

Article

There Is Harm Even In Harmony: On why documentaries so often are about human vulnerability, harm, and suffering

Shaheen Dill-Riaz & Pradeep Chakkarath



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Abstract

In the following pages, we — a documentary filmmaker and a cultural psychologist — share some of the thoughts that we have been concerned with since we started thinking together about some issues that are as much on the minds of the filmmaker as they are on the minds of the scientist. On the one hand, this is our way of encouraging scientific research on the harmful aspects of life to open up to alternative perspectives, methods of exploration, data collection, and documentation that are often considered vague and blurry or even unscientific; this is due to established, almost scholastic demarcations that make it difficult to gain broader insights into complex and interrelated phenomena such as violence, aggression, repression, malice, fear, despair, etc. In addition, we would like to make sensitive to the fact that those phenomena that usually interest conventional research on violence the most — for example wars, genocides, mass killings, rampages, and rapes — have their breeding grounds which are still waiting to be explored and conceptualised more thoroughly. An exchange between social scientists and documentary filmmakers serves as just one of many examples of how a more thorough exploration of our fragile existence could benefit from interdisciplinary and interprofessional cooperation and resulting insights.

Keywords

documentary films, violence, aggression, interdisciplinary research, victims experience

Introduction

We, the two authors of this article, have our professional focus in different walks of life: Shaheen Dill-Riaz works mainly as a documentary filmmaker, and Pradeep Chakkarath, mainly as a cultural and social psychologist. Even though we both have our biographical roots on the Indian subcontinent — Shaheen in Bangladesh and Pradeep in India — the two of us met for the first time in Germany, as fellows at a so-called Centre of Excellence, which — between 2006 and 2019 — brought together scholars, writers, and artists from all over the world at the University of Konstanz to explore innovative ways in cultural and historical theory and thus also promote deeper insights into the cultural foundations of social dissolution and integration. Our shared biographical backgrounds, as well as our common interest in people and settings on the Indian subcontinent, may have played a role in why we started to take an interest in each other's work. However, quite early on, we also discovered that there were interesting commonalities between our professional perspectives and approaches. Without going into detail about the similarities in

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Corresponding Author(s):
shaheen@dill-riaz.com
pradeep.chakkarath@ruhr-uni-bochum.de

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content and method between cinematographic and more conventional academic, that is, *written* documentation of social and cultural phenomena, it is important to note that in our respective fields of work, we both have to deal with the problem of providing a certain kind of *adequate* or *authentic* representation of mainly social phenomena. Like the filmmaker, the social scientist has to find a topic, narrow it down, think about the method of gathering information and how detached or involved one should be in that endeavour. After all, both have to process and condense all the information they have gathered in such a way that it reflects and conveys something important, sometimes even something essential, about reality — in a limited number of pages or minutes. Both also have to decide which data they want to highlight more than other, and which data they consider less relevant in the course of editing their documentation.

In our discussions about parallels in our professional activities, it also struck us that in both fields of work, problematic relationships between people and difficult circumstances in which they live and often suffer, receive special attention. This may have to do with the fact that all living beings permanently dwell in conditions in which their own life plans, their desires for self-realisation, health, happiness and often also simply their very existence are constantly endangered. The organisation of individual and social life is particularly characterised by the desire to create structures, orientations, and orders that make life possible in such a way that fear and worry are not permanent and that happiness and fulfilment are possible despite all threats. However, danger, threats, and hazards as fundamental components of our lives are rather rarely in the focus of so-called violence research. Violence research is particularly interested in sudden and usually temporary events, seen as interruptions of supposedly non-violent normality. Somehow representative of this is the following view articulated in connection with documentary violence on TV, for example, in the news:

A news item is considered to contain violence if it depicts a person or persons who consciously commit an act which kills, injures or causes another person suffering, against their will, or which inflicts damage on an inanimate object, or if it depicts the consequences of such an act (Höijer, 1997, p. 54).

