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Degrees of *becoming* on recent Netflix docu-shows: Representations of women in *Unbelievable* and *Mercury 13* vs. *The Keepers* and *The Staircase*

ABSTRACT

Although billed as a 'crime TV drama', the Netflix series Unbelievable (2019) is more of a docu-drama. The correspondence between fact and fiction creates a powerful empathic relationship with audiences, the nature of which is comprehensible through how this film, alongside more traditional format documentaries on the online platform, engages 'the real' through representing bodies and actions that manifest cinematically in 'the aesthetics of the frame'. What can be described as the occurrence of these manifestations is found both in a present- and past-oriented

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description of material facts, whether actual or imagined, and a future-oriented sense of becoming that derives from a relationship that docu-subjects and characters have with potentiality in the progression of the story. Some films describe what people do or have done, while others write docu-subjects and characters as people who have a view to the future. This takes the form of both an objective sense of agency qua freedom and autonomy and a subjective sense of psychodynamic potential formed by representations of their conative orientations towards a future. The sense of possibility that emerges reflects a more nuanced and subjectivized sense of becoming than explained by Ilona Hongisto as constituted by the generation of 'imagination', 'fabulation' and 'affection'.

INTRODUCTION: DOCU-FICTION

Dialogues in the scholarship of fact-based film that took place in the 1990s challenged assumptions that documentaries are substantively different to fiction films. Nichols' (1991: 12) definition of documentary as a filmed version of events that manifests in 'the use of conventional means to refer to, represent, or make claims about historical reality' was disputed by Eitzen (1995: 84) on the grounds that this description does not sufficiently account for how fiction makes references, representations or assertions about historical fact. Plantinga (1989: 25–40) argued that both proffer a world but that only non-fiction makes assertions about that world, which Eitzen equally problematized, countering that both fiction and documentary express fact-values about the 'real' world through actualized places and people. Subsequently, it has become relatively widely acknowledged that 'documentary' is not defined exclusively by faithfulness to facts or by a course of events that are taking place or have played out in the world, and that documentaries are not inherently substantively or necessarily structurally different to fiction.

Nevertheless, such assumptions persist in the media industries, in how broadcasters, distributors and film festivals tend to separate genres in commissioning, production systems and marketing, pigeonholing documentary alongside actuality. The business models of online distribution platforms challenge this, perhaps in part because they can no longer schedule factual and fiction genres in different time slots as does broadcast television, leading them to list side-by-side alongside fiction both 'pure' documentaries that recount facts in a reportage style and 'based on real events' stories. The relatively new cross-over 'true crime fiction' genre now serves as a counterpoint to 'based-on-fact documentaries' in a way that reveals interesting insights into how the notion of agency is reflected in fact-based media.

A recent example is the Netflix series *Unbelievable* (2019), which, although listed under the heading 'crime TV drama' (and therefore billed as fiction), derives from a piece of narrative journalism published in 2015 in the non-profit newsroom ProPublica that 'won a Pulitzer Prize for explanatory reporting' (Hale 2019: n.pag.). Like the article, the series recounts 'the real-life story of an eighteen-year-old Washington woman named Marie (played by Kaitlyn Dever), who was bound and gagged in her Lynwood apartment by a perpetrator, then raped as he took photographs of her' (Minutaglio 2019: n.pag.). Shockingly, '[w]hen she reported the vicious attack to police however, the officers – with very little regard for the toll of recounting trauma – charged her with filing a false report' (2019: n.pag.).

The facts are fictionalized largely through how the focus is not on Marie Adler, but on Grace Rasmussen (Toni Collette) and Karen Duvall (Merritt Wever), two Colorado detectives who ‘investigated a string of sexual assaults with the exact same modus operandi and linked them back to Marie’s case, proof she’d been telling the truth all along’ (Minutaglio 2019: n.pag.). Their pursuit for justice becomes a complex whodunit detective drama that ‘hews fairly closely to the ProPublica/Marshall Project story, with some dramatizations based on details shared in the article’ (Gajanan 2019: n.pag.). This results in a departure from imaginary story-telling and from the woefully spare creative licence used by many ‘pure’ documentaries to poor effect in an attempt to render re-enactments faithfully realistic. It also results in a divergence from many other ‘based on real events’ docu-shows that ham-handedly rely on rather on-the-nose film grammar as a stand-in for documentary evidence in attempts to render characters entertaining. The merger of fact and fiction begs questions about how significations work in such a cross-over genre.

