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"Swept to the sidelines and forgotten" : Cultural Exclusion, Blind Persons' Participation, and International Film Festivals

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Abstract

International film festivals are privileged sites for cultural exchange and creative incubation to which blind persons are effectively excluded, a barrier that needs addressing. By recognizing barriers to film festivals, we instigate a solution to making film culture more accessible to blind persons. Using the film *Blindsight* as an exemplar along with a study conducted on film festivals, this paper argues a triadic thesis: that the issues of blind audience members at film festivals, blind subjects in films, and blind filmmakers must be viewed together in order to attend to cultural inclusion. We situate the paper in the domain of autobiography theory and specifically draw upon G. Thomas Couser's work *Signifying Bodies* for a model. Couser attends to self-representation thereby enabling us to focalize the research on agency at various subject positions in the acts of participating in film culture.

Keywords

Accessibility; blind persons; film festivals; audio description; low-visioned persons

"Swept to the sidelines and forgotten"[2]:

Cultural Exclusion, Blind Persons' Participation, and International Film Festivals

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Film festivals are without a doubt important cultural phenomena in the west. The über festival, *Festival de Cannes*, connotes this sentiment on several levels. Its founding purpose is "to draw attention to and raise the profile of films with the aim of contributing towards the development of cinema, boosting the film industry worldwide and celebrating cinema at an international level" (Cannes). Festivals are viewed as worldwide events, despite their local geographical identity; ultimately, their followers join an international audience that consumes these films across multiple channels. They are also very much considered talent incubators. Thierry Fremaux, General Delegate of the Cannes Festival, writes "The Festival is very keen to discover new talent and act as a springboard for creation" (Cannes). The cultural importance of the festival is also often elevated to the transcendental. Jérôme Segal and Christine Blumauer in their work on Cannes quote artist Jean Cocteau's famous statement on what it means: "the festival is an apolitical no man's land, a microcosm of how the world would be if people could have direct contacts and speak the same language" (156). Society is in awe of them. Western culture attaches a reverence to the festival which instantiates a value system that informs its constructed prominence.

[2] Erik Weihenmayer *Blindsight* (Walker)

We begin by making this extended point about the importance of film festivals to contend that they are privileged sites for cultural exchange to which blind persons are effectively excluded, a barrier that needs addressing. However, the goal for this paper is to take a step further. By recognizing barriers to film festivals, we instigate a solution to making film culture more accessible to blind persons. We situate the paper in the theoretical domain of autobiography theory and specifically, draw upon G. Thomas Couser's work *Signifying Bodies* for a model. Couser's attention to self-representation and the differently-abled helps us to focalize the research on agency at various subject positions in the acts of participating in film culture.

In 2006, the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) held a screening of *Blindsight*, an autobiographical documentary that tells the story of six blind Tibetan teenagers who climb the Lhakpa-Ri peak of Mount Everest. The expedition was led by Erik Weihenmayer, a world-renowned mountaineer who previously climbed Everest and who is himself blind. As the film opens, Weihenmayer crosses a steep mountain cavern, clearly a visual metaphor for fear, danger and vulnerability, and says in a voice-over: "When I was fifteen I went blind completely. I hated blindness. And I wasn't afraid to go blind and see darkness. You see, I think that's a myth. I was afraid to be swept to the sidelines and forgotten." Weihenmayer and Sabriye Tenberkenand (co-founder of *Braille without Borders* and the Tibetan school for blind children) launched the expedition to bring attention to the ostracism that blind persons face in Tibetan society with the cooperation of teenagers Sonam Bhumtso, Gyenshen, Dachung, Kyila, Tenzin, and Tashi Pasang (see figure 1). Disturbing scenes depict these teenagers being openly scorned on the streets and sometimes within their own family circles. Since the Toronto festival's inception in 1976, *Blindsight* has been the only movie screened for blind patrons using audio descriptions. We use

Blindsight as an exemplar because its Toronto screening represents a nexus of motives to make film and film culture more accessible to blind persons. It touches on all three qualities that we argue are significant. First, it depicts blind subjects taking a role as cast members in the film's narrative. Second, it involves the creative talent of blind persons in the role of making the film. While Erik Weihenmayer, Sabriye Tenberkenand and the children are not credited as filmmakers, they are more than film subjects; argued below, the film meets the criteria for *autobiographical documentary* and they, film documentarians. By recognizing that they are centrally involved in the telling of their own stories we can argue that their contribution shifts the political orientation of the film. Third, and most significant to this paper, is the fact that the film was made accessible to blind persons at TIFF, a mainstream festival. We argue that the discussion of film accessibility for blind persons ought to sit on a model that includes all three points as a unified phenomenon. We also emphasize that aspects of *Blindsight* are controversial, and the film must also be challenged for some of the messages it conveys.

