



The
Independence
Project

Manuscript – Volume 1

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independence-project.org



The purpose of the Independence Project is to help encourage a ground swell of conversations amongst documentary filmmakers across every region. In a time when public interest media is in jeopardy – from market forces, from big tech, from political pressures – we need to organise. To reclaim our identity. To name and describe the practice of independent filmmaking and why it matters. Only then and only together will we be able to make the case for the resources and the platforms that this field needs and deserves. To imagine and design new infrastructure that will allow citizens everywhere to access this critical genre of storytelling.

We hope this manuscript will spark conversation, help us to see ourselves anew and understand ourselves as connected across continents with common purpose.

This begins with listening to our comrades.

This manuscript contains extracts from longer interviews conducted in eight languages with 51 fellow documentary filmmakers from over 34 countries – each describing their understanding of the practice of independent filmmaking and its significance to their lives, cultures, societies. It is one of the only research projects of its kind that centres the voices of global majority makers.

In volume one, we have pulled together responses relating to just one theme; **what does independent documentary mean to you and why does it matter?** Excerpts from interviews relating to this theme have been compiled under filmmaker's names.

We will be publishing more volumes over the next year which explore questions of sustainability and funding models, the future of public and corporate distribution, assessment of media industry festivals and markets, how to build better communities and networks, and other subjects. Our aim is to provide a richer and a more diverse set of perspectives on the state of the field and hear where filmmakers are aligned, what they want to see changed and what we might build together.

You can follow the unfolding project at independence-project.org

Who is behind the Independence Project?

The Independence Project is a project of DISCO.

DISCO (Decentralised Independent Story and Culture Organizers) is a network of global cultural and documentary organisations who have come together to collaborate and coordinate around shared field challenges and advocate for the unique importance of independent documentary to culture, society and democracy.

Ambulante, AFLAMUNA, DocsMX, Doc Society, DocSP, Docubox and In-Docs have come together to peer-share learnings, collaborate on initiatives and create novel resources for the field. Over time, we have become an informal support and sharing network to collaborate together on some of the systemic challenges facing independent media, and are now formalising our collaborations to deepen support for each other and the broader ecosystem as DISCO.

Individually we each hold deep local intelligence but together we are also a global force in the creative community. In the past year alone the network has worked in over 40 countries including: Colombia, UK, US, Australia, Netherlands, Brazil, Uruguay, Kenya, India, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Pakistan, Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Costa Rica, Cuba, Ecuador, Guatemala, México, Paraguay, Panamá, Perú, Puerto Rico, República Dominicana, Uruguay, Venezuela, Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Jordan, Palestine, Yemen, Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Sudan, South Sudan, Ethiopia, Comoros Islands, Sierra Leone and South Africa. Across DISCO, we are directly supporting 2000+ independent filmmakers each year, with funding, hosting festivals and markets and training programmes in our respective regions.



How was the Independence Project research conducted?

The concept and research behind the Independence Project was designed by DISCO with the aid of academic advisors and a wider constellation of cultural organisations.

Together we agreed on regions to be represented in the study – the Arab Region, Central Asia, Central & South America, East Asia, East & Central Africa, North America, Oceania & Pacific Islands, South Asia, South East Asia, Southern Africa, West Africa, West Indies, Western & Eastern Europe.

The number of filmmakers recruited for interviews from each region was determined by population. Emergent and emblematic filmmakers from diverse backgrounds were identified and recruited by local cultural organisations.

All interviews were conducted in the preferred language of each filmmaker. Interviews were approximately one hour long, where interviewees were encouraged to ask questions, and contribute their visions towards the project.

Some interviewees have chosen to protect their identities. Consent has been sought specifically for the publication of the research in this form. Please contact zeena@docsociety.org for permission to use the research in any other contexts.

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What does independent documentary mean to you and why does it matter?

What does independent documentary mean to you and why does it matter?



Hady Zaccak

When you make more and more films, you are practically sure that you won't change the world, but... [laughs] maybe at least when you make films, there is something on the personal level that you want to change yourself. It's a way to preserve your values, the things that you dream and you fight for. This is a way to live, too. So, it becomes a way to fight also. And especially in the context of my country, to fight amnesia, to fight corruption, to fight the same people that are still governing you, to say that you have a voice.

You can express yourself through other means, not only orally, especially also in a country where you have plenty of revolutions and people going to the streets but nothing is changing. At least when you are making a film, you are preserving this. You are recording this. You are memorising this. You are archiving this, where everything is being erased. So you are fighting against deleting and erasing. And you are contributing to writing history. You are working not only on writing the history of the past, but also on writing the history of the present, and on making a dialogue. A constant dialogue between the past, the present, and the future. So it becomes a kind of mediator too, which is something really very wonderful.

If we take the Lebanese documentaries that were done for the last 15 years, the positive thing about these documentaries, where finally we can talk about a small community of people that are sharing some political and social awareness because they are tackling subjects which are very critical.

For example, to the memory of the civil war, to the current situation, political and social, even to the things that are related to religion, to sexual identity. All these usually have problems with different kinds of censorship, from the state or from the religious authorities, or from society itself. Documentary has been a platform to share all these issues that, in the case of fiction films, you cannot talk to them because you are also in a kind of industry, more in a kind of investment, where you are putting a lot of money [in] and waiting for a return fund.



Arya Rothe

I have always looked at filmmaking as something that is inherently collaborative, transcultural. I don't see a documentary filmmaker as an individual entity. Instead, I see them as a non-binary, collaborative of multiple nationalities, experiences, colours, voices, and shared experiences.

For me, it's not just about the films themselves, but also about the process, which often takes me beyond familiar territories and allows for unimagined encounters and collaborations. I like the diverse perspectives that documentary filmmaking can accommodate within itself. I don't believe collaborations should be limited by language or cultural context. I have mostly made films in languages I do not understand because I did not want to impose my language onto my characters.

I feel we should all tell the stories we gravitate towards, while keeping in mind that as filmmakers we need to be listeners first. If I don't listen and try to understand what I have heard, I won't allow any change within myself, and my films will only echo my pre-existing, limited thoughts. Only through this position will I be able to acknowledge my privilege and try to become a medium through which my characters' voices can be heard and amplified.

I don't confine myself to any one particular form as the only correct way of making a film. Each story dictates its own form and each film has its own process. I feel, there are multiple correct ways to tell one story and you can find your way, only if you remain open to other possibilities.

I also feel that every time I make a documentary film, it provides me with a new insight into myself. It has consistently changed me, regardless of whether it's a commercial or non-commercial project. Just the mind-blowing worldview that each documentary presents, not just filming but even during the research process or editing, is something I wouldn't otherwise experience. I believe it shapes my worldview and makes me a better person. That's why I make films—because they change me in ways I can't foresee. And it feels particularly meaningful to be doing so now, considering the direction the world is heading. I believe dialogue is essential, and documentary films facilitate that. Not just the final film but also the process of the creation.



Xun Sero

Translated interview
from Spanish

How do I describe the work I do? Well, I still call it audiovisual work because I started out with the understanding that the audiovisual medium is a tool for fighting back, given where I live.

I live in Chiapas, in the region known as Los Altos de Chiapas [Chiapas Highlands] and this area is characterized by the violence that Indigenous peoples experience. And also by their resistance and their struggle. And there is a whole process, a process of activism, in this city, San Cristóbal de las Casas, which is the political and cultural centre of the Chiapas Highlands.

This activism has also focused a lot on helping us understand that the tools we now know how to use can also be used to save our lives. It's very ugly to say it, but we have been getting killed for a long time and there's very little media coverage. Or sometimes the media coverage focuses only on giving one version of the story, the official version, that there's nothing going on or that if something is happening it's communities fighting with each other, something internal, and what isn't said is that, in reality, there is systemic violence that runs through these conflicts.

So that's why I think of the audiovisual medium as a tool for fighting back, first to make what is happening to us visible to the outside world. But it is also a tool for creating dialogue within our communities in the context of our struggle. I come from a community-based media background, right? So the understanding is that communication can work in two ways: there's a type of communication that is designed to go inward, for communicating to our communities, and a type of communication that is needed to talk outwardly. Because sometimes what we need is international action, sometimes letters or calls are made to governments to intervene or for them to understand that violence is happening.

At least as far as my culture is concerned, I feel that it is contributing to an entire, let's call it, people's movement. Many years ago, a friend of mine told me something. He makes rock music in Tzotzil. He is a rocker, and he told me, "I want to make songs that make people from our communities feel proud of who they are". So, in my case, I am

constantly naming the civilization I am from, rather than talking about how others categorize me. I mean, I don't like to call myself Indigenous because it's a category, it's not even a culture.

Every time I talk about my Tzotzil cinema, I feel that I am contributing to other Tzotzils stepping out of the shadows and resonating with, or liking this idea of "wow! We have people among us who are making films, who are writing books, novels, who are working on their doctorate in the United States". And that sows a seed in us, because we have grown up in a super racist context in which we've been told we can't. We can't because we can't speak Spanish well, that we can't because our family never could, that we can't because we're poor.

So this extremely violent racist environment has become embedded in our heads, to the extent that, for example, at some point even my mother told me, "okay, time to go get a job". I know that this happens to everyone, but in our case it is because if it's difficult for those who are mestizo and poor, it is even more difficult for those of us from Indigenous communities. Because when we go to apply for a job, down to our skin colour will be going through the mind of whoever employs us. They will think we are going to steal from them. That if they give us a job in their store or in their company, we are going to steal a computer or something like that. So, all that creates a narrative that you can't, but the moment we start to say "ah, no, you know what, here is a Tzotzil, a Tseltal, a Yoreme, there is a Konkaak, a Mapuche exhibiting their work in New York", all of this has a positive impact on the collective imagination of the people from our cultures.

I do not know how I am going to have an impact at the national level in Mexico, or if I have an impact—I am not even interested—but I am interested in, for example, if I have children, that they are no longer marked by the way society treats them, because of where they're from.



Jason Fitzroy Jeffers

When I was very young, the first thing I ever said [was] I wanted to be a filmmaker, but growing up in Barbados that seemed so very far out of reach. It just seemed like an impossible dream. There were no resources for that. It was the kind of thing that if you mentioned it to friends, family, even your teachers, it was regarded as, well, there's no way one can make a living doing that. And I know that is something that budding filmmakers and young people face even in first world countries, such as America and the United Kingdom. But the degree to which it feels impossible in Barbados is just that much more.

And so I had entirely given up on the idea by the time I came to America, and what I did instead was become a journalist. [...] I came to America, and I worked as a journalist for quite a while for a newspaper, as a newspaper reporter for very, very South Florida publications, such as the *Miami Herald* and others. I eventually became a freelance writer. I was on staff for a while there, and then went on my own [...] It really took a former editor from the newspaper, saying to me that I should explore film and him getting me a job field producing a segment for Arte. [Arte] was playing a piece on the killing of Trayvon Martin and they needed someone with Florida knowledge to guide the French reporting team. And that's kind of what brought me into filmmaking. And then soon afterwards, I learned about a martial art in Haiti, called Tire Machèt, that I was quite interested in, because, one, it reminded me of home. It reminded me of Barbados, and seeing that nobody had made a documentary about it, I made a short film about it, and I wrote and produced that.

I think, finding a unique voice, finding a way of expression that is so deeply rooted in who you are...there's a degree of self discovery, I think, in creating your own systems in reference... Because there isn't a huge cannon of Caribbean cinema, for example. We often find ourselves looking to things like Caribbean literature, Caribbean poetry, or fields where Caribbean artists are a bit more deeply rooted and more fully expressed. So I think a deeper pride in who you are and where you're from, again, community. I think some of the relationships that have grown out of doing this work, I might not have found otherwise. And people who... I've worked jobs, and I've been fond of people that I worked with but the friendships that come out of jobs and the friendships that have come out of the Caribbean film space, or Third Horizon in particular, are quite different. They're comrades. They're really people who are fighting for the same cause, and there's great love that comes with that. So yeah, love actually... Love of self and love of community.



Vera Krichevskaya

For me, the key thing is to stick strongly with my ideas. It's complicated not to let others influence you, especially during editing. It might sound funny, but I really need to keep all the doors shut completely. Especially during editing months, because otherwise something or someone might mix up everything. [...] It's quite an emotional thing, as well, to be in a completely closed environment. Not to talk to anyone. Of course you are not alone. You are not alone, because you work with editors. This is, I think, the most important thing. This is my first thought in my mind - isolation, isolation.

That's why I think you have to work as a gatekeeper. And sometimes, especially when you work with very sharp political issues, that's based on my own experiences, [it is] better not to read [the] everyday news. Your product must live longer than this week. And you have no idea what will be the repercussions of today's news. In one year, or in 2 weeks, or so, because news itself lives [for] several hours until the next day. So that's why I try to bypass any breaking news.

All the time I try to explain to the audience 'I stand for that, I'm an "independent". I'm completely independent. I don't work for this company. I'm not connected to any money or whatever. And yeah, I think it's important. [...] I've never tried to explain it back in Russia, because in Russia I have kind of a reputation, but the problem is especially, maybe in the United States, what I feel recently is that the word independent itself is kind of discounted. Discounted. You know, everyone wants to label yourself as independent. And that's why this word, this word has lost its value. I see lots of scepticism about it recently, because the environments we live in are so mixed up. And every day you have to find new words, new ways to persuade the audience to trust you or to dissuade people who don't trust you. And unfortunately, in all this, that's not enough to say we are independent, unfortunately. It's becoming quite common unfortunately.



Rebecca Barry

It's sort of a grey area for us, because in Australia we rely heavily on government subsidies and even when you have philanthropy involved, even though it's supposed to be altruistic, there's always a little bit of a catch. And then, of course, if you get a broadcaster involved, which I would say is probably 70% of our business, you are independent to a certain extent. But then you give away creative, editorial control.

There's actually probably only been a couple of projects that have been truly independent. *The Opposition* would be one of them, *Call Me Dad*, although that did get a broadcaster. The feature *Belong To Us*, the TV cut down *Belong to Them*. But yeah, I think of us as independent because we operate outside of the system a bit, because we're always trying new ways. We're trying to hustle to think of new ways to finance things and get things out there and because we're small and nimble, we can do that. So I guess that's kind of how... it's sort of like... we're interconnected into an ecosystem that means that we kind of aren't independent?

I like that [idea of an independent spirit]. That resonates loudly with me because it does feel like we pick stories that aren't necessarily part of the mainstream. They're with a different eye. They're stories that need to be told. People who will give voice to important stories, not necessarily mainstream, and sort of sitting within that mainstream space. So I feel like that's an independent heart. With storytellers we use a term a lot, which I do think relates to independent – “subversive enchantment”. And in a way that sort of feels independent, because we're looking at what we need to change. Sometimes we go into disguise to get people thinking about things, and they don't even know it. We like to trick people. I mean... manipulate [laugh]. Yeah, that's how we would describe ourselves. Subversive enchanters.



Sami Tlili

Translated interview
from Arabic

The situation in Algeria or Tunisia is not the same as the situation in Lebanon, and even in Lebanon itself there are different situations. Therefore, even the expression Arabic films is problematic. As if it is an attempt to stereotype documentaries. As if every creative independent documentary presented in a festival has to follow only one “recipe” when presenting a topic, or when conveying a point of view, etc. And this is really dangerous.

