

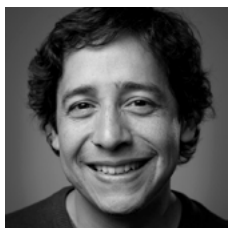
- EN**     **The Documentary Stereotype: Discussions on the Western influence in the conception, production, and distribution of contemporary Colombian and Pakistani documentary films.**
- ES**     **El estereotipo documental: debates sobre la influencia occidental en la concepción, producción y distribución del cine documental contemporáneo colombiano y pakistaní.**
- ITA**   **Lo stereotipo documentaristico: Discussioni sull'influenza occidentale nella concezione, produzione e distribuzione dei documentari contemporanei colombiani e pakistani.**
- FRA**   **Le stéréotype documentaire : Discussions sur l'influence occidentale dans la conception, la production et la distribution des films documentaires contemporains colombiens et pakistanais.**
- POR**   **O estereótipo documental: Discussões sobre a influência ocidental na concepção, produção e distribuição dos filmes documentais contemporâneos colombianos e paquistaneses.**

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Umar Bilal*

# The Documentary Stereotype: Discussions on the Western influence in the conception, production, and distribution of contemporary Colombian and Pakistani documentary films

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## ABSTRACT (ENG)

This article functions as a panorama of the contemporary international documentary film market and as a case study with the participation of documentary filmmakers from Colombia and Pakistan, both components in relation to issues of representation in cinema. As a first step, we discuss instances of misrepresentation and Othering in historically renowned documentary films and renowned documentary filmmakers with the objective of discussing and exposing the imbalance between Western film historiography and the fairly invisible but ever-present non-Western opposing positions. The article then examines academic criticism on the role of hegemonic international film funds and festivals in perpetuating practices of misrepresentation and the affirmation of stereotypes in films from the Global South<sup>1</sup>. It discusses how dissident voices remain marginal due to the rules imposed by dominant film historiography. Finally, it compiles conversations with Colombian and Pakistani filmmakers analyzing the systematic biases they face, particularly how Western structures influence local practices, resulting in the simplification of narratives to meet market demands and the reinforcement of stereotypes that fit Western notions of “the other.” The study finds that many filmmakers feel compelled to conform to this framework to access funding and recognition. These conversations also reveal critical perspectives on the market’s dynamics and outline potential solutions that still require collective adoption.

**KEYWORDS:** Documentary, visual, representation, film, festivals, funds

## RESUMEN (ES)

Este artículo funciona como un panorama del mercado internacional contemporáneo del cine documental y como un estudio de caso con la participación de cineastas de Colombia y Pakistán, ambos enfoques relacionados con cuestiones de representación en el cine. En primer lugar, analizamos casos de tergiversación y de producción de otredad (Othering) en documentales y cineastas históricamente reconocidos, con el objetivo de debatir y visibilizar el desequilibrio entre la historiografía cinematográfica occidental y las posiciones no occidentales, invisibilizadas pero siempre presentes. A continuación, el artículo examina las críticas académicas al papel que desempeñan los fondos y festivales internacionales hegemónicos en la perpetuación de prácticas de tergiversación y la reafirmación de estereotipos en los filmes del Sur Global<sup>2</sup>. Se analiza cómo las voces disidentes continúan marginadas debido a las normas impuestas por la historiografía dominante. Finalmente, se recopilan conversaciones con cineastas colombianos y pakistaníes que analizan los sesgos sistemáticos que enfrentan, en particular cómo las estructuras occidentales influyen en las prácticas locales, lo que conlleva la simplificación de las narrativas para responder a las exigencias del mercado y refuerza estereotipos acordes con las nociones occidentales del «otro». El estudio concluye que muchos cineastas se sienten obligados a adaptarse a este marco para acceder a financiación y reconocimiento. Estas conversaciones también revelan

1 In this text we make use of the sociological concept of the Global South that refers “broadly to the regions of Latin America, Asia, Africa, and Oceania. It is one of a family of terms, including “Third World” and “Periphery”, that denote regions outside Europe and North America, mostly (though not all) low-income and often politically or culturally marginalized”, as explained and contextualized by Nour Dados and Raewyn Connell. The full concept’s evolution and articulation can be accessed here: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1536504212436479>