As the author herself notes, events that can be considered coincidental or natural disasters (floods, earthquakes, forest fires, extreme climatic changes, etc.) or what is usually referred to as “structural violence” do not fall within the scope of the definition. This is also the case in most social psychological definitions of violence, although social psychology is more interested in *aggression* and understands it to mean behaviour intentionally aimed at harming others without their consent and against their resistance. *Violence* then is understood merely as a particular manifestation of aggression, which is intended primarily to cause *considerable physical harm* to others (cf. Allen & Anderson, 2017). Thus, the question of whether we are dealing with aggression or yet already with violence is ultimately a matter of degree. Although the debate around these conceptual and definitional issues is broader and more complex than it appears in this brief sketch, the most widely shared view of aggression and violence is that an act should only be considered aggression or violence if it is accompanied by an *intention* to harm. In addition, there is the view that the intention to harm is usually aimed at *physical* harm, although it is not excluded that this may also result in *mental* impairment. As an aside, this limitation of the definition is out of touch with reality, since many aggressive acts, such as bullying, character assassination, or even certain acts of torture, primarily intend psychological injury. Moreover, this established but abstract definition of violence pays too little attention to the many different ways in which violence is experienced and what is experienced as violence by different people. People whose homes and properties have just been razed to the ground by a forest fire or hurricane, and who blame irresponsible climate policies for this disaster, will find little comfort in scientists telling them that their experiences are not really experiences of violence (cf. Hobbs-Morgan, 2017).

Let us note that these scientifically influential views convey an image of violence that makes it an exceptional case, all the more so because it is even declared to be a special case of aggression. In this view, violence is depicted as an interruption from normality, which has as a main characteristic to be non-violent. Life is portrayed, so to speak, like a quiet calm ocean, in which smaller and larger wave movements occur from time to time, and sometimes even a tsunami. Apart from a brief reference in the next section, here, we will not elaborate on the

immense influence of quite different ideological traditions that profoundly shape our discourses and thus our perceptions and interpretations of our life-worlds (see, for example, Chakkarath, 2021); we believe, however, that far more attention should be paid to this issue in violence research than has been the case so far.

On the following pages, we will not draw a completely different picture, but primarily try to understand the picture as deceptive, because for humans, oceans are *in principle* dangerous and life-threatening. So, when we compare life with an ocean, we should not lose sight of the fact that it is part of the normality of life to have to live under conditions that are always threatening. This seems to us to be an important reason why films that want to document social reality in its most diverse facets, conspicuously often capture hurtful conflicts, harm, recklessness, aggression, and violence. Thus, documentary films can serve as a source of data, so to speak, for exploring more thoroughly the ground on which the perpetration and the experience of violence and various closely related phenomena arise. We think that they can also make plausible that people can experience events as violence without this violence being intended by other persons. Cinematic illustrations of life in documentaries can thus also stimulate reflection on whether research on violence perhaps looks too much at malicious persons and their intentions and too little at victims and their experiences or at their interpretations of these experiences.

Why is there so much Harm in Documentaries?

Throughout the history of mankind, experiences of crisis and related fears of various threats, including apocalyptic visions of doom, have played an important role in the way people behave and arrange themselves in this world. Throughout history, these fears have also been exploited, again and again, to propagate religious and ideological views that pretend to show different ways out of fear. Not infrequently, these views include the proposal to defeat fear — the *inner* enemy — by destroying supposed *external* enemies. That individuals not only worry in the face of uncontrolled social change and apocalyptic conditions, but also fear persecution, punishment, and exposure, plays an important role in stabilising social order and reveals why the social sciences have some difficulty to seriously imagine a fear- and threat-free society that could be entirely free of dystopian aspects (cf. Schlapentokh, 2006). This is evident in a large part of social scientific classics which focus in an unmistakable way on the gloomy sides of human life, on collective risks, dangers, injustice, exploitation, mass crimes, scenarios of dissolution and end times, but also on individual deficits that not only emerge from these gloomy conditions, but also contribute to them. This may serve as a reminder of how humans, or human societies, seem to tend to move in a vicious circle kept in motion by fears and simultaneously creating new threats and additional fears.

