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Ik gebaar, ik leef / I Sign, I Live

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BOOK AND FILM REVIEWS

Anja Hiddinga and Jascha Blume, *Ik Gebaar, Ik Leef / I Sign, I Live*, 58 minutes, 2012. Distribution: Stichting Geelprodukt, Makuxi.

The documentary *I Sign, I Live*, directed by Anja Hiddinga and Jascha Blume has won several prizes and was screened at ethnographic, disability and deaf film festivals. The film opens with clips of a small, deaf, Dutch boy receiving speech training at different moments in his childhood. This boy is Jascha Blume, now a rebellious young man in his twenties who visits various elderly deaf people and talks with them about their lives. But first, Jascha is further introduced. He is filmed from the bottom of a swimming pool, a clip that returns again and again in the documentary. This is probably meant as reference to the metaphor of feeling 'like a fish in water' when being able to use sign language. We do not see him signing yet, though; subtitles tell his story, and we see clips of Jascha in his room, behind his laptop, eating a sandwich, looking a bit surly.

When Jascha goes out to meet elderly deaf people, his first stop is the Gelderhorst, a retirement home for elderly deaf people in Ede, the Netherlands. He interviews a deaf couple and they and three other protagonists are recorded in various locations: at a beach, in a coffee house, in their home, in their former deaf school, in a cheese shop, in a harbour, and in a classroom, where they tell stories to deaf children. During the first half hour the protagonists are introduced, and in the second half of the documentary each of them returns to tell their stories.

Their conversations with Jascha are about a broad number of themes: deaf sports, not being allowed to sign at school with fellow pupils, signing with deaf children as a deaf educator, life in a boarding school for deaf pupils, relationships and marriages with other deaf people, dancing and music, communication in the family, and contacts with other deaf people. Old pictures of those interviewed play an important role in the film, as do historical movie fragments that were recorded in deaf schools. Jascha himself also takes a number of photographs of the people he interviews, and is videorecorded doing so.

In between the sections that focus on elderly deaf people, the portrait of Jascha continues. He is filmed in his home, on his bicycle, in his art class with an interpreter, and in a stairway, often looking

pensive. During these in-between fragments, the subtitling does not translate people's signing but tells Jascha's story instead. In the subtitles, he, for example, reflects on how important his time at Gallaudet (the world's only university for deaf people, in Washington, DC) was for him. We see exuberant shots of him with his international friends on Facebook, and we see him signing through a webcam with his girlfriend on the other side of the world. Information and communication technologies, and his international contacts play an important role in his life, in apparent contrast with the lives of the elderly deaf people interviewed. Jascha is also recorded when editing the photographs he has taken of the elderly people, and at the end of the documentary Jascha is filmed during an exhibition of these photographs. This is the first time we see him interacting with other Dutch deaf youth, which is surprisingly late, in my eyes.

Jascha's role in the documentary is interesting and puzzling at the same time: he is not only one of the protagonists, but also cameraman, photographer, interviewer, and interlocutor. I believe that this visibility of multiple roles is innovative in comparison with other documentaries about deaf people, and the concept of a young deaf person going to meet elderly deaf persons, and wearing multiple hats while doing so, is an appealing one. The way Jascha is portrayed during his interactions with them is, however, rather partial and fragmentary. I did not see him signing with his face clearly visible until the eighteenth minute of this one-hour video, in one of the conversations with elderly deaf people, when rebellious Jascha moves over and makes room for a friendly, empathic Jascha. It is not until the thirtieth minute that we see him telling about himself in sign language, empathising with an elderly deaf woman about being ashamed to sign in the past. In the few fragments like these, he becomes an active interlocutor. We learn how his experiences and views meet and contrast with those of the elderly, on topics such as style of dancing, ideas about enjoying music, and ideas about finding it OK to be deaf versus preferring to be hearing. I found these the most interesting clips of the documentary.

The way that the directors cinematically depict Jascha's signing with elderly deaf people during interviews is inconsequent, and therefore looks chaotic. Sometimes he is not filmed when he asks a question, and the question is displayed in the subtitles only. Other times his hands are partially in view, not enough to understand what he is signing, but enough to know that he is signing something. Other times his whole front is visible: two different screens are positioned next to each other, with one camera portraying Jascha and another camera portraying his interlocutor. In the

interlocutor's frame, parts of Jascha's hands are visible, which I experienced as disturbing and unaesthetic. Yet other times Jascha and the elderly person are in the same screen when they have a conversation. The fragments when Jascha is not in view, or not enough to decipher his signing, are problematic in terms of accessibility for people who do not want to rely on subtitles.

The dominance of subtitles over sign language in both Jascha's story and the interviews with elderly people is ironic given that the title of the documentary is 'I Sign, I Live'. Furthermore, because of the changes in camera positions during interviews, I got the impression that the positioning of the camera(s) during interviews was an experimental trial-and-error enterprise, rather than carefully planned. The ultimate aim of the documentary is not clear to me: Is it the story of how Jascha experiences his life and contacts with elderly deaf people? Or is the main aim to bring the stories of elderly deaf Dutch people to light? In my eyes, the strength of the film is the encounter between different generations of deaf people, in particular the conversations where both Jascha and the deaf interlocutor are clearly in view and discuss aspects of life as a deaf person. I found myself hungry for more of such clips.

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