2 En este texto utilizamos el concepto sociológico del Sur Global, que se refiere «en términos generales a las regiones de América Latina, Asia, África y Oceanía. Es uno de una familia de términos, que incluye «Tercer Mundo» y «Periferia», que denotan regiones fuera de Europa y América del Norte, en su mayoría (aunque no todas) de bajos ingresos y a menudo marginadas política o culturalmente», como explican y contextualizan Nour Dados y Raewyn Connell. La evolución y articulación completas del concepto pueden consultarse aquí: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1536504212436479>

perspectivas críticas sobre la dinámica del mercado y proponen posibles soluciones que aún requieren una adopción colectiva.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** *Documental, visual, representación, cine, festivales, fondos*

### RIASSUNTI (ITA)

Questo articolo offre una panoramica del mercato internazionale contemporaneo del documentario e funge da studio di caso con la partecipazione di registi provenienti dalla Colombia e dal Pakistan, entrambi focalizzati su questioni di rappresentazione nel cinema. In un primo momento, analizziamo casi di rappresentazione distorta e di produzione dell'alterità (Othering) in film documentari e registi storicamente affermati, con l'obiettivo di mettere in discussione e portare alla luce lo squilibrio tra la storiografia cinematografica occidentale e le posizioni non occidentali, spesso invisibili ma sempre presenti. L'articolo passa poi ad esaminare le critiche accademiche rivolte al ruolo dei fondi e dei festival internazionali egemonici nella perpetuazione di pratiche di rappresentazione distorta e nell'affermazione di stereotipi nei film del Sud globale<sup>3</sup>. Si discute di come le voci dissidenti rimangano ai margini a causa delle regole imposte dalla storiografia dominante. Infine, vengono raccolte conversazioni con registi colombiani e pakistani che analizzano i pregiudizi sistematici che affrontano, in particolare il modo in cui le strutture occidentali influenzano le pratiche locali, semplificando le narrazioni per rispondere alle richieste del mercato e rafforzando gli stereotipi conformi alle nozioni occidentali dell'"altro". Lo studio rileva che molti registi si sentono costretti a conformarsi a questo schema per ottenere finanziamenti e riconoscimento. Queste conversazioni rivelano anche prospettive critiche sulla dinamica del mercato e delineano soluzioni potenziali che richiedono ancora un'adozione collettiva.

**PAROLE CHIAVE:** *Documentario, visivo, rappresentazione, cinema, festival, fondi*

3 In questo testo utilizziamo il concetto sociologico di Sud del mondo che si riferisce "in senso lato alle regioni dell'America Latina, dell'Asia, dell'Africa e dell'Oceania. Fa parte di una famiglia di termini, tra cui "Terzo Mondo" e "Periferia", che denotano regioni al di fuori dell'Europa e del Nord America, per lo più (ma non tutte) a basso reddito e spesso emarginate dal punto di vista politico o culturale", come spiegato e contestualizzato da Nour Dados e Raewyn Connell. L'evoluzione e l'articolazione completa del concetto sono disponibili qui: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1536504212436479>

### RÉSUMÉ (FRA)

Cet article propose un panorama du marché international contemporain du film documentaire et constitue une étude de cas incluant la participation de réalisateurs colombiens et pakistanais, tous deux engagés sur les enjeux de représentation au cinéma. En premier lieu, nous examinons des cas de représentation erronée et de production d'altérité (Othering) dans des films documentaires et chez des réalisateurs historiquement reconnus, dans le but de mettre en lumière le déséquilibre entre l'historiographie cinématographique occidentale et les positions opposées non occidentales, invisibilisées mais constamment présentes. L'article poursuit avec une analyse des critiques académiques concernant le rôle des fonds et festivals internationaux hégémoniques dans la perpétuation des pratiques de représentation erronée et la réaffirmation de stéréotypes dans les films du Sud global<sup>4</sup>. Il examine comment les voix dissidentes restent marginales à cause des règles imposées par l'historiographie dominante. Enfin, il rassemble des entretiens avec des cinéastes colombiens et pakistanais qui analysent les biais systémiques auxquels ils sont confrontés, en particulier la manière dont les structures occidentales influencent les pratiques locales, simplifiant les récits pour répondre aux exigences du marché et renforçant les stéréotypes conformes aux conceptions occidentales de « l'autre ». L'étude constate que de nombreux cinéastes se sentent contraints de se conformer à ce cadre pour accéder au financement et à la reconnaissance. Ces échanges révèlent également des perspectives critiques sur la dynamique du marché et esquissent des solutions potentielles qui nécessitent encore une adoption collective.