ANALYTIC TOOLS FOR THE INVISIBLE

How is the series not a mere mediated statement of rape and police maltreatment? How does it instead deliver a nuanced fiction-film-making logic and style to both present a rendition of the facts recounted in the ProPublica article *and* employ optimal creative licence in ‘a superb example of what show-don’t-tell storytelling looks like’ (Chaney 2019: n.pag.)? An indication as to how the film (and by implication others like it) effects engagement lies, perhaps paradoxically, in theories usually applied exclusively to fact-based rather than fiction films, particularly in Hongisto’s view of documentaries as forms of media that ‘capture and express individual bodies and actual forms in their becoming’ (2015: 12). The embodied actions of the female characters in *Unbelievable* actualize this *becoming* for the characters, which is something that ‘not only operate[s] on a plane of signification, but also partake[s] in the material processes that co-compose the real’. Such ‘real’ is not merely constituted by renditions of facts, as is often the case in documentaries that attempt fidelity and accuracy. It is constituted by how bodies and forms-of-being are represented so as to suggest what *could be* found in the world as a fully experienced ‘reality’ that is ‘dynamic in its own right’ (2015: 12).

The *could* proposition of this dynamism becomes apparent in how the characters are rendered cinematically differently to subjects in other documentaries that merely deliver ‘dull substance’ (Hongisto 2015: 12). More particularly, how *Unbelievable* represents the ‘real’ for its characters as a phenomenologically embodied representation hinges on how it constructs ‘documentary experience conditioned on potential’ (2015: 21), in particular how it ‘attun[es] the viewer to political change on the level of becoming’ (2015: 21) by ‘impos[ing] justice on a world that is anything but fair’ (Gilbert 2019: n.pag.). Although it is reasonably obvious to discerning viewers and critics how *Unbelievable* presents a (political) world in which women are regularly disbelieved and trapped by the spectre of rape, the more particulate communication mechanisms by which the hope for a different world is shown through a series of statements of embodied reality is not. This is particularly because ‘potential’ and ‘becoming’ are abstract ideas that are not empirically identifiable in filmic texts in the same way as the obvious representations of gender disparity and discrimination in the story world. Instead, how these ideas manifest is primarily visible through an analysis of the significations that present *becoming* as ‘propositions

of how the world we live in could be arranged differently' (Hongisto 2015: 137).

These propositions are revealed in the signs used to generate a sense of 'agency in capturing the world in its becoming and expressing it as a sensation of the real's continuous unfolding' (Hongisto 2015: 135). This sense of filmic agency and the agency ascribed to the docu-subjects/characters as the story unfolds dialogically mirror one another in that the agency ascribed to docu-subjects/characters serves as a metric of the extent to which a film as a whole is a story that represents the people in it as actualized bodies and forms in their *becoming*. This logic derives from a starting point in Massumi's (2011: 44–45, 106–07) expression of 'momentum', qua how states change without a clearly identifiable corresponding representation. Viewers form mental impressions in a cumulative fashion from the grammar and narrative of the film. These impressions in turn build an increasing sense of the agency of docu-subjects or characters as people who, as embodied beings who live in their *becoming* in the 'real', do (or do not) enjoy 'an autonomous and free move in a social practice' (Claassen 2017: 1281), whether or not they are able in explicit terms to effect change in social or political circumstances within the bounds of the film. This agency in turn serves as a metric of the extent to which the film constructs a message of the possibility of a different future: films whose docu-subjects or characters have a high level of personal agency express for them a high level of *becoming* and are therefore 'films of *becoming*', while those that show docu-subjects/characters as bound and dependent do not, and are not.

The 'feeling of agency' is built upon emotional cues that are often difficult to divine in the most obvious of semiotic terms, but are visible through a tool of analysis that accounts for significations of emotion as they manifest in particulate forms in the film, rather, as with many critical analytic approaches, that merely describe the overall aura of the product.