By virtue of my work in festivals and in programming, I come across, sometimes in the same year, about 10 films that are practically similar to one another and I find this really dangerous, because for me independence is interconnected with the freedom of expression and with individuality. When I say freedom I mean the freedom of creating a film according to my point of view and not according to what the other party requires in festivals.

What made matters worse was the confusion that occurred when it came to documentaries, that I call pre-paid documentaries. I know they are very important in the industry since they procure work for technicians, directors and many other people, but I do not consider them as independent, creative documentaries. Therefore, we need to focus more on this matter.

There is a famous quote by Patricio Guzmán, who is a famous Chilean director who specialises in documentaries, about the importance of documentaries in societies. He says that a country without documentaries is like a family without a photo album, so imagine that you live in a family that does not have a photo album. Imagine that you don't have a picture from when you were young, you don't have a picture of your parents' wedding, you don't have a picture of your grandfather, you don't have your picture when you were in school, and this for me can cause a trauma. And this is where independent documentaries play an important role, not pre-paid documentaries which belong to the entertainment category...

I mean, as a person who suffers from insomnia in general, I usually watch documentaries on TV channels at three and four in the morning about buffalos in Amazon forests, let's say, it's very useful and I don't have any problem with that. But it belongs to the entertainment category; because it does not contribute to societal discussion and political debate, and this is what independent documentary is all about.

For me, independent documentaries are not independent just because of the source of the funding. It is considered an independent documentary when filmmakers are the real owners of the film, meaning when the film really expresses their opinions and thoughts and not the opinions or ideas of the donors, the channel, festivals, or global public opinion.

So for me, the Arab region's films must express the views of the Arab region's directors, regardless of what the vision might be. This is for me what independent documentaries mean. Regarding the funding, almost all of us get our funds from the same sources, from support funds or TV channels, without mentioning any names. Some TV channels fund prepaid films, and impose their opinion, at the same time, they fund independent films to show their "soft power" and to put their logo on the films. Fair enough, it's a win-win deal.

Maybe I can identify myself as an independent filmmaker. I don't really like extravagant slogans or terms. I believe that your work is what defines you, if you know how to present yourself. So I consider myself a filmmaker, since I worked in both fiction films and in documentaries. I consider myself independent in the sense of what I've already mentioned before.



What does independent documentary mean to you and why does it matter?

Michel K. Zongo

Translated interview
from French

Hm, this term [independent]... it's true, it's a complex term and one that echoes through the ages. For me, a documentary filmmaker, by definition, is independent by vocation. Quite simply, they are an author. An author has a point of view and this particular point of view is very subjective. This subjective point of view stems from independence, from freedom. Now, what exactly does that mean in practice? It means that you must already have an independent point of view, that you accept it and stand by it. You must be independent in every aspect of your vision and creation, throughout the film. That means that it is clearly an independent status.

Let me give an example. You might deal with subjects that are presented in isolation, outside of a national context, that go against the principles of a State, a government, or an organisation of any kind. From that moment you can be, "excluded" from certain funding systems, certain distribution structures, or certain recognition mechanisms. Because this independent point of view that we defend goes against the interests of an organisation or a government, especially in African countries where freedom of expression is not widespread. Even throughout Europe, in other countries, in Asia, the independence of documentary filmmakers is still a battleground.

However, that is not all – economic independence is also essential. It must find the means to make films without pressure, without concessions, standing by this point of view. But that's not always the case when there are organisations or grants, acquisition by television, or films about our work. Of course that can affect the independence of our point of view! It can become fragile, because if we don't accept it, if we don't do things the way the TV companies want or how the funding body wants it, you might not be able to make the film.

Fragile economies, especially in Africa, mean that people don't work; they just make films, not only to pursue their passion, but also because they are committed to something. But at the same time, the reality is that you have to survive, and you can't live on water alone—you have to buy bread, too!

For true independence, a filmmaker would have to be able to wake up one morning, open this or that drawer, take out his material, make the film he wants to make, with whom he wants to make it, using the distributor he prefers, where he wants. That is the ideal. We live in a world where that isn't possible.

These days, we live in a world where freedoms are increasingly restricted. Yet, a documentary filmmaker is possessed by this. He is driven by the desire to be independent, to present a topic as he wishes, to truly convey a certain point of view to the world, to question the world, to travel, to go and make things elsewhere, to bring an outside perspective to other subjects, in relation to himself and his society.

There you go. For me, that is what independence is for a documentary filmmaker. That is what I dream of.



What does independent documentary mean to you and why does it matter?

Anonymous

[Independent means] editorial and creative freedom essentially. It's not even the mode of production for me. For instance, in my last independent [project] I had a lot of support, a lot of grants, but these institutions never [...] gave rules. They really trusted you. Trust is the word. And at the same time, it's difficult, because all the decisions are mine. These are very heavy decisions, and you cannot rely on anyone else to make decisions for you. But I also really valued that, and that is probably the best thing about it, because I was not answerable to anyone but myself and the people who trusted their stories with me. And because of that, I put a lot of value in that. I put very high expectations on myself about how people come off on screen. How people are perceived after they're on the screen.

I'm not sure what really is the quantification for independence. Is it funding? And it seems like the freedom that comes with funding, it really, for me, comes from who is helping you make this film, or who is paying you to make this film. And then it comes from there, the creative and editorial freedom. But before that as well, before the idea of independence, there's also this idea of motivation. Where is this motivation really coming from? Is it from you, or is it someone, something else? So I think it's motivation and then it's independence and then it's creative and editorial freedom. These are the things that are connected, for me.



Arthur Pratt

That's what independence is. It brings to your attention your ability to stand on your own, to be able to do things the way you want to. But for me, I always say that that word "independent" is a kind of relative term, because nobody is actually independent of himself.

That term "independence" is one of those terms that I would see are not really suitable for the world that we live in. There is no way anyone can say "I am absolutely independent in whatever I am doing".

You are not absolutely independent in terms of funding, because if your stories are not lined with what's in funding organisations, granting organisations are looking out for, it's going to be very difficult to get that kind of funding, so you are not independent.

And then you are also aware of the fact that many organisations require you to have some kind of a collaboration with other creatives within that area. So you're not even independent when it comes to the application of your creative ideas, or your creative mind, into whatever you're doing. You're not absolutely independent.

But that in itself does not negate the fact that creatively we're able to come up with original ideas for ourselves, and try to pursue these initial original ideas, which in themselves are a mark of our independence. These are marks that, okay, we are independent in the sense that we can develop our ideas, we can pitch these ideas that we've developed and, whether we have funding for them or not, we are able to tell our stories, one way or the other, and we might be able to tell a short story, we might be able to tell a feature length story. But once you begin to think of breaking out of your cycle, going big, going outside, I think the word "independence" becomes weaker and weaker as you venture out of your space. The more you venture out of your space, the more you see that collaboration, which in itself is not independent. Collaboration begins to be the watched world, and brings you into the space of others.

Another thing that I have also noticed is the fact that people talk about individual creativity. People talk about independence and creativity and all of that. I think it's not as simple as they are saying it is. Because even when you come to these funding organisations with whatever might be your creative style, many of these partners have their own mindsets. They know what they are looking for, they've already made up their minds for what they are looking for, they already have a picture for what they are looking for.

So no matter what you come in with, it might be new in your own sense, it might be new to them even. But then because it has come from Africa, it's not even taken seriously – that I can tell you for free. Many times the stories that are coming out, creative ideas coming out of Africa seem not to be given the importance in decision making, because for them it's not coming from a well known or a well-named kind of filmmaker that's new, that's gonna do that. If you want to pass with your own original creative ideas, you'll have to find somebody who will have to help you develop your writing and say, "yes, I know this person". Somebody that will vouch for you and all of that. For me, these things affect this idea of being independent.



Xun Sero

Translated interview
from Spanish

I do consider my work to be independent because, although independence also has a lot to do with economics, I believe that with creativity there shouldn't be any conditions put on the topic you work with, so that makes me independent, regardless of the funding I might seek. To date, my work hasn't been influenced by whoever gives me money, something that does happen when you work, for example, for an NGO. Then you have to produce something, something audiovisual, that complies with the interests of that NGO, or that C, or of that company, or even governments.

For me, independence means creative freedom, and that no one gets involved in the topic you want to address. That's independence, isn't it? And there are many people who may say "no, no, your project received money from the State, so it is no longer independent", well, it is. In other words, for me that's what creative freedom is, and I will look for ways to be able to make good on the idea I have.

For me, yes [independent identity is an important identity]. I am captivated by the work I do because I am telling the stories I want to tell. Of course, we are not always knowledgeable about everything in the world and there are topics we don't know about and suddenly someone comes along and says "hey, it would be good to talk about this topic", and you join in talking about it, but it doesn't take away your freedom to express your opinion on those topics.

I do consider my work independent because of what I had said earlier, there is no industry here. And I think that's great because it gives us a lot of freedom. In other words, we live with a lack of economic resources. That becomes frustrating at a financial level. But I also know that the little I earn on those productions I'm on gives me complete freedom to work the way I want to work.

I like the words independence, freedom. Yes.

Because making a film takes a lot of time, a lot of work and also a lot of money. And I think that, maybe because of my family history of scarce economic resources, I was taught that if I am going to spend money on something, it has to be worth it, it will be useful for other people, that it's

not just for yourself. Maybe that's a characteristic of the work, right? We are always, from the outset, fighting for the recognition that we know how to make films. That's the first challenge we have.

I don't think there is an independent form or aesthetic, and looking for one is a mistake. Because it would mean tying yourself down, it would be limiting yourself. What I tell people is, "let's explore". Just as there are people who say "I don't want to shoot with an Arri camera anymore because, well, whatever it is", I say, "okay, give it to me", because I have been shooting with a small camera for ten or thirteen years, just like you want to film, I want to explore how to use it...

I don't know how to drive a car, but I always give the example that knowing how to drive allows you to either take different jobs, or move around more freely, regardless of the car put in front of you, be it a tractor trailer, a bus, a Volkswagen Beetle, it's important to know how to drive all of them. The same is true for aesthetics. You need to understand all of them. I don't feel like there is an oppressive aesthetic. There is no seeking of an aesthetic that is oppressive. But there is a tendency to say this is what is good, this is the best.

In that sense, I do believe that we have to counteract narratives, narratives such as how they have said... For example, why do we, those of us who are darker-skinned, always have to play the roles of murderers, thieves, poor people? We have to change that narrative. But that narrative was imposed by society. It's not that narrative or the language of film itself is oppressive.



Marjan Safinia

You know, [independence is] a word that can mean a lot of things, right? And [it] has been a lot of different things over time. But in this moment, what it means to me is something that isn't the corporate giant. And the media landscape, it's like a magician's trick. It looks like it's wider than ever, but it's narrower than ever. I don't think that most people understand that – average regular humans, civilians, don't get that. In this moment, the thing that it most means to me is the ability to make work that may not please the shareholders, may not please the systems of power. And to have that work [...] not just made, but widely seen and defended when it gets attacked, because it always gets attacked, and that is the link to a functioning democracy.

I think it was at the beginning of the Trump years that *The Washington Post* did a big thing, and they re-did their tagline – “Democracy dies in darkness”. I can't get pithier than that, right? Democracy dies in darkness and with the media landscape, it's so easy to be fooled. And so, we really need places where we can reliably understand that this has come to us without a million hands shaping it down into what they want it to be. That's what [independent] means now, most critically, because I really feel like we're in dark times, desperate times, and we need that kind of force.

So, I think that's what it means. [...] And then there's a lot of things that are attendant to that, like who has the final cut, but the big picture is that we're in the communications age and the mass of what we see has passed through the hands and control of a very small number of people who mostly don't look like the rest of us. And I mean [at an] odd scale, right? It's not proportionally representative. And it becomes truth – if truth even means anything anymore. I'm not sure it does. But that's what we believe.

This is the moment that as people we need to pull together to fight the big battles collectively. Big things, right? They're serious. We can't do it on onesies and twosies. We all need to be in it, and it's very hard to get access to information, and not just information, but the truth – the truth of people's lived experiences. So, for all of those reasons, that's the independence I'm fighting for today... Otherwise, it's game over. I mean, you can hear the beginning of the game over time in the distance, right, it's not time to be fucking about.

I don't think most people have a true picture of the interconnectedness of all these things. It's like a mesh, and we kind of have to have a network approach to fixing it. And I think DISCO is part of a networked approach...

One of the bad things about independence, I think about this all the time – it's not a new idea, but let's say I'm friends with 20 independent filmmakers. We are all struggling to fund someone to help us with our research, to be able to help fund someone to help us with some scheduling and some admin to know who's a bookkeeper who understands how to do accounting and taxes for an independent film. It's gonna take five years. We're struggling to figure out so many of these things. And because we're independent, we don't reach out to each other, right, and use a collective approach. If we just had small, business based collectives, 10 of us can fund a researcher full time, and each of us can use that person for a portion of their time and together.

So that there is also a curse to independence as opposed to interdependence, which hampers us. It ties our hands and feet because we're constantly reinventing the wheel that our neighbour already has the wheel next door. We don't think as a system, we don't have systemic thinking, network thinking. We're so proud of our independence that we'll die on that hill. And as a result, many of us are dying.



Michel K. Zongo

Translated interview
from French

As for me, I don't think I'm independent. I do not live in an independent country, because the country is subject to an entire system tied to domination, to the law of multinationals, of the market, of the decisions of superpowers, of geostrategy, and the law of "everything that we could do, if only..." I have the impression that I live in a country that subjects itself, that has no strength or freedom to say, "Yes, let me do that". No. So, this idea of independence, I don't feel it.

I do not define it as "living in a free country", because that idea of independence is tied to the history of my country and of francophone West Africa. Most of this independence was given. You know, independence cannot be given; it is torn away. You take independence, you claim your independence, but you cannot be given independence. You become independent; you make the decision for yourself. It does not come from someone saying, "Here you go. Today, you are independent".

No, that is not independence, although that is what happened. We were under colonial rule, under domination, and one day, they said to us, "Ok. You are independent now". We did not fight for it; we did not snatch it; we did not claim it for ourselves. They had to give it to us because the world was evolving into something new, a world where people said that we must put an end to colonization. So, of course, they needed other methods to grab colonies. They said, "Ok, you are independent, but we will stay here, right next to you, and we are going to continue to help you because you don't know how to be independent.

And so it has gone ever since, and it still goes on today. You are going to develop your country this way, you are going to grow your crops that way, or you are going to make films this way. It is as if we are in a perpetual internship, waiting to be independent at some given time.

That is why I don't feel it. You have to take it. You have to decide, "Yes, we are independent". It is not up to other people to decide. That's it. There is a price that must be paid, a fight that must be won. I think that there is a generation that is starting to understand, that is encouraging reflection, that has a vision, and that will not accept the way things used to be.

For me, this word, "independent", well, I wonder if there is anyone who truly is. I ask this question all over the world: if there really is such a people. I'm not talking about a country, but a people, which is different from a country. Yes, countries can say they are independent, but the people within that country may not be. They may be dominated by a dictatorial system or by an oligarchy, where the only thing produced is poor people who are not independent. They depend on the oligarchy, on extreme liberalism, which prevents people from thriving, which gives the State currency with a small group of multinationals.

