Guilt-based filmmaking: moral failings, muddled activism, and the “documentary” Get a Life

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ABSTRACT
To date consideration of negative emotions in the context of cinema has been largely limited to the issue of why spectators would be drawn to films that target psychological responses such as fear and disgust. The aim here is to consider the phenomenon of negative emotion as a motivating factor in the context of, not spectatorship, but film production. The focus is on documentary filmmaking with a strong ethnographic dimension, the camera being used to record the circumstances and culture of an ethnic group to which the filmmaker does not belong. Get a Life by Michael Klint (in collaboration with Claus Bie) is presented as an instance of guilt-based filmmaking, the filmmaker having repeatedly foregrounded his own guilt as a decisive factor in the film’s making. A so-called “documentary” film based on filmmaker Lars von Trier’s “Documentarist Code,” Get a Life is shown to rely on moral notions that are consistent with the future-oriented and redemptive aspects of the phenomenon of guilt. The filmmaker’s rhetoric foregrounds the idea of “making a difference” for the Nigerian victims of a devastating flesh-eating disease (noma) and further purports to challenge the norms underwriting TV reporting on the “Third World.” Analysis of Get a Life, however, reveals it to be a failed work on moral grounds. The filmmakers’ self-importance, deficient self-understandings, and self-deceptions regarding the bases for their putative actions on behalf of others are identified as especially problematic. The relevant failings warrant attention at a time when filmmakers from privileged cultures increasingly pursue performative-style documentary filmmaking, fueled by purportedly moral intentions, in a variety of contexts in the Global South.

The decision to make a film can be an emotion-laden one and there are times when the emotions in question belong to the category that philosophers have dubbed “negative” (Hjort and Laver 1997). The category of negative emotions is typically discussed with reference to the emotions of spectators, not filmmakers, the emphasis being on the conundrum that arises when pleasure is derived from the experience, through film, of emotions that most of us seek to avoid in our everyday lives. Horror films, provoking both fear and disgust, are puzzling in precisely this regard (Carroll 1990). Yet, films may also find their origin in negative emotions. For example, anticipating the emergence of second-generation immigrant filmmakers onto the Danish filmmaking scene, the politically minded director Erik Clausen referred to the possibility of filmmakers deriving their creative energy, not from some inward process of personal inspiration, but from a sense of outrage or even anger prompted by social injustices (Clausen 2000).

Michael Klint’s 2004 documentary Get a Life purportedly finds its starting point in a negative emotion: guilt. In Klint’s case, guilt springs from an awareness of the privileged nature of first-world Danish realities, and of certain practices in the sphere of documentary filmmaking for television that are at once dubious and pervasive.1 The perspective provoking the sense of guilt is a broad one encompassing conditions in the “Third World” (Klint 2004, 15), yet the film’s specific focus is illness caused by poverty in Nigeria. There is no evidence of Klint’s having engaged with Nigerian history or culture previously, his main interest in the country having to do, as we shall see, with the high incidence amongst Nigerians of a particularly gruesome illness.

Get a Life is a striking example of what Elisabeth Oxfeldt and her colleagues call “Scan-guilt,” the term having been coined to capture the many ways in which Scandinavians’ focal awareness of Scandinavian privileges prompts guilt in an increasingly global world.2 In the case of Get a Life, the filmmaker’s sense of guilt is tied to highly convergent, rarely questioned, and ultimately nationalistic conceptions of Denmark. The putative site of exceptional welfare, i.e. privilege, Denmark—a placeholder for an entire way of life defined by a variety of benefits associated with the welfare state—occasions guilt within the context of what are ultimately highly stereotypic and deeply
parochial comparisons with Africa. The comparisons feeding the filmmaker’s guilty conscience fit neatly with narratives of Nordic exceptionalism, where the role, for example, of Danish colonialism is obscured in favor of preferred notions of robust collective agency oriented towards peace and justice within the region, but also on a global stage (Yang, Forthcoming; Loftsdottir and Jensen, 2012). The analytic payoffs of engaging with the documentary Get a Life extend well beyond insight into the specifics of Scan-guilt, for the film offers an opportunity to consider the problematic nature of what I wish to call guilt-based filmmaking. Get a Life points to the pitfalls of guilt-based filmmaking, but also, as a result of its clear failings, to some of the conditions that must be satisfied if guilt is to play a positive and genuinely hopeful role within a process of change- and justice-oriented filmmaking.

