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BOOK & FILM REVIEWS

***Una Vida Sin Palabras* (A Life Without Words)**, directed by Adam Isenberg, colour, 71 minutes 2011, Nicaraguan sign language and Spanish, English, Spanish, French, Catalan, Turkish and Kurdish subtitles, including subtitles in each language for the Deaf and hard of hearing, Zela Film (Istanbul), distributor: Documentary Educational Resources.

Una Vida Sin Palabras is a documentary film that follows a short period in the lives of a *campesino* family living in a rural area of Nicaragua as a teacher of Nicaraguan sign language, working for a local NGO, endeavours to teach two deaf siblings, Dulce Maria (28), Francisco (22), how to sign. The film has won a number of international awards including the Margaret Mead Filmmaker's award at the Margaret Mead Film Festival (New York, 2012) and the *Prix Documentaire* at *Cinélatino Recontres de Toulouse*, France, 2012. In an interview about how he came to make the film, the director, Adam Isenberg, describes its origins as follows:

> I studied linguistics and remember from my studies the curious story of the emergence of Nicaraguan Sign Language. I wanted to make a documentary about that, so I started digging around online and came across the NGO 'Nicaraguan Sign Language Projects' […] Along the way, through a friend of a friend, I was introduced to the family in the film. Dulce Maria and Francisco were like no one I'd ever met: adults who knew not a word of any language – not even their own names. They seemed suspended in another dimension, even a bit mystical, forgotten at the outer limits of our linguistically and socially constructed reality. Their life, and the predicament of countless others like them, became more important to me than the history of the local sign language. So the film became about them, and the sign-language teacher's efforts to reach them[1].

In seeking to capture the lives of a family he views as extraordinary, Isenberg's project is entirely in keeping with the provenance of documentary film making in ethnographic research as a mode of academic discourse that endeavours to represent and evaluate difference. The film is dominated by Isenberg's perception of the children as 'suspended in another dimension'. For example, the film provides no historical information about the development of sign language in Nicaragua or about its relationship to the mass literacy programmes initiated by the Sandinista government in the 1980s. The absence of this kind of contextualising information is coupled with a lack of detail in relation to the spatial, geographical and social location of the family. For anyone without background understanding of the recent history of Nicaragua, debates around dependency theory in Central America and the societal or systemic causes for such socio-economic and educational divisions within

Nicaraguan society, making sense of the life of this family is very difficult. The decision not to address the historical and structural causes of marginalisation and disability in Nicaragua means that any understanding produced by the film cannot go beyond the implied tragedy of lives which are presented as being 'without words' or the depiction of deafness as a form of pre-modern other-wordliness: lives 'suspended in another dimension'.

As if to reinforce this notion of the mystical nature of the family's existence, the film provides no sense of the passage of time – either in terms of the duration of the events depicted or of the process of film making in the community itself. As such, the depiction of the countryside and of its rural populace is separated off from the assumed modernity that underpins the viewing position of the film's intended audience (namely participants at international documentary film festivals). The film provides us with countless shots of mountains and an un-developed landscape alongside the religious songs of Dulce Maria's aunt and images of the sons chopping wood and Dulce Maria fortifying the walls of the kitchen with mud. These present a 'mythified' image of rural life – as if this family exist outside the temporality, modernity and movement that is associated with the urban spaces in the film. It is worth noting that the teacher is characterised from the outset in terms of travel and her engagement with technology. In other words, she is associated with change, movement and development. In contrast, the boys in the family are depicted only in the immediate vicinity of the house, and Dulce Maria's only journey is to the local church. There is a sense of circularity and repetition in the depiction of their lives; a well-worn representation of rural life as unchanging, cyclical and predictable. In this sense, Isenberg's stated interest in a family he views as '…a bit mystical, forgotten at the outer limits of our linguistically and socially constructed reality' has evident affinities with a history of representation oriented around the presentation of an exoticised difference marked by its apparently incommensurable alterity.

Despite the critical celebration of the film as a means to educate and combat the injustices experienced by such marginalised groups, if the visual tropes of the film are read in relation to the critique of ableist discourse we find in disability studies, then a very different and very problematic engagement with disability and the global south emerges. Isenberg's aim is to present his audience with something extraordinary that they, like him, have never before encountered. His curiosity at these figures he presents as inhabiting the very limits of our "reality" is effectively a definition of enfreakment wherein the family become the passive objects of the audience's half fascinated, half horrified gaze. One could argue that this is in keeping with the history of documentary as a genre; some of the earliest documentary footage was produced by a Romanian professor Gheorghe Marinescu who made several short films about the physiological effects of neurological impairments such as *The walking troubles of*

organic hemiplegy (1898), and *The walking troubles of organic paraplegies* (1899). Documentary also developed as a genre in Britain as part of the mandate to educate the peoples of the British Empire by way of the work of the Empire Marketing Board. This body utilised the new technology of film to develop the visual history of empire which had its origins in the production of exotic images of otherness at the Great Exhibitions in the nineteenth century. However, the twentieth century trajectory of the genre is characterised by increasing self-reflexivity on the part of the film maker, something that occurred in tandem with the academic auto-critique of anthropology and ethnography in the 1970s and 1980s in the work of scholars such as James Clifford and George Marcus and with the history of anti-colonial and national liberation movements. Indeed, during this period Nicaragua was the setting for arguably one of the last examples of such a mass based movement of political and cultural change: the revolutionary victory of Sandinista Front for National Liberation in 1979. However, unfortunately Isenberg's film is neither self-reflexive as far as the process of its own construction is concerned, nor does it acknowledge or problematize the position of the ethnographic gaze of the film maker. A key example of this occurs at the end of the film when we see the teacher break down in tears as a result of the difficulties she has experienced in her endeavour to teach Dulce Maria and Francisco to sign. The camera stays – somewhat relentlessly – fixed on her tears and the repetitive movements she makes to wipe them away with her scarf. It moves from close ups, to the middle distance and back again, at one point becoming blurred for the first time in the film, as if this moment, these tears, are significant enough to disrupt the film making itself. The teacher addresses the family who stand around her, watching in a passive if uncomprehending manner. She says:

> The three of them I love them. That's how I feel. Yeah I'm crying thinking of them. Here in this house they can't learn. They should have gone to school. They know nothing. That's why I'm crying. They're smart […] They can learn […][2]

This moment – which brings the film to its conclusion – condenses a number of elements that underpin the film's construction of the family at the centre of its narrative. It conveys the implied tragedy of lives which are presented as being "without words" and the implicit blame that is meted out to the children's parents for the decision to take the children out of school earlier in their lives. What we get here is an affirmation of the perspective of the outsider as the one who is authorised to speak about and speak for the needs of the children and their family. This is predicated upon the interpellation of a viewing audience who are aligned with the structural position and perspective of the teacher. It is a film about a *campesino* family but one that is made for an educated, urban audience with a predilection for Art House cinema. Far from addressing what Isenberg's calls the "predicament" of the siblings and of "countless others", the film ultimately re-inscribes and reinforces their silence and the subordination

they experience as a consequence of disability, class and geography.

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Notes

[1] 'Going behind the scenes *of Una Vida sin Palabras*' an interview with Adam Isenberg for the 19th ¡Viva! Spanish & Latin American Film Festival, Cornerhouse Cinema, Manchester, UK. http://www.cornerhouse.org/viva-festival/viva-festival-news/going-behind-the-scenes-of-una-vida-sin-palabras accessed September 20th 2013

[2] *Una Vida Sin Palabras*, 2011, I:08:38 - 1:09:43