

The Alterity of the Image: the Distant Spectator and Films about the Syrian Revolution and War

Shohini Chaudhuri

Department of Literature, Film and Theatre studies, University of Essex, Colchester, UK

To cite this article: Shohini Chaudhuri (2018), 'The Alterity of the Image: the Distant Spectator and Films about the Syrian Revolution and War,' *Transnational Cinemas*, DOI: 10.1080/20403526.2018.1444929

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/20403526.2018.1444929>

ABSTRACT

Images of the Syrian crisis, circulating on the international film festival circuit as well as in mainstream and social media, help to construct narratives about those events, people and places. This article explores how three Syrian documentaries – *Silvered Water: Syria Self-Portrait*, *The War Show* and *Little Gandhi* – appeal to their distant spectators and how the international film festival circuit shapes their aesthetic form. While the use of citizen videos in news reporting has generated a sense of familiarity with the audio-visual style and iconography of Syrian conflict imagery, these films invite us to look at their footage in a different way, foregrounding an experience of cultural distance through an emphasis on the formal qualities of the image. By focusing on the aesthetic rather than merely evidentiary qualities of these documentaries, I draw out a particular kind of transnational cinematic encounter in which, to borrow John Berger's words, 'meaning is a response not only to the known, but to the unknown'. Drawing upon the work of Berger and Laura Marks, the article offers a new conceptualization of distant spectatorship in terms of the alterity of the image.

KEYWORDS

Distant spectator; Syrian uprising; Syrian documentary; *Silvered Water: Syria Self-Portrait*; *The War Show*; *Little Gandhi*

Introduction

The events of the Syrian Revolution, which began in early 2011 as part of the Arab Uprisings and turned into a bloody war, have been revealed through the images of citizen journalists and filmmakers. These images, circulating in mainstream and social media, help to construct narratives about those events, people and places. What does it mean to confront those images from afar? How does the international film festival circuit, in which many films about the conflict are exhibited, shape their aesthetic form and audience response? This article seeks to explore these questions through a study of three documentaries – *Silvered Water: Syria Self-Portrait* (Ossama Mohammed and Wiam Simav Bedirxan, 2014), *The War Show* (Obaidah Zytoon and Andreas Dalsgaard, 2016) and *Little Gandhi* (Sami Kadi, 2016). *Silvered Water* presents itself as a collaboration between exiled Syrian director Ossama Mohammed, Wiam Simav Bedirxan, an

amateur Syrian-Kurdish film-maker in the besieged city of Homs, and ‘1001’ anonymous film-makers whose YouTube videos are compiled in the film. *The War Show* follows a Syrian radio DJ, Obaidah Zytoon, and her friends, who take part in the revolution and travel around the country, filming each other. *Little Gandhi* revolves around the Syrian activist Ghiyath Matar, renowned for his peaceful tactics of giving flowers and bottled water to security forces deployed to crush the uprising, and who therefore earned the nickname ‘Gandhi of Syria.’ These films foreground an experience of alterity through their approach to their subject matter and formal qualities; they invite us to look at their footage in a different way from citizen videos circulated on social media and mainstream news, thus unsettling spectatorial complacencies engendered through familiarity with this format.

By focusing on aspects of these documentaries that go beyond the evidentiary purpose of documenting struggle and conflict, I hope to draw out a particular kind of transnational cinematic encounter in which, to borrow John Berger’s words, ‘meaning is a response not only to the known, but to the unknown’ (1995, 89). At the same time, the article attends to different kinds of meanings shared by spectators with greater local and contextual knowledge, along with the fact that many aspects of these films are liable to be misunderstood when they circulate internationally, due to a multiplicity of factors including the linguistic and cultural distance of the subject matter, the films’ experimental form and the existence of multiple interpretive communities holding different narratives of the Syrian conflict. The goal of my analysis, however, is not to ‘make sense’ of the films but, rather, to show the ways in which the foreignness of the images is productive of sense-making when spectators are positioned ‘outside’ events. With the term ‘foreignness’ or ‘alterity,’ I refer to the cultural distance of the images – the way in which they are partially apprehended by spectators – as well as certain formal effects they perform that provoke a sense of the unfamiliar and unknown.

The article begins with ‘the politics of pity,’ the model within which the distant spectator is conventionally conceived. Then, using the work of John Berger and Laura Marks as a starting point, I go on to offer a new conceptualization of distant spectatorship in terms of the alterity of the image. The concept of alterity not only highlights the formal and cultural otherness of images but also their active intervention in the power dynamics of the Syrian conflict – offering another way of telling it. Drawing links with the cultural context of Syrian film-making before and after the revolution, I employ this conceptual framework to analyse how *Silvered Water*, *The War Show* and *Little Gandhi* address their distant spectators.

From the ‘politics of pity’ to another way of telling

The notion of the ‘distant spectator’ has been influentially shaped by Hannah Arendt, who contrasts ‘spectators,’ who are situated outside events and witness them from afar, with political ‘actors’ who are immersed in the events as they are happening. Arendt believed that spectators have the advantage of being able to judge and reflect upon events impartially from a distance, an idea traceable to Kant’s notion of ‘disinterested “interest”’ (1992, 55). Concurrently, spectators lay themselves open to the risk of becoming mere bystanders, watching idly while others suffer. Today, the distant spectator figures mostly in debates about ‘distant suffering’: the media spectacle of war and other hardships beheld by a trans-national community of spectators, usually conceived of as spectators in the West, marking an asymmetric, neo-Orientalist power relationship between those who watch and those who suffer (Chouliaraki 2006, 4). Luc Boltanski

(1999) has analysed the rhetoric of distant suffering in terms of ‘the politics of pity,’ which presents scenarios of conflict or hardship as a relationship between victims, persecutors and saviours. The politics of pity mainly works either through sentimental identification, which bids spectators to imagine the sufferer’s suffering and position themselves as benefactors, or through denunciation of perpetrators.