One such tool is the tri-level schema for analysis suggested by Bartsch (2008), which identifies three layers of signification that express filmic meta-emotion:

- the aesthetic representation of emotions qua film grammar, styles and forms;
- the narrative context of emotions qua narrative structure and
- symbolic elements that refer to cultural norms and values concerning emotions qua reflection of the social environment in which the film is produced and that it represents.

Hongisto asserts compellingly that powerful documentaries 'bear witness to the respective political situations in ways that work on the viewer affectively' (2015: 21). This 'affect' is reflected in the three layers of signification to generate a sense of the threefold *becoming* of 'imagination', 'fabulation' and 'affection' as Hongisto (2015: 20–21) explains it, thereby engendering an overall sense from the film that a different world is possible. As is implicit in the notion of 'possibility' as 'a state of being that has not yet happened', this sense is future-oriented and lies, at least partly, in the three constituent elements of Hongisto's framing for *becoming*. Imagination is not dependent on remembering that consists of 'reconstituting lives long gone' (present-orientation). Instead, it is about imagining 'possible lives' as they could be (future-orientation), in a process that 'takes shape as the documentaries divert emphasis from the indexical qualities of their documents to the incipient relations in them'.

Although fabulation includes observation of 'situations in which the actions of the filmed subjects have been deemed inappropriate or abnormal by their respective communities' (present-orientation), it also includes observation of 'subjects in ways that overcome these categories', thereby resulting in 'visions of alternative ways of being in this world' (future-orientation). Affection means not merely 'foregrounding the discursive dimension of political commitment' as a statement of circumstances as they are (present-orientation), but also 'captur[ing] the transformative potential in the events they discuss and pass it on to the viewer' with a view to the future. This construction of *becoming* allows for representations of docu-subjects and people as being able to escape oppressive systems.

NOT ALL DOCUMENTARIES 'DO' *BECOMING*

As Hongisto suggests, not all documentaries 'do' *becoming*. Many in popular entertainment spaces like Netflix do not notably 'explore the limits of the world in ways that affirm the potential in becoming and inaugurate the first steps towards realities to come' (Hongisto 2015: 137). Some evidence agency only to a minor and inconsequential extent, while others fail spectacularly to represent the capacity of docu-subjects/characters to face political or social circumstances and overcome victimhood. In framing docu-subjects/characters as non-agentified people with low levels of freedom and autonomy they thereby fail to construct 'documentary experience conditioned on potential' or to 'attune the viewer to political change on the level of becoming' (2015: 21).

The Keepers (2017) describes the unsolved murder in 1969 of Sister Cathy Cesnik, a Catholic nun and high-school teacher who may have been killed by a sexual predator, and which primarily writes women as passive, helpless, trapped, objectified and reliant victims, rather than free and autonomous agents. *The Staircase* (2004, 2013, 2018) follows the trial of author Michael Peterson after accusations that he murdered his wife Kathleen, and which writes women as largely deictically absent and therefore de-agentified, without the prospect of either freedom or autonomy. Neither reflects the possibility for a new world beyond women's subjugation to patriarchal systems.

Aesthetic representation of emotions

In *The Keepers*, women are aesthetically represented primarily as victims, trapped by the power of the system. They are often framed through close-up visuals that are dull and grey, and that are accompanied by an ominous soundtrack. When challenging political power as represented by the office of the State Attorney and the FBI, the framing and composition calls attention to a sense of helplessness and despair, which is highlighted by how most female interviewees recount their feelings through sit-down interviews in enclosed spaces that signal entrapment and subjugation, rather than demonstrating action and activity in scenes showing their freedom and autonomy.

Women in *The Staircase* are primarily shown aesthetically *in absentia* from a deictic perspective. Although the film is nominally about the death of Kathleen Peterson, she is virtually absent on screen. The camera follows the years-long journey of her husband, Michael, as he tries to defend prosecution for her murder. Most interviews are of men – in the form of Peterson, his attorney, a private investigator and the judge – while Kathleen is persistently missing from a visual perspective. She is not physically represented at all in

the legal proceedings, and is only shown in her house through photographs and through lifeless indicators of her dead body such as chalk outlines. Verbal descriptions primarily describe her death, not her life, and are recounted by others against the backdrop of Michael Petersen's.

