

The BETTENCOURT SCHUELLER FOUNDATION presents
a GOODPLANET FOUNDATION project

HUMAN

A FILM BY
YANN ARTHUS-BERTRAND



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

THE SHOOT

THE EDITING

OVERALL SCOPE

PRODUCTION AND
DISTRIBUTION

The first feature film led by two non-profit foundations



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#HUMAN

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THE SHOOT

A – GENERALITIES

How were the crews organized? Was Yann present on all the trips?

The interviews were recorded over 18 months.

Yann did practically all the aerial filming. During filming, he was accompanied by a camera operator, Bruno Cusa, a digital imaging technician, Stéphane Azouze, and a production manager, Yazid Tizi.

Apart from several key interviews, like the one with Pepe Mujica which was done by Yann, the interview shoots were carried out by two-person crews, one journalist and one camera operator, with the help of a local fixer and one, sometimes two translators. On average, during the main filming periods, three crews were shooting simultaneously.

Lastly, the ground-based shoots to obtain high shots using cranes, platforms, etc., were carried out by special crews headed by Eric Van Laere. This enabled the filming of some powerful images of mass gatherings, celebrations and competitions like the human pyramid in Catalonia, the artificial swimming pool in China, or the mass wedding in South Korea.

How did you choose the 60 countries represented in the film?

The great majority of the shoots were defined in advance to respond to Yann's very precise wishes. On the one hand, he wanted to represent the diversity of mankind and the rich landscapes which make up the world, but on the other, to give a voice to those whom we never usually hear or see, and to venture into far-flung, almost unknown places.

The overall narrative structure was constructed throughout the three years of production, with the precise chronology of the countries in which we filmed being built up gradually. It also depended on the seasons, unforeseen events, or simply on delays in obtaining authorizations.

Certain destinations were straightforward, depending on the required topics, issues or themes that Yann wanted to explore, seen from the angle of human stories, to make us question ourselves and help us understand. Examples include the Israel-Palestine conflict and its impact on local populations; Melilla, that terrible crossroads for migrants at the gateway to the European "Eldorado"; and the Dadaab camp in Kenya, a genuine city of refugees, home to a stateless generation.

Other destinations, in particular those shot from the air, were chosen for purely esthetic reasons, or for their allegorical impact in making the power of the words resonate over shots of the world's beauty. We found this power and beauty in the landscapes, the buildings, the gatherings, the violence of the water raging through a dam in China, or the implacable immensity of the Mongolian steppes.

Although the shooting locations were chosen in advance, nature provided us with some unexpected images, some moments of magic, like the waves of salt and water in the Lençois Maranhenses park (Brazil), the tree etched into the salt in the desert of Uyuni (Bolivia), and the caravan of camels snaking graphically across Ethiopia.

How did the crews select the interviewees and find the translators?

Thanks to Yann's previous projects, in particular "7 Billion Others", the crews could rely on a trusted network of fixers and translators. Each journalist worked in advance with a local fixer, allowing them to identify key people who could express one or other viewpoint that we wanted hear. This research often allowed us to define the itinerary on the ground, to go and meet with this or that community.

One can underestimate the work of the translators, which is little known. They played a key role in HUMAN, because it was through them, and them alone, that we could understand what a person was saying, and the messages and emotions they conveyed. The translator was always there with the crews on interview days, but also during the evenings to transcribe the rushes – an essential task which should be underlined. This translation work was a major challenge in some countries, notably in Ethiopia where each interview had to go through two or even three translations before it could be understood in French. From Suri into Amharic, then from Amharic into English, and then into French for the subtitles. This was a rigorous and long-winded job.

Inevitably, HUMAN also threw up many surprising encounters and unforeseen situations, making it a unique human experience. For example in Brazil, the crew was dazzled by the tale of happiness that the maid in the house where they were staying told them. Just like in real life, the beauty of HUMAN comes from the chance encounter.

What difficulties did the crews face during the shoots?

HUMAN is an adventure which, simply because it involved visiting some 60 countries, faced certain logistical, administrative and political difficulties. On some occasions, shoots had to be relocated because visas had not been received, equipment not delivered or authorization not granted. That was the case with the Kumbh Mela – the mass pilgrimage to the Ganges in India – which was one of Yann's great regrets.

Thanks to meticulous organization and a degree of good fortune, we were delighted that the 18 months of filming unfolded without major incident.