As seen in international news and humanitarian NGO reports of the Syrian crisis, the politics of pity frequently entails further ‘othering’ of ‘the other,’ turning the people who suffer into statistics. Placing the toll of death, injury and displacement centre stage, it often occludes the political and strategic interests invested in the conflict, which is constructed as a ‘humanitarian emergency.’ In Lilie Chouliaraki’s analysis, this amounts to ‘a “securitization” of news,’ designed to persuade the target audience that a policy of intervention is necessary to alleviate it (2015, 109). Importantly, the question of ‘security is not a fixed moral “truth” but ... is always entangled with the power relations of the international order’ as involved parties weigh up humanitarian responsibilities against other, ‘more self-interested’ motives (2015, 110).

All three documentaries in this study seek to develop other ways of telling the story of the conflict for international audiences to counter problematic news coverage. Yet, no film, no matter how powerful, can convey everything that has happened in Syria; it is only possible to show partial perspectives. Atom Egoyan and Ian Balfour suggest that an experience of partial comprehension might be productive when they remark ‘Every film is a foreign film, foreign to some audience somewhere – and not simply in terms of language’ (2004, 21). They claim that ‘film itself might be considered foreign, that is to say non-natural, in its formal qualities’ with the use of experimental forms that ‘transform our perceptions and conceptions of the real’ (2004, 27). These formal qualities may destabilize the conventions of mainstream cinema and news journalism along with the customary expectations and responses they evoke.

Laura Marks surmises that, in our Information Age, the nature of the image consists of three elements, namely, experience, information and image:

While experience is infinite, the vast majority of experience lies latent. Few images ever arise from it ... In our time, those that do arise from experience are often selected, or unfolded, by political and economic interests that deem them useful as information. (Marks 2015, 71)

Drawing on Gilles Deleuze’s writing on the fold and classical Islamic philosophy, she offers a theory of folding–enfolding aesthetics to understand how experiences, imagined as being virtually ‘enfolding,’ become perceptible. Information is ‘a filter of experience’ through which only certain experiences are selected or translated into ‘useful material,’ serving various forms of power (Marks 2015, 69, 71). For example, the impulse for information can be found behind the constant demand that Middle Eastern film-makers ‘explain’ their part of the world through their work. In the Information Age, it is information that has become ‘the new spectacle’ (Marks 2015, 71). For Marks, ‘the typical image that power selects from experience is the cliché: an image that confirms ideology and blocks more nuanced and multifarious aspects of experience’ (2015, 71). I suggest that conventional images of suffering and securitization propagated by humanitarian agencies and mainstream news can be encompassed within her concept of information, making the politics of pity another filter between experience and image.

Rather than assuming that images simply ‘represent’ experiences or events, Marks suggests they are ‘performative’ vis-à-vis their activity of actualizing experiences into sense perception (which she calls ‘unfolding’) or protecting them from perceptibility (‘enfolding’) (Marks 2015, 73). Her work lays the basis for my thinking about the performance of alterity; for example, experimental films address the festival audience through their performance of qualities of distance and otherness, exchanging the taste and expectations of classical narrative with those of the festival community. The image enacts a performative effect on both the events it reveals and the audience it addresses. Furthermore, Marks’s ideas resonate with Stella Bruzzi’s argument that ‘documentaries are performative acts’ (2006, 1). They allow us to see documentary as a negotiation not just between image and reality (in Bruzzi’s dualistic formulation) but between image, information and experience.

But while film-makers unfold or enfold events, it is another matter for spectators, for whom the events do not form part of their lived experience, to unfold and understand them. On- and offline, images of the Syrian conflict are disseminated to multiple interpretive communities, each capable of imposing disparate and conflicting interpretations onto the same artefacts. As Chad Elias and Zaher Omareen point out: ‘As with much of the digital sphere, discussion around the images shot by mobile phones [by citizen journalists] is often characterized by suspicion, dissensus and evidentiary uncertainty’ (2014, 263). The possibility of manipulation afforded by the digital provokes scepticism and doubt about the events it represents, as shown by a number of hoaxes and staged videos that have purported to come from Syria.¹ For John Berger, writing in the pre-digital era, the evidentiary value of a photograph lies in its indexicality, a property now often presumed lost. However, although digital photography lacks an indexical trace in the shape of a ghostly negative, the camera’s digital file retains an indexical relationship to the object photographed. Indeed, as Berger reminds us, the very fact that a photograph can be faked attests to its evidentiary value: ‘You can only make a photograph tell an explicit lie by elaborate tampering,’ either by staging (lending authenticity to any set of appearances) or post-production manipulation, hence the widespread use of photography ‘to deceive and misinform’ (1995, 96, 97).

Although a photograph is strong in evidence, it is weak in meaning; in other words, it offers ‘irrefutable evidence’ of the existence of this or that object, but it ‘tells us nothing of the significance of their existence’ (Berger 1995, 86). Berger’s distinction between evidence and meaning highlights that photographic ambiguity does not simply lie at the evidentiary level. He suggests that ambiguity arises from the fact that images ‘quote’ from appearances, which, in themselves, are ambiguous, containing multiple meanings. This produces a discontinuity, arresting the flow of time so that the appearances of the moment are isolated and taken out of continuity. Hence, when we read a photograph, we surmise the past and future of the moment captured; in order to understand it, we need to know something about the context, even if the images cannot be reduced to that history. The cut that a photograph makes across the flow of time can be imagined as a ‘cross-section of the event,’ which Berger pictures as a circle. The circle represents the amount of information in the image – he uses the term information differently from Marks, meaning how much the image has ‘quoted’ from appearances. However, the size of the circle also depends on ‘the spectator’s personal relation to the photographed event,’ which supplies the missing continuity (Berger 1995, 121). For example, if the figures in the image are strangers, the amount of information and size of the circle are very reduced; if they are personally known to you, both the amount of information and circle’s size enlarge exponentially.

The discontinuity produced by ‘quoting’ from appearances is the ground of the photograph’s ambiguity, its potential for ‘another way of telling,’ yet, when combined with words, such as captions, that ambiguity dissipates and it gains qualities of certainty and assertion.

