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### The Man in Black: Johnny Cash

*Walk the Line* is the much-touted biopic of the life of country singer Johnny Cash and his wife June Carter Cash. Movies that chronicle the life of a real person are often very hard to do because they can incite much criticism about everything from factual integrity to the actor selection. Using various strategies, the director of *Walk the Line*, James Mangold, managed to make a movie that critics have loved.

Cinematography is important to this film to really give the viewer the sense that they are there watching Johnny Cash perform, or they are there with him as he deals with his demons. For the shot variety aspect the director uses short focal length (wide angle) lenses to show the crowds as Cash is performing or to give the viewer the perspective of looking up at the stage from the crowd. The more personal parts of the film used the regular middle focal length (normal) lenses to get up close and personal to Cash's expressions, emotions, and interactions with others. This lens variety helps the viewer to transition from those public and private moments.

The type of lens used also goes hand in hand with the framing and camera work. As stated earlier, wide shots are used to show Cash performing on the big stage. There are significant parts of the film that use very close up frames to capture Cash at his most vulnerable. The viewer can see every bead of sweat and line of tension on his face as he takes drugs or becomes emotional. This is very important for the viewer to see in places

such as when Cash drugs himself and ends up lost in a forest. Also, there are scenes where the camera work becomes almost shaky and rapid, such as when Cash is in a rage tearing sinks out of walls. The viewer gets the sense they are watching “reality TV” and Cash could at any moment turn on them. The director was probably purposely using this camera work to elicit tense feelings from the audience. The framing variety is symbolic because it balances the two worlds that Cash had to straddle, public and private, hence, the song title “Walk the Line.”

One of the most important aspects of the movie is sound. Capturing the essence of Johnny Cash required bringing to life that distinctive sound he is known for. Mangold made the important decision that the actors playing Johnny and June Cash would do their own singing and not lip sync. In this era of digital sound mastering, it would have been very easy to dub in the authentic voices. But, the choice that Mangold made lends a real authenticity to the actors. There is a different kind of emotion displayed when one is actually singing and feeling the music, than when one is just singing along and lip-syncing. The supporting cast also plays their own instruments and the resulting surround sound in the theater makes the viewer feel as if they are witnessing a personal concert from Cash himself. It is important to have that oral integrity so that the viewer believes they are seeing the real person on screen.

Something else noticeable, but maybe not as important as sound or cinematography, is the attention paid to the aesthetics. Obviously, to play a real person the actor has to look the part. The explicit detail that was shown in the authenticity of the costumes, cars, houses, and even hair and makeup really helped the film. I never thought for a minute that I was watching Reese Witherspoon or Joaquin Phoenix and not Johnny Cash and June Carter Cash. All of the little details, such as the kind of guitar Cash used,

came together to paint a bigger picture. Period pieces are only successful if they transport the viewer to that time wholly, and *Walk the Line* did just that.

*Walk the Line* was all around a great film. It did have a few problems typical to any biopic though. It is very hard to fit all the events of a person's life into one film. With Cash, Mangold focused on the main events that shaped his life; but because it was so immersive, the viewer is left wanting for more. For instance, I would have liked to have seen more of his life after he finally wins June and they get married. This is where good editing comes into play. I know those extra events weren't possible in the time constraints, but Mangold did a great job capturing the essence of who Johnny Cash was through his editing choices. He also chose to use a younger actor to portray some of the significant events that happened early in his childhood. This helps the viewer understand why Cash did some of the things he did later in life.

I have never listened to Cash's music and didn't know much about his life before seeing this film. But, after leaving the show I felt that I knew who Cash was and what he was all about. So in conclusion, I think the director James Mangold accomplished what he set out to do. This is a film that could have potentially only appealed to a small portion of the population, but due to Mangold's choices, it has become a blockbuster success.