

## The Politics of Documentary Today

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Participants: Leo De Boer (Netherlands), Dr. Christian Christensen (Sweden), Diana Groó (Hungary), Christian Frei (Switzerland), Anna Ginestí Rosell (Germany)

The following discussion on “The Politics of Documentary Today” took place at the end of the two-day workshop *Alternative Images: Documentary as Counter-Culture*, held in Budapest, Hungary in conjunction with the fourth Verzió: International Human Rights Documentary Film Festival. The workshop explored current trends in documentary filmmaking, from the political economy of distribution to the apparent increase in popularity of the documentary form and the explosion in the number of documentaries being made today. The main issue which all of the papers took up was the political impact of documentary in the era of globalization. The vast majority of documentaries today understand themselves as offering complex narratives and pointed interventions into a media and political landscape characterized by stasis and a lack of real alternatives or positive visions of the future. Such direct, political energies might suggest that this visual form is bringing about changes in our political circumstances, if not in our consciousness of the dire straits we find ourselves in political, socially and ecologically. But while there are more documentaries made than ever, it has also become more difficult than ever to see them in movie theatres: the new ‘home’ of documentaries seem to have become film festivals and on-line sites such as YouTube. What do such shifts mean for the impact of the documentary form today?

The concluding roundtable asked directors and producers involved in the Verzió Festival to reflect on questions related to the politics of documentary today. Does documentary have an impact on politics? How and why? Have new forms of political documentary emerged alongside new production techniques? Finally, should the focus of contemporary documentary be on the local or the global, and what are the implications in each case? The interesting answers given to these and other questions provide those of us interested in contemporary visual culture a great deal of food for critical thought.

Films discussed (director, title, date):

- Davis Guggenheim, *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006)
- Joris Ivens, *Spanish Earth* (1937)
- Hubert Sauper’s *Darwin’s Nightmare* (2004)
- Leni Riefenstahl, *Triumph of the Will* (1935)
- Emile de Antonio, *Point of Order* (1964)
  
- Fernando Solanas, *Hour of the Furnaces* (1973)
- Bruce Connor, *Cosmic Ray* (1962)

- Michael Moore, *Sicko* (2007)
- Michael Moore, *Fahrenheit 911* (2004)
- Robert Greenwald, *Outfoxed* (2004)
  
- Luc Jacquet, *March of the Penguins* (2005)
- Christian Frei, *The Giants Buddhas* (2005)
- Christian Frei, *War Photographer* (2001)
- Theo van Gogh, *Submission* (2004)
- Siddiq Barmak, *Osama* (2003),
  
- Chrisian Mungiu, *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* (2007).
- Leo De Boer, *The Red Stuff* (2000)
- Tom Whitter, *First on the Moon* (2005)
- Gabriel Range, *Death of a President* (2004)
- Kevin Hull, *Einstein's Brain* (1994)
  
- Jim Brown and Gary Burns, *Radiant City* (2006)
- Joris Ivens, *Indonesia Calling* (1946)
- Gereon Wetzels, *Castells* (2006)
- Christian Frei, *Ricardo, Miriam y Fidel* (1997)
- Leo de Boer, *The Russian Folk* (1996)
  
- Leo de Boer, *Train to Grozny* (2000)

**Imre Szeman:** Thanks to everybody who has participated in this workshop over the past two days. We are concluding the workshop with a roundtable. The roundtable includes six discussants, some of whom have participated in the workshop to date, some of whom have not, but all of whom are involved in documentary cinema in one way or another.

The topic of the roundtable is an issue that has come up repeatedly over the past two days: the politics of documentary today. This is what we will be discussed at some length over the next two hours.

Let me introduce our participants on this roundtable.

Leo De Boer (Netherlands) is a filmmaker, screenwriter and lecturer. He studied history at the University of Amsterdam, followed by four years at the Dutch Film Academy. He has worked as film editor at NOS Dutch National Television and is presently lecturer at the Utrecht School of the Arts (HKU). De Boer is the screenwriter and director of several documentaries and feature films, including documentaries such as *The Russian Folk* (1996), *Dreaming in October* (1999), *Under Moscow* (2001), and showing here in Budapest, *The Red Years: Were We Terrorists?* (2005)

Allan Siegel (Hungary) is a filmmaker, video artist, writer and teacher. In New York he was involved in the experimental filmmaking movement and was a founding member of the film collective Newsreel. His films have been presented at major festivals in North

America, Europe and Asia, and have appeared in exhibitions in Budapest, Pécs, Chicago, New York and Montreal. He was a lecturer at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and has taught at other universities in the United States. He is currently a lecturer in the Intermedia Department at the Hungarian Academy of Fine Arts, and is completing *Usti Opre*, a film about Roma musicians in Central Europe.

Dr. Christian Christensen (Sweden) is Assistant Professor in Media and Communication Studies and Director of the Human IT research center at Karlstad University. His areas of research interest include international media and politics, new and alternative media, documentary film and journalism. He has published in a variety of journals including *The Harvard International Journal of Press and Politics*, *Global Media and Communication*, and the *British Journalism Review*. He is editor of *Human IT: Technology in Social Context* (Cambridge Scholars Press, forthcoming). An article by Dr. Christensen on his research on documentary film was published in the October 2007 issue of *Le Monde Diplomatique*.

Diana Groó (Hungary) received her education in Budapest, Hungary, obtaining a Bachelors degree in French and Hebrew from the Faculty of Arts, Eötvös Loránd University, followed by a Masters in TV and Film Directing, Department of Film and Television Directing at the Hungarian Film Academy. She co-founded the DocClub (2000) and Madzag Film (2001) associations, and Katapult Film studio (2002). Since 2001, she has been a director and scriptwriter at the Cinema Film and Katapult Film studios. She directed her first feature film, *A Miracle in Cracow* in 2004, and since 2001 had been working on a series of art historical films known collectively as the *Wild Imagination* series. Her film *Elöttem az élet (My Life is Ahead of Me)*, (2006), is being screened here at the Verzió Festival.

Christian Frei (Switzerland) is a filmmaker. He studied Visual Media at the Department of Journalism and Communication at Fribourg University. He shot his first documentary in 1981, and has been working as an independent filmmaker and producer since 1984. He works regularly for the Swiss National Television SF DRS. His works include *Ricardo, Miriam y Fidel* (1997) and *War Photographer* (2001). His award-winning *The Giants Buddhas* (2005) is being shown in Budapest.