Using the film *Blindsight* as a exemplar along with a study conducted on film festivals, this paper will argue a three-pronged thesis: the issue of blind audience members at film festivals, blind subjects in films, and blind filmmakers must be viewed as a triad in order to attend to the notion of cultural inclusion of blind persons[3] in film culture. The argument that the telling of stories in film *about* blind persons ought to be *led* by blind persons is widely accepted in disability studies. Indeed the inclusion of blind filmmakers in filmmaking and audiences at theatres is indisputable. However, we argue that the exclusion of blind participants from film festivals, these culturally privileged sites, amounts to an exclusion that is different from mainstream film because the resulting consequence is more complex. By pinpointing this gap or

[3] This paper will use the term "blind persons" rather than "person with visual impairments." It focuses on blind persons but acknowledges those with low vision as persons who face similar cultural exclusion. It refers to "differently-abled" individuals rather than "disabled" individuals.

omission and characterizing it in this triadic model, we seek to offer one site where transformation might occur. Jay Timothy Dolmage intimates that one method we use to expose stereotypical disability rhetorics is through "creating, as well as uncovering, new stories and alternative traditions – different bodies" calling it "a powerful move" (9). We explore film festivals by probing *Blindsight* as a triadic phenomenon –as a film at a festival, as a production, and as an audience experience – and suggest ways that it serves as an exemplary model in both positive and negative terms for understanding barriers to film culture.

This paper will follow in three parts. First, it will review relevant theoretical models for the paper with a concentration on the work of G. Thomas Couser. Second, it will recount the previous work completed by the authors on cultural accessibility for blind persons. This work contributes to an ongoing humanities-based research project dedicated to making visual media accessible to blind and low-visioned participants. Third, it will analyze the film *Blindsight* and its screening in light of the thesis.

Figure 1: A "head and shoulder" photograph of Erik Weihenmayer and Tashi Pasang. They are side by side, outside in front of a blue cloudy sky. They are dressed in heavy coats for the cold weather. Weihenmayer's head is turned toward Pasang in a manner that makes it seem they are very close. Pasang clasps Weihenmayer's hands with both hands. © Robson Entertainment

Theoretical Perspectives on Life-Writing

Blindsight is a vehicle for several individuals to tell a life story. However, with an overt political agenda, it simultaneously uses these life stories to make salient the fact that blind persons in Tibet are stigmatized under a negative epistemological ideology operating in Tibetan culture. In his historical survey of disability studies in Canada, Geoffrey Reaume summarizes the value of life writing in a section dedicated to those with "sensory disabilities":

> Given that disability scholars advocate disabled people telling their own stories and reclaiming history, writing histories that validate the past can also be a way of community building, particularly amongst people who have historically been marginalized. The key is to be critical of our history as disability historians, avoiding the sort of 'great man' narratives that doctors, for example, have been criticized for. Instead, histories need to discuss our past that is both respectful of the disability community's legacy but which does not paper over difficult issues. (40)

Telling one's own story through the full range of autobiographical genres functions to reclaim lost history and build community amongst marginalized populations. However, the use of autobiographical genres also warrants critical attention by disability scholars who can lay bare subtle, elusive, and difficult threads damaging to the differently-abled that the genres can bring. In their book, *Human Rights and Narrrated Lives*, Sidonie Smith and Kay Schaffer argue that life writing also "accumulates political import":

> In local contexts, life storytelling constitutes a social action on the part of the individuals or communities, resonating through multiple cultural contexts, including the moral, aesthetic, political, and legal (Wilson 1999, 7). As stories circulate beyond local contexts through extended national and transnational communication flows, they enable claimants to "speak truth to power," to invoke Foucault. (4)

Smith and Schaffer add to this conversation the way life storytelling invokes "power" when globalized beyond local contexts.