Narrative context of emotions

In *The Keepers*, the victimhood of women, and therefore their lack of freedom and autonomy, comes across in how the docu-subject victims of rape and abuse, and those associated with them in murder and rape cases, are unable to obtain justice. The archdiocese and state institutions persist in confounding their search for truth as adults, trapping Jean Wehner (Jane Doe) and others in similar circumstances in a decades-long struggle in pursuit of legal action against Joseph Maskell. Jean is ultimately unsuccessful and, along with other women in similar circumstances, is silenced in the narrative.

The Staircase represents women as persistently absent through a storyline dominated by male perspectives. Women do not drive the main documentary question of 'did he do it?', which is further never answered, leaving no closure for the deceased Kathleen who, along with other women in the story, is denied both freedom and autonomy. Instead, the alleged murderer, Michael Peterson, occupies most of the storyline, while women's narratives appear infrequently. Peterson's adopted daughters, Margaret and Martha, primarily only serve as comfort for Peterson while providing sparse support for Kathleen. Kathleen's sisters are similarly substantially absent as mere voices of antagonism to Petersen instead of as providers of information about Kathleen.

Symbolic elements that refer to cultural norms and values concerning emotions

Although *The Keepers* is obviously intended to expose patriarchal power dynamics that work at the expense of women, it leaves them as helpless victims. The efforts of women to obtain justice are thwarted at every turn, as is evidenced in symbolic representations of the power of the church, state and society through images and sounds that speak to the failure of vulnerable women to obtain justice or closure, or to attain freedom and autonomy.

The Staircase is told from the authoritative perspective of men as most of the key characters, while women are largely absent, and without substantial symbolic representation of their freedom and autonomy within the flawed legal system. At the end, the judge is shown at the bench in his position of authority in court suggesting that Michael Peterson has always been innocent from the beginning. This symbolizes the dismissal of truth and justice in the judicial space, which, although touted as the foundation of freedom and autonomy, represents the status quo that silences women and undermines their agency.

Neither *The Staircase* nor *The Keepers* substantively foreground the freedom and autonomy of their female docu-subjects. Both films represent past events or present opinions in visual signifiers, narrative tools and symbolism that are under-curated and that thereby deny the docu-subjects presence or potentiality and refuse the possibility of women to transcend their circumstances or reach different conclusions. In *The Keepers* women are victims who cannot escape patriarchy, while women in *The Staircase* are predominantly absent. In both films women have no freedom or autonomy, and thereby are

without agency to influence their lives, which similarly by implication denies the *becoming* of women more generally through a failure in activation of imagination, fabulation and affection.

SOME DOCUMENTARIES ‘DO’ BECOMING

Other films on Netflix present a strong sense of future-oriented agency in imbuing docu-subjects with an abundance of freedom and autonomy despite unfortunate circumstances. This agency is also comprehensible in terms of Bartsch’s analytic paradigm. *Mercury 13* (2018) tells of female pilots in the 1960s tested to be astronauts but not sent into space due to sexist political bias. Here, women are represented as heroines through how, despite not having won the fight to go into space, they nevertheless succeeded as pilots and paved the way for future generations of female astronauts. Similarly, *Unbelievable* also represents the female characters as empowered and agential in being heard and believed by the right people despite obstacles, and taking control in the face of a ruthless rapist, thereby moving towards success and self-realization on their own terms.

Aesthetic representation of emotions

In *Mercury 13* women are aesthetically represented as strong, assertive, determined and resourceful heroines. Audio-visual signifiers of freedom and autonomy take the form of women standing alongside planes in poses that reflect ability, authority and pride, and flying planes across a clear blue sky in vignettes of action. Such visuals are often underscored by commentary from the docu-subjects in their own voices that assert forceful opinions about goals, such as ‘I didn’t tell people I was going to be an astronaut, I just did it’, and ‘[s]omeone has to start the fight to change opinion, someone has to lead the way’. This aesthetic, which reflects women’s persistent agency, runs all the way from the film’s opening with a voice-over that sets the scene for the theme of heroism: ‘Most harmful behaviour is based in fear, protecting one’s perceived position in society, protecting one’s territory or physical wellbeing, but progress is inevitable’.