**MOTS-CLÉS :** *documentaire, visuel, représentation, cinéma, festivals, fonds*

4 Dans ce texte, nous utilisons le concept sociologique de « Sud global », qui désigne « de manière générale les régions d'Amérique latine, d'Asie, d'Afrique et d'Océanie. Il fait partie d'une famille de termes, dont « tiers-monde » et « périphérie », qui désignent les régions situées en dehors de l'Europe et de l'Amérique du Nord, pour la plupart (mais pas toutes) à faible revenu et souvent marginalisées sur le plan politique ou culturel », comme l'expliquent et le contextualisent Nour Dados et Raewyn Connell. L'évolution et l'articulation complètes du concept sont accessibles ici : <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1536504212436479>

**RESUMO (POR)**

Este artigo oferece um panorama do mercado internacional contemporâneo de documentários e funciona como um estudo de caso com a participação de cineastas da Colômbia e do Paquistão, ambos voltados para questões de representação no cinema. Em um primeiro momento, discutimos casos de deturpação e produção da alteridade (Othering) em documentários e cineastas historicamente renomados, com o objetivo de evidenciar o desequilíbrio entre a historiografia cinematográfica ocidental e as posições não ocidentais — muitas vezes invisibilizadas, mas constantemente presentes. Em seguida, o artigo analisa críticas acadêmicas ao papel dos fundos e festivais internacionais hegemônicos na perpetuação de práticas de deturpação e na reafirmação de estereótipos em filmes do Sul Global<sup>5</sup>. Discute-se como as vozes dissidentes permanecem à margem, em função das regras impostas pela historiografia dominante. Por fim, são reunidas conversas com cineastas colombianos e paquistaneses que analisam os vieses sistemáticos que enfrentam, em especial como as estruturas ocidentais influenciam as práticas locais, resultando na simplificação de narrativas para atender às demandas do mercado e no reforço de estereótipos alinhados às noções ocidentais do “outro”. O estudo revela que muitos cineastas se sentem compelidos a se adequar a esse quadro para obter financiamento e reconhecimento. Essas conversas também trazem à tona perspectivas críticas sobre a dinâmica do mercado e delineiam soluções potenciais que ainda requerem adoção coletiva.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** *Documentário, visual, representação, cinema, festivais, fundos*

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5 Neste texto, utilizamos o conceito sociológico de Sul Global, que se refere “amplamente às regiões da América Latina, Ásia, África e Oceania. É um termo que faz parte de uma família de termos, incluindo “Terceiro Mundo” e “Periferia”, que denotam regiões fora da Europa e da América do Norte, em sua maioria (embora não todas) de baixa renda e frequentemente marginalizadas política ou culturalmente”, conforme explicado e contextualizado por Nour Dados e Raewyn Connell. A evolução e articulação completas do conceito podem ser acessadas aqui: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1536504212436479>

## INTRODUCCIÓN

We, the authors of this document, a Pakistani and a Colombian, so distant geographically and culturally, were able to connect as if we were siblings the moment we met about ten years ago as documentary film students. Like any other siblings, we understand the world in very similar terms. For example, for either of us being at an international airport can be equally an unpleasurable experience; we both have been the constant prey of negative stereotype jokes even by people close to us; throughout our lifetime we have had to continuously prove to others that we do not represent any danger, that we do not have ties with criminal organizations, and that we are not carrying bombs or drugs.

Both of us tend to spend a lot of time justifying that we are not *that* Pakistani or we are not *that* Colombian, but that rather complex process of deconstructing the interlocutor's reality usually does not allow the space and time to go further into explaining that "*that* Colombian" or "*that* Pakistani" does not even really exist, but is rather a construct conceived by a hegemonic discourse. However, by not having the opportunity to put this on the table, the existence of *that* Colombian or *that* Pakistani is not invalidated. *They* still roam the world in the popular imagination carrying bombs and drugs in search of their next victim, which could be you.

The 20th century gave birth to cinema, and both the powerful and those in search of power quickly saw how they could use this new technology: a mechanically reproduced discourse that can be played ubiquitously (Benjamin, [1935] 2010). The world we live in does not freely present a multiplicity of cinemas, rather we are predominantly exposed to the cinema of the Western gaze, on the one hand the hegemonic cinema of Hollywood, and on the other hand a European cinema

that struggles to survive. In opposition to this, there is a huge swath of peripheral cinema industries that range from the very big to the miniscule, but they almost always remain invisible to one another, hidden in the shadows of the Western model. The fact that this assertion mirrors the political world order easily refutes the pro-free market arguments that pretend to discredit any political use in the race for the dissemination of film and media as entertainment. The establishment of a discourse brings a set of rules. Today "one sole type of film production is regarded as universal and disseminated as such, while the others are only local expressions" (Paranaguá, 2003).