For me, the word "independent" is rather idealistic, but at the same time, it is a source of inspiration. We need to be independent, but do we hold it to a degree where someone could say, "Yes, I am independent"? I think not; we don't have that. I think what is important is moving towards independence, saying that I want to be independent, that I do things to be independent. That's what it is; it is the road to independence that is interesting to me, that is exhilarating, that is alive, that is exciting.

But can we achieve it? Can we ever reach a level where one can say, "I am independent"? I ask myself this question, but it is the desire to be independent that is important. It's a struggle, it's a vision, it's active, it empowers you to do things. It helps you avoid traps. It enables you to make demands, and it helps you to move things forward. But every time, there is always something. So, do we ever manage to be independent? I cannot say yes or no, but for me, it is important that we strive for independence and trace that path. When you do that, it's important. It is. That is where you see what it is all about.

In other words, I fight for it by making films. In fact, it is in making films that I express my desire for independence because I am able to put forward subjects that are personal points of view that stand in stark contrast to many things or ideas that question an established order or accepted truth. And for me, it comes from trying to make films. Every film that I make is a small step, a small piece of independence that I tear away from somewhere. So, I am not independent. I strive to be. I fight for it with my films. I make films in order to be independent, but at the moment, I am not.



Jason Fitzroy Jeffers

[Independent is] a word that I use a lot, because it feels like we've always operated outside of any [industry]. Even being in Miami, though it's a part of the United States, it's so far away from New York and LA – be it culturally or geographically, be it the film circuits, the funding circuits, the industry. It's outside of the industry. And then that [distance is] exponentially even greater when you consider the Caribbean. I think we've always felt as if we have to fend for [ourselves]. I've certainly felt as if I've always had to fend for myself, be that finding support as far as funding is concerned, even just moral support.

Myself and my community, did we not advocate for ourselves as much as we did to get what few resources we do have, [we would not have them]. It is hard to operate without them, to make films as a collective, to self-fund and finance, be that through personal savings, fundraising events, crowdfunding. Gradually I would say more so in the last five years, maybe a year or two before the pandemic, I started to see more and more grants that are international grants, that myself or people in the Caribbean filmmaking community would be eligible for. But it really felt like that was not the case for quite a while.

I still feel there's a lot to be gleaned from [the word independent in terms of types of filmmaking] You know, one of the things we notice in Miami is that when film crews from elsewhere, usually LA or New York, come to Miami, they are woefully inefficient. And that's because the systems they use don't work in a place like Miami because there's almost a different way of operating. They don't understand the shortcuts of a place are... So yeah, things tend to go woefully over budget and just semi collapse, and I've seen it happen with productions in the Caribbean too, where people from outside are making that happen.

I think I've definitely observed more collectivity, more collective forms of working together, because if you have nothing else, what you do have is each other. And I think that's also because if you're working in a space that has told you that you can't even do what it is you want to do, the minute you see somebody else who's daring to dream the same impossible dream that you are, you gravitate towards that person. [...] [Collective work] is really big for me. It's definitely something that I've observed more of in the Southern tropical spaces. Not that it doesn't exist elsewhere, but I think you have little else to rely on.



Amil Shivji

That's a really good question [what does independent mean]. I wish I had a drink near me [laughs].

It's something we debate a lot. We started a collective during COVID called the East Africa Screen Collective – Comoros, Ethiopia, Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda at one point we had South Sudan. It's a group of filmmakers that really trust each other. We got together because of that word, independent – what does autonomy mean? Autonomy of IP? What does the autonomy of an idea mean? Political autonomy, creative autonomy – we would constantly have these discussions over drinks, at festivals, and we're like, let's actually do something with this that just doesn't lead into drunken nights, you know? Let's actually create some space for this. It's done good work.

We're working, initially, with Deutsche Welle, this film fund. The first year was more based out of Berlin, and we called for more autonomy for us to run it from ground, so now we're running it out of East Africa. So it's kind of putting the right people together with the right networks, the right ideas, who've also been through similar situations where we're kind of tired of just being consultants on projects that are to do with our people, our stories, our infrastructure, our institutions.

So we've been pushing more of that across the region, that if you want to work with us, you have to support our institutions. You have to support our infrastructure. You have to build infrastructure here that we can maintain, even when you don't get your regional funding... So that's been a very big factor for us. It's because we want it to be independent, and we're not dependent on donor money by itself.

I can give you another example. I work with the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, they support my films for a couple of years now. So I'll write a script, I'll write a story. I normally have Communist tendencies in my story writing. So then I'll reach out to them and say this is what I'm doing, and they'll give me a little bit of money to make the film which we both use for outreach work, because I do rural screenings, it helps them bring a crowd when they want to talk about land grabbing, etcetera etcetera.

It's a win-win situation for both of us, and they don't put any conditions on the funding. When I work with them, for example, right now we're investing in an air screen, those inflatable screens, because streaming doesn't make sense in Tanzania, for obvious reasons. The cinemas are in multiplex malls that no Tanzanian is actually going to. So, how do you get films to the people?

It's mobile cinema. It's outdoor screenings, drive-ins. We're getting that equipment to now go to the people and show films there and have conversations with them. In that way, that's how you can work with these organisations. But for us, when we pitched it to them, we said we are going to curate the films. It's not going to be your work, it's not going to be any NGO stuff. You support this, and sure we'll put a sticker of your organisation on the air screen, but we'll curate it. For me, that's what independent means. It means long-term autonomy.



What does independent documentary mean to you and why does it matter?

Reid Davenport

I think [independent is] a really all encompassing word. I've always thought of it as if you're not with the studio, it's an independent film. So that would mean only 1% of documentaries are not independent. I look at the word in that way.

I think the actual meaning is that you are definitely a self-starter, that you have to be involved in every facet of the filmmaking process, especially fundraising. To me, independent documentary means you start off with zero dollars, and it's about kind of making something out of nothing.



Sein Lyan Tun

This is kind of an easy question [*what does "independent" mean to you?*] but also difficult to answer.

I think that in Myanmar, being an independent filmmaker is very difficult. Especially in documentary. Even though we are trying to be that independent, we want to do whatever project that we like to do, but we don't have resources. For example, we have a project, we have an idea, [but] I don't know how we are going to develop [it]. I don't know how we are going to get money to start this project if we have an idea. So we have to make our own sacrifices, to make it ourselves our own filmmaker, cinematographer, and also the producer. So it is a more long way, you know?

What is the reason we make a film? Of course we can screen the film, but even if you make only one film, and you sacrifice your own money, your own budget, but [you are not] able to make another project, because you are already using your energy and your money. It's very difficult in Myanmar to make another film. So that is a reason that we have to look for a regional producer... It's become more independent than becoming dependent on someone who can really help us.

I think in my experience [NGO documentaries and independent documentaries are] very, very different, because if your own documentary is in your own artistic style, your own storytelling, then you can tell what you really want to tell, then you are more free.

For the one making [an NGO project], you pitch for the NGO project – that is a very specific project, for example, I'm helping with [project about] women who are exiled to Thailand now, and I'm helping this project as a mentor. And I really want to show the suffering of the women and the reality. But in the way of the NGO, they also need to prove to their funder, or their donors, that you have to tell [what] percentage that you have been using this amount of money and how you already benefit, and also you have to put the milestone – how many women have already been benefited?

Those kinds of information. So this information is... I mean, of course they spend a lot of money for this project, but sometimes I see this is not the documentary filmmaker's job, telling all the things about how the achievement is [in terms of] milestones.

[...] But you have to make it [...] That's all the donors and the funders that will be investing more so they will be useful for these women. So that is a reason that we keep working on [these projects], but you cannot show [it] in a very artistic way, and you cannot shoot a very beautiful scene. But we have to do it because we need to survive.



Michèle Stephenson

[The word independent]... It's extremely important. It's at the centre of what we do, in the sense that the importance of having final cut on what we feel is important is central and crucial. I've actually had experiences with work as works for hire that have varied in terms of the impact that I've had, and many have turned sour for a number of reasons.

I think there's also a personality thing. I am very much a contrarian, just as a personality. So that's something that I sort of grapple with, and it's not to say that we don't compromise, right? Because everything is a collaboration. Compromise is certainly important in the process because it is a communal endeavour, filmmaking, this type of storytelling. But there is a core of intention that really is very crucial to maintain. And that's where I get back to this idea of market.

For me, I am my first audience, and the reason why I came into this is understanding that I am my first audience. I also have a confidence that there are other people who see things the way I do and who feel and who are searching for validation and confirmation of their lived experiences, and how that plays out in the wider world. And so that's where I want to invest my time. And so it almost sort of goes without saying why I do it. I do it because of independence.

But we have also made sure from a financial perspective, because we don't come from a trust fund - I've got to send money to my mother, who's older. We've put our kids through school. We had to balance, because it's not a sustainable model.

We have done everything financially to be able to maintain our independence, because it's when you have to compromise financially, where you have to keep your lights on, is where then you also have to compromise the creativity, right? It's much harder to say no when you need that check. Or to walk away when you need that check, because you need to put food on the table, right? Or you want to pursue something. And so, we've been lucky enough because our training was as professionals prior to this, to be able to cultivate a space where our means of revenue - not that we don't get paid, because that's a whole other thing, we do get paid in this process. But we don't necessarily depend on documentary filmmaking or on the storytelling.

I think about what do I turn to as points of reference in people who've done work in the past right there. There are filmmakers from the past, whether it's a Melvin Van Peebles or Oscar Micheaux or St. Clair Bourne, or other people whose work I have looked to that have fed my ability to continue the work that I'm doing with this independent space.

So, it's not about how much work I do or becoming this big sort of machine just cranking out stuff that includes some representation. Now, it's really about being intentional, about hopefully, every piece of work, whether it's commissioned or not. And then that is behind, hopefully, those who come later to... who knows? This may be lost, but for someone who's digging, they can see "Oh, this is a Rada piece, it's really inspiring". And it's nurturing me to continue. So, we think about it that way. But us, it's all about the how can I build something that allows me to maintain independence in this space, whether it's my teaching, Joe practising in psychiatry part-time. It's probably the occupation that's best suited in terms of being able to balance the two if you don't come from money, but it also doesn't really pay that much [laugh], but it certainly helps with health care.

The only thing I would leave you with is that the driving force that I see around independent work is not about commerciality, but it's really about, in some ways we are the warriors of the vision of what you know, what storytelling can be and what it can provide. And independence is a crucial part of that. And it's really about legacy and envisioning beyond. And the only way we can allow that is not to be burdened by market forces.



What does independent documentary mean to you and why does it matter?

Trang Dao

In my own understanding, independent film means we are fully responsible for our film, in terms of creativity, and also financially. So we take the whole control of the film, and it's not affected by any other external parties. The film is made by and totally controlled by the filmmakers.

Some of the same projects I have been working on, we are independent films, but we also do other commissioned work, or corporate video or documentaries... something like that. That's not the only thing, but the film we work on is independent.



What does independent documentary mean to you and why does it matter?

Toni Kamau

What is independent? I mean, I guess for me, independent would mean that the core directing and producing team has editorial autonomy, it's a project that they specifically care about and wasn't necessarily commissioned by someone else. It also means that you're getting financing from multiple sources to maintain that editorial autonomy.

A consideration as an independent documentary producer is that a lot of times, if you want to do projects, [you need] a partner who has relationships that you can't have access to for geographical cultural reasons. And that's a consideration. If you know you're doing a certain kind of project, it's thinking, okay, who's the right partner who already has these relationships? You'll be very intentional about who you are going for as a potential partner.

The nature of financing [also matters to independence]... If you're working with a commissioning editor who's paying you for a strand, and they put their foot down about a direction, at the end of the day, if they're the ones who are paying the bill, then they have final say on editorial. But I feel like as the lead producer on a project, not even the lead producer, the director, and the lead producers, in my opinion... I feel like their creative, editorial, and moral motivations would come first before an additional co-producer.



Sam Soko

I think independent is like... is it the word vestigia? It's like a remnant of how filmmaking has worked for a very long time, and where the money comes from in terms of filmmaking.

It's like there is a certification of financing when it comes to making films, so there's apparently a level that's not independent where people make films and where money is available. But I don't really think that many people are part of this. There's like such a few numbers of people who are in that space, and a highly privileged group whom you might not even meet in your lifetime, just to be honest. So, I think, while I respect the term "independent" – meaning the filmmaking – I think there are different ways in which I view the terms.

There's the filmmaker's ability to be the one who comes up with what they want to film and see it through and develop it to the end. And by developing it to the end I mean even determining and engaging in the path in which they take the film – go to the festival, sell it to someone, or sell it to different people, that kind of thing. However, I feel there's so much that has happened in how media is distributed and where the money comes from that it's a very loose term for me.

I just believe we're just a bunch of filmmakers trying to make work, and if you are able to sell your work before you finish it or as you're trying to make it, it doesn't make it less independent. If you find one or two primary sources of funding that execute help, you execute your work and you finish it, it doesn't make it less independent. If you scrape from everywhere to make your content, it doesn't make you more independent. I think it's because the sources of funding have become so few, and so limited, [that] independence has been lost in terms of what you need to do, and why you need to do it, and how you need to make it. That's number one.

I think the other thing is that the conversation of independence is a very privileged conversation at the same time, because from where I stand, what choice do I have? If I am born black, what choice do I have to say I am not black? If I come from a place where there is nothing but independent filmmaking, why do you still call me an independent filmmaker?

So, I think it used to be an endearing term of independence, but in the present, as it stands, genuinely, if 90% of the filmmakers are independent filmmakers, why do we call them independent filmmakers and not just filmmakers?

Another thing that's super interesting is, speaking from a producing standpoint, [that producers here are] similar to how we use the term "independent filmmaker". The producer has – for all intents and purposes – been seen, formed, designed to be someone who comes from the West, or someone who comes from privilege, someone who comes from money. Whenever people are talking about "filmmaker", and especially talking about "independent filmmaker", they're purely talking about this often young, eager, novice, this unknown person who has this amazing idea, and they just want to present it to the world.

However, the reality again from where I stand and where I come from, is that the same can be said of a producer who's in this space, and engaging and working in this space. This producer does not have the resources, the same as that filmmaker. However, they need each other in such deep ways to make sure the project comes through and comes out. But by defining it as an independent filmmaker you've removed this producer, so you only get to work with this director, more or less. And almost all of the time, this producer is left in the bottle, and as a consequence we have very few producers in the African continent, because so many resources have gone into developing this filmmaker, but not seeing this producer as a filmmaker.

So, I find, even the use of the term "filmmaker", as great as it is, because of its historic use it has forgotten, it ignores producers. Because if you meet any filmmaker coming from this continent, they will always have the same line when you meet them at a festival or a pitch. They'd be like, 'what are you looking for? I'm looking for a producer'. If they have a producer, a lot of the time the producer is not from this continent. And, consequently we've probably marginalised some people who are as important as the filmmaker themselves. On both an opportunity level and informational level. And, therefore, we are kind of stuck in the same cycle.

I don't want to just be seen as a Kenyan, African filmmaker. I want to be a filmmaker. I want it to be okay for me to go to Ireland or Scotland and make a documentary as a filmmaker, not as an African filmmaker. It's important for us to deconstruct these viewpoints, so creating work as pan African filmmakers is a step in that direction, that I would move from being a Kenyan filmmaker to an African filmmaker. Hopefully. I want to produce work by a Dutch filmmaker being done in the Netherlands, and I'm their producer. And where am I based? I'm based in Kenya. And I'm an African. And it's okay. And it's normal. So we don't consistently get pigeonholed.