Anna Ginestí Rosell (Germany) was born in 1975 near Barcelona. She received a PhD in Classics from the Autonomous University of Barcelona. She worked as assistant at the International Documentary Film Festival in Munich. Recently, she has been working with Gereon Wetzel as production manager for the documentary *Castells* (2006) and other forthcoming projects.

What are the politics of documentary today? There are two issues that have come up in the discussions that we've had over the past two days. The first concerns questions of audience and space. In recent years there has been a change in the kinds of spaces in which documentaries have typically been shown – a change which may open up new political possibilities while closing down others. While there are fewer documentaries being shown in regular movie theatres, an unprecedented number are available for

purchase on DVD, for viewing on YouTube, for distribution via Bit Torrent, and so on. What does this mean for how we imagine the politics of documentary?

The other issue has to do with relationship between politics and form. Do filmmakers have to respond to contemporary political circumstances with a re-imagined documentary form, or can older forms of documentary still serve us in the present situation? But you are free of course to speak about whatever you like.

**Leo De Boer:** These are interesting points. I'm just talking off the cuff, just saying what comes to mind. I speak as a filmmaker. I am not a very theoretically inclined person. In fact, I try to avoid this: as a filmmaker, I don't work from fixed ideas. But I do think that film is an enormously powerful medium. If you want to define it for yourself as a filmmaker, you know that you are working on people's emotions. For me, film has much more to do with emotions than with politics (though maybe in the end politics has to do with emotions as well—the two are not alien in the end). This being so, film is a powerful means to express something that can be political. It can have political connotations: there are lots of examples of this. Even Al Gore's film, *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006), has an absolutely political influence – he won the Nobel Prize and we still have to see what impact that has, but it is a good example of the scale and impact that film can take.

The filmmaker Joris Ivens made enormously political films, such as *Spanish Earth* (1937) about the Spanish Civil War. At the time he made it nobody knew about the Civil War. This is big difference between filmmakers now and then: they served as our eyes. Film had a political meaning to show things hidden from the world. I think this is still going on. If you take Hubert Sauper's *Darwin's Nightmare* (2004) it has the same effect. It is not political in the narrow sense, but it certainly has an influence. I can see it on my actions: if I'm at the fish market I certainly won't buy Victoria Carp! It's very direct, something I notice in other people, too. Film can have an effect on people.

But if the question is *should* documentaries have political implications, I think that's a very hard question to answer as a filmmaker. I cannot tell anyone what to make or not make. It's a bit like the opposition between artistic and engaged cinema – the two choices one has to make when one starts a film. Do you film as an artist or have you got a prevailing message? Of course, the two can intermingle. Every film has a form that has to be created. I think that as a filmmaker that you are very concerned with the form of the film. Formal aspects are crucial in getting whatever content you have across.

The Gore film is actually a good example of this. It's very American, it's very rhetorical, and so it's not very critical of itself, but I think that this is why it works. The film is very smartly made. You might be able to question it on factual grounds (in the UK, for instance, you can only show it in schools if you discuss the eight or nine points that are scientifically wrong, or at least still debatable) . But I don't think that this is very important because of the strong form.

I don't know if Leni Riefenstahl's documentaries have been mentioned, but they are an example of what I have in mind. They are hard to resist because the form pulls you along: you are seduced. We filmmakers are essentially seducers.

A Dutch author said once: what is badly written is not true. And this is what one has to have in mind in making a film. An agenda is a start. But then you have to do it really well to convince people of this message.

**Allan Siegel:** This raises some good points, I must agree. I think that one way for me to start is talk about some films that influenced me as a filmmaker, and which to a certain extent provide some context to think about documentary film which is political – or political film which is documentary: I'm not sure which one comes first.

One of the films is *Point of Order* (1964) by the American filmmaker Emile de Antonio. The film was about the McCarthy hearings in the U.S. He made this film out of footage that CBS was about to throw out. At the time that the film was screened the discourse about the McCarthy hearings and what it represented about American society was a closed discourse—not a public discourse. This film brought questions about the hearings into the foreground. It had an impact on me.

The other film was *Hour of the Furnaces* (1973) by Fernando Solanas, which I saw in a movie theatre in New York. It's a seven-hour documentary. The film was made and shown clandestinely in Argentina. It raised points about Argentine society, imperialism, and a whole range of political questions that were circulating and being discussed in Latin America. The film was an event, not just a film. People would sit through the film and talk about the points in the film with other members of the audience. This film had a huge impact on me.

The other film which had a huge impact on me was *Cosmic Ray* (1962) by Bruce Connor. It's not a documentary, but a tremendously artfully made film which takes up the question of form. What struck me about this film (and which relates to the other two) is the way that the filmmaker was able to recontextualize the material in the film. The film was made of appropriated footage, and the recontextualization enabled us to see something that was familiar in a new way. This I thought was very profound.

This to me has something to do with what it means to make a film political: it's able to provoke in the audience a questioning of the normal perception of what the world looks like, in relation to whatever issue the filmmaker is interested in. I agree with Leo that to make a film one has to believe passionately about whatever the film is about – whether it's about bridges or the Vietnam War, whatever the subject matter is.

Finally, to me what is important in documentary today is that place that these films are shown. I think that we've entered a phase that Herbert Marcuse called "a space of repressive tolerance" where it's amazing what is being made and what is being shown, but also amazing what little impact it has on what things change or don't change. I don't

know how documentary functions outside of the US and Western Europe. The context in which a film is made and the situation in which people see films is enormously important.

**Dr. Christian Christensen:** I'm speaking as a non-filmmaker, looking at these issues from my perspective as someone interested in the political economy of communications.

If I were to discuss the politics of documentary today it would be about the politics of what happens after the film is made – distribution and exhibition. Films such as *Sicko* (2007), *Fahrenheit 911* (2004) and *An Inconvenient Truth* have put documentary in more of a spotlight than it was prior to 9/11. This raises interesting questions about the kinds of documentaries that get released, shown and distributed at major movie theatres.