The idea that life means, in principle, suffering and that this shows itself especially in the transience of moments that seem to be free of suffering shapes the perspectives on the world, life, and human beings not only in the social sciences but in many influential philosophical and spiritual traditions, probably most clearly and consistently in Asian schools of thought such as Buddhism, Jainism, Hinduism, Daoism, and others. Although, the contributions and insights from these traditions are another domain in which social science research on violence and harm shows little interest, after what has been said above, we can at least state the following: It is probably not too surprising that both the cinematic and the scientific documentation of human realities can hardly avoid — whether intentionally or unintentionally, whether explicitly or between the lines and behind the scenes — depicting aspects of harm and suffering. This may not be too surprising, since documentaries that focus not on humans but on the larger whole, the earth, nature, the wilderness, and especially the animals that live in it, also make use of narrative and dramaturgical framings that portray life on this tiny planet as continuously threatened and threatening. We feel that this reference does have some relevance, although we are aware that theories of documentary often question whether wildlife films are true documentaries at all (e.g., Bousé, 1998).

With these remarks, we do not want to suggest that *all* documentary films centre on the darker side of life as their theme. Of course, there are also examples of documentaries that are primarily intended to communicate aesthetic messages, document musicians or their concerts and audiences, portrait artists at work, or bear witness to seemingly harmless scenes of ordinary human life. It seems obvious to us, however, that among the best-known examples of films from this multifold genre, most of them illuminate, in various ways, the relationships outlined above

(cf. Chanan, 2007). A look at those films nominated for the Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature Film since 1941 quickly reveals how many internationally successful documentaries deal with war, persecution, killing, genocide, exploitation, abuse, injustice, resistance, physical and mental illness, or difficult living conditions of various kinds. It is no surprise that most of the *winner*s in this category also deal with these or similar topics.

In the following, we will very briefly outline our perspective on the topic of violence and harm, as far as it is necessary, in order to subsequently better understand to what extent some exemplary documentaries can inspire us to gain something from this perspective. It should be noted that our aim here is not to contribute to the film-theoretical analysis of cinematic representations of violence as it is already available in many other works (e.g., Bacon, 2015; Boerman & Noordenbos, 2022; ten Brink & Oppenheimer, 2012); rather, we are concerned with the far more simple and straightforward, but in our view important, comment on the extent to which documentary films can help to make plausible a perspective on violence and violent relations that can enrich our thinking about these issues.

We will use three of Shaheen's films and related experiences to try to show, by way of example, how many different facets of harm documentaries can draw our attention to, even if the depiction of violence was not a primary concern of the films at the beginning of production.

Lives and Harm in Documentaries — A Few Examples

Shaheen has been working as a documentary filmmaker for more than two decades. When he looks back and considers his experiences and observations in terms of the human condition, in every case or situation that he tried to portray in his films, damages and injuries were always common phenomena. Either it was persons or communities that were exposed to a short-term act or event of violence, or they were living in a hostile condition that caused a significant harm to their mental or physical health. One interesting aspect in all these cases was that the protagonists were in a constant conflict to negotiate compromises with their opponents or to find a sustainable balance despite many opposing forces. But escape from that situation, simply leaving the stressful environment and giving up the familiar was never a serious option for most of them. Either they did not want to take that option, or they just did not have it.

Forces of Nature: Sand and Water

"Sand and Water" (2001), Shaheen's first film, is about the people living in the middle of the river Brahmaputra (local name *Jamuna*), in the small alluvial islands in Northern Bangladesh. Each year, with the heavy summer monsoons, the river breaks its banks and transforms the entire area into a vast watery expanse. The flood lasts from June to September, with the "ocean" disappearing in the winter months only to be replaced by an unforgiving landscape of seemingly endless sand. Nevertheless, the arduous struggle of these farmers to survive the hardship during the monsoon is rewarded by the river in winter with fertile sediment that makes the sandy riverbed cultivable, which is existential for the island dwellers. The dense vegetation and productive harvest during the winter months make people somehow forget the times of flood.

