The coming of the Olympics later this summer will ramp up a kind of journalistic saccharine that has become standard fare on American television – especially those programs pretending to cover the high drama of competition. The viewing public is becoming more and more accustomed to the maudlin segments that seem to frame every story as a near-miraculous tale of great effort and sacrifice, produced in warm tones and a almost cheesecloth-like soft-focus that makes the solemn voice of the narrator that much more meaningful. Unfortunately, watching sports coverage is often a very frustrating experience due to the actual lack of coverage in lieu of this kind of pedantic story-foisting. This could easily be the case for the annual Scripps Howard National Spelling Bee, where 249 nervous, arguably over-parented kids soak (sometimes roast) in the limelight, asked to spell words from the dankest recesses of the English language. In following the progress of eight of these contenders (with additional footage from others), Jeff Blitz’s Oscar-nominated documentary *Spellbound* manages to avoid the trappings of snooze-fest sports “coverage” in creating a deeply engaging ethnographic insight into the idiosyncrasies of childhood, family life and competition. Through the use of skillful editing and wise subject choices, the chronicles of these young spellers allows the audience a closer look at the underlying familiarity of the seemingly strange.

**Editing**

While not as sharp or aggressive as documentaries like Michael Moore’s *Bowling for Columbine*, *Spellbound* does characterize a homier individually-centered notion of what it means to literally “document” something in film. Through use of interviews that show us everything from a parent oblivious to the dog licking her leg (encouraging us to wonder what other oddities she is immune to noticing) to the barely hidden racist undercurrent of a Texas ranch owner, the filmmakers evoke the strange without forcing their intentions on viewers. The use of individual close-ups in the film helps reinforce the importance of the individual – each dependent solely on themselves, yet questing alongside many others – in a story so geographically and demographically diverse. We come to know each of the children by the way they think during the bee – eyes closed, mouths twisted, tongues protruding – only after we have carefully experienced segments of their personal lives in detail. Even more than that, we are treated to an interesting side-view of much of the competition (and occasionally in interviews as characters ride in cars, talk with family, or work on their spelling), suggesting that we have the privileged perspective of another competitor, or at least a bee official.

It is one of the most impressive aspects of the documentary, how the audience is able to jump into the lives of these sympathetic kids. We feel the pain and anguish of their stressful and sometimes quirky upbringing, which inspires cheers for them word after mind-numbing word. It is precisely through the use and editing of interviews and competition footage that the filmmakers tap into the audience’s psyche with more power than the mere saccharine and maudlin, even if they are pressed for time in doing so. This tension between medium and message is an interesting parallel to the tension felt by the spellers themselves.
Though there is loads of tension, Blitz and crew supply us with enough humor for a release. We laugh with Ted as his schoolmates mindlessly slap at each other on the bus – seeing them through his eyes, recalling his dismissive description of them as only understanding “things about trucks.” We chuckle as Neil’s parents and teachers are placed behind him and to the side when on screen, evoking the image of ventriloquists when combined with his reluctance to speak his own mind. We feel like collusive jokesters when April compares her mother (again displaying a talent for affable obliviousness) to Edith Bunker. Though it is mostly good-natured slice-of-life, the humor also permits insight into the idiosyncrasies of the characters.

The limits of the medium

Limitations are always placed on our ability to report what we document – there is never enough time or space to convey the entire experience of a researcher. Even so, the limitations of film are even more constraining than print: the intense dependence on visual rhetoric and the inflexibility of run-time. Unfortunately, Blitz falls victim to the temporal siren by heading in the “Olympics” direction: spending an entire half of the movie at the bee leaves him only 45 minutes to slap together meaningful stories about the eight contenders. This simply is not enough time to dig into their individual routines and home lives, and leaves the audience wanting more. In what seems like an afternoon each – sometimes post-competition, as in the case of Harry – the filmmakers do brief flybys of each home, spending time to corner teachers and occasional others when possible. The tension and excitement of the bee, the entire second half of the movie, is easily read on the faces of the spellers and could have told just as much in a shorter time, providing more breathing room for the highly complex interviews in each of the vignettes. This under-use of the individual stories is certainly an unfortunate consequence of the medium’s constraints, though one that could have been managed better; yet it is not the only one.

As the result of there being an actual (as opposed to the research world’s more common metaphorical) lens through which the audience is obliged to experience the work, the scope of the presentation is necessarily limited. The “comfort room” is only tangentially mentioned, never seen nor explained. For a less skillful filmmaker this would have cost precious screen time, yet Blitz explains it all by showing so many leave the stage in various forms of discomfort. Another example of the film’s limited lens, and one that is not so effectively dealt with, is the diffuse nature of the broad connections between contestants, invariable outsiders that are frequently the children of industrious immigrants. Though this would clearly make for a much larger social commentary, especially coupled with the ubiquity of intensive home schooling, Blitz steers clear of running this longer race. Of course, these and other choices made in the filmmaking process determined the scope of the film, but the selection (and more interestingly, the omission) of certain spellers provides the objects on which the lens is focused.

In or out – Who qualifies?

