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## Speaking Directly

### 1 Prologue: Innocence Unprotected

Article 19 in the 1948 UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights asserts that “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.”

What are the rights to international communication in practice? Clearly the abstract aspiration of the post war Universal Declaration’s section on freedom of opinion and expression only takes meaning in its concrete historical implementation and enactment. What are the concrete contemporary dynamics of “receiving and imparting information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers”? There are often subtle political distinctions between what is seen and said from ‘inside’ vis a vis what can be seen or represented from ‘outside’ a culture or community. The basis of all anti-colonial movements starts from the construction of self-identified subjects and this is an important difference in the post-1968 radicalism motivating communities of interest from sexual politics to racial groupings, exemplified in a slogan like “Nothing about us without us”.

How do the institutions of film and television articulate relations between the North and the South of the planet at this point in their histories? A significant and largely unspoken dimension of our lives is the way in which these different parts of the world are configured in terms of prosperity and power, health and wealth. They are often described respectively in terms of their levels of ‘development’. It is difficult to address the diversity and complexity of different societies within the binary<sup>1</sup> opposition ‘developed’ and ‘underdeveloped’, perhaps now we need to think of a third term: ‘overdeveloped’. The extent of the underlying overproduction crisis and the way it generated surplus income for a section of the population, the destructive

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<sup>1</sup> “Binarism... a particular taxonomy meant to be swept away by history, after having been true to it for a moment.” Roland Barthes, Elements of Semiology, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1972) p. 82.

effects of the financialisation and speculation it encouraged, became clear as a complex of fictional financial devices disintegrated both local banking systems and global financial markets.

The teleological notion of ‘development’ needs to be rethought in relation to new values – if we stop and think about these relations at this moment of economic and ecological crisis, a more complex, inverted version of current hierarchies begins to emerge. It is from perspectives outside the geography and the dominant ideological assumptions of the West that the material and imaginative basis of our everyday life and the current formation of our merchantile social relations can be questioned and transformed most readily.

The form of this essay and the development of these perspectives is inevitably inflected by my particular experiences; a specific trajectory working in television and film in Britain and Ireland.<sup>2</sup> This writing takes place in an intersection of History and the personal: that “intimate voyage that is permeable to the world’s upheavals ... autobiographical fiction and documentary report.”<sup>3</sup> *My* direct speech works to integrate that experience and accrue an analysis, attempting to dissolve divisions between creative and critical, personal and academic discourses. It is only the reflexive and critical engagement of our subjective experience, attempting to think through the complex contradictions that we live within, that offers any chance of cutting through the imposition of the oppressive doxa of common assumptions.

## 2 The Missionary Position

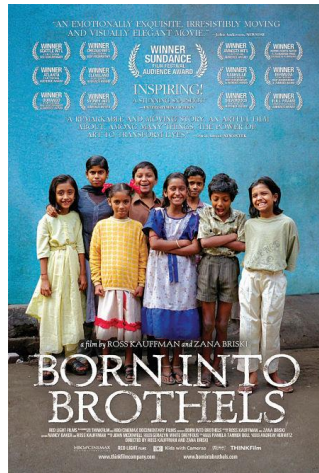
We should examine the terms of the flow of expression across existent frontiers through specific examples. The first, Born into Brothels by Zana Briski and Ross Kauffman, is a documentary produced in 2004 in the USA. Two documentary filmmakers chronicle their time in Sonagchi, Calcutta and the relationships that they developed with children of prostitutes who worked the city's notorious red light district. Photographer Zana Briski had set aside her original intention to document the

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<sup>2</sup> Channel 4 television 1983-93 (Cf. 'Sins of Commission', Screen, Oxford University Press, v33 n2, Summer 1992); and Bord Scannan na hÉireann / the Irish Film Board 1993-2003 (Cf. 'The Sins of Commission II', Screen, Oxford University Press, v46 n2, Summer 2005).

<sup>3</sup> Jean-Luc Godard's exhibition at the Centre Pompidou in Paris in the Spring of 2006 worked through the relation between the personal and the external world: “Voyages en utopie is an invitation to an intimate voyage that is permeable to the world’s upheavals. It is from the tension between these two poles – autobiographical fiction and documentary report – that poetry is generated.”