G. Thomas Couser explores how biographies and autobiographies by those marginalized as "disabled," (including blind persons) is a growing phenomenon and one that is increasingly entering mainstream media. In an accompanying footnote to the word "life writing," Couser

adds, "life writing need not literally be written; documentary films and videos would be included" (18). His *Signfying Bodies* makes the point that the genre of autobiography is a potential site for empowerment:

> In the last quarter of the twentieth century, a new genre has come to the fore, the some body memoir. And in the United States, at least, it has become increasingly common for ill and disabled people to represent themselves in life writing. Those who represent their own experiences with disability are often consciously countering ignorance about or stigmatization of their conditions. In any case, insofar as they initiate and control their own representation, they become less vulnerable subjects. Indeed, their narratives may seek to reduce their vulnerability to pre-inscribed narrative. But this is still a relatively new and unappreciated cultural phenomenon, and it takes place against a background of representation in popular and literary media that often thoughtlessly perpetuates negative stereotypes. (18)

Couser provides strong justification that those who self-represent their life stories and "initiate and control their own representation, [ultimately] become less vulnerable subjects" (18). However, Couser also raises a key point that agency over self-representation is always an issue. He writes:

> I wish to address here, then, the situation when the portrayal of aberrant somatic states is *not* autobiographical. Such representation poses ethical problems, especially when the conditions in questions render the subjects unable to represent themselves or even to collaborate in an informed way with others who undertake to represent them. Individuals with disabilities that preclude or interfere with self-representation are thus doubly vulnerable subjects. (18)

Couser makes salient the point that differently-abled individuals might be vulnerable to representations by others *in the name of autobiography*, especially in the case when informed collaboration is difficult. Following Reaume, Couser, Smith and Schaffer, we will argue that *Blindsight* works to destigmatize or counter ignorance about blind persons in both Tibetan society as well as Western society by basing the narrative squarely on the life stories it tells. *Blindsight* constitutes a space where blind life narrators from the West and East congregate, signifying a community-based voice. However, we bring to the conversation the fact that

Blindsight's representations are simultaneously controversial given the clearly postcolonial gaze that the film constructs through the narrative. Analysis over the agency of the *Blindsight* autobiographers occurs later in the paper.

Film festivals, Culture, and National Identity

Audienceship is as fundamental to film culture as filmmaking. We extend the argument for this paper to include the actual screening of the film at an international film festival for the very reason that Smith and Schaffer identify; film festivals signify a powerful "transnational communication flow" that ought to be commandeered by the marginalized community that is virtually excluded from it (4). Scholars have written on the cultural importance of festivals and film festivals. *Festivals and the Cultural Public Sphere*, edited by Liana Giorgi, Monica Sassatelli, and Gerard Delanty provides theoretical backing for the claim that they play a significant role in understanding how societies form and operate within communities. Of festivals in general, Giorgi and Sassatelli write that "culture is not to be understood only with reference to 'national identity'" or even multiculturalism, but more broadly as including aesthetic forms of cultural expression" (1). Festivals provide one such venue for expression that is unique. Film critic, Kenneth Turran writes in his book *Sundance to Sarajevo: Film Festivals and the World They Made:*

> The key cause of festival proliferation, however, is a symbiotically linked trio of factors. Newly active independent and foreign-language filmmakers hunger for appreciative audiences, a need that dovetails nicely with audience members' yearning for alternatives to the standard Hollywood fare that dominates film screens…Small distributors as well as national film industries locked into an unequal battle with the American juggernaut see these hungers as a not-to-be-missed opportunity to both earn money and promote their goods to the fullest extent. (7)

Film festivals are grounds and gateway for showcasing and promoting emerging talent, bonding with audiences who desire stories outside those shown in mainstream cinema, and connecting filmographers with small distributors hoping to reach these audiences. Historically, films that debut in festivals enable independent filmmakers and artists to reveal the experiences of marginalized subjects to broader communities. Indeed, film festivals are local, national, and global cultural phenomena. When it comes to TIFF for example, the event dominates the cultural landscape of Toronto every September but is also heavily covered by the global international media. To reiterate our thesis, we argue that the barrier issue is not only the physical exclusion that occurs when a film is not made accessible, the barrier issue is that budding blind filmmakers and audiences miss out in the fertile creative grounds that festivals provide.

Audio Description and Cultural Inclusivity

The conventional method of adapting visual media for a blind audience is through the use of voice-over tracks or *audio descriptions*[4] that recount visual events from the perspective of an objective narrator using a third-person point of view (i.e. "Bill walks down the street."). In a previous paper, we analyzed a special episode of the animated Canadian television show *Odd Job Jack* that had been made accessible using a new theory for creating audio descriptions that countered the conventional method. Created by Smiley Guy Studio in Toronto for The Comedy Network, *Odd Job Jack* was a television cartoon that illustrated the hilarious misadventures of a university graduate named Jack Ryder as he pursued full-time employment. The episode "American Wiener" was created in collaboration with the Center for Learning Technologies at Ryerson University featuring a unique approach to audio description that employed a first-person

