Chapter 15

A Social Cognition Approach to Stereotyping in Documentary Practice

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Abstract

Our perceptions of the social world are guided by categorical (i.e. stereotypical) thinking based on pre-existing schematic knowledge, which frames filmmaking as well as viewing practices. This chapter outlines how folk-psychological mechanisms, as manifested in films and filmmaking textbooks, potentially result in the construction and perpetuation of social stereotypes that are detrimental to certain communities such as disabled people. This knowledge is then deployed in my own film practice to reduce or reconfigure disability stereotypes, particularly using the strategy of narrative fragmentation, which prevents the formation of schematic characters and plots.

Beth Haller (2010, p. 27) explains that, Western societies are mass-mediated, and ‘“their citizens understand ‘“reality’” through personal experience and mass media information.’”, This means that if we have no lived interactions with(in) a particular community, our understanding of that community is, to a large degree, formed by the social stereotypes disseminated across different media, especially nonfiction media. However, as stereotypes are hardwired cognitive mechanisms that enable social comprehension and interaction, it would be counterproductive to attempt to make a general case against them. Hence, in this chapter, the concept ‘“stereotype’” is used to refer specifically to those filmic representations that perpetuate hegemonic in-group/ out-group binaries, contributing to the maintenance of detrimental social boundaries between communities. The particular binary of abled *vs.* disabled—the focus of my film practice—is the subject of the chapter’s case study.

This discourse on stereotypes, which is situated at the intersection of social cognition and cultural studies, is concerned with the formation of ‘“otherness.’” According to Richard Dyer (2006, p. 355), this represents a form of boundary maintenance using the ‘“fixed, clear-cut and unalterable’”

representations attached to those excluded by society's normative rules. Known as the ‘‘out-group homogeneity effect,’’ these stereotypes are fuelled by undifferentiated categorical perceptions of out-group members (Moskowitz, 2005, p. 459), deemed ‘‘abnormal others,’’ and are the prerequisites for the formation of prejudice and the enactment of discrimination (e.g. Nelson, 2009; Kite and Whitley, 2016). For instance, Susan T. Fiske et al. (2002, pp. 895–896) have shown that non-disabled people tend to hold paternalistic prejudices towards disabled people, shaped by stereotypes of perceived inferiority, low status, incompetence and pitifulness. There is an obvious link between such social stereotypes and how disabled people are generally portrayed in nonfiction media: as Dyer (2002, p. 1) reminds us, the way social groups are treated in real life is a direct consequence of their media representation. Furthermore, these stereotypes can also inform the self-esteem, self-perception and self-identity of members of the stigmatized out-group (Zhang and Haller, 2013, p. 322), with a consequently detrimental impact on their cognitive and social performance—due, for example, to long-term stress arousal (Schmader et al. 2008).

Stereotypes in films are formed and perpetuated through the specific configuration of popular narrative formulas and categorical sociocultural schemas. However, equipped with this knowledge, documentary practitioners can create films that have the capacity to collectively *re*configure such stereotypes and reduce the perception of the categorical other's ‘‘abnormality.’’ Such research-led, critical practice shows that cognitive models can help filmmakers make conscious (rather than intuitive) decisions about representation, narrative structuring and the use of audiovisual aesthetics—decisions that are informed by an understanding of their film's possible social implications. It also highlights the need for cognitive scholars to abandon the assumption of a universal audience and instead critically engage with the particular social contexts that frame the construction and reception of documentary films.

With this in mind, this chapter first briefly establishes the folk-psychological mechanisms spectators and filmmakers share, and which are apparent in the narrative formulas widely disseminated by documentary filmmaking textbooks. This provides a valuable insight for film practitioners and teachers of film production into how common narrative and character schemas can potentially lead to, as well as result from, the formation of stereotypes that create harmful in-group/ out-group divisions. This general hypothesis is then tested by analyzsing a range of mainstream documentaries that depict blind people according to schematic narratives and character roles, with the conclusion that the frequent application of coherent *narrative* stereotypes of characters with visual disabilities leads to *social* stereotypes that ‘‘other’’ blind people. These become ossified as a divisive abled/disabled binary in spectators' schematic dispositions. Finally, the chapter demonstrates how this meta-practice knowledge has informed my own filmmaking, most particularly in relation to my documentary, *The Terry Fragments* (2018), featuring a blind painter. The film exemplifies the ways in which I strive to reconfigure the narrative and, by implication, social stereotypes of blindness.