“brutality and beauty”<sup>4</sup> of the prostitutes’ lives and decided to initiate a photography



project with their children.

The film became highly successful, it was nominated as Best Documentary Feature and then won the Academy Award in this category in 2005 and went on to win 26 awards in different film festivals that year. An analysis of the film and its reception must recognize the way this documentary brought a group of disadvantaged people and their lives into international focus, including the circulation of many striking photographs made by the children themselves. There was broadly a positive response to the film in the first phase of taking the subject to a wide international (read euro-american) audience. The filmmakers subsequently set up a charity, ‘Kids with Cameras’, to benefit the children.<sup>5</sup>

The film raises issues about the relation of the visual images the young people produced to the framing representation, a narrative exposition of the photographic project and film-makers’ intervention. One early symptom of the complex politics embedded in the film emerged with the criticism contained in a letter written by Partha Banerjee, one of those involved in its making. It also received censure for being “too much about the film-makers”,<sup>6</sup> and not focused enough on the children themselves and neglecting Calcutta sex workers and activists self-organisation.<sup>7</sup>

The film contains several sequences which denigrate the adults that surround the children, the kids’ parents spew aggressive invective in a series of striking vignettes – “Tell your mother to get fucked... you worthless little cunt” is one of the memorable phrases. This works to demonise the parents while positioning the filmmakers

<sup>4</sup> Notes in booklet accompanying DVD.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.kids-with-cameras.org/home/> (accessed 30 March 2009).

<sup>6</sup> IMDB bulletin board<<.

<sup>7</sup> The Durbar Womens’ Co-ordination Committee was specifically cited in an article by Seema Sirohi.

consistently the sole source of succour and hope, emanating benevolence, offering dependable long-term care. Zana Briski is constructed as the agency for the children's redemption, as she is the only caring person able to offer the children a chance to escape from their oppressive environment and the chance of fulfilment elsewhere.

The film's lacunae occur around what the parents feel about their own children and vice versa. Disparagement of their extended families distances the children from the most proximate and long-term support available within their own environment. The film starts from the unquestioningly naïve notion – that 'we know best' – although Zana Briski, the filmmaker in front of the camera, clearly has difficulty in persuading some of the children and parents of the solution that is being proposed to them. It is clear when they visit the school set up by the Sabera Foundation in the last section of the film, that their salvation lies in a route through a strict education for the middle class roles of "doctor, engineer or lawyer". This involves commitment to an institution with a strict regime where the childrens' parents are warned against disrupting their studies by taking them out for funerals, weddings or birthdays. When Robert Pledge, a visitor from a New York photo agency<sup>8</sup>, suggests to a grandmother that she should be proud of Avijit, the old lady deferentially replies "if you are pleased, so are we".

As a powerful documentary vehicle the film deploys its narrative to deliver cathartic redemption "I'm not a social worker, or even a teacher... but without help – they're doomed" says Zana Briski. One child is signified as finding redemption at the end: "Kochi chose to stay at Sabera. She is happy and doing well" is the film's final caption. Judging by the celebratory reunion that takes place three years later, recorded in the short film Reconnecting,<sup>9</sup> she is still at the school. Zana Briski asserts "We believe in dreams... whatever you want to do you can do, because you are famous artists now." But the kids, even though they are clearly articulate teenagers by this point, still do not speak directly, we understand them through the descriptive captions the filmmakers have written *about* them.

It is revealing to conceive a commutation test – imagine a film where wealthy Asians offered to remove and rescue poor and destitute children from their parents who

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<sup>8</sup> Contact Press Images.

<sup>9</sup> A DVD extra.

inhabit cheap social housing in Chicago, or the children of a drug abuser in Dublin, or the socially deprived from a poor district of London...