If you take my home town in Sweden of a 100,000 people as an example: We have three movie theatres. There's one movie theatre—a multiplex—that has six screens. There is a second movie theatre with two screens that just closed its doors. That was the movie theatre that showed smaller films—it showed independent film and documentary films. And then we have the library, which also has a screening room where it shows documentary films and smaller films. So basically now we have a major movieplex and a small library, which is the only place to watch documentaries (though *Sicko* is being shown at the multiplex).

To me this raises the question: what do you have to do as a documentary filmmaker to get your film distributed and to get it shown to any significant degree? It has to do with policy at the government level. My understanding is that the new European Union system for funding film is that it follows a two-tier system. The majority of funding to films in the future will go to those that show significant signs of possible commercial success, followed by the rest. So the EU is placing its eggs in the basket of films like *Chocolat* (2000), a European film that would have commercial potential not only in Europe but globally—in other words, films that can make some money. This is a political question.

As is regulation of exhibition venues. How close do we have to get to a monopoly before we have any significant regulation of cross-ownership? In the United States there are two or three companies that control almost all the major screens in the country. Let's take the case of Moore's *911*, which was produced for Miramax, which at that time was owned by Disney. So Michael Moore was basically working for Disney when he created the film. The pretense that Moore was stunned that Disney would want to censor his film is unbelievable! Michael Moore knows who he was working for – he was working for [Michael] Eisner and he was working for Disney. And of course when Disney came out and said they didn't want to release the film, [Harvey and Bob] Weinstein decided to buy the film back from Disney and release it through Lion's Gate. But of course Moore was playing a very clever game: "I thought I lived in America, how could this happen!" he was saying, while laughing all the way to the bank. This is the best PR his film could have ever gotten – being censored was the best thing that ever happened to *Fahrenheit 911*.

If you look at this case as an example of the politics of documentary film, what do you have? Disney is a major landholder in Florida, Jeb Bush was the governor of the state at that time, the film was attacking his brother, who is the president. Disney has enormous tax breaks for its landownership for Disney World and all its ventures in Florida. There is a direct economic-political relationship between Disney's decision on releasing the film in the United States and its business interests. So just from a very strictly vulgar political economic perspective, that film has all sorts of interesting political connotations. I think you can take those kinds of things and look at them if you want to talk about the politics of documentary – all the way down to the smallest films. In other words, how does distribution and exhibition influence the ability of films to be political?

And then you can go to the question of language. How easy is it to have a film distributed if it is not in English? A lot of the films that we are seeing about the Iraq War, for example, such as *Outfoxed* (2004), are English language films. What is the tendency for films that are subtitled?

And one last point for thinking about the politics of documentary. Benjamin [Halligan] has said at one point that in Europe documentary film has replaced public service broadcasting. Public service broadcasting had a mission to educate, inform, and entertain. Two of these things have disappeared now: the information and education has basically gone away and now we're left with entertainment. The question is: has documentary replaced the role that was once occupied by public service broadcasting?

But then you get into the question of whether you can even compare the two things – a television system that basically has universal service as compared to a form of communication that has to pass through complex channels of exhibition and distribution even to be seen. Is there any chance that a typical documentary will be seen by as many people as a BBC television program in the 1980s, a time when it only had two commercial competitors? So to even pose the question of whether documentary is replacing something that we've lost from newspapers or television, you then have to place the next question, which is: is it even fair to compare the two? Should it be the role of documentary film to fill this space? On the one hand, you're asking a lot, and on the other hand you're talking about having to go through very oligopolistic distribution and exhibition mechanisms that makes the kind of stuff that comes out at the end—for example, *March of the Penguins* (2005) and *An Inconvenient Truth*—hardly comparable to what be on public service broadcasting.

**Diana Groó:** Just some additional thoughts because there have been some very interesting things said here already. I'm thinking about the role and function of documentary in Central Europe and here in Hungary. What is the life of the documentary after it has been shot? Unfortunately, it's really depressing because there are not really broadcasters or television channels who are very interested in showing documentaries. There are no movie theatres who would say, "Yes, this is a documentary film, and we would like to screen it and bring in an audience" – this doesn't exist. The only places to watch documentaries are festivals. It is really sad.

I think there are historical reasons for this. If we focus on Central and Eastern Europe over the last 40 or 50 years. Documentary film had a real message – an underground message – to tell the real truth about these societies. These had to be underground; and strangely their secretiveness and their connection to the truth made them very attractive to audiences: people wanted to see them and learn about the true situation of their societies. Documentary was the space in which you could talk about social problems you otherwise would not be able to talk about.

Now everything is allowed. You are surrounded by an astonishing array of media choices, even if few of these broadcast material with deep messages. The main aim is to entertain people. Now people want to escape to the cinema to be entertained, not to think. Actually this is a sad time in this region. Documentary filmmakers are not in an easy situation. Even at this time of supposed openness, documentaries once again seem to be distributed through underground chains in an effort to get them to audiences.

I feel very sorry that yesterday I couldn't be here because I saw in the program that there was a presentation about Leni Riefenstahl. This makes me think about director's responsibilities: how we use and reflect on life in documentaries.

Leni Riefenstahl did an important job, but the way she did it and her ethics, she didn't really realize what she was doing. She introduced fantastic and new technical forms – really, the whole idea of how to make a propaganda film. 10 years ago, when she was 95 and still alive, I watched a documentary about her, and I was really depressed and shocked the way she summarized her life and work. She was shown watching *The Triumph of the Will* (1935) in a screening room. The Nazis were marching and raising their arms to the skies, and Riefenstahl stopped on a frame of the film. After the Holocaust, after the 'end of history,' at a point when she had ample time to reflect on her work, at the age of 95, she looked at this frame and said, "Isn't this beautiful." It was beautiful as form; but she seemed to have no consciousness of what she participated in or any sense of her own responsibility.

I think that documentary filmmakers are trying to show reality, the world that we are surrounded by, and it is a big responsibility to show it in the 'right' way.

**Christian Frei:** I am filmmaker and this question of responsibility is something I struggle with everyday. Film is discovering and encountering other people's lives. But it is also entertainment and you could question Michael Moore's success and see it as a form of intelligent entertainment. I think we are living indeed in a golden age of documentary films worldwide. More and more people are attracted and interested in alternative moments. It's really a worldwide phenomenon.