This is a fragile world that is existing at the mercy of a mighty river, which in mythological, discourse-shaping tradition, is often understood as the personified and acting divine. Human existence is difficult in a landscape turned seascape and that transforms from one to the other and back again with an unpredictability that leaves the people often unable to prepare for what is to come. After the flooding, some of them can never come back again. People lose even their lives due to sickness and lack of treatment because they cannot reach the hospitals in mainland in time. The lengthy flood that sometimes results in crop failure, causes malnutrition and even starvation. The reason why most of the people still want to stay on these islands is the possibility of cultivation *after* the flood and the expectation that the harvest will secure their survival. They know that the cycle of nature will continue without any exception. Mainland people often praise and romanticise these farmers' lives as they see from the distance, hardly knowing the price the dwellers must pay for what they get from the river. The inhabitants of these islands are often portrayed as a rare example of human life in "harmony" with nature. Experience with different audiences has shown that this is a way of reception that some viewers in Western countries share.

Flow of the water from the Himalaya is the reason why the islands are eroded. But that very waterflow is also the reason for the creation of these islands in the first place. The destructions of an old island caused by the erosion is compensated by the flood that deposits the nurturing

sediments on the new island. But can the loss of a child in flood water be compensated? Would anything ever be able to console the pain of losing a homestead that is demolished and flown away within hours by the violent flow of water? Do the people seen in the film really deal with their situation as calmly as it seems in some scenes or is their willingness to permanently expose themselves to the destructive forces of nature an example of the conviction that they suffer but consider the destructive forces of nature to constitute the normality of life, so that suffering itself is not considered an exception but as intimately linked to all life.



Image 1. Flooded lands and floating houses.

Forces of Religion: Koran Children

Every religion aims at harmony, and so does Islam. But the inharmonious conflicts lie beneath the surface of seemingly peaceful religious practices. Another film of Shaheen's films, "Korankinder", that he filmed in 2009, shows the life of young children (7 to 12 years old) at a Madrasa, a koranic school. Twelve hours a day, every day for at least two years they have 6,000 verses of the Koran to memorise, even if they do not understand a single Arabic word of these verses. This is the monumental task facing the children at the *Hifz-Khana*, a special department of a Madrasa. Many parents are happy to send their children to this special program of the Islamic orthodoxy in Bangladesh.

Such an extreme religious practice always comes about when the observance of religion disappears from our everyday lives. If the thousand-year-old traditions associated with this religion are lost, people will want to retrieve them somehow and somewhere. This serves as compensation for a situation in which people are not allowed to or cannot afford to really live out their religion in their daily lives. Most of the children's parents are not religious at all. But they believe that they are doing a tremendous service to their religious life if their child succeeds in memorising the entire Koran. The price their children must pay when practicing this tradition is immeasurable. The trauma that is caused through this severe mental and physical pressure to memorise verses without understanding them influences their entire life. If the parents are conscious about the pain and sufferings their children have to go through, it is painful for them as well. But they are ready to "sacrifice" because, in the long run, so the tradition says, the effort will be good for the kids as well.

This tradition started at the early age of Islam when the Koran did not exist as scripture but as oral record that had to be preserved by oral tradition. People therefore had no other choice but to memorise the verses and tell them to the next generation — and it was said that Allah would have a great reward for them if they can successfully do this. After more than a thousand years, this promise transformed to something concrete: Some of the protagonists in the film (parents of the children) claim that not only the children but the entire family would enjoy the grace of Allah and get access to Heaven in the afterlife.



Image 2. At the Madrasa.