What is guilt?

Psychologists categorize guilt as a self-conscious emotion. Much like pride, embarrassment, or shame, guilt is a social emotion. Guilt, that is, occurs in response to beliefs about, and assessments of, social relationships (Fischer, 1995, 4). When experiencing guilt, it may be a matter of recalling some person’s, or some community’s, negative judgment of the self, but the emotion may also arise through a reflexive process. In the latter case the person who experiences the guilt is identical with the individual who articulates the negative judgment of the self. Such reflexive assessments make reference to preferred self-understandings and social norms, and to the ways in which negatively assessed behavior falls short of certain standards. Guilt is also seen as belonging (along with shame and empathy) to a category of “moral emotions” (Zahn-Waxler and Robinson, 1995, 143). A sense of responsibility for others often plays a causal role in the genesis of the emotion of guilt. The emotion may be prompted by a perception, whether on the part of others or the self, of having fallen short of what is right in terms of behavior towards others.

There is an important retrospective dimension to guilt, for the actions that attract scrutiny and judgment have typically already occurred. In this sense, guilt differs from an emotion like fear, which is provoked by thoughts regarding the future. At the same time, guilt is not entirely oriented towards the past. If a concept of responsibility is indeed constitutive of the emotion in question, then the psychological ground is potentially prepared for future behavior that to some extent compensates for the failings that inform certain negative assessments of the self. Guilt is also, potentially, about making things right. This point is especially thought provoking in the context of Get a Life, given the filmmaker’s stated intention to “make a difference.”

Guilt-based filmmaking: evoking the scope of the concept

Guilt-based filmmaking is neither a recent nor a uniform phenomenon admitting of little diversity. Since the early days of Robert Flaherty and his Nanook of the North (Flaherty, 1922), documentary filmmakers have been mobile, and the production history of reality-based filmmaking offers many quite different examples of guilt-ridden reflections related to the documenting of other cultures. Flaherty, for example, is typically described as having construed his own filming in the Hudson Bay area of the Canadian North as an attempt to capture a way of life that was being destroyed by companies such as the one for which he worked. He is said to have had “a growing sense that he himself represented the cultural destruction that troubled him” (Barnouw, 1993, 45), with film scholars noting how he attributed a “redemptive potential” to the filmmaking process. That is, Flaherty appears to have nurtured a self-conception that enabled him to see his own filmmaking as a means of counteracting the negative effects (on indigenous communities) of a corporate exploitation of mineral and other resources (Kinder, 1999, 9). Constitutive of his guilt-driven filmmaking were judgments regarding the negative effects of actions undertaken by the ethnic group to which he belonged, but also thoughts about how his camera might be used to make amends.