We, the authors of this document, are documentary filmmakers and documentary film scholars. I, the Colombian, spent a long time shooting a film in Buenaventura, an impoverished Colombian coastal city that has become the easy target of drug trafficking mafias, thus turning it into a place facing waves of violence, leading the international media to quickly label Buenaventura "the most violent city in the world." While shooting my film, there were many occasions when people would change sidewalks the moment they saw my video camera, or they would cover their faces in order to avoid the risk of being part of what was being filmed. When I wasn't filming, people often approached me to ask if I was filming what everyone always did - the violence and the negative side of the city.

I, the Pakistani, spent an extended period filming in Sehwan, a city in Pakistan rich in Sufi tradition and history. As a documentary filmmaker, I was frequently met with distrust by its inhabitants. While filming a documentary on spiritual rituals and practices, I encountered numerous locals who hesitated or outright avoided my camera, fearing that their participation might be another avenue for misrepresentation. They voiced concerns about their images being sold for profit to Western broadcasters, perpetuating a cycle of exploitation. Many refused to be filmed, citing past experiences where filmmakers captured their stories but left their living conditions unchanged. There was also a skepticism among them that documentary filmmakers, such as myself, were funded by Western entities intent on casting Pakistan in a derogative light.

Issues of representation, contrary to what some may argue, are not an abstract and theoretical discussion. Representation is observable and tangible in people's relationship not only with cinema and media, but even with their immediate surroundings when they are defined by media. The present dynamics of international film

production and film consumption define to a large extent how nations, cultures, ethnicities and individuals are portrayed and represented.

### THE WESTERN FICTION OF REALITY

The fate of documentary filmmaking was sealed from the beginning of its industrial and commercial successes. The often discussed *Nanook of the North* (Flaherty, 1922) with its long list of 'inaccuracies' that result in an overall manipulation of costumes and behaviors of the Inuit, is still regarded and taught by many in film schools around the world as the most important documentary film in history, an assessment that "keeps being repeated ad nauseam, like a nightmare" (Mora Calderón, 2023). "It was a film for white people", says Charlie Nayumallok whose father was friends with 'Nanook', when interviewed in the documentary *Nanook Revisited* (1990).

*The Hunters* (1957) by John Marshall was at the time of its release the second most successful ethnographic documentary film after *Nanook* (Weinberger, 1992). The film follows a thirteen day long hunting trip made by four !Kung men in which they chase and kill a giraffe. After the release of the film, it was revealed that the footage was actually filmed over years of observation. That finally explains the strange sensation while watching the film that those four men in the film are not always the same four men.

The father of Cinéma vérité, Jean Rouch, is one of the most important documentary film directors in history, part of any film history class, influencing generations of filmmakers. An ocean of literature praising his work exists, nevertheless the criticism he sometimes receives testifies to the seldom discussed problems many, including us, see with regard to his position in relation to the people he filmed. Ousmane Sembène once said to him "you fix a reality without seeing the evolution. What I hold against you and the Africanists is that you look at us as if we were insects" (Cervoni, [1965] 2008). In 1977, at the Margaret Mead Ethnographic Film Festival, after the presentation of a retrospective of his work, he was confronted in an interview that unfolded in these terms:

Chronicle (of a Summer) has a very different look than the others. Generally in your African films, we are given long distance shots of people active in a religious ritual or some other rite involved with non-rationalist values. In Chronicle the subjects mainly talk, and they talk about complex philosophical and psychological ideas. The action is generally indoors, and there are many close-up shots. (Rouch, Georgakas, Gupta & Janda, 2003).

In 1985, anthropologist Adolfo Colombres criticized Rouch's work in the prologue of the book *Cine, Antropología y Colonialismo* (Film, Anthropology and Colonialism), arguing that even if Rouch's work was innovative, as a good disciple of Flaherty's he developed the core of his filmography as the member of a colonialist society that was heavily exploiting the territories and peoples that he filmed, making Rouch's argument of avoiding politicization "laughable". Colombres discusses that Rouch made the conscious decision of selecting characters that served the purpose of being a stereotype of the observed black, who is not a good worker, is lazy but is a good dancer. He also notes that when Rouch is filming a European the function of such a character is to think, but when representing his black counterpart his role is to do funny or impressive things in front of the camera. An opinion, an original thought, or an open condemnation of political reality is not expected from an African. Colombres maintains that Rouch had the evident purpose of celebrating a primitive Africa, thus isolating it from a modern reality. He concluded, "Everything that dehumanizes the oppressed plays in favor of the oppressor" (Colombres, 1985).