In Switzerland, where I live, we have around twenty feature-length documentaries in movie theatres every year. We have a subsidy system. I happen to be at the head of this body and we give money to documentary filmmakers. We are not trying to do what the EU is doing – only giving money to mainstream documentaries or films. It doesn't

matter if it is only dealing with one issue, or if it's just of interest for a few people or for a more mainstream audience.

Before Michael Moore, no one was interested in the Oscar for best documentary film. It was not an issue. They were interested in Best Makeup or Best Editing. Now people *are* interested in the Academy Award documentaries – who is being nominated and who wins. You have more and more people worldwide going to see documentaries at festivals or on DVDs. The problem now is really that it is less and less possible to have creative, feature-length documentaries – the ones that are not just reportage or journalism – on TV, in Europe at least. In the US, the situation is sometimes better, because you have documentary channels or the Sundance Channel. My film, *The Giant Buddhas*, was screened during primetime on Sundance, but on Swiss TV or Arte, only 11:30pm at night.

This might change with new technologies, since TV might become non-linear (it might just be possible to download movies straight from TV). But right now it is agenda-setting – what is in prime time and what is not. We shouldn't have any illusions: the majority of people in the world are attracted by entertainment, which is why Michael Moore is so popular. This is not the main task of normal documentary. When I did *War Photographer* (2001), it was really a difficult film because it is about pictures of war. I didn't expect this film to be shown around the world. It was theatrically released in eight countries and broadcast on TV in 52 others. It wasn't successful in terms of the number of people who saw it in each context in which it was shown; I certainly didn't get rich as I might of with a documentary about penguins. It was seen by a small number of people, but worldwide. It is never going to be a majority of people seeing these kinds of films.

I see documentary filmmaking as the best antidote to fundamentalism -- the best way to fight the tendency towards becoming fundamental on all sides. Because you encounter other people, you feel with them, and that's the best way to avoid xenophobia and to understand other people's reasons.

What I like about the very best film festivals are when they create circumstances in which a Palestinian and Israeli filmmaker might be sitting on either side of me, as documentary filmmakers engaged at the same level of conversation, even though we may have totally different politics. But we all agree on a certain ethics of doing films and this is an important political element of documentary film today. The 'propaganda' of documentary filmmaking today aims to try to understand other people's ways of living, thinking, conflicts and doubts.

**Anna Ginestí Rosell:** I'll try to say something new. An important question is what we expect from documentaries. Do we expect them to tell the truth? That's so difficult: what's the truth? Does it exist? The documentaries that I'm interested in don't want to tell the truth, but want to have a critical view of society and the world. This intention is, for me, highly political. I understand 'political films' as a very wide category. For me it's a critical view of things.

It's a little like Socrates: he defines himself as a midwife for thinking. This is the power of documentaries. If after seeing a documentary you can *think* and not just believe, it has had its impact. This is why, for me, Michael Moore's films are not really political films, because they are for an audience that is already convinced of its message.

I would like to say something about YouTube. The main thing about the Internet is that the volume of material is so huge that it is very difficult to make assessments about what is good and bad online. You can find great things on YouTube. At the Autonomous University, I'm currently teaching about tourism in Spain (which has nothing to do with documentary, I know!), but I thought I'd check on YouTube to see what it says about it, and... it's really great! There are some interesting critical videos that you can use and show to students.

If you want to be active in politics, you need a critical point of view—that's the main thing I'd like to insist on.

**Imre Szeman:** Thank you very much to all of our panelists. What I'd like to do now is to invite people to comment and we can start a discussion. There are a lot of great ideas in circulation thus far.

**Audience Member:** I have a question I'd like to raise before things get too complicated: It's about what I'd like to refer to as the 'politics of life.' I know only a little about video. I'm in anthropology and I just recently completed a course on videomaking. I'm interested in the benefits of combining my work with images, and so I've had to think about the politics of my practice to some degree.

What I want to ask is: what do we mean when we talk about 'politics'? It seems that when it comes to documentary, politics is about protest, or the election of the President, or about war. I don't think we should be reduced to understanding politics in this way. What I have in mind is a general sense of what is allowed and disallowed in each society; the process of deferral or censorship that inevitably happens should also be seen as politics.

**Leo De Boer:** I don't quite know if this ties in with something going on in Holland right now. After Theo van Gogh, a Dutch filmmaker, was killed by an Islamic extremist, and in Denmark a cartoonist drew Allah with the head of a dog, there was a great deal of rebellion and protest in Islamic countries. This raises a wide question: what is politics? There is 'politically correct' and 'politically incorrect,' and now a certain fear of politics. What is being discussed in Holland is whether or not filmmakers can still criticize Islam.

You mentioned the word "censorship." State-censored is fairly unknown in our context, even in Hungary. It's not a reality any more. But what has emerged is a censorship of caution – one has to be cautious about how one deals with criticism towards certain groups in society. This creates 'do's' and 'don'ts'. I don't have an answer for this: I'm just noting that ever since the death of Theo van Gogh, it exists. I don't know if anyone else has similar experiences in their own situation.

The carelessness with which you could once make documentaries – you could take on any subject – seems to be gone. Theo van Gogh made the film *Submission* (2004) for Ayaan Hirsi Ali, who now lives in America. I think that very few people have seen it, since no network will show it, though it might be available on YouTube. It's a provocative film.

You can criticize it for the way that it is done. It criticizes the role of women in Islam. What the filmmaker and scriptwriter [Ali] have done is to show women with the text of the Koran painted on their bodies and wearing veils made of see-through material. If you are Islamic it is very offensive.

Should these films be forbidden? What should be the attitude of the filmmaker be in such a situation? I'm curious as to how other people would see this.

**Anna Schober** (Institute for Contemporary History, University of Vienna): One thing that emerged that I wasn't very happy with in the discussion was an opposition towards entertainment. We're saying: some people just want to be entertained, while we want a deeper understanding of the world. I don't think this is right.

How does this relate to politics? If you want to create a political space, you need others to react or respond to what you are saying. If you do a film like Theo van Gogh did, it is clear that it will be offensive to a certain group. This doesn't mean that such films shouldn't be done; this would be completely wrong. But you have to know if you do something like this that it will be offensive.