From Ffolk Ppsychology to Nnarrative and Ssocial Sstereotypes

Filmmakers and spectators share the same mechanism of schema formation and the same need to construct and comprehend narratives because they also share an inherent '"folk psychology."' This is defined by the disciplines of the philosophy of mind and cognitive science as a hardwired cognitive disposition that propels us to automatically turn to everyday knowledge to '"predict and explain the behaviour of others"' (Currie, 2004, p. 108). The universal human need to make sense of the thoughts, feelings and actions of others manifests itself in the construction of narratives (Hutto, 2007, p. 45). Film is one of the cultural artefacts that shapes and is shaped by this inbuilt narrative practice,[1] which is why the study of film reveals shared interpretations, experiences and dispositions, comprising what Carl Plantinga (2011, p. 30) calls, the 'filmmaker–audience loop'. This loop accounts for the fact that, on the one hand, an audience is able to understand a film narrative, and on the other, a filmmaker can predict an audience's response. Although the inextricable relationship between filmmakers, films and spectators has been widely discussed in cognitive film studies (albeit predominantly in terms of fiction films), there is still a lacuna in the discourse, as Plantinga (2009, p. 257) points out, when it comes to the understanding of how folk psychology informs spectator demographics and identity politics, and—particularly relevant in the context of this chapter—how it can result in averse social implications through the formation and use of stereotypes.

Documentary filmmaking textbooks are rich repositories of folk-psychological mechanisms and their role in the conception of schematic film narratives and the representation of real-life characters. These normative mechanisms have the potential to perpetuate out-group stereotypes that, as will later become apparent in the analysis of films about blindness, cultivate the social boundary between '"us"' (the abled) and '"the others"' (the disabled). Some of the most popular textbooks include: *Documentaries: And how to Make Them* (Glynne, 2008); *Directing the Documentary* (Rabiger, 2004); *Documentary Storytelling* (Bernard, 2007); *Creative Documentary: Theory and Practice* (de Jong et al. 2012); and *Documentary Editing* (Everett, 2010).[2] Although their pedagogical value is indisputable—they enable the acquisition of filmmaking skills that help streamline the production

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[1] For a detailed account of how folk psychology operates both in real life and in film, see Per Persson (2003, pp. 161–246).

[2] This selection of titles is only indicative and is based on their recurrence on the reading lists of undergraduate and postgraduate documentary practice courses, as well as being frequently recommended within the wider documentary filmmaking community.

process and create narratives that resonate with mainstream audiences—these books lack both sociocultural contextualizsation and any critical consideration of the potential such skills hold for social ‘“othering.’” In short, they fail to actively encourage the practitioner to critically assess the given narrative and aesthetic formulas.

The central tenet of these texts is the creation of empathy and character-related emotions. For instance, Sheila Curran Bernard (2007, p. 27) argues that a documentary should tell ‘“a story for greatest emotional impact and audience participation.’” Similarly, Michael Rabiger (2004, p. 135) declares that ‘“documentary should act on our hearts, not on our minds alone … It exists not just to inform us about something but to change how we feel about it too.’” These emotions should be evoked through a character-centered narrative that makes the audience ‘“draw difficult conclusions about motives and responsibilities, and takes us along as accomplices in a painful quest for truth’” (p. 11). According to Karen Everett (2010, pp. 68–87), a plot journey has to start with a life-altering conflict (the ‘“inciting incident’”) that upsets the character’s world at the beginning of the narrative, guaranteeing that the audience empathizses with the character and feels motivated to follow him or her through their difficult journey towards a final denouement. Evidently, the emphasis is on creating an empathic emotional response to the characters by encouraging the viewer to fully comprehend and experience their motivations, behaviour and psychological development in the context of the film’s goal-driven narrative. These types of narratives, therefore, operate according to folk-psychological principles, which, according to Plantinga’s filmmaker–audience loop, resonate with universal audience schemas.