Much like Crapanzano’s Tuhami, there are contestants we inherently like in whom we are also interested, and it is most likely that this is the main reason for Blitz’s choice of subjects. It seems hardly imaginable that the flat, toneless affect of Ted could compare to the verbally impaired precociousness of Georgie. Yet the latter is relegated to a small supporting role of “other” – a linguistic version of Rocky’s nemesis worthy of our respect as we root for Nupur, in whom we have developed a vested interest. This calculated choice pays off in the end as the
audience is happily corralled (like so many of Mr. Arenivar’s cows) into supporting the last of the eight featured students, the other seven having faltered along the way. Yet, these students were chosen for their characteristics that elicit our interest, and most likely our affections. Take Harry, and his spastically rambling wit; or April and her persistent pessimism about the chances for victory; or Ashley and her determination to overcome the many difficulties that life seems to have placed in her way. These children are not so much individual subjects as they are characters – and therein lies the substance for questioning why the others were left out. As one of the bonus features of the DVD, Blitz has made available three additional vignettes of contestants that did not make the movie’s final cut. It is through analyzing these three segments, in comparison with those who are in the movie, that we can understand some of the filmmakers’ choices.

Cody, the noticeably arrogant son of an Indiana steel worker seems to reluctantly (on the surface) bask in the role of child-provocateur. His parents are almost too normal, talking about the pressure and the future benefits of the bee in very realistic, middle-class terms. Feigning fastidiousness with the cleanliness of the microphone, Cody is dinged out on the first round, and shows an expression of angry amazement while being escorted to the comfort room. With no footage of his emergence – his mother simply explains he is “not well” – we are left to assume the disappointment was indeed more than his insouciant exterior let on. Were his story told alongside any of the others, the hollowness of his facade would stand in stark contrast with the sincerity we sense in the others’ desires. His mother’s comments allow the audience a subtle view of Cody’s real internal workings when explaining how the pressures of the bee are “hard on the parents,” and that “it is hard for him to realize how much he has gotten out of” the experience. We are left to assume that her grounded realism will sustain Cody, but not all parents in the bonus vignettes are so supportively nonchalant about the competition.

Allyson, the highly precocious ten year-old, is the daughter of bio-medical professionals in Ann Arbor who are certainly hands-on regarding her bee experience. Her father explains that no child her age is cognitively capable of studying for such an experience, even though his own capabilities are revealed to be minimal by his wife, who claims he “can’t spell his way out of a paper bag.” Allyson’s mother, in a gratingly passive-aggressive manner, makes it clear that the veritable rainbow of Post-It notes on their living room wall are all in Allyson’s hand. She expresses an ironically clinical regard for her daughter, talking about “enabling her” and “absorbing some of the stress and pressure” of the event herself. Her brash admonishment of the “gamesmanship” of other parents at the competition, and ironically presumptive packing-up as Allyson misspells ‘purblind’ completes a none-too-flattering picture. The audience, even if relatively unmoved by Neil’s family-imposed ‘wartime’ regimen of preparation, would be astounded by the extreme nature of this child’s parenting. She’s only ten, yet in need of stress management caused by a completely elective competition? Inclusion of Allyson’s story in the film would have clearly exceeded the boundaries of the filmmakers’ somewhat ambiguous position on the bee-as-child-abuse issue. Her highly abnormal and very professional middle-class background also would have unbalanced the diversity of the contestants highlighted. This inference also explains the other omissions; it works especially well for the practically all-American boy raised in the California sunshine.

Bradley, the small-town, freckle-faced son of an airy, ex-flower child seemingly has more of an interest in his former-bee contestant study-buddy than he does in competing. The closeness of their relationship is both heartwarming (to underscore the normalcy of these kids) and tedious (her story of failure dominates Bradley’s). They pass notes, they hug, and they tease
each other – all under the blatantly transparent guise of a coach/student relationship that is apparently invisible to Bradley’s mother, too busy dressing her sculptured “friend,” Deer-Woman. His mother’s odd artistic sense aside, Bradley’s story is quite plain and over-shadowed by the relationship he has with Corey. These alone would be reasonable excuses to eliminate him as a film subject, but it is his very easy-going attitude and consistent reaction to being eliminated in the 4th round of competition that makes him likeable, while also dreadfully bland. With little hardship to draw upon aside from a single, slightly odd parent (though perhaps the norm for northern California), Blitz chose well by relegating Bradley to the bonus features.

In fact, given we are only able to view three vignettes of those who did not appear in the film, it seems reasonable to wonder how many others Blitz and his crew had interacted with. In the commentary track, the filmmakers admit to looking for stories of “great interest” in a cross-section of the diverse “geographic, socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds” without “faking some multicultural thing.” Clearly, in their own words, we come to understand the reasons for choosing some over others – it was an aesthetic choice, a means for telling a more interesting, more representative story. Indeed, they are characters in a film that, however much a documentary, has the distinct aim of entertaining while representing.

Final Thoughts

In the end, this film is a delightful montage of a small, curious sub-set of America that draws on a wide array of people from a variety of places and backgrounds in a quest to show how even extraordinary kids really are still kids. In the process, we can clearly see that the purposes, goals, means and ends of a spelling bee (like documentary filmmaking) can be different for many different people all at once. The careful choice of characters and the skillful, though almost undersold story-weaving are enough to engage the audience in an enjoyable run through something so absurd sounding on the surface as a spelling bee. Blissfully free of weighty commentary or revolutionary fervor while managing to earn the trust and intense interest of a documentary audience, Spellbound is, quite simply, a study of the human (albeit child’s) spirit; in it we see how an esoterically dull activity, perhaps even more than some larger-than-life Olympic sport, can reveal just how alike we all are.