and those unaware of or even antithetical to these goals.

Documentary, media effects and tools of analysis

Documentaries on online distribution channels are offered via an interesting new style of interaction design enabled by how audiences search for material by 'types' of show. Traditional film and television listings specify what type of show is available and when a particular one will air, as per time slots dedicated to either fact-based or fictional content. This framing pigeon-holes documentaries as 'actuality', and by implication, therefore as a form of news. Online distribution platforms like Netflix, however, increasingly list documentaries as part of an 'entertainment' line-up, intermixing fictional 'based on real events' stories with fiction, as well as with traditional documentaries in less easily demarcated story types.

Netflix categories confuse the genre categories that media scholars and teachers rely on and that separate documentary-as-fact from fiction-as-entertainment, which in turn adds a new context for Eitzen's (1995, p. 84) now well-worn problematising of Bill Nichols' (1991, p. 12) framing of documentary as mere reality-made-manifest through "the use of conventional means to refer to, represent, or make claims about historical reality". Such a definition does not sufficiently distinguish non-fiction from fiction films that also make references, representations or assertions about historical fact. It also re-invigorates Eitzen's problematic of the distinction between documentary and fiction that Carl Plantinga's (1989, pp. 25-40) bases on the argument that although both set out a world for audiences to experience, only non-fiction films make assertions about that world. This is inaccurate since, like documentaries, fiction films also represent a fact-value about the 'real' world through representing actual (albeit fictionalised) places and people. As Eitzen (1995, p. 96) argues in ways that are now equally relevant to the new online offerings, whether a film is documentary or fiction depends not on its listing category, but on the audience, since "documentaries are presumed to be truthful, even though considerations about the veracity of particular assertions may play little role in how viewers actually make sense of them" (Eitzen 1995, p. 88). This is important since "it is not the representational or formal aspects of a movie that determine whether viewers 'frame' it as a documentary" (Eitzen 1995, p. 96). Instead, what counts is "a combination of what viewers want and expect from a text and what they suppose or infer about it on the basis of situational cues and textual features" (Eitzen 1995, p. 96).

Netflix's presentation of fiction, non-fiction and partly-fiction alongside one another means that audiences are likely to expect documentaries to be both actuality *and* entertainment, and that these shows are best explored in terms of media effects theories that acknowledge that documentary is not by virtue of its form a separate 'actuality' genre of film to fiction (Bryant, Jennings & Oliver 2009). Agency in Netflix documentaries therefore cannot effectively be understood in terms of theories historically applied to factual media and phrased primarily in political terms, for example the Agenda-setting theory (McCombs 1972; McCombs 2004), Cultivation theory (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan & Signorielli 1986) and spiral of silence theory (Noelle-Neumann 1993). Nor can representations of agency adequately be explored exclusively through analytic tools usually applied to fiction cinema, which focuses on how actors and film grammar replicate the subjectivities of characters by manipulating how the audience perceives the reality depicted (Bordwell 2013). Neither of these approaches alone accounts for fact-based films marketed through online platforms that use fiction film grammar and that are listed alongside fiction and partly-fiction shows. This docu-tainment is more than ever like fictionalised fact rather than longer-form news whose veracity can be assumed merely on the basis of the nature of the medium.

Viewers are even more likely than with non-internet-based forms of media presentation to experience these in similar ways to how they experience fiction: through the formation of empathic engagements (Nathanson 2003) with documentary subjects as takes place with fictional characters on the basis of a suspension of disbelief. These empathic engagements do not derive from simple intellectual digestion of facts, but instead (at least in part) from emotional engagement with the overall reality the films present, which is revealed through a tri-level schema for analysis suggested by Bartsch (2008) that acknowledges the role of audience engagement and expectation around meaning-making in the process of reception of the subject-matter of the documentaries. In terms more appropriate to the Netflix films as docu-tainment than alternative abstracted discourse analytic techniques, her framing acknowledges audience engagement with the agency of documentary subjects by avoiding a focus on 'what the film says' as purported fact. Instead, with a focus on 'feeling with' docu-subjects/characters during reception as is appropriate to an exploration of agency, it allows for an analysis of the film grammar, the story as a whole, and the social environment in which the film is watched.