In order to universalizse character behaviour and motivations in a variety of circumstances and so facilitate the generation of empathy, these textbooks recommend the clear exposition of easily recognizsable, comprehensible and emotionally experienceable character traits and constellations (e.g. Everett, 2010, p. 91; de Jong et al. 2012, pp. 119–129; Rabiger, 2004, p. 229), drawing from a pool of stock characters. This renders the strategies for character-led documentary narratives virtually identical to the ones used in fiction screenwriting (or in telling stories through any type of medium), as Henry Bacon’s description of stock characters suggests:

> Stock characters, by definition, exist in a ready-made form in a shared cultural sphere. In an individual film they are elaborated by a few character traits-… Their motivations are self-evident-… At its most simplistic the mere recognition of a stock character is sufficient to explain a certain type of behavior. Transtextual motivations reign. (Bacon, 2011, p. 42)

When it comes to the representation of people from particular social groups, the constant deployment of stock characters can shape the audience’s long-term mental representations of the real world and even change their general beliefs toward these groups (Polichak and

Gerrig, 2002, p. 92). In such cases, narrative schemas directly link to corresponding social schemas. Thus, Patrick Colm Hogan (2015, p. 335) warns that the use of simplified, categorical identities (that is, stereotypes) to represent people deemed to belong to out-groups increases group division and fosters discrimination. In addition, the evocation of a generic ("universalized") empathy does not, as filmmakers often assume, automatically deconstruct hegemonic in-group/ out-group relations, but can result in either "failed" empathy without any real-world effects or "false" empathy that relates more to the imagination of the in-group spectator than to the out-group character (pp. 340–341).

The knowledge obtained through a critical cognitive study of filmmaking textbooks, therefore, can help the filmmaker adjust their deployment of established craft skills. The following case study, taken from my own film practice, illustrates this by first examining common stereotypes of blindness in other documentaries and then analyzsing how this has informed my attempt to reconfigure these stereotypes through my own documentary films.

Narrative and Ssocial Sstereotypes of Bblindness

Documentaries depicting blind people generally adhere to folk-psychological narrative formulas: they usually aim to engage the viewer with the emotional world of their characters, prompting the audience to empathizse with them by experiencing a narrative journey in which the disability is the narrative force that drives the plot. The most popular formula is the "supercrip" journey found in *Blindsight* (Lucy Walker 2006), *High Ground* (Mike Brown 2012) and *Victory over Darkness* (Donny Eichar 2008). The "super cripple" (or "supercrip"), as Colin Barnes (1992, p. 12) explains, is a stereotype that assigns super-human, almost magical abilities to disabled people, in order to elicit respect from the non-disabled.

Blindsight tells the story of the attempt by six blind Tibetan teenagers to climb a mountain in the Himalayas. At the beginning, the film establishes that many Tibetans consider blindness a curse, and this immediately sets up the characters' primary narrative goal of overcoming the social stigmatizsation they suffer in their community. The seemingly impossible physical journey represents a parallel spiritual process of transformation, at the end of which the characters feel themselves validated as members of society. A very similar storyline occurs in *High Ground*, where eleven war veterans with different mental and physical injuries—one was blinded by a bomb—also climb a mountain in the Himalayas. The blind character, Steve Baskis, grows increasingly more confident throughout the journey, especially when moving through rough terrain. Meanwhile, in *Victory over Darkness*, the heroic struggle to overcome physical impairment and gain social acceptance is

performed by five blind athletes competing in the Ironman Triathlon. All three plots place the blind characters in initial character schemas: each are beset by some form of conflict-laden predicament (such as trauma, exclusion or bitterness) which impels them to take a physical or mental journey of transformation. By the end of the journey, they have overcome their initial predicament (Pointon 1997, p. 87). Following the narrative conventions, the initially precarious character schema progressively and cathartically changes during the journey into its positive binary opposite, the '"supercrip"' stereotype.