[4] Audio Description (AD) might also be termed "Described Video" (DV).

point of view (i.e. "I walk down the street.") that was integrated seamlessly with the show's narrative while maintaining its trademark humour and irony. In this case study, we discussed some of the creative ways to make films interesting, entertaining, and culturally inclusive of blind persons through the use of metaphor, irony, and other techniques (Pedersen and Aspevig 2009). In another case study, we analyzed the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's mini-series *Death Comes to Town*, created by the comedy troupe *Kids in the Hall*. This production also used a novel (and we argued, more inclusive) approach to audio description: namely, the use of narration that maintained the humourous flavour of the script. However, the analysis highlighted the lack of audio description in Canada and outlined the factors inhibiting audio description production, including policy, the commercial and organizational structure of television, and established genre conventions (Aspevig and Pedersen 2011).

Finally, in a third case study, we dealt with the importance of including blind persons as characters and filmmakers in the medium of cinema in the pursuit to make film culture, not only film, accessible (Pedersen and Aspevig 2011). We used the documentary film *Antoine* (2009) because it extended a voice to a blind boy to tell his life story through his own yarns, reminiscences, and imaginative arrangements. *Antoine* is a film about Antoine Houang, a five-year-old Vietnamese-Canadian francophone, which captures his life as he plays, goes to school and lives with his family. It uses lyrical and dreamlike passages appropriate to his age (e.g., he drives a car) alongside some gripping, realistic scenes that reveal the challenges he faces as a blind person (e.g., he cries when a child is angry at him for his clumsiness). While Laura Bari is credited as the director, writer and documentarian of the film, she also calls Antoine Houang her collaborator. As one film reviewer described the process: "together, they've created a kind of magical cinematic synesthesia, collaborating on a visual and aural landscape both real and

imagined" (Cohn 2009). Notably, Houang himself used a small boom microphone as well as a camera to film and broadcast a part of his own story. We argued that the categories "autobiography," "documentary," and "autobiographical documentary" needed to be re-envisioned in the pursuit to making film culture accessible to the differently-abled.

Antoine instigated the crux of the argument for this paper. The festival screenings of *Antoine* were not made accessible to blind persons, which was the impetus for our question, *Are films ever made accessible at major festivals?* If not, then the opportunity to celebrate blind characters and actors at juried festivals is omitted. Further, if blind audiences, adult or children, are not invited into festival spaces to enjoy films – sites designated specifically as creative incubators and international community-building venues – how will blind persons be motivated to engage in cinema as filmmakers? The practice of enjoying a film festival as an audience member must be viewed as a factor in the process of *becoming* a filmmaker. We make the point that barriers to film festivals have resonating consequences at each subject position. In order to empower independent filmmaking and embrace values that are alternative to commercial models, the interplay that goes on amongst these positions – maker, character, audience member – ought to be addressed (see figure 2).

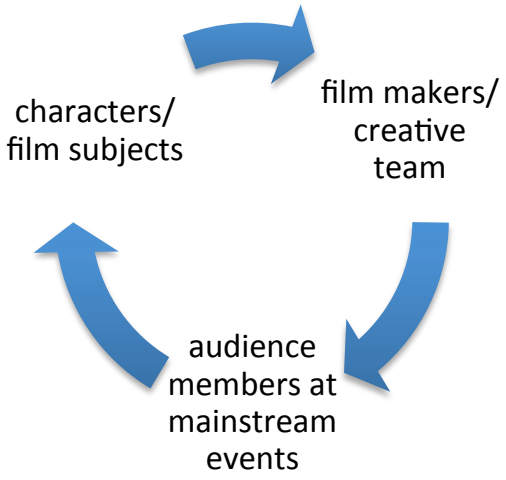

Figure 2: A triadic view of film culture inclusivity including all three subject positions. Circular arrows point to "film makers/creative team," "audience members at mainstream events" and finally "characters/film subjects" to express the idea that they cannot be fractured off into discrete units.

Blind Persons as Film Festival Audience Members

By conducting a small study in 2013, we strove to understand whether or not major film festivals had been making any accommodations for blind or low-visioned persons. We sampled thirteen large festivals, mostly North American and some European. This selection was also based on the assumption that a larger festival would be more likely to have the funding for audio description than a small local one. The complete sample was comprised of the Aspen Filmfest, Berlin International Film Festival, Festival de Cannes, Chicago International Film Festival, Hot Docs Canadian International Documentary Festival, Montreal World Film Festival, New York Film Festival, South by Southwest (Austin, Texas), Sundance Film Festival (Utah), Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF), Tribeca (New York), Vancouver International Film Festival, and the Venice Film Festival.

