

# WHAT WILL LONGING AND BELONGING LOOK LIKE IN 2021 AND BEYOND?

By Johanna Koljonen



“WHAT ARE THE ABSTRACT IDEAS – A COMMUNITY, A COUNTRY, EUROPE, A FAITH, HUMANITY – THAT CAN SERVE TO ORGANISE YOUR LONGING AND BELONGING?”

This year I have been thinking a great deal about my youngest friends and the children of my oldest friends. They are the under 25s, and their generational event will be this pandemic.

I'm 42. For my generation, our portal events were the fall of the Berlin Wall and 9/11, and wedged between them the changes that shaped my life most practically: the expansion of the European Union and of the internet. We became the generation that would never quite understand borders. I wonder whether this will be a generation that can never take safety or mobility for granted.

For my generation, especially people in power, the lesson of the pandemic is that it is possible to enact science-based policy quite rapidly, even at the cost of disrupting economic systems. (This is good news, because it means we can address the climate crisis). For younger people? I am not so sure what their lesson will be. In many places they have not handled the restrictions well. They are not stupid, no more than we are; but many seem to be lacking some core concept of a society, of what it is for. Deciding together. Acting together. Surviving together.

And how should they know? They have only ever lived in a globalised and largely neoliberal world, with precarious labour markets and a future dominated by fear. If I am hardwired, even now, to believe in peace, prosperity, and history bending towards justice, they have grown up expecting the world to be at war and people in power to be short-sighted and greedy. They have also spent their lives constantly connected, irrespective of geographical location. They believe enormously in community, but community to them could be a space in their phones rather than a physical neighbourhood.

The grand narratives of this generation will be about fighting for justice and survival in a world that is indeed unjust and has the odds stacked against them. Some will be fighting for everyone, and some only for their own, insular group. The under 25s also cannot remember a time when nationalist populists, outright fascists, and reactionary terror movements did not have a public voice. Some of them are attracted to those voices.

Another way of framing such a grand narrative is about belonging. Who is allowed to belong? Who counts as fully human? Who will you fight for, or sacrifice for? What are the abstract ideas – a community, a country, Europe, a faith, humanity – that can serve to organise your longing and belonging?

“THE YOUNGER GENERATION ARE YEARNING FOR STORIES ABOUT SOCIETY AND BELONGING, ABOUT SOCIETY-BUILDING, TRUTH, SURVIVAL AND JUSTICE.”

Looking at how we did in the last century, it is probably just as well that this generation has mostly lacked grand ideologies and very few institutions were allowed to dictate truths. A more startling realisation is that this also means reality is negotiable. Young adults have not read daily newspapers, or built deep relationships to public service journalism. In a splintered media landscape, everyone must be their own storyteller of the real, and learn – more or less – to navigate claims, sources, rumours, humour, hot takes, and commentary on a day-to-day, moment-to-moment basis. Not everyone has the capacity, or the skills. I suggest that at least science remains as an arbiter of the real – and am reminded that scientific truth is a process too. Truth is an agreement.

This is why young people are not particularly unsettled by “deep fakes,” algorithmically generated videos that can make anyone’s face convincingly utter anything. To me, deep fakes represent a complex challenge to free speech, journalism and the democratic process. But my younger friends would never automatically assume that a video represents what it claims to – or that it is even, necessarily, a recording of something that has actually occurred in the physical space. Even after a full quarter century of daily and passionate online life, to me, the digital is still somehow an allegory of the real world, conceptually a translation of tangible rooms. The under-25s live in a non-geographical world as fully as in their physical environment, and to them one is not more real or fictional than the other.

If kids’ understanding of reality is more of a process than a binary, then so is their relationship to art. They express appreciation of culture by engaging creatively with the work or with audience communities. Many meaningful media (such as videogames) literally require participation to be completed and legible, and that assumption seems, for this generation, to be as true in other artforms. The work becomes real only as part of the context in which it is enjoyed, reacted to or discussed. All art and all media is, on some level, participatory.

The European feature film industry has struggled with domestic audiences for some time, and a big part of it is all of us struggling to find our footing in this new dance between formats and viewing behaviours, content and audiences. The other big problem is relevance, and there we have failed in particular with the youngest age groups. We have not listened to the audience, and we have not believed in the younger storytellers when they have tried to tell us how their lives and realities are constructed, or about the way they communicate with and around media. We are Victorians marvelling at flappers after the trauma of the Great War. We speak from another century.

If we get this wrong, European cinema will rapidly become a quaint artefact for the nostalgic few. But the opposite outcome is just as possible. Young people still enjoy the feature film format; they love the theatrical experience when they can afford it; and they invest passionately in complex storytelling. Their lives are about distraction from fears in the moment, but also about meaning-making. Like everyone else, they are yearning for stories about society and belonging, about society-building, truth, survival and justice. Just not as dictates, but as conversations.

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