Flaherty’s film is an early instance of what has come to be known as “salvage ethnography,” a central feature of the filmmaking in question being the camera’s role in mitigating the effects of destruction through the provision of evidence of existence. In the case of Nanook of the North, the relevant approach involved reconnecting with the past in order to capture the “former majesty” of the Inuit (cited in Barnouw, 1993, 45). Flaherty was unconcerned about power relations between the documentary filmmaker and his subjects, the result being that the Inuit in Nanook were asked to take unnecessary risks for the sake of the camera. Although the Inuit had abandoned traditional hunting methods in favor of the less risky rifle, Flaherty insisted on filming a walrus hunt with harpoons. The scene in the film is notorious, due to Flaherty’s own recollections: “For a long time it was nip and tuck—repeatedly the crew called to me to use the gun—but the camera crank was my only interest then and I pretended not to understand” (cited in Hjort, 2012, 41). In addition to providing an early example of a type of guilt-driven filmmaking, Flaherty’s Nanook shows that, even with its future-oriented redemptive
intentionality, the emotion in question by no means offers protection against deficient moral thinking or behavior. In Flaherty’s case, the noteworthy failings have to do with the exposure of the Inuit to unnecessary risks for purely self-interested reasons, the misrepresentation of certain practices as current rather than lost or disappearing, and the tendency to exoticize cultural difference. In the case of Get a Life, a central problem is the reinforcement of a “saviors and survivors syndrome” (Perugini and Zucconi, 2017, 2, citing Mahmood Mamdani, 2010), the guilt-based filmmaking serving primarily to boost the positive self-concepts of Klint and his fellow cameraman, Claas Bie as they enact their self-appointed role as saviors and critically minded filmmakers. The Get a Life project finds its starting point in guilt and takes the filmmakers to a site of considerable suffering. In spite of this the making of the film is a clearly a source of gratification and pleasure, the filmmakers being inclined throughout to interpret their undertaking as expressive of virtuous dispositions and attitudes warranting affirmation and admiration.

Get a Life: manifestos, rules, and intentions

The guilt-driven Danish documentary Get a Life owes its existence to the so-called “dogumentary” manifesto, which was filmmaker Lars von Trier’s attempt to extend the highly successful Dogma 95 initiative onto the terrain of documentary filmmaking. Recalling Dogma 95’s ten-rule “Vow of Chastity,” the dogumentary manifesto from 2001 imposed rules on documentary filmmakers. Presented in the guise of a rescue operation, the “Documentalist Code for Dogumentarism” consists of 9 rules aimed at bringing “us back to the core, back to the essence of our existence.” The manifesto called for the “burial” of a “documentary and television reality that has become more and more manipulated and filtered by camera people, editors and directors.” The stakes were high: nothing less than the “public’s faith” in the credibility of reality-based depictions (Christensen, 2001, 29).

The dogumentary code was initially to be embraced by six filmmakers selected by Lars von Trier and Carsten Holst, then director of Zentropa Real (Michael Klint, Klaus Birch, Bente Milton, and Sami Saif, all from Denmark, Pål Hollender from Sweden, and Margreth Olin from Norway). The rule-based intervention was announced with a fair bit of ceremony, including pronouncements by decision makers from the film and media world, many of whom drew attention to the moral dimensions of the rules. Henning Camre, then Head of the Danish Film Institute, referred to a “process of purification”, while Jørgen Rønnebov, at that time in a decision-making role at Danmarks Radio, indicated that the National Broadcasting Corporation was “eager to promote a discussion of ethics and production practices” (Katz, 2002) and thus supported the project. Yet, Klint’s film would ultimately prompt serious disappointment.

There is much to say about the intentions informing the dogumentary rules and about how individual directors chose to interpret, implement, or even circumvent them. For now, let us simply note that von Trier’s initiative was designed to give documentary filmmakers new freedoms. That is, the first dogumentary films were to be funded on the strength of von Trier’s concept alone, not on the basis of the filmmakers’ intended foci and approaches: “Part of the idea is that the investors have no influence on the content of the films, which they have financed before anyone decides what they will be about. That’s quite unusual for documentaries” (producer Carsten Holst, quoted in Neiendam, 2002). The manifesto was designed to give documentary filmmakers “the freedom to tell stories they’re really passionate about,” and in ways that deviate from the pervasive (mostly ratings-oriented) approaches to representing reality on our screens (Holst, quoted in Christensen, 2001, 29; see also Keck, 2010, 19).

Get a Life tells a harrowing story about a little-known illness called noma that is prevalent on the African continent. Caused by the effects of poverty, by malfunctioning immune systems and the overgrowth of common bacteria in the mouth, noma rapidly devours the tissue of the affected person’s face and entails death if left untreated (either with antibiotics during the early stages or through surgery in more severe cases). In his commentary on the film, “Drop that Film,” director Michael Klint (2004) explains why he chose to make a documentary film about noma:

I had first heard about Noma about 10 years earlier while interviewing a Swiss doctor for a film that was critical of the World Health Organisation (WHO). The doctor complained bitterly that the WHO was not interested in Noma at all. He showed me pictures of sick and dead children. … It was horrifying …. The subject got a few minutes in my WHO film, but now I had the chance to do an entire film about it. Again, I was warned: no one would show the film. … But I thought: at least Get a Life would be a shot at making a difference for somebody (Klint, 2004, 15; emphasis added).

