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Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

Benazzo, Zaya and Maurizio Benazzo (Directors). *The Wisdom of Trauma* (Film). Science and Nonduality, 2021. 1hr., 27 min. <https://vimeo.com/762456491>

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The documentary *Wisdom of Trauma*, directed and produced by Zaya Benazzo and Maurizio Benazzo, is immersed in the work and philosophy of Dr. Gabor Mate: an author, physician and distinguished figure in the field of addiction and trauma. Renowned for his empathetic perspective, which drives to build a trauma-informed society, his observations gleaned from long-term interactions with trauma and addiction survivors constitute the center of the documentary. The film's narrative lens is primarily from the point of view of Mate's observations that our childhood experiences often weave our understanding of the self. Through this perspective, the film taps into trauma and addiction, and their implications. As a way of reiterating this belief, the film begins and ends with the image of an infant, hinting at the cycle of life. Furthermore, the ethnographic take of the film is reflective in its presentation of time spent by mental health professionals with the survivors of addiction and trauma. The perspectives of survivors in connection with the society at large is also equally foregrounded. The interactions with prisoners, survivors, and homeless people, provide eye-opening insights about the influence of trauma in everyday life.

The film's intention is made quite clear from the beginning. The voice-over by Mate resonates with the idea that suffering and pain can lead to trauma and it is through the journey of healing that one gains wisdom. By presenting a montage of people's faces through close-up photographs, an exhibition of various subtle expressions occurs, allowing scope for reflection. Without preaching, the film smoothly and convincingly, through individual narrative clips of survivors, depicts various facets of their lives, which have shaped their worldview. The narrative is neither quick-paced nor slow, giving the viewers time to take in the emotions expressed by the individuals.

Mate's careful analytical observations about generational trauma, and the link between physical ailment and a disturbed mental state is one of the focal points. The observations are amalgamated through videos of him being interviewed, either on stage or on a podcast, or through his conversations with his patients suffering from addiction. Thus, the film is an excellent primary source for students studying mental health. It not only presents concepts that lead to and trigger trauma but also offers insights into ways to approach people undergoing trauma. The film raises the question of human life and social ties touching upon the profound power of physical touch and the soothing effect of a listening ear.

Offering a deep outlook on the inner workings of trauma and the social structures that induce addictive behavior, the film invites an open-ended subjective understanding of Mate's technique of 'Compassionate Inquiry.' Through the empathetic conversations between Mate and the traumatized people, and their individual narrations of their lived experiences, a vision of healing through a non-judgemental recognition of the source of their hurt is sensitively reflected upon.

This is accompanied by a melodic instrumental background score that gently tugs the viewers' emotional chords. While the narrators share their experiences, their voice-over is interspersed with a montage of digital sketches, which has a video-like quality to it. It explicitly represents the abuse and suffering they've gone through. However, there are also layers of meaning to this art etched through its symbolic representations of fire/rage, water/sorrow, and the like, opening the scope for compassionate meaning-making.

Human consumerism is critically viewed through the cinematic lens, shedding light on the larger response of addiction and trauma. This link is crucial in the ever-escalating consumer culture. Moreover, a moral evaluation of human degradation and, in turn, the actions that cause the earth's degradation is traced, drawing a grim picture of societal and collective trauma. The lack of education about trauma in institutions like schools, medical academia, and prisons is also severely critiqued by Mate to show that a change in policies is necessary for a brighter future. The idea of pharmaceutical companies acting as corporate giants in the system of global materialism projects highlights the risk of sole reliance on medication while neglecting psychological and social factors in healing. Similarly, the hard reality that medical professionals are still trained only in biological psychiatry and not psychotherapy is also woven into the narration.

Mate's self-reflection of his own trauma is traced through his memories of the horrors of persecution during the Holocaust, hinting at an intense understanding of generational trauma. This is further colored by his wife's nostalgic ruminations of their life together—both good and bad

times. Their journey together over the years is picturized through a montage of photographs and it has a black-and-white color palette to it. In contrast, a vibrancy comes in when the wife's art studio is shown, where her colorful paintings not only reflect her way of coping with difficulties but also counterbalance the dim and serious tone that the film most often imbues.

As a token of exposing a secondary approach to trauma, the film shows Mate's unconventional method of treatment that includes using the psychedelic brew, *ayahuasca*. It is hinted that this opens the mind into a world of illusions and hallucinations, allowing one to deeply connect with the self. It is in this instance that the scene shifts to indigenous practitioners of healing; alongside the change in spatial dynamics from the modern, urban way of life to one around a bonfire, with the additional effect of native song and people. These small scenes also emphasize a non-judgmental approach to unconventional and traditional methods of treatment. It shows how Mate combines this indigenous tradition with his own modern style of treatment.

Though the film destigmatizes a common paradigm for all, it falls short in its presentation of transcultural and socio-political influence. This is because the narrations are just short excerpts from individuals of varied races and genders, but belonging to the same geographical vicinity in Canada (in and around Vancouver). Yet, it is possible to connect the dots of people's individual narrations owing to the flow in editing and the overall theme of the collective nature of trauma. This is both its beauty and its bane, as it offers varied perspectives that are also unfortunately repetitive.

The film ends with a gratifying sense of optimism. Though for the most part, the film is focused on Mate's observations of addiction and trauma, and his role as the subject of the director's lens, the interview-like conversational take interspersed with digital art that the film has crafted during the narrative, offers a wonderful dive into the world of wisdom that trauma taps into. It shows that we create the world with our minds.

Bio-note:

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