

The Documentary That Found Humanity by Interviewing 2,000 People
Important? Filmmaker Yann Arthus-Bertrand's "Human" is only the first movie to premiere at the U.N.'s General Assembly.

A few years ago, Yann Arthus-Bertrand's helicopter broke down in rural Mali. While waiting for repairs, the filmmaker spent a day talking with a local farmer about his hopes, concerns, and priorities—examining the basic questions that shape a life. "It was the first time I had ever been confronted with really finding out about a person's life and experiences," Arthus-Bertrand says. And now, thanks to Google, the United Nations, and 2,020 willing subjects, Arthus-Bertrand hopes to bring that experience to all of us.

Last Saturday, HUMAN became the first movie to premiere in the General Assembly Hall of the United Nations, to an audience of 1,000 viewers, including U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon. (Arthus-Bertrand is a goodwill ambassador for UNEP, the UN Environmental Programme.) On the same day, Google launched six HUMAN-dedicated YouTube channels, offering the film subtitled in Arabic, English, French, Portuguese, Russian and Spanish. The YouTube channels also host three hour-long features on HUMAN, covering its genesis, the making of the film, and its music. (While the film opened in 500 French theaters, U.S. theatrical distribution is still pending.) Arthus-Bertrand's nonprofit, the GoodPlanet Foundation, will also provide free copies of the film and debate materials for schools and NGOs around the world. "Hopefully, it will be a film that opens the discussion," he says.

Unprecedented Scale

To create HUMAN, Arthus-Bertrand and his team of 16 journalists interviewed 2,020 people in 60 countries. Each interview consisted of the same 40 questions, covering heavy subjects from religion and family ("When is the last time you said 'I love you' to your parents?") to ambition and failure ("What is the toughest trial you have had to face, and what did you learn from it?"). The questions stemmed from those asked in 7 Billion Others, Arthus-Bertrand's 2003 project and traveling exhibition that features over 6,000 interviews.

In the film, single-frame interviews are interspersed with the sweeping shots of deserts and mountains that Arthus-Bertrand is known for, against a soundtrack of world music composed by Armand Amar. Arthus-Bertrand, who points to Godfrey Reggio's Koyaanisqatsi and Terrence Malick's Tree of Life as influences, sees the film as a portrayal of the world through three voices: people, landscape, and traditional music. "Getting at the heart of what it means to be a human can be a little heavy," he says. "The aerial images give you a respite, a moment to reflect on what has been said before."

One thing HUMAN does not offer is background. The film cuts between interviews and landscapes without an introduction of name or country or language. Arthus-Bertrand hopes that removing personal identifiers will draw focus to our similarities. "We wanted to concentrate on what we all share," he explains. "If you put the name of a person, or what country they're from, you don't feel that as strongly."

Arthus-Bertrand recognizes that HUMAN is not an objective portrayal of the values of his subjects. After all, each interview consisted of 40 questions selected by his team, probing into views on homosexuality and the cost of war. He calls it "quite a political movie," and says that his own values informed those in the film: "There are 70 countries in the world where homosexuality is forbidden, and 20 where you can face a death sentence—people didn't want to talk about it, but it is my duty."

Although Arthus-Bertrand saw it as his responsibility to seek out participants who could articulate

these liberal values, many of the film's most compelling views come through an unexpected lens—a nurse in a war zone who opens up about her homosexuality, or a rural farmer who speaks about raising a child with a handicap. "I would interview someone for a reason, and they would tell us about something else entirely," explains Arthus-Bertrand. For many of these individuals, the interview was a chance to open up about their everyday concerns—which often differ from society's narrow definition of them.

A Veteran, and a Person

The 40-question interview certainly provided that opportunity for Sean Davis. After spending 14 years as an infantryman—and being severely injured by an IED in Iraq—Davis, whose memoir *The Wax Bullet War* explores his identity as a soldier and an artist, has worked to bring the varied voices of combat veterans to the public consciousness. He saw HUMAN as a way to do so.

As a combat veteran, he wasn't asked only about war, or duty, but also about love and insecurity. "I'm not a two-dimensional guy who was given a gun and became a robot in the military," says Davis, and he felt that the broad-reaching 40 questions recognized him as an individual beyond experiences in war. "As a combat veteran, to be asked about love—that was really surprising," he explains. "Feelings and flaws are the first thing we should talk to returning veterans about, but we usually don't talk about them at all."

Davis looks forward to seeing how people with wildly different lives, from a freedom fighter in Ukraine to a 15-year-old serving a life sentence in the U.S. to an untouchable in India, answered the same questions as he did. "You see a person—not only combat veterans, but everybody—in a certain role, but they're a person just like you," he says.

Arthus-Bertrand hopes that message will lead those watching HUMAN—whether in the U.N. General Assembly Hall or on a smartphone browser in a rural village in Mali—to seek out meaningful conversations about our responsibilities to each other. It's a lofty goal, and one that he believes we should all build our lives around. "To succeed in your professional life isn't that hard, but to succeed in your personal life is a lot harder," says Arthus-Bertrand. "To really be a human is a lot harder. We forget about that."