

Film Review: We Are All Neighbors

Antonia Young, Colgate University and Bradford University, UK

We Are All Neighbors is a 52-minute video made by Granada TV with anthropologist Tone Bringa in a traditionally Muslim/Croatian (3-2) village, 7 kilometers from Kiseljak, north/west of Sarajevo.

This video is the result of filming by the British Granada TV film unit in their series "Disappearing World", a series of over 50 documentary films made during the past 23 years (and shown spasmodically on PBS), intentionally recording everyday life in areas of the world which are undergoing change for whatever reason.

"We Are All Neighbors" (first shown in Britain in May, 1993) is one of a sub-series of 3 films made in villages which are suffering the effects of war (the other two to make up this trilogy: "Orphans of Passage" and "The Longest Struggle" were made in southern Sudan and in Burma respectively).

What is especially valuable in all these films is that they have been made over a much longer period of time than any news reports which we may see, and we are therefore able to get much closer to the roots of the problems than through the daily depictions of the destruction in the aftermath of bombing and firing or the resulting tragic plight of refugees with which we have become all too familiar. Here we watch the gradual development of distrust between people who never considered their differences of any importance, and the disastrous effects that outside pressures can play in the deterioration of human interactions.

"We are all Neighbors" is the result of many years' work. The Norwegian anthropologist, Tone Bringa had spent 15 months in this Bosnian village in the late 1980's, before any intercultural tensions existed. She was therefore an obvious person for the Director of the "Disappearing World" series to approach to return to this village when Sarajevo was already under siege. She speaks Serbo-Croatian (the language of both the local Muslims and Croats), and became a good friend to many of the villagers; she can allow us, for instance, the unusual intimacy of seeing Muslim women at prayer.

At the time that Bringa is working on the main part of the film, (early in 1993) heavy shelling can be heard in the background; the conflict is in the forefront of everyone's minds and is already affecting most of their lives at least indirectly. But the message she receives on both

sides is that it would be impossible for the inter-ethnic hatred to affect the lives of their immediate community.

Tragically the faith of these people is proved to be unfounded and we see the development of suspicion, mistrust, fear, disbelief and helplessness as everyone becomes sucked into a conflict imposed upon them from outside. The final minutes of the film show us Bringa returning to the village 8 weeks after they had left; only Croat families are living there - all the Muslim houses have been systematically destroyed; those inhabitants who were not killed have fled. Bringa was able to visit one or two of her Muslim friends, now refugees in other nearby villages, but fearing the repetition of terror and attack. She was only able to re-visit the bewildered Croats still living in the village, under UN armored escort and with special permission. Some of them are housing their Catholic/Croat relatives driven from their neighboring-village homes by Muslim soldiers and neighbors.

One important point which is not fully brought out, but which should certainly be stressed when showing this film, is that the fact that although it portrays Muslims suffering from Croat offenses, in the wider picture these two ethnic backgrounds are irrelevant: it could equally have been Serb/Croat, Croat/Serb, Serb/Muslim, Muslim/Serb or Muslim/Croat: irrelevant also is which of these 6 options is the most prevalent in the former-Yugoslavia. The question of the possibly biased sympathy for the Muslim families, should rather be seen as sympathy for the immediate victims. Our major concern is that this kind of build-up of hostility in a previously well-integrated bi-ethnic village can develop, and at such speed; the portrayal here is of a dimension of the development of antagonism which one rarely sees. Provided with this unusual picture viewers may try to unravel and consider how to reverse such escalation.

In calling these situations bi-ethnic, it should be borne in mind that Muslims of ex-Yugoslavia are already of Slavic descent for it was only during the Ottoman occupation that many converted to Islam rather than suffer extra taxation and other inconveniences under the Turks. In the 1991 census all the peoples of ex-Yugoslavia were forced to declare their ethnicity and on this has been based decisions concerning their claims to remain in their hitherto homelands (the 5.5% claiming "Yugoslav" nationality in this way have rights, only to claim identity cards in what remains of that country - Serbia and Montenegro).

As with other documentaries in this series, the role of the anthropologist, whilst pivotal to the delicate portrayal of the situation, is wholly unobtrusive; for our interest, we do catch a

glimpse of Tone Bringa but only by listening carefully can we hear her gentle prompting which keeps the continuity of the dialogue flowing. The overlying commentary is clear and concise without detracting from the villagers' own words.

The video is available for purchase (\$99 + \$5 p & p), from:

Films Incorporated Video

5547 N. Ravenswood Avenue

Chicago, Illinois 60640-1199