

Mythology, Meaning, and Design // Popular Myth/Phase 1

Amy Martin // Fall 2009

BRIEF SYNOPSIS

Man on Wire is a documentary film by James Marsh about Philippe Petit's high wire walk between the Twin Towers of NYC's World Trade Center on August 7, 1974. The film weaves three narrative approaches to the same story. One is through a tightly filmed re-enactment of the events on August 7, 1974 along with some supporting re-enacted events. The second is via interviews with Philippe and his team—Jean François Heckel, Jean-Louis Blondeau, Annie Allix, David Forman, Alan Welner, Mark Lewis, Barry Greenhouse, Jim Moore and Guy F. Tozzoli—about that day and about Philippe's stunts until that point. The third is through actual photos and recordings taken on and surrounding the event.

On the morning of August 7, 1974, the team is en route to the World Trade Center with fake ID cards and a lot of heavy equipment. Two teams head to the separate towers. The top floor is guarded in both towers so the teams have to wait for hours in incredibly uncomfortable positions. After one guard leaves and the other falls asleep, the teams ascend in night time to the roof to set up the rigging. A few more snags occur when the arrow used to shoot a fishing line between the towers (which will eventually be used to thread the cable) is lost. Also, a little too much cable is sent over the edge of one tower and Jean Louis (on the other tower) must spend hours pulling the slack of the gigantic cable up and out of the void. After the sun rises, Philippe ascends the rope and makes 8 memorable passes between the two towers including laying down, kneeling and saluting and infuriating the cops by walking to one side almost within reach of the police and then turning around and heading back towards the middle.

When Philippe leaves the high wire, he is arrested, sent to a psychiatric ward for questioning and eventually released. He is charged with trespassing and disorderly conduct but the charges were dropped because he agreed to perform publicity stunts for the city of New York.

The film also includes extensive footage, re-enactments and interviews about the events surrounding the WTC high wire walk as well as Philippe's other high wire walks on Notre Dame and the Sydney Harbour Bridge.

NARRATIVE THEMES

David vs. Goliath	Obsession
Beauty	Love story
Charming trickster	Impossible odds/pursuit
Cheating death	Fantastic/aspirational outcomes
Training montage	Rebellion
Man vs. Machine/Technology	Youth
Nature vs. City	Magic
The Heist	Superhero