There is not a small number of these children who ultimately fail to achieve this goal. The children also cannot always transfer to a normal school and as a result, their education suffers a lot. Those who manage to succeed and go on to become a so-called *Kuran-E-Hafiz* are able to go for further study to become an Imam. Not all of them are happy about this profession but most of them do not have the strength and support to pursue a different career. Another interesting aspect is that some of these children not only just become a Hafiz, but they also continue their religious studies and start deeply identifying with their religious practice and beliefs. They maintain a committed spiritual life which appears even strange to their own parents. In some cases, they even break up the relationship with their families because of the supposedly inadequate religious practice of the family members; a development that their family could never have predicted earlier.



Image 3. Two Koran students with their younger siblings.

In a nutshell, the damage, or dramatic changes this religious tradition causes to the lives of these boys (nowadays also girls) is mostly irreparable and irreversible. There is massive concern in the society about the outcome of these institutions. But there is also a flip side to the coin: These small Madrasas, a huge number of them exist in the entire Indian subcontinent, are also serving as orphanages. Majority of the children who end up in these Madrasas are either orphans or their parents do not have the financial means to feed their children. This is also one of the reasons why these Madrasas are able to attract donations very easily. The sympathy for the humanitarian aspect of this institution is understandable. So, there exists a stance in the society that Madrasas are not doing any harm. On the contrary! Without these institutions, these children might have ended on the streets and become criminals because the state would not take care of them. At the same time, everyone is also conscious about the fact that the potentiality of religious extremism in these Madrasas is indeed very high. The initiative to reform and regulate these institutions in order to control this negative development face resistance from the religious community. As a result, the tradition of *Hifz* in the Madrasas remains unchanged and confined in a dilemma.

Forces of War: Side by Side

Shaheen had to spend a significant part of his childhood in a military boarding school because his father was convinced that he should get this kind of a strictly discipline oriented education, even if he was not sure whether his son wanted to become a soldier or not. Six years of Shaheen's life was shaped by this institution which had some similarity to a Madrasa. In the end, Shaheen did not become a soldier but a filmmaker. Still, he was curious about the life of a soldier in the field and had the chance to explore this topic in his film "Shoulder to Shoulder" (2012) — a double-portrait on a German and an Afghan soldier who were working in the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) camp in the North-Afghanistan city of Kunduz.

"Five meters deep, two meters wide — ten square meters. At some point everything feels like home." Daniel, Captain in the German camp in Kunduz, speaks almost lovingly about his room in the shipping container. Daniel believes in what he is doing. "There is right and wrong. And I think we are the good guys." His six-months stint is almost over, and he is looking forward to going home again. But he will certainly return to Afghanistan, for "this is real life here."



Image 4. Daniel on patrol.

Three kilometres away in the Afghan military barracks, Lieutenant Mehdi M. also shares personal details. He shows the scars from the tattoos he had removed: "My initials and those of someone I loved. I married someone else, so the tattoos had to go." Ever since he can remember, Mehdi wanted to join the army. He sees no difference between the Afghan and the German soldiers.

Two staunchly committed professional soldiers whose families were living apart from them for long periods of time. Sandra, waiting with two children in a small German town, says: "Actually, I never wanted to be with a soldier..." In Kabul, Marina, who also has two children, admits: "Of

course I am afraid, ... but one has to accept it." Almost half of the film explores the professional lives of these young men and the challenges that it brings for them. With the daily routines and the scheduled activities, both lives seem to be surprisingly harmonious, quite free from war scenarios that one would expect and without severe disturbances — until we see the men returning home after their six-month's service.

During a slideshow, when Daniel is showing Sandra the photos taken during his stay in the military camp in Kunduz, provoked by a harmless comment that Sandra made about a picture, Daniel becomes very angry and claims that she is not conscious about how dangerous his job is. But we, the audience, know that she does feel the potential danger of her husband's job because we spent a significant time with her, listening to her worries and the struggle with the children, being alone in Germany while Daniel was working in Kunduz. The disgruntled mood that arose during the slideshow was probably the tip of the iceberg, the spark that caused a long-simmering tension to explode.

Scenes following Daniel and Sandra right from the beginning of his arrival at the German airport show the uneasiness between them which was not caused by the presence of the camera. During Daniel's long absence, a rift had arisen between them; both had visibly distanced themselves from each other. Maybe they will need some time to fill up this gap, a thought Shaheen had during the filming. But the fact is: Daniel will, and wants to return to Afghanistan again, after just three months. And this was not to be the last time in his life.