As you said: a filmmaker can act as a seducer, but he or she can also act as an aggressor or a divider. Political space is one in which a lot of people voice their opinions. We can't start with the idea that some people are stupider than we are – they just have other views. We cannot control these views and these different views can sometimes be very explosive. We have to accept that no one can control these differences. When you enter the terrain of the political, you have to be ready for people to do something with what you did that you might not have ever expected them to do.

**Christian Frei:** When I finished my film, *The Giant Buddhas*, which is about the destruction of the giant Buddha sculptures in Afghanistan by the Taliban, I invited Taliban students to my editing room in Zurich to show them the film. It's my normal gesture as a filmmaker-- I always do this. The students agreed that their position was in the film. But I also had the feeling that at a certain level there was no communication. They really hate the Western way of living. They could accept my gesture of making the film – they didn't hate it like van Gogh. But I had to realize that they are not really interested in what we are still fighting for: pluralism, understanding other people's opinions, and debating different ways of seeing the world. Their way of seeing the world is one way and that's it. There is really a 'clash of civilizations' here – and that's just the beginning.

This is the most important debate – more important than the debate over ‘entertainment.’ Perhaps you misinterpreted me: I’m not against entertainment at all. I love it! I love mainstream movies. The point is just that there are a small number of people who are also interested in films that offer a deeper explanation of things.

**Benjamin Halligan** (Senior Lecturer in Performance, University of Salford, UK): Here in Europe there are also things that we are not allowed to talk about. There are laws, for instance, against Holocaust denial. If you make a film that propagates the idea of Holocaust denial, you may end up in prison. The same, I think, in some European countries about homophobia. In liberal democratic societies where we accept the opinions of others, we also have taboos that we don’t cross.

So to a certain extent, I am always wary when we set white European values higher than Middle Eastern values.

**Christian Frei:** I didn’t say higher...

**Benjamin Halligan:** Not higher, but the idea that we believe in other peoples points of view, we like to accept them. I just want to remind us that we also have taboos and limits on what we say. ‘Repressive tolerance’: you can almost say everything, but there are things that lie beyond what you can say.

I think that the key to some of these debates is a clarification of the role of the documentary maker. On the one hand, in terms of liberal society, we all agree that every subject should be discussed intelligently, provocatively and so forth, and as part of our on-going education. Documentary makers can then often say that they are just reflecting society as they find it – not intervening in it, but just acting as a mirror of sorts. “My hands are tied – you can’t blame me for what you see.”

On the other hand, a documentary with the best intentions can be used by the wrong side. A few years ago in a British newspaper there was an article about the films that George Bush had been watching in the White House (he has his own cinema). One he really liked was an Iranian film called *Osama* (2003), about a young girl who hides in Taliban school.

This produces a perverse problem: a film full of liberal good intentions of sympathy for the ‘Other,’ of the view that exposition of different views could lead to better understanding, can also at the same time work within in a much more aggressive, imperial mindset.

It seems important for me to urge documentary filmmakers to be clear as to whether she is an activist or a reflector, or to understand that in reflecting society one can even inadvertently be an activist. Maybe this is a way in which we could progress beyond a very postmodern problem: the idea that everything can be talked about, that nothing is off limits, that we are free to make a documentary film about Britney Spears one day and suicide bombers the next.

**Allan Siegel:** This is a good point. I think that first of all that documentary filmmakers have a certain responsibility in terms of the subject that they are filming and what is permissible and what is not permissible. You have to have a consciousness of this. You can say: “This person has good politics, but as a filmmaker they are crude and insensitive—disrespectful in terms of the people they are working with.” They might be making the film with a very specific agenda. It may not be on the scale of Leni Riefenstahl, but they have a political perspective on how they make the film and what it’s for. And if you agree with the politics of the film these issues may not be so important. You might be critical of how Michael Moore makes his films but like what he’s talking about, and so not care that he’s abrasive, or exploits the people that he’s working with, or whatever.

So then you enter this murky ground where Michael Moore is beholden to whoever is paying the bill. What really is the difference between someone who is working for Disney and someone who is working for the state? Where is the border here? Where are the ideological differences between someone working for Hungarian state television before 1989 and someone working for Disney in 2007? What are the differences?

There are taboos. In the media in the US the discussion of the Israeli – Palestinian conflict is off limits. You certainly don’t talk about it in a way that reflects the Palestinian view. You can only talk about it from one perspective. This to me is a form of de facto censorship – and this in a society supposedly promoting democratic values. There is a real problem here for someone who is a documentary filmmaker who would like to show their films in this context.

**Leo De Boer:** I really wonder if you want to make a film denying the holocaust, you can’t make it. I don’t know if in Holland you would have a problem. But on the other hand, in Holland you can’t blame the Queen for anything!

What bothers me as a filmmaker is the impact of structure or of the dramatic way of reaching people. As someone said, when you go to a Michael Moore film, you know it’s not new for you. For a European audience, we all know that guns are bad, and that Bush is – well, whatever he is – we don’t need to be convinced. The way the film is made, it is almost only entertainment. It has a light tone, Moore is very good *raconteur*, he takes me along—watching the film is a joy. You know the outcome—that’s not why you go see the film.

There is a big difference between reportage and documentary. We use the word documentary very freely. The definition of the concept has been sliding ever since TV has started to call everything a documentary. A 20 minute report on water supply in the Sahara is now documentary.

Sometimes we draw too great a line between documentary and feature film. A few years ago at International Documentary Festival in Amsterdam it was a big thing to ask questions about the manipulation of reality in documentary. Yet as a maker, you want to produce a dramatic effect with your story, so it is very, very tempting to use methods

from feature films. Just before I got here, I saw the Romanian film that won the Cannes film festival: *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* (2007). I don't know if you've seen it, but it comes off as a documentary film: no music, hardly any editing, it does away with the 'filmic' means of expression. Sometimes in a feature film you can find almost equal or even better 'authentic moments' than in a documentary. It's a beautiful film. You could never have made such a film in a documentary form.

I came across this problem when I made a film about the Russian cosmonauts called *The Red Stuff* (2000). It deals with the first group of cosmonauts who flew with Yuri Gagarin. I knew from Gagarin's biography about a very dramatic incident. In order to celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Soviet Union, a ship was being sent into space even though it wasn't ready. Nothing was well-prepared and they knew that if the cosmonaut tried to go into space he would die. A letter was prepared about this, and since only Gagarin was famous and important enough not to suffer any repercussions, he passed it along. The whole thing was forgotten and the cosmonaut ending up dying.