But the *verité* form that the documentary takes does not encourage questioning, it produces a storyline with a powerful, visceral single-minded emotional thrust – excluding any exploration of the complexity and contradiction that is inevitably involved in the project of North / South collaboration. The pronounced passion of the American protagonist cannot raise the terms of relationship – whether it is possible for the inhabitants of a third world slum to be more than mere mendicants. Western film-makers should exercise particular sensitivity while exploring a relationship in which all the terms: age, knowledge, wealth and possibility are so unequal; a film can usefully examine the basis of the interaction more reflexively.

Partha Banerjee, who worked as a post production translator on the film, disputed the claim that the children's lives had been improved. In a letter written to the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences on 1<sup>st</sup> February 2005,<sup>10</sup> he pointed to “serious flaws – both ethical and stylistic” within the film and suggested that many of the kids ended up in worse circumstances than they had been in before their involvement in photography classes. He argued “the children’s despair has been exacerbated” because their hopes to live a better life had not been realised and their lives and family circumstances were too complex to be entirely changed by educating one family member in photography, or even by sending them to boarding school.

Debates about the politics of representation in the film are not to be construed as deploying some facile moralism which leads to a refutation of the filmmakers’ undoubted good intentions. The aspiration, stated at the beginning, that the film would enable us “to see this world through their eyes” is disingenuous and naive, it is a process with a very high degree of mediation. Inevitably their photos are selected then presented and edited with rostrum re-framing; the powerful use of sound and music much of which was composed by John McDowell to set the atmosphere lies behind reviews which describe the film as “emotionally exquisite”.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ref>>>

<sup>11</sup> Ref>>>. Partha Banerjee seems offended by the reuse of music from *The Apu Trilogy* (India, Date), although this is presumably what is being referred to by the “acknowledgement of the life and work of Satygit Ray” in the end credits.

As the long end credits roll we are reminded of the extended and precarious struggle many American independent documentary makers have to undertake in order to achieve funding to make a film, it is clear that this project drew its financial support from a plethora of sources in addition to the subscription channel Home Box Office.<sup>12</sup> It is not unexpected that there is no visible funding, or presumably editorial input, from indigenous Indian sources.

But hypothetically it would be reasonable to assume that an Indian documentary made on the same subject would comprise a very different texture of images, perspectives and politics. This should not be misconstrued as an attempt to condemn or dismiss the film categorically as ‘politically incorrect’.<sup>13</sup> If we examine the context of its exhibition and reception it is clear that the film has had a productive impact; whatever its problems or limitations, Born into Brothels has some potential to change perceptions and raise issues that are normally far from the consensus media agenda. At least it is a film which focuses on the predicament of the dispossessed, which engages and gives some scope to the children’s creative and aesthetic potential in visual terms. It was a project that *could* be realised *because* it is made by outsiders. The arguments for prioritised direct speech should not lead to the reduction of concerned filmmaking from ‘outside’ – a wide range provides useful and dialectical contrasts of perspective.<sup>14</sup> However it is imperative to begin to counter the global imbalance and glaring absence of direct speech reaching us. We should aspire to many films, pluralist perspectives.

A film like Born into Brothels raises questions about images and sounds we have been listening to and their provenance. A story told by whom? For whom? There is an exchange in Michelangelo Antonioni’s 1975 fiction film The Passenger when the journalist, played by Jack Nicholson, tries to interview an African tribesman who says “Mr Locke there are perfectly satisfactory answers to all your questions, but I don’t think you understand how little you can learn from them. Your questions are much more revealing about yourself than my answers will be about me.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Six couples, fourteen other donors, miscellaneous foundations and the Sundance Institute.

<sup>13</sup> The new politically correct line, that the politically correct is incorrect, is itself incorrect.

<sup>14</sup> The arguments around one such example of a documentary from outside (Irish filmmakers examining the 2002 coup attempt in Venezuela) is analysed in the present author’s Chávez: The Revolution Will Not Be Televised, (London: Wallflower Press, 2008).

<sup>15</sup> Significantly this film was co-written with Mark Peploe and Peter Wollen, who played a key role in introducing structural theory to film studies in the Anglophone world.