Were the interviews conducted on location or in the studio?

The interview modules could be set up either inside or outdoors, depending on the conditions. We sometimes rented houses, with access to a courtyard so we had the option to shoot inside or out. Conditions on the ground were very variable, and some of the crews had to conduct interviews in very complicated circumstances, outside and in some urgency, such as in the forests of Melilla where migrants were waiting to cross the border.

How was the interview format against a neutral background developed?

From the start of the project, Yann had some clear esthetic demands in terms of the backdrop against which the accounts should be filmed. So the crews came up with an interview protocol to meet the criteria of neutrality and intimacy. They tried to reproduce the same set-up for all the shoots: the black sheet as a backdrop, uniform lighting that stands out against an under-exposed background. Natural lighting is much nicer, but was much more complicated to employ.

How long did the interviews last?

The interviews were genuine conversations. In general, they lasted between 60-90 minutes, allowing time for intimacy and trust to be established and for a human bond to be formed.

Did the participants know the questions in advance?

The framework of questions for HUMAN acted as a reference point for the journalists, but in actual fact, the interviews rarely followed the list of questions. As they progressed, confidences emerged, and the interviews took a certain direction and form, and concentrated on life experiences and themes dear to the person concerned. We also wanted the answers to be natural and spontaneous, which is why we never gave people the list of questions, but instead just told them the main themes that would be tackled.

Did any people set conditions before being filmed?

When they discovered the kind of questions they were being asked, some people had a certain apprehension. They were afraid of the camera and of opening up in front of strangers. But as the exchanges moved on, the interviewees grew in confidence. Sometimes, speaking to strangers who were listening attentively turned out to be an opportunity to tell one's story, to pass things on. The journalists applied no pressure on their interviewees and gave them the freedom to respond or not to certain questions, but also to go back over their story and reconsider their consent.

Were the interviewees paid?

No payment was involved for any of the interviews because the participants had to want to tell their story. There was no way their trust could be bought; it had to emerge from their own free will. The crews did, however, sometimes leave gifts, or even some money for local charities or villages to thank the communities for their time and their hospitality.

Did you have them sign release forms?

Yes, always. Nonetheless, participants could always review their decision and their testimony. The crews tried to reassure them, but the release form was in now way used as a source of pressure or emotional blackmail. That goes without saying.

Was there ever a cultural gap concerning certain questions or concepts?

Each language is impregnated with the culture from which it comes, and so necessarily reflects notions that are inherent to it. Whereas abstract terms can seem obvious to Western ears, they maybe don't exist in Native American, Asian or African tribal languages. This is the case for the Herero language spoken by the Himba people in Namibia, in which the notions of "happiness" and "love", in their conceptual and general sense, had no meaning. So for many of the interviews, there was a great deal of cultural adaptation.

Did anyone ask for their testimony not to be used?

Some people did ask us afterwards to not use their story. We respected this choice on every occasion. There was no question of us putting anyone in potential danger, or of not respecting the image rights of the participants who entrusted us with their personal stories.

Did you film certain answers several times?

It was common to ask an interviewee to reformulate his or her response – certainly not to change its meaning, but to add elements of context. The extracts of personal accounts selected for the film HUMAN only last a few seconds or minutes. So it was essential that each anecdote and important answer contained the contextual elements to allow the spectator to understand the story, without knowing the person's whole life.

Were the participants aware that their interview was going to contribute to a film on such a scale?

When they introduced the HUMAN project, the journalists were careful to explain the global scale of the work and how their image might be used. To do this, the journalists took with them some materials from the "7 Billion Others" project (flyers, DVDs, etc.) to explain how their face and story would be used in conjunction with those of hundreds of others.

How did people feel after the shoot? What feedback did you get?

The discussions were often intense and profound, and were usually experienced as a journey, because they involved lots of memories and emotions, both among the interviewees and the crew. After the interviews, there was often a moment of reciprocal gratitude, showing thanks for listening and the trust shown.

Did the interviewees have the chance to see the footage that was shot of them?

Often the crews showed photos or extracts of interviews to the people concerned. But given the length of the exchanges, it was impossible to show them the full interview.

Are you still in contact with the people interviewed?

Some encounters were fleeting, others evolved into genuine friendships. That was the case for Christian, a migrant from Mali who the film crew met in Melilla, then saw again at the post-production studios in Paris a year later.

Are there as many men as women?

