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# Cosmopolitan Narratives

## *Documentary and the Global 'Other'*

Ib Bondebjerg

Globalization is a phenomenon much discussed in contemporary society, and rightly so. But it is by no means just a dimension linked to modern societies and cultures. In fact, globalization as such is as old as civilization. Globalization is a complex phenomenon, both now and in a historical perspective. Therefore, a simple and descriptive definition is a good starting point:

Globalization can be defined as the movement of objects, signs and people across regions and intercontinental space (...) Globalization can be located on a continuum with the local, national and regional. At the one end of the continuum lie social and economic relations and networks which are organized on a local and/or national basis; at the other end lie social and economic relations and networks which crystallize on the wider scale of regional and global interactions. Globalization can be taken to refer to those spatio-temporal processes of change which underpin a transformation in the organization of human affairs by linking together and expanding human activity across regions and continents. (Held et al. 1999: 15).

Defined in this way and removed from more normative and political discussions focusing on the consequences of different forms of globalization, it seems obvious that all societies and cultures are dependent on globalization. No society or culture can exist in splendid isolation from other near or distant parts of the world. Societies need to find ways to communicate and exchange ideas and goods in order to be open, creative and dynamic. If we were to close borders and ways of interacting, we would also narrow down our mental and cultural space. Globalization is a fundamental and necessary dimension of our societies and cultures, and it has been ever since we started leaving the East African savannah thousands of years ago.

Globalization has always been with us, but what has changed historically is the form and intensity of global processes. Globalization used to be dependent on very slow processes of communication and very physical and material forms of transportation. Furthermore huge divides, even bigger than today, existed between developed and developing countries. Today, a vast part of our communication takes place through fast, digital networks that cover larger areas of the globe than before (Held et al. 1999: 327ff, Castells 2001: 207ff & 248ff). The world is not completely wired yet, and many parts of the globe are still inhabited by people who live in an everyday life culture with very little access to the basic needs, not to mention advanced communication and media.

Pictures of the globe indicating electricity and communication lines show a very strong concentration in certain parts of the world, and much less in other parts. There is still a long way to go to the global village Marshall McLuhan talked about in the 1960s (McLuhan 1964).

### **A Cosmopolitan Imaginary Community and Reality**

But even though this is a fact, even though global media industries are dominated by concentration of power in the hands of the multinationals, and even though globalization is also very much about exploitation of resources and humans – globalization is also about a growing need for a cosmopolitan mentality and imaginary. We have become part of a mediatized reality that stretches beyond the nation state, and we are entering, in different ways, into a communicative space of a more global nature than ever before in history. Although we cannot in any way talk about a global public sphere, the new digital media culture and the many new media platforms clearly make transnational communication easier. We are part of the new global imaginary Arjun Appadurai writes about (Appadurai 1996) when he points to the global mediatization of cultures, the development of a new global mediascape through which audiences globally are increasingly linked together. Despite asymmetric power structures in the global media industry, this global mediascape nonetheless offers new dynamic methods of cultural exchange and images of what previously were distant others.

Both documentary and fictional film and television have always played an important role in shaping our understanding of reality. This reality is increasingly present in our everyday life and politics as a global reality. Whether we accept it or not, the nation state is no longer an undisputed frame of reference for our social, political and cultural life. The present financial and ecological crisis clearly demonstrates that we are in it together and that no nation can solve problems isolated from other parts of the worlds. Appadurai therefore talks about the consequences of our more transnational world and the role of media in a more cosmopolitan and diasporic culture and public sphere. Where Benedict Anderson (1983) talked about the role of media in the creation of an imagined community of nations, Appadurai speaks about the necessity of a transnational, cosmopolitan imagined community:

Benedict Anderson did us a service in identifying the way in which certain forms of mass mediation (...) played a key role in imagining the nation (...). My general argument is that there is a similar link to be found between the work of imagination and the emergence of a post-national political world (...). But as media increasingly link producers and audiences across national boundaries, and these audiences themselves start new conversations between those who move and those who stay, we find a number of diasporic public spheres (...) The transformation of everyday subjectivities through mediation and the work of the imagination is not only a cultural fact (...). The diasporic public spheres (...) are no longer small, marginal or exceptional. They are part of the cultural dynamics of urban life in most countries and continents. (Appadurai 1996: 21-22)

Sociological thinkers like Gerard Delanty, *The Cosmopolitan Imagination* (2009), and Ulrich Beck, *The Cosmopolitan Vision* (2006), have also clearly defined the social,

cultural and political challenges following the more and more intensified processes of globalization. For Delanty they include, among other things, the need for a new global, political vision and for other images of our different global others:

The global public impinges upon political communication and other kinds of public discourse creating as a result new visions of social order. To speak of cosmopolitanism as real (...) is thus to refer to these situations, which we may term the cosmopolitan imagination, where the constitution of the social world is articulated through cultural models in which codifications of both Self and Other undergo transformation. (Delanty 2009: 37).