### 3. The Present Imperfect

A formative moment in the development of ideas about direct self-expression was my experience from 1983 – 1993 when I worked as a Deputy Commissioning Editor in Channel 4, a new British television station which developed the concept and practice of radical pluralism as a concerted policy. Its legislated remit was to “encourage innovation and experiment in the form and content of programmes... generally give the Fourth Channel a distinctive character of its own”, this involved “ensuring that the programmes contained a suitable proportion of matter calculated to appeal to tastes and interests not generally catered for [by ITV]”.<sup>16</sup> Set in a particular conjuncture of opportunity in the 1980s, Channel 4 embarked on new and different strategies to extend both television audiences and the range of material transmitted.

This included a consistent commitment to direct speech – in a number of forms and contexts. The very title of one of the series that I was involved in during 1982, Ireland: the Silent Voices,<sup>17</sup> about the British media and the conflict in Northern Ireland, suggested a space for those previously excluded, it was predicated on the notion of those left out, unheard, allowing people on air whose right to access the public airwaves had not been realised.

Within the Independent Film and Video department, with Alan Fountain and Caroline Spry, we were able to extend the range of direct speech in different areas of programming and in urgent political, fast moving circumstances. During the 1984-85 Miners’ Strike for instance, the regional workshops and independents were able to place programmes from grassroots perspectives largely absent from television screens. Mother Ireland, a programme about republicanism and feminism made by the Derry Film and Video Workshop, became a controversial documentary when Mairéad Farrell, an interviewee in the programme, was shot in Gibraltar.

In our minds at least, developing forms of direct speech was a critique of standard European and American television editorial approaches. The most dramatic examples of pervasive Eurocentrism would be the ‘parachute journalism’ so often deployed

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<sup>16</sup> Clauses in the Broadcasting Bill published on 6<sup>th</sup> February 1980; Maggie Brown, A Licence to be Different (London: BFI, 2007), p. 28.

<sup>17</sup> Making the introductory documentary and linking the season (TX: 7<sup>th</sup> March 1983)<<.



when reporting conflict zones. We asked Michael Grade, as Chief Executive of Channel 4 at the time, to launch South, a magazine programme conceived as a vehicle for independent film-makers from Africa, Asia and Latin America. In his speech he quipped that “Most British television research into the Third World takes place in Terminal 3 of Heathrow airport.” Ironically it is at those urgent moments when journalists set out to cover a conflict where people are engaged in an armed contention, that it is most crucial to hear and understand directly from the protagonists themselves.<sup>18</sup>

Our department was involved in purchasing and commissioning documentary and fiction films from the third world (as it was known), accessing programmes from regional workshops and communities in Britain, supporting a wide range of personal and poetic film-making. All of these very different strands of programming were implicitly informed by the post-1968 politique of self-assertive identity and collectively agreed expression. This is consonant with the aspirations to create public spaces where at least some direct speech could occur to “impart information and ideas through any media” in less mediated direct forms.

Beginning with seasons like ‘New Cinema of Latin America’, ‘Africa on Africa’ and ‘Vietnam Cinema’ in the early 1980s, we assembled programming with a wide variety of formal styles and generic formats, mixing both documentary and fictional material, categories which are complex and permeable and their separation in much television scheduling can usefully be questioned. The engagement with filmmaking from the South initially took the form of acquiring finished films and subsequently expanded to include co-production in which larger sums of money were contributed to the films’ production. The seasons made some impact and we were able to develop a weekly slot, ‘Cinema of Three Continents’, at 10pm on Sundays for 30 weeks a year. The unfamiliar textures and rhythms of many of the feature films from Africa, Asia and Latin America offered insights into other cultures, glimpses of other ways of being and seeing. Placing them in the public space through the television schedule began to have an appreciable effect on audiences’ perceptions.

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<sup>18</sup> There was a telling, post 9/11 headline in The Los Angeles Times: ‘One of the reasons that they hate us is because we have to ask – Why do they hate us?’