In *Unbelievable*, women are similarly characterized as free and autonomous. Detectives Rasmussen and Duvall are visually represented as powerful, genuine, authentic and central leads who take up much screen-time while tracking and arresting the rapist, while all male characters are given background, secondary roles and only appear sparingly. The detectives are shown to be ‘always on the go’, pro-actively occupying multiple kinds of space – both professional and personal. They are not passive, but are clearly focused on assisting the rape victims to deal with their trauma. Multiple scenes focus on the detectives ‘listening’ to the victims, showcasing their dedication to understanding the trauma with sensitivity and empathy. Similarly, the rape victims are shown across multiple scenes and contexts as complex people trying to ‘move forward’ despite their fear – some appear to be in denial, some appear to cope and others come forth slowly with information. There are no specularizing visuals of rape or of women’s body parts that would exploit the rape victims. Instead care is taken to focus on emotions in the face of trauma, which is shown mostly through close-ups of their faces that underscore protection and respect.

Narrative context of emotions

In *Mercury 13*, the female docu-subjects' heroism speaks to both freedom and autonomy, and is carried across the storyline of the film, from the introduction, through selection for the NASA training programme for astronauts and explanation of the refusal for the planned second leg of testing, to the epilogue that focuses both on the new generation of female astronauts and the heroism of the older generation who never lost their ambitions and passion for flying planes. Although the patriarchal system is acknowledged, the storyline does not cast the women as victims. Instead, the docu-subjects are given strong, assertive voices that express their capacity for achievement as both pilots and astronauts, which is carried in how they are shown to pursue their desires despite the sexist system.

The narrative of *Unbelievable* centres on the process of self-empowerment in the face of rape, with an overarching plotline of the police investigation and immediate stories of individual women who were targeted by the rapist. Notably, the story of the quest for justice is juxtaposed against that of the first victim, Marie Adler, who is made to give repeated accounts of her experience by officials who take it in turn to interrogate her in various capacities in a cold and clinical manner, and who turns from victim to suspect and then suffers public condemnation. As the detective story proceeds, so in parallel does Marie's story of redemption, freedom and autonomy. Although the rapes and the unjust political and law enforcement system serve as the context, the narrative primarily reveals both the trauma suffered by the women and their journey to justice and healing driven by the detectives.

Symbolic elements that refer to cultural norms and values concerning emotions

In *Mercury 13*, symbolic imagery such as official buildings and American flags represents the patriarchal institutions of NASA and the US government that prevented the docu-subjects from becoming astronauts. However, more space in the story is given to symbolism of achievement and heroism, for example the many scenes of women flying planes in images that represent the freedom and autonomy of people who remain undefeated in spirit despite not being allowed to complete the NASA training programme. Visual symbolism is highlighted by dialogue that speaks to transcendence, like 'I have to imagine I'm not a jet, I'm not a person, I'm a spirit going up', and '[t]o 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, 'cos that's what I live'.

In *Unbelievable*, symbolism is used to show victory over victimhood. Marie Adler moves from low social standing to self-realization in ways that are notably juxtaposed against the middle-class experience of rape on the part of others who have been raped by the same perpetrator. Marie starts in the foster care system, moves through the court system and ultimately becomes an agentified person with hopes for an empowered future, symbolized by her driving away in her new car bought by the proceeds of a pay-out by the system as recompense for mistreatment. The two detectives progress from lone, overworked, under-respected female investigators to a highly accomplished team that solves the case and helps the women who were raped and prevents more from being abused. The series uses a range of different markers of symbolism to distinguish the socio-economically hierarchical and sexist society and

systems that fail the victims of rape and to note the possibility of success for women who exhibit determination and collective endeavour.

Overall, *The Keepers* and *The Staircase* assiduously avoid substantive engagement with the female docu-subjects, while both *Mercury 13* and *Unbelievable* show women as having freedom and autonomy. The latter are imbued with the embodied agency of *becoming*, which engages imagination that constructs 'the possible lives of those who are no longer here', fabulation that encourages 'resistance to actual circumstances and envision[s] new ways of being in the world', and affection that 'advances political commitment by attuning the viewer to qualitative change' (Hongisto 2015: 20–21).

