

SUMMARY:

This is a story about humanity's relationship to its questions: those we ask ourselves individually, that concern us collectively as one global body.

On a deeper level, the film asks what role questioning plays in the formation of *persona*, of the 'I' that we conceive ourselves to be at any one moment of our lives. *What do we know? What do we think we know? What don't we know? What are we still striving to understand? How do the questions that we ask ourselves (and our answers to these questions) determine our perception of the world and our connection to other human beings?*

SYNOPSIS:

The film begins by signalling the idea that we are born into unknowing, that the natural condition of our existence is *curiosity...* "How do you perceive the world around you?" a philosopher asks, "as something very strange and unfamiliar? Or something with which you can identify yourself, which you feel in close relationship with?"

Within a mysterious cosmos, on a BLUE PLANET, life blooms into awesome and strange natural beauty. Individual human consciousness emerges and evolves within ever-expanding collectives, from tribal ritual to proto-civilization to 21st Century global society...

Neurotransmitters SPARK across synaptic connections in the brain, as VOICES intermingle: "I'm very curious to know..." "What question do you want to live your life out of?"

One on one with you, PEOPLE (from all walks of life and all round the world) open their mouths to speak. A visceral sequence of VISUAL COLLAGE imaginatively contextualizes the QUESTIONS (addressed directly to camera, each in their own language) of a multiplicity of FACES and VOICES: a global VOX POPULI, asking you to *ask yourself* about...

- endemic POVERTY... (*in a world of seeming abundance but sick with imbalance, in which exploitative commercial colonialism has diseased the body-politic, corrupted the way we perceive human need and human lack, amputated our ability to feel compassion for the suffering of 'the other', alienated us from ourselves*)...
- WAR... (*political violence and institutionalized mass murder, sanctioned by the powerful, throughout the suicidal history of man 'the mad animal', ever marching gloriously out to a perennial battleground where the screams of the dying, like all calls for reason, go unheard*)...

- ECOLOGICAL DEVASTATION (*on a disquietingly vast scale, due to the mechanized, oil-fueled, machine-rape of nature now intensifying the melting of polar ice, desertification, deforestation and the destructive power of natural cataclysms*)...
- YOUR PERCEPTION, questions that speak to your essential understanding of existence as an individualized experience. "*What is your tree?*", an environmental activist asks. "*What do you love?*" an author wonders, "*What are you gifts? And what is the largest, most pressing problem that you can help to solve using the gifts that are unique to you in all the universe?*"

Each question is a mind-set, a phrase revealing some essential aspect of the persona of the individual asking it, some authentic insight into *the way they view the world*. United together, these individual perceptions of seemingly localized problems (the condition of living in a particular slum, say, or in a specific region in conflict), reveal themselves as GLOBALIZED PROBLEMA caused not by any one individual but by the human collective.

"How do you perceive the world around you?", the sage-like philosopher HANS PETER-DÜRR asks from his office at the Max-Planck-Institut für Physik. How do we perceive it, we ask ourselves, *this world with its injustice, its imbalance, its poverty, war and environmental mass destruction?*

Transported visually into the world of each question (that is, the contextual 'world within a world' that inspired the individual to ask it), we find ourselves identifying more and more with the collective desires of people to address the problems that preoccupy their lives. *Their* longing to understand – their *curiosity* – begins to enflame our own. We recognize just how much we share this powerful impulse to question. *If we too had a question to ask the world, we wonder, what might it be?*

We don't know. But we no longer need to be right or wrong, but only open. By conceding the limits of our knowledge, we ready ourselves to learn, to investigate the important matters with others and, together, to succeed or fail to discover solutions.

Sat in her elegant living-room, the performance artist LAURIE ANDERSON locks eyes with us. "How does the individual relate to the group in the 21st Century?" she asks. "*What is your group?*"

Neurotransmitters SPARK across synaptic connections in the brain, as humans come together in diverse religious and cultural CEREMONIES, always congregating in a circle. Across geography and history, these CONCENTRIC CIRCLES radiate together as one vision of an answer to all questions...

TITLE:

Problema

The film unfolds from within the largest question & answer ceremony in human history. In a place out of time and space (the classical surrounds of a postcard-perfect square in a European city), OVER 100 PEOPLE are gathered at THE WORLD'S LARGEST ROUND TABLE, around and from within which we experience a 21st Century ritual first-hand.