I found this to be a very moving movement and wanted it in the film. I asked every cosmonaut: "What was this with the letter? How did it happen?" and they all flatly denied it. There is a British director making a feature film at the moment about these same events. He's working on the script. He can add this event with the letter without any problem! The strange opposition is that you can sometimes touch better on the truth in a feature film than in a documentary.

You are enormously dependent in a documentary film on the people that you film, on the limitations of your subjects. And then the temptation to help this a bit is very high – your integrity is at stake. I talked to Hubert Sauper, whom I know quite well. I know some things that he did in *Darwin's Nightmare*. It's something like the cook's art: you shouldn't look in the kitchen to see that he pisses in the soup. It's a reality that's really there.

**Allan Siegel:** Even when people deny it! It happens all the time.

**Oksana Sarkisova** (program director, Verzió Film Festival): You can actually go way further in a fiction film. I don't know if any of you have come across *First on the Moon* (2005), which was made in Russia by someone who before that made documentary films. This film is a fiction in the documentary style. What they did is stylize the contemporary shooting and mixed it up with archival footage to create a story about the first attempt to make a trip to the moon, which happened in 1937 in the Soviet Union. This attempt was suppressed and only found recently in a KGB archive. They reconstructed the story – which is necessarily a completely fictitious story. It is shot in the style of the 30s. And there is a very peculiar way in which the archival material makes its way into the fiction.

What emerges is a funny and tricky pastiche of messages. You can see it as a way of restoring national pride or you can take it as a completely postmodern joke. But what it's actually showing is that the fusion of documentary and fiction has great potential. It

sometimes does allow you to get closer to reality and it also allows you to jump completely to the other extreme, but by using the documentary form.

**Leo De Boer:** It also proves that both Lenin and Hitler -- he wasn't engaged with Riefenstahl for nothing -- both understood the enormous propaganda potential of film. Whenever there's a revolution now, they don't storm the palace, they storm the television station! That's the first thing that you need to have control over.

**Oksana Sarkisova:** That would be my next point. I'm very glad that this roundtable is taking place after a workshop where this entanglement between documentary and politics that we're treating as a contemporary issue has been addressed in an historical perspective. The interconnection of sponsorship and filmmaking is not new: think of Grierson using the British Post Office to finance his films; or Lawrence using government money to make propaganda films for the New Deal Program; or Dziga Vertov, who not only made political propaganda films, but also made films commissioned by state trade organizations. One of Vertov's early films is something like an advertisement. But he made use of the money from his sponsor to subvert the message he was supposed to get across. He received a huge budget to make the film -- on the scale of a budget for a feature film. While he was supposed to be making an ad, he had cameramen going all over the Soviet Union and made a film selling the idea of the new federal empire.

The deep entanglement of sponsorship, politics and filmmaking has been around for a very, very long time. I think it's good to sometimes put all of this into a historical context.

**Leo De Boer:** Do you know in this context a story about Joris Ivens? He made a film called *Indonesia Calling* (1946). It was just after the War. Indonesia was a Dutch colony and the Japanese had occupied it. After World War II, Indonesia wanted to become independent but the Dutch didn't want this, so they sent troops there.

Ivens got money from the government to make a film about the situation in Indonesia. The Dutch government clearly had an agenda. They wanted him to make a film showing the necessity of Indonesia staying with Holland. He made a film that very clearly opposed the Dutch view that they should keep it. As a result, they withdrew his passport and he left the country. This is a good example of using the state's money with an agenda completely different than that of the state -- something which cost Ivens his citizenship.

**Alice Lovejoy** (doctoral candidate, Yale University): To add to this quickly: we've been drawing a polarity between propaganda and documentary. I think that we have to remember that there can be a progressive aspect to propaganda. John Grierson writes at length about the politically and aesthetically progressive potential of state supported film. The political polarity that we've been relying on isn't necessarily there. Latin American documentary -- Alvarez and Solanas -- is a good example of this as well.

**Oksana Sarkisova** If you allow me just one more point. It follows up on what Allan [Siegel] said yesterday. He drew two lines of political film: from more straightforward political activist cinema to work by Godard or Solanas. But the polarity is not that clear. It is possible for there to be a film that is not straightforwardly a political documentary, but where the material simply takes over and it ends up having a political life of its own.

**Péter Molnár** (Senior Research Fellow, Center for Media and Communication Studies, Central European University): Two quick comments. One concerns what Allan said about Disney and state censorship. I only wanted to say that I see the point that a company like Disney can limit what can actually be said. But I still think that it's totally different from state censorship in non-democratic country. Whatever influence a huge company might have on the public sphere of a country, you can still go to many other places to do what you want and to produce what you want – from public television to independent media. It's simply not the same situation.

It also seems to me to be totally different whether the same film is shown in a movie cinema – a place where audience members decide consciously whether or not they want to go see the film – as opposed to a place like television, which doesn't require a well-informed decision to view, where audience members simply stumble upon something by accident. This difference is something to keep in mind.

Take the example yesterday of a movie about someone's father who was in charge of the deportation of Hungarian Jewish people. This movie could have worked in a cinema, where people go to see it if they want to and would have had some sense in advance of what they were seeing. But it was shown in two parts on television and Holocaust survivors in Hungary were not prepared to see a guy who was trying to defend his war criminal father, without any critical reflection on his actions. Of course, it is possible that the filmmaker thought that it wouldn't have the same impact if he or she criticized the interviewee. But if it's shown on television, I cannot really see how you could provide it in a package that could not offend viewers unprepared for it.

**Christian Christensen:** I realize your comments were directed at Allan, but just in terms of the question of Disney versus the state. I disagree with you. If you make a distinction between actual legislation which bans something under the law – that's one kind of censorship. That's direct censorship. But economic censorship is also an extremely pervasive and powerful form of censorship. I would still call it censorship. It's stronger in some countries than in others, but it very certainly limits the range of discourse that is possible.

If you want a good example of this, consider the development of political discourse in the United States after September 11 attacks – what was acceptable to speak about and what was unacceptable to speak about. There was no state censorship, but there was de facto censorship. One takes the form of legislation and the other is rooted in economics. Will advertisers jump away if I air something critical about the war effort, or 'fill in the blank' – whatever the issue might be?