The director foregrounds the impossibility of making the film under normal circumstances in the very title of his piece: “Drop that Film.” This injunction, he claims, is how “an editor at a TV station or a producer at a film company” would normally respond to a proposal to make a film about noma. The imagined editor evoked by Klint with reference to a putative norm appears to be worried, not so much about the
“compassion fatigue” (Chouliaraki 2006) of (especially western) viewers, but about the sheer horror of the illness in question. Klint’s claim is that von Trier’s Dogma project allowed him to circumvent the norm in question, offering him an opportunity to “choose the subject” of his film without interference. Freed from the normal constraints, Klint opted to make a film about “sick, black Africans, destitution, and misery,” a film, that is, that “no TV station will ever show in … primetime” (Klint, 2004, 15).

Klint’s commitment to “making a difference for somebody” points to broadly moral intentions that appear to be in keeping with the thinking that informs the documentary code. For example, in addition to its critique of manipulation and its call for depictions of reality warranting belief in their veracity, the documentary manifesto indirectly takes issue with practices that effectively constitute documentary subjects as “victims.” The term “victim” is used in a very specific sense, namely with reference to a diminished agency resulting from inadequate opportunities for involvement in the production process. Two of the nine rules are of critical importance in this regard. Rule nr. 2 requires the director to be transparent about his or her plans: “The beginning of the film must outline the goals and ideas of the director. (This must be shown to the film’s participants and technicians before filming begins).” Rule nr. 3 adds a further moral requirement in the form of free speech by the participants in the documentary: “The end of the film must consist of two minutes of free speaking time by the film’s ‘victim.’ This ‘victim’ alone shall advise regarding the content and must approve this part of the finished film. If there is no opposition by any of the collaborators, there will be no ‘victim’ or ‘victims.’ To explain this, there will be text inserted at the end of the film” (Christensen, 2001, 30). Offering a framework for a documentary practice that attempts to take a concept of informed consent seriously, these rules foreground the extent to which documentary representations find their depictive content in the lives of actually existing human beings.4 Like Klint’s insistence on making a difference, the rules are decidedly moral in their thrust.

The guilt that Klint sees as informing his noma film is prompted by the plight of the afflicted children in Nigeria, but also by the norms and attitudes that govern first-world documentary filmmakers’ representations of “Third World” realities. What is foregrounded is the gravitation towards poverty and misery, combined with various forms of indifference and disengagement:

As this kind of endeavor might easily end up being pathetic, I also wanted the film to be about our common, and my personal, perception of the Third World, our film gaze on the problems of hunger and disease in Africa. And my own guilty conscience (emphasis added) when I travel and make films in the Third World or when I am confronted with these problems in other ways. …. [D]eep down, I do not want to deal with it, and by and by I have grown callous. I wanted to get behind this callousness, my own and my cameraman’s shield. I wanted to get behind the smugness, the complacency, and the self-righteousness (Ibid).

The result of Klint’s guilt-laden intentions is, as we shall see, a problematic film, but one offering lessons that are well worth learning.

The moral of the story: deriving guidance from failure

If Get a Life is a failure, it is one produced by a highly experienced professional (Klint won the prestigious Cavling award in 2006, for Under Anklage (“Charged”)). The lessons to be drawn from the infelicities, transgressions of taste, and deep moral confusions that are in evidence in Get a Life are anything but trivial. In Klint’s highly problematic guilt-based filmmaking there is, quite inadvertently, guidance to be found for the first-world practitioner who hopes to make morally sound documentaries about significant issues in cultures other than his or her own.