Indeed, Berger goes on to say that photographic ambiguity is often ‘hidden by the use of words which explain, less or more truthfully, the pictured events’ (1995, 128). A link can be drawn with the use of titles, voiceover and interview testimony in documentaries – in the conventional, expository mode of documentary, these explain the visual images, telling us how to interpret them. What we see in a documentary image is ‘the record of a moment when a camera (or sound recorder or other device – really anything that can take an impression) grabbed something and recorded it’ (Marks 2015, 173). For Berger, however, photography is the antithesis of cinema, which has a different relation to temporality: ‘photographs are retrospective and are received as such: films are anticipatory. Before a photograph, you search for *what was there*. In a cinema, you wait for what is to come next’ (1995, 279). Despite this, I would argue that film spectatorship encourages a similar interpretive strategy of imaginatively filling in what lies beyond the temporal frame of the image, hence the different kinds of meanings shared by spectators with greater local and contextual knowledge, along with the likelihood that many aspects will be misunderstood by international audiences. As I will argue in my film analyses, the image requiring completion reflects the experience of viewing from a distance. However, even as we struggle to ‘make sense’ of the films, the incompleteness of their images are productive of sense-making. As Marks writes, films ‘initiate this process by releasing perceptibles and statements from their frames,’ requiring the viewer to complete them (2015, 212). The incompleteness of a film stirs affects that persist long after it is over, because it is up to the viewer to unfold it.

Syrian film-making before and after the revolution

To place this aesthetic approach in a cultural context, some background to Syrian film-making before and after the uprising is necessary. After the Ba’ath Party’s assumption of power (1963), the National Film Organization (NFO) was established to produce Syrian films and control film distribution within Syria, as previously Egyptian, Indian and Hollywood films had dominated Syrian theatres. Far from being subservient to the state, NFO-sponsored films were known to be aesthetically and politically radical, although they enfolded their criticism of the regime in metaphor and allegory – for example, *Stars in Broad Daylight* (Ossama Mohammad, 1988) evokes state oppression through its symbolic *mise-en-scène* of a patriarchal household in which the head of the family resembles Hafez al-Assad – and ‘[d]ocumentaries were avoided altogether’ (Van de Peer 2017, 203). The NFO exercised strict censorship to curb internal dissent while recognizing cinema as an artform and tool of national promotion, ensuring that such subversive films were not released within Syria even as they won acclaim at festivals abroad. Ossama Mohammad, one of Syria’s ‘most iconoclastic filmmakers’ (and director of *Silvered Water*), was at one time head of the NFO (Ginsberg and Lippard 2010, 382). With the advent of cheaper, more accessible digital film-making technology which enabled film-makers to circumvent the restrictions of the NFO, an independent film movement arose, whose films were also banned in Syria.

In their account of Syrian film-making during the revolution, Elias and Omareen identify two phases. The first is amateur mobile phone videos made under life-threatening conditions, such as

during demonstrations when snipers on rooftops targeted anyone with a camera or during constant shelling and bombing. Such images were speedily made ‘with limited means’ and without regard for either journalistic or aesthetic quality (Chad and Omareen 2014, 257). Their primary purpose was to serve as evidence of the Syrian regime’s human rights violations, lending themselves as material for circulation on broadcast news and social media. The second phase of film-making, in which Syrian film-makers were given training, funding and equipment by transnational organizations such as Bidayyat and DOX Box, tended to work against ‘the instrumentalised practice of news and information-gathering’ through its conscious emphasis on film aesthetics: a ‘shift from extemporaneous documentation to a more reflective mode of filmmaking’ (Chad and Omareen 2014, 265, 268).² Similarly, miriam cooke contrasts the raw documentation of the amateur videos, intended to shock and move the international community to act, with a later phase of ‘affective art’ which sought the aesthetic impact of formal experimentation to urge ‘critical thought’ (2017, 57). At the same time, straightforward, expository documentaries about the revolution and war were also made with international support.

Silvered Water, *The War Show* and *Little Gandhi* are outcomes of these developments. However, rather than the dualistic criteria of reflexivity and criticality deployed by Elias and Omareen and cooke, my analysis draws on the more nuanced triadic framework of experience, information and image offered by Marks and Berger. I interpret the films as responding to the question of how to represent the revolution and war in a way that resists the pull of existing clichéd images and information; they resist the imperative simply to convey a ‘message’ through the assembly of performative images that leave a gap between themselves and their significance. In so doing, they bear affinities with the state-sponsored Syrian art cinema, although with a different set of aesthetics and potential to connect with new audiences.

Stylistically experimental films tend to find receptive audiences at international film festivals which base their criteria of selection on innovative approaches to film-making rather than clear, legible storytelling. International film festivals have provided the main forum for the circulation and discussion of the films analysed in this article. *Silvered Water* premiered at Cannes, then went on to show at numerous festivals around the world, including Toronto, Rio de Janeiro, Busan and London, where it won the John Grierson award. *The War Show* premiered at the Venice Film Festival, where it won the Federa Award for Best Film, and thereafter screened at Toronto, London, Hong Kong and Sydney, among other festivals. Although *Little Gandhi* was turned down upon submission to Toronto, suggesting that (unlike the other two films) it did not meet the aesthetic criteria of A-list festivals, it was well received at festivals such as the European Independent Film Festival in Paris and the International Family Film Festival in Los Angeles, where it won awards for Excellence in Filmmaking and Best Foreign Documentary, respectively. Furthermore, it has been shown to the Canadian parliament and U.S. Congress, and at university campuses in the U.S., France and U.K. It has also been selected as Syria’s entry for the 2018 Best Foreign Language Film Oscar. With its more conventional style, *Little Gandhi* provides support for my argument about how the international festival circuit shapes aesthetic form and response yet, at the same time, it, too, highlights the alterity of the image.

Silvered Water, Syria Self-Portrait

Silvered Water is a searing revelation of the Syrian regime’s brutal destruction of its people, its

harrowing footage of torture, executions, bombings, and dead and injured bodies interspersed with moments of tremendous beauty. Although he does not appear onscreen, Ossama Mohammed exerts his presence through his meditative voiceover, reflecting on footage of the revolution and its bloody aftermath from afar: the figure of the film-maker in exile acts as a proxy for the spectator. In a lyrical scene floating in the clouds, on his way to give a talk at Cannes, he tells us how he left Syria in 2011, believing his life was in danger (after protesting against the detention of political prisoners), and has since lived in exile in France. In exile, he is dependent, like the rest of the world, on online images emerging from the country to follow the events. Mohammed's status as a distant spectator and his feelings of being a helpless bystander shape the film's aesthetic structure: firstly, as a cinematic letter between him and his co-director, Wiam Simav Bedirxan, a Syrian-Kurdish teacher-turned-film-maker in the besieged city of Homs, who contacted him online and sent him her footage (as well as the content of their communications via online messaging, we hear keyboard clatter and other sounds associated with receiving electronic alerts); and, secondly, as a dialectical unfolding of anonymous YouTube videos which draws out their subtle potentials.

