



Blindsight

104 minutes, 2006 UK

Director Lucy Walker

Cast: Erik Weißenmayer, Sabriye Tenberken

Synopsis: Set against the breathtaking backdrop of the Himalayas, *Blindsight* follows the gripping adventure of six Tibetan teenagers who set out to climb the 23,000 foot Lhakpa Ri on the north side of Mount Everest. A dangerous journey soon becomes a seemingly impossible challenge made all the more remarkable by the fact that the teenagers are blind. Believed by many Tibetans to be possessed by demons, the children are shunned by their parents, scorned by their villages and rejected by society. Rescued by Sabriye Tenberken -- a blind educator and adventurer who established the first school for the blind in Lhasa, the students invite the famous blind mountain climber Erik Weißenmayer to visit their school after learning about his conquest of Everest. Erik arrives in Lhasa and inspires Sabriye and her students Kyila, Sonam Bhumtso, Tashi, Gyenshen, Dachung and Tenzin to let him lead them higher than they have ever been before. --© Official Site

Review, Peter Bradshaw, The Guardian

British film-maker Lucy Walker has found some great material here. The film has already, rightly, won much praise for the way Walker declines to judge Weißenmayer. Was this a heartwarming, life-affirming idea to help underprivileged young people, or a grotesque exercise in conceit from a well-off westerner obsessed with climbing and conquering, who has dragooned poor, bewildered kids - who can have given no informed consent to this desperately dangerous adventure - into his own compulsive, never-ending need to prove himself? Something in the structural balance of this last sentence will give a hint of my own suspicions, although it's the "heartwarming" explanation that made the film a hit with audiences. The footage Walker gets is tremendous, particularly when one of the young Tibetans gets sick, and a Sherpa unsentimentally suggests leading him back down, but not telling the others he's gone: exploiting their blindness for group morale!

Nobody asks the most basic but valid question: what precisely is the blind child's experience of "climbing Everest" anyway? After all, these children are being guided every step of the way, and take none of the adult climber's decisions, and Weißenmayer himself needs sighted guides. If it is genuinely different from just doing the equivalent on a treadmill in the open air, then how is it different? Is it so wrong and insensitive to ask?

I found myself thinking about the blinded Gloucester in Shakespeare's *Lear*, poised over his non-existent precipice - although, for these children, the precipice certainly does exist, and threatens at any moment to turn this questionable exercise in altruism into tragedy and scandal. I also dug out Gilbert Adair's essay on Abel Gance's cult melodrama *Blind Venus* (1943), about a blind woman placed aboard a boat by her sea-captain lover, who then simply chugs back and forth across the harbour, wafting exotic smells across her face and assuring the pathetic woman that she is travelling the world. What's the difference for her? What's the difference for the children?

Wouldn't it have been better, and more meaningful, to teach them to sing, or play a musical instrument?

On the Genesis of the Film:

The idea for the film came from Erik Weihenmayer the blind mountaineer and one of the main characters in the film. Erik was put in contact with film producer Sybil Robson Orr by producer Steven Haft. He thought this story would likely resonate with her because of her interest in Tibet and mountain climbing. (She met her husband Matthew climbing Kilimanjaro, the same mountain on which Erik got married.) It only took one meeting with Erik before she decided to make the film.

“Erik told me climbing mountains gave him confidence as a blind teenager and he wanted to share that experience with these blind Tibetan kids. He asked me if I thought taking 6 blind Tibetan teenagers up a 23,000-foot mountain in the Himalayas sounded like a movie. I told him it did and decided to make it,” says producer Robson-Orr. Sybil and Steven Haft had liked Lucy Walker’s ‘Devil’s Playground,’ the critically acclaimed documentary feature about Amish teenagers, and asked her if she’d be interested in directing this project. Lucy connected with the material personally, and thus the filmmaking unit was complete.