The cues to meta-emotion for this are found in the documentary styles and forms:

- the aesthetic representation of emotions; and
- the narrative context of emotions;

The cues are also found in elements usually only substantively explored in fiction films:

- symbolic elements that refer to cultural norms and values concerning emotions.

This allows for an analysis of how women in Netflix documentaries are represented as possessing agency (or not), through an explanation of the films that reveals more than what docu-subjects are reported as doing. It allows a view of how agency manifests as the thoughts that result in actions taken by people or groups (i.e. the docu-subject women in the films) with the intention to shape their own experience and make personal meaning. This, therefore, reflects agency as a subjective orientation that references the power and volume of women's voice in culture but is more psycho-social in focus. Through this lens, agency is thereby phrased as a personal characteristic that might have important political ramifications rather than a political statement with more minor personal associations.

Analysis

'Mercury 13' is about female pilots in the 1960s tested to be astronauts but not sent into space due to politics. 'The Keepers' is a docu-series about the 1969 unsolved murder of Sister Cathy Cesnik, a Catholic nun and high-school teacher possibly killed by a sexual predator. 'The Staircase' is about the trial of author Michael Peterson, who is accused of murdering his wife, Kathleen. The female docu-subjects are characterised with wildly differing levels of agency: 'Mercury 13' presents women as heroes who have determination and persistently strive to define a new reality for themselves as female pilots; 'The Keepers' on the other hand, presents the female documentary subjects as helpless victims with little agency; while the women in 'The Staircase' are persistently absent, which nullifies agency *in toto*.

'Mercury 13' – (women as hero)

Emotion-revealing aesthetics

The female docu-subjects are represented as strong, assertive, determined and resourceful through aspirational visuals of their flying planes in an open sky, or standing next to planes in postures of authority and ability. These images are often accompanied by direct commentary from the women in their own voices making strong assertions of what they wanted to achieve. For example, the opening voice-over states, "Most harmful behaviour is based on fear, protecting one's perceived position in society, protecting one's territory or physical wellbeing, but progress is inevitable". Later, one of the women states, "I didn't tell people I was going to be an astronaut, I just did it", while another states "Someone has to start the fight to change opinion, someone has to lead the way". These are clearly explicit demonstrations of their persistent agency.

Emotion-framing narrative

In the narrative's three acts the 'Mercury 13' women are introduced, then an account is given of how they were selected for the NASA training programme for astronauts but then denied, and finally it is recounted how, despite what happened, they have never lost their ambitions and passion for flying planes, a stance that is underscored by a comparison between them and

the next generation of female astronauts who were given chances that the 'Mercury 13' women were denied. The 'good old boys' network' is acknowledged but not foregrounded so as to make the women victims. Instead, their voices sound powerfully against the corrupt system, and assertively about their abilities to compete for a place in the space programme and their abilities as pilots, all of which shows their powerful agentified positions.

Symbolism revealing norms and values around emotions

Throughout 'Mercury 13' symbolic imagery such as official buildings and American flags represents patriarchal state institutions such as NASA and the US government, which at the time stood in the way of the women fulfilling their dreams of space travel. These images are presented at places in the story that underscores how the women appear undefeated in spirit despite not managing to complete the NASA astronaut training programme. Further, the use of symbolism in dialogue highlights a clear sense of their agency and determination to define their own reality despite the system. This is clearly indicated by two closing commentaries. The first states, "I have to imagine I'm not a jet, I'm not a person, I'm a spirit going up". The second is Wally Funk, one of the key docu-subjects, who states, "To the youngsters today, get yourself into space, be an airline pilot, be a flying instructor [...] if that's what you want to be, do it 'cause that's what I live".