Klint’s moral project in Get a Life is flawed to the point of delivering not only a failed work, but an unethical one warranting “moral rebuke,” to use Noël Carroll’s term (Carroll, 1998, 150). One problem has to do with the emotions and attitudes that Klint himself names—guilt, smugness, complacency, and self-righteousness—for the cinematic outcome of the putatively self-reflexive attempt to “get behind” the relevant psychological profile is an emotional muddle that does little to advance moral thinking. Far from presenting a consistent and cogent critique of certain modes of thinking and feeling, and of their pervasiveness in first-world
TV milieus and societies, the film points to their personal nature in the current case. That is, the performance of smugness, by Klint and his fellow cameraman Claus Bie, only offers insight into what appears to be a set of off-putting and highly provocative personal dispositions. Especially telling are the sequences in which Klint and Bie, over breakfast, exchange thoughts, not about the specific village in Northern Nigeria where they are temporarily located, but about the "country" as a whole, and about "Africa" in its undifferentiated entirety:

Claus: This is not too bad. These have been wrapped individually [pointing to wrapped cheese slices].
Michael: That’s what I call a plastic cheese. It’s a shame. I’m sure this country could produce a lot of things.
Claus: Goat cheese.
Michael: I’m sure they could produce some great cheese, but there’s no … There’s no system. They don’t even produce fresh milk. It’s hopeless.
Claus: They could achieve so much in Africa, but they can’t be bothered.
Michael: I don’t think it’s that. They don’t know how to organize things. It all goes wrong every time they try to organize things.

During a subsequent breakfast scene, Klint offers thoughts on Nigeria’s resources in the form of oil, and on the paradoxical lack of availability of petrol in the country. The situation is interpreted, once again, as a purely African problem, with Bie and Klint quickly agreeing that the problem is caused by corruption, by the putative penchant for immoral behavior that is pervasive throughout Africa. If the aim with exchanges such as the above is to evoke, examine, and critique some of the typical elements of western viewers’ thinking about African realities, it is fair to say that the relevant intentions are anything but clearly discernible. The glib exchanges—which ignore, for example, the absence of western-style cheeses in a traditional Nigerian diet as well as the role of western corporations in the Nigerian oil industry—are not marked as utterances consistent with a mere role, that of the cynical first world filmmaker whose behavior is symptomatic of a host of ills ranging from the personal to the systemic. The exchanges thus become expressions of beliefs and attitudes to which the filmmakers are actually committed. Let us think of this as the problem of inadvertent expression. In the overall context of a performative documentary, the foregrounding of the filmmaking self in a performance role is a risky undertaking, for the utterances are easily taken at face value, as genuine assertions.

It is worth noting that provocation, in the dual sense of challenging one’s own self-concepts as well as those of others, is at the very core of Lars von Trier’s identity as a filmmaker (Hjort, 2011). That provocative utterances should figure centrally in Get a Life is hardly surprising, for it is fair to assume that von Trier’s general approach was salient in the context of his dogumentary initiative. It should also be remembered, however, that narratives about Danish identity repeatedly foreground a strong attachment to irreverence, be it in the context of humor or critical debate. Consistent with these narratives is the fact that a large number of Danes supported Jyllands-Posten’s publication of irreverent cartoons of the prophet Mohammed in 2005, and thus the explicit intent to offend Muslim communities in Denmark. Unthinkable in a country like Canada where multiculturality is a core value, the widespread support for the offensive cartoons in Denmark was framed as a much-needed defense of freedom of speech and as a necessary reaction to a growing pressure to engage in self-censorship, due to the failure of immigrants and refugees to embrace properly Danish values. The provocations of Get a Life are of a piece with modes of behavior that are accepted, even encouraged, by Danes and there is undoubtedly a good deal of provincialism, even chauvinism, to be found in the offensiveness of the dialogues between the two Danish filmmakers in Get a Life.

