

REVIEWS

We make Films project, in association with Kirti Film Club, New Delhi & Mumbai

Reviews of Documentaries: 'We Make Film' & 'I Didn't See You There'

A screening of two documentaries, namely 'We Make Film' (dir. Shweta Ghosh, 2011) and 'I Didn't See You There' (dir. Reid Davenport, 2022) was held on 23rd July 2022 as a part of the We Make Film project, in association with Kriti Film Club. The screenings were held in New Delhi and Mumbai as well as over Zoom.

The first documentary 'We Make Film' started with looking at how disabled characters in Indian films are portrayed. A popular film, *Sholay*, was discussed to talk about how one of the characters, Thakur, is made to feel like he is being given the ultimate punishment when the dacoit, Gabbar, threatens to cut his hands. The documentary then goes on to ask as to why there are no disabled actors in the industry and in the very next breath questions if there are any disabled filmmakers? If the filmmakers are all able bodied, then chances are that the actors and characters on screen will be too. The documentary then moves on to explore the lives of three filmmakers who have disabilities. The documentary has the director Shwetha Ghosh conversing with the filmmakers in an informal interview and she is assisted by filmmakers Priyanka Pal and Sumit Singh.

The first filmmaker we meet is Debopriya who is hard of hearing and uses a hearing aid. She relates her story about her growing-up years and the struggles she underwent which included the challenge of facing apprehensions of her otherwise supportive parents when deciding to send her to college. She also speaks about how she was really scared to take up the internship at an animation firm the environment of which she later began to like once she started her work there. She feels that using alternative means of education, such as using animated movies, might be a better pedagogical tool for many children with disabilities, but not just limited to them. She emphasises the importance of including everyone not just for

the purpose of ticking the diversity box but also to include people even if it requires restructuring the way in which things have ‘always’ been done.

The next filmmaker in conversation with Ghosh is Anuja who is blind and has been learning the tropes of filmmaking by using accessible apps. Anuja highlights the fact that even the most accessible apps are not sufficient when it comes to the field of direction. She feels that the audio descriptions that are provided in the apps are only for the general audience. For example, the app does not mention anything about camera angles, hairstyles, shot angles, and so on. She also underscores the need to change the way direction is seen and taught for more students to be included.

The last filmmaker is Mijo who is hearing impaired. He recounts how his school-life experience was a bad one as long as he used to go to a hearing school till class 8. Once he enrolled in a deaf school, he could understand what was being ‘said’ as Sign Language was finally being used and he, thus, gained confidence. In his professional experience, he says he has noticed that a lot of stories on deaf subjects do not see the light of the day due to many films getting rejected. A producer might notice such a film if by any chance, the film goes viral. Also, the team needed to make a film is quite often not available to a director who has a disability. All this could be due to societal and attitudinal barriers. The process of filmmaking should be an accessible process.

The documentary ends with the underlying message that if and when material technology and filmmaking process are accessible, everyone can make films.

The next documentary ‘I Didn’t See You There’ is filmed by Reid Davenport and is from the perspective of what he sees and experiences during the day. Reid has cerebral palsy and he uses a motorised wheelchair to move around in the city of Oakland where he lives. Throughout the documentary, he has the camera either mounted on the wheelchair or positions it at his own eye level. While mounted on the wheelchair, the camera usually captures either the road or the sky or a side view but never Reid’s face. We get to see his life lived out from his point of view, both literally and figuratively. The film captures the mundane everyday activities – the settling of flies in kitchen, the answering of the voicemails, the pouring of juice to enjoy in the evening, the drinking of coffee in the morning on the balcony and such.

It is on one of these balcony sessions that Reid points to an orange-coloured circus tent that is coming up at the corner of the street. This circus tent, over the course of the documentary, becomes almost like a second protagonist. He invokes the notion of ‘freaks’ that have long been associated with circus and also how those with bodily abnormality were seen as. As the documentary progresses, Reid, in his daily commute, captures the tent from closer angles, almost as if it is growing on him and is taking an overwhelming space in both his mind as well as the screen. Throughout the film, he often invokes this concept whenever he sees and comes across the tent.