Another popular narrative template focuses on the tragic progression of blindness, as seen in *Notes on Blindness* (Peter Middleton and James Spinney 2016), *Going Blind* (Joseph Lovett 2010) and *Across Still Water* (Ruth Grimberg 2015). In these films, characters who have begun to go blind or who are partially sighted attempt to come to terms with the inevitable deterioration of their vision. For example, in *Notes on Blindness*, the main character, John Hull, describes in a voice-over the physical effect of his loss of vision, especially the fact that he can no longer see his wife and children but still retains a visual memory of their physical appearance. Later, his wife explains how Hull's loss of sight has impaired their relationship, as *his* lack of the ability to '"see"' and *her* lack of the ability '"to-be-seen"' have had a negative impact on their affective interpersonal experience. His emotional decline, losing himself in '"loneliness and nothingness"' and '"a sense of impending doom,"' is finally transformed as Hull comes to terms with his blindness and learns to consider his '"new"' life as a cathartic rebirth.

Similarly, *Across Still Water*, depicts John Chapman's initial fear of his impending blindness (particularly in relation to his ability to pursue his hobby of night fishing), which is encapsulated in his reluctance to use a cane and a guide dog. By the end of the film, however, Chapman not only accepts his condition but also indicates that he will continue fishing, a determination that is underlined when he lands a large carp. Meanwhile, the autobiographical *Going Blind* establishes filmmaker Joseph Lovett as a man who also dreads the loss of vision and the way the deterioration of his sight is severely impacting his physical activities, such as cycling and, by implication, filmmaking. However, after learning more about his condition (glaucoma) and meeting a variety of visually impaired people, who describe how they have learnt to overcome daily obstacles, he adopts a more positive attitude towards living with blindness. All three films essentially end with the archetypical death and rebirth/ renewal theme found in numerous Western literary works (e.g. Bloom and Hobby, 2009).

Narrative arcs, such as those of the '"supercrip"' and the '"tragic journey,"' are consciously constructed by filmmakers through a careful selection of what events to film, how to film them and in what order to edit them, according to the array of folk-psychological narrative conventions mentioned above. For example, the plot template of problem—intensification—climax—resolution (Bernard, 2007, p. 28; Rabiger, 2004, p. 80) is prevalent, as is the carefully plotted progression of obstacles in

order to create a dramatic arc. This narrative tension between the character's aims and their ability to overcome the obstacles in their path is seen as a prerequisite if the audience is to identify with the characters (de Jong et al. 2012, p. 124): it ensures that viewers feel they have access to the characters' minds, understanding their thoughts and motivations, experiencing corresponding emotions and empathizsing with their screen personas. However, the generated empathy represents Hogan's notion of a '"false'" schematic empathy, evoking a paternalistic sense of pity and inspiration among in-group members, which technically transforms the intended empathy into sympathy.

Thus, from a social perspective, the main problem with these films is the use of blindness as the key constituent and driving force for the narrative '"supercrip'" and '"tragic character'" stereotypes, which is why they rapidly turn into socially othering stereotypes. For instance, *Notes on Blindness* makes little reference to Hull's distinguished academic career or his books on religious education, and when it does refer to these accomplishments, it consistently links them to the fact of his blindness. Indeed, the character's religiosity is portrayed as the vehicle for a cathartic process whereby he is able to come to terms with his deteriorating vision. This predominant focus on his disability sacrifices other aspects of Hull's life, the addition of which would have turned him into a more rounded character, one that would not fit so easily into the supercrip or tragic-journey schemas.

Disability scholars have long lamented that fiction and documentary films featuring blind characters do not portray the diversity, complexity and ambiguity of individual character traits (Schillmeier, 2006; Badia Corbella and Sánchez-Guijo Acevedo, 2010) but instead focus on the convenient narrative of blindness. Disabled film characters in general are one-dimensional and function only through their impairment. As such, the use of disability as character traits, plot device or atmosphere is a lazy shortcut for writers and filmmakers who wish to draw the audience into the story (Shakespeare, 1999, p. 165) by instrumentalizsing what appears to be the most obvious hardship or area of conflict in the characters' lives, thus conforming with the advice proffered by the filmmaking textbooks. The disability becomes, according to David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder (2000, p. 59), a '"surface manifestation of internal symptomology'" that stands for the equally abnormal subjectivity of the individual.