'The Keepers' – (women as victim)

Emotion-revealing aesthetics

Most of the seven-part documentary shows close-up visuals of the female docu-subjects and those associated with murder and abuse cases. The visuals are generally dull and grey and are generally accompanied by a haunting soundtrack, in an audio-visual aesthetic that underscores the women's roles as helpless victims. When some women are shown to challenge the corrupt institutes of the state such as the office of the state attorney and the FBI, they are shown, in quite visual terms that impress their state of helplessness and despair, to be confounded in their attempts. Notably, most interviewees merely recount their feelings in passive contexts, and very few visuals demonstrate women in action.

Emotion-framing narrative

The narrative of the seven-part documentary follows the interviews of victims of rape and abuse, and those associated with them in murder and rape cases, against the background of an archdiocese and institutions of the state that kept working against them in their quest for the truth as adults. Jean Wehner (Jane Doe), in particular, and her court charges against Joseph Maskell and the archdiocese are a key storyline. Wehner is shown as waiting decades to take action. After she does, she is left in despair at the end, which underscores overarching victimhood despite her attempts at finding justice. Along with other women in similar circumstances, she is shown as being led around by the system, both by being abused and silenced as a child and then later as an adult as she deals with the turmoil of the rape and abuse incidences. This silencing clearly signals a lack of agency carried through a key narrative theme beginning in descriptions of fear instilled in the women by their perpetrator in childhood and then later in life by their own psychological fears.

Symbolism revealing norms and values around emotions

'The Keepers' clearly undertakes to expose both the corrupt patriarchal system represented by the church, government, law and police, and the resultant victimhood of the women. Visual symbolism throughout reflects how all of the efforts made by the women to speak and seek

justice in the system take them nowhere, and how their agency is nullified at every step. These symbols point to church, government and social norms, and are sprinkled around the story as signifiers of the power of the state in upholding patriarchal systems of religion and social strata. The symbols of power represent the women's inability to obtain justice or closure, and their overall lack of agency.

'The Staircase' – (women as absent)

Emotion-revealing aesthetics

The documentary projects an almost complete dismissal of the search for truth and justice and supports the status quo of a system that effectively silences the voices of women. All the dominant characters are male (Peterson, his purportedly heroic attorney, the private investigator and the judge), while visual representation of the deceased wife, Kathleen Peterson, is almost completely absent. Visuals of the legal proceedings largely exclude her, and her presence in her own house is primarily shown only through photographs of her and signifiers of her dead body, rather than through indication of her life before the murder. Dialogue describing her is imparted by others, in tones that reflect her death and absence, rather than her life experience. Overall, Kathleen is presented as absent and without agency.

Emotion-framing narrative

The story of the years-long journey of Michael Peterson in the various stages of a court battle to clear his name after accusations that he killed his wife is dominated by the various lead male perspectives. Women only appear from time to time, primarily in the form of Michael Peterson's two adopted daughters, Margaret and Martha who serve as supporting and comforting figures for him rather than for Kathleen. Kathleen's sisters, who do not appear often, are presented as angry antagonists to Michael as they recount their stories in terms that express ire against him rather than revealing Kathleen's life. None of the women is given any lead in the progression of the story in answer to the question of 'did he do it?', and altogether female voices are all but silent, and women are invisible and therefore without agency in addressing the core story problem.

Symbolism revealing norms and values around emotions

The documentary's perspective of a masculine and patriarchal system is evidenced in visual symbolism lodged in how most of the key characters are male authority figures, which underscores how the legal system is flawed and is effectively defended by men. A powerful example is when, despite no clear evidence, at the end, the judge suggests that Michael Peterson was innocent from the beginning. The visual framing of this statement within the context of the formal legal system symbolises the might of the judiciary and the power of the patriarchy to protect its own at the expense of the women in society. The lack of visual representation of women as empowered seems to indicate that the documentary-makers are at least in part unaware of the irony of the story being about women but without them.