First, we conducted an Internet analysis to determine if there was any information concerning accessibility for blind or low-visioned persons at the festival website. Second, we

emailed and/or phoned all thirteen festivals in our sample listed above to ask official representatives about the situation of making the festivals accessible. The basic question was: "Have any films been made accessible for blind audiences, through audio description or other initiatives?" Only Toronto had held a screening accessible for blind audiences; the film showed was *Blindsight*. *Blindsight*'s premiere featured special audio equipment from Dolby Digital as well as proprietary audio headsets from electronics manufacturer Sennheisser. In addition to the film's traditional audio and video tracks, the filmmakers included additional descriptive audio narration for the audience, which included sighted and blind persons. *Blindsight*'s audio description track can be found on the DVD.

As recently as April 2014, after the initial study was conducted, the TIFF website now includes information on its "Accessibility Commitment" page concerning their own facilities:

> In fulfilling our vision and mission, TIFF strives at all times to ensure that our policies, practices, and procedures are consistent with the principles outlined in the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2005.* We recognize diverse audiences and are committed to a strategy that works to remove barriers to interacting with our programming.

And it points to practices for how it will fulfill the relevant provincial legislation, *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act,* 2005 (AODA):

> Each of our cinemas at TIFF Bell Lightbox are equipped with a DTS CSS Cinema Subtitling System to provide DVS Theatrical descriptive audio narrative for visually impaired patrons and Rear Window Captioning for hearing impaired patrons.
> In order for these systems to be operable, the prints that we receive from distributors must have been formatted as such. We are working with our distribution partners to ensure that as many prints as possible are formatted accordingly. We will advertise on our website films that come with prints equipped with this format. Patrons can pick up the equipment at the box office when they purchase or pick up their tickets. Please note that older and archival prints may not be formatted.

Even though the technology is available to make the festival accessible, as stated above, no films have been made available to blind and low-visioned audiences at the festival since *Blindsight*. While large studios now add an additional descriptive audio channel to all feature films, the

financial and logistical situation for festival films is not so simple. They are generally art-house, independent, specialty films, which makes it difficult for smaller, independent studios, producers and distributors to fund audio description. While TIFF is committed to setting internal policies and procedures necessary to make the supplementary content available, it needs the filmmakers and distributers to provide the content first. We argue not that any one festival is at fault; we argue that this cycle of omission -- no accessible films, no culture to nurture blind filmmakers, few depictions of blind subjects in festival films -- ought to be envisioned as the barrier to film culture.

Finding that major, mainstream film festivals seemed to be neglecting blind persons for various reasons, we further researched community-based film initiatives geared to include blind persons and found a selection. The monthly *Tocando La Luz* ("Touching the Light") festival in Cuba is an initiative of a cultural promoter at the Cuban Film Institute (ICAIC) and the National Association of the Blind (ANCI) (Izquierdo) and features accessible screenings using audio descriptions. The India International Disability Film Festival screens films with either audio descriptions or aural enhancements for blind audiences. There are also examples of festivals that strive to enable emerging blind talent. In 2008, a series of short documentaries shot and directed by blind women was featured in the Middle East International Film Festival in Abu Dhabi. The filmmakers had been chosen from among 150 volunteers with varying degrees of blindness to learn the basics of screenwriting and documentary filmmaking as part of an initiative by Iranian filmmaker Mohammad Shirvani (Seaman). ReelAbilities New York's Disabilities Film Festival claims to be the largest festival in the country "dedicated to promoting awareness and appreciation of the lives, stories and artistic expressions of people with different disabilities." Canada also promotes films by differently-abled creators. Since 2001, the Picture This

International Disability Film Festival run out of Calgary has showcased films by blind filmmakers, as well as provided bursaries and access to technicians and equipment. Montréal hosts the Regarding Disability Film Festival. Finally, the Abilities Arts Festival in Toronto showcases films by blind filmmakers. Events organized under the theme of inclusion for the differently-abled are indeed underway. However, the larger point for the paper is to entreat annual mainstream events to consider blind participants to be a permanent facet of their ongoing production. Universal design theory states "The design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible," ("Principles of Universal Design"). We interpret this goal to mean that film festival "environments" ought to expect blind audiences and require audio descriptions for all of the films they host.