It happens that the film HUMAN features more men than women. In the course of the shoots, we had some difficulty in finding women who wanted and were able to participate in the project. The selected themes also meant the crews met more men than women, for example, war veterans, migrants, prisoners, etc. We were however very attentive towards having a balanced representation of the sexes during the shoots and the editing, but this criteria could not determine the final choices.

Why are there very few children in the film?

HUMAN is a film about the experiences of life, so Yann thought it was difficult to include stories about children and teenagers in the project, which would create too great an imbalance with the intensity of the other stories. That said, during the shoots, our crews came across children who had grown up in tough circumstances, and who, sadly, already had a life behind them to recount, their experiences having forced a certain maturity upon them. These accounts moved Yann deeply, and he wanted to convey them as testimony to a reality that exists everywhere – that of damaged childhoods, the first victims of our acts. The film includes the voices of several children, street kids in Mexico, young Syrian fighters, a child sorcerer from the streets of Brazzaville, etc.

How did the crew perceive the finished film after three years of work?

After three years of work, having met so many people, with so many images in their heads, it was difficult for everyone to think that the film might one day see the light of day, that the adventure would be over. HUMAN is a once-in-a-lifetime project! Most of the members of the crew saw the film at the same time, and it was met with a great deal of emotion. Seeing the finished film take shape, all those images, those faces crystallizing in a three-hour film... Florent Gilard, artistic producer, describes the emotion of seeing those three years of work finally reach the big screen: "Seeing HUMAN take shape was like tasting a wine after working the vine, then leaving the grapes to macerate. It was all those people who gave it its unique character. HUMAN came into being before our very eyes, and one day took its final form, a form that could have been different in a thousand ways. We were submerged by emotion the first time we felt that, at last, we had found it, that HUMAN was born."

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C – THE AERIAL FILMING

Were the aerial shots filmed exclusively for HUMAN, or did some of the footage come from Yann's previous films?

The aerial shots were all filmed exclusively for HUMAN.

How was the aerial footage filmed?

In order to get as close as possible to scenes and to obtain the necessary quality and stability of the image in slow motion, Yann and his crews filmed all the aerial shots using Cineflex cameras. These cameras, mounted on helicopters, have long focal lengths, which provides great depth of field. The helicopters used were hired in the country of the shoot, or occasionally in a neighboring territory.

How is the aerial footage put together with the interview footage?

Yann wanted to make a film in which people's words resonate with the pure beauty of nature. The sequences of aerial footage provide time for reflection and introspection. In certain cases, this acts as the prolongation of an idea raised by the preceding interview; sometimes they announce what is to follow, like the transition from the sequence on agriculture to that on labor. These images are also designed to illustrate our way of life to remind us who we are and where we come from. The director leaves the spectators to arrive at their own interpretation of these images, the film is just a suggestion: it should inspire thought, dreams, change.

THE EDITING

How were the themes and their order decided?

Choosing the themes was difficult because HUMAN focuses on the major issues and big, transversal problems that are affecting all of humanity. The film invites the audience to navigate between different life stories to obtain a portrait of mankind and the elements it comprises. It's an immersion in the heart of human nature, in all its diversity.

As for the order of the sequences, the crew found it a lot easier to decide on the ending for HUMAN than the beginning. It seemed obvious to conclude on the meaning of life and mankind's place on Earth. It was more difficult to agree on the film's opening. But this doubt was soon put to one side, once the interview with Leonard had been done, because the words of this man sentenced to life in prison encapsulate everything that HUMAN sets out to illustrate: a man in his present condition, immutable, facing the evolution of his conscience, of his decisions. This testimony also offers an underlying analysis of the influence of the family and social environment, the cycle of violence, the power of love, resilience, the asperity of human nature and its contradictions. This portrait allows all the masks to fall, as soon as the curtain goes up, and lets us understand what HUMAN wants to show: not only nice stories, but the complexity of mankind, and the view we have of others.

How did a runtime of 191 minutes emerge during editing?

In actual fact, 191 minutes is extremely short for such an ambitious project and to cover such vast topics. The first rough cut was more than six hours, then we brought it down to four. The idea wasn't to alter the film's duration, but to enhance its power. In general, spectators don't see time passing because they are totally immersed.

How are you going to use the footage which doesn't appear in the film?