The epistolary exchange between Mohammed and Simav makes *Silvered Water* a powerful acoustic text in which sound and voiceover play pivotal roles. Sarah Kozloff defines voiceover as 'oral statements ... spoken by an unseen speaker situated in a space and time other than that simultaneously being presented by the images on the screen' (1988, 5). In its disembodied state, reverberating from off-screen space, voiceover has the potential to express alterity, as at the beginning of *Silvered Water* when a male voice (later identified as Mohammed's) utters the words 'I saw it' over a black screen. A woman's sigh is heard as the black screen is replaced by pixellated images of a crying baby having its umbilical cord cut. To Mohammed's voice is added a number of other voices and narrators, among them the opera singer Nouma Omran, heard humming and sighing before her song becomes part of the haunting soundtrack. Mohammed has called her the 'hidden narrator,' which he, in reference to *1001 Nights*, associates with Scheherazade; Omran announces the arrival of Simav who, for Mohammed, embodies the identity of the anonymous '1001' Syrians who posted their videos on YouTube (Chaudhuri 2016). Whether or not one recognizes the allusions to *1001 Nights*, the use of multiple voices and multiple sources of narration fractures the omniscient narrative system of both conventional documentary and journalism. Simav's voice is revealed about half an hour into the film, when Mohammed recalls how she contacted him online. 'Are you Ossama Mohammed?' she asks. 'If your camera were here in Homs, what would you have captured?' 'Everything,' he answers. All around Simav, buildings are shaken by large explosions and lives are destroyed. With her own poetic voiceover adding to the film's unusual lyricism, her camera captures everyday life in Homs as it is devastated. Neither Mohammed's nor Simav's voiceovers belong to conventional voice-of-god narration, but are rather personal and subjective.

As *Silvered Water* does not seek to explain what we are seeing, the images appear to arise from an abyss that endows them with a mystery that a straightforwardly factual documentary would lack. This preserves their ambiguity, opening up a space in which viewers can project their own interpretations. The pixellated images of the newborn baby are followed by silent mobile phone footage of a teenager being tortured in prison. Stripped to his under-wear, the teenager is hit by his tormentors, who simulate rape with a rolled-up magazine and later force him to lick their boots. The teenager was one of several schoolboys arrested for writing anti-regime graffiti in Deraa, their brutal treatment in custody forming one of the triggers for the revolution. This is not

clarified in the film; instead, a series of black title cards are inserted, halting the flow of images with allusive and cryptic text, which contains little information for those unfamiliar with the events: ‘After a school day, this boy wrote on a wall “The people want to topple the regime.” He was detained. His nails were pulled out. This happened in Dar’a. His family ran to the officer, demanding his release. “Forget him,” the officer said. “Go make yourselves a new one! If you can’t send your women here, we shall help you.”’ The sequence ends with a final title card – ‘And cinema began’ – and sounds of a baby crying again.

The use of a multitude of anonymous mobile phone videos, filmed by agents of the regime as well as revolutionary activists, unfolds previously latent events and knowledge, an alternative micro-history of everyday experiences of the conflict. Even when pixellated and partially legible, the mobile phone footage possesses evidentiary qualities. Indeed, as Nicholas Elliott points out in his review, the images of the teenager being forced to lick a soldier’s boot ‘is powerful *because* of the pixel. The pixel is a constant reminder that an individual stood in a jail cell and decided to video another man’s humiliation,’ using a device that we carry in our pockets (Elliott 2014). Not adhering to traditional aesthetic or technical considerations, mobile phone images reflect the conditions under which they were made. In *Silvered Water*, their defining characteristics are their low resolution, defying standard conventions of sharpness and high resolution, and ‘filmmaker body language,’ a term used by Elias and Omareen to describe emotional reaction to events expressed through shaky images and irregular breathing (2014, 259), itself constituting a form of evidence appealing to us as embodied witnesses.

However, mobile phone footage does not perform a merely evidentiary role in *Silvered Water*. Some images are repeated, slowed down and arrested with the original sound removed and Mohammed’s voiceover laid over them. Near the beginning, we are thrust into proximity with the demonstrators calling ‘Freedom! Freedom! Freedom!’ A banner proclaiming ‘No to detaining children’ loosely links the demonstration to the previous scene of the schoolboy in prison. The ambient sound is cut, as we hear a sigh and see a pointing finger, that of the camera operator themselves, as they walk, casting a shadow on the ground, towards a young man who has just been killed: ‘The first martyr.’ Later, a low-flying military helicopter menacingly hovers, blades whirling, over marching demonstrators. Then, suddenly, the image shakes violently. Screams of terror are heard, as the camera phone is dropped in the confusion, its images up-close and blurry, revealing partial glimpses of skin and fabric, and a person lying on the road, blood seeping from their body along the ground. Shifting to another piece of footage, filmed from relative safety from behind a window grille, demonstrators are shown fleeing across the street amidst the clatter of gunfire. Mohammed speaks in voiceover: ‘This morning someone took the camera from me. He started cinema. I ran after him to get it back.’ We hear sounds of footsteps as the cameraperson runs breathlessly along the puddle-soaked street towards dead bodies on the ground and towards an injured man being carried. ‘I found myself talking to him,’ Mohammed continues. ‘Don’t move the camera. Stabilize it.’ The film briefly pictures the previous scene and arrests the final shot in a freeze-frame. Then, returning to the current scene, Mohamed utters ‘A static shot is beautiful’ over the image of an injured man on the street and declares that the filmmaker has become the new martyr.