While documentaries that explore the life of the differently-abled are rare, there are targeted online events and *Blindsight* was included in one in particular. Indiewire, the web's leading site for news and information about independent films, recommended its readers check out its curated collection of films on the web-streaming content provider Hulu. In the article "7 Docs for Disability Awareness at Indiewire @ Hulu Docs," posted in October 2013, Indiewire advised its readership to view seven documentaries that deal with disability: *Charlie Don't Surf* (wheelchair patients learn to surf); *High Ground* (amputee war veterans climb mountains); *Blindsight* (blind students scale Mount Everest); *39 Pounds of Love* (man with muscular dystrophy locates doctor who predicted his childhood death); *Up Syndrome* (Down Syndrome patient graduates high school); *Loving Lampposts* (growing prevalence and controversy around autism); and *The Horse Boy* (family travels to Mongolia to heal son of autism) (Indiewire, 2013). Indiewire's initiative is an important stride. However, it also clusters these films under the topic

"disability awareness" which borders off the life stories of the blind persons from *Blindsight* as part of an outsider category.

Film festivals are important cultural events; even if the venues provide physical access to film, it is not enough. This paper's argument rests on the fact that accessibility is traditionally treated in a fractured model and that research often concentrates on one "barrier" issue that the differently-abled face. A more fitting model, then, concentrates not only on solo facets, but rather the connections, affordances, and relations that go on amongst subject positions, namely audiences, actors or film subjects (in the case of documentaries), and filmmakers in mainstream contexts. Film culture requires a model for accessibility that ought to be envisioned triadically to be inclusive.

Filmmaking and Autobiographical Documentarians

Blindsight was produced by Sybil Robson Orr and directed by Lucy Walker. However, Erik Weihenmayer, Sabriye Tenberken, and indeed, all of the Tibetan teenagers are credited as cast members depicting "himself" or "herself." They use the film for deliberate autobiographical disclosure and we argue that it is an "autobiographical documentary" amongst collaborators. Recognition under this genre will help to fully realize *Blindsght's* contribution to film culture in political terms. Choosing to tell one's story is a much different act than letting another tell it. In a 2008 interview, director Lucy Walker is asked about the filmmaking origins of *Blindsight*:

> How did the idea for "Blindsight" come about and evolve?
>
> The initial idea for "Blindsight" came from the people in the movie, I didn't originate the project. Blind American Erik Weihenmayer is the only blind man to climb Everest - another two blind men tried, and one died and the other fell and didn't make it (for every ten people who summit Mount Everest, one dies trying -- just in case you were inspired by the movie and thinking about trying it, don't do it for me, please). Equally formidable is blind German woman Sabriye Tenberken, who

> invented Tibetan Braille and opened the only school for the blind in Tibet, Braille Without Borders.
>
> When Erik climbed Everest, Sabriye emailed him to tell him about how he has inspired her students, and he was so moved by her email that he decided to visit her school in Lhasa. But as a mountaineer extraordinaire he wasn't content with an ordinary visit. Oh no. He decided that the students should climb their own mountain, and he picked 23,000' Lhakpa-Ri, which sits on the shoulder of the north face of Everest. And by the way translates as Stormy Mountain. Then he wondered if that might make a documentary film, and that might publicize the school and help raise funds. So he reached into the film community, and I was recommended (by various people, including Vanessa Arteaga who I'd worked with at Wellspring on "Devil's Playground") as the go-to filmmaker to get remote worlds and elusive teenagers to open up in front of the camera. I was asked if this sounded like a movie, and it was a no-brainer. (IndieWire)

In this interview, Walker explains in simple terms that she was approached by Weihenmayer and Tenberken to make the film. It was their motive; she says "I didn't originate the project," adding that "he reached into the film community, and I was recommended." In their work, *Identity Technologies,* editors Anna Polettti and Julie Rak explain that "in some cases, the form of identity expression works to give the writer access to certain kinds of power and knowledge formations, which were not available to him or her before" (6). While neither Weihenmayer and Tenberken are credited *as* filmmakers, their role in the filmmaking collaboration is key because they intended to tell their own life stories in the medium of film.

Erik Weihenmayer might be described as a famous athlete and his accomplishments are very much rhetorically framed by the fact that he is blind. He is the first blind man in history not only to reach the summit of Mount Everest, but to successfully scale the globe's Seven Summits (the highest mountains on each continent), making him one of only 150 men to accomplish this – the rest of whom were sighted. The *Blindsight* production notes list his media coverage in terms of his appearances:

> Erik's extraordinary accomplishments have gained him abundant press coverage including repeated visits to *The Today Show* and *NBC Nightly News*, *The Oprah*

> *Winfrey Show*, *Good Morning America*, and The *Tonight Show*. He has also been featured on the cover of *Time Magazine* and in *Sports Illustrated*, *People*, and *Men's Journal*.