Discussion: Agency and the conative domain

A plethora of conventional cues in these three films signals a discourse of the non-agency of women in a patriarchal society. Although 'Mercury 13' speaks to the women's self-possession, overall the film makes an unintentional and unfortunate comment on American society: that the ability and achievement of the women in this story are notable and worth celebrating only because they are unusual in historical context, rather than merely an

expression of the inherent character of all women. 'The Keepers' and 'The Staircase' highlight victimhood and absence, respectively, is a reflection of the absence to a concerning extent of women's voices from mainstream culture and the media. The implicit message from the three films as seen together is clear: even when women do express themselves, their social positions make self-expression difficult or dangerous. This implicitly underscores rather than dismantles prevailing damaging essentialist and determinist stereotypes of womanhood: that women are 'more emotional' and less 'goal-directed' than men, and that, if they are to be taken seriously, they must be less vocal than men.

The voicelessness evidenced in the themes of victimhood and absence in 'The Keepers' and 'The Staircase', together with the unusualness of female achievement in 'Mercury 13' reflects passivity, objectification and victimhood as characteristics of women. Nevertheless, the positive voices in 'Mercury 13' deserves more discussion as an example of a film that has a double layer of meaning that lies in both the political and the personal: a prevailing lack of political voice in a patriarchal society does not stop women being active, subjectified individual agents. Despite that, their story is set against the backdrop of political powerlessness that denied them the opportunity to contribute substantively to the early years of the space race; the women are presented as having 'agency' from a complex psycho-social perspective, as understood in terms of the intersection between emotion and mediated narrative as has been explored in literary fiction (Mar, Oatley, Djikic & Mullin 2011); the relationship of identification between audiences and media characters (Cohen 2001); the architectures of such engagement (Tan 2008); and multimedia semantics and narrative structures (Salway & Graham 2003).

Agency here is understood through the lens of 'conation' as mental process, which stands alongside the psychodynamic constructs of 'cognition' (intellectual understanding) and 'affects' (emotion). Conation here can be defined from within the field of psychology as "the ability to apply intellectual energy to a task, as needed over time, to achieve a solution or completion" (Reitan & Wolfson 2000, p. 444). From this perspective, the female docu-subjects in 'Mercury 13' are represented through discrete visual and aural significations and narrative construction as people who engage or focus behaviour and action, and exhibit intrinsic motivation, goal-orientation, volition, will, self-direction, and self-regulation in ways that countermand assumptions that women are inherently merely the passive victims of a sexist society. They are represented as both being emotionally capable and able to engage motivated, goal-oriented, self-regulated activity that derives from their intrinsic psycho-emotional make up. This renders the women in a hopeful way as whole human beings rather than mere representatives of social inequality.

Overall, again following Reitan & Wolfson (2000), 'Mercury 13' effects what neither 'The Keepers' nor 'The Staircase' do. It evidences ways in which the female docu-subjects:

- analyse problems to be faced;
- identify critical components, and apply persistent effort, including trial and error;
- reappraise their problems and possibly adopt a new strategy; and
- persistently use insight and intelligence to reach a solution.

These cannot easily be extrapolated from 'symbolic elements that refer to cultural norms and values concerning emotions' as the third dimension of Bartsch's (2008) tri-level schema. Although this dimension is useful to describe how agency is represented as a politico-social notion of what people do, it does not explain conation as an inner, subjective psychological constitution that describes how people feel and think about their lives. Symbols are not universal, but instead, are constructed in the relationship between specific audiences and the film, and therefore perhaps more accurately describe what is said in the texts of the films by the film-makers than what the women think. This suggests that an analysis of the film's

symbolism speaks to how audiences respond to the films as active participants in the communication process (Şerban 2012) by means of ‘meta-emotional responses’ whereby “emotions are accompanied by metalevel mental processes that colour the experience of emotions and influence how people express and regulate them” (Bartsch, Vorderer, Mangold & Viehoff 2008, p. 8). This relationship between audience and film rather than audience and character is more appropriately understood in terms of the scholarship of media psychology as relates to audiences than to the docu-subjects.