This emphasizsed abnormality or deficiency and its resulting supercrip and tragic-journey schemas function as a direct antithesis to the non-disabled norm in society, highlighting the loss or lack of a particular ability and establishing a binary of '"us'" (seeing) *vs.* '"them'" (blind) (Markotić, 2008, p. 7). This attests to the cognitive attributes of stereotypes as rigid, simple and homogenous, and to their role in perpetuating the maintenance of in-group/ out-group boundaries. In the specific case of blindness, this boundary is of an ableist nature, one that regards blind people as inferior, less socially capable and pitiable, instilling a paternalistic prejudice.

From a film-practice perspective, however, the question remains as to how this knowledge of stereotype formation and maintenance has aided my own filmmaking practice in its attempt to represent blindness without resorting to conventional disability stereotypes. The film analyses above illustrate how blind people are, to a large degree, reduced to their disability and placed within schematic narratives with the aim of eliciting the viewer's empathy. Since, from a social-cognitive perspective, stereotype-inconsistent information can undermine stereotyping (Moskowitz, 2005, pp. 481–482), one solution would be to maintain schematic empathy-driven narratives but shift the focus away from disability. This would have the advantage of bypassing disability stereotypes while providing the audience with an engaging documentary that still resonates with universal folk-psychological schemas. One such example is *Dina* (Antonio Santini and Dan Sickles 2017), which uses the narrative of a romantic comedy to depict the lives of Dina Buno and Scott Levin, who each have varying degrees of intellectual disability; the film culminates in their wedding day.

However, there are potential risks with such an approach. Firstly, the disability is deliberately relegated to the background and the characters' similarities with non-disabled people are emphasized. This '"normalization"'—another (though less frequent) disability stereotype—is problematic as it tends to deny the existence of ableist prejudice and discrimination, and skates over aspects of victimhood, trauma or burden (Pointon, 1997, pp. 89–90). Secondly, such narratives are often carried by inspirational and overly positive plots that make the audience feel '"nobly uplifted, even ethically superior, for '"supporting"' what is in effect a blatantly over-sweetened version of life with disability as concocted by a community that cannot countenance physical imperfection except in certain sanctioned and saccharine forms"' (Riley, 2005, p. 71). Thirdly, categorical identities based on simplistic and minimal definitions of out-group members (whether they normalize the disability or present it as a deviant spectacle) can promote further divisiveness because they increase the perception of out-group homogeneity, in contrast to the in-group, which is perceived as more heterogeneous (Moskowitz, 2005, p. 59; Dyer, 2006, p. 355).

A more reliable way of preventing disability stereotypes is to shift from '"categorical"' to '"practical"' identity representation—a socially co-ordinated complex identity that is, at the same time, individually unique (Hogan, 2015, p. 335), acknowledging the presence of both personal and collective character traits in the individual. Essentially, categorical identities are deductive and prescribed, while practical identities are inductive and grounded. This strategy also addresses the lack of diverse and multi-layered (rather than universalized) portrayals of disabled people. If reiterated frequently enough in nonfiction media, this defiance of existing disability stereotypes and refusal to meet certain schematic expectations may well lead viewers to the perception of a more heterogeneous out-group, and may even begin to gradually reduce the averse social divisions that are currently manifest in paternalistic prejudice and discrimination towards the disabled community.

An Aalternative Nnarrative of Bblindness

My documentary, *The Terry Fragments*, illustrates the use of practical identity representation and the reduction of schematic narrative scenarios as major filmmaking strategies. The film depicts the everyday life of Terry, a blind painter, using narrative fragmentation: it juxtaposes related and unrelated events, in which the disability itself is neither foregrounded nor relegated to the background but is simply *there* as a tacit part of the character's quotidian existence. Narrative fragmentation usually results in what Bill Nichols (1981, p. 211) terms "mosaic narratives," in which the "whole is not organized as a narrative but more poetically, as a mosaic; only the parts have a diegetic unity." Greg Smith (2007) analyses the way this type of narrative structure is employed (as an alternative to a folk-psychological plot) in *The Aristocrats* (Paul Provenza 2005), a documentary film in which the same joke is repeatedly performed and interpreted by different comedians. He observes that its episodic structure focuses on self-enclosed fragments, each of which are singular moments that highlight the performative act itself without setting up any character development or cause-and-effect (or question-and-answer) chains, thus undermining any narrative impulse towards forward progression or the infamous 'narrative arc' (pp. 87–88).