A second key problem warranting attention has to do with the activist intentions that inform the decision to make Get a Life. The film is said to find a starting point in a guilt-driven desire to do good, yet there is little evidence of effective actions or decision-making in keeping with the foregrounded intent. As dictated by the dogumentary code, the film begins with a sequence in which the filmmaker Klint (located in Copenhagen, as indicated by a title) explains his concept and intent. Speaking to the camera, Klint says:

This film is about appreciating your life—in comparison with people who may lead cursed lives. This film is about helping other people and making a difference. It is about giving life to other people. I have to warn you. Some images in this film look like they stem from our worst nightmares or our fear of death. These are images from a remote place in this world. They are images of unknown fatal disease called noma. But I still hope that the film can make a difference. Enjoy.

There is much that is off-putting in this mix of intentions, including, most strikingly, the invitation to enjoyment. Of the various intentions, the one focusing on "helping other people" merits attention, for this is consistent with the future-oriented, redemptive thrust of guilt-based action. The relevant intention also meshes with the dogumentary code’s
specification that no “victims” may be produced in the course of filmmaking. In Get a Life the required “two minutes of free speaking time by the film’s ‘victim’” take the form of Klint reading a letter (accompanied by photographs) that one of the doctors at the noma hospital has sent him. Klint shows the camera pictures of the severely afflicted boy Savino, who survived his operation and is now thriving in his village. We further learn that the two three-year old girls whose operations we were shown in gruesome detail also survived. Klint’s final utterances point to the broadest possible interpretation of the “victim” rule, for rather than confirming the moral soundness of the film’s approach, the doctor merely asks a central question. Klint says: “And they would like to know how the documentary is going. And if it would be able to help them. I haven’t answered them yet.” One suspects that the preference is to avoid answering the question, that the honest and straightforward answer is an unambiguous “no.” If we are to understand the unfortunate lack of impact we must look to what is ultimately the pseudo-activism on which Get a Life rests.6

The problem arising in connection with Klint’s activist intention is one of sincerity: activism requires effective thinking about the desired effects of cinematic interventions and about how best to achieve them. Sam Gregory, program director at WITNESS—an organization that “trains and supports activists and citizens around the world to use video safely, ethically, and effectively to expose human rights abuse and fight for human rights change”7—has much to say about the necessity of planning for impact (Gregory, 2012a; Gregory, 2012b). The core elements of effective planning are highlighted in one of WITNESS’ training modules, “Before Filming,” (2017) in which aspiring video activists are encouraged to clarify their goal, to define their audience (which can be large or small), and to make the invitation to action concrete and specific:

To have the most impact with your video, focus on two things: Do you have a clear, specific goal for change and a defined audience that can help you achieve it?

Once you have made your video, how can you place it in front of the right viewers at the right time? Timing is everything. Organize a day of action and mobilize a worldwide community of support online to take action. Or put your video in front of a judge who is deciding a key case or a policy-maker about to vote on legislation.

Make sure to have a ‘message’ for your audience. It helps to have a direct, concrete request for action underlying your video. Try expressing this as a sentence with an action verb. STOP discrimination against people living with HIV/AIDS (WITNESS, training module).

If the criteria defined by WITNESS capture the conditions for successful activist interventions through moving images, then Get a Life is an instance of failed activism already at the planning stage. How the film is to make a difference—to the lives of viewers who need to appreciate life more, or to African victims of nom—is entirely unclear. In the film itself, Klint

Figure 2. The two filmmakers with some of the young noma patients (courtesy of the Danish Film Institute).
repeatedly insists that no broadcaster will wish to show it, the link between film and audience being thus apparently severed in advance. Finally, the question as to what any viewer who happens to find a way of seeing *Get a Life* is supposed to do in response to the harrowing images of children’s faces being half removed in the noma hospital, or with the filmmakers’ expressions of horror, nausea, outrage, and cynicism, is left entirely open. Nothing, in short, follows from the film. Evidence of neglect in all the areas to which WITNESS draws attention has the effect of making the cinematic undertaking seem highly disingenuous. *Get a Life*, we suspect, is ultimately a narcissistic project, for what matters at the end of the day is the rule-governed cinematic experiment for its own sake and its vague connection to a putative virtue role for the filmmakers. The project ultimately serves the filmmakers, for their professional profiles now include involvement with a Lars von Trier initiative and a manifesto-based approach to filmmaking that bills itself as critically minded and morally probing.

