# The Eagle Huntress: Crash Course Film Criticism #12

Crash Course: Film Criticism
https://youtube.com/watch?v=if36bqHypqk
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/if36bqHypqk

Documentaries come in all shapes and sizes, from the political urgency of Michael Moore's *Farenheight 9/11* (2004), to Werner Herzog's meditative *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (2010). Some are funny, like Errol Morris's 1997 film *Fast, Cheap, and Out of Control,* and others are earnest and striking, like *13th (2016),* Ava Duvernay's examination of mass incarceration. The best ones use many of th cinematic and storytelling techniques as fiction films to explore their characters and themes, and take audiences on an emotional journey. In Otto Bell's 2015 film, *The Eagle Huntress*, fits that bill. It tells a nonfiction story using traditional cinematic techniques and ultra modern equipment, all without sacrificing the heart of the tale.

[Intro Music]

Director, Otto Bell, found his inspiration in a few still images published by the BBC in 2014. They showed a young Kazakh girl in traditional dress with an enormous eagle hoisted on her arm or launching into flight. Within the year, Bell had packed some gear, enlisted a few crew member, and travelled to one of the most remote locations in the world, deep in the heart of Mongolia. And, what he found there was an extraordinary character and an underdog story.

Now, during CrashCourse: Film History in production, we talked a lot about film as an illusion of reality. Film makers use the tool of cinema, things like shots, cuts, sound, and narrative structure, to trick us into believing what we're seeing. The whole point is to make an audience feel something, whether it's fear, joy, or heartbreak. A director wants us to experience the story with the character.

Documentaries are no different. They're illusions of reality, too. I mean, sure, the characters they depict are by and large real people and the stories actually happen, but documentaries use the same basic techniques as fiction films. And, the best ones use those cinematic tricks in good faith. They might collapse time or choose out-of-sequence reaction shots, but only in ways that remain true to the spirit, theme, or subject of the story.

In *The Eagle Huntress*, those film techniques are beautifully harnessed to tell the story of Aishol-pan Nurgaiv, a 13-year-old Kazakh girl living in Mongolia who dreams of becoming an eagle huntress. Eagle hunters have both a practical and cultural significance to Aishol-pan's nomadic people. Eagles are used to hunt game for fur and meat, but they're also used to compete in festivals and competitions, where eagle hunter's test their horseback hunting and eagle-calling skills.

The film opens with sweeping aerial shots of the mountains and plains of Mongolia. These could just as easily be the opening shots of a *Lord of the Rings* movie, they're so epic. And, in the first scene, we see an older man riding a horse to a far off mountain top. He's there to release his eagle back into the wild after seven years as his hunting companion, as per tradition. We sense this man's deep connection to the bird, as he offers it a final meal and then rides off, never to see it again.

From there, we meet our protagonist, Aishol-pan, who lives with her parents and siblings in a yurt-like tent. We learn that she's always idolized her father and grandfather, who are both prize-winning eagle hunters. She wants to follow in their eagle hunting footsteps, something relatively few women are doing. And, just like that we're on her side. The film has given us a compelling protagonist with a clear goal and obstacles. We're pulling for her, and her father is pulling for her, too. As he trains her in the techniques of eagle hunting, he tells us, "I don't want to let her down."

The film then introduces us to a group of older, conservative, male eagle hunters. None of them believe a girl should be allowed to learn how to eagle hunt, it's a man's job. But, they've never met Aishol-pan. She's tenacious, hardworking, and, we're told, naturally gifted. She's also a 13-year-old girl who takes care of her brother and sister at her boarding school, paints her nails, and giggles with her friends.

In one of the film's most thrilling sequences, we see Aishol-pan and her father tracking an eagle to its nest, high up a rocky cliff. There they discover two eaglets. Her father ties a rope around her waist, and she clamours down the cliff face to capture her very own eagle. From there, the training ramps up until it's time for Aishol-pan to compete in her first eagle festival, which takes place in Olgii, Mongolia. She's up against men three, four, or even five times her age, with years of experience and competition titles. And, still, in event after event, Aishol-pan holds her own. Her eagle even sets a speed record, flying from high atop a hill to her arm in less than five seconds. Spoiler alert, against all odds, she wins first place in the festival, raising her trophy overhead in triumph, surrounded by a cheering crowd. It's a powerful moment. But, it's not enough for the chorus of elder eagle hunters. They're dismissive and some even change course and claim that her youth and gender gave her an edge.

Lastly, the documentary follows Aishol-pan and her father as they pack up and ride off into the snowy wilderness hunting for a fox. They work together, father and daughter, for days, and after several missteps and some seriously deep snow, Aishol-pan and her eagle finally spot, chase, and bring down a wild fox. In the film's final moments, her father straps the fox to her saddle and they ride off for home, not just as father and daughter, but as a pair of true eagle hunters.