The conative domain for the docu-subjects can, however, adequately be described through a reflection on Bartsch’s (2008) two other dimensions, which reflects what is represented about the women’s inner life through the ‘aesthetic representation of emotions’ as the denotative dimension, and how their subjectivities are presented through the ‘narrative context of emotions’ as the connotative dimension of the communication.

The aesthetic representation of emotions

Through the visuals and soundtrack, the film often phrases women in and around planes, and in particular as flying the planes, which shows the women as feeling athletic and capable. Through archive footage rather than mere verbal description, women are also shown visually as feeling empowered, albeit nervous, as they sat in senate hearings arguing their case. In similar ways, the later generation of women is shown to feel both emotionally and physically powerful while preparing for and then being in space. Altogether, the juxtapositions between images and voice-overs demonstrate high levels of ability to analyse problems, identify components and exercise of persistent effort, re-appraisal and development of new strategies, as well as insight and intelligence. In other words, they are demonstrated as exhibiting high levels of the conative element of psychology that constitutes agency, and are therefore shown to be complex human beings.

The narrative context of emotions

The narrative can be teased out in four sections that each demonstrates differing levels of conation in the women.

In section 1, the history of the women as pilots after World War 2 contains significant numbers of scenes/sequences in which they are shown, through voice-overs superimposed on archive footage and to-camera interviews, to demonstrate high levels of problem analysis; component identification and persistent effort; re-appraisal and development of new strategies; and insight and intelligence.

Section 2 shows lower levels of conation in the lead-up to the second level of testing for their capacity to go into space. Much of this part is shown through to-camera interviews about how they felt and what their aspirations for going into space were. Although their problem analysis; component identification and persistent effort, as well as insight and intelligence, are shown to be high, re-appraisal and new strategy development are low. In particular, the women follow up after their initial tests, but do not challenge them or find new ways to approach them, instead of waiting for the project leader, Dr Lovelace, and his wife to find the solution, which they fail to do.

Section 3 shows lower levels of conation similarly during the period after the women had been denied the opportunity to continue with the testing by NASA. Problem analysis; component identification and persistent effort are high, as are insight and intelligence. However, re-appraisal and new strategy development are lower, especially through how, rather than driving their own course, the women rely on trying to garner high-level support for further testing from the wife of a senator, and from the high profile female pilot.

Section 4 describes the new generation of female astronauts after 1976, returning to a demonstration of high levels of conation in all analytic components. There are high levels of re-appraisal and new strategy development on the part of the new recruits, especially in relation to how a young female pilot had to remain quiet to her male colleagues about her desire to become an astronaut, failing which she risked being socially excluded or her aspirations being thwarted.

Conclusion

Umberto Eco (1976, p. 7) asserts that signs are “in principle [...] everything which can be used to lie”. Even if they do not actively lie, the three Netflix films under discussion creatively construct a reality for the worlds of the docu-subjects that consists of more than the events that the women underwent. Although none of the women represented in the films necessarily had essentially more or less power to influence their lives than others, the films reflect the agency of their docu-subjects in different and unequal ways. ‘Mercury 13’ shows the women as empowered and agentified, while ‘The Keepers’ and ‘The Staircase’ show the female subjects as victims and absent, respectively.

A deeper analysis reflects that the agency displayed by ‘Mercury 13’ is further not merely a political voicing, but is also a representation of the complexity of the women as whole human beings. Despite that the film is set against the background of the political circumstances that prevented the women from becoming part of the NASA forays into space, the film demonstrates agency as something that is a political notion, and is further a more personal, subjective and emotional aspect of humanity. Through evidencing the psychological construct of conation, as understood in context of the psychodynamic constructs of ‘cognition’ (intellectual understanding) and ‘affect’ (emotion), the grammar of the film, in particular the aesthetic representation and narrative context, reflects the women as exhibiting “the ability to apply intellectual energy to a task, as needed over time, to achieve a solution or completion” (Reitan & Wolfson 2000, p. 444).

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