The Terry Fragments also uses this sort of episodic structure to portray the protagonist's life through a collage of incomplete vignettes that appear in no apparent order, such as Terry labelling his CDs or pouring his traditional evening whiskey. The only chronological string of events is that which portrays him at different stages of working on a painting; however, as the painting process is almost incidentally intertwined with other quotidian episodes and is also open-ended (the audience never sees the finished painting), there is no overall goal-driven character trajectory. Together with the randomness of the different fragments, this strategy precludes the formation of formulaic plots and schematic event scenarios, such as the "inciting incident," which functions as a jump-start to a goal-driven journey, or the "denouement" at the end of that journey. By implication, this also precludes the audience perceiving the character in a fixed schematic role or categorical identity; instead, it mediates Terry's multi-layered and ambiguous practical identity, which is in itself a negotiation of different identities based on the separate scenarios in each scene: skilled painter, philosopher, musician, blind man, hermit, misanthrope or bitter man (because of his blindness), as well his girlfriend's jovial partner.[3] Of course, the cognitive processing of such personalities and scenarios also require the viewer's deployment of a range of folk-psychological character and event schemas,

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[3] Seung-jun Yi's *Planet of Snail* (2011) is a rare example of a documentary about a blind character that also uses narrative fragmentation, resulting in a multi-layered practical identity portrayal. The main character is portrayed as a poet, a theatre actor, a deaf--blind man, and a loving husband and good-humoured partner.

even certain stereotypes (for example, Terry as the ‘“eccentric artist”’), within the individual fragments. However, these operate at a micro-narrative (scene) rather than macro-narrative (plot) level, and this helps disperse generic empathic responses and character schemas. In other words, by the end of the film, the viewer should have a multi-layered impression of Terry that does not easily match the narrative or social character schemas that operate in common portrayals and perceptions of blindness.

The narrative fragmentation was a particular challenge during the editing process, as my paradoxical objective was to make the narrative appear like a chaotic muddle of arbitrary scenes by using certain systematic principles. This was largely facilitated by my adoption of the neurocognitive model of ‘“event segmentation,”’ which describes how we process the fluctuating sensory information we encounter in daily life and give it meaning by separating the continuous flows of related or unrelated events into small segments that are specific and defined (Tversky et al. 2008, p. 436). This segmentation operates through the cognitive recognition of event boundaries, which are ‘“points of perceptual and conceptual changes”’ that bracket together events of relative stability (Swallow et al. 2009, p. 236). In *The Terry Fragments*, this stability is accomplished by ensuring that most episodes are coherent in terms of space, time, aesthetic treatment (for example, cinematography and editing) and general theme. Consequently, almost all the scenes resemble self-contained short films with, to use Nichols’s (1981) term, a strong ‘“diegetic unity.”’

Nevertheless, according to the ‘event segmentation’ model, the events must not only be intrinsically coherent but also extrinsically disparate in order for a segmentation to appear in the first place. Hence, in *The Terry Fragment*’s narrative scenes, it was only possible to convey the sense of a series of disparate fragments following one another by creating a strong contrast and avoiding causal links between the episodes. The contrast is evident in the length of the scenes and in the themes, the characters’ clothing, the weather and the filmic aesthetics, rhythm and mood. The segmentation effect is reinforced by the titles dividing the episodes, which laconically signpost their content (for example, ‘“Pouring Whiskey”’ or ‘“Painting 1”’).

One example can be found in the ‘“Still Life”’ scene, which is directly followed by the ‘“Writers’ Club 1”’ scene. The ‘“Still Life”’ scene is composed of long static shots of objects in Terry’s home during the daytime. The mood is neutral, and the absence of any characters creates a period of ‘“dead time,”’ which potentially triggers disparate reflections in the viewer—speculation about the objects in the scene or absent characters, self-reflection, symbolic interpretation, metaphorical associations, anticipation of future scenes or recollection of past ones (several objects reference earlier scenes). By contrast, the ‘“Writers’ Club”’ scene, which takes place at night in someone else’s home, is highly dynamic and verbally busy; it involves a range of participants and conveys a positive mood, due to the constant humorous exchanges about literary genres and story ideas. The audience collectively experiences the characters’ conversations without being given time to reflect on or interpret them. In

addition, the filmic style contrasts the obviously hand-held shots in this scene with the static tripod shots in the previous one. Further contrasts include the time of day, the different domestic spaces and the opposing themes of non-speaking material objects *vs.* verbalizsed, disembodied stories. There is also no causal progression between the two scenes, and there is a stark change in the mode of spectatorial address: the ‘“Still Life”’ scene, a montage of empty spaces accompanied by non-diegetic music, express a high degree of authorship, whereas the ‘“Writers’ Club”’ scene is purely observational, without any apparent authorial intervention.