But these modes of representation are not exceptions or isolated to the past. According to the original synopsis of the 2016 British-American co-produced documentary film *The Eagle Huntress*, the film...

[...] follows Aisholpan, a 13-year-old nomadic Mongolian girl who is fighting an ingrained culture of misogyny to become the first female Eagle Hunter in 2,000 years of male-dominated history.

Anthropologist Adrienne Mayor challenged these claims by showing how eagle hunting has been practiced by women in the region for more than 2,000 years.

The film makers have also misrepresented the historical independence of women in Kazakh and Mongolian culture. Mongolia is far from backwards or misogynistic: women have voted and held office since 1924 in Mongolia, more than 80 percent of women have secondary education, and 70 percent of college students are women. Strong women have always been part of the venerable Kazakh nomad heritage and girls were never forbidden to train eagles. (Mayor, 2016)

Nevertheless, *The Eagle Huntress*, the heartwarming fake story of a girl who manages to change the millenary misogynistic non-western traditions of her backward community, premiered at the Sundance Film Festival, was released by Sony Pictures, received several awards internationally, and is currently widely available for viewing on streaming platforms. 20th Century Fox

acquired the rights for an animation remake. Apart from now having a new and rather deceiving synopsis, no modifications were made to the film.

### FILM HISTORICISM, DOCUMENTARY FILM FESTIVALS AND THE FILM MARKET

The system implemented for film historicism is a mirror of the world's ruling political and economic system. Film historicism has been a self celebratory system exercised through power, telling a story in which a few cultures and nations portray themselves as strong, wise and complex, while portraying other cultures as backward, savage, ignorant, exotic, violent, etc. Festivals, awards, and film criticism are all part of the same machinery that looks inwards in order to promote itself.

That is how, as with any hegemony, the discourse of the filmmaking industry is written and then replicated. Hollywood blockbusters are discussed in all types of printed media, irrespective of thematic approach: there are articles on the clothes worn by the main character just as there are articles on the empty plot of the film. Awarded films and directors are a perpetual object of study in academic journals, resulting in gigantic piles of papers that reference each other and reference the same films, expanding the same reductionism of film culture that works in favor of the hegemonic industry.

Hollywood presents itself today as the international standard for film production, but that is because by becoming part of giant media conglomerates, these undertook all possible measures to concentrate film production and distribution. The ongoing golden age of Hollywood is thanks to its increased control and purchase all over the world of film distribution companies, cinema chains, cable operators, and TV networks. Hollywood films and Hollywood's cultural goods are now part of a pervasive decentralized accumulation logic that has as its corollary the centralization of media corporate capital (Wayne, 2003). In the past two decades, media conglomerates have transformed into 'Big Media' and 'Big Tech' mergers that solidified the current dominance of streaming platforms over film consumption (Schatz, 2023).

We have studied the aforementioned factors through the lens of visual representation in order to show how issues of representation in documentary filmmaking are not a collateral effect, they actually reflect how the dominant film industry and its practices are conceived. There is a significant and eloquent body of academic research into both narrative and documentary film on the problematics that have undergirded Western domination of the global film industry, such as how media narratives

that are deemed universal are being defined by the white and Western, expecting others to conform to them, also through 'universal' festivals and awards (Hudson, 2022; Jonsson, 2008); how the common practices of Othering in documentary filmmaking with its tropes of exotic, backwards and savage peoples, fulfills the purpose of redeeming the Western spectator (Tascon, 2012; Majaca & Sivan, 2016); how film festivals through their support programs for filmmakers in the Third World end up creating 'festival films' tailored for the festival's needs and reinforcing its gaze (Falicov, 2013; Falicov, Valck, Kredell, & Loist, 2016; Ostrowska, 2010; Toribio, 2013; Ross, 2011; Hoefert de Turegano, 2004); but most notably, how film festivals with their industry activities and film development funds, present methods that are reminiscent of or inscribed in colonial relations (Vallejo, 2020; Toribio, 2013; Falicov, 2016; Tascon, 2012).

Western festivals continue to be the most important gateways for the cultural legitimization of world cinema; Western funding has a disproportionate influence on international co-productions; and the primacy of Western taste results in the "ghettoization" of cinemas from developing countries in the less prestigious program sections of the various festivals (de Valck, 2007).