Even a community access series like ‘People to People’<sup>19</sup> made programmes with elegant form – showing that collaboration with a non-professional ‘community of interest’ doesn’t imply an invertebrate, shapeless programme structure. The invocation of the first ten years of Channel 4 explorations has been characterised as “melancholic nostalgia”,<sup>20</sup> but they were a starting point that should have been built on and surpassed long ago. Although the British television experience is specific and confined within national boundaries, clearly there are elements to adapt and adopt in other specific situations. The domestic political arena of individual territorial states truncates the global scope of rights issues and cross border communications. The demand for open international communications is not the same as the “false ideological universality which masks and legitimates a concrete politics of Western imperialism...” exposed in Slavoj Žižek’s critique of the global equivalencies often deployed in human rights discourses<sup>21</sup>.

Sadly the pluralist range of films and programmes available through public television in Europe has been significantly reduced over the last 15 years. Haphazard legislation released market forces which themselves, in combination with the self-fulfilling prophecy of marketing which is a determinant on the formation of popular taste, led to new, more congenial and conservative configurations in the longer term. The whole ecology of European public service television was decisively undermined by the effect of aggressive multi-channel competition which paradoxically has reduced choice.

Channel 4 in the mid 1990s took a significant role in the development and proliferation of Reality TV formats in Britain and many other countries in recent years – this is not a genre to encourage thought or debate. The very label ‘reality’ is disingenuous – as one indicative example of the hidden structure of manipulation, the room temperature in the Big Brother house is calibrated and changed in order to drive people from one room to another and orchestrate the encounters that are the centre of the narrative machinery that sustains the show. Jade Goody, known through Big Brother 3, attracted vilification and derisory sneers about her intelligence in the

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<sup>19</sup> This television genre had been established through the BBC’s ‘Open Door’ series.

<sup>20</sup> Hannah Andrews, ‘A view from the demographic: notes on a conference’, Screen v 49 n3 / Autumn 2008, p. 329.

<sup>21</sup> ‘Against Human Rights’, New Left Review 34, July – August 2005.

tabloids, who transgressed with a racist aside in Celebrity Big Brother (2007) took a telephone call in the diary room of the subsequent Indian version of the series in 2008 to hear the results of her test for cervical cancer, and, at the time of writing, enacted her own death as part of a spectacle. Reality TV has played its role in a new television environment that has eliminated the range of programming which could include filmmakers from around the world.

Inevitably the way in which historical circumstances have shifted and changed has effected access to the reception of direct speech from different perspectives within the global symbolic order. The dominant discourses from the colonial epoch quickly appeared staid and anachronistic after World War II, they were then caught in a bipolar cold war in the half century of the post-colonial epoch. More recently monoglot culture emerged as centripetal forces began to dominate in this last phase of American hegemony.

In the contemporary image system marketing works to become a self-fulfilling prophecy and local, national and international versions of the culture industry reaffirm a highly globalised and centralised structure. The media tend to concentrate on results and effects, rather than causes, and the proliferation of global television, cinema and visual configurations often reinforces the hegemony of the existent social formation. Fictional and factual forms have become forces of repetition which support the same doxa, a reinforcement of the terms of existing relationships.

Often direct speech is blocked and excluded by the notion of 'professionalism'. If this term was used to designate an approach to making films seriously and carefully with a well-achieved end result it would be less of a prohibition. But it is often a discourse deployed to define a defensive line around those who are already carrying out the activity. The qualifications and associated criteria mean that nearly all communications produced by a wider community of interest are eliminated from the public space. The proliferation of electronic means has not extended the profession of production; individuals who make short films, artistic experimentalists, communities who have something to say – none of these get on air any more frequently in the digital epoch. Perhaps it was naive to think otherwise – the availability of the means

of public writing and the posting of individual blogs has not substantially widened input to the press.

There's an arcane historical example of this process working in the wording of an announcement made before Ezra Pound's broadcast on Mussolini's radio on 29<sup>th</sup> January 1942: "Radio Rome, acting in accordance with the Fascist policy of intellectual freedom and free expression *by those who are qualified to hold it...*"<sup>22</sup> The key term is the coded qualification (in all senses) that is necessary to hold opinion. The constraint of free expression to allow only 'qualified' access to transmission is the basis, then as now, for selection. The process of separation and selection, the decisions for inclusion and exclusion as always remain invisible and shrouded.