This seemingly unsystematic oscillation between different aesthetics, diegetic content and modes of address reflects the uniqueness of each moment and the randomness of the narrative fragments (even if there are recurrent motifs and loose subplots, such as the painting process). The audience simply cannot predict what comes next, and the coherence of potential folk-psychological plot trajectories is counteracted, as is the formation of generic documentary modes or genres that rely on the spectator’s deployment of intertextual schemas of narrative and aesthetics. The reconfiguration of a range of cognitive schemas is potentially conducive to also reconfiguring disability stereotypes. This hypothesis is supported by the viewer’s activation and acquisition of knowledge through the episodic structure of the film. Narrative comprehension relies on the activation of two types of past knowledge structures: ‘“generic knowledge”’ and ‘“episodic knowledge”’ (Grasser et al. 2002, p. 244). Generic knowledge is based on schematic scripts and stereotypes, both of which are informed by the past consumption of folk-psychological narratives, while episodic knowledge is based on individual episodes experienced in the past at a particular time and place. Hence, a narrative comprising unique, momentary experiences without a generic plot structure activates episodic knowledge and impedes the activation of generic knowledge. It also prompts spectators to acquire new episodic knowledge that is largely devoid of disability-related schemas, and this may inform how they experience documentary films featuring similar (blind) characters in the future.

Final Rreflections

This chapter proposes that the documentary filmmaker should be alive to the schematic dispositions embedded in their own practice and in their intended target audience, and consciously and critically reflect on the social implications of their filmmaking choices. Basically, filmmakers need to be aware of how folk psychology works and what its pitfalls are. Teachers of film production, too, need to understand folk psychology and the way its mechanisms govern ubiquitous storytelling formulas, in order to critically frame the craft knowledge found in textbooks. This does not mean that these formulas should be subverted; rather, they should be adjusted in relation to the desired audience experience or social impact. This approach may help filmmakers to avoid certain stereotypes, use

certain stereotypes deliberately (for example, for specific activist purposes) or tell stories that depart from particular stereotypes while using other stereotypical schemas that resonate with mainstream audiences.

The balance between reconfiguring stereotypes and using stereotypes that will resonate with a wide audience is a high-wire act. The prevalence of folk psychology and stereotyping embedded in filmmaking textbooks, filmmakers and audiences attests to the fact that they are essential, hardwired mechanisms that enable us to interact in the social world. Even the practice of maintaining in-group/out-group divisions—which are not always hegemonic divisions—is a hardwired strategy that results in a variety of benefits, such as the solidification of in-group identity. These divisions are also intricate and relative, as even an out-group will have its own in-group/out-group stereotypes—for example, between subgroups or directed towards the in-group itself. The main point is that these social-cognitive processes are fundamental to our existence and deviating from them in film narratives may deter a mainstream audience. What the filmmaker needs to take into consideration, however, when adhering to such narrative strategies, is the potential for detrimental social consequences. Ableist (social and narrative) stereotypes of the disabled, for example, indicate prejudices that compromise accessibility, opportunities, social support and adequate medical care for disabled people.

On a final note, the type of research-led film practice advocated here is beset by theoretical hypotheses, combined with heuristic and intuitive decisions; spectatorship is theorizsed and inferred but not empirically verified. From an independent filmmaker's perspective, an experimental verification would prove unpragmatic and is not common practice, although anecdotal indications of audience reception can emerge, for example, during previews and Q&As following cinema screenings. Nevertheless, the critical framing of film practice through the flexible adoption of cognitive spectatorship models is still more expedient than -"blindly-" following textbook conventions.

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