*The Eagle Huntress* is a simple movie, and that's part of its power. The film distills its theme beautifully and presents such a winning and offhandedly-heroic protagonist, that it feels easy. But, it wasn't, like at all. We don't judge the quality of a film based on how hard it was to make, but director Otto Bell and his skeleton crew deserves special mention for capturing the images and sounds that bring this story to life. First, they travelled to a bitterly cold, remote region of Mongolia, and relied on very modern technology to tell the story about a long-standing tradition. Relatively light-weight digital cameras allowed them to travel and work in these far flung locations. Drones allowed the film makers to create tracking shots, crane shots, and those glorious opening aerials without the expensive dolly tracks, helicopters, and actual cranes.

Mini GoPro cameras strapped to Aishol-pan gave us a first-hand view of her climb down to the eagle's nest, and the first interaction she has with her eagle. Those same cameras, attached to the eagles themselves, provided us a glimpse of their point of view as they soared through the sky.

Second, they integrated themselves into the lives of Aishol-pan, her family, her friends, and the older eagle hunters. Aishol-pan was understandably shy at first. It took time and patience to get her to open up and speak conversationally in front of the cameras. And third, they did it all while trying to remain respectful of her culture.

Documentaries aim to depict real people in real situations, but they're still illusions of that reality. So these films bear a different kind of ethical burden then fiction films, and no one in *The Eagle Huntress* comes off mocked by the film or filmmakers, not even the old men who look down on Aishol-pan. They're presented as wrong-headed and misguided, for sure, but it's also clear that they're grappling with a changing world.

This brings us to one way to look at this kind of film: as an ethnographic study of a long-standing culture within the modern age. The roots of this documentary film tradition trace all the way

back to one of the first feature documentary films, Robert. J. Flaherty's *Nanook of the North*, made in 1922. Nanook took audiences deep into the frigid Canadian Artic to follow the struggles of an Inuk man and his family. That film, however, has been roundly criticized for distorting or even fabricating events to make the Inuk culture seem more exotic and out of step with the current, temporary world. In real life, the main character wasn't named Nanook, didn't have a wife, and hunted with rifles, not spears as the film shows.

By all accounts, *The Eagle Huntress* is a more culturally respectful and honest film. Rather than exoticize  Aishol-pan, the filmmakers seem more interested in presenting her real life. By doing that, it actually makes this remote culture feel familiar. While we do see her in traditional dress and riding horseback, we see her wearing denim jeans and modern coats. Her family rides motorbikes and trucks, as well as horses. And, one shot even shows us a portable solar panel that the family packs up with them when they travel.

The juxtaposition of ancient tradition and modern life is driven home when Aishol-pan and her father travel to Olgii, the largest town for a hundred miles. A series of shots show them riding horses across vast empty landscapes, eagles perched on their arms, dressed in traditional furs. Then, we see them riding into town along roads next to cars and past stores. It's as if they've ridden out of the past right into the present. Which, by some interpretation, is how Aishol-pan functions within her culture. She's taking on the traditional practice of eagle hunting, and doing it as a contemporary woman.

Now, *The Eagle Huntress* has been criticized for distorting Kahzak and Mongolian culture. So, it's not a perfect ethnographic study. Standford historian, Adrienne Mayor, suggests that this documentary may have focused too much on making Aishol-pan's story seem unique and filled with adversity. Mayor points out that there were many female eagle hunters throughout history, and that there are several active ones today. Women like Makpal Abdrazakova, who's story has been reported on since 2011.

And, even though the head-shaking elders add to the drama and conflict of the film, Mayor and others say that Mongolia isn't a misogynistic culture, even though western audiences and filmmakers might assume that of nomadic societies or other countries. Aishol-pan's parents' constant support of her and her passion for eagle hunting is genuine, but may not be as unusual as the documentary implies. Other eagle hunters and people of Mongolian communities have said that women were never discouraged from this tradition, and there's evidence that women have consistently had important roles and opportunities in these societies. So, this could be the case where the director had a story in mind, because of what he filmed and his assumptions rather than what he researched. And, it led to a slightly skewed portrait of the truth.

Still, *The Eagle Huntress* works as a traditional hero's journey, and as an examination of a long-lived society in an increasingly modern world. Sometimes, the simplest stories pack the biggest punch. It's a beautifully made documentary about a young girl who embraces her culture, works to master an old art, overcomes her obstacles, and, through hard work and fearlessness, claims her place in the world.

And, next time, we'll make our way to Miami for a look at the intimate, heartrending, coming of age story and best picture Oscar winner, *Moonlight.*

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This episode of CrashCourse was filmed in the Dr. Cheryl C. Kinney Studio with the help of these nice people, and our amazing graphics team is ThoughCafe.

[Outro Music]