Kristina Mikhailova

In Central Asia we use “independent filmmaking” as a commonplace. During dictatorships, it’s cool and inevitable to use the word “independent”. But independent of what?

We have strong censorship, which regulates freedom of speech. We have an extreme lack of resources for the cultural sphere, to prevent opposite opinions. Some independent filmmakers use governmental money, doing a double play with high risks. If they choose a topic that governmental funds don’t support, they need to package it within the limits of what is permitted. To be truly independent in our choices, we need to be smart and combine mutually exclusive opportunities. It’s no surprise that this is a common practice throughout the Global South, but how tiresome it is.

For the whole region, “independence” covers some sides of social life, which other media cannot cover. No, we cannot use the word “underrepresented”. There are exactly topics, which it’s better to be silent about. Do you use a female protagonist and a little bit of a feminist approach? You instantly become independent because you take such radical approaches. Let the audience be shocked.

I live in Kazakhstan, it looks neo-liberal slash progressive enough. You can afford a little more freedom as a documentary filmmaker than others in Central Asia. In Tajikistan, if you say a few critical words towards officials, you have a great chance to go to prison. Personally, I am against labelling us as post-soviet countries or even Central Asia, because all five countries have completely different conditions, although we are so close to each other. But as documentary filmmakers, we must act as a cohort. Does everyone know Turkmenistan as one of the most closed countries in the world? Even in Turkmenistan, I have three filmmakers who contact me anonymously intending to unite and develop documentary filmmaking. In existing conditions, we are forced to practise documentary filmmaking as a strategy of resistance to the existing political regime, even if we do not have the right to say it out loud.

It is not difficult to guess that in such conditions the concepts of “identity for export” and “independence for export” appear. When you have no money and want to make documentary films, taking into account the absence of industry, the smartest among us realise to sell themselves.

At first sight, when you label yourself as an independent, it’s a huge statement. But you can play the game, sometimes using “independent”, sometimes not. You can also fake independence for money. Constant pressure from outside deprives us of open reflection on such things. This is the reason for significant atomisation both in society and in the professional field. This is one more reason we don’t have movements of independent filmmakers, who can say “we are independent and we do things together”. It’s hard to practise togetherness, especially “independent”, when you’re constantly competing for a few very limited resources. Winning this competition determines your very existence. So is “independent” the most valuable world in this context? I guess no.

Let’s imagine the other Central Asia, forget about ideology and talk about business. So I’m a young businesswoman (we call it “female individual entrepreneur”), I make my stuff, I make films for money. I have a company, I need it to be sustainable. I pay taxes, obviously. Why do these “young woman” taxes go towards supporting films by the National Fund? Films by “old not gold” honourable men? Films which go nowhere? Films which will never be seen? Imagine the level of corruption.

I want the system to be changed. I go to the government, go to ministers, I’m still curious and stubborn enough. It seems like a principle question to combine governmental money and international money, setting the precedent for filmmakers that we shouldn’t hesitate to use governmental money. Sure thing, they are dirty, but which money is not dirty? Political capitalism as it is. Let’s imagine the other Central Asia with independent documentary filmmaking.



Anaïs Taracena

Translated interview
from Spanish

You know now that I'm thinking about it, I don't use the term [independent] that much. Although I've used it, it's not something that I've used on the daily, but I've thought about it. [...] Considering it within the context of my own experience with creating, I can see the difference between some documentaries I made where I feel I had a little less independence with certain things, and others, where I did [have independence]. For example, with my feature-length documentary *El silencio del topo* [The silence of the mole], which was six and a half years in the making, I can confirm that it is one hundred percent an independent documentary.

In many ways, right from the start, when I began my research, I didn't want it to be a project funded by any NGO or any organization or any newspaper. Although it does touch on the topic of a journalist and talks about journalism, even though it's not a journalistic piece. But I knew it was a delicate issue, it's a complex issue in Guatemala, it's an issue that is not politically correct. I already knew that I was going to be digging into very sensitive topics, but I wanted to avoid a lot of things.

In terms of funding, ultimately, the documentary was financed using only film funding. Since there is no national funding for film, it was funded through international film funds, with open calls, and then with *Cinema en Construcción*, Work in Progress.

Honestly, these funds are very difficult to obtain, but I find them very advantageous because the only thing you commit to is putting a logo at the end of the documentary, but they don't meddle in your subject matter, they don't set a time frame, they won't tell you "this has to be finished by next year", which to me, this issue of time frames is very harmful to the independence of a project, for a work to end up... being thought of as something.

I think the time frame issue is the worst thing you can do to a documentary, because a documentary can take a long time and sometimes the editing process takes a long time. And a lot is determined during the editing process. I think it's terrible! A fund that tells you that you have to have it ready in a year is like—exactly [what we've been talking about]!—it puts you in that grey area between independent and not or really takes away from the creative freedom and the process itself.

Setting such specific time frames can even damage the ethical process itself that you have with the people you're filming, because you have to rush the whole process, and sometimes the process needs to be more collective, more consensus-based, or you simply need more time. So that also seems awful to me.

For *El silencio del topo*, the funds I obtained, which were few and far between (and obviously, I did not pay myself, my wages for six years), were at least funds that did not require anything of me, they simply gave you the funding and that was it. Because I continue to check in with the people who appear in the documentary and as of now the decision has been for us to not put it on the Internet in Guatemala; the film is still available to be seen in person or even in other spaces abroad.

So that was also another freedom that I feel I have had, and that we must also think about in regards to independent documentaries. Each documentary has its own path, I'm leading you along the one I experienced, but it's also [important] to think about distribution when it comes to independent documentary, because what independence do you have if you sell to Netflix and Netflix streams it and won't let you put it anywhere else? You can no longer do in-person screenings. You can't make posters. Netflix drops it and that's the end of that. So you say "okay, well, the documentary is independent, but was the distribution independent? I don't know.

And I think that, above all, in addition to that, when we make documentaries where trust with the people we are filming is so important, regarding sensitive subjects, how do you manage that independence when it comes to distribution? No one questions this. That's how the industry works. You have to make back the money, you have to... I don't know what, but they go over your head with all the decisions and it's concerning. I said to them, if we only put this online, is that what the protagonists want, for this to be forgotten on the Internet, or for there to be screenings and debates and for them to also talk about what they are doing?

That's my point, that these funds do not see it, they only want the end product, the content, the result, but they don't care about the whole process behind it. So, I think there has to be independence in many things so that there is also respect for the process, ethics, time frames, [...] I think these are situations that, of course, each case is different, but I'm questioning [these things] more and more.

And I'm telling you, in Guatemala there's no funding. I work with human rights, I like to work in these spaces, but I'm getting increasingly tired of these types of contradictions, I'm getting really tired of them. We worked harder than what was actually gained. We gave our all, we did the distribution, we promoted it, and everything, and it turns out that the fund just wants to do it their way. So I say, to what end?

I now increasingly prefer to work in cultural arts organizing and training and to focus on one thing: my more independent creative work, where time and process are respected, as well as if you want to do it collectively, for it to be more independent.

That's how it was with *El silencio del topo*. When we screened it here, there were organizations or spaces that work with historical memory that wanted to screen it. I said: "No, we can screen it in your spaces, but you're not going to take the film and use it for propaganda". That was defending it in a big way. That's why I also say that the independence of distribution must be defended. And they understood. We've held screenings in universities or we've gone to organizations' spaces to screen it, but defending that this is a movie, and that's that. In other words, you are not going to grab it, put your logo on it and from there make it controversial, which is what I wanted to specifically avoid in the case of *El silencio del topo*. The film is already political enough to be debated, but it must be left independent, that is, through the lens of its own subjectivity and the biases that it addresses; understand it from there.



What does independent documentary mean to you and why does it matter?

Hady Zaccak

When you talk independent, especially for example if we take American cinema because there is an establishment, [...] whenever you are independent that means that you are out of the establishment.

When you take a country like ours, there is no establishment, no system, no industry to say really that the term has the same meaning.

So this is [saying] that you are not part of any kind of institution, you are making your films on your own, trying to fund them, sometimes by going to some of the available funds, or even maybe getting television as a co-producer. But this is also [a way in which] you are trying to preserve the rights of your own films and get a kind of freedom, and expressing what you want, and [also freedom with] the content and the form. This is [it] somehow, if we want to briefly define what independent filmmaking means.



Don Edkins

For me, what comes to mind is that it is the vision of the filmmaker that gets supported and that there is no editorial control other than professional support.

With Generation Africa, because many of them were first or second time documentary filmmakers, we provided each filmmaker with professional support in the various elements of the production. We worked together with them from story idea to story development, through dramaturgy, post-production, distribution, marketing, community screenings and impact. But they hold the story and the craft as the central point. So independent, for me, means that they get the support to make the film that they want to make and that their vision is not superseded by some other editorial control. It happens in collaboration, but with them as the focus.

For me [independent] is an important word. I think it's very important that the independence tag on a filmmaker means that they are telling their stories, that they're not working for a corporation or publicising the work of somebody else, but they have that independence to be creative. And so it's that creative independence that I think is at the core of the independence tagline.

I would like to see more support given to reaching people through community screenings, and we have a few of those. We've got our network, then there's the Manyatta screenings of East Africa, there's the Cinéma Numérique Ambulant CNA in Francophone West Africa that operates in eight Francophone countries. So there are these groups, with the value of reaching a community to allow them to benefit from watching a film that is not telling them what to do or what to listen to or what to think, but allowing them to think for themselves and consider what kind of actions they want to take themselves. That, again, [is] the independence of the medium.



Maheen Mirza

I was briefly reading about the independent project and also how you all see 'independent', and I was very struck by that. It's clearly something that you look at as independent of the market and independent of the state.

[I]n our context and sociopolitical context today, I think [both of these things] are very, very relevant, and I cannot underline the importance of that. But I was also thinking in this sense, if we could open independence to also look at whether it is independence of control, independence as far as subjectivity is concerned, which is something that often comes up in filmmaking and also in terms of censorship.

I just don't mean censorship that comes from the state, but self censorship as well that comes from values which we as a society right now [are] probably emulating. In that context, I think it's important. [...] In India at least, documentary filmmaking, independent documentary filmmaking, has seen various stages. It's not something which is very young, we've had it for some time.

Earlier it used to be in the form of news reels or whatever, and then it went on to become something like a counter cinema culture. And now, I think, we are moving into more of the creative realm of where we look at expression as something which becomes a part of the documentary process, not just direct action or something like that, because a lot of that cinema has also come through in the country.

Cinema is still lacking in that because, probably, of the requirement of having both creative, technical as well as aesthetic elements, which are very firmly embedded in the narrative.

If there is a narrative that is a departure from that, you get a feeling that it is not good enough, that it's actually sub where the stories are coming from. In that sense, when we are talking about independence, we should also then look at access and the control that is also being shifted. And when we talk about independence, independence becomes important because then the people who tell the stories and the way in which they tell them [...] will also be very, very different from what we have in the context.

I feel that what we should also think about is the ethics of this whole thing, because there is already a given equation by which we judge certain things. But when I say ethics, I also mean that as a documentary it has to become a little bit more aware of the kind of relationship the person who's behind the camera has with the person who's in front of the camera.

What kind of agency or what kind of dynamics of control [there are] between them, and how much influence can a person who is the subject of the documentary [have to] be controlling or owning or [...] [asking] you to remove some things from the interview. Can I really do that in an edit? These are also questions that [...] have been coming up, but I don't think that there has been a redress of them very often.

In any case, we have this heteronormative, patriarchal structure which is constantly controlling us. [...] It actually would go against an ideological place from which a documentary emerges, of trying to shine the light on certain experiences, for example. [...] How are those contradictions also being addressed? That also becomes very, very important [when] we talk about independence, because independence is not the freedom to be heteronormative and patriarchal, but is also the freedom of others to critique it and to collaborate on it.



What does independent documentary mean to you and why does it matter?

Vuslat Karan

In my point of view, I mean as a queer feminist maker... "independence", to me, it's not only about my country, but it's also in the sense of Eurocentric - or in the sense of left wing sensing point of view - I really don't want to serve that point of view.

I want to tell my story in the way that I experience this country, for example. Not in the way of how a North American funder wants me to tell this story about Turkey, for example. Or what they expect - not want, but what they expect... I mean, we have some circles around it, and intellectually, I mean, no one forced us [to do] anything, but intellectually, that was also something [we think about].

I feel like... I always check myself in terms of queer politics. And this is also something that [makes me] feel like if I am independent or not. It's again, maybe about feeling other people's expectations, maybe.



What does independent documentary mean to you and why does it matter?

Burcu Melekoglu

Independent... Well, I think it might mean a little something different here than globally.

Well most, like almost 99% of filmmaking in Turkey is independent in the sense that there's no studio system. It's not like the whole system [exists] and then they acquired all the indie films and then they made them part of the [system]... There's no history like that. There's always that, you know, mainstream, so I guess independent in the sense to me is being outside of the mainstream, as opposed to being outside of the money funding schemes... It's not in the financial sense as much.

But in terms of forms, the way that you look at film and the way you want to tell your story is independent. But in Turkey there's also the National Funding mechanism. So I think that's... especially for documentaries, being outside of it also means that you have some independence, because then you don't need to answer [to them] For example, they would never fund a film like ours, because it's a queer film... but [it doesn't mean] you're no longer independent if you get it, or if you applied.

I guess in terms of the facts of documentary filmmaking, it's kind of like, if you get Broadcast Commission money, then you feel less independent, you know? It's those kind of things where you just submitted treatment, and someone keeps you up to that original treatment about your [work], you know what I mean? That kind of stuff.



What does independent documentary mean to you and why does it matter?

Rehad Desai

Well, the critical thing [with the technical side of independence], and this is where Netflix and streamers become a mess, is to own the intellectual property. Because that's the only way I've been able to survive for these last 20 years, by having a catalogue of films, [...] the royalties, and so on. So that's critical. The commissioning system in many territories remains in place and it's very hard to get co-productions off the ground, co-productions where you're not signing away a very significant amount of rights. It also means that the premise, the idea, the concept for the film comes from the filmmaker themselves. That may be a producer, but it's often a producer-director type, if you like. Different companies have different models. Producer-driven projects are fine, but it means in that instance that the producer is working very closely with the director, and they've got a very clear agreement on the film and the rationale. What they're trying to do with the film, why the film is being made, why the 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 year struggle is about to take place. So that relationship often has to be very close, because there's times where there is no money for the director, and no money for the producer. It is often the commitment to the subject, to the story. For the story to be realised, [that] has to be in place with an individual filmmaker or with the filmmaker's team.



Anisa Sabiri

I think I'm more comfortable calling myself an artist storyteller rather than a filmmaker because I just don't want to be put into a box. From the very beginning, my desire to make films was very simple, or maybe even selfish – to tell who I am, where I come from, and how the people around me live and feel. When I was growing up in Tajikistan, the narratives I was reading and watching were always about other countries, and those few about us were usually told by imperial authors. Meanwhile, all the stories around me seemed important, and I always believed that they should be told by ourselves. Filmmaking looked like the most universal medium for that.