Apportioned at perfect intervals, sat upon different chairs, the PARTICIPANTS of this TABLE OF FREE VOICES each confront an individual digital camera (one of over 100 crowning the Table, which are all already continuously recording). Up close with these people, face to face and eye to eye with them, we see that they are from south, east, north and west: from Africa and Asia, Australasia and the Americas, from Europe and Eurasia and the Arctic Circle. As young as 20, as old as 80, they seem to have arrived from *all points of the compass...*

"No answer given here today is, in itself, right or wrong", the strikingly beautiful Nigerian human rights advocate HAFSAT ABIOLA announces, before turning to her CO-CHAIR, the charismatic American actor WILLEM DAFOE, who voices aloud "*Question One...*"

Composed of the participants' face-to-face (*to camera*) responses, wrestling with some of the burning issues of our day, the resulting MULTILOQUE is presented as IMAGISTIC STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS: an imaginative experience of VISUAL COLLAGE that transports us into the 'world within a world' of each question and the answers given to it at the Table. As we engage with the very real implications of contemporary global *problema* (all aspects of the over-arching thematic triptych of economic injustice, political violence and ecological devastation), we are empowered to confront these important issues anew, in the certain knowledge that we are not alone as we do so. For we have over 100 others with us. *Their* knowledge and understanding, their wealth of expertise, their cultural and experiential histories begin to merge with our own.

Each participant has their own reasons for why they find themselves answering questions about 21st Century global society, raised by global citizens, at a surreally vast round table in the shadow of Humboldt University, in the historic square in old east Berlin called 'Bebelplatz'. For some, the gathering is an opportunity to speak on behalf of their own community of concern (be it an indigenous minority or their NGO's constituency). To others, it represents a pioneering experiment in alternative media. To others still, it is performance art, a portal revealing *a new way of seeing and understanding ourselves and each other.*

Some participants question the anonymity of the monologue format. They seek more interaction with others in the circle. They do not know to whom they are talking. All they know is that someone is out there, watching and listening. A few contemplate the sound that they make together, the orchestral "murmur" of their

collective voices which underscores their individual responses to every question. "It carries you away somewhere," the filmmaker WIM WENDERS (seat 083) says. Criminologist MARK BENECKE (seat 091) sees the experience another way: "It's not about the questions," he suggests. "*They're doing something to us here.*"

Watching and listening to these human beings communicating with us strangely intimately, we perceive how different from and how similar to each other they really are. In brief excerpts and longer streams of monologue, we are roused by individual passions, impressed by expressions of conviction, beguiled by the *singular insights* of some, charmed by the humor of others, touched by moments of vulnerability and self-doubt, and moved by individual histories of courage and suffering.

Shifting around and across the Table, from one perspective to the next, we engage with the individual personae of the participants as they, consciously or unconsciously, reveal themselves (to us and each other) simultaneously individually and *en masse*. The more we empathize with more and more of them, recognizing ourselves in all these many different *others*, the more our own *individual view* expands to embrace the limitless *diversity* of the group, of these over 100 global representatives of the greater whole of which we are all, each one of us, a part. Ultimately, it is the vision and spirit of the Table itself – its *collective* hope and fear, indignation and outrage, joy, sadness, wisdom and idiocy – that determines our EMOTIONAL JOURNEY, with these people, through these challenging questions concerning *the state of the union* of humanity and that of humanity and nature.

As the image-rich multilogue powerfully evokes the dramatic global circumstances in which we live, within answers to questions and across questions and subjects, connections emerge between previously disparate-seeming phenomena in global society. We recognize the relationship between, say, how the mass media portrays 'the other', or the existence of nuclear weapons, or the unsustainable resource-consumption prevalent in the wealthier parts of the world and the psychological insecurity which pervades the consciousness of global citizens. We perceive the centuries-long continuum of oppression of the Global South by the Global North (from slavery to colonialism to neoliberal economic imperialism engineered through debt), and we see it within the wider human context of there being no Third or First World, just "one world... not doing so well", as the guerrilla poster-artist Robbie Conal (seat 094) sardonically makes plain.

We understand only too clearly how rapacious economic fundamentalism (greed for profit at the expense of human well-being) has given rise to a corrupting system that disfigures our natural perception of who we are and what we truly desire for ourselves and those we love. And we wonder, like Shakespeare's Cassius, if "the fault is not in our stars but in ourselves", in the way that we as individuals perceive the human group. As the

writer ELIOT WEINBERGER (seat 066) puts it: "The other is nobody until you get to know 'em..."

