A Bob Dylan Story: Martin Scorsese Adapts the Past

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Writing in *Rolling Stone Magazine*, Bono, U2 front man, said this about Bob Dylan: "There is a voice for every Dylan you can meet, and the reason I'm never bored of Bob Dylan is because there are so many of them, all centered on the idea of pilgrimage." *Rolling Thunder Revue: A Bob Dylan Story by Martin Scorsese* (2019), the director's second Dylan documentary, following 2005's *No Direction Home*, which traced Dylan from childhood through his 1966 motorcycle accident, focuses on Dylan's persona and a journey. The latter film is conventional in its approach to Dylan and his life, albeit with Scorseseian flair, utilizing cutaways, interviews, and file footage; the former film is structurally similar, but it is closer in spirit to Bono's assessment of Dylan. Scorsese incorporates crafty maneuvers, suspect performances, and stunningly remastered concert footage to create another narrative representation of Dylan. Scorsese presents the mercurial Dylan as an American creative persona rather than a public figure with an accessible history, which complicates the ever-evolving creation that is Bob Dylan.

In his first Dylan documentary, Scorsese builds on his earlier documentary projects. As Peter Doyle observes, both *A Personal History with Martin Scorsese through American Movies* (1995) and *My Voyage in Italy* (1999) are "structured around Scorsese's direct-to-camera presence" and the director's urgent voice-over narration. Scorsese is, according to Doyle, "the guide" (63). In *No Direction Home*, however, Dylan occupies the guide chair, speaking to the camera in footage produced by him and his manager Jeff Rosen. In his new take on Dylan, Scorsese uses fresh, original footage supplied—again—by Dylan and Rosen, archival footage of the Rolling Thunder Review, shot by Howard Alk in the 1970s, and new interviews by a cast of people who tell stories that challenge the realistic illusion of non-fiction documentary film.

Rolling Thunder Revue: A Bob Dylan Story by Martin Scorsese squares with Defene Ersin Tutan and Laurence Raw's definition of "history-as-adaptation," which values "individuals as creative talents who not only come to terms with the world around them, but possess the capacity to transform that world though experimental behavior" (11). Dylan's Rolling Thunder Revue pilgrimage and Scorsese's adaptation of that story illustrate both how Dylan represents himself and how Scorsese's adaptation of a section of Dylan's history helps promote that unending narrative representation by utilizing creative experimentation. As Tutan and Raw suggest, in order to move beyond "questions of historical accuracy" in order to "concentrate instead on *narrative representation*" four components should be explored: 1) "*story*," 2) "*narrating*," 3) "*narrative*," and 4) "*mode of expression*" (11). Scorsese's subtitle complicates the documentary as a device of signified actuality because he builds a historical narrative construction as a personal interpretation, trafficking at times in what Tom Gunning called the "cinema of attractions," by creating a fictional counternarrative to engage his audience in Dylanesque mythmaking. Did the Rolling Thunder Dylan decide to wear Kabuki face paint because Kiss, then a loud band out in Queens with a connection to his violin player, wore face paint? For Scorsese, Dylan says yes. Here, Dylan's words and Scorsese's auteurist views of cinematic production combine not to document history but rather to adapt it for the sake of fictional truth telling. The choices made by the filmmaker in order to capture his subject emphasizes Dylan's importance while constructing a narrative that is at least partially fabricated in order to construct a narrative representation that captures the feel of Rolling Thunder and to recognize the attraction of the cinematic Bob Dylan.

In the fall of 1975, Dylan set out with an assortment of singers, acoustic and electric musicians, poet Allen Ginsberg, playwright Sam Shephard, and miscellaneous others on a concert pilgrimage he called the Rolling Thunder Revue, which stopped at venues ranging from New England college towns to Madison Square Garden and resembled an east coast version of Ken Kesey's Merry Pranksters on tour with serious musical talent. After the first cut of his "Rolling Thunder" was completed, Scorsese told Philip Horne from *Sight & Sound*

that he was not satisfied with the period piece as created: "It's conventional. It's just a film about a group of people who go on the road and they sing some songs. I'm going to have to start over. We have to go with the music, maybe, go with the spirit of *commedia dell'arte.* And then the words started to come in about possibly people who weren't there, being there. That's interesting. Let's say [these people] represent certain things. What about the businessman, the marketing man….What about the filmmaker? And he has to be taken advantage of. He possesses the performers; he wants to be them" (www.2.bfi.org). Scorsese goes on to tell Horne that documentary filmmaking has helped him break free of "narrative" to tell stories in a different way. Further, he suggests that documentaries for him are more spatial than temporal, which for Scorsese invites intuitive connections to the subject matter to "fly off at some other beautiful piece of music or something or, you know, some wonderful monologues" (www.2.bfi.org). In this rambling interview, Scorsese touches upon all four *narrative representation* components and attempts to explain how he recreated the antic spirit of the Rolling Thunder Revue forty-five years later and fifteen years after his first Dylan documentary.