For me, film is just a technical instrument. Just like any other craft it of course has rules and genres and requires skills and knowledge, but it does not mean that the craft of creating films is necessarily art-making. Art is mysterious, like magic; you never know how it emerges and why. Otherwise, everyone could google the formula and make great art. Being an artist-storyteller is like being a dreamcatcher, who might even not succeed in catching their dream. And you need to preserve your independence for that kind of journey, at least to maintain your mindset and environment as organic as possible for that dream to come. What I see, unfortunately, is that currently, the industry doesn't value artists; it instead prefers to spread pesticides and foster rapid growth, akin to a greenhouse.

I usually identify myself as an independent artist, which implies the intention to preserve the act of creation from influences that shouldn't be there – political, creative, and technical, amongst others. But "artist" and "independent" are essentially the same, because the true artist is always free. Such self-identification is ambitious, especially for a female filmmaker from an underrepresented country with no funding and limited political freedom. And it also is crazy, because the industry is just not there for people like me. The film industry essentially says, "Hey, we want you to play our game. We might chew your story, but it needs to be crisp, catchy, exotic, political, and also, bring your national funding by the way". And they might not even buy it from you unless you've already won a bunch of A-list festival awards in your portfolio. Sometimes I think these people live on a different planet because they have no idea where artists like me come from. The only way

to enter their world is essentially giving up on your dreams, and selling your soul, unfortunately. But that's not why I came to filmmaking, you know. I wanted to make films to heal my soul and, through art, invite my audience to do the same.

Such intentions face challenges not only from the industry but also from the geopolitical landscape, both in Central Asia and globally. My stories are inherently political, and amid the authoritarian backdrop of Central Asia, being in Russia's colonial pocket, coupled with Western hypocrisy, being an independent filmmaker focused on telling honest stories from my part of the world is almost akin to a suicide mission. I cannot make my films in my country, but I also cannot get funding to make them elsewhere – in the UK, where I reside, for instance, my films do not tick the boxes of the Cultural Test. So, it is like racing for funds with no legs, when your competitors have no disability. And, despite all these challenges, when taking your projects to markets and labs, you must also mind the environment all the time – be aware of extradition cases, news, the political situation in your country, region and the world, and also be ready for any scenario at any time.

Maintaining creative freedom over the project also means that you are often responsible for producing yourself, unfortunately. This is my current reality, which means non-stop, round-the-clock work, because I need to apply for hundreds of labs, and markets, fundraise, and be responsible for communication, meanwhile supporting myself by doing some paid jobs, and at the same time trying to remain creative. And then it is a story of two ends because funds require an experienced producer, who, at some point, you need to find. It is a big risk because convincing the producer to trust your vision and story means a lengthy journey beforehand. Also, you need to be experienced, so you can identify if the person is right. It is a limbo, it means you will risk a lot, including your mental health, and be alone for quite a long time. It's truly exhausting – I am currently developing my projects myself, and I simply have no time for my private life, friends or whatever.

When I call myself an independent artist, I mean that I'm independent from unwanted policies, unwanted narratives and from things that I find unethical. I suppose not from social, political or financial pressures, but I can choose who to ally with and what steps to take. I recently was advised that my first feature doesn't need to be perfect. What kind of artistry is that when you are invited to compromise your first creation before it's even brought to life? Indeed, an independent filmmaker needs a producer who is an ally in their views, someone who is equally passionate and ready to fight like a warrior to protect the vision.



Everlane Moraes

Translated interview
from Portuguese

I think that's a very general term. General, because we will always be dependent. The cinema is an industry. Even the most experimental, most informal, or most independent cinema will always need money. And money is something institutional, conventional. I will also need money, or I will make the film in precariousness. There is nothing free in the world. Money comes out of somewhere or comes out of someone. It comes out of some place. So, this "independent" idea does not exist. The money comes out of somewhere. Often, we slap it together, with our money. We think: "I made a film at zero cost." No - the cost of transportation, food, catering, it comes out of our pocket. It always comes out of somewhere. So, there is no such thing as a completely "independent" film, right? It may be independent of an institution, so to speak, but still, you would have to display it in some space. "Independent", it is difficult to conceptualise what is "independent" in a world that is so correlated. And in cinema, which, in its essence, is already a correlated art. It is a multidisciplinary, transdisciplinary, and interdisciplinary art. So, there is no cinema alone. There is cinema linked to anthropology, sociology, philosophy, phenomenology, anthropology, mathematics, physics, chemistry. There is no independent cinema, there is no independent language. Not to mention that cinema is the seventh art. I mean, it comes after six arts that precede it. Cinema is young, cinema is a baby. So, cinema is a very well located social phenomenon that depends a lot on technology, it depends on the budget, it depends on several issues. So, it's never just independent. It can be a more independent of the institution cinema. More independent, but still, some instances will have to relate.

I understand that I make independent cinema, because this financial instability, which I assume, is at the cost of my formal freedom. It's at the cost of my thematic freedom, it's at the cost of my political and ethical freedom. Because maybe if I were inside an institution, or in the "dependent" cinema, commercial and everything else, I would have a financial, political, and ethical, aesthetic dependence, within a thought of the institution. It is a very big difference if you remain in black independent cinema, in independent cinema made by women.

I see it as a place of freedom, too. It is a difficult place to survive, to maintain, but at the same time it is a place of very great freedom. And I think I have an independent side. It's an independent side and a side

where I can rent my soul. I won't sell my soul to the devil, but sometimes I'll have to rent it out a few times to survive. I always seek this balance so as not to freak out in this place of independence and the cause. I always think that I can also dedicate time to financial stability, now that I'm thirty-five years old, after seventeen years of contributing to independent cinema. To also be able to occupy other spaces and have a stability that will help me support what I want to do independently. In other words, look how crazy it is. It is the commercial or the institutional that, often, nowadays are giving me the possibility to pursue my authorial process. After seventeen years of precariousness, I manage to balance financially with less precarity. And at the same time, I can be in this independent cinema, be in the film clubs, in the universities, in the hill slums, in the independent shows. But also in large festivals, also on TV and in the museum, also licensed in large channels, and at the same time.

We have a certain prejudice against these places, right? Against television, the commercial place. So, I no longer have this prejudice. I think advertising matters for us to be, so does television. Because, otherwise, we will not be able to make the necessary evolutions in these spaces that are so difficult, but which are places of formation of our people. Our people are practically formed by television. Daily. So, I can already, nowadays, reconcile these two places, you know? The place of the independent Everlane, in which Everlane has a certain plastic, conceptual, political, fighting thought, to be this independent artist who says what she wants the way she wants to. Who wants to make different films, who wants to seek a new language, style, right? And at the same time also dealing with this market, which is also an interesting place, is a very challenging place.

Let me just say that independent cinema is not just independent cinema. It is independent in other respects as well. There are a number of issues around being independent cinema, about being the most independent work because we have this band, this series of affective, psychological, spiritual supports. We do not live, for example, without going to axé, without making an ebó. In one institution in particular it was like this: during breaks when we had time off we would return to Bahia and go to the axé to strengthen ourselves. Then, we would return to stay within that commercial and institutional space, which is super complex. There are several supports: psychological, financial, legal, spiritual, affective so that we can support ourselves in independent cinema, in short, consciously. Aware of precariousness, but also convinced of several issues that are very dear to us, right?



Irene Gutiérrez Torres

Translated interview from Spanish

The term independent is a contentious term. Who are we independent from? Does independent mean low-budget? If it is about the budget level, we work with regional and national grants—Ibermedia and the ICAA, respectively—and even international ones: For example, Tribeca and Sundance have supported my films. But we do not work with television grants, private broadcasters, actually, not even with public broadcasters, which have other interests. We don't know why. It's still a mystery to us. Canary Islands television has supported our work, our second feature.

So, independent at the funding level? Relatively speaking, yes. Independent at the content level? Well, yes, because we take on stories that we want to tell, that we feel are politically urgent. Independent at the distribution level? Therein lies the rub. How to do that? Because in the end you have to work with distribution companies that are daring enough to move this type of film that has a rich festival life—but very little life when it comes to marketing it in theatres, and internationally.

So, what is the real challenge for what we call independent film? Having truly independent circuits at every stage. Here I mean for production and distribution, even for development. Because it's also very important that the development stage is financed so that you don't have to work on other things but so you can write. Basically, I'm working in academia now, because it's been very difficult for me to get a third feature film off the ground. So, if we work on how film policy decision makers can really support independent film from its inception, while writing it, through its development stages, to have income and time to attend pitch events, script labs or writing labs. Also, support for a substantial production, make it so that we are not always on shoestring budgets where we have to juggle everything to pay for the film. And then, with creating independent distribution circuits, that they not be marginal circuits, but ones that, beyond local, are national and international. Then we can really say that there is a commitment to preserving this type of film as heritage. But of course, it has to come from above, however from a way of organising horizontally.

I believe that independent film is more alive than ever, because there is

clearly a need to work with stories in a way that is not mere entertainment. Platforms are also making independent films. If we look at it that way, Scorsese's latest film is independent cinema. So, what I'm getting at is how do we create a paradigm that supports this type of film, so we are not competing with the platforms? In a universe as complex as the film one, everything fits. It is in this diversity for the need of independent film, because if, in the end, we only adopt a film-as-mere-entertainment approach, film that is not independent with respect to the number of viewers, box office sales, subject matter, the time you have had to make it and to develop it in proper conditions, the million-dollar marketing campaigns to promote them... If we can't make film that is independent of all of these factors—basically, economic profit, stats and publicity—where will the film end up? Especially on our continent and throughout the entire Ibero-American region, but also globally. I think it is more important than ever to create a new paradigm in which all of this independence coexists with everything else, and also has an added value. Not economic value, but value as cultural heritage and as critical thinking that is consumed not at home, watching the film, but going to a theatre, where people gather, and, basically, conspire against the status quo. They make you think.

That's why I also demand to coexist, or proclaim the importance of making sure that film continues to be that kind of space. It can be a very nostalgic notion—and I know it is also great to watch films at home on digital platforms that are available—but I think that discussion spaces are very important: the forum. But this type of discussion space is also online because we have Letterboxd, but it is not the same. It is about the approach to work in these spaces of creation, production, outreach with an independent mindset, because you realise, that all said and done, when working with this type of film, it's not about the author's perspective, that the author is the enlightened one, it's that these are issues that concern us all and are issues that we all need to talk about. It's not that the author is enlightened. No. I don't like films surrounded by a director's halo. Filmmaking is a team sport. Filmmaking is group work and it is also collective memory work, especially documentary filmmaking.

That's why it's so important that it be independent— independent from policies and funding agendas—because sometimes there are issues that they'll give you money for, but for other issues, no, because talking about them is inconvenient. When it comes to financing a film, there are always agendas. And, when it comes to distributing a film, there are also agendas that are a function of the film's subject matter.

I see my work as independent. Because our films are made in an artisanal way. For five years you work to get a feature film off the ground, if you're lucky. And I also think so because, in spite of working with uncomfortable issues we have had wonderful allies. We have worked with uncomfortable

topics that the ICAIC was never ever going to produce, for example. So, well, I don't know if "independent" is a good label. Perhaps it is auteur-type cinema. I don't like that label either because I was the director and a lot of people were involved. Lisandra was the screenwriter, Javier, in my first, was a co-director. Producers always contribute their ideas. In the editing cuts, the editor is co-writer. Producers give feedback all the time, responses to a cut. Friends who are not involved, who have fresh eyes, see the cut and give you feedback. So auteur cinema, independent cinema—since people understand those labels well—let's go with that. But they are debatable.



What does independent documentary mean to you and why does it matter?

Vera Krichevskaya

I completed four feature films during the last 10 years. Each time, it was a unique experience, and very different compared to each other. I can say that all topics were connected to politics... to freedom for expressions, freedom of speech and human rights. And each time I try to tell the story of the historical and political trajectory of Russia through different protagonists.

[Several] times, the biggest obstacle and challenge was the budget and money, and how to build a wall between money and the storyline. This is the core of independent filmmaking, because in any case, you always use someone's money, some institutions, people, and etc. The first goal is to find them to persuade them. Sometimes you have to pitch hundreds of times. The second thing is to feel secure in terms of your storyline, to build the wall between any money and a storyline. And fortunately I managed to do that somehow. And I can say that in terms of my ideas, in terms of my views, perspectives, each time I was completely independent. It was just my own influence on the project.

You have to keep in mind that the documentary industry, [it's] not that developed in Russia as [it is] in [other] European countries. And I can say that – at least to my films, to my documentaries, the second and the first – I'm sure that modern Russian history in years will be watched, and will be learned, through these films.

Yes, we do have documentaries that cover some topics, but almost always you need distance. Distance between some events and the documentary. You need time to process. You need time to see a wider picture. That is why, because when the war started immediately, I got a couple of offers to make a documentary about the war, and at the same time, I knew that almost every Ukrainian filmmaker is on the field, all of them are filming. I started, I made a pitch. But at the same time I understood that it is impossible to make the film now. Yeah, you can film, but you cannot have an idea about what to do with this material, because you need time. And I understand that if I made that film that I pitched, it would be so stupid, and you won't be able to watch the war through this film in 10 years.

If you produce a film for an international audience, it must be teamwork [...] [From] a historical perspective, even now you have no idea what would be the end of this war. You do not know. You cannot guess it. And the lens is so important. Time was the best lens.



Rebecca Barry

[I was actually going to go into] drama for a while, and then documentary became.... There was just something about [it]. The moment was when I survived the tsunami in Samoa in 2009 and came this close to it being over. I'd been having a lot of fun [working in drama], I directed some 15 episodes of "Home and Away", and it's like, this is glamorous and fun, and then that incident happened, and it was literally just the biggest wake up call of my life. It was almost that the veneer of the bullshit filter had just arrived and I said, "this is bullshit".

First of all, you realise your own mortality and then you realise how small you are, and then how interconnected you are. It's sort of like a spiritual awakening, I guess. And then I came back and went look, this has to be this authentic life, and that is telling stories, empowering stories that are real and that I can serve. It was really [that] it boils down to serving stories that need to be told. That's why I chose documentary and why I keep doing it, is because it's just pretty addictive, [laughs]. I don't know what else to say, it's the community, the people you know, how rewarding it is and how real and tapped in, and when you're in that flow of connection it just works. Even though it's tough. It's definitely a tough, tough calling.

It's so important, so important [when stories are made independently]. I mean, when you think about how institutionalised mainstream media is, and you know where the power structure is, who runs it, who controls it, how it's manipulated for evil, our jobs are critical, absolutely critical. As tricky as it is, as hard as it is – and I know it's harder for other places in the world without systems and funding in place – but pushing through and telling these stories is critical to humanity. Otherwise, we're just going to get a couple of rich guys' versions of how the world is. And we all know what a freaking car crash that is.

We've got to keep pushing through and telling these stories, because otherwise it's going to be really bland. Being optimistic about how humanity is going to fair over the next little while, 50 years, we need to hear these stories because they're often based on the truth, and that's important because often [truth is] manipulated. I feel like what we do is vital, and being independent is vital, and keeping the good fight going, and doing what we can to speak truth to power.



Sami Tlili

Translated interview from Arabic

I started my first feature-length documentary film, when I was 25 years old, between 25 and 26, and I had a kind of nonchalance, and I think that this nonchalance saved me, in the sense that I had a movie idea that I wanted to implement because as a director, I wanted to be part of what Tunisia and the Arab region were living at the time. I loved doing a movie like that.