Trickster/Pied Piper



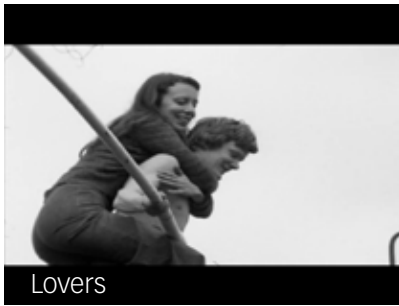
Accomplice



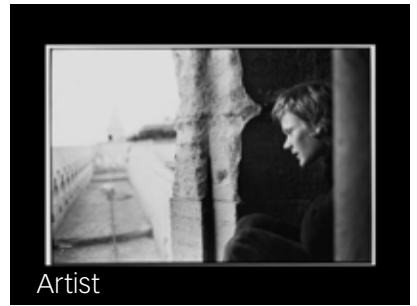
Unconditional Supporter



Contrarian



Lovers



Artist



Authority



Monster



Seductress

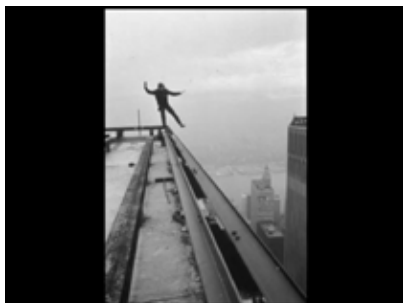


Superman

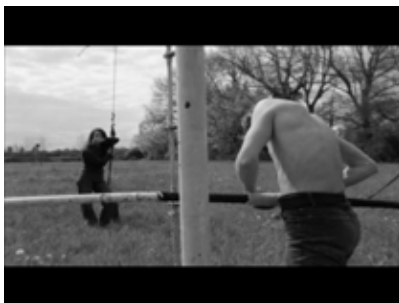


Pied Piper

SITUATION ARCHETYPES



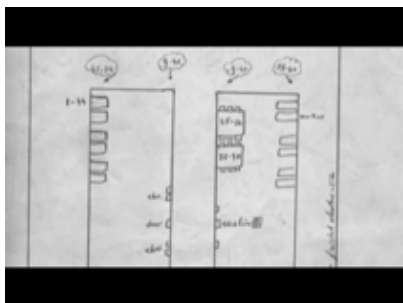
Art against utility



Boy meets girl



Training montage



Planning montage



Adult vs. Child



Human body as art



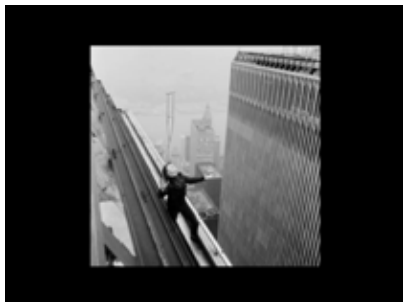
Man in the sky



Magic, illusion



Fantastic, aspirational

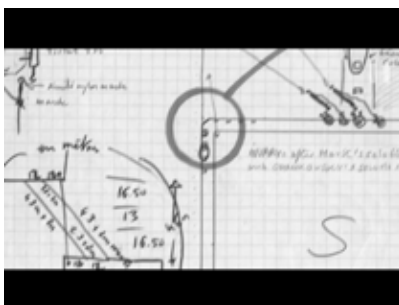


Against all odds

SYMBOL ARCHETYPES



Strength



Engineering



Math



Illusion/Mystery



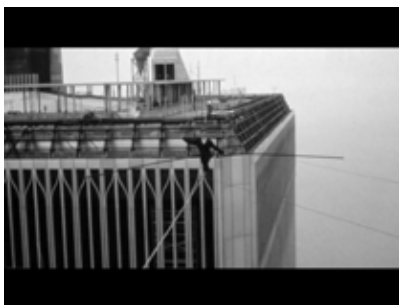
Authority



Modernity



Forces of Nature



Balance



Edges

BINARY OPPOSITIONS

Sky/Ground
Man/Woman
Oppression/Freedom
Legal/Illegal
Art/Utility
Beautiful/Ugly
Organic/Inorganic
Small/Large
Life/Death
BW/Color
US/Europe
Age/Youth
Past/Present
Short/Tall
Clear/Blurry
Secure/Insecure
Fear/Bravery
Fame/Anonymity
Power/Weakness
Hope/Hopelessness
Hidden/Exposed

MYTHEMES

Interdiction: *Hero is warned.*
Mediation: *Hero discovers lack.*
Counteraction: *Hero chooses positive action.*
Departure: *Hero leaves on mission.*
Testing: *Hero is challenged to prove heroic qualities.*
Reaction: *Hero responds to test.*
Acquisition: *Hero gains magical item.*
Guidance: *Hero reaches destination.*
Struggle: *Hero and villain do battle.*
Victory: *Villain is defeated.*
Resolution: *Initial misfortune or lack is resolved.*
Return: *Hero sets out for home.*
Pursuit: *Hero is chased.*
Rescue: *Pursuit ends.*
Recognition: *Hero is recognized.*
Transfiguration: *Hero is given a new appearance.*

PRIMARY MYTHS

Man on Wire contains a couple of different core, related myths. First, it touches the story of David and Goliath; the underdog winning against all odds; a triumph of beauty despite 2,745 feet of steel and concrete (the height of both buildings combined). To see a man where he should not be seemingly floating in the air at a fantastic height is as unrealistic as felling a giant warrior with a tiny rock. And yet, it happened. To get to that point Petit and his team had to haul of 450+ pounds of equipment past numerous guards and checkpoints, then work all night and into the morning setting up heavy and complicated rigging in two buildings 140 feet apart. All impossible and yet all true. Petit is David. Goliath is the building, the security, wind, the height, even gravity itself. All these things must become Petit's putty for him to prevail.