But it may already be too late, we realize, as our faith in humanity is now itself brought into question. In haunting moments of doubt, together with the participants at the Table, we too believe that the end may be nigh, that the odds against our species' survival are just too great. The ice caps are melting irreversibly. Resource wars, already ravaging the lives and homes of millions, can only intensify. Over a billion people live in abject poverty. Over a million children die vaccine-preventable deaths each year (around one every 22 seconds). The consumerist model that defined the latter half of the 20th Century as an era of aggressively violent competition for resources in the name of unsustainable economic "growth" (and desire for profit) has not only devastated the planet's ecology but disconnected the modern, Western individual from any sense of their more ancient, indigenous understanding of the sanctity not only of human life but of *all lives*...

...with the result that today, so it seems, humanity is facing challenges to its survival graver than any it has faced before. And yet, this species of ours is also consciously aware (like never before) of itself as one species – one body, *one organism* – with a common interest in ensuring its collective well-being within that of the biosphere on which its existence depends. "There is, in evolution, a kind of learning curve," the biologist ELISABET SAHTOURIS (seat 051) explains, "that moves from win-lose economics to win-win economics, from hostile competition over resources to the cooperative sharing of resources." As a sustainable alternative to capitalism, she proposes an economic model based on a living system: the human body "made of 100 trillion cells, each one as complex as a large human city." Biophysicist MAE-WAN HO (seat 104) deepens the thought, describing "a system based on sensitivity and responsiveness" where "there is maximum spontaneity and freedom at every level", in which "there is no conflict between global cohesion and local freedom... And that *is* the organic way of being. That is the way natural organisms are organized. I mean, we are the archetype of a sustainable system, yet we *have not learned from how we are.*"

This new paradigm – this new understanding of ourselves – conforms with "the pattern", as philosopher Ashok Gangadean (seat 021) sees it, of "integral, holistic consciousness" in which "the finite has the infinite within it, the one has the many within it, the global is the local and the local is the global." According to physicist Hans-Peter Dürr (seat 108), this is the formula for "the optimal development of personality" by which each can attain the "higher state of flexibility" prerequisite to successful evolutionary maturation. Philosopher Cornel West puts it more concisely: "It's not a question of either/or. It's a question of both/and." Beyond the binary polarity of ego-based consciousness, the boundary between 'the self' and 'the other'

dissolves. The one embraces the many. The individual becomes the group. "*Shift your consciousness and shift the world.*"

Before our eyes and ears, the perceptions of the individuals at the Table metamorphosize from gloom at the prospect of an ecological doomsday impending to a transcendental vision of a sustainable future culture. Seemingly simply by their presence at the Table, each participant is convincing those around them that *another world is entirely possible*. To some, it even seems as if they are already creating it together here today. And, for a single brief moment, we share their optimism. How do we realize it, we ask ourselves, *this world* without poverty or war, in which humans live in balance with nature? How, if not by understanding that the only obstacle to its coming into being is the collective belief that it cannot (and will never) be? In this way, the antidote to species annihilation reveals itself as our individual perception expands to embrace the possibility of the harmonious well-being of the entire human group. For only by assuming individual responsibility for the collective well-being of others, and by manifesting this in action (within family, community and/or society), can we become worthy of the name 'homo sapiens' (that is, 'the wise human').

And, just like those at the Table, we know that we need each other to create *this world* of which we dream. None of us has the ultimate answer. No one truth is absolute, no single perspective without flaw. No one voice can dominate except the voice of the one that is the all – the ENDLESS INTERCONNECTION – that defines our collective being. Located not behind closed doors but outside in a public space (through which people are wandering freely), the TABLE itself has already come to fulfill the utopian vision of a transparent global democracy in which the unique significance of every individual human consciousness is apparent.

Through addressing ourselves to the questions of others, we have come to a new understanding of all that remains for us to understand. By witnessing how questions inspire responses which, in turn, inspire more questions, we have arrived at an empowering realization of the freedom that lies not in being 'right' but, rather, in trusting to our intuitive sense of ourselves as one small part of a far greater whole (which, as Aristotle observed, "is more than the sum of its parts".)

Finally, we understand that the condition of our existence is sourced not in the answers to our questions but in the questions themselves, that life is itself a continuous process of self-education (and *-transformation*) through questioning. For, amid this 21st Century ritual, we too, like the over 100 human beings at the Table, have been transformed... (and all in the very place where, seven decades before, the Nazis made a BONFIRE OF BOOKS).