Martine Beugnet writes that ‘for all its photographic objectivity, cinematographic vision allows for the indefinite to surface’ – elements that ‘resist stability and definition,’ such as the inherent confusion of the phenomenal world and its constant transformations (Beugnet 2017, 1, 2). As

well as recording this instability, cinema magnifies our experience of it through techniques such as shallow focus, changes in speed and other alterations of the quality of the image that pull it towards the painterly. In *Silvered Water*, the experimental form of the jittery and fuzzy mobile phone images is emphasized through Mohammed's meditative voiceover, highlighting their ambiguity rather than their evidentiary value alone. As the mobile phone image liberates cinema from its standard conventions, these amateur film-makers make striking choices of subject and composition, heralding for him a reinvention of cinematic language. The film's title is a play on Simav's name, which means 'silvered water' in Kurdish. Water imagery runs through the film, creating cinematic metaphors, as if images are developing from a darkroom. *Silvered Water* is an exploration of the cinematic medium as it crosses boundaries from its silver-based photographic form into digital and mobile formats, suggesting that these have altered cinema's formal possibilities.

This is not to say that *Silvered Water* does not perform the politics of pity, for it activates the figures of victim and persecutor with a stream of harrowing images. Furthermore, aesthetic contemplation is another discourse apart from sentimental identification and denunciation that Boltanski identifies as belonging to the politics of pity (Boltanski 1999, 54). Some viewers have been disturbed by the film's juxtaposition of beauty and atrocity (Quilty 2014). However, its concept of beauty is the aspect most apt to be misunderstood for Mohammed does not mean physical beauty. Rather, he says, pointing to another way of telling, 'The criterion of beauty is to save the tale of the victim from oblivion' (Chaudhuri 2016). By salvaging the images from the archive, highlighting their creative potential and editing them together in a dialectical montage, the film recuperates their value beyond either news sensation or documentation, endowing them with other meanings.

An archive, Marks suggests, can be thought of as a collection of folds, 'some of which the researcher chooses to tug out and actualize while leaving others enfolded' (2015, 183). In its use of found footage from YouTube archives, *Silvered Water* unfolds and salvages these images that are tucked away, making these elements of the past present again, although not with the same intentions as the original makers. The amateur videos show the events from the 'inside,' while Mohammed's voiceover comments upon them from the 'outside.' While the film-maker sounds like he is taking a great distance from these harrowing images, his voiceover is best understood in the dialectical rather than expository tradition, in which the archive does not figure merely as a confirmation of past events (that is, solely as information) rather as what Bruzzi calls 'mutable, active ingredients' in our interpretation (2006, 29).

In dialectical montage, meaning arises from juxtapositions (Eisenstein 1994, 147). Separate fragments are linked together to make new connections or 'folds' – what Marks calls an 'imaginative folding' (2015, 213). In this way, *Silvered Water* both preserves the original footage and puts it into new constellations. The recurrent image of the newborn baby signifies birth; given the brutal events, it has been interpreted as conjuring a 'cycle of life in hell' (Weissberg 2014). However, through dialectical montage, it takes on other meanings, implying metaphoric links between disparate images. As Mohammed explained to me in interview, 'The story of the boy who got arrested gave birth to demonstrations [which] gave birth to a new cinema and to the anonymous filmmaker' (Chaudhuri 2016). Therefore, contrary to many viewer assumptions, the images in *Silvered Water* are not decontextualized – rather, they are recontextualized through the dialectical montage, in which meaning does not merely reside in the images but in the gaps

between them that spectators must fill. This does not stand in the way of the audience forming their own responses, capable of seeing the material in a different way from that of the film. The unstable and incomplete image is a stimulus to the imagination and is what makes *Silvered Water* more provocative and ‘interactive’³ than many films on the topic, since its extremely partial legibility has a greater capacity for activating the spectator’s faculties of perception and interpretation.

The War Show

The War Show is an account of the conflict by former Syrian radio DJ Obaidah Zytoon and her friends, who participated in the revolution and documented their experiences. For Zytoon, who co-directed the film with Danish film-maker Andreas Dalsgaard, the footage is her personal archive, vibrating with memories – an attempt to bring the dead back to the life, the images of her dead friends having been folded away on her hard drive. The narration fluctuates between the domain of the personal and the historical or collective, juxtaposed with Zytoon’s voiceover. Her voice does not merely lend credibility to her personal story. A crack between voice and image registers distance from the events, as the film was put together after she left Syria. Her melancholy, subdued tone highlights the inadequacy of words to make the images more transparent and bearable. A personal voice, it seems broken as well as idiosyncratic in its timbre, articulating the specificity of her experience, far from the ‘voice of universality’ that Bruzzi ascribes to the expository, information-driven documentary (Bruzzi, 66). The film is poignantly structured by aporias that invite viewers to experience, rather than merely see, loss. The aporias here take the form of a fragmented narrative style, creating gaps in the narration that viewers are invited to fill.

At the beginning, intertitles situate events against the backdrop of the rule of Hafez al-Assad (1971–2000) and his son Bashar (2000–), and arrival of the ‘Arab Spring’ and, at the end, update us on numbers of people killed, displaced and imprisoned along with the status of places depicted in the film, including Zytoon’s hometown Zabadani, Homs (both liberated by rebels and subsequently retaken by the regime) and Kafranbel (which, at the time of the film’s release, was dominated by the jihadist rebel group Jabat Fatah al-Sham, formerly known as Al-Nusra Front). The footage is labelled with captions stating date and location, adding the name of the source when taken from sources other than Zytoon and her friends (for example, YouTube). Aside from the steer given by this minimal observance of expository conventions, the viewer must, to some extent, make their own way through these images, as in *Silvered Water*. Indeed, both amateur and professional reviews of these films have been remarkably similar, referring to their disjointed structure, while attesting to their powerful, long-term effects and ability to appeal to audiences at a deeper level than merely convincing them with an argument or set of ‘facts.’