For Ulrich Beck the main point is that cosmopolitanism can no longer be seen as some kind of abstract ideology for a global elite. Globalization is entering all dimensions of our societies and everyday life in such a way that cosmopolitan answers are clearly needed. Ulrich Beck's analysis of the modern forms of globalization points to a strong need for global crisis management, a need to deal with the fact that modern societies are becoming increasingly multi-ethnic and multi-cultural, a need to deal with a transnational and increasingly borderless world with people, power and money flowing freely, and with strong conflicts in the traditional nation states following this development. Beck is not predicting the death of nation states, but rather a fundamental change in the conditions of the existence of nation states. In his discussion of cosmopolitanism, he actually states that "cosmopolitanism without provincialism is empty, provincialism without cosmopolitanism is blind" (Beck 2006: 7). We cannot live in the whole world, we have to have some forms of belonging of a more regional, local and national nature. But we need cosmopolitan narratives to experience and imagine this new reality and the connection between us and the global others.

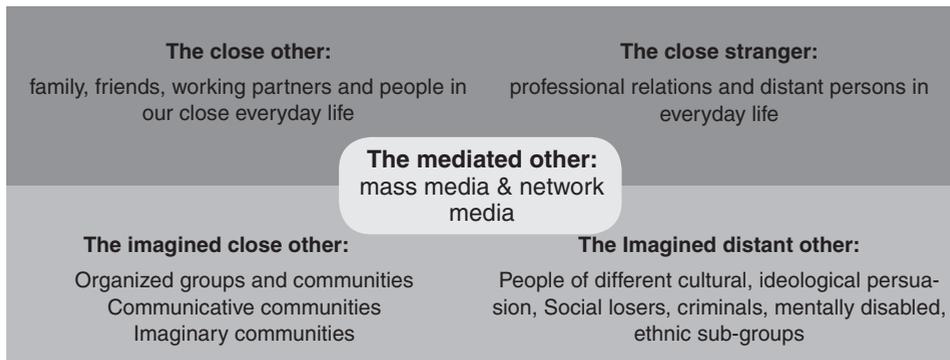
## **Documentary Narratives and our Global Other**

Documentary film and television deal with reality in a more direct way than fictional narratives. Even though fictional narratives can very easily develop cosmopolitan themes, documentary forms bring reality to us with greater authenticity. A strong fiction film with a cosmopolitan narrative is Susanne Bier's Oscar winner *In a Better World* (2010). Here the story of a Danish doctor working in an African refugee camp is mixed with a dramatic, local Danish story about the friendship of two boys tested by the life of their families torn being torn apart and by conflicts in the local community linked to the family narrative. In this story the local and the global are thematically mixed, and through parallels between life in the refugee camp and life in a seemingly provincial Danish idyll, a cosmopolitan dimension of 'us and them' is developed into a more universal narrative of good and evil that deals with empathy and understanding of others.

The film clearly deals with the different dimensions of our mental frameworks and typologies concerning the close and distant other and stranger. As indicated in Fig. 1, we can define our social and cultural others in categories that are based on distance, both cognitively and geographically, but also on our actual contact and experience with others. Before the arrival of the modern forms of media and communication, our ability to connect with others over long distances was much more limited. Today both social media and other forms of media have expanded our images and knowledge about oth-

ers, at least in mediated forms. News is important in this connection, especially the 24 hour news channels that update us on global issues and themes on a daily basis. But documentaries are in one sense more important for forming global narratives and cosmopolitan imaginaries. Documentaries can tell stories about reality that bring us much closer to the everyday reality of distant and strange others. They can create identification and empathy by showing us that people who may seem to be very different from us have universal, human dimensions, despite cultural and other differences. The phrase ‘we are all humans’ may seem banal, but it points to a fundamental truth, supported by cognitive sociology (Fiske and Taylor 1991)

