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Man On Wire - DVD

Get high on documentary suspense

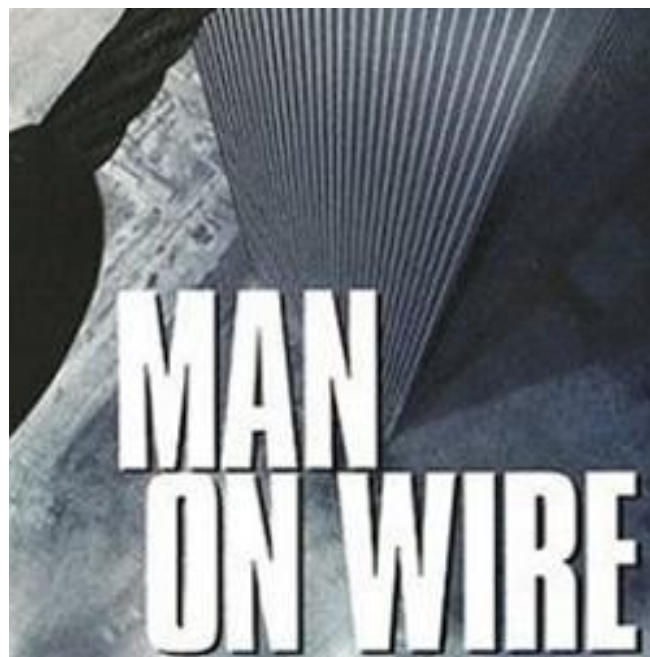
by Neil Queen published on 2 January 2009

If ever there was a film that toyed with the boundaries between documentary and feature films, James Marsh's intensely striking *Man On Wire* is it. Based on the astounding 1974 exploits of wire-walker Philippe Petit, it recounts his beyond-daring attempt to walk between the two towers of the World Trade Center - then the highest building in the world at over 1000 feet - with a pacing and dynamism that many a blockbuster would be proud of.

This was a story that screamed out to be filmed. From his eureka moment in his homeland in France when the construction of the WTC was announced, it tracks Petit's single-minded determination to realise arguably one of the craziest ambitions anybody has ever had. Assembling a team of fellow conspirators, driven by a mixture of friendship and devilment, they scheme and plot a way to make the extraordinarily dangerous feat happen.

Using a sleek mixture of archive footage, reconstructions and interviews, the story plays out like a heist movie - they scheme, go undercover, hook up with inside men and go on recce missions for weeks before the event - it literally is planned like a bank job. There's even an undercurrent of ye olde crime gone wrong film genre, as there is division and mistrust between Petit's Gallic pals and the American counterparts enlisted to help make it happen, which adds a further frisson of danger to an already fraught affair.

So it has all the makings of a dramatised feature, yet the fact that it's a documentary makes it all the stronger a story. If this was turned into a feature, it'd diminish the spectacle - and though the archive footage of the actual moment when Petit attempted the walk is scant, actually watching him risking death on the wire makes for a gobsmacking experience, a stomach-tweaking



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moment that no dramatisation could truly capture.

VERDICT

One of the key reasons why this works so well is that it dispenses with much of the filler that characterises documentary making. Marsh rejects the option for the film to be an omnipresent, all-wise take on things and instead concentrates solely on the incidents that build up to "the coup". It wastes no time on peripheral background that would have clogged up a lesser docu, nor is there any desire to discover what was behind the events or contextualise it - the stunt stands on its own. This for me gives it its distinct purity, resulting in an incredible pacing and stripping it down to a story that feels like a heist movie in its own right.

It helps too that Petit himself is an engaging livewire, whose manic vibrancy draws you into his squiffy world, and embellishes and recounts the story with boundless enthusiasm.

Fresh, exciting, tense and awe-inspiring, Man On Wire is a remarkable film that reaches far beyond its remit as a humble documentary.

Starring: Philippe Petit

Directed by: James Marsh

Extras: Short film, commentary

At a glance

What is it?

Documentary

Good

Great, fast-paced storytelling

Bad

Not too much - maybe some more footage of the stunt itself might have been nice

Verdict

Fresh, exciting, tense and awe-inspiring, Man On Wire is a remarkable film that reaches far beyond its remit as a humble documentary

Price £19.99

Our score

8/10

Your score

?/10