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Franklin (2022) Documentary Reflection

Franklin (2022), directed by Kasimir Burgess, is for the environmental optimist. It is a tale of great hope and activism leading to the protection of a natural landmark, the Franklin River in Tasmania.

The purpose of the documentary is to inspire further environmental action, it makes a point to show the emotional highs and lows of fighting to save something one loves. It also aims to promote the idea of a world heritage, a place that everyone has the obligation to protect, no matter where they're from. The main theme is best demonstrated in the quote: "There's no turning back on the Franklin". This is a double entendre for both the act of riding down the stream of the river, but also the ecological impact of a large scale infrastructure project on the environment. The message is that the work must be done upfront, there is no catch-up that can be done. This is further demonstrated by the Lea Tree, 22 feet in circumference and possibly three thousand years old. The Lea Tree's destruction is the low point in the film, around this event the greenies (as the environmentalists were called) rally even harder to stop further harm to the ecosystem.

I knew nothing of the Franklin River before watching this documentary film. I expected to see a lot of hippie antics in the archival footage, and I was correct. However, the contemporary interviews gave much needed context to the actions of the greenies. Every song sung and tree cried for came from a place of deep emotion and care for the beauty of nature. I wanted to know how just non-violent activism could stop such a project, especially without market pressures on the company pushing a halt on the infrastructure.

In 1983, Michael Cassidy, with the aid of his friends, paddles down the Franklin on a 14 day journey to join the protest occurring at the mouth of the river. Interspersed in the story of this

man are the modern testimonials of activists who were present at the demonstrations as well as a subplot about the character of Michael and the beauty of the river through the eyes of his son, Oliver Cassidy, on his own re-creation of the two week long journey.

The archival footage tells the chronological story of the fight for the ceasement of an approved hydro-electric dam, the protests, the greenies' failure to get a sympathetic politician election and the factions against them, mostly the labor party, which supported the dam construction because of the creation of jobs in the area. It follows the sacrifice of the activists, in getting arrested and refusing bail on the condition that they could not return to the protest and getting their tiny rafts plowed into by large metal boats carrying terraforming equipment. And ultimately, the salvation that came with celebrity, a popular television show host and a millionaire businessman.

Oliver's story of his father brings credibility to the character of the environmental activists as well as the mission to protect certain natural landmarks for future generations. Oliver reads from his father's journal as he repeats every step of the trip, bringing the audience along to see the beauty of the Franklin for the first time. Additionally, Oliver is transgender and speaks to the support of his father in that, as well as the strength and wisdom that he had in his final moments as he battled cancer. This portion of the documentary is to make one feel the humanity and a closeness to the activists, to see oneself in the position of them and to understand the desperation with which they were fighting.

The interviews were filmed in Tasmania, and the archival footage and Oliver's pandemic-era journey were filmed on the Franklin River, a further testament to the absolute win of non-violent activism in this situation.

Crisp, clear audio and visuals from this documentary. The layering of auditory and visual messages to create a complete picture without saying it is great film direction. There are many styles of filming, in the archival footage its amateur, home video style tapes. In the interviews its static, multicam setups for maximum emotional impact. And in the raft adventure it's high

definition, artsy, wide shots, to give the full picture of the beauty of the area. There are no special effects, everything seen is genuine.

The greatest part of the film is the 1983 footage, there is a strong emotion transmitted of the struggle, as well as the lightheartedness of the Tasmanians. They play tricks on the police, having them arrest a doppelganger of a celebrity protester and have clever word plays for the opposition. This showcases the cultural habits of the people on this Australian Island. One of the critiques I have of the film is that Oliver's story does cause the story to drag for a little while, certainly a lot of charm with it, but it could have been integrated a little more cleanly to avoid distracting from the main idea. This documentary relates best to our in-class discussion of land consent, especially with government owned land. Does the future of a national park belong to who owns it or the patrons who utilize it the most? This film also brushes over the labor party argument, and never fully addresses what happens to the complaints of that party. Which causes it to fall into another well traversed in-class topic, the potential benefits of building a power plant in a community.

Overall a great film, a must watch if you're interested in the activism and public opinion side of energy production and infrastructure development.

References

Burgess, K. (Director). 2022. *Franklin* [Film]. Chris Kamen Productions.