We also go with him to his house to visit his mother and experience the issues he faces with the wheelchair in the flight while de-boarding. At his mother’s, we are also shown a side where his mother fusses over his decision to live independently in another state altogether. Parts of this worry stems from the motherly love and part from the fact that he is a person with disability, on a wheelchair who needs to manage everything on his own. On another trip to his mother’s place, she also shows concern about his radical and upfront political opinions, which might get him into trouble. Comparing the two places, Reid says that the town he grew up in is like a purgatory while Oakland is an ethical purgatory. However, he insists on living in the city as it gives him access to commute independently in the form of sidewalks, open well-paved parks, buses and subways.

Towards the end of the documentary, we see two separate incidents that have probably become a part of the routine in his life. In one, while he is driving his wheelchair, it loses balance and he falls. The reaction of the people around him put him somewhat in a precarious situation, where he does need the help, but also does not want to come across as being overly dependent. In another situation, the main ramp that leads to his apartment is blocked off by thick coils of electrical cords being used by workers nearby. He tries to navigate his way around but is not successful. When he tells the workers off for putting a cord there, they apologise and remove it but yet say that the work was only for an hour and would have been removed after that anyway. He does not engage with them much after the path is clear, but he is clearly frustrated once he is home and asks off camera why his path to home should be blocked for an hour when nobody else’s is. Why is this not seen as a basic matter of concern? The documentary finally draws to a close with a montage of clips taken from the wheelchair, some aimed to the ground, some straight ahead and some focussed on the sky. We can see

the gravel, road, concrete and grass running by at different speeds. We also see people always around but yet never at the same level, never interacting. It winds up with a line in his voice saying, how, even though he is always around, he is told, 'I didn't see you there'. He is always in the line of sight, or the line of stare, but yet, never important enough to be acknowledged, or have his opinions considered in a public setting.

Both the films try to capture the way in which disabled filmmakers create films and pieces of creativity while also talking about the process of doing this. But this is where the similarities end. Based in two different countries and shot from two entirely different points of view, the films in a way portray the insider–outsider perspective – how does the world see the disabled body versus how the disabled body sees the world? Also, while the first film focuses on the challenges to filmmaking while having a disability, the second one is a journey into filmmaking because of the disability. The challenges that they face is governed by the social context of their social location. Their age, gender and class status, in addition to their place of living decide how much accessibility (whether physical in terms of rights or attitudinal) they have.

The film screenings were followed by a panel discussion with both the directors, along with Anita Ghai (Professor, AUD), Prateek Vats (independent filmmaker), Sumit Singh (participatory video specialist/filmmaker) and Priyanka Pal (film accessibility specialist /filmmaker). The panel discussion was via Zoom where Sumit was present physically at the Delhi location, Prateek and Priyanka at the Mumbai location and the rest of the panellist from their respective spaces. The main point that emerged was that, till date, the process of filmmaking is a very ableist process. While there have been attempts to incorporate the disabled perspective here and there, it is mostly from the margins, from the perspective of a 'freak', and a disabled perspective in and by itself is not desired. Filmmaking is not just the actual making of the film but it is the concept which one has in mind. Apart from it being a privileged process, it is not a disabled friendly process at all. The intersection of disability and gender, of the rural and the urban backgrounds also play a large part in the process of filmmaking, which might make it exclusionary not only for those with disability. Or conversely, it makes it even more exclusionary when other marginal identities also exist. However, it is also important to keep in mind as to who is making the film and for whom it is being made. The marketability of the films is always a central concern. Here, it was pointed out that since content, that is, accessibility to the disabled, is naturally accessible to the able-

bodied, it should in fact be more marketable as it will include a larger audience. Adding different layers to the process will add to the experience of the viewers. It is therefore the industry which is missing out if it does not take disabled people on board.

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