Our emphasis on film festivals and film development funds is presented here simply because the great majority of documentary filmmakers can only make their films if they find financial support, which is provided mainly by film festivals and their film development funds, or by film funds that measure their success rate by examining the participation of the supported films at film festivals. When a documentary film is ready, festivals are almost the only resource for finding artistic validation and, hence, the possibility of commercial distribution. In a highly concentrated film market variety becomes scarce, less buyers means also less points of view, less artistic and political positions. Thus, documentary film festivals have started to function as the actual exhibition platforms, filling the gap of commercial distribution (Vallejo, 2020). However, when festivals become exhibition platforms, the formula changes. One of the key criticisms of documentary film festivals nowadays, especially the biggest and most influential ones, is the seemingly double standard they present when proclaiming ideals of diversity and inclusion, while progressively becoming spaces ruled by principles of corporate growth, premiere exclusivities, and the standardization of narratives that turn documentary films into commodities (Carbonell, 2021; Winton, 2020). The current relevance of this discussion is also founded on the paradox that documentary films have never been as popular as now, though there seems to be less and less variety (Aldarondo

& Chadwick, 2021). Still, these academic approaches and analyses are only a marginal part of all the written literature on filmmaking and documentary filmmaking.

### COLOMBIA AND PAKISTAN BY LOCAL DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKERS

The above described panorama led us to attempt to find out how these views are received and whether they are shared by documentary filmmakers from Colombia and Pakistan. The filmmakers are the ones presumably affected by these circumstances and at the same time are the creators of the raw material that feeds this discussion. Generally, documentary filmmakers are not given the opportunity to express their views in regard to the present discussion, their role in the production and exhibition system is specifically to speak about or promote the films they have made. This led us to examine the possibility of weaving a collective voice composed of their fairly absent opinions.

In order to do so, we conducted conversations with several documentary filmmakers from Colombia and Pakistan. The selection criteria was to find documentary filmmakers and/or producers who have made at least one feature length documentary film in the last ten years and whose films have been screened at reputed international film festivals and/or funded by national or international film funding institutions. Out of fifteen conversations, ten were selected and are at the moment being edited with the purpose of compiling a book that will present their opinions. For this article, we have selected four of these filmmakers, two from Pakistan and two from Colombia and we have summarized their opinions. We talked about how they engaged in the production of their films. Afterwards, we discussed with them whether they believed there are any specific representations of Colombia and Pakistan that are expected or demanded by the international film market. Subsequently, we delved into their experiences and their understanding of the international market in connection with said representations.

There are differences in the documentary film production conditions of the two countries that need to be pointed out. Colombia has a national film production fund that is the main local source for independent documentary filmmaking, whereas filmmakers in Pakistan, where there is no such institution, rely heavily on international funding. Another difference is tied to the 'state of affairs' in each country. Colombia nowadays has a different political panorama in comparison to the past thirty years, when armed conflict and big drug mafias were everyday news, which makes it less appealing

for stories that demand 'urgency' (a word repeatedly used in the international film festival and film funding circuits and that has been discussed as the equivalent of 'exploitation'). On the other hand, in recent years Pakistan has been grappling with a persistent state of political and economic turmoil, which continues to reinforce its image, internationally, as a problematic country. Due to this, the government has struggled to prioritize film funds or support artistic endeavors. Unlike Colombia, which has seen a slight shift away from its historically problematic image, Pakistan remains trapped in continuous struggle for economic and socio-political stability.

The following is a summary of what the filmmakers shared with us:

#### ASENETH SUÁREZ

Aseneth Suárez's latest film bears her mother's name, *Clara* (2022), in which she documents the journey of the reconciliation of her family with her mother's decades long hidden and condemned same-sex relationship. Aseneth makes it clear from the beginning of our conversation that choosing to make a very intimate film about her life and her family runs counter to financial and commercial ambitions. To make and subsequently present her film has been a struggle, because there is little interest at major film events for this type of story coming from Colombia. On the contrary, she mentions there has been a clear international demand for Colombian documentary films about the Colombian Peace Agreement of 2016, therefore those projects more easily receive national and international funding, which reinforces, once again, the one-dimensional views on the country. The experience presented by the local distribution of *Clara* shows yet again the influence of international markets on film reception, since films awarded abroad are a bigger priority for Colombian local distributors, even if those films are lower in quality, since the "international stamp of approval" is a typical component of local distribution strategies. According to her personal experience in this regard, this situation ostracized her film to the point of being "bullied" by the local distribution company she worked with. Furthermore, Aseneth spots a class divide among filmmakers that brings further repercussions to visual representation in Colombian cinema: filmmakers who have had the privilege to study abroad often learn how to make films that appeal to the taste of the Western market. *Clara* was not selected by reputed documentary film festivals, but since the film was born out of a personal artistic and intimate desire that prevailed over commercial ambitions, Aseneth personally propelled the film's distribution with the same familial spirit, presenting it in-person to audiences in the format of an intimate



dialogue, which resulted in a more than satisfactory balance in the reception of the film by Colombian audiences. This perseverance has proved effective as the film also started reaching more audiences both nationally and internationally at festivals that connect with the film's ambitions.