**Figure 1.** *Typology of Social Types Schemata of Others. Inspired by Alfred Schutz (1932) and Fiske and Taylor (1991)*



Let us consider the images we have been receiving over the past ten years or more, where the war in Afghanistan has been on our news media agenda, in a growing number of fiction films and documentaries. Few of us living in modern Western societies have first hand, personal experience of who the Afghans really are or of their everyday lives and ways of thinking. They belong to the category of imagined distant others, and even though we may feel empathy for their situation and the terrible consequences of living in a constant war zone, we cannot really imagine the full reality of such a life. To this we could add a potential feeling of danger in relation to some groups in Afghanistan identified as Islamic fundamentalists and potential terrorists. Many stories presented in our daily news would feed into this uneasy image of a somewhat deviant and frightening social and cultural other. Mixed with this, however, one would most certainly also find some forms of empathy, especially when confronted with images of civilian casualties and dead children. News seen in a war perspective is not without a human dimension and perspective on the other, but such news items tend to see things from a military and political perspective. News is mainly authoritative, informational stories, not broader narratives.

But documentaries come in many forms, and the freedom to combine them is also fairly great. Documentary filmmakers have a wider spectrum of modes in their representation of reality and the themes and dimensions they can take up. In Fig. 2 I have listed four very basic modes, which capture most forms of documentaries and define four rather different approaches to reality. These different approaches also position the spectator differently in relation to the reality presented and the cinematic form of

the film. These modes combine the observations and concepts put forward by other researchers dealing with the basic documentary genres or modes (most importantly Bill Nichols 2001 and Carl Plantinga 1997). Documentary as a cinematic form can be a very authoritative approach to reality, where documentation, explanation and analysis through experts and witnesses are the most important. But documentary can also speak with a much more open voice, giving us a kind of ethnographic, anthropological position from which we can observe reality and life, and where authoritative explanations are not given directly. Documentary can finally take dramatized or poetic approaches to reality, in which subjectivity and objectivity, the more symbolic and imaginary, the fictional and the factual meet or even clash.

**Figure 2.** *Basic Modes of Documentaries (Ib Bondebjerg 2014)*

Authoritative	Observational	Dramatized	Poetic-reflexive
Epistemic authority	Epistemic openness	Epistemic-hypothetical	Epistemic-aesthetic
Explanation-analysis	Observation-identification	Dramatization of factual reality	Reality seen through aesthetic form
Linearity, causality, rhetorical structure	Episodic, mosaic structure, everyday life	Reconstruction, narration, staging (dramadoc, doc-drama, mockumentary)	Symbolic montage, meta-levels, expressive, subjective form
Q & A, interview, witnesses, experts, Authoritative VO	Actor driven, human-institutional life world	Testing borders between reality and fiction	Form driven reality experience, the poetics of reality, framing reality
Information, critique, propaganda	Documentation of lived reality, social ethnology	Narrative drive, reality driven narrative. Media-reflexivity	Challenging reality concepts and traditional doc-forms

## Afghanistan Seen from Different Perspectives

Danish, British, American and other soldiers are fighting in Afghanistan, and they do so as part of a UN supported mission to free Afghanistan of a fundamentalist, authoritarian regime that does not recognize basic human rights. So one aim is to secure democracy and a better way of life. But can Western forces, even backed by the UN, really impose profound changes in a country like Afghanistan? That is the basic question recent documentaries have raised, and they have sometimes done so by taking a more authoritative, critical look behind the politics of the war, like in Alex Gibney's Oscar winner *Taxi to the Dark Side* (2008). This is a highly critical, investigative documentary that delves into the dark sides of US warfare in Afghanistan, but also the whole political dimension behind the war. The cinematic form of the film follows all the classical rules of investigative journalism with witnesses, expert interviews, documents, film footage, etc., as well as a very strong authoritative and interpretative voice over. Gibney's film follows one cinematic strategy for documentary, but other documentaries have delved deeply into the Afghan reality by bringing us inside everyday life in the Afghan war zone and

behind doors that are normally closed to Western media. They have taken a closer look at what the military and war are really about and have portrayed culture, family life and culture in a country in turmoil and under huge stress.