It is a story that holds weight within society because we want to believe in the impossible. We want to believe we can still be surprised. This is how wonder is created and wonder is a feeling that is increasingly difficult to experience as one grows up and begins to understand the world. People also want to feel as they can accomplish anything no matter what is against them. It is comforting to see others prevail in even grander circumstances against even larger odds. A film such as this is fantastic and aspirational, soothing our need to feel powerful throughout a largely powerless existence.

This film also has a very strong feeling of a heist movie. The first scene is of the re-enactment where the team is loading the van with equipment. Throughout the movie we see elements of the heist. Fake IDs are used to grant the team access to the building. Lies are told to the freight elevator to get them higher up in the building. Both teams in both towers have to wait in uncomfortable positions for hours while security patrols the floor. Petit even sets a booby trap so they'll know when a guard is approaching. It has all the elements of a crime because they were committing a crime. And while this was a crime of art and a crime of beauty, for some of the team members it had real consequences. Jean François Heckel, for example, was expelled from the United States.

It also follows the "one last big job" element common to heist films. We see earlier art crimes Petit and his crew have committed when we see him tight rope walking across Notre Dame and the Harbour Bridge. It is also mentioned that this will be their last job. This is the pinnacle of Petit & his team's work.

The basic plot of a heist film is preparation, the heist itself and the aftermath or unravelling of the plot. *Man on Wire* also follows this pattern. To prepare for the crime, Petit himself goes into the building on scouting missions several times. He injures his foot on one trip and then later discovers that having crutches opens doors. Nobody asks him for ID so he starts using the crutches even after his foot heals. Once he even takes two friends as photographers and pretends to conduct interviews for the French magazine *Metropolis*. The authorities never thought to ask for credentials. On top of all the research trips, the film also shows pages and pages of diagrams, brainstorming ideas, sketches of the building, engineering sketches, hiding places and several models. It even has a present day Philippe in front of a model showing how the cabling was going to work.

The heist itself is almost entirely shown in re-enactment, at least until they get to the roof and the sun comes up, then we see a whole slew of photographs from that day from the roof as well as from the ground. We see both teams hiding from security, setting sentries and booby traps, then finally completing the rigging as the sun rose. This section ends with a montage of photographs of Petit on the wire. It is breathtaking.

Betrayal is a common theme in heist films and we see it here as well. During the aftermath Philippe is arrested, questioned in a psychiatric ward and then eventually released only to betray his closest friend, Jean-Louis, and his girlfriend, Annie. Instead of going to them and sharing the limelight, he spends his first free moments having sex with a stranger. It seems clear that Petit is affected by his own betrayal in that he felt guilt at the time but it is also clear that he simply sees it as what was to happen. Annie seemed to accept this as well but in the documentary it seems clear that Jean-Louis still feels the sting of betrayal. He is unable to control tears when discussing the events.

Heist movies where the criminals are the protagonists are becoming common in popular movies (the *Ocean's* franchise comes to mind). The thieves are handsome, charming, and get away with the impossible, just as Petit charmed his team into helping him, charmed his way into the towers and got away with the impossible. They are all crafty individuals who conquer giants. This is a story that is told over and over again because people need to feel hope, even if they are up against all odds.

It also worth noting that this movie came out in 2008. The Twin Towers that are a central character in this narrative were destroyed in 2001. There is no mention at all of the terrorist attacks in this film. It is hard to watch Petit make sketches of the towers' interiors, deceive the guards and NOT think about 9/11. At the same time, the juxtaposition of Petit's harmless act of beauty versus the terrorists' harmful act of violence only works to further define the still, surreal quality of Petit's performance. It is the film's omission of the events of 9/11 that show the director's belief that Petit's feat is important enough to stand on its own, Petit's accomplishment is a strong and necessary myth to exist alone.