#### ANAM ABBAS

Anam Abbas is a Pakistani/Canadian documentary film director and producer. Her works include *Showgirls of Pakistan* (2020, producer) and *Dagh Dagħ Ujala / This Stained Dawn* (2021, director). In our conversation with her she highlighted similar challenges mentioned by other filmmakers that we spoke to around the topic of funding constraints imposed by Western gatekeepers in the documentary film market. Anam emphasized the importance of creating films that represent her cultural identity authentically without catering to Western festivals, funds or audiences, which she feels often misrepresent and tokenize films from the Global South. She confirms that the challenges faced by filmmakers in Pakistan are due to the lack of a state-level funding and distribution network which makes the filmmakers rely heavily on foreign funding, which not only restricts the types of stories that are told but also imposes a Western lens that can distort and simplify cultural narratives. This led her to advocate strongly for creating alternate film funds that prioritize cultural integrity over commercial success. For example, she expressed a keen interest in establishing a South Asian Documentary Fund, modeled after successful initiatives like the Blue Eyes fund for African films, to support filmmakers in South Asia without compromising their artistic vision. Anam also spoke about her involvement in the BDS movement (Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions) and how she intends to stay committed to ethical filmmaking practices that reject ties with institutions that are linked to colonial legacies and human rights abuses. Anam's stance on this issue is part of a broader call to filmmakers to seek and establish new funding mechanisms that align with their ethical and creative values. She also shares her experience of having been gaslighted by the industry, where she feels her concerns and experiences are often dismissed by the gatekeepers, leading her to question her own perceptions and creative process.

#### MAURICIO ACOSTA

In Colombia's Cauca province, Mauricio Acosta developed much of his documentary film work within the Association of Indigenous Councils of Northern Cauca (ACIN) and their Communications Fabric, an

initiative developed with the aim of establishing media communications channels for the community and by the community. In his films, he follows the demonstrations and protests of the community against state policies, clearly evidencing the mediatic agenda of the state and its security forces, the latter being prominently portrayed in the films as they violently confronted the community, thus revealing abuses and human rights violations. The Communications Fabric encompasses radio stations, printed publications, a TV channel, Internet based communications and community meetings also known as "Mingas," therefore the documentary films were, as stated by Mauricio, only a small part of a rather extensive and well-defined communications strategy within the community. For instance, the documentary films were mainly used as part of those community meetings, in order to discuss how to address state oppression collectively. One very important component in the documentary films directed by Mauricio is the inclusion of how the demonstrations were depicted by Colombian mass media networks owned by economic conglomerates. As Mauricio defines it, these media have a totalitarian view in which the Indigenous are categorized as ignorant or as terrorists. The documentary films made by the Communications Fabric act as a counterargument to the continued visual representation of Indigenous people and its bipolar nature: Indigenous people as wise and solemn humans or Indigenous people as ignorant enemies. Within this frame, Mauricio also questions the use of Indigenous Cinema as a label, since the ambiguities in the authorship and content of such a categorization might yet again reinforce established hegemonic representations. In regards to the Colombian film industry and the role of the Colombian Film Development Fund, Mauricio expressed that as an entity the Colombian fund is interested in one type of filmmaking that, even if beneficial for the industry, should not be regarded as the only definition of filmmaking practices. Today, as new internet based technologies gain prominence, he recalls the processes of land recovery in the community: "We wanted (...) to have a large amount of territory to give to people. But once that land had been recovered, then it was said, now there should be people for the land." He feels we are in a similar

moment in film, the new and more accessible technologies are there, “but now there should be people who can critically use them on our behalf”.