It is this nonchalance that saved me from adhering to standardization. And this is somehow a difficult choice, since when you decide to create a film that you love, you might not find producers who will believe in it and if you ever find these producers you might face a problem, because in the Arab region there's the production system that is dependent on the fund, meaning that almost every Arab film is funded in the same way, but unlike the Tunisian Ministry of culture that has a support fund for films, in Lebanon, for example, the government doesn't support or fund films. So we end up presenting our films to the same support funds, like for instance AFAC, or Doha Film Institute Grants Programme etc...

But the problem is when you say I don't care, I want to make a film that represents me, fair enough, you can do it, but how would you fund it if these support funds don't share your opinions. Some would say, then, it would be very hard for us to continue, others would say, no, we want to create films that we love, and some others would say we will find a balance between what we want and what the other party wants. So the answer to that is to follow your personal choice. I am someone who made lots of documentaries and I made them the way I wanted to, even though I knew how difficult it's going to be in terms of funding conditions and the European or non-Arab recipient. The goal of the documentary in a specific context is to contribute to enriching the societal and political debate, with an artistic vision along other goals.

Of course [independence is a meaningful identity], it is how much you know yourself and how you perceive yourself. For me, how you perceive yourself is more important than how others perceive you. It depends [on] if you are satisfied with what you're doing or not. It has to do with your conviction, your artistic identity, your political identity, your social and intellectual identity – are all part of your identity.

I always defend the directors who influenced me, the directors who have an intellectual project, and who have a vision of the world. Let's take for example Nouri Bouzid, he still has the same intellectual project even after 60 years, whether you like or dislike his films. When you think about artistic views and projects you think of Omar Amiralay, and when you think of literature you think of Saadallah Wannous. So directors have to have a complete artistic project, and this project is part of their identity. Your films might be different, but they are interconnected following the same intellectual project.

This is more important than doing a film "à la carte". There was a program called "What the listeners request", but, us, in the film industry we have "what the funders request". So, for your film to reach Cannes festival, it should follow the vision of your funders. That's what I witness during Cannes festivals whenever Arab and African films are screened. So it is hard for someone to choose to go the other way and be independent. But if you ever choose the hard path, don't expect people neither to praise you nor to insult you.

I always say that I like to disturb the atmosphere. I like to make stagnant waters muddy. My mission is to have a calm pond of water and throw a stone in it to agitate it. For me, the real role of the director of documentaries is to make stagnant waters muddy. Someone once said to me, you love breaking myths. Indeed, my mission is to destroy myths. I am always busy disturbing the atmosphere by stirring up this stagnant water. When I was young, I grew up in a popular neighbourhood, when it rained, the water would form puddles. So the best game for me and the children of the neighbourhood was to throw stones in the puddle so the water splashes. As for me, I don't agree with provocation, I'm against provocation, I mean I am against free provocation. And when I say disturbing the atmosphere, I say it in the figurative sense of the word, what I really mean by that is to shake stagnant water or to shake things up.



What does independent documentary mean to you and why does it matter?

Michel K. Zongo Translated interview from French

Well, first of all, my work as a documentary filmmaker: As long as I have been a director, I have mainly focused on documentary film. For me, it is an instrumental film genre, as I come from a country and a continent that lacks visual representation beyond its own borders.

In other words, our images are rarely seen on the other side of the world, and yet we receive lots of visual media from the rest of the world. So, in my opinion, it is important. It is very important to make this kind of film for several reasons.

First, I define documentary film as society's memory, as the memory of a people. It leaves a permanent mark. What we film, what we explore, what we question, is reality. And that leaves an imprint on the memory of a people or a society.

Beyond that, it is a mirror for modern society, for the society we live in, because it reflects our desires, our aspirations, our vision. It reflects who we are. It is almost an identity because, as I said before, documentary film is based on reality.

Documentary is also a form of expression. It is an expression that makes things clearer. In other words, it is a tool that I can use to denounce, demand, express or claim freedom, or present a point of view.

So, for me, that is what defines documentary film in the country and on the continent where I work. These different aspects were what really pushed me to make documentaries in Africa. The genre was not developed at all, and it is still not developed because it is the underling of cinema. Also, it lacks funding and distribution. It lacks structure for production, but at the same time, it is a genre that African people love, because it is a reflection of them. They see themselves in it.

There you have it. For the past decade, I have been trying to work on this type of cinema, this type of image, and I can see progress.

There is a dictum that says that a film cannot change the world. I say no. I don't agree. I don't know who said it. But I hear it often, "No, a film cannot change the world". But I say, "No, no, no. A film CAN change the world.

It CAN contribute to changing the world. It MUST contribute to changing the world". That's the starting point when I make a film. So, what I do is much more engaged. It is also much more independent. That's what it is. My cinema is much more independent because I give my point of view a lot of space. I fully accept responsibility for that.

And I assume some risk because I cover delicate topics: the administration, our way of seeing things, or how our leader runs the country, international governance, domination, ministers, and other things like that. So, that's it. I always work on those kinds of issues. These are global topics that are interesting to everyone, but that cover a subject related to my country, or a fact about my country. And that isn't easy.

What makes me happy is that the people love my films. People who are marginalised? They love the films I make because they recognize themselves in them. For those people, it is as if I am defending a cause that is their own. I am the spokesperson for the voiceless. I try to speak on behalf of those who say, "No one ever gives me the chance to speak". I figure that I have the privilege of making films. For me, it is an opportunity to say, "There it is", to show things. The only means, the only freedom, the only power of the filmmaker is that he is free to illustrate things that the people are not free to point out or to say. But he carries that burden because he has this privilege; he is a filmmaker.

What I want is simply that the public, whether here or elsewhere, understands our aspirations as human beings living in a given spot on the globe. As people, we have the right to our perspective on the world, as well as the right to share that point of view. We have the right to influence global affairs, in addition to the right to assert or provide that influence. That is how I see it. Because I think that my films must also change things. I figure that if there is widespread injustice, if there is poor distribution of resources at the global level, if there is not universal individual freedom, I think that my films can contribute to changing that, and I want them to do so. That's what it is all about.

I want peoples, populations, and individuals who watch my films to perceive that. That is the message that I want to convey with my work. I hope that I am successful in that, but that is my goal; that is what I do. That is the reason for everything. For me, a film is like a letter that I send to the entire world. That letter will go out into the world and find people who will see a reflection of themselves in what I say, in what values and principles I defend, in what I observe, and in my point of view. That is the greatest gift I can hope for.

That's it. If somewhere in the world, someone sees my film and says, "Wow, but this film... you know, it's a bit like that here, the same things happen here, just like that, you know?"

That has happened here. I have been able to travel a lot with my films and very often, it was just like that. I was surprised and said, "Wow, with that, I have affected other humans. I have touched people from around the world who see themselves in my story, which is often a personal story, or one that is centred around a town or a place, that focuses on an anecdote or a story from my country, from my neighbourhood". In the end, across the globe, so many people say, "Yes, you know, what is happening in your home is also happening in our region..." Or, "I had an uncle who was just like that person. I had that, too". Or, "Where we are, too, the government liquidated our businesses and now, people can't find work". ... "Yes, in your country, it is gold mining, but in ours, it is overfishing in the ocean. The Chinese come with their boats and take too many fish". You see what I mean.

When I see that, I tell myself, "Yes, we are fighting a common battle. The whole world is involved in a shared struggle". I want my films to show that. I want my films to participate in this global struggle.



Trang Dao

Most of the time, when we start the project, it comes from our own interest first. Mostly, if we have connection with the characters, or with that location, or it shares some personal connection with us. That's normally how we start the thing. And later on, when we develop the project, we will look more at the values, such as pick[ing] a story or... a mission, or something – but it comes later. It's important that it always comes from our interest... Our film interests. And if it has anything to do with us.

They normally say that the documentary film is... it's keeping the story of a country, or the history of a whole era, or something like that. So I just want to keep my way of looking at something...I just want to keep memories. And also, I want to try to depict the war to my own point of view, to my [out]look.

Because, for example, in the specific case of Vietnam... So talking about our country, normally people would think a lot about the Vietnam War, and maybe some of the problems with Vietnamese refugees. But in fact, we have a lot of other things to offer, and most of the documentaries so far haven't discovered the different sides of Vietnam. Not just a war, but our lives, or our problems as well. So, I just wanted to somehow try to keep the picture of those stories. So little people can watch and kind of look at that and understand, so this is the thing happening. Something for the future. And also to express my own understanding of that.

When we make the film, I don't know about other filmmakers, but for me, I want my [people], the Vietnamese people, to see it first. It's made about Vietnamese people. So if they can see [it], then... I think they are the ones that understand it most.



Marjan Safinia

I should say one thing I really miss – I do want those hard hitting democracy and fucked up corporation films because I think we really need those. But also... there's a film that I've never forgotten, this Swedish film, I saw it, I don't know, 10 years ago, or something, and I've never forgotten it [...] It was about an old Swedish lady who had some kind of a disease which causes her to literally be bent.

So, she walks, her face facing the ground, and it's about her taking care of her cows, and it's the most extraordinary slice of life, completely inconsequential, story. There is no great meaning about anything other than this amazing woman and her resilience, right? No, it's not going to change governments. There's no policy you're going to write from it. You can't measure its impact. It's just a beautiful human story, and I miss those just as much. We don't have those either, and so we are left poorer for all the money, we are left so much poorer. [It's important to] feel those shared moments of shared humanity.

I think that's the thing right – if I can connect with the story of a yak farmer who is living on the side of a hill in Mongolia, and I remember that the things that are similar among our human family are greater than things that divide us, right? And that's fundamental to all those big ideas, to all those the democratic ideas.



Arthur Pratt

Well, [what got me into this practice] has to do with my long term relationship with my friend Banker White in the US. I always appreciate the fact that I cannot talk about me being a documentary filmmaker without mentioning him, because that is the foundation.

When we met, I had been a fiction filmmaker before. I'd been doing fictions and he challenged me into doing *A Day in the Life of Sorie Kondi*. Sorie Kondi is this blind guy in Sierra Leone and I did *A Day in the Life of Sorie Kondi*. I edited it and I was captivated by the editing process of just shooting raw footage of people from morning to evening and trying to do a 5 minute story. And that was actually what motivated me into documentary filmmaking. But also, I think it's also about telling the stories of people as they are. It's very important that the audience see characters as they are, see them what they are and what they actually go through. And for me, it becomes this path of linking the rest of the world to my own, my own community and the rest of the world, what is actually going on in the lives of people, in the lives of everyday people. So that is what actually tied me to it.

My first feature film *Survivors* was this huge break that enables me... It doesn't only give me a break in terms of within the documentary film spectrum, but it also helped me to take it as a serious passion. Because I have always been passionate about telling the stories of my people. I grew up with a storytelling tradition, we have our own storytelling culture, it's very powerful here. But what we also find out is that many times, actual stories of people are not being told. And this is all from working within the NGO circle - there's a lot of things that I found out, working within the NGO circle and I said, I cannot do this anymore, you know, I cannot keep fictitiously doing things. I really want to tell these stories as they go on, void of political voice, void of the voices of those who think they know what people are actually going through, and enable the voices of these indigenous people to be heard for themselves, for who they are and for what they are, and being able to outwardly express themselves to the rest of the world in these stories. So that's what actually gets me going.



Anonymous

I wanted to make a feature length documentary film and my interest is always human rights and social justice. And I have to say, that's still probably the motivation, now, if you have maybe finished the first film, and then you want to make another one independently and not something for TV [...] Everyone is gonna say, you know, 'because I feel like I need to tell the story'. Sure, but there are also many ways of doing that. On the other hand, I was there, I was in the best position possible because I was freelancing. I had a camera, I had time and I was looking for a project. So why not, you know?

I was surprised, because a lot of the stories that were in that film, they've already been in the news. But then, it's just a very clear illustration that the documentary form exists in a very important space, because there are so many things that the news cannot tell. You know, it can only do so much. I would even say that the docs offer more space.

Maybe what I noticed...they have the intense moments and images on the news reports, they have the photographs, and then they sit through a feature-length film about this issue. And then that's the feedback that I got as well. I didn't even realise it as well, while making the film. I didn't think it was anything new. But when people see the story completely [new]... Yeah, that was an interesting observation for me. I would even say, it was much more powerful.



Amil Shivji

I ventured into filmmaking really out of fluke. I just wanted to be a writer. I thought I was going to do a course in journalism and a scholarship got me into a film program.

Not that I wanted to go, but I thought it would look good on my CV. So long story short, I ended up doing a four year program unwillingly in film. But that's how I learned about it, because this was in Toronto, so I learned about Ousmane Sembène and Djibril Mambéty and all these African filmmakers. Because [in Tanzania] I had never watched an African film. Or [never had] had heard of these African filmmakers who had been doing in the sixties what I wanted to do now.

I thought progressive writing journalism doesn't give [us] journalism telling stories from the African perspective. [These filmmakers] were doing it through a mass media in the sixties to the eighties, and having the bravery and the courage to critique newly independent states on the continent, which almost was beyond that time. It got me really excited. It showed me the potential. I thought then I would write for film.

When I moved back to Tanzania after undergrad, I just kind of focused on doing that, and then realised there was no infrastructure, no industry. Tanzania kind of adopted the Nollywood model with Nigeria filmmaking, so straight to DVD. Straight to the markets. They take one feature film and divide it into six DVDs, call it six parts in order to make their returns back. And distributor was king. Distributor owns all the IP worldwide, in perpetuity, and you get a one time payment. And then they make millions.

So very early on, I realised that this is not a system that made sense. It's essentially like a mafia network. And it wasn't catered to independent filmmaking. Because the actors had signed contracts with distributors, so they essentially had removed the producer director role for 10 years. And I was like, who am I going to write for if there is no producer director? And the actor just simply wants to be seen, so the more screen time, the better for them.

I had written some short stories, and I decided to try those out. I wrote [a] short script called *Shoeshine*. We applied for a grant from Canal Plus, [and] we got the grant just for Sub-Saharan films, mostly focused

on francophone. I think we were the only anglophone [grantee] if I'm not mistaken. And I made the film. It was a very small budget, like €10,000, which is like a big budget Tanzanian film feature, but it's obviously [a] small budget when you pay your people. We did that, and I had no strings attached. I just made the film. There were no requirements, there was no agenda, there was nothing. It was just the story I wanted to tell. And I think the response to that film was so immense, it was so good, especially within the continent. Even internationally – we played at Rotterdam.

But even in the continent, in the country, it made me realise that there was this desire for a different kind of storytelling than what people had been used to seeing. It was really exciting to see that and [it] gave me the courage to keep doing what I was doing, which was this alternative storytelling.

But what's funny is that it did so well, people wanted it more, so then kind of the next couple of films that I made, they are independent films [where] I take years raising money. They're very political, social commentaries questioning the government, questioning the state, but they become almost mainstream in terms of the way they are received by people, because they do the international circuit. They do well, we get the awards, blah blah blah, they get the attention. So it's weird in that way that I actually kind of have this leverage where I'm able to now say, this is what Tanzanian cinema can look like.



Sein Lyan Tun

All the situations, all the stories that we are working on are from Myanmar... Because a lot of [foreign] people know about it. They know how we are suffering... And you want to raise the voice. It's not only in your region or your country - you have to raise the voices to the other audiences to understand or to be able to understand or to be accepted, who we are or how we are going to suffer.