DEGREES OF BECOMING

In *Mercury 13* women are presented as heroines who can conquer their circumstances and (literally) reach the moon, while women in *Unbelievable* are represented as empowered in a perhaps more down-to-earth sense: having the ability to overcome circumstances by dint of hard work and dedication. Detectives Grace Rasmussen (Toni Collette) and Karen Duvall (Merritt Wever) find the rapist after dealing with the lack of collaboration between police departments in Colorado that initially prevents a clear picture of linked crimes from being put together. Marie Adler (Kaitlyn Dever) is finally believed in her story of rape, which enables her to move on. In ways that do not rely exclusively on historical veracity or 'truthfulness' to actual events, both films employ 'the aesthetics of the frame' in what Hongisto describes for documentary as 'a novel ontology' that expresses both 'the exhibiting agency of the real and documentary renditions of it' (2015: 17). Both thereby execute a re-orientation of 'the work of the documentary from explicating what already is to facilitating the vibrant becoming of the real in its myriad manifestations' (2015: 17). Unlike the other two films, both at the same time engender a sense of *becoming* through how they 'build up in artistic frames' the characters as 'extra-beings to the actual forms delimited by the frames' (2015: 17). The medium of film thereby reflects 'the worldview embedded in the aesthetics of the frame', bringing 'more life into the real by framing actuality in its becoming' (2015: 20–21).

In successfully representing agency *qua* potential in the form of autonomy and freedom, these films enact the political function that occupies much of Hongisto's work and is clearly the intention of the filmmakers. They tell of a future in which all women might transcend the current patriarchal systems, even (in the case of the older generation in *Mercury 13* and Marie Adler in *Unbelievable*) if they cannot immediately and for themselves overcome that system.

However, these two films express a more subtle distinction between degrees of *becoming* than one that merely lies in political expression on behalf of all women, which is visible in how the films express the power of the individual to make meaning in their own lives in immediate circumstances. This becomes clear in an analysis of how the films frame the freedom and autonomy of agency in a relationship with both external (political) constraints and the inner (psychological) drive to conquer them. This inner drive is not as obviously visible as the emotions to be described as emerging from the aesthetics, narrative and symbolism that express agency, but is revealed through an additional analysis of the characters' subjectivity, in particular through a psycho-dynamic lens that enables a view of representations in the films of thoughts

and feelings on the part of the docu-subjects/characters. This lens focuses on the conative, as basic strivings demonstrated through behaviour and actions. This notion stands in a triad alongside the affective, which is the experience of feeling or emotion and is a present-oriented notion, and cognition as intellectual understanding. These latter notions are readily expressed in most, if not all films, and are therefore not expressly relevant to an analysis of *becoming* towards a different future.

The conative element lies in the hopes, fears and aspirations for the future of docu-subjects/characters as they manifest in action: 'the ability to apply intellectual energy to a task, as needed over time, to achieve a solution or completion' (Reitan and Wolfson 2000: 444). Both *Mercury 13* and *Unbelievable* represent women as people who engage or focus behaviour and action, and exhibit intrinsic motivation, goal-orientation, volition, will, self-direction and self-regulation. However, they do so to different extents and in different ways, which is apparent in how, following Reitan and Wolfson (2000), they are shown to:

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

The women in both films are shown to have different levels of subjective capacity to respond to external circumstances, and are therefore shown to have different levels of an inner sense of freedom and autonomy. While some are shown to feel inadequate and unable to progress in the face of obstacles, others are shown to be driven more strongly by subjective attributes and convictions to achieve possible outcomes. Both films say similar things about the *existence* of agency, but in different (subjective) forms and to different extents. *Mercury 13* goes little further than the idea of 'potential' as the characteristic of the notion of *becoming*, in a proposition that the docu-subjects 'can-do-but-are-prevented-from-fully-actualising'. *Unbelievable*, on the other hand, substantially actualizes potential in a 'does do' proposition that takes account of the women's goals. Both films to different extents represent *becoming* as something that might be either partly or fully actualized, thereby going further than presenting agency as a sense of freedom and autonomy qua indicator of abstract potentiality.

MERCURY 13: PARTLY ACTUALIZED BECOMING

The story in *Mercury 13* plays out in four sections that each demonstrates differing levels of the conative domain and that overall show a sense of partly actualized *becoming*.