#### SAAD KHAN

Saad Khan, a filmmaker from Pakistan, spoke about his struggles with securing funding from Western sources, which convinced him to abandon traditional funding routes and instead release his film *Showgirls of Pakistan* (2020) on YouTube through a partnership with VICE. He expressed a cynical view of the documentary film industry as whole, which he sees as self-deceiving, particularly in the context of its funding sources. He described at length his frustration with pitching sessions at documentary festivals during which he faced what he describes as “extremely ignorant comments” from funders. He talked about how filmmakers from the Global South must navigate a minefield of Western prejudices to secure funding. According to him, *Showgirls of Pakistan* was expected to be reduced to fit Western narrative expectations which focused on victimization, especially regarding Pakistani women and transgender individuals. Saad also critiqued the influence of corporate sponsorship on the content and integrity of documentary filmmaking. Drawing parallels with colonial anthropology, he questioned the authenticity and ethical implications of current documentary practices, where the dynamics of power and storytelling are often influenced by corporate profits. Adding to his critique, Saad highlighted the stark class divisions within the Pakistani film industry, noting that it is predominantly those who have studied at prestigious institutions abroad, the “Brown Sahibs,” who end up dominating the filmmaking scene. These filmmakers often return with Westernized notions and production styles that do not necessarily reflect the authentic stories and cultural nuances of Pakistan. This results in narratives that align more with Western expectations than with the complex realities of local life. During our conversation he found the seriousness with which we were approaching our questions about the film industry almost amusing, implying that to him there’s nothing particularly serious to discuss or debate with the circumstances being so evident. This perspective reflects his view that the film industry often overstates its own importance and disconnects from the realities it seeks to portray. This critique led him to use platforms like YouTube and create his project *Khajistan* to challenge and subvert the established norms and serve as a direct response to this disillusionment with the industry. *Khajistan* (<https://khajistan.com/>) aims to preserve the layered existence he witnessed growing up in Lahore by capturing the complexity of race, ethnicity, religion and gender that conventional archives often oversimplify.

This project embodies his belief in the democratization of content and rejecting traditional methods of distribution in favor of more direct, unfiltered methods of storytelling and archiving.

#### CONCLUSION

As mentioned above, this project will present ten conversations with documentary filmmakers in the form of a book. Evidently, the four conversations showcased here present a number of elements that give validity to the claims pertaining to the existence of imaginaries and biases that very often validate stereotypes and misrepresentations as the expected content for documentary films from Pakistan and Colombia. But even if this can be assumed as the hegemonic market’s status quo, it does not imply an obvious state of affairs, especially to documentary filmmakers themselves in their role as artists developing an individual artistic expression. The discussions on visual representation in documentary filmmaking have belonged almost exclusively to a small and marginal portion of academic studies and word of mouth reflections among documentary filmmakers. The experiences of the filmmakers is similar to that of the individual who adapts to or debates the rules of the market, illustrating the power imbalance of the individual facing an institution. The other six filmmakers that will be part of this project have expressed the same concerns even if appropriating them in different forms.

However, the filmmakers have also gone beyond the present situation and have taken measures, even if such measures are an acknowledgment and a reaction to the circumstances, but not exactly a solution. They look for alternative distribution strategies on different platforms, they detach from established narratives or initiate a conversation on the possibility of envisioning other funding bodies. These measures are conceived a posteriori, after experiencing firsthand the rules of the system, after having access to the inner workings of the documentary film market, a privilege reserved only for the small percentage that is selected to be part of it. Therefore, we still cannot talk about collectively delineated concerns, because there is a lack of collectively defined actions among filmmakers. Collectivist thoughts are fairly absent in their opinions, possibly caused by the imperative dynamics of the industry, which celebrates directors as individuals competing against each other at a moment in history when the individual has been given center stage.

We also consider it important to mention that these conversations show, yet again, real and tangible effects caused to the filmmakers by hegemonic visual

representations. All of them have felt such effects when rejected, cornered, patronized, or feeling gaslit. It is imperative to put a stress on the power imbalance documentary filmmakers face. Even if film festivals and film funding institutions have shown some awareness in this regard, an informed understanding of the real implications is needed. The principles of inclusivity and diversity that are touted as key components of such institutions are not enough unless they can incorporate the perceptions of the filmmakers and make a critical reflection on how such foundational principles are actually being implemented, especially now when the documentary film industry is taking a new direction as a result of the immense power that corporate streaming platforms and their interests have, which is creating a new set of rules.

We have to be reminded of what a filmmaker's work represents to them : it is the pursuit of their artistic ambitions in which they invest all of themselves. Independent filmmakers not only have to navigate the struggle to find financial resources, they also have to find validity in a system that often treats them adversely in ways that are many times indiscernible, invisible – an immaterial weapon that might as well be the originator of such lack of collectiveness. Misrepresentation is and has been on many occasions an act of dehumanization, and as cited before, “Everything that dehumanizes the oppressed plays in favor of the oppressor” (Colombres, 1985).

We hope this document will serve as a step forward for the articulation of a common discussion, a collective voice for the filmmakers that might vehemently and confidently address, discuss, and affirm their role in the cinema industry.

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