The first fragment of footage in *The War Show* is chaotic and handheld, revealing sounds of gunfire, shouts and gravel underfoot, before the film’s title appears, followed by a black screen with a vertical list of numbered chapters, the first in white type and the rest in grey: ‘(1) Revolution, (2) Suppression, (3) Resistance, (4) Siege, (5) Memories, (6) Frontlines, (7) Extremism.’ At first, the opening footage appears as an unrecognizable sliver, out of time and place. Only later are we able to identify it as a flashforward to ‘Frontlines.’ *The War Show* resists classical narrative conventions and the storybook justice of the hero’s journey, which underlie attempts for clear, legible storytelling, on the understanding that they distort experience

and readily convert it into information. As Dalsgaard, who faced the challenge of turning into a coherent narrative the ‘fragmented’ collection of footage shot by Zytoon and her friends, remarks, ‘The hero’s journey is rarely true. The most effective storytelling often actually compromises and corrupts reality’ (Nord 2016). The film’s alternative structure of dividing the film into seven chapters captures disparate moments with a photograph-like quality. At the start of each chapter, the chapter list appears again, the grey type turning to white for the present chapter. This enhances what was identified earlier in this article as the retrospective *and* anticipatory temporality of film-viewing so that, as Jay Weissberg comments in his review of the film, ‘audiences are reminded of what came before, and [are] made aware of what’s still to come’ (Weissberg 2016). Because the chapters are not always chronologically structured – in other words, they are, in Berger’s terminology, ‘discontinuous’ – viewers have interpretive space to make their own links between moments, inferring a ‘before’ and an ‘after.’

The War Show reveals a different reality of the Syrian conflict through its intimate focus on a small circle of friends. Each friend is introduced with a freeze-frame, likened to photographs through the sound of a shutter clicking, their name on screen in white type against a series of black strips resembling redaction tape, obscuring other information about them, concealed for security reasons. In this way, the film unfolds and enfolds the friends with their distinctive traits: Amal, the fearless camerawoman; Houssam, the doe-eyed, talented architecture student; red-haired Lulu, who removed her ‘veil of fear’ to join the protests without disguise; Rabea, musician and heavy metal fan, who was less enthusiastic about the rhythms of revolutionary chants which he felt were too similar to the regime’s; Argha, the dentistry student, who plays pranks with fresh meat; and the loveable dog Fifi, whom Zytoon adopts and who also gets her own freeze-frame and redaction tape. With images of the friends taking a road trip, fooling around on the beach, smoking a joint and bathing Fifi in Lulu’s bathtub, which mean little at the level of information about the Syrian conflict, the film focuses on the materiality of these experiences, revealing an openness to moments of everyday reality unremarkable in themselves.

The earlier footage of friends becomes haunting when we find out that they do not all survive the events. In chapter 5, ‘Memories,’ we accompany them on their last trip which in voiceover Zytoon calls the ‘last memory of a sacred past we shared.’ The chapter preserves events that occurred before the previous chapter and anticipates events that occurred there- after. Listening to psychedelic music in the car, they travel to Kassab, Lattakia Province, on the border between Turkey and Syria, in the summer of 2011. For them, the trip is a return to nature, which the film conveys by recording the sea waves, sandy beach, and craggy hills as things of beauty. These ordinary scenes of friends climbing the hills or camping on the beach gain a much deeper meaning as the film reveals how the friends are, one by one, imprisoned, tortured and killed. Rabea was found, dead and brutally mutilated, in a car. This information is contrasted with his appearance in the film, where he can be seen alive and playful on the beach. His image is arrested in a freeze-frame, to the sound of another shutter click, which halts the flow of time and upholds the moment. Through this alternation between still and moving images, the film invites viewers to participate in its attempt to bring the dead back to life.

The focus on the specific experiences and fates of a group of friends furthermore enables the film to reveal other aspects of the conflict less discussed in the international media, including enforced disappearance. Over flashbacks to intimate, homely moments between the couple Lulu and Hisham, we learn that Hisham was kidnapped. The film makes reference to the ‘Caesar

photographs,' the archive of photographs taken of deaths under Syrian government custody that was smuggled out of the country. In many of the photographs, the tortured bodies of the victims were altered beyond recognition, but Lulu found one of Hisham, still dressed in the jumper he wore when kidnapped, a poignant detail that raises the photograph beyond mere evidence of crime and that the film accentuates through Zytoon's voiceover. Images of Lulu playfully burying Hisham in the sand on the beach are repeated, as Lulu watches on her laptop, having herself fled to Turkey.

More than any other film in this discussion, *The War Show* is concerned with analysing the performative nature of the image. It focuses on the participation of the camera in the war – not merely as a witness, but as a key player in the events. As Bruzzi writes, 'documentaries are inevitably the result of the intrusion of the film-maker onto the situation being filmed' (Bruzzi, 11). *The War Show* reveals the intrusion of the camera into reality in a number of ways. Firstly, the camera is a source of endangerment. 'The regime's biggest fear were those who held cameras, so they were the first to be eliminated,' Zytoon remarks in voiceover. Early in the film, she and Amal attend a demonstration in Al-Midan, Damascus. However, the protesters start the demonstration too early, before a critical mass of people have arrived, so have to escape when regime forces appear. Keeping her camera on, Zytoon captures their frenzied escape and hides in a shop, while Amal is arrested. Simply possessing and operating a camera puts them in danger.

Secondly, the camera is a means by which both rebels and the regime reveal their own reality for political purposes. The unfolding of reality in terms of expedient interests is a game played by all sides in the conflict: the flow of images is a war of information. Just as the regime invents its own story, staging its own demonstrations for the media to counter revolutionary images, so do some rebel groups exploit the camera to build support. In Zabadani, the regime is blamed for blowing up a car with three rebels in it. More local families join the protest for the 'martyrs.' A little girl appears carrying a placard, 'Why did you kill my father? You murderer!' The rebels were actually killed by their own bomb accidentally exploding; nonetheless, the event forms a turning-point from unarmed to armed resistance in the area. In a key scene in the chapter 'Frontlines,' rebels in Saraqeb, Idlib Province, urge Zytoon to come and film – firing a shell another time because the first was not captured on camera. Some rebels have obtained their funding from foreign powers by these methods – 'Blow things up, film, upload and get paid.' In this way, the film suggests, the Syrian conflict has become a proxy war in which rebels are provided with 'light weapons, not enough to win the war but enough to ensure it continued' – a 'war show' in which armed rebels and arms traders as well the camera itself are participants.⁴

Little Gandhi

Little Gandhi unfolds a history that has been forgotten: the reasons for the uprising and its violent repression that few mainstream commentators seem to know or remember. Its focus on Ghiyath Matar, a non-violent activist from the Syrian town of Daraya who died at the hands of Syrian security forces in September 2011, is a reminder of the uprising's peaceful beginnings. The film consists of interviews with Syrian activists who knew Matar and other expert witnesses, including Robert Ford, former U.S. ambassador to Syria. The director, Sam Kadi, originally himself from Aleppo, moved to the U.S. in 2000; similarly to Ossama Mohammed, his film is a product of his sense of disconnection from Syria and need to respond to the situation. The majority of activists interviewed in the film are, like many other Syrians, refugees based in

Turkey. However, some were still in Syria. Because it was too dangerous to enter the area physically, scenes with activists in Daraya were directed remotely via Skype from Kadi's base in Istanbul, using one computer screen to address questions to interviewees and another to supervise the framing of the shots by a local fixer (Kadi 2017). When the activists Motaz Morad and Mohammad Shihadeh are interviewed, they make their way onto a makeshift set in a ruined building. The ambient sound of sniper fire positions us in their space. The two interviewees have to repeat themselves or patiently sit out the gunfire in order to be heard. The Skype technology used to create the film enables us to be simultaneously in the war zone and zone of safety.

