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## Filmmaking, Violence and the Imagination of Peace

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### A Technology of War

Moving images have been engaged in violent conflicts almost since their first appearance. Either as fragments bearing witness to violent events or as catalysts and agents, moving images have shaped the way violence is imagined and performed. Film is therefore not only a passive mirror of violence, but plays an active role in forging violent worldviews. Film language itself relies on martial metaphors, starting with the basic gesture of 'shooting a scene' all the way to the documentary's stated mission to 'capture reality'. As Paul Virilio puts it 'war is cinema and cinema is war' (26). Cinema is thus a technique and a technology of war. If all of this is true, it is equally true that the very same cinematic mechanisms that shape violence can be used to imagine peace and justice and invent images for them.

### The Image of Peace

Whilst we have a vast and pervasive warmongering visual culture, we do lack an imagery of peace to tap into. In this sense every film that concerns itself with resisting violence, has to invent and imagine its own peace. It has to do so also because peace and justice do not exist in the reality the film approaches. In this

sense then films have to find a new method and instruct a new way of looking and listening, a retraining of our militarized perceptions.

These reflections, shaped by our own filmmaking experience – derived from the making of *About a War* and an [ongoing film project](#) with Syrian women – suggest this act of imagining peace through film is always specific, a particular resistance to a particular violence. This might partially be due to the medium itself. Similarly to other art forms, film is inherently partial and derives its force from the personal and the affective. It is a naïve knowledge, 'low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity [...] which involve what I would call a popular knowledge (*le savoir des gens*)' (Foucault 1980: 82).

Films that strive to imagine peace and give it an image – call it 'peacebuilding films' – would therefore be context-specific and defined by the processes encountered in their making (in an industry and culture so obsessed with pre-defined and identifiable outcomes, this means working against the grain). They would also have to imagine a space for peace in the midst of war and a space for justice where there seem to be no chances for it. They have as it were to find ways to imagine dialogue, even and more so where dialogue doesn't exist in the society the film is focusing on. Importantly to imagine peace through film cannot mean merely to sidestep difficult questions and unreconciled positions. Quite the opposite, dialogue can take the form of an accusation, a quest for reparation. Precisely because neither peace nor justice might exist in a given context, it is important to stress that – however 'documentary' and 'factual' the film is – the main task for the filmmaker is not just to gather evidences and testimonies, but to imagine *from* them. This imagination has both to attend to very real experiences and very real situations and at the same time transcend the status quo, imagine an alternative.



### Dialogical Practices

What could then be some of the defining methods of a peacebuilding film? Our work in *About a War* has showed us that specific dialogical practices arise, some of which are in direct contrast with the accepted practices of documentary filmmaking. The first is a resistance to manipulate interviews and points of view. Instead one works through an openness to (at times very difficult) dialogue between interviewer and interviewee, an openness that also informs the choice of location, the duration of the interview, and a patient attention to the landscape through which something unfolds. A peacebuilding film tends to sacrifice the creation of 'scenes' and instead willingly relinquish a degree of control to the incidental scenography negotiated between

interviewer, interviewee and place. Peacebuilding films also push back on 'soundbite culture'. Instead longer sections of the interview are taken in a way that strives (and sometimes succeeds) to remain faithful to the interviewees' subjective experience and to how this is performed and communicated in the testimony. Dialogue continues then in the cutting room as one asks: how do conflicting testimonies meet or contrast with one another? What, if anything, do they have in common? Whether the film is fully co-created or only loosely participatory, it is important that those who feature in the film have a hand in the editing of their stories, even when – in particular when – they cannot be present in the cutting room.

Most importantly, peacebuilding films do not seek to construct a coherent narrative. These films are not searching for a 'unified voice' or for an imposed rationality. Instead they aim to create layered accounts, including versions of the past that complicate official truths, memory scripts and challenge amnesia. The attention is not so much on 'events' as on their affective echoes, the often imperceptible marks left on individuals and communities. The nuances, ambiguity, ambivalence of accounts that find no comfortable conclusion or resolution are the very building blocks of these films.