#### 4. Talking Liberties

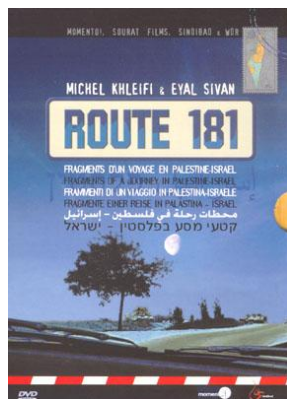
A relevant example of recent 'direct speech' to examine is Route 181: Fragments of a Journey in Palestine - Israel (France / Germany, 2004) a documentary which has its origin in a collaboration between two filmmakers from the two communities involved in a fierce contention: "an Arab-Israeli war, beginning in 1948, which is yet to end"<sup>23</sup>. In the Summer of 2002, the Palestinian filmmaker Michel Khleifi and Israeli filmmaker Eyal Sivan set off on a cinematographic journey in their country, Palestine-Israel. Those who cross their path, men and women, Israelis and Palestinians, young and old, are captured in the ordinariness of their daily life and given voice.

Michel Khlefi made Wedding in Galilee in 1987 which we screened on Channel 4 and Canticle of Stones in 1990 to which the Independent Film and Video department contributed production money. I remember a season of mixed programming from different parts of the channel called 'Maps and Dreams: Israel / Palestine'; ironically there was protracted argument about the season title – whether it should be 'Maps and Dreams: Palestine / Israel' or 'Maps and Dreams: Israel / Palestine', I think we resolved it in alphabetical, if not chronological, order.

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<sup>22</sup> Pound was interned for 12 years after the Second World War on the basis of these transmissions. Noel Stock, The Life of Ezra Pound, (London: Penguin, 1974), p. 502. [My italics].

<sup>23</sup> Caption opening the first section 'South'.



Eyal Sivan made The Specialist (France, 1999), a timely documentary re-editing archive footage from Adolf Eichmann's trial in Jerusalem in 1961. It follows Hannah Arendt's seminal Eichmann in Jerusalem in its refusal to construct the nazi as an anti-semitic monster, rather the film implies that some of his banal evil may finally stick to his victims.<sup>24</sup>

The extensive scale of Route 181's format already signals a significant difference in approach. As it follows the notional line of the 1947 UN Resolution 181 dividing the territory between Arabs and Jews; there are three sections 'South', 'Centre' and 'North', adding up to a running time of 272 minutes. Unlike fast-response short-term dramatic reportage, it is generative of deeper, longer term, understandings. This format had been used by Robert Kramer when we commissioned him to made Route One USA (1989), I remember going to Paris to view rough cuts which were eight hours long; it eventually became a 255 minute documentary exploring the country he had left ten years earlier. His exploration took place through the most original strategy of placing a fictional protagonist, the 'Doc', in front of the camera and journeying through America from north to south via the artery of Route 1 from the Canadian border to the Florida Keys. The encounters and witnesses en route offer indices, symptoms of the body politic in all its contradictions.<sup>25</sup>

As they drive from south to north of present day Israel the two filmmakers access direct extensive comment from a range of residents, workers, shop owners who they

<sup>24</sup> Gal Raz, 'Actuality of Banality: Eyal Sivan's The Specialist in Context', Shofar v24 n1, 2005.

<sup>25</sup> A relevant and adjacent precedent would be Claude Lanzmann's Shoah (France, 1985) which refines and extends the basis of recording the witnesses of a historical trauma – the Holocaust. Large areas of a three day schedule was cleared to screen this seven and a half< hour documentary on Channel 4 in 1986<, as no advertisements could interrupt the transmissions for reasons of taste, this was a significant financial as well as scheduling commitment.

encounter along the road. Significantly these protagonists giving voice to disputed versions of history, politics, territory are from the grass roots – they are not politicians, professionals or pundits. We begin to understand the dreadful symmetries and contradictions, convergences, conflicts and reconciliations. From the Jewish property developer who immigrated from Kurdistan who says of Arabs “They’re animals, not human”, to the Arab son in Masmiye “Basically they don’t treat us like human beings”, to the perception of the owner of Varda’s Inn (Kosher discounts for soldiers) “I know that you are on the side of the Arabs, all the media are...”, there is some sense of the actual and personal web of understandings that motivate those on the ground.