Capturing the enigmatic Dylan has always been a fool's errand. Famously, he lied to journalist Nat Hentoff about where he had lived as a young man before making a name for himself as a folk musician in New York City. On film, Dylan has been even more circumspect in how he represents himself, often occupying personas he cultivated, starting with D.A. Pennebaker's *Dont Look Back* (1997). Scorsese, in a manner, avoids the Dylan as persona trap by creating a story of his own, which includes Dylan but also narrative representation from characters he manufactured who help to capture the space and time of this barnstorming concert tour. Scorsese's invented characters are his *mode of expression*. Scorsese confounds the Rolling Thunder Revue by making aspects of the narrative his own, a choice that effectively functions to further complicate Dylan's identity. He told Horne that the last time he saw Dylan was twenty years ago, which may or may not be true, and that his connection with Dylan is Rosen, who is also Dylan's archivist and serves as the interviewer for

Dylan's new interview footage. Rather than present Dylan on tour, Scorsese adapted the material he works with to express what the tour may have meant for its time and for today.

"Life isn't about finding yourself or finding anything," says Bob Dylan in *Rolling Thunder*, "it's about creating yourself." It's difficult to believe that Scorsese and Dylan did not collaborate on this latest cinematic self-reshaping effort. Early on, Scorsese provides visual hints that this film is a subjective adaptation instead of a conventional documentary or rockumentary. A clip from Georges Méliès's *The Vanishing Lady* (1893) introduces the film. The clip implies that Scorsese's mode of expression will be performative, and not a cinematically documentated Dylan historiography; that it will be, instead, to paraphrase Gunning, a rupture of the self-enclosed non-fictional world that reaches spectators by working creatively with history. Scorsese used existing footage from Dylan's ill-fated film collaboration with Sam Shephard, *Renaldo and Clara*, filmed during breaks in the tour, to supplement his version of this fifty-seven-concert tour. He adapts portions of a film for this film. Even Dylan suggests that history is cloudy: "I don't remember a thing about Rolling Thunder," an odd new comment about this almost mythic tour; he stresses the point: "It happened so long ago I wasn't even born." For both Scorsese and Dylan, *Rolling Thunder Revue: A Bob Dylan Story by Martin Scorsese* is about capturing a time, a feeling, by creating a fresh *narrative representation*.

According to Dylan, *Renaldo and Clara* was influenced by François Truffaut's *Shoot the Piano Player* and Marcel Carné's *Children of Paradise*. Scorsese's team remastered the footage, and then he used a clip from Carné's film to remind his audience—again—that musicians are also performers. By bookending the film with clips from Méliès and Carné, Scorsese indicates that his film should be seen as a distinct *mode of expression* and how stylistically separate it is from *No Direction Home*. Dylan had encouraged his Rolling Thunder musical partners to wear masks during the tour (only Joan Baez agreed). "When somebody's wearing a mask" he says, "he's going to tell the truth." Maybe. Scorsese, too, traffics in masks by injecting the film with

familiar faces who relate unfamiliar stories. While much of the archival footage we see was shot by Howard Alk (who receives no film credit here), Scorsese presents the dyspeptic "filmmaker" who contridicts some of the information provided by Dylan himself in the film and who seems to be barely tolerated by those who provide contemporary interviews. In truth, "the filmmaker," as he is identified in the old-timey list of "Players" in the end credits, is the performance artist and comedian Martin Von Haselberg. Likewise, a politician appears near the end of the film and recalls how his old friend President Jimmy Carter was able to get him into a sold out Rolling Thunder at Niagara Falls, because "Jimmy" and "Bob" were friends. "The Politician" is Michael Murphy, performing as U.S. Representative Jack Tanner from *Tanner '88*, a fictional character created by Gary Trudeau and Robert Altman in their mockumentary about the runup to the 1988 presidential election. Perhaps the strangest character creation is "The Beauty Queen," played by Sharon Stone, who claims to have had a late teenage affair with Dylan. And Dylan, functioning as the filmmaker's accomplice, verifies that he met a "young blond girl who told him that she would be famous one day." Scorsese's audience is left to create their own truth, which would satisfy Dylan, by engaging these performances and applying them to the theatrical energy of the tour's musical performances.

"What remains from the tour?" Dylan is asked in his final new interview segment, and he responds, "Nothing. Not one single thing. Ashes." As film critic Shelia O'Malley observes, "Comparing *No Direction Home* to *Rolling Thunder Revue* is an abject lesson in how content can dictate form" (film comment.com). Scorsese's first documentary is stylistically traditional. *Rolling Thunder* allows both Dylan and Scorsese to play with the past in order to connect live musical performances with the now almost mythical Bob Dylan—whoever he really is. Poet Allen Ginsburg compared the barnstorming Rolling Thunder Revue to a "con man, carney, medicine show of old" (nyt.com). With *Rolling Thunder Revue: A Bob Dylan Story by Martin Scorsese*, the director extends the con but blends it with the visual attraction of cinema. Dylan, of course, is now a celebrity persona and a wizened entertainer who

continues to perpetuate and renew the contradictions of his own mythology.

Works Cited

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The Adaptation of History

Scorsese

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No Direction Home (2005)