Mostly [the stories I tell], in Myanmar, it's women... You know that in Asia there are more male dominated countries. So women are always suffering in a different way [...] We are living in this kind of horrible political situation. And this kind of cycle is always happening. And I heard a lot of those stories, I'm hearing that there is no solution [...] I think these kinds of stories need to be raised somehow [...] And also at the same time, when you see the protagonist, you go and meet them and talk to them, and you can really, really feel senses from their side. Sometimes you talk to someone that you don't feel senses [from], or you are not sure that you are going to make this story, or don't believe in it, and that can be difficult, or that can be problematic. So I always try to talk to the protagonist. And if I feel really, really sensitive, and I can feel their laugh, or, you know, the way how we can work together and we can raise the story. So that is another reason that I choose... I pick, okay, this is the right movement with the right people. I can talk about the story. So that's how I work.



Michèle Stephenson

I am an independent, what I would call non-fiction storyteller, and I collaborate with my creative and life partner, Joe Brewster. We co-founded the collaborative Rada Studio and we're based in Fort Greene, Brooklyn.

I have been working in this field for over 25 years. I entered this area with an intention to explore the intersection of art and storytelling and change, but change from a very personal perspective in terms of thinking about what was I not seeing out there that I wanted to express. That both represented my lived experience, my community's lived experience, but also where a critique of injustice and inequities could happen, but using the artistic form.

That developed more as I got into more of the storytelling process and a better understanding of an investment in practice, that it was also a form of healing. For us it is very important that the process centres this idea of healing both individually and collectively, which means really being engaged with community, exploring vulnerabilities, but also the intimate impact of a systemic oppression and of racial capitalism, and what it does both to the environment and to us as individuals. Everything sort of pours out of that.

I probably think that my work at the beginning was a little more advocacy centred. But no, now that I think about it, it was kind of playing a little bit of all approaches. But in terms of the evolution, I feel that we are really exploring the craft and exploring the boundaries of storytelling, so that our impact and what we're challenging is not just even how our lived experiences [are] around inequities, but we're also celebrating our joy in terms of how that is a form of resistance, but also how exploring the craft and playing with it is also an active resistance, and a challenge of how we absorb master narratives.

So, one thing I do want to make clear is the idea of the independence and of the stories that we tell. I came into this not to make money. I didn't come into this to get commercial appeal or commercial understanding. I could have just stayed in my previous work. I didn't go to film school. It was really about the desire.

I think every artist, in some way, is trying to grapple with the lived experience and figuring out how to express it in a way that we evolve as human beings, but also how can that be shared in a way that there is a commonality of experience. And so, I feel that more recently there's been this sort of confusion about the commerciality of non-fiction work that is masking, and it's sometimes sort of appropriating, and that we need to take a breath around what does it mean to engage with the commercial sector and the market.

I see the deep resonance, and joy, and validation that these black and brown audiences have in the moment with the film, with our films, and that's across the board. The first thing they ask is, "where can I see it?" I want to share that experience. And they want to share what they have just experienced. And I think you can't ask for something better, right?

I think leaning into this idea of wanting to share this with others, and be in community, whether it's digitally or otherwise, it's part of what we humans do. If I have this beautiful experience, I want to share it with the people that I love or the people that I know, or beyond me. They have that common experience. It's part of being human. For me, that's what's been not just transformative, but part of the healing process.



What does independent documentary mean to you and why does it matter?

Burcu Melekoglu

I studied film, but I was not sure [about] internal genres and everything. But I did start making docs first. I had a short documentary and I liked people's stories. I was intrigued by what I wanted to tell. And then I realised more and more that it's also a creative field, you know, just like, you know one thing in terms of form and storytelling. So that kind of drew me more into it. But it's always been like, oh, this person's story needs to be told, kind of prompt that I want to tell... What steered me away from fiction into documentary more was that, you know, their issues that need to be talked about. There are people's stories that need to be heard, that kind of motivation.

We had to make sure that we could tell the story in the way that we have full creative control, you know, and it felt like that was going to be a risk, even with a regular co-production company partner. Because I think people have different ideas about what they want out of, what they want to see about the film about Turkey. They want to see context more. They want to see more details about stuff that doesn't matter to our story. We just knew that that's not the route we wanted to go, and it felt like it was gonna happen if we did a quo pro... you know, a different way of going on with the film.



Arya Rothe

I don't think independent filmmakers in India can sustain themselves solely by making independent documentary films. In India, I believe there is a much stronger inclination towards fiction filmmaking. Documentaries are often seen as a pathway to eventually transition into fiction filmmaking.

I came from a middle class household, no one from my family had studied abroad or even been to Europe. I could study in Europe because I received a scholarship. For someone like me, pursuing documentary filmmaking instead of studying something with a more assured pay was already a significant privilege. Another privilege is to have the opportunity to study documentaries with 23 students from all over the world in 3 different European countries! It changed me and my world view! It opened a world of documentary that I didn't even know existed back at home.

In India, both of our national film schools offer documentary filmmaking as a short-term course- you can only get introduced to the subject in such a short time frame. I have occasionally taught small documentary courses at film schools, and I've noticed a great deal of curiosity from the students. However, within the academic structure, there are often limited means to further satisfy this curiosity.

Though I would say the Indian documentary has, in the last few years, really kicked ass - garnering recognition in festivals and earning accolades. More audiences are being built for documentaries, especially through streamers. However, the documentaries being made for streamers are limited in terms of content and style. I feel there is a pressure on them to be gripping, suspenseful- catering to true crime or a celebrity story. So, on one side, there are independent, author-driven, often labelled as "creative" documentaries, and on the other, there are docuseries for streamers that are consumed by a majority. Both are important to exist and are right in their own way but the main issue for me is, currently there is no bridge between these two worlds of documentary cinema.

I feel the word independent in itself should mean that there is a system that caters to the needs of the filmmakers within their own countries. I deeply believe in intercultural, inter geographical collaborations that stem from the creative needs of the film or the film makers. Where true collaborations are explored. [...] Not all of Indian collaborations with the Western funding bodies or co-producers are born out of creative

necessity. Many times, they stem from financial needs and consequently end up catering to an audience that is predominantly western.

In my honest opinion, I find that working primarily on TV documentaries abroad I have had to fight a colonial gaze at times. It's often blanketed under a reason to make it more accessible to their audiences. Even though as true as this might be, I also feel, in order to shift the perspective of audiences- the decision-maker and industry heads need to change their perspectives and allow a real global collaboration.

I have experienced the pressure to tell a story that is local, from my own culture, but in a way that the Western audience might find more desirable to consume. This has sometimes involved making narrative choices and contextualising my work in a manner that I would not have preferred otherwise. So as one adapts to the western system, one's voice automatically starts shifting and modifying itself to fit in these expectations. However it would be unfair to say that all my collaborations are the same. While some may indeed perpetuate a colonial gaze, I have had many experiences with those who are genuinely interested in finding a global way of storytelling and breaking away from these preconceptions. These ones I cherish the most. This was the reason why we established Nocut Film Collective internationally.

What I feel is that, currently, if I want to sustain a decent lifestyle through documentary filmmaking, I don't really have the luxury to carefully choose whom I want to collaborate with. This is because we lack an independent structure in India. [There are organisations that are attempting] to make Indian films for the Indian audiences and to find how you can build an infrastructure to make it sustainable. But I also feel it is something that has to be supported and integrated into a larger structure.

It cannot solely be the responsibility of filmmakers facing these challenges to create solutions for fellow filmmakers. Instead, it requires involvement from a broader system. Documentary cinema might not be as commercially viable as one would expect, but it also doesn't require the same kind of finances as a commercial fiction film. On the other hand, documentary cinema has an immediate power to connect the world, something not measurable in terms of money. The contrast between various art forms—some commercially viable and others culturally significant—has long been recognized. And financial structures and supports have been built around that, However, documentaries have not sufficiently been categorised into either- limiting the scope of the field.

So, if you ask me, we all find our way of making independent films within these restrictions. We persist because the process of documentary cinema can be so transformational that we endure the systemic failures

we face and continue to work. However, I believe we would be able to create better cinema if we dealt with less financial uncertainties.

An independent infrastructure would involve a more democratic approach within the country to decide how grants are allocated, who the potential audience could be, understanding the director's vision and what it adds to the development of cinema. In this system, there can be a clear distinction between funding for documentaries intended for mainstream television and those aimed at more artistic or experimental endeavours. Funds are allocated based on the financial success of certain projects to support the advancement of thought, art, or new perspectives.



What does independent documentary mean to you and why does it matter?

Sam Soko

Everything I think I'm doing is documentary in some shape or form.

Currently, I am a producer, director, and editor based in Kenya, in Nairobi. [...] 100% of the work I engage in is documentary. 90% of it is on a deep level – social impact, engaging, I dare say, groundbreaking on its own level.

I think my work and career has always constantly been trying to go through a space where it always feels like, the analogy I use is, 'you have to clear the field'. Because no one had cleared the field before. It's not to say it's good to cut down forests but I would say...the road that was there wasn't meant for you or a person who looks like you, or the kind of information that is existing in that place was clearly wasn't defined or supportive of what you're doing.

I have found myself in that space. I continue to find myself in that space, and I view it as a way to bring in more people or create more access to a lot more people, or building a support information base for a lot more people. This is something that's super important for me just to even have this conversation, because I think access to opportunities and information and all that stuff is at the top of what I do and why I do it. So, it's essentially because of how I got here and how I got here was I first was making films.

Like most people who I think are in the nonfiction space on this side of the world, [we] started out with doing a lot of NGO work, which in many ways became super frustrating, because you end up being told to make something in some place that is not true. So, for many facts that you could kind of re-engineer it for the purpose of the fundraiser, or, you know, for the purpose of the organization.

I think, coming from that, and kind of by chance, I started working on what was supposed to be some short videos to go onto Youtube and that morphed and developed to become my first feature doc, *Softie*.

Making the film became the transition into developing work where the filmmakers are a lot more passionate and also opened so many doors and opportunities to meet many people, to learn so much about the existence of an industry which I did not know before that.



What does independent documentary mean to you and why does it matter?

Reid Davenport

I think independent films are more political because non-independent films are usually worried about algorithms and trying to appeal to a really wide audience.

I mean, it's an industry with people living that and other people are entertained by it...yeah...I also worry about how money is squandered when making these conventional apolitical films, and what that leaves for independent filmmakers who are telling really important stories.

I mean, [independent filmmaking] can definitely cover or contextualise stories that we don't know about. They can do it in a way that journalism can't with visuals, and films definitely affect change, politically, socially. [...] I think you can be unabashed and be opinionated, whereas with journalism objectivity is held as a tenant.



What does independent documentary mean to you and why does it matter?

Anaïs Taracena

Translated interview from Spanish

I am not attached to any certain institution. I'm freelance, so to speak. That's how I often define myself [...] because I don't work for any institution or organisation. I'm an audiovisual producer. That's my main activity, both professionally and beyond. But I also do different kinds of jobs.

For context, in Guatemala, I've ended up involved in two lines of work, in addition to filmmaking and audiovisual production. One is cultural arts organising, [because there] aren't any exhibition and distribution spaces. We have to create them, we have to shape them. I've often been the one doing the organising, not only for my own content, but also organising film forums, discussion spaces, screenings, etc. I have also had to organise [these spaces] for other documentaries, or films, or short-form films, or even participate in screening events as part of this coordinating and cultural arts organising work.

For audiovisual production, on the one hand, I have what I call my projects, which are my thing, which I do one little step at a time, little by little; they take several years because, for starters, in Guatemala there's no money. So to fund them, to produce them, the process is slow. I've also done audiovisual production for human rights organisations and NGOs. Whether it be for a specific assignment, institutional profiles, or even if there is a fund where I'm given the creative freedom to choose a topic. But, whether I like it or not, I'm bound by that specific fund. Those are the areas I've been active in professionally. I have to be very honest with you, what I enjoy the most are my projects. But, unfortunately, there's no money, so I have to do other things.

I think [independent production in the context of all types of production in Guatemala is] very important because sometimes the televised content is awful. And I think there is also content from other types of media where they respond to media's needs or become propaganda. And I think it is important to maintain that independence because, although I am someone who is very politicised and I can be as activist as you want, we do need content independent from that, we do not need to make propaganda.

Film itself is already political and social. But they should be spaces that are open to [different] points of view, to biases, to different ways of understanding and conceiving the world. I think that is very important.

Because, without a doubt, there's content that's inherently low quality. There is also very corrupt, very reactionary content. Everyone has the right to make their own political activist propaganda, but that doesn't necessarily inspire reflection.

I believe that maintaining that independence, that content, is also to take responsibility for our own biases, our own ways of seeing the world. It also calls for diversity, it does not force a format, it gives creative freedom, it is free thinking.

That is my point, that when it comes to distribution, it is also necessary to defend promoting it as something independent. You can be presenting it within an organization. You can be presenting it as part of a festival. You can be presenting it in some space, but it is not necessary to take the content itself and then make it propaganda or just use it to benefit a certain space. The content must be allowed its own freedom as well. That's why I think that when we think about what's independent, [we should] also think about independence in regards to work that is already finished.

[M]aybe we don't see it now, but all of that is now part of a country's visual heritage [...] It is without a doubt important to defend that independence, that creative freedom. Especially in countries that are so controversial, so polarized, as in the case of Guatemala, where content can be highly manipulated. And it really is time for us to tell our own stories the way we want to tell them, for us also to not be afraid to do so. That is my point, to defend the multiplicity of those subjectivities and truths that arise when it comes to producing.

Documentary for me is much more than a profession. I mean, if I were to say I make a living from it... honestly? Not really, I make a living doing other things. I even do translations, I do interpreting to make ends meet as well. But we have had conversations, which is something very deep that moves us, of wanting to create, of wanting to tell a story. I, at least, do identify with it being a way of relating to the world.

With all the topics related to historical memory—and I can understand, given how difficult it was, it was a conflict that left many dead, many missing persons—over the last twenty-five years there has been a narrative controlled by organizations, the victim narrative.

Everything is through the lens of the victim and victimization, which I can understand because there were more than 200,000 people killed,

45,000 missing persons. So this issue of the victim is there, but what has happened? Victimization discourse has emerged from this, and victimization discourse, what does that do?

It makes it so we are no longer political subjects in our own history. We no longer take responsibility for the decisions we make. We always put ourselves in a neutral position. We are not capable of making political decisions.

In *El silencio del topo*, which addresses that, I wanted to turn that on its head. And I said here we are going to talk about subjective memories, here we are going to talk about people who were political subjects of their own decisions, whether or not they are questionable, whether or not they are radical, etc., but where there is a safe space to talk about that, where there is no expectation of political correctness. For me it was very important for this documentary to remain independent of everything, of any stance, of any foundation, of any NGO, of any fund.



Don Edkins

A lot of my work started when I was living in Lesotho, because I was in exile from South Africa. And so the first films I made were based around stories from Lesotho. Then when I moved back to South Africa, to Cape Town after we got democracy here, I started working on a collection of films.

The first one I did was with a network of organisations in Southern Africa called SACOD, Southern Africa Communications for Development. It was a network of film organisations in Mozambique, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Lesotho, Swaziland, that were connected together in the fight against apartheid, but also about sharing information about documentary films, how they were made, where we distributed them, like a support system.

So SACOD was an early vehicle for things that have grown since then. The collection of films in the SACOD group I produced was called *Landscape of Memory*, and that was around how do societies find reconciliation after civil war. And those were films from Mozambique, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Namibia. A collection from the region for the region around our own stories.