A third problem concerns the film’s targeted response on the part of viewers. The film aims at a degree of emotional symmetry, with viewers coming to embrace some of the putative guilt experienced by the two filmmakers. Yet, the likely result of the rhetoric and images of *Get a Life* is the viewer’s determined decision to take his or her distance from the film, and from the thinking and behavior that inform it. An issue of profound disengagement, this problem is the most serious of all, for it reveals an overall judgment of the film as ultimately immoral.

Cognitive approaches to emotion typically distinguish between the formal and particular objects of emotional states, the former being the “evaluative category under which the appraisal or evaluation of a particular object ... falls on a particular occasion” (Lyons, 1980, 100). Thus, for example, fear is prompted by an evaluation of a particular situation as belonging to the category of what is dangerous. This category constitutes the formal object for all experiences of fear, unlike the emotion’s particular object, which may consist of any number of different circumstances, ranging from the presence of free-roaming lions in the immediate vicinity to the anticipation of losing one’s job.

The audio-visual displays of gruesome illness in *Get a Life* are linked to different types of guilt, ranging from the humanitarian (prompted by general membership in a privileged group), through the professional (prompted by the TV documentarian’s regular involvement in perpetuating certain practices of televisual representation), to the personal (arising from complacency about distant suffering and from a failure, on a daily basis, to be properly appreciative of good fortune). The film’s depiction of the horrors of noma, in close-ups that flout the norms of televisual representation, is designed to prompt a parallel response in the viewer in the case of humanitarian and personal guilt. The filmmakers’ expression of professional guilt targets a different response, however, for in this case the point is to instigate outrage about the deficiencies of western representations of, and engagements with, the “Third World.”

A critical failing of *Get a Life* has to do with the way in which the intentions pertaining to viewer uptake in connection with the specifics of professional and personal guilt are inadvertently thwarted by the filmmakers’ decision-making and behavior. In the case of professional guilt, the insistence on placing the camera inches away from the operating table registers, not as a form of virtuous rebellion against inadequate norms of representation, but simply as a violation of a possibly dying child’s dignity and as an insensitive intrusion into the most immediate workspace of the medical professionals who are intent on saving lives. Lack of clarity and muddled thinking are also in play in the case of the filmmakers’ expression of personal guilt and the intention to encourage viewers to “get a life.” A major distraction has to do with the filmmakers’ narcissism. For example, due to his blood type, Klint is able to provide blood that is critical to the survival of one of the noma patients. His concern about his own personal safety in connection with the drawing of blood is excessive, just as his subsequent embrace of a redemptive savior role is highly self-absorbed and self-important. The personal attitudes of the filmmakers—revealed in glib, superficial reasoning and racist explanations lacking historical depth and understanding—ultimately claim much of the viewer’s attention. Highlighting personal failings and the superficiality of the filmmaker’s guilt, the many off-putting utterances and actions in *Get a Life* spur reaction, not identification. Guilt, we realize, can be superficial or deep, and the actions it generates appropriate or inappropriate. Based on guilt, *Get a Life* is supposed to provoke productive forms of guilt, not shame. For the western viewer—especially the Danish viewer—shame would not, however, be an inappropriate response to the results of what is ultimately a distasteful cinematic adventure on foreign soil and in the midst of extreme poverty.

**Notes**

1. The film is available through the Danish Film Institute’s videotheque, in the Film House, Gothersgade 55, Copenhagen; ([http://www.dfi.dk/faktaomfilm/film/da/42406.aspx?id=42406](http://www.dfi.dk/faktaomfilm/film/da/42406.aspx?id=42406)). It was shown at a number of festivals, including: One World Human Rights Film Festival; Sevilla Festival de Cine; Jihlava International Documentary Film Festival; Sheffield Doc/Fest; Anthropology Film Festival Pärnu; IDFA; CPH:DOX.
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