I Am Human is a tech doc with a refreshing focus on people

Welcome to Cheat Sheet, our brief breakdown-style reviews of festival films, VR previews, and other special event releases. This review comes from the 2019 Tribeca Film Festival.

We're in a dark moment for the tech industry: a time when some new technologies have been adopted recklessly and backfired terribly, and others have developed far more slowly than their creators hoped. Against the backdrop of this pessimism, a film like *I Am Human* – a fundamentally optimistic documentary about neuroscience and brain medicine – feels surprisingly refreshing.

I Am Human is a moving trio of narratives about people who are trying to overcome serious physical limitations with cutting-edge brain science. The debut feature from Taryn Southern and Elena Gaby, it offers an accessible look at a complicated subject – even if it occasionally succumbs to unnecessary hype.

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What's the genre?

Technophilic narrative documentary. *I Am Human* follows its subjects through their daily lives and medical procedures, supplementing their stories with talking-head interviews from the doctors and researchers involved. It also features appearances from a handful of high-profile commentators, including Time Well Spent co-founder Tristan Harris, Kernal CEO Bryan Johnson, and Duke University ethicist Nita Farahany.

What's it about?

I Am Human is primarily a story about three people. Bill was left paralyzed after an accident, Anne struggles with Parkinson's Disease, and Stephen lost his sight because of a neurological condition. Each gets the chance to try an experimental high-tech treatment, and they all decide to go through with their operations, with varying levels of hesitation. And in each case, the results are deeply meaningful — even if they're small or temporary.

What's it *really* about?

The film is mostly technological-progress inspiration-fuel — covering the ways science is cracking the mysteries of the brain and using them to solve huge problems in people's lives, not just helping people squeeze juice or hail taxis. Its subjects all vividly describe the things they've lost: Anne has had to put her art on hold, Stephen doesn't feel confident leaving the house, and Bill dreams of being able to eat a plate of food on his own. The film is careful to avoid presenting technology as an instant, risk-free cure. But it does emphasize the positive results, and everyone ends up with some form of happy ending.

Toward its end, *I Am Human* gestures toward bigger transhumanist questions. How far should we go in augmenting the human mind and body? If brain-computer interfaces become commonplace, do you really want Facebook in your head? As one expert puts it, "Are we about to change what it fundamentally means to be human?" But these questions feel obligatory, and compared to the sharp, intimate portraits of the film's subjects, the responses feel perfunctory.

Is it good?

If you follow science and technology news, you may already know about some of these procedures, and they're not the most

cutting-edge or philosophically unnerving brain treatments out there. But *I Am Human* explains them in a clear, detailed way without talking down to its audience, and it usually doesn't overhype the capabilities of the tech itself. It's a modest but informative, compelling look at the real people who take risks on big medical breakthroughs.

The film's last-act leap to futuristic predictions feels shakier. It suggests there's an inevitable, near-term jump between treating paralysis and sending email with your thoughts — which is a common talking point from the likes of Elon Musk and Mark Zuckerberg, but one that's completely wrong. The filmmakers were in a great position to contrast the difficult reality of brain science with the glibness of these predictions, so the lack of skepticism here feels like a missed opportunity.

Many people with disabilities have also warned against over-emphasizing "fixing" disabilities with tech, and that's a potentially fair critique of this film. But the filmmakers don't portray their subjects as fundamentally broken or helpless, even when focusing on the problems they face. They treat Bill, Anne, and Stephen as pioneers exploring an exciting realm most people will only see in science fiction — or in a documentary like *I Am Human*.

What should it be rated?

Plausibly PG. It's an overwhelmingly wholesome film, but if you're squeamish about eyes or surgical procedures, a few scenes might give you pause.

How can I actually watch it?

The Film Sales Company acquired the movie before its premiere, and although the company didn't announce release plans, it mentioned the possibility of a sequel or TV series — so we might be seeing even more of *I Am Human* in the future.

https://www.theverge.com/2019/5/19/18528099/i-am-human-review-documentary-neuroscience-technology-medical-innovations-tribeca-2018