Of course you can turn to other venues to say something, but then the question becomes whether any of these even come close to audience of a major mass media form? You could turn to other sites, so that technically this wouldn't be censorship. But the fact of the matter is that in comparison to what might have been my original choice I'd be reaching dramatically fewer people.

I agree with you that they are different. You might not have a strict limitation on what you can say, but the effect of economic censorship is such that, especially over a long period of time, only some things are said at all. There are things you just don't hear in the United States. Not because they are banned, but because no one will air them – they'll affect profit margins. And not just profit margins, but the reactions from regular viewers, such that broadcasters just aren't willing to go there.

**Péter Molnár:** A very short follow-up question. Is it that a big company or group of big companies, such as the media barons in the US, are the problem, or that there is a majority suppression of different views?

After 9-11 seems to be a case in which the overwhelming majority didn't want to hear certain views. I still have problems seeing a profit-driven mass media as being the same as state media censorship.

**Christian Christensen:** There's no direct parallel. But let's take your example. Which came first? The mass resistance to wanting to hear certain things? In the US, dissent might mean something different than elsewhere, as does Left politics. In America, Hilary Clinton is seen as being on the left; in other countries, she certainly wouldn't be. I think it's obvious that in many countries she'd be seen as being on the right: she's pro-war, her policies are not obviously leftist.

Michael Moore made a very interesting comment. He was criticized very heavily by people on the Left for the entertainment characteristics of his films. They said that he substituted conflict for analysis: they said that his film was a war between Left and Right without any analysis. Moore had an interesting comment in response. He said that the Left in the United States is very interesting: the Left loves society, but hates people.

What he meant by that was that we are all in favor of democracy and freedom of speech and so on. But when the actions of individuals are the kinds of things that the academic left doesn't like – popular culture, mass entertainment – then they distance themselves from it. High-level theory about democracy is fantastic, but when you produce a product that speaks to the people instead of above them, then you are criticized for being a populist. This really drives Moore crazy.

**Imre Szeman:** I think we're getting close to the end. I like to throw in a comment about what we've just been discussing and then make one further comment based on some of the issues that have come up.

I agree with Christian. It's not that it's being put on the same level, but there's a kind of *absolute* censorship that emerges out of a liberal democratic state as well that can sometimes be difficult to fathom. It's a point Slavoj Žižek makes about the function of ideology in different social circumstances. He makes the point that in the communist era the state was terrified of a mimeographed poem that was circulated underground -- as if one poem could bring down the state. What you have in liberal democracy is the opposite: you can do whatever you want, you can say whatever you want, more or less, because the state assumes in advance that it doesn't really matter. It's this liberal permission which defines it and allows a more general form of structural injustice and dispossession to go on unabated. I think that there are deep-level censorships that we can sometimes miss if we focus on what a corporation does, or doesn't do, or doesn't allow, or what a state doesn't do, or doesn't permit, or doesn't allow. In the same way: now everything is permissible in an art gallery, precisely because the impact that an exhibition might have once had outside of the art gallery has been lost.

Let me turn to something else. One thing has come up again and again. We've talked about ethics, integrity and responsibility – words which have arisen from all of you as you've reflected on how you think about your own practice as filmmakers. Sometimes this has come up in relationship to questions of representation and what you feel appropriate to show (or not show) on screen. I'd like to hear more about this.

When Leo spoke about things one could do in fiction that one cannot do in documentary, I immediately started to think of what I see of as another revival: the *mockumentary* form – films such as *Death of a President* (2004) or *Einstein's Brain* (1994), or a recent Canadian documentary, *Radiant City* (2006), which is an investigation of the suburbs, and a mockumentary that goes beyond most. It includes talking heads –urban planners and cultural critics – and animated inter-titles with statistics, combined with documentary-style elements throughout the rest of the film. Its ability to say something about the nature and politics of suburban life go beyond most films that I've seen which try to comment on this.

Back to ethics, responsibility and integrity: what guides this?

If your aim as a filmmaker part of your activity is to give shape to some alternate vision of the world, as opposed to engaging in pluralist discussion, then it would seem as if all kinds of formal possibilities are opened up – including hiring a Russian actor to pretend to be a cosmonaut who saw the letter that Gagarin sent to the Politburo! So I'm curious: these question of ethics and responsibility – how do you frame them in response to your desire to be faithful to reality and to the desire to get the narrative right?

**Anna Schober:** Those are difficult questions. I should begin by saying that I am speaking not as a filmmaker but as a producer. I think that attitudes are as different as people. We cannot expect filmmakers to be better human beings than we are.

We discussed what is allowed in documentary and what is not allowed. Not only what is allowed, but what one might do: what are the kinds of things you might have to engage in to get the shots you want to have?

We were filming *Castells* for three months. Our protagonist was a family. The mother of the family was a difficult person: she drank a lot, she talked a lot. When we edited the film we had to think seriously about whether we should include her in it. Would it be good for the film? Good for her? Would we be putting the family in a difficult situation? We censored ourselves a little. We decided that some things that she said were not so important for the film — the film works equally well without them. And it would in the end create less problems for her.

You have to decide on a case-by-case basis. In most cases, there isn't someone who will tell you what to do or not to do: you have to make a decision and be able to defend it. There's no rulebook you can look at in making a documentary film.

**Christian Frei:** I just have an instinct to feel responsible for my protagonist; otherwise I'd be bored or feel bad about my profession. I want to go back with my films and show them to the people involved. I just couldn't do my job if I couldn't go back or if I was accused of being exploitative.

I did a film in Cuba about the founder of the Radio Rebelde (*Ricardo, Miriam y Fidel*, 1997) – a communist, a very nice man. During the film, his daughter was preparing to leave Cuba to go to Miami. I remember during the interviews that I had to help this man because he was speaking as a communist: no feelings at all, trying to put everything 'correctly,' such that Che and Castro would agree. And I told him that he would lose the battle to keep his daughter, because she is speaking from her heart about why she is leaving the country. I tried to help him just in order to make him stronger because the film would be stronger in the end. I knew that I had to protect him from a kind of internal censorship. In making my films, I go as far as trying to protect my protagonists from censoring themselves.