In Janus Metz' Danish documentary *Armadillo* (2010), we follow a group of Danish soldiers before, during and after they are sent to Camp Armadillo in the Afghan Helmand province. The film brings us very close to army life, both the dull camp moments and the dangerous actions. But the film also shows the precarious relations between the soldiers and the civilians, the fact that no trust is achieved and the feeling that what the soldiers are doing doesn't really matter to the civilians. War is portrayed like a kind of surreal Sisyphean job, where things keep rolling back. The group of soldiers are portrayed with special focus on two prototypes: the daring warrior and the intellectual sceptic. Metz has described the intention of the film in the following way:

I felt it was important to make a film that provided a really detailed picture of the reality of war, and of its consequences for the soldiers, and for the civilians for whose sake we allegedly are involved in the fighting in the first place. However, what I was really interested in was raising some big existential questions about our civilization and our way of being human in the context of contemporary global realities (...) it's also a mental journey, on a national level, through our self-conceptions as a democratic nation. It's a film about what might be problematic about our new militant 'humanitarianism,' about the idea of a tough kind of tit for tat in a global game. Metz in Hjort, Bondebjerg and Redvall (2014).

Thus Metz's film is clearly about creating a cosmopolitan, narrative film that reflects on the relation between the others and us. It is a film that questions aspects of military power in a global context where we obviously are not able to understand or act in the cultural and social context, which is Afghanistan. Other documentary filmmakers have approached this problem of a mental lack of global imaginaries by focusing more intensely on the world and mind of the other, and not so much the relation between them and us. In Eva Mulvad's *Enemies of Happiness* (2006), we follow the first elected female politician in Afghanistan, Malalai Joya, as she first enters the constitutional session for a new parliament and later goes through the first election after the constitution has been approved. Like Metz's film this is clearly an observational documentary, where we follow Malalai Joya around in the province where she lives; we see her act as an advisor in all sorts of conflicts, and we see her election campaign and contact with local voters. We also get an intense feeling of how dangerous it is to be a woman and a politician in Afghanistan. Malalai Joya has survived four attacks; she has bodyguards around her all the time, and she constantly has to change places. So the film is about the fragile and unstable Afghan democracy, but also about human courage and the beauty of the Afghan landscape and towns outside the combat zone.

Mulvad's intention in making this film was clearly to change our image of Afghanistan by bringing us close to humans and human stories. A large part of the film deals with how Malalai Joya acts as a consultant on conflicts in her local community, in marriages and other forms of conflict. Through observation and documentation of her everyday life and activities we are given an opportunity to come very close to different types of people and human stories in Afghanistan. The film presents a possibility for identification with the other through a narrative based on reality, so to speak:

Documentary films can be seen by a lot of people without a lot of prior knowledge or understanding. They allow you to bring some fairly complicated discussions about, for example, war in Afghanistan into people's homes. With *Enemies of Happiness* I was looking for very human stories in the midst of war. What do the streets look like in Afghanistan? What's it like to go to school and to go to work in the middle of a war? Who are the local heroes? So that it's not always about us, us, and us again, that is, about the Western world and our soldiers. I'm actually not especially interested in politics, but I am interested in the human stories that are caught up in the political discussions. I'm interested in stories that an audience can relate to emotionally and not only intellectually, even though they deal with serious current affairs issues. Mulvad in Hjort, Bondebjerg and Redvall (2014).

It is no coincidence that Metz and Mulvad both work with a basic, observational form in their films. They have an anthropological and ethnographic approach to reality, and even though they use many narrative and visual techniques, they do not offer an authoritative message. Instead they want to give us a deeper experience and understanding of the distant, imagined other, they want us to question our own stereotypes. Still another version of this can be found in films where people themselves shoot part of the film, and where the filmmaker therefore uses a kind of collaborative, observational form – ethnography through cultural interaction. This is the case in the Danish-Afghan director Nagieb Khaja's *My Afghanistan – Life in the Forbidden Zone* (2012) and the American HBO production *Baghdad High* (2008), made by Ivan O'Mahoney and Laura Winter. Giving the global other a visual voice takes away the director's dominance, although he/she still has the role of editor and can combine his/her voice with that of those doing the filming.