Jay Leno, Oprah Winfrey, and Larry King all interviewed him under the theme of his accomplishments as a formidable athlete as well as the challenges he faces as a blind person.

One might argue that his life story is always framed for him in the 'great man' narrative that Reaume warns against; adoration for him falls on his great achievements as an athlete alongside adoration for *being blind*. At the same time, one might counter argue that Weihenmayer controls his personal narrative and he consistently constructs it through his personal website, in motivational speeches, film projects, writing, and in *Blindsight* itself. This self-depiction across various channels might be characterized as his "autobiographical manifesto." Drawing on the work of Judith Butler and Donna Haraway, Sidonie Smith discusses the idea of a document with purpose for change, and describes the relationship between autobiography and manifesto:

> Autobiographical practices become occasions for the staging of identity, and autobiographical strategies occasions for the staging of agency. Thus within what Butler labels "this conflicted cultural field" the autobiographer can lay out an agenda for a changed relationship to identity. We see this agenda in recent texts by women which participate in self-consciously political acts. I call these texts autobiographical manifestos. (189)

Putting aside its Hollywood-style embellishments, *Blindsight* gives voice to less-than-famous blind subjects to "initiate and control their own representation" (Couser 18). It is also a political text for establishing "a changed relationship to identity" (Smith 8). In this form, Weihenmayer's fame is a catalyst to reveal the stories of several everyday individuals. Ultimately, they are enabled to participate in the overt political act of telling a life story that might have been muffled without him. Weihenmayer facilitates the goal that Couser outlines for autobiographies of the differently-abled: "they become less vulnerable subjects. Indeed, their narratives may seek to

reduce their vulnerability to pre-inscribed narrative." Weihenmayer's story might be "pre-inscribed" as heroic – *Blind Man Conquers Everest* – but it simultaneously acts as the impetus for other blind subjects to tell a life story in the medium of film, from which they would previously be barred.

Sabriye Tenberken is a Nobel Peace prize nominee. Her stated mandate is to bring about ethical social change for these children who are vulnerable to social ostracism, extreme discrimination, and physical violence. In one case, her school acts as a refuge for a child who has been tortured by his guardians. The claim is made in the film that Tibetan culture views blind people as being "punished" for wrongdoing in a past life. The cultural dichotomy between east and west over the constitution of the disabled body runs throughout the film. In simple terms, Tenberken tells her own story of supportive parents and school life in Germany that empowered her as a blind individual to never hinder her ambitions. In parts of the film, she frames herself as an adventurer travelling alone across Asia. Tenberken's autobiography clearly acts as a moral touchstone providing for the film a value system for a model childhood. Indeed, she overtly speaks of her school's philosophy for educating blind students with life and career skills, reflecting a decidedly Western work-ethic ideology. The postcolonial missionary-style relationship between Tenberken and the children is always present; however, it is counterbalanced to an extent by the voice of each Tibetan teenager.

The visual framework of the film flips between the climb itself and the life stories of the Tibetan children. The film crew returns to their homes and provides day-in-the-life-of glimpses of their pasts in rural spaces across Tibet. One teenager is discovered to be a Chinese national and the team returns to China to find the parents who abandoned him in the streets in Tibet. While many of the teens portray themselves as rescued survivors, some characterize their

experience at the school as a benevolent episode in a mundane life. These multiple voices give *Blindsight* more credibility as a documentary. In several episodes, the children disclose an origin story concerning their blindness in terms of ostracism and violence experienced in early life. Dachung (age 14) says, "I went blind at the age of five. The worse word I was called was 'zhara'- blind idiot. So I got into fights. But I was tougher than the other kids. I'm fourteen years old now. I have no fear." At the same time, the camera follows Dachung along with his father in everyday tasks such as crossing a river, passing time with siblings in his home, and visiting the monastery. His father's concern that climbing Mount Everest might be dangerous for Dachung is palpable but never melodramatic. It offers a portrait of Dachung's everyday life.