The film embodies extensive and variegated direct speech, we are enabled to hear a wide range of voices. “Serenity comes from listening,” as Michel Khleifi suggests and points to a route to release people from the confrontation process, “There is hope in the film – when you understand a process and its mechanisms you can reflect and create a new vision.”<sup>26</sup>

##### 5. Coda: Voyages in Utopia?

Behind the notional human rights of expression and communication embodied in a UN Declaration lies the question of reaching a concrete audience and, through this, a route to interaction with power. The Scottish poet and conceptual artist Ian Hamilton Finlay elegantly formulated the irony of liberal democracy’s freedom in one of his ‘Detached Sentences on Revolution’ issued on behalf of ‘The Committee of Public Safety: Little Sparta’ :

<p style="text-align: center;">FREEDOM OF SPEECH</p> <p style="text-align: center;">IS NOT THE FREEDOM TO SPEAK</p> <p style="text-align: center;">IT IS THE FREEDOM</p> <p style="text-align: center;">TO DISCUSS</p>
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<sup>26</sup> Ref >> Discussion with filmmakers<< Disk 4.

The basis for the freedom of expression is the possibility of reception by a significant audience which can effect perception or opinion. It is not meaningful or communicative to “have a voice” if the words are lost in the noise of competing chatter. The international Babel of the internet may bring some unheard voices to the fore – but in erratic and unpredictable patterns as most are obliterated by clamour and commotion where it is impossible to distinguish signal from background noise. This is the electronic equivalent to a peripheral ‘Speakers’ Corner’ in the top right hand corner of London’s Hyde Park. Inaccessible or unheard expressions do not constitute a dialogue, speech which is absorbed into a pervasive international hubbub does not justify the West’s self-righteous proclamation of open democracy.

What are the possibilities for the creation and reception of a wider range of direct discourses within new digital media? Many also face economic or technical constraints which hinder access to the internet and there are the other disparities of what has been called the ‘digital divide’.<sup>27</sup> The development of more effective forms of digital compression will allow the reception of available television streams and new versions of niche audiences may be built internationally when broadband can approximate to transmission quality.<sup>28</sup> It is clear that there will be no immediate panaceas as the same determinant forces metamorphose in a resilient and persistent way. The key issue for any significant demographic impact is marketing – currently the full range of politics, music, literature and visual art may be notionally available but it is not actually accessed in practice by a significant numbers of people because taste and inclinations have taken the vast majority elsewhere. Writing a blog or posting a film on YouTube makes it immediately available<sup>29</sup>, but two recent examples will indicate how marketing directs audience attention. Without Words, a short student film, was posted on the YouTube and Huston School of Film & Digital Media websites. After a few months of minimal attention it won a prize presented by Spike Lee at the Cannes Film Festival in May 2008 and the resultant publicity took it to over 500,000 hits in a week. Recently a set of three newsreels about the pan-African film festival FESPACO was made with students from Ethiopia, Nigeria and South Africa in the Imagine Newsreels; they were immediately posted on the Daily Motion website

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<sup>27</sup> The average number of computers per 100 people in the West is 50-90, in most of the South it is 0-5. >>(Source Wiki?).

<sup>28</sup> Cf Rod Stoneman, ‘Recycled Electrons: Film and the Digital’; *Kinema*, Fall 2001.

<sup>29</sup> Although not necessarily in all countries – Tunisia for instance may not receive either YouTube or DailyMotion.

and achieved about 20 to 30 hits a day until the moment it was selected on their front page when it reached 2000 viewings a day.

These processes go hand in hand with an increasing narrowness in the way most people find information through electronic media. Reading an article in a physical copy of a broadsheet newspaper is part of an encounter with various short pieces on a series of pages which touch on elements of a wider world, we come across information about a wide range of people and events that opens onto an expansive horizon. We inevitably run into reports and pictures of other communities and other continents that we are entirely unfamiliar with. The experience of reading the same newspaper online may be a very different one – we often navigate through the sections in a more selective way, the frequent use of search engines encourages a focus on specific threads that particularly interest us.