Khaja's film was made to give voice to those more remote provinces, which we only very rarely see in Western media. He has expressed his concern that we never get to see this reality:

My conviction, based on experience, is that the reality of the Afghans, particularly that in the villages, has been ignored by the generally superficial foreign press, which has only focused on life in the larger Afghan towns, home only to a small proportion of the population. The alternative has been the embedded tours on which the military presence often terrifies the locals and makes it impossible for them to express their true views to directors and the press." (Director's statement of film, can be found on <http://www.dfi.dk/faktaomfilm/film/en/76460.aspx>).

Most of the film footage by the Afghans is shot on mobile phones, as cameras would be much too revealing and dangerous. Those doing the filming represent completely ordinary people, also women, with no prior film or journalistic experience. By letting them film what they find interesting we get quite another perspective on Afghanistan, a perspective that also shows the hardships of war and everyday life, as well as the universal dimensions of life. What we see are images of distant others who are in fact very much like us, although living under different social and cultural conditions.

This is also the case in the HBO film *Baghdad High* in which we follow four high school boys in Baghdad, Iraq. They represent different cultural and religious groups and even though this is another country, it is the same type of film sending the same message. The film is shot during a whole year and has a clear video diary style and

aesthetics, where we follow the boys around and they speak in close up to the camera. Ivan O'Mahoney, who directed and produced the film with Laura Winter, has said about the film:

The daily news about Iraq was so relentlessly depressing for so many years. It was therefore fantastic to realize while making this film that there is normality amidst all the violence, and that people do lead normal lives, despite the mayhem around them. It gave me a lot of hope to see kids be kids. (quoted from HBO 2009).

The film is based on 300 hours of footage shot by the four teens, and the four boys (Hayder, Anmar, Ali and Mohammed) present a life much like that led by most normal young people all over the world. They dream of careers as singers or football players, they think about girls, but at the same time they are stuck in a nightmare of violence and suicide bombings in a seemingly never-ending war situation. We see them in family situations, in school situations, we follow their interest in rock and pop, dance, television and film, but we also see them performing specific religious rituals and relating to or reacting to the local political situation, the media and the situation in the country. Bringing Iraqi everyday life, the situation for normal human beings like you and me, home to an American audience was clearly a deliberate strategy taken on by alternative directors and cable channels like PBS and HBO. Given that the average American probably has an image of Iraqis as being hateful terrorists and fundamentalists, this kind of documentary representation of the 'normality' of Iraqi youth and their life and dreams is part of changing the global image of and discourse on us and them.

What we experience through films like this is in fact how many things we humans have in common, how many things are universal to us. We may have differences in the way we live and think, different cultural traditions, different religions, but beneath our cultural group affiliations, we focus on some of the same things, and have the same dreams and expectations. High school boys in Baghdad salute another flag and sing another national anthem, and religion plays a stronger role there, but most of the time they are thinking about girls, music, films and sports – and they want to have fun, even though bombs sometimes rattle the neighborhood.

It is the same impression one gets when watching American Director Havana Marking's film *Afghan Star* (2008, HBO). *Afghan star* is the Afghan version of the global TV-format *Pop Idol*, where people compete to win the prize as best singer and get a record contract. In Afghanistan this program became the most popular TV show ever, gathering millions from all over Afghanistan. The program follows some of the contestants, both male and female, their performance and the audience in different parts of Afghanistan. The program reveals unity in an otherwise divided country, but also the deep divides between religious and secular Afghanistan, between those who believe in freedom and democracy, also for women, and those who feel it is a mortal sin when women perform in public. The film crew was given exceptional access to the families of the four contestants, also the women, and therefore the film offers us a unique insight into Afghan culture and everyday life. By using a Western pop culture phenomenon as the focus point, the film shows both the universal and culture-specific dimensions of culture. It is the same, but there is also global variation.

## Creating Cosmopolitan Dialogue and Platforms

The documentary films mentioned so far are the result of the work of individual directors, commissioned by TV stations or made independently with production companies. They are also all made by Western filmmakers, although some of the filmmakers have a double identity and a background in the regions they deal with. In some cases the filmmakers work together with local journalists, co-directors or photographers. Basically the films are global documentaries in the sense that they deal with global themes, but also in the sense that they want to create a cosmopolitan dialogue. They deal with global problems in order to raise questions about our global engagement or lack of it, and they want to challenge and change our global imaginary, our way of thinking about and looking at distant others. But we also find more collaborative projects, projects that go even further than *My Afghanistan* and *Baghdad High*, in which those being portrayed also filmed themselves.