Section 1 recounts how the women served as pilots in the Second World War, and describes them both visually and through voice-overs, the latter which are superimposed on both archive footage and to-camera interviews. The women are shown in, around and flying planes, indicating that they feel athletic and capable of achievement. In how they were able to become pilots during the war years despite persistent sexist assumptions and expectations, the women are shown to demonstrate high levels of problem analysis; component identification and persistent effort; re-appraisal and development of new strategies; and insight and intelligence.

In Section 2 the women are shown as they prepare for being in space through archive footage that represents them as actively initiating and participating in action, and as being both physically and emotionally powerful in reaching for their goals. Such demonstrations of action reflect in them high levels of ability to analyse problems, identify components and exercise persistent effort, to re-appraise their circumstances and develop new strategies, as well as to apply insight and intelligence, in overall high levels of conation.

They are, however, shown to have lower levels of conation as they approach the second level of testing. To-camera interviews reveal their feelings and aspirations, and reflect high levels of problem analysis; component identification and persistent effort; as well as insight and intelligence. However, re-appraisal and new strategy development are low, especially in how, although the women follow up after their initial tests, they fail substantively to challenge the negative decisions or adopt new ways to approach them. Instead, they wait unsuccessfully for the project leader and his wife to resolve the issue.

In Section 3, the women also have lower levels of conation as they argue their case in senate hearings after being denied further NASA testing. These experiences are recounted through footage of their sitting passively as they recount their situation, which indicates high levels of problem analysis; component identification and persistent effort; and insight and intelligence; but lower levels of re-appraisal and new strategy development. This is especially underscored by their lack of pro-action when their case is refused, and their passive reliance on support for further testing from a senator's wife and well-known female pilot.

Section 4 returns to high levels of conation in all analytic components in coverage of a new post-1976 generation of female astronauts. Women are no longer shown as being overwhelmed by resistance to their attempts at inclusion in the space programme, and levels of re-appraisal and new strategy development on the part of the new recruits is high. Their challenges are recounted – for example, a young female pilot felt it necessary to keep quiet to male colleagues about her goal of becoming an astronaut for fear of social exclusion – but only as the backdrop to the main story of her success.

Mercury 13 shows a large element of frustrated *becoming* in the past and a small amount of actualized *becoming* towards the future, which overall makes for a view of a world where women in general are agentified and not necessarily held back as a result of sexist attitudes. Sections 1–3 tell of women who, although not victims or absent as are the women in the other two documentaries, are not shown to have expressed a large conative capacity in attempts to achieve their goals. The revelation of success on the part of the new generation of female astronauts turns the frustrated efforts of the previous generation into an overall message of partly actualized *becoming*. This overall message translates to a kind of 'possibility plus' message, in terms of which it is now possible to succeed as a result of the application of will power and action where it was not before.

UNBELIEVABLE: FULLY ACTUALIZED BECOMING

The plot in *Unbelievable* plays out in a parallel narrative progression, with the story of Mari Adler running alongside those of Detectives Rasmussen and Duvall. The two storylines do not intersect until relatively late into the story when the detectives realize that the rapes they are investigating began many years earlier in a different state, starting with Mari. This juxtaposition allows

the series to represent the conative capacity of the three main characters in important ways that are different and less linear to that of *Mercury 13*.

Mari is shown to have very low levels of all components throughout. Her problem analysis, component identification and persistent effort, re-appraisal and development of new strategies, and insight and intelligence are very low to begin with, as a deeply troubled child who has been in and out of foster care and state homes all her life. Her conative capacity is further discouraged by how the system treats her – at first her story of rape is disbelieved, and then charges against her are incorrectly pursued for false police reports. As a result, she is failed by the people tasked to protect her, leaving her victimized by the system and lacking in self-belief, and with little emotional capacity to stand up for herself and navigate her way to a better future.

Detectives Rasmussen and Duvall are presented very differently. Throughout, they are each shown to be dedicated and driven, with strong family support and strong conative capacities. As effective law enforcement officers, throughout they are both shown to have high levels of ability to analyse problems; to identify components of issues and to sustain high levels of persistence in trying to achieve their goals; to re-appraise their circumstances when they do not succeed and develop new strategies; and to demonstrate high levels of insight and intelligence.