On Blindness:

“Blind people in Tibet are really lacking in resources, support, understanding, medical care, and expectations, and even at the blind school it was hard to believe that Erik could have done something so immensely challenging” says Lucy Walker, director. “Sabriye herself knew that blind people can do anything they put their minds to, and Erik provided the perfect example for her to instill this in her students - once she had convinced them that it was true. Then they were so overjoyed that Sabriye wrote to Erik to tell him about it. When Erik received the letter he said he “felt like a coward” in comparison to what Sabriye had achieved, and resolved to visit - and then the idea for a climbing expedition was born, as we see in the film”.

On Interpreting Blindness Cinematically:

“I was always anxious not to use the cliché of a soft-focus lens to depict the vision of the blind people in the film who have some vision - because that is not what their vision looks like,” says director Lucy Walker. “They have all kinds of variations on image distortion, with dancing eyes, or being able to sense light only, all very specific, and I felt we should either go for it or not, but I didn’t want to use an inaccurate analogy like out-of-focus”.

On the Production Schedule and Locations:

The production was divided into 2 shoots; the spring training in May 2004 involved a climb up a vertical rock face and a trek over a 16,000-foot pass beginning at Tsurpu Monastery. The second shoot from September to November 2004 involved traveling across the Tibetan plateau to all of the 6 kids’ villages, including a trip 1000 km away to southern China, by plane, and an additional 3 days by van to find Tashi’s family in Szechuan Province. The expedition up the 23,000-foot Lhakpa Ri was also shot in the fall.

On the Challenges of Shooting in Tibet:

Producer Robson-Orr notes, “Shooting in Tibet presents a myriad of challenges. The most significant being that the Chinese authorities are extremely particular about what you shoot. If it is not listed on your shot list, approved in Beijing prior to your arrival, they won’t let you shoot it. You are assigned minders to make sure you don’t. At the same time, if you are shooting what you said you intended to, there is no problem. Fortunately, we only had the best of intentions and only a few hiccups.”

“When we were shooting in southern China, Szechuan police arrived and demanded we stop shooting at the very moment Tashi was being reunited with his father for the first time in 9 years. Tashi’s reunion was a major moment in our film, unfolding before our eyes, and it could never be recaptured. Fortunately, Petr Cikhart is very experienced in tense shooting conditions and was not

fazed by the pressure. Ultimately, we did get shut down but not before we shot the first 10 golden minutes of the reunion. The police put us under a 'house arrest' of sorts back in our hotel in Luding. They seemed to be concerned we were shooting something political. Turns out the film permit we purchased from Beijing only applied to locations listed for Tibet, but not the ones in China. Fortunately, a senior official from the Tibet Autonomous Region called officials in Luding and told them everything was okay and they let us continue shooting the next day."

On Shooting at Altitude:

The biggest challenge at altitude is making sure the crew gets enough rest, proper food and most importantly, doesn't get sick. In order to shoot the climbing team passing by, the crew had to run ahead of the climbers, set up, let them pass and then run up in front of them again, all the time carrying over 40 pounds of gear and all at altitudes ranging between 15,000 and 22,000 feet. Concentration is hugely important and is one of the first things to slip when at altitude. Nightly production meetings were held to insure the team was getting the coverage necessary, recognizing there would never be a way to shoot everything, but always checking to make sure what they did have was quality.

Director, Lucy Walker grew up in London, England. She studied literature at Oxford University and directed theatre before winning a Fulbright Scholarship to attend NYU's graduate film program, where she won various awards and received an MFA. Her directing credits include music videos, short films, children's television (she was nominated for two Emmys for Outstanding Directing for Nickelodeon's BLUE'S CLUES), and DEVIL'S PLAYGROUND, a feature-length documentary about the struggles of Amish teenagers which premiered at Sundance and went on to win numerous accolades including the Audience Award at Sarasota, Jury Prize at Karlovy-Vary, Best Documentary and Grand Prize at the AFI DVfest, and nominations for three Emmys (Best Documentary, Best Directing, and Best Editing) and an Independent Spirit Award (Best Documentary). Lucy appeared as a guest on The Oprah Winfrey Show and the film is now a hit DVD. She was named one of Filmmaker magazine's "Top 25 New Faces in Film" and is currently writing and directing a fiction feature with BBC Films and Hart Sharp Entertainment.