

Film Review

Title: *A Life Without Words*

Film/Video Producer: Documentary Educational Resources, Director: Adam Isenberg

Release Date: 2013

How to Obtain: <http://www.der.org/films/life-without-words.html>

Cost: \$24.95

Name of Reviewer: Amanda McLaughlin

This transporting film left me with one sobering thought, encompassed in the film's title, *A Life Without Words*. I realized all the thoughts in my mind were within the confines of language learned early in my life. What would it be like not to have this capability? What would thoughts look like without language? What would it mean not to use language to differentiate between everyday objects, colors, and feelings? What would it be to live a life without words?

A 2010 study led by [Jennie Pyers](#) from Wellesley College, tells us how language shapes our thought. She discovered, by studying Nicaraguan Sign Language (NSL), a language created in the 1970's, that, "The grand idea behind all of these singular observations is that as human language evolved, our mental abilities became increasingly entwined with linguistic devices. Those devices are part and parcel of modern language, and thus modern thought" (Yong, 2010). This research also indicates that as an adult it is nearly impossible to acquire some of the abilities that language provides a pathway for, such as spatial awareness. This interconnectedness that exists between language and learning about the world around us highlights the importance of *A Life without Words* and also shows the tragedy of it.

The film focuses on the eldest children in a family from the mountains of Nicaragua. Dulce Maria (28) and Francisco (22) were both born deaf. Until recently, neither had been educated in any formal written, spoken, or signed language. Instead they had spent their days on their family's farm, with little connection to the outside world. They developed a basic way of communicating with their family, mostly through gestures and sounds, but their frustration was evident.

Dulce Maria's pain was more visible, her eyes filled with emotion and curiosity without the means of fully expressing it. It was like watching an artist try to create without the necessary tools. Francisco approached his circumstances differently, with a quiet stoicism, seemingly internalizing the difficulty he experienced. Had it not been for the scene where he cries as he watches his father emotionally discuss feeling powerless, one would think he was resigned to his life of limitation.

When a deaf sign language teacher named Tomasa visits the family, they seem mildly interested, a little confused, but also open. It is clear the parents know more could have been done for Dulce Maria and Francisco but were completely unaware of how to meet their needs. At one point the mother talks about trying to send them to school but with no accommodations for their deafness, they were bored and refused to go back.

When Tomasa begins working with them, they are at first reluctant and unsure. The teacher is kind and patient, attempting to win them over with jokes and cookies. Dulce Maria is harder to warm up to. Her family calls her rebellious and stubborn, two traits she readily displays. She watches Tomasa closely, intrigued but uncertain. Francisco is more open to learn and gives the teacher his full attention, enjoying the chance to be engaged.

We see that Tomasa is moved by her time with this family. She understands what it means to be deaf in rural Nicaragua, a part of the world that provides little to no resources for people with disabilities. She sees the potential of these two young people, how confined they have been, and how devastating it is to not have access to something as basic as language.

The last scene of the movie is the teacher sitting with the family. She rests on a stool, camera directly on her. She begins to weep, to sob at the thought of living an entire life without the opportunity to communicate effectively, to develop relationships on a deep level, or to gain a true independence. She tells the mother how smart the kids are and how much they have to offer.

One is left thinking of the injustice revealed here, how these two people are so capable but wholly unassisted. What could they do with the proper tools? What would their lives look like had they learned sign language at a young age? This film not only explores the far reaching issue of a lack of education for those with disabilities in the developing world, but also puts you directly in the midst of its outcome. *A Life Without Words* is a beautiful, emotional, and informative documentary that offers many questions but does not lead the viewer, instead offering a meditative visual essay, where you can draw your own conclusions. It is suited for a wide audience, appealing to a disability studies as well as human rights interest. For more information, please visit <http://www.nicaraguansignlanguageprojects.org/>.

References

Yong, E. (June 2010). New Nicaraguan sign language shows how language affects thought. *Discover Magazine*. Retrieved from http://blogs.discovermagazine.com/notrocketscience/2010/06/22/new-nicaraguan-sign-language-shows-how-language-affects-thought/#.Usia_BiE5R5

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