Beyond the film, HUMAN is a project involving more than 2,500 hours of interviews and aerial images, a unique and precious heritage. GOOGLE, which is HUMAN's digital partner, enables us to put hours of content online, along with specific films and a digital exhibition, thanks to platforms like the Cultural Institute, YouTube, and Google Play.

Public broadcaster France 2, which has been a major partner of Yann's for several years, is giving exceptional visibility to the film and the wider project on television. Three complementary films which allow for a better understanding of the background to the project and Yann's choices and intentions will also be aired by the channel starting from October.

Lastly, two 52-minute "making-of" documentaries will explore the various stages of the shoot, plus Armand Amar's sources of inspiration and creative process for the music.

Did you try and create a balance between genders, ethnic origins and social classes?

We tried to be as balanced as possible in terms of representation, but it was the power of the words and the message in the interviews which took precedence for us.

Why do the aerial views exclusively illustrate rural scenes to the detriment of cities, apart from the sequence over New York?

Yann deliberately chose to show more of the rural environment than the urban, since the former better reflect the beauty of the world and are more readily surprising.

Why do you not mention the names of the interviewees, the location of the aerial shots, or the date of the interviews?

Yann hesitated for a long about whether to show the identity of the people and to name the locations to facilitate the understanding and contextualization of the images. But the core of HUMAN remains the universality of mankind, and those values, those pathways which brings us together. Anonymity and making this diversity into a single entity seemed the obvious choice for him. The approach in HUMAN is not that of a documentary, but that of an artistic work. It acts as an emotional experience, one of introspection about who we are and what we universally share as human beings.

In the same vein, the aerial images come as moments for pause, to mediate after hearing some powerful stories. That's why Yann didn't want to flag the locality of the filmed landscapes. At times, within the same sequence, you suddenly go from one country to another. The director wanted above all to avoid interrupting the magic and rhythm of the film. Identifying the countries would have encouraged the audience to slip into analysis, instead of being carried along by emotion.

Lastly, it is important to note that the names of the countries appear in the credits and on the HUMAN website, as well as in other publicity materials.

OVERALL SCOPE

What messages and values does HUMAN try to convey? Is it a politically engaged film?

By setting out to show the fundamentals and challenges of living together, the obstacles to peace (inequalities, intolerance, conflict, etc.), HUMAN is a politically engaged film. It invites us to think, whilst drawing our attention to the issues shaping our future, both as individuals and as a community. It offers various possible readings, without claiming to resolve the problems posed. This film asks some questions that are key for everyone: “What meaning do we give to our presence on Earth?” “What kind of person do I want to be today?” And it lets us answer these in the light of our own experiences and life stories. HUMAN is a politically engaged film, but one which doesn’t aim to give any lessons.

Is it a film about freedom of expression?

Through HUMAN, Yann is setting out to liberate voices: he’s encouraging people to share, to communicate, and to reach out to those around them.

Who does the film address?

HUMAN addresses anyone who can and wants to see it, with their own stories, their questions, their distance, and their desire to hear another’s story.

Why is the title in English?

Yann decided to give the film a symbolic and universal name so that it would reach the widest possible audience.



THE PRODUCTION AND THE DISTRIBUTION

Why was HUMAN financed by the Bettencourt Schueller Foundation?

In supporting the film HUMAN by Yann Arthus-Bertrand, the Bettencourt Schueller Foundation is pursuing its commitment to “images of values”, images that lead us to share a collective challenge of renewing the relationship between mankind and the environment, whether natural or man-made. Driven by great directors whose personal journey chimes with a wish to celebrate the beauty of the living world, to encourage increased awareness of the fragility of our environment, and promote a humanistic vision of our future.

This backing follows on from previous cinematographic works supported by the Bettencourt Schueller Foundation: Le Syndrome du Titanic by Nicolas Hulot and Jean-Albert Lièvre; Winged Migration, Oceans and Seasons by Jacques Perrin; Ice and the Sky by Luc Jacquet.

Thanks to the Bettencourt Schueller Foundation’s backing for the GoodPlanet Foundation, the production of HUMAN was fully financed, allowing it to be made and to enjoy international, multi-platform distribution, decisive conditions for the Foundation’s support for this project.

What role did the GoodPlanet Foundation play in making the project?

The GoodPlanet Foundation was closely involved in initiating the project, but did not take hands-on charge of production. It drove the project, insofar as it holds the copyright and is responsible for the film’s distribution. The production and post-production of the film was handled by the company Humankind Production, specially created for this project as part of the Robin & Co group.