The juxtaposition between Marie and the detectives makes for a clear comparison of conative capacity: Marie has little and the detectives have much. The two storylines of Marie and of the detectives occupy different amounts of screen-time, which creates a clear message of *becoming* in that, although Marie's story is the key introduction to the series, the bulk of the story is focused on the crime drama of detectives Rasmussen and Duvall as they follow the clues to find the rapist. Each has their own individual storyline, which doubles the overall message of *becoming* as they team up and slowly fit the clues together to find their target. The relative volume of screen-time allocated to their stories of success achieved through dedication, drive and hard work (rather than to the story of Marie's victimhood) allows for an overall representation of high levels of conation. The women succeed in finding the rapist, and Marie ultimately is heard and believed, which makes for an overall message of 'actualised *becoming*' for the film, which represents the possibility of achieving a world in which individual women can transcend circumstances and work together with determination in a mutually supportive relationship towards a clear goal.

'OCCURENCY'

Although *Unbelievable* is listed on Netflix as a limited series under the fiction category 'crime TV drama', it dramatizes facts presented in the ProPublica story and is therefore a kind of docu-drama that differs in style and delivery from 'pure' fiction films that imagine a whole world and its inhabitants. Similarly, it differs from documentaries that narrativize historical information, which '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: 88). The series therefore aligns with Eitzen's contention that 'it is not the representational or formal aspects of a movie that determine whether viewers "frame" it as a documentary' (1995: 96), or correlatively as fiction, or to what extent they do so. Rather it 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' (1995: 96).

As active participants in the communication process (Şerban 2012), these viewers engage 'metalevel mental processes that color the experience of emotions and influence how people express and regulate them' (Bartsch et al. 2008: 8). They want and expect fiction and suppose or infer from situational cues and textual features a sense of humanity that they share with the docu-subjects/characters. This shared humanity is clearly built into certain documentaries like *Mercury 13*, which was described by Sheila O'Malley from the movie review website *RogerEbert.com*: 'There's a catharsis of emotion watching these now elderly women screaming and crying as they watched the space shuttle blast off, knowing a woman was at the controls' (2018: n.pag.). It is also built into fictionalized films like *Unbelievable*, as suggested by Brian Tallerico from *RogerEbert.com*, who notes, '[i]t's a tough watch' in how it reflects the political issue of rape, 'but it's a rewarding one [...] because of what it says about hope and empathy' (2019: n.pag.). This suggests an empathic engagement as a process by which audiences connect with docu-subjects and characters as they experience their lives.

This focus not on politics but on meaning in life is an existential engagement with 'the real', as explored in relation to literary fiction (Mar et al. 2011), how audiences identify with characters (Cohen 2001), explanations of how this identification is structured (Tan 2008) and discussions of multimedia semantics and narrative structures (Salway and Graham 2003). Such existential engagement is revealed in '[t]he aesthetics of the frame' through scenes and sequences that 'bypass [...] the gap in representation by insisting on the emergent consistency of matter and the ways in which the frame taps into reality as occurrent' (Hongisto 2015: 16).

As is apparent in both documentaries like *Mercury 13* and cross-over docu-dramas like *Unbelievable*, the medium reveals this *occurrence* partly in a present- and past-oriented description of material facts, whether actual or imagined. The medium also, on closer inspection, reveals that *occurrence* is also borne of a relationship that docu-subjects and characters have with time. Some films remain steadfastly locked into a description of the facts in the present and past – a description of what people do or have done – and do not reveal an embodied sense of *becoming* and therefore of possibility for docu-subjects and characters and those like them in the world. Others include representations of docu-subjects and characters as people who have a view to the future in the form of an objective sense of agency as freedom and autonomy. Some stories ascribe more of a possibility for a better world, while others show less, which is visible in how docu-subjects and characters are ascribed in the medium a subjective sense of psychodynamic potential that takes the form of their conative orientations towards a future. The joinder of representations of agency and conation allows audiences to 'feel with' docu-subjects/characters and to enjoy the possibility of a different world with them.

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TELEVISION PROGRAMMES

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