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Reviews

Little People

Documentary film, 1981, VHS
Produced by Jan Krawitz and Thomas Ott. Distributed by Stanford University Department of Communication

Big Enough

Documentary film, 2004, VHS
Produced by Jan Krawitz. Distributed by Fanlight Productions
Reviewed by Posey Gruener, Independent Documentarian

Little People, a documentary film made in 1981 by Jan Krawitz and Thomas Ott, opens with a long stare. The camera pans across a crowd of Little People milling on the deck of a paddleboat. It lingers on a young blonde couple who dance with their short arms and awkward gaits perfectly synchronized, stops on a man who drags a cigarette with stubbed fingers, then continues his survey of the crowd. Occasionally the long pan cuts to a close-up of dwarf children brazenly staring. This is a social event at a convention of the Little People of America, and aside from the band, who stand almost two feet taller than the crowd, everyone on screen is short. Very short. It is a dangerous opening, and a good strategy: these long shots grant the viewer permission to stare.

Documentary films must distinguish themselves from films that present Little People as objects of fascination, whether as Munchkins or Mini Me. Krawitz and Ott do so by placing the viewer parallel to the children on screen, thereby changing the nature of the viewer's gaze. Though these children were all born with some form of Dwarfism, many have never seen another Little Person, and their curiosity is raw and purposeful. The message to the viewer is subtle but important: we learn by looking. Go ahead.

'When you want to make someone evil,' Len, a dwarf, activist, and comedian, asks early in *Little People* 'what do you do? In literature? In cartoons? You cut off a hand, you chop off a leg, you poke out an eye ... From an early age, we're all told that people who are physically different are evil. Or, they're good. Super good.' In *Little People*, and in *Big Enough*, Krawitz's 2004 follow-up, the filmmakers steer squarely between those extremes of representation through skillful camera work that, at appropriate times, slakes the viewer's curiosity, distracts him from the fact of Little People's bodies, unsettles his visual expectations, and finally challenges him to alter his perceptions of beauty.

Bringing the focus away from such bodies is difficult. Krawitz and Ott do so by setting interviews in the subjects' backyards or in scaled-down portions of their homes so that they appear in scale to their environment, or by shooting their subjects in close-up so that only

their face is visible. This is used to dramatic purpose when Karla, a teenager with a pretty face framed by feathered blonde hair, speaks of the shock she experienced as a toddler when she realized she was a Dwarf; because her face is in close-up, it is only when she brushes back a strand of hair and her shrunken, disproportionate arm enters the frame that we discover her difference, and our surprise mirrors her own.

The filmmakers sometimes use wide shots or high angles to demonstrate Little People's physical awkwardness or social difficulties, as when we meet Mark, Krawitz's youngest subject. The camera scans dozens of gangly pre-teens in fifth grade Physical Education class then settles on Mark, whose hips are level with his classmates' knee socks and whose head is lower than the waistband of their running shorts. The wide frame and high angle make clear Mark's alienation as he struggles, grimacing and out of step, while his classmates bounce in time, scissoring their long legs and chopping their slim arms.

This careful direction of the viewer's gaze persists throughout *Little People* and carries into *Big Enough*. Like the acclaimed documentary series *7-Up*, which tracks its subjects every seven years to explore the effects of the English class system, *Big Enough* revisits select subjects twenty years later. Cutting between old footage marked by oversize spectacles, feathered hair, and velour tracksuits, and new footage that shows the subjects' wrinkles, potbellies and teenaged children, Krawitz explores the effects of the intervening decades.

Anu, whom Mark grew up to marry, speaks the defining words of *Big Enough*. Sitting in a lawn chair in a saffron dress, she says that life as a little person is difficult but, as a Hindu, she feels that she chose this incarnation in order to learn from it. Each subject Krawitz revisits has learned a lesson, though the lessons themselves are divergent. Karla, sans feathered hair and plus an average-sized husband, has soured from her youthful optimism. Len, who in *Big Enough* appears mostly in his fishing boat or at the worktable in his garage, says he has 'retired' from being a Dwarf. As for his previous life, as an advocate-entertainer who cracked jokes to make uncomfortable topics acceptable, he says wistfully, 'Oh! I was *angry*.'

The climate for Little People also changed in the time between *Little People* and *Big Enough*. Most Little People are born to average-size parents due to a random genetic change in the womb. Once the gene is present, however, it is dominant. Little People have a fifty per cent chance of passing on their gene – and their condition – to their children. A Dwarf couple has an additional twenty-five per cent chance of passing on both genes and conceiving a child that is too severely

dwarfed to live. In the time when *Little People* was made, Dwarf mothers often delivered babies who would not survive infancy, as Krawitz showed with heartbreaking detail by shadowing a dwarf couple from respirators and feeding stations to syringe as they nursed, and then lost, their infant daughter. In 1994 this situation changed when the gene for Achondroplasia, by far the most common type of Dwarfism, was located on the human genome and a pre-natal test was developed. Now, dwarf couples can get tested early in pregnancy and decide for themselves whether or not to endure the suffering of watching their child die.

Other, luckier couples tossed the genetic dice and got healthy children, some dwarfed, some average-sized. Krawitz and Ott took advantage of these unexpected combinations with images that betray the viewer's expectations. In *Little People* a young Dwarf father sits beside his Dwarf son on the couch; during the interview the camera slowly zooms out to reveal, at the opposite end of the couch, his average-size wife. The 'reveal' amplifies the surprise, and forces the viewer to confront his feelings about a pairing that is controversial in both Dwarf and average-size circles. Similarly, in *Big Enough* Krawitz upends the viewer's idea of the normal by filming Len's average-size teenaged son making cookies in a scaled-down kitchen. Hunched dramatically over the stove, at risk of scraping his chin on the top of the cupboards or tipping over the saucepot by brushing the handle with his knee,

this 6'1" teenage boy seems a giant unsuited to his environment.

In the final scenes of *Little People*, Krawitz urges the viewer to put this awareness into action. While *Little People* began with an open-mouthed stare on a paddleboat, it ends with an appreciative gaze at a fashion show, in which a parade of Little People saunter down the runway to thunderous applause. Here, the symbols of the beauty industry are subverted and the viewer is challenged to expand his ideas of a praiseworthy body. It is a far cry from the hand-holding voyeurism of *Little People's* opening scene.

Big Enough ends on a similar note, showing the same fashion-show footage, but making one change in deference to the changed climate, in which the discovery of the gene for Achondroplasia has raised the spectre of genocide behind closed doors, perpetrated by doctors who encourage pre-natal tests and parents who would rather abort a pregnancy than raise a genetically undesirable child. In the closing frames of *Big Enough*, we hear Karla's voice as we see the Dwarf models saunter. 'I take it personally,' she says, 'when people look at me and say, "We don't want that in our society." I just have to ask, "Why?" Don't we all have faults? Where do you draw the line about who's good enough to be born and who's not?' It is a good question that should be asked loudly, and often; a question that Krawitz leaves hanging as the credits roll. She has done admirably in opening the discussion; the answer, it seems, is up to us.