The attempt to imagine dialogue means that films have to follow the detail and accept the unexpected. Marginal moments might resonate more powerfully than the events historiography has marked as 'important'. To accept dialogue means to be willing to discover significance where one was not looking for it, to allow for the terms of what is significant and insignificant to be rewritten from below. In *About a War* for instance a pinball machine in Tel el Zaatar became a window onto the destruction of a childhood home, the making of a refugee and one of the bloodiest sieges of the Lebanese Civil War.



### **Ethics in the Aesthetics**

Ultimately though, audiences are likely to experience only the finished film, rather than the process that made it possible. It is the finished film – this little malleable object – that will travel and be screened. There is therefore an obligation to translate these practices onto the screen as precisely and effectively as possible. The responsibility towards the difficult subject matter goes hand in hand with a commitment to the craft of filmmaking. The finished film has to deliver images and sounds through which one can see this dialogical method at work. In other words, these films need to put forward an ethical and an aesthetic appeal to their audience, one inseparably weaved into the other. The aesthetic appeal translates in a demand for a different way of looking/listening or more precisely for a specific, unique way of looking/listening. Each film demands to be seen in a certain way and in its unfolding lays down the conditions for its reception. The ethical appeal is intimately connected



to this former point and suggests that the film gives a unique form to the events it concerns itself with, interrupting the automatism of our judgments and interpretations. This openness to dialogue that is proper of the work of peace has to inhabit the films that try to imagine peace.



This mixture of resistance to a specific violence and commitment to the medium invests filmmaking that imagines peace with a specific responsibility for dialogue and therefore tests many of the issues at the heart of documentary filmmaking. Can 'filmmakers relinquish authority; allow things to happen 'with' participants, renounce 'our view'? Can stories speak in their own voice, manifest themselves in their own mode? Filmmaking in this context is therefore also about reframing one's own practices. It is about finding ways – practical ways – to let go of a sense of ownership over sounds and images. This letting go, as and when it is achieved, is the result of craft, practices, and acknowledgement of one's position. It might produce the fleeting imperfect image of a peace that doesn't yet exist, imagined from an insistence on the possibilities of dialogue. Perhaps this also indicates that instead of 'capturing reality', a filmmaker's work is a matter should of seeking a response and patiently attending and listening, for a word to come back.



**Postscript on Impact**



What impact can a film have? Potentially the impact a film can have is enormous, if difficult to quantify. Much has been written about the real social impact of documentary filmmaking and many documentary films about violence and conflict have captured the attention global media over the last years. The impact of a film however can only be acknowledged if one follows it through the folds of different contexts. Global media attention maximises the opportunities for a film to receive widespread distribution and therefore to reach the average cinema-goer and user of streaming services. The consideration of such a wide and large audience helps to put the issue the film revolves around at the centre of the news cycle and the echoes of this might reach policy-makers at high levels. The risk however is that this exposure is purely cosmetic and the felt impact of such recognition remains as glamorous as it is short lived and diaphanous. This is the reason why it is important to follow impact as it happens also at a different level, among affected communities and even among the people whose imagined dialogue on screen becomes, because of the film, acknowledgement, recognition. In these cases the dialogical imagination presented in the film can become a trigger, a catalyst for very real dialogues among those with whom and for whom these films are made. In other words, the dialogue enacted and articulated on screen stops being just an imagined alternative, but becomes the anticipation of realised conversations off screen.

You can **watch About a War** [here](#)

To read reviews on the film:

*"a unique glance"* - **International Documentary Magazine:**

<https://www.moderntimes.review/breaking-the-silence-about-the-lebanese-civil-war/>

*"speaks powerfully to a universal issue"* - **Middle East Monitor**

<https://bit.ly/2tjh4Dc>

*"a compelling and important work"* - **Will Self, Curzon Blog**

<https://bit.ly/3axhDR7>

*"seamlessly executed"* - **The Daily Star**

<https://bit.ly/2GbJ3y9>

*"compelling and often unsettling documentary"* - **Arab News**

<http://www.arabnews.com/node/1450216/art-culture>

*"stirring movie"* - **The New Arab**

<https://bit.ly/2TLzQVe>

*"a multi-perspective picture of horrendous times"* - **The National**

<https://bit.ly/36jjO>

References:

Foucault, M. (1980), *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and other writings*. 1972-1977. New York: Pantheon Books.

Virilio, P. (1989), *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception*. London: Verso

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