**Diana Groó:** I just want to go back to one of my first experiences at film school. I did my first on-screen interview, which was with a blind woman. I chose to interview her because she was a very interesting character, who just happened to be blind. I noticed when I was editing the film that I made a big mistake: I filmed her in extreme close-up, so that it was very visible that her eyes were not okay. I felt ashamed of myself. I was talking with this person because she was interesting, not because she was blind. But I kept focused on her eyes. Why? Probably because I was curious, but I realized that in the future I'd have to learn to better keep my distance.

I showed the woman the interview. She wanted to watch it, and, of course, we had to watch it together. I told her the truth: that I felt that I spoiled the film by doing a close up of her eyes. She said it was okay. Still, this was the first film lesson in my life. It gave me insight into how to approach a subject in the future.

Last year I was a jury member of a documentary film festival in Transylvania. There was a film that dealt with a bookseller, who happened to have an enormous nose. It was absolutely huge – it was not nice to look at. The film was about how this man loves books, the significant collection he had put together, and so on. What occupied the screen, though, was his giant nose. I was angry at this, because it took my attention away from the main topic: his books, his intellectual interests. Here again, the filmmaker's responsibility emerges: what one shows, how one shows it and what one wants to address are linked together, and can be defeated by small choices such as whether the camera stays on a subject's eyes or their nose.

**Allan Siegel:** I think that the documentary director and narrative director have a lot in common, in the sense that they understand how a film is put together, while the interview subject does not. So you are a step ahead of your subjects all the time. In this sense the responsibility is built in – if you want it to be built in. You can ignore this fact, and take advantage of this fact, and exclude this fact to get that moment of maximum entertainment value. I know some documentary filmmakers that are looking for just this: that moment of revelation in terms of your subject. You can see it in some the films that have been shown at this festival: you know that it's coming, and the question is where is it coming and how did the director get it. This to me is a really important point in terms of the ethics of filmmaking.

To give just one example: I was filming in Nicaragua, traveling through the jungle to get an interview. It turned out that the woman that we were going to interview had had her husband killed the day before by soldiers sponsored by the US. Here I was, a citizen of the enemy, getting ready to interview this woman, and the question for me was: do I go ahead with this interview or not? The way that we dealt with it was that we discussed it with her. She knew who we were, she knew why we were making the film, and it was her choice whether she wanted to do the interview or not. It turned out that she wanted to do the interview.

It becomes a question of transparency in terms of your objectives and what you are doing – how transparent you are to your subject.

**Leo De Boer:** I keep thinking about the story about the nose. You're often stuck with the reality of the protagonist that you have to make a film with.

I once had to make a film – *The Russian Folk* (1996) – with a leading lady that was completely unfit for film, in every respect: voice, movements, everything. We had to maintain relations because she was related to the people whom we were filming. You can't just take someone else. (Well, we wanted her brother, actually... )

Sometimes I think it would have been easier in this case to make a feature film. I think one has to be very clear about the different choices one has to make in creating a documentary or creating a feature film. It's ultimately about effectiveness. Truthfulness is not the terrain of documentary. We tend to think that. But it's quite arrogant to think that truthfulness is the terrain of documentary.

The nose: you have to listen to yourself as well. The first question to the book collector while the camera was rolling, just to get it off one's chest, should have been: does your nose bother you? You have to put these kinds of things right in the film.

**Diana Groó:** I didn't say it should be forbidden to show his nose. But if you do a close up of it, then the film is no longer about the bookseller. The film became about the nose, and, as an aside, that he had some interest in books despite the big nose!

**Anna Schober:** People see films in different ways. Sometimes, watching a film I feel really embarrassed: I don't want to hear what someone is saying, it's too personal. I don't want to know it. But the filmmaker probably wanted us to hear these things or to show them.

**Leo De Boer:** If something distresses you as a filmmaker, it will also distress the viewer. I've had a female producer who didn't listen to an interview once because she said, "This man's coat is so wrong!" "Listen to what he says!" I said to her. "No, I can't – the coat is out!"

An image is really complicated. It has to do sometimes not just with who is talking, but how he or she talks. That was my problem with the woman in *Russian Folk*. She couldn't tell a story! I wrote text, we had to hold it next to the camera, we used all the methods from feature film to improve her role in the film, but still, it didn't work, and the need to use her felt confining.

I made a film called *Train to Grozny* (2000). We got on a train in Moscow, with the idea of seeing how far we'd get heading in the direction of Grozny. The film started with us buying a ticket to Grozny. Well, you can't actually buy a ticket to Grozny, but we bought one that took us in the direction towards the city.

We stopped at a place called Mineral Waters, because there the rebels had stolen the train tracks. There we got embedded with the Russian army. And then, of course, you have to take sides. Okay, he we are, riding in tanks and on buses with soldiers. The original idea of the film was to talk with normal people in the trains—the people whom the war affects. But now things had changed.

By intuition, I wanted to portray the Russian army in a negative way. As it was, the spokesman of the Russian army who I had to deal with the most was a *very* nice man. This created a dilemma: I didn't want him to be nice! I wanted him to put his hand in front of the camera. These are the kinds of issues that one has to solve.

The best way to deal with these kinds of documentaries, ones that rely very much on a reportage style and are meant for broadcast on television, is to start out with as few preconceived ideas, with as little of an agenda as possible. With an open mind – otherwise you make yourself very unhappy. You shouldn't be trying to prove something.

That's Michael Moore's method: he starts with a preconceived idea and sets out to prove it. Al Gore as well.

My personal idea of documentary is posing the question, showing things, and not so much drawing the conclusions – that's the job of the viewer.

**Allan Siegel:** I want to put something in here at the end. You have to put all this in context. The amount of money that goes into documentary film production globally is miniscule – in the United States, so small as to be blasphemous, as to make the phrase 'a drop in the bucket' seem like a large amount.

And yet the potential in terms of subject matter, in terms of genre and ways of making film is enormous. This to me is a kind of censorship. Documentary is not happening – and it could be, and in so many ways. It has become much more difficult to make the kinds of films we're talking about here. This has become a real contradiction at this particular moment. We might see that there are more documentaries in movie theatres. Michael Moore might be filling movie seats. That's part of his function as an entertainer. But documentaries that are investigatory and open-ended are not found on television or in movie theatres, and yet could be and should be – maybe through greater state-support.

**Imre Szeman:** We're out of time. Please join me in thanking our participants on the roundtable today.