To assert common humanity is to celebrate the paradox: we are the same but different. Our cultural attention is narrow and our media are insular, what we know of others is the basis of our understanding of our place in the world. We must assert equal rights while refusing the equivalence which flattens or denies either diversity or the underlying differentials of wealth or power – which are structuring and overdetermining nearly all aspects of our relationships. As Theodor Adorno wrote “An emancipated society would not be a unitary state, but the realisation of universality in the reconciliation of differences.”<sup>30</sup> But there are not sufficient spaces to expand and explore these differences. The systematic effects of global communication structures largely work to render the variegated complexity of indigenous voices inaudible.

The exploration of more equitable discursive interaction, let alone the redistribution of material benefits between and within societies in the north and south, is inhibited by shadow boxing with an ideology which renders its own structures transparent, its operations natural and impartial: we must accept that the parameters of change are limited and this is just *the way things are*. In this context of complacency direct communication at least begins to throw the constraining capillaries of power into relief.

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<sup>30</sup> Minima Moralia, (London: NLB, 1974) p.103.



If we examine material differentials within and between different societies we encounter unexpectedly wide differentials of average GNP per capita per annum, even within Europe: say between Armenia at \$460 and Switzerland at \$39,980. Of course there are wider contrasts in global comparisons: USA \$29,240 (life expectancy at birth 77 years) and Burkina Faso \$240 (life expectancy at birth 44 years).<sup>31</sup> One would be accused of excessive naivety if one asked why people born on one part of the planet should have double the life expectancy or 100 times the income than people born on another part of the planet. Perhaps a degree of such ‘unrealistic’ incredulity may be a necessary starting point for reconfiguring our expectations. The extent to which the gap in per capita income between, roughly speaking, the North / West and the South / East of the world has actually deepened after half a century of ‘developmentalism’ suggests that the stable structure of inequality is interdependent.

One thing is clear – it is only by direct continuous representation that poor and short-lived persons, who do not normally present their visage to the prosperous West, can take up the space of self-representation and begin to effect an address. This is no longer ‘just’ a question of social justice to address the disparities of northern prosperity, but the bigger question that underlies expectations of our economies of perpetual growth which has endangered the planet ecologically. The politics of representation leads to the re-presentation of politics – direct speech to effect the durability of the status quo. The achievement of Article 19 is an integral part of a strategy to attain new forms of human organisation where the issue of rights will be redefined as a mutual respect between humans and a collective respect for nature. The plurality of direct speech brings the relativity of dominant discourses into focus, challenges their neutrality and, in its negation, insists on negotiation.

This discussion takes place at a moment when we have models of the current crises in world financial and ecological systems only reinforce the urgency of the rights to access new forms of direct speech. The ‘Plea for Products of High Necessity’ issued by nine intellectuals from Guadeloupe<sup>32</sup> is inspiring and resolute in its reaffirmation of the utopian. It reasserts the need for that which gives meaning to our lives: the poetic, the imaginative and the reflective and insists on the aspiration to self-

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<sup>31</sup> All figures 1998, last figures available on [www.worldbank.org/depweb](http://www.worldbank.org/depweb) (accessed 27th March 2009).

<sup>32</sup> *Le Monde*, 16th February 2009.

fulfilment nourished by music, sports dancing, reading, philosophy, spirituality, love. There is a sense that the current perspective from the South is a challenge that could initiate change. The most likely scenario is one in which the transformation is uneven and diverse, continually modified by local conditions, local demands, expectations, resistances and compromises, the future still bearing the residual traces of the way it always was.

Thomas Sankara, short-lived and radical President of Burkina Faso, warned against caution “You cannot carry out fundamental change without a certain amount of madness. In this case, it comes from nonconformity, the courage to turn your back on the old formulas, the courage to invent the future. It took the madmen of yesterday for us to be able to act with extreme clarity today. I want to be one of those madmen. [...] We must dare to invent the future.”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Press conference in Ouagadougou< on 21<sup>st</sup> August 1983.