One year after the film had wrapped up, Shaheen received a phone call from Sandra with the information that she and Daniel got divorced. Was it Daniel's regular stint in the warzone that damaged the relationship between them? "Not only that" was Sandra's short answer. Somebody once said: "There is no winner in a war, only losers." In his interviews, Daniel emphasised again and again that it is a "war" they are taking part in even if the official German mandate of their mission was "training the Afghan soldiers". Even if armed conflicts do not dominate the film, it becomes clear that the soldiers constantly had to reckon with the potential danger of an attack by the Taliban.

We do not know much about the relationship of Mehdi and his wife Marina because we could meet them only once in Kabul after Mehdi's return. But 11 years after filming, in May 2021, after the invasion of Taliban and the collapse of the Afghan Government, we received news that Mehdi had to flee from Afghanistan, was now living in Cologne, and applying for asylum in Germany. He is currently trying to hide his identity as a former soldier of the Afghan army because his wife and son are still in Kabul and might face persecution by the Taliban. Consequently, all his photos and texts about the film from the website and the trailer of the film on YouTube had to be taken down.



Image 5. On home leave — Mehdi with his family.

Mehdi and his family's life is now connected to his identity as a former soldier. Even if they try to, it is impossible to erase every evidence about this fact. Irrespective of whether the Taliban ultimately does any harm to them or not, they must live with this fear for a long time. Mehdi wanted to be a soldier. It was his passion. The entire ISAF mission was also meant to build the security force of

Afghanistan. And Mehdi was grateful for this opportunity to be trained by Western professionals. But today, this episode of his life proves to be a disaster for him. Right now, he is waiting for the decision of the German court on whether he should be granted asylum or not. In the case of a rejection, he will be deported to Afghanistan.

ISAF was the biggest, longest, and most expensive security mission that the Western countries have ever undertaken. In the first ten years, it was allegedly successful before the signs of chaos started to show. There were enough warnings from the military experts and political analysts to take control of the corruption and reinforce the democratic process to build an Afghan leadership. But whatever the reasons might be, ISAF failed to reach the goal of the mission.

Not only that, because of their sheer existence in the past now endangers an entire generation and stigmatises them in their own country for being collaborative with an “enemy force”. It is quite thought-provoking to see how a stereotypically violent context such as a war zone may help soldiers to construct their identity and their role in life in a positive way, while it is other contexts that are experienced as harmful, threatening, and oppressive.

Concluding Remarks

Knowing full well that not all readers will share the opinion that there is such a thing as “established mainstream research on violence”, we believe that there are at least widespread scientific views on the nature of violence and aggression that have effectively led to the influential solidification of certain perspectives, assumptions, and related problems. These include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Violence is studied primarily as *exercised* violence, far less as *experienced* violence. Experienced violence seems to be of particular interest when it comes to the psychological impact of violent attacks, that is, the supposed *aftermath* of violence — a research domain that has now partially detached itself from violence research, is known as trauma research and has almost taken on a life of its own. Since the concept of “trauma” is no less ambiguous and unclear than the concept of violence, this separation of research areas is of little help in gaining a more complex and adequate understanding of the manifold manifestations and experiences of violence and its equally manifold facets.
- Since research on violence looks more at the perpetrators of violence and less at the victims’ experience of violence, it seems plausible at first glance to conceive as violence only those phenomena that arise from the *intention* to harm other living beings against their will. However, as we have tried to show, plausibility depends to a large extent on whether we look at the perpetrators of violence or the experience of their victims. Culturally shaped attribution styles, for example, formed by certain world views, can play a major psychological role in whether natural forces are interpreted and experienced as outflows of a personified higher will. Within the conceptual limitations of scientific nomenclature, something may not manifest itself as violence, since the damage does not emanate from a perpetrator capable of intentions, but from natural forces. Subjects in different socialisation and enculturation contexts, however, can certainly experience natural disasters as controlled and purposeful events, even as violence. Our short sketch of two different documentaries — “Sand and Water” and “Koran Children” — may also have sufficed to illustrate that people can *willingly* abandon themselves to events that they perceive as violent, without this preventing us from accepting their experiences as experiences of violence.
- Although the terms “violence” and “aggression” are not usually used synonymously in research, there is a tendency to understand violence only as a special case of aggression, as a particularly strong manifestation of acts aimed at inflicting physical harm on others. As stated before, the focus on physical harm is out of touch with reality, since in many cases, violence is primarily aimed at harming others psychologically. By choosing the experiences and accounts of the protagonists from the documentary “Side by Side” as examples, we were perhaps able to illustrate that it is not so easy to determine what a *particularly strong aggression* is. Is it necessarily the bundle of strong negative emotions that arises from experiences of frustration in a war zone, or can stronger aggression arise