With the large-scale documentary projects *Why Democracy* (2007) and *Why Poverty* (2012), we get a global multiplatform project that tried to establish a global public sphere and dialogue around important global issues. The two projects were initiated by Danish public service broadcaster DR's Mette Hoffman-Meyer and the BBC's Nick Fraser, in collaboration with the NGO organization Steps. In the first project, they asked 10 filmmakers around the world to make a film about democracy and what it meant to them. The ten one-hour films were made by independent filmmakers from China, India, Japan, Liberia, the US, Bolivia, Denmark, Egypt, Pakistan and Russia and covered very different issues of democracy: from the US focus on use of torture to the Danish Muhammed cartoon crisis and experiments with school democracy in China. The films were shown simultaneously in more than 180 countries; they were made available on the project website and shown in places around the world where media were not present. The project also teamed up newspapers around the world, and in this way a global poll and discussion on democracy were established.

In many ways the project is an advanced example of a cosmopolitan dialogue; it is an example or a prototype of a global public sphere trying to establish a form of global citizenship. As Nick Stevenson (2003: 35) says:

The associated processes of the decentering of society, the rise of network capitalism, globalization, risk, reflexivity, and consumer culture have all served to reshape and to question the operation of citizenship (...) the historical tie between nation, culture and citizenship is becoming increasingly decoupled (...). Cultural citizenship is related to these changes and is more generally the struggle for a communicative society.

Naturally, establishing such a global citizenship cannot be fully accomplished by an initiative like this, but as an example of what collaborative documentary projects can do, the project is interesting.

In the second part of the project, *Why Poverty?*, BBC, DR and Step basically followed the same strategies, this time with nine films. The films in the project dealt very critically with the reasons for poverty in the world and the global power structures. Again the films were very different, both in form and content. In American director Alex Gibney's film *Park Avenue: Money, Power and the American Dream*, the focus is on the incredibly rich and powerful people who live on Park Avenue in New York and who seem to rule politics

and finances, not just in the US, but globally. The film is a classic, journalistic documentary, an authoritative, revealing analysis of the stuff power and corruption are made of. We also find very dramatized kinds of documentaries, like Ben Lewis' ironic, satirical history lesson *Poor Us*, in which he describes the basic patterns and forms of social and financial exploitation that have been at play since the Neolithic Ages and up until today. In contrast, Mona Eldaif and Jehane Noujaim's film *Solar Mamas* follows Arab and African women in remote, poor parts of the world; it deals with a project that is trying to educate women to become solar engineers, taking them out of poverty and the male dominance they suffer from. The film takes the form of documentation of a kind of social experiment, which clearly exposes some of the reasons for poverty in this particular part of the world.

## **Conclusion**

Projects like *Why Democracy?* and *Why Poverty?* are examples of the power of documentaries to raise global issues and to establish a cosmopolitan dialogue between parts of the world that are normally less connected. They represent a new form of mediated, global public sphere. But documentaries in general and new mobile media and technologies as such have started developing more global narratives and have transformed our imagination of global others. More often than in the past, outside perspectives are now combined with various inside views into everyday life. If world news has a tendency to focus on big news and the negative and catastrophic, documentaries also try to tell another story: stories of different cultures, but also the universal human dimensions behind the differences. The documentary festival system, the presence of online documentary sites and the fact that some of the strong public service channels (BBC, Channel 4, DR 2, PBS) are actually trying to give voice to independent documentaries and to collaborative projects are all encouraging. Documentaries may help open our minds to more cosmopolitan dimensions, and we do see tendencies towards broadcast documentary films that have a broader global representation.

Digital platforms for independent documentaries – for instance Top Documentary, Free Documentaries or Vimeo – do exist and represent at least a small step towards a more open, global documentary public sphere. But we cannot deny that technologies and platforms cannot do the job alone. Technologies create possibilities, and digital technologies certainly create a number of new exciting possibilities – as many of the documentary films and projects mentioned above demonstrate. But technologies in themselves cannot make the change, only people can. Only continued work with creating cosmopolitan narratives and collaborative structures and projects can make a difference. Such work must be done on a much more global scale. Documentary filmmakers must work within their own distinctive context and on the basis of their specific background, but they must also continue telling stories that link them and us and that move into the lives of distant others.

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