To apply Berger's terms, *Little Gandhi* 'quotes' more than the other films, offering more context and a coherent narrative through-line which matches the viewing expectations of the kind of distant spectators it targets – policy-makers, activists and young people, in the belief that these are the groups disposed to make change, rather than the cinephile festival crowd. The film effaces the traces of its unconventional production process in the interests of a smooth narrative which is meant to feel 'natural' (Kadi 2017). It even follows the three-act structure to get viewers emotionally involved. So we follow Matar's story, the first and second acts providing his background and involvement in the uprising. The narrative builds to Matar's death, which forms a climax halfway through act two, focusing on its meaning for the uprising through the reactions of fellow activists for whom it marks a transition from peaceful protest to armed insurrection. Finally, act three focuses on the responsibility of the international community. The use of the three-act structure enables the film to shift from complex, murky representations of the conflict to an accessible account of the regime as persecutor and international community as bystander, clarifying the political divisions between members of the UN Security Council and the geopolitical factors that have stood in the way of Western intervention on behalf of the Syrian people.

Little Gandhi's information-driven approach can further be seen in its use of archive images from both amateur and official sources, which perform an illustrative function, corroborating the words of interviewees, in the absence of a voiceover. For example, interviewees refer to protests in Daraya in 2003 which did not receive any media attention, due to regime pressure – part of the forgotten prehistory of the uprising that it uncovers. The words of different interviewees converge with each other and with the archive footage, labelled 'Daraya, Syria (2003).' While the archive images enable us to assimilate the events being discussed, they do not activate debate or interpretation. As Bruzzi notes of expository use of archive footage elsewhere, we are 'not invited to speculate upon the origins of the material or any possible discrepancy between original and current meaning ... and the edits between images and voice offer a cumulative as opposed to a dialectical understanding of the event they represent' (2006, 37). Similarly, at the climax, when Matar's death is announced at the U.S. State Department as the death of 'an apparently high profile Syrian activist' and at the United Nations, the purpose of this archive footage is to corroborate the regime's shocking brutality towards peaceful protesters already established by the words of interviewees and other information sources.

Yet, despite this conventional structure, *Little Gandhi* makes a startling artistic choice. It withholds from the viewer the image of its central character. This decision was determined by the fact that, when Matar was apprehended by security forces, his possessions were seized and not much footage was left to make a film about him (Kadi 2017). Therefore, Kadi was left with the problem of representing a person whose physical traces had almost disappeared and impressing

upon the audience the significance of this person. Although a renowned figure in Syria – at the start of the revolution, a few activists became prominent in every city – because Matar died so early on, relatively little is known about him even by Syrian audiences. Furthermore, he is largely unfamiliar to international audiences, who must become acquainted with this remarkable character in the course of the documentary. *Little Gandhi* eschews one strategy that lends itself in such circumstances – namely, dramatic re-enactment – and, instead, Matar becomes a structuring absence. Kadi was inspired by *The Message* (Moustapha Akkad, 1976), a biopic of Mohammed in which he is never revealed, observing the Islamic prohibition on images of the prophet. We see other characters talking to Mohammed, but he remains an off-screen presence – a manner of enfolding. Likewise, Matar’s image is enfolded but, as it is non-religious, its manner of enfolding can be termed ‘secular aniconism’ which, Marks mentions in relation to artistic responses to graphic news coverage, ‘respects the sacredness of human bodies and human lives by not allowing them to be seen’ (Marks, 99). In this regard, *Little Gandhi* is the most careful of the films in this discussion.

At the beginning, we hear interviewees talking about Matar, offering personal reminiscences about his activities of organizing peaceful protests, making us wonder, if we are not familiar with him, who is this Ghyiath Matar whom everyone is talking about. While parallels with Gandhi, Martin Luther King and other well-known peaceful protesters render Matar and his tactics more relatable for distant spectators, his absence makes him an enigma, around which the film revolves, and elevates him to almost sacred status. At one point, we hear his voice, in a video of a demonstration sourced from YouTube and, later, we briefly glimpse his torso in a video that was filmed when his tortured body was released. His full image is not disclosed until the end of the film, in a final shot, which reveals him as a mosaic of countless other images. The camera zooms back from a photograph of a flower and bottled water, established as the iconic image of Matar’s peaceful strategy, then gradually enlarges the visual field to encompass other photographs, including that of Matar’s son, born shortly after he died. As viewers, we are invited to constitute Matar’s image by filling in the gaps between these other images in this mosaic composition, piecing him together as a way of understanding his significance.

Conclusion

This article has presented a theory of distant spectatorship in terms of the alterity of the image. It has developed the framework of experience, image and information offered by Marks and Berger to argue that images exert performative effects on both the events they reveal and their audiences – and it is up to the spectator to complete them, their ability to do so dependent on their local and contextual knowledge. At the same time, I have shown how incompleteness is productive of meaning in experimental forms of documentary cinema fostered by the international festival circuit. In these films, images are not valued for their evidentiary qualities alone but for the interpretive possibilities they engender. *Silvered Water* invites us to look at mobile phone images from the Syrian revolution and war anew through its poetic voiceover and dialectical montage, creating a provocative dialogue between the original footage and subjectivities of the film-maker and audience. *The War Show* takes a more complex and analytical stance than the other two films in its focus on the participation of the camera in the war, not merely as a witness, but as a catalyst in the events. It leads us beyond the evidentiary to reveal the flow of images as a war of information. While *Little Gandhi*’s more conventional form gave it a different kind of festival trajectory, it also activates the spectator’s interpretive faculties to complete the image of its

central character which, in a bold artistic decision, is withheld until the end.