where there is significantly less evidence of violence, for example, during a slide show in the shared living room, far away from tanks, missiles, and bloodshed?

- In large parts, especially Western researchers from mainly Christian countries show an unmistakable tendency to view and describe violence as a temporally rather short interruption of non-violent normality. The documentary films we have chosen, which we could supplement with numerous other documentaries from a variety of other contexts, encourage us to reconsider this view. At the very least, one could attempt, on a trial basis, not to focus on the particularly conspicuous outbreaks of violence and their agents, but at the more complex network in which they arise and where, to a certain extent — metaphorically speaking — the flap of a butterfly's wings can trigger an earthquake. It is in this complicated web that we have to search if we want to trace more precisely what we call harm. Harm does not erupt from time to time but is continuously there as a constant in our lives. Such a change in perspective also allows us to think about a different image of the human being and his relationship to the environment — and thus to arrive at a more well-founded image of violence and aggression.

Using only a few examples, we have tried to show how documentary films can serve as sources that can inspire scientists to think more differently about phenomena, concepts, contexts, and cultural imprints, including cultural imprints in scientific thinking, including research on violence and aggression. To illustrate this, it was not necessary to deal with the well-known question of the extent to which documentaries also edit and trim what is shown, usually to lend more credibility to the filmed raw material, but often also to make the film more entertaining. We think that the indications we wanted to give about the value of documentary films as sources for research on violence are not seriously affected by these questions. This does not mean, of course, that these questions are generally meaningless; of course, they are not. Here, however, we wanted to give an example of how the exchange between people with a thirst for knowledge, who try to obtain insights by various means, can be stimulating and fruitful for both sides. Documentaries are, of course, sources of their own kind, just as literature and other artifacts are. For all these sources, which are still far too little analysed by violence research, the following applies: They provide access and distance at the same time, the necessary space for us to find our own selves, teaching us how to “tirelessly touch with my gaze the distance from me at which the other begins” (Daney, 1994, p. 39). We may add: Where the other begins, there is always danger and potential harm. And in order not to end the whole thing so pessimistically, we must honestly state: Where the other begins, there is always also reason for hope.

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About the Authors

Shaheen Dill-Riaz was born in Bangladesh where he went to school and worked as a film journalist. He studied art history and theatre studies at the Free University of Berlin, Germany, before studying cinematography at the HFF Konrad Wolf in Potsdam-Babelsberg, also in Germany. His documentaries have won several international awards. Between his film projects, he had several teaching assignments at German universities. For more information about the selected films and Shaheen's filmmaking, see: <https://dill-riaz.com/films/>.

Pradeep Chakkarath, PhD (Ruhr-Universität Bochum) is a cultural and social psychologist and co-director of the Hans Kilian and Lotte Köhler Center (KKC). He is vice president of the German Society of Cultural Psychology and the Co-Editor of *HARM*. His research focuses on the history, philosophy, and methodology of the social sciences, with a specific interest in culture-sensitive approaches, indigenous psychologies, and the psychological role of worldviews.