Sonam Bhumtso (age 15) recounts: "Some people they says blind, blind, you are blind! Then I fight them off," however, her smiling tone and facial expressions designate her statements to a past that now seems like an anecdotal story for her. She is also framed alongside her father who tells the story of how she goes blind after visiting relatives and eating fish that fell into the fire. He says, "we consulted deities and Lamas and they said it could be the fire spirit." When she speaks of her own life, some fragments are conveyed as a voiceover while she is depicted working in a field with other teenagers preparing grain. The visual story illustrated is *Here is Sonam in her everyday life*. However, the camera cuts to her addressing us directly, which enables her to reflect on her future. The audience hears her voice alongside her facial expressions, which convey realism and concern. She concentrates on practical worries, "My parents support me at the moment. But if they died my two younger siblings would have to take care of me. At the moment, they are very good to me but they might change their minds." The film returns regularly to practical concerns for these children.

When the climbing expedition starts, an experienced mountain climber trains and assists each teen in the ascent. As the climb progresses up the mountain and each teen responds differently to the intense physical challenge, the professional climbing crew occasionally questions what it means for privileged athletes to lead Tibetans to climb Mount Everest. They reflect on the physical danger and risk, but they also discuss the fact that climbing Everest is only considered a feat in Western culture. Huddling in tents during the climb, they worry over their decision to project Western values on a culture that does not prize mountain climbing as a ritual signifying bravery, fearlessness, or leadership. Oddly for the viewer, ethical self-reflection seems to take place only when the risk is apparent and many of the team members start to react to the altitude with illness. On the whole, the common thematic arc across all of the life narratives is that the school acts as a sanctuary for education, comfort, and solace in a country with religious beliefs that hold the students responsible for their blindness. Climbing this mountain is framed both as a public spectacle (meeting the film's motive to publicize the plight of blind Tibetans) and as private act of empowerment for each person, including Weihenmayer, Tenberken, Sonam Bhumtso, Gyenshen, Dachung, Kyila, Tenzin, and Tashi Pasang.

In our previous paper on *Antoine*, which followed Jim Lane's work on the genre of autobiographical documentary, we argued that the definition must be broadened to account for collaboration between filmmakers and blind subjects. We wrote:

> *Antoine* is also an autobiographical documentary created by Antoine Houang that invites us to listen to the solo disclosures of a child who also identifies as blind. To this end, the generic conventions of both autobiography and documentary open a space for Antoine to present himself and to represent his thoughts, ambitions, hopes, fears, and fictional compositions. Through his collaboration with Bari, Antoine Houang is given a voice and a filmic platform to describe his life in his words–a politically liberating act. (Pedersen and Aspevig 2011) (654)

There are many similarities between *Antoine* and *Blindsight*: both involve blind children telling life narratives, leading to all the issues of consent that come into play with minors in cinematic roles. Both films involve specialized considerations for facilitating the filmmaking process to enable these children to even have an autobiographical voice. There are significant differences as well. Antoine Houang lives in Montréal with loving parents, friends, schools and infrastructures that are essentially benevolent. *Blindsight* frames a much different portrait for these Tibetan children. While many are depicted in loving relationships, they face a cultural value system that rejects their identities as blind individuals.

Conclusion

Blindsight is unique. Simultaneously a documentary by Walker and an autobiographical documentary, it affords eight subjects some creative control over the content and the aspects of their lives they choose to share. Weihenmayer's fame enabled him to instigate the film in the first place and his role in this regard is somewhat controversial. The paper identifies *Blindsight* as an exemplar film *by*, *about* and *for* blind persons screened in a mainstream event, the Toronto International Film Festival. It has argued a foundational rationale for why film festivals need to include blind persons as audience members. While it is important for festivals to make films accessible with audio descriptions to overcome a barrier, it is also crucial to cast this goal within a broader model in the form of a solution to making film culture accessible. To participate as blind audience members, particularly at film festivals, is to witness nascent film - new styles, genres, discourses, techniques etc. - which could also serve as inspiration to budding blind filmmakers. Blind and partially-visioned audience members can and should vet representations of blindness in film. They should be included in the full range of film culture celebrating,

deconstructing, criticizing, and enjoying films beside sighted audiences. More so in this paper, we call for the film to be formally considered an autobiographical documentary in order for the life stories told in the narrative to be treated with greater import and political weight. Using the cinematic term "autobiographical documentary" to describe collaborative endeavours between sighted and blind filmmakers in the pursuit of telling life stories is a positive step toward making film culture more inclusive. By extension, we encourage film festival curators and those involved in festival programming to recognize the value and cultural importance of autobiographical documentary when it comes to including the differently-abled. However subtle, the term shifts agency back to the blind filmmaker, a teller of one's life story, and provides that filmmaker with all the credit due to the position. Inclusion in film culture is important. However, inclusion in film culture with the full potential to be an artist, maker, director, autobiographer or writer of a film is a more constructive and sincere goal in the pursuit of broader cultural accessibility.

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