But then when the HIV pandemic hit and it really affected Southern Africa very drastically, there weren't any films being made by African filmmakers around this, or very few. Most of the films were being made by filmmakers from Europe or North America – from the West, and they were about death and disease and tragedy and hopelessness. And we said no, there's another narrative here and that's about hope and love and courage and resilience.

So we started a project with 38 documentary films from seven different countries by African filmmakers. When we distributed the films, we versioned them into 18 different local languages because we knew we wanted to reach rural as well as urban audiences in as many places as possible with these films, in particular together with the HIV/AIDS support groups we had partnered with.

But the partner organisations didn't really know what to do with them. And so we started a facilitator training program and built up a number of mobile cinema units of which many still exist today. This approach to encouraging dialogue and distribution through a facilitated discussion after a screening of a documentary film has been the basis of the work that we do at STEPS.

This facilitated film screening approach to create a safe space for dialogue and discussion, this methodology is something that we've used over the years. After that first STEPS project 'Steps for the Future', we then made a collection of films called *Why Democracy?*, because America had just invaded Iraq in the name of democracy. And we thought, well, something seems to be wrong here. We had filmmakers from around the world look at democracy from their own perspectives. This was a collection of 27 films which were broadcast very widely, and one of those films, *Taxi to the Dark Side*, won the feature documentary Oscar for that year.



Maheen Mirza

Those kinds of stories, you would not want [them] tainted by making them dependent on things like funding. It also comes from a space of, probably, commitment to a certain issue. And I think that is also something that is really fading in our society. The more capitalist that it becomes, everything needs to have a value. Every minute of your day needs to have value, and every word you write has to have value. Every shot you take has value. I think in that whole thing, it's very funny that you lose the invaluable.

There continue to be many people, especially when you look at the women's movement or when you look at the anti-caste movement, who would give time to just shoot those stories and bring out that independent-ness. But it also comes from a very strong commitment from when you believe in something. I think documentary allows you to do that. I mean, independence is a very strong part of that. And for you to believe in that would mean that you have to take some risks.

Really what we need to do is to populate all kinds of stories into the space. Just have as many stories as possible be there, because what may not affect you or what may not seem to be something that you find interesting would actually be a validation for somebody else and of who they are and what their life is. It is from that space that I think we start to function, because we cannot think for everyone. I can never imagine and I can never think of how someone who is my counterpart, who does not identify like me, thinks. It's as simple as that.

And I think with that, the kind of stories, the way in which they're told, the aesthetics that embellish them, everything is going to change and it's going to be different. I think that more and more stories from more and more people who are not traditionally filmmakers need to come into the space. I mean, it's really not rocket science, filmmaking. I know we like for it to be, and yeah, we do have certain things, but it's not, and people can make fairly good cinema, maybe not the best and maybe not the whatever, but who cares? It just needs to be out there. And especially now, people are constantly watching reels. I mean, if I was not talking to you, I would probably have been doing the same thing. [W]e need to populate the space with more stories.

Even things which are personal stories or [...] if you were to talk about things like one's sexual preference or trans stories, these are stories that need to be very clearly independent. [...] The need to protect the people who are participants in that also becomes very real. The people who are making that also becomes very real.

In our country, if you make even something about music that is happening among the youth in say, Kashmir, that also doesn't find its way into mainland India, it gets banned outside. I'm talking about completely nonpolitical content where people are just about music, and music itself is an expression of revolt more often than not.

And I think then the other thing would probably be more stories which are self-reflexive, talking about things that don't even need to be directly critiquing the state [...]. And then if you look at more stories that look at the caste system or look at very ingrained social problems within society, those also are met with so much resistance and they have to be then independent in that sense.

Then also things that are self-reflexive and they need for the other to think about what they're doing. [...] It could be really a very personal expression, but that itself would have to find space in independence because so much of self-expression is self-censored.



Rehad Desai

I really started my journey into independent documentary in, I suppose it would be the early 2000s, when I did a documentary on Jörg Haider from the Freedom Party – it’s essentially a proto-fascist party that came dangerously close to power in Austria. They’re nearly in power in Austria now, certainly... [I] have produced approximately 10 or so documentaries, most of which have also had feature length cuts, that I determine as independent pieces. I’m a “green fields producer”, I come up with my own ideas. And then I’ve attempted to forge many partnerships for each film, so the big commissioning editors or whatever don’t feel like they are in control. And I’ve had, generally, quite a reasonable relationship with all of the major commissioning editors I have worked with. What happens when you have a few broadcasters on board, they sort of elect someone who’s the main person when it comes to TV broadcaster input. Regarding the documentary funds, they can at times make inappropriate comments, where they point to solutions to problems. Yeah, so that’s it in a nutshell.

Well, I think what makes these films unique and adds to the ecosystem of the documentary landscape is really an undiluted point of view when we are talking about documentary film. A strong point of view and, of course, whether that point of view of the documentary filmmaker is foregrounded or backgrounded, it’s ever present. In the way that the shape of the film and the content, the central message that the filmmaker’s trying to get over. So if we are to compete for audiences, and that’s the reality unless you’re happy for your film to be shown at a few artsy film festivals, then that’s what makes them attractive. That’s what makes them unique. You know, Aristotle says there’s only five stories, and these involve big universal questions and the uniqueness is in the details in many ways, so determining what the details are for those stories is important. And I want to make it clear upfront, I strongly believe in narrative-driven stories. Not to say that I don’t believe concept films, or high concept films or art films have no place. My particular concern is of political, social, and the films move beyond the staple that began in the 70s and 80s of rather didactic, propagandistic films. But at the same time, I’ve subscribed to the belief that what we’re trying to do is manipulate our audiences towards our own truths. And I use the word “manipulate” in the more positive sense. Of course that manipulation is bringing your audiences around to ask themselves key questions, getting there in a non-didactic manner is critical. So it’s not only the persona in terms of political films.

It’s very hard to get it right unless you’ve got some political savvy. You need to understand where the debate is and what the import of your argument inside that debate is. If you are attempting to shift the dial in one way or the other, to raise the conversation, to gain some impact, however you want to define that or establish those impact imperatives. So, what brought me to the documentary is the emotive truth can only really come through where you are having an immersive experience. You can only really engage audiences through cinema and film, and that means carefully structuring your piece. The dramaturgy that’s involved is not as universal for non-fiction as it is for fiction. We have different cultural codes, and so on. The key thing is, for me, making, [is] being very clear about who the primary audience is for the film and making your intervention clear in that regard. So there is the economic aspect to this. It’s very hard to not be swayed or not to become a sweetheart of your commissioning editor, because the reality is, particularly the good commissioning editors who have lasted a while, they’ve had many films go through their hands, and they have a tremendous amount of experience, and they can often see mistakes early on before you. The question then is how forthright they are, and how much space you have. I mean, part of the problem with working with broadcasters is that often their systems require them to come in very late because they’re risk averse or they need their films done very quickly from the point of contract.



Anisa Sabiri

I began writing poetry and short novels at the age of twelve or thirteen, curious about the meaning of life. I also felt a deep sense of injustice around me. Perhaps this sounds too pretentious, but these were themes that made me feel like an artist. Then I went to study in Moscow, where racism against the Tajiks was just horrifying. Central Asian migrants in Russia have no rights. And many Russians do not feel guilty for their country's colonial actions in places like Tajikistan, or events such as our civil war and ongoing political and economic instability. But people in my country are also unaware of these circumstances because they watch Russian TV and our education relies on books written in Moscow. At the same time, due to its distance from the EU, Tajikistan has never been a country of significant interest in the West, which made me realise that I need to make films and explain why it is important to understand Tajikistan or Central Asia better. It is not only a place with a rich political and cultural history but also a unique example of national identity in the backdrop of colonial powers, and it is very multicultural and diverse. This realisation centred my focus on the nature of memories, the crisis of belonging and intergenerational traumas, which are very personal to me. I believe that's what films should aim for – to deepen our understanding of each other, encouraging us to be less judgmental, feel less alienated and gain a mutual understanding so that together we can address global issues more efficiently.

There are challenges, but there's also immense joy in making things happen. There is discrimination against so-called "small nations", but there is also solidarity between us. I am very lucky to know so many inspiring people in the industry, who are courageous enough to fight for a better world, and it really motivates me. I come from a country where women are traditionally not expected to work in the film industry, as they are presumed destined for motherhood and serving their husbands. It inspires me to show, with my example, that women can and should pursue their dreams. When one woman sees another from her community chase her dreams and succeed, it makes her follow their own. So, even if it takes a long time, it is important to continue. That's why I'm actively involved in education in Central Asia, trying to share my knowledge and connect Central Asian talents with my network. Yes, I might not be able to transform the Tajik film industry by pouring millions into art and education, but I can bring an impact by supporting talent, connecting with my network, and motivating others

through my example of resilience in independent storytelling. My biggest dream is to launch a film school in the Tajik Mountains one day – a place where young talents can learn and practise real-life skills, develop creative and philosophical thinking, peer support, and shape their stories. Not a typical film school – it will be a school for creative warriors. The world needs these people. So, I believe that once my stories are told, many more will emerge from my region. This vision really inspires me, makes my blood run and move forward despite all challenges.



What does independent documentary mean to you and why does it matter?

Irene Gutiérrez Torres

Translated interview
from Spanish

I think it's very important to safeguard this kind of filmmaking. Especially in light of the threat that all art is not entertainment. We should consider it part of our heritage and collective critical thinking for future generations to come, because there is a brutal loss of knowledge, of our historical memory. My niece is twenty-three years old and she knows nothing about the Spanish Civil War. The people who are voting for Milei, I do not understand if they have lived through or if they have talked to anyone who lived through what happened during Pinochet's dictatorship. And we can go on to infinity and beyond: Chile, Ecuador, Bolivia. So how important is independent film? Very important. How well safeguarded is this genre? I do not know. How much can be done? Create policies that support story incubators, fair financing policies where platforms are not allowed to compete, film legislation that supports independent productions and where other big production companies aren't allowed in to compete. They have other means of support. We cannot continue in this fight of David against Goliath if there really is no support from above, from the state, to the small, independent producer, who puts capital into creating high-risk films. And above all ensure fair distribution, with the necessary time frames, so that there is time for the films to spread by word of mouth and so that they can stay in theatres for a while. Not just in the small town theatre, in the alternative theatre or in the auteur movie theatre, but in any exhibition space in the city for a prudent time, because they are films that take time to show a return.



What does independent documentary mean to you and why does it matter?

Everlane Moraes

Translated interview
from Portuguese

I mean, cinema, since its beginnings, has always had black bodies, subordinate bodies, at the base, working in the heaviest part of cinema, in machinery and everything, in short. We've always been there. We were always in front of the cameras, being these bodies that were recorded as a very folkloric thing, a "Brazilian" thing, an idea of nationalism. Anyway, an idea... We have always been in front of the cameras as an object, but also, at a certain moment in the cinema, right? At the same time that Gláuber and others were rolling, there were also black filmmakers, female filmmakers who were not visible.[...] I am an integral part of this first wave of filmmakers who had Zózimo Bulbul as their patron. We came after a generation of filmmakers who came before me and who also helped solidify the independent film market. And then, I am from this third wave of filmmakers who are vying for political spaces, spaces almost like a vanguard. It's a generation that made APAN [Associação dos Profissionais do Audiovisual Negro], we managed to be in all training, distribution, production spaces. Of jury, of critics. So, I am part of this group of filmmakers who are occupying these spaces and giving this new face to national cinema and independent cinema.

I arrive today with enough baggage to discuss, to talk about cinema, to talk about language, because I studied cinema. We were able to study cinema, the language, the history of cinema, we learned the language of cinema. And we can do it, we know how to make movies. And, at the same time, we have life experiences that allow us to have a closeness with certain reality, characters, and social, sociological, historical problems. The body's own experience that leads us to perhaps have an additional advantage, which is this. It is to be able to deal better with these existential and humanistic issues. We are humanists above all, full citizens with our rights, duties, in short. And now with a very great aesthetic and political sensitivity, because if we don't fight for these spaces, for sure, no white will be fighting for us. They were always there. They've always been there. And only them. We work in a cinema that is always collective. Just as we work in the quilombo, in axé. When we go, we take the others. We don't move alone. Just like the indigenous people, we do not move alone. We have collective cinema along with social cinema as well. And not just cinema with a cause. In summary, adverse cinema, with a variety of motivations.

In a way, we need this independence. And I think that's mainly in the sense that the industry might not be interested in what I have to say. Because I have no condition, at least so far, in which I am, at the same time being an artist, being human... while I'm taking care politically so I can be human and make my art in this world... At the same time, I also suffer the social ills of the themes I am trying to address in my films. So, this is very complex... Somehow, this independence of making the film makes me able to... express myself better. The industry is not interested in what I have to say, because what I have to say are criticisms and films with a lot of sadness, a lot of pain. They are films of pain; they are films of a lot of tension. [...]

At least in my style of auteur film, it's harder. So, independence is good in that sense. [O]n the one hand it brings a very great financial instability, but on the other hand, it brings security so that I can say what I want to say in the way I want to say it without me having strings attached and functional or institutional purposes, or at least to a lesser extent. But the interest of this independent cinema [is] as counter cultural cinema also, right? This cinema that doesn't mince words, that [can] be whatever it wants, in whatever way it wants to be. Confronting conventions of what the film has to be... [T]his independence is, in this sense, an independence of a precarious artist, who lives in precariousness, who lives on public policies, who lives on public notices, [...] who doesn't have a secure basis even for financing my films.

When we say, "independent cinema", it is also quite difficult because, when we say "independent" it's mostly documentaries. Of course, there's a lot of independent fiction as well, but generally we start with documentaries because they are the cheapest, the simplest, right? We have very pressing social issues, and we don't have any money. And in our community, we start making movies in our neighbourhood. Since documentaries have more aesthetic freedom, so to speak, without actors. [...] We start filming there in a freer way because fiction requires a more systematic study of shots, actors, scripts, and so on, which are things we do not have right from the start. We start with documentaries because it seems like documentaries are even simpler to make, as everyone says. So, we start with this place, not by choice, but because it is the only possibility.

Brazil is a very important country on the political, cultural, and historical world stage. So, I think documentaries, independent cinema, do bring that more real aspect of Brazil. And this more modern independent cinema brings another perspective. Because we had it before. We had an independent cinema in Brazil that, obviously, was more connected to a viewpoint of left-wing white people, so to speak. Left-wing intellectuals. Obviously, with the businessmen who funded this cinema, or not... This wave of filmmakers who were independent and wanted to show this side of Brazil [...] But we know, nowadays, that it's not such a Brazilian cinema.

There were many Brazils missing there. [...] So, I think the new independent cinema that we are producing through indigenous perspectives, women's perspectives, black cinema, etc, revisits and reinterprets the images that were already made in national cinema, which sold something exotic, something folkloric to the world. It's quite difficult. We are dealing with these images that impoverished us quite a bit, limited us quite a bit with unilateral visions of these people, of these people as objects. I would even say as ornaments. Black, indigenous, women's bodies were used as ornaments within Brazilian independent cinema for several decades. I understand that, nowadays, independent cinema comes more from a cinema of the real, a more diverse cinema. Different perspectives, especially political perspectives on bodies.

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