Notes

1. For further discussion of the hoaxes, see Della Ratta 2017.
2. DOX BOX began as an international documentary film festival that took place in Syria in 2008–2011 and has, since the uprising, become a transnational organization based in Berlin; it aims to assist and enhance documentary in the Arab world through activities such as online education, film archiving, research, policy-making and film production. Since 2013, the Lebanon-based company Bidayyat has been supporting Syrian filmmakers; it produces documentaries, along with short and experimental films, and provides funding and training for documentary makers.
3. I am indebted to Zaheer Omareen for the idea of *Silvered Water* as an ‘interactive’ film (see Chaudhuri 2016).
4. A number of Syrian documentaries, like *The War Show*, have become mired in controversies around ownership. These bitter fights bear out its stance on the reduction of the image to a commodified performance, produced and circulated in exchange for money and weapons as well for consumption by international audiences.

Notes on contributor

Shohini Chaudhuri’s main research area is World Cinema, with a particular focus on film and human rights. Her work develops transnational and comparative frameworks to explore links between different film cultures. She has written three books – *Cinema of the Dark Side: Atrocity and the Ethics of Film Spectatorship* (2014), *Contemporary World Cinema: Europe, the Middle East, East Asia and South Asia* (2005) and *Feminist Film Theorists* (2006) – and published numerous journal articles and book chapters, most recently in *The Blackwell Companion to Wong Kar-wai* (2015) and *Disappearing War: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Cinema and Erasure in the Post-9/11 World* (2017).

References

- Arendt, Hannah. 1992. *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, edited by Ronald Beiner. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Berger, John. 1995. “Appearances.” In *Another Way of Telling*, edited by John Berger and Jean Mohr, 81–129. New York: Vintage.
- Beugnet, Martine. 2017. “Introduction.” In *Indefinite Visions: Cinema and the Attractions of Uncertainty*, edited by Martine Beugnet, Allan Cameron and Arild Fetveit, 1–13. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Boltanski, Luc. 1999. *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media and Politics*. Translated by Graham Burchill. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Bruzzi, Stella. 2006. *New Documentary*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Chad, Elias, and Zaher Omareen. 2014. "Syria's Imperfect Cinema." In *Syria Speaks: Art and Culture from the Frontline*, edited by Malu Halasa, Zaher Omareen and Nawara Mahfoud, 257–268. London: Saqi.
- Chaudhuri, Shohini. 2016. "Beauty is When Justice is Retained Somewhere, Even If This Somewhere is in the Future." *An Interview with Ossama Mohammed and Zaher Omareen*. <http://mosaicrooms.org/blog/beauty-is-when-justice-is-retained-somewhere-even-if-this-somewhere-is-in-the-future/>.
- Chouliaraki, Lilie. 2006. *The Spectatorship of Suffering*. London: Sage.
- Chouliaraki, Lilie. 2015. "Digital Witnessing in War Journalism: The Case of Post-Arab Spring Conflicts." *Popular Communication* 13 (2): 105–119.
- cooke, miriam. 2017. *Dancing in Damascus: Creativity, Resilience and the Syrian Revolution*. New York: Routledge.
- Della Ratta, Donatella. 2017. "The Unbearable Lightness of the Image: Unfinished Thoughts on Filming in Contemporary Syria." *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 10: 109–132.
- Egoyan, Atom, and Ian Balfour. 2004. "Introduction." In *Subtitles: On the Foreignness of Film*, edited by Egoyan Atom and Ian Balfour, 21–30. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Eisenstein, Sergei. 1994. "Béla Forgets the Scissors." In *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents, 1896–39*, edited by Richard Taylor and Ian Christie, 145–149. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Elliott, Nicholas. 2014. "On Silvered Water, Syria Self-Portrait." *Bomb Magazine*, October 10. <http://bombmagazine.org/article/1000279/on-i-silvered-water-syria-self-portrait-i>.
- Ginsberg, Terri, and Chris Lippard. 2010. *Historical Dictionary of Middle Eastern Cinema*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press.
- Kadi, Sam. 2017. *Skype Interview with the Author*, March 13.
- Kozloff, Sarah. 1988. *Invisible Storytellers: Voiceover Narration in American Fiction Film*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Marks, Laura. 2015. *Hanan Al-Cinema: Affections for the Moving Image*. Cambridge, MA: MIT.
- Nord, Liz. 2016. "Why a Syrian Filmmaker 'Signed a Contract with Death' to Tell Her Story." *Interview with Andreas Dalsgaard*. <http://nofilmschool.com/2016/09/war-show-andreas-dalsgaard-obaidah-zytoon-tiff-2016>.

Quilty, Jim. 2014. "Squaring Cinema with Syria's Terror." *The Daily Star*. November 18: 16.

Van de Peer, Stefanie. 2017. *Negotiating Dissidence: The Pioneering Women of Arab Documentary*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Weissberg, Jay. 2014. "Cannes Film Review: 'Silvered Water, Syria Self-Portrait'." *Variety*. <http://variety.com/2014/film/festivals/cannes-film-review-silvered-water-syria-self-portrait-1201183212/>.

Weissberg, Jay. 2016. "Film Review: 'The War Show'." *Variety*. <http://variety.com/2016/film/reviews/the-war-show-review-1201848749/>.

Film References

Akkad, Moustapha, dir. 1976. *Al-risalah/The Message*. Libya/Egypt: Filmco International Productions.

Kadi, Sam, dir. 2016. *Little Gandhi*. USA/Syria/Turkey: Samer K. Production.

Mohammed, Ossama, dir. 1988. *Nudjum al-nahar/Stars in Broad Daylight*. Syria: National Film Organization.

Mohammed, Ossama and Wiam Simav Bedirxan, dir. 2014. *Ma'a al-Fidda/Silvered Water: Syria Self-Portrait*. France/Syria/USA/Lebanon: Les Films d'Ici/Proaction Film.

Zytoon, Obaidah, and Andreas Dalsgaard, dir. 2016. *The War Show*. Denmark/Germany/Syria/Finland: Fridthjof Film.