

## Making Film Militant

Sandra Schäfer

*"The originality doubtlessly arises through this ever-present blend of investigative activity and the practical activity of change, even if the theory related to this method is still rather confusing. At any rate, the moment where militancy was verified through struggle and consciousness was absolutely fundamental."*<sup>1</sup>

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### Filming in the Context of Militancy

The Afghan director Siddiq Barmak won a Golden Globe in 2004 for his movie "Osama" (2003). He studied film in Moscow and had shot several short films in Afghanistan before joining the Northern Alliance troops under Ahmad Shah Massoud in the late 1980s during the civil war. Massoud established a department for documentary film, and Barmak created various documentations in this context and also wrote the screenplay for the movie "Uruj/Ascension" (1995).<sup>2</sup> The documentary film "The Invasion File" (1997), created by Siddiq Barmak between 1995 and 1997, focuses on interviews with Pakistani prisoners of war in an attempt to substantiate the influence exerted by Pakistan through the establishment of the Taliban.

In contrast to the normative frameworks that deem the lives of certain people are not worthy of mourning, especially in war situations, that their lives do not count as life since they are a threat to a certain community,<sup>3</sup> as Judith Butler has argued, the statements made by prisoners of war in Barmak's "The Invasion File" are indeed significant and do not appear coerced. However, the question remains as to how free their speech can actually be as prisoners of war, not least because the interrogative nature of the interview repeatedly assumes the centre of focus. In this martial conflict, film takes on an enlightening role of military and intellectual nature: "I didn't have a weapon, but I always had my camera."<sup>4</sup>

As opposed to the act of wielding a weapon, the camera pursues an explorative aim, such as the filming of the Taliban's use of violence against beggars in the streets of Kabul. At the same time, the film masks the power struggle between the various Afghan militia leaders. Therefore, it simplifies the conflict and pins it on Pakistan's exertion of influence. The film makes an effort to trigger the appropriate emotions; the affects circulating here are meant to help foment and hold together a community that believes in the imperativeness of resistance.<sup>5</sup> In those places where the image closes itself off as a statement and no longer allows any room for interpretation, the film becomes a kind of agitprop. This also implies that one's own role in the war remains unreflected. So how would militant image production that is not propagandistic look? Is there even such thing as non-propagandistic militant image production in a wartime setting?

### Real Play

In Siddiq Barmak's movie "Osama", filmed in 2002, the representation takes a much more open form. Based on real events, the director developed a fictional film that deals with the difficulties that a mother, grandmother, and granddaughter have in making ends meet, despite women having been banned from employment during the Taliban period. I was present while the film was being shot and was able to document several marginal situations with my camera.<sup>6</sup> One of the biggest scenes being shot in Kabul at the time was the re-enactment of a demonstration staged by women calling for the right to work during the Taliban regime. In November 2002, one thousand women appeared to take part in the scene. At the time, no one had anticipated that so many women would participate. The act of demonstrating had to be practised first; however, by contrast,



Siddiq Barmak, *Osama*, 2003. After the Taliban banned women from working the main character is pretending to be a boy in order to earn a living for herself, her mother, and her grandmother.

most of the Taliban actors knew exactly how to hold a weapon. Even though I was unable to learn more about their concrete past, it was still evident that familiar military activity was being activated in the context of the film set.

Similar to the situation in Gillo Pontecorvo's documentary film "La battaglia di Algeri" (The Battle of Algiers, 1966), the scenes found in the film "Osama" are seen to blend the actors' recent past with the acted reality. For instance, the co-producer, who had previously been a resistance fighter for the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN), plays himself in the film. The premiere of "La battaglia di Algeri" was celebrated in 1966 in Venice. Opponents of the Vietnam War identified parallels between Algeria and Southeast Asia. The film critic Andrew Sarris noted the following: "Waves of applause broke out at scenes of terrorism against the French colonials, at individual acts of murder. ... At times, there were cheers. 'Saigon next!' a man shouted as the Algerians blew up a crowded café in the French quarter".<sup>7</sup> What does it mean when specific scenes from a film spark such reactions? Does it become a militant film by inciting the public to call for military action? Or is this demand always present anyways and merely finds its equivalent in the filmic scene?

### The Making of a Demonstration

Four years after the film "Osama" was made, I travelled back to Kabul with the Berlin filmmaker Elfe Brandenburger in order to research the film together with those who had been involved, and also to explore the women's resistance activities in an expanded context. A conversation with



Sandra Schäfer, *The Making of a Demonstration*, 2004. During the shootings for "Osama" in Kabul 2002: reenactment of a demonstration of women against the implementation of a working ban against women during the Taliban regime.

some of the women actors from the demonstration scene revealed that the staged call for work still today reflects of their demands. The discussions with the extras also revealed that one of the reasons behind their participation in creating the film "Osama" was the generation of income. Moreover, the protagonists were inclined to work on the film in hopes of it impacting their real-life situation. During our collaboration, the protagonists appropriated the filmic space according to their conditions so as to engage in public speech through the framework of the film. During the filming process, they also assumed the role of co-producers who helped to shape scenes in terms of content and repeatedly took over facets of the director's

role. The image production navigated between the historical act of protesting, its present-day activation during the filming process, and the hope that it would impact one's own personal situation in the future. Indeed, the shooting of the film represented a fragile social and political space that intervened in urban space in a changing way, at least temporarily.

Our working approach in the movie "Passing the Rainbow" (2008), filmed in 2006 in Kabul, displays similarities to the collaborative investigation (*con ricerca*) conducted during the Operaismo political movement in the 1960s and 1970s in Italy. During this period, intellectuals in Italy were joined by factory workers in investigating their working conditions there, with an aim to analyse, understand, and change the conditions related to labour and exploitation. The workers' experiences and their concrete situations were the centre of focus. In "Passing the Rainbow", we explore the different methods employed by the protagonists in Kabul for intervening in social processes and those related to gender-based hegemony—regardless of the plane involved, whether acting, political work, or everyday life.

#### All the Sounds, All the Images, in That Order

In 1968, the two French filmmakers Jean-Pierre Gorin and Jean-Luc Godard founded the Dziga Vertov Group. They declared film to be a revolutionary approach meant to increase awareness of the contradictions inherent to the capitalist system and underscore the necessity of change.<sup>8</sup> In 1970,



Anne-Marie Miéville & Jean-Luc Godard, *Ici et Ailleurs*, 1976.

the Dziga Vertov Group filmed PLO activist camps in Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria, where the activists were in the throes of preparing for their next deployment. The film titled "Jusqu'à la Victoire" (Towards Victory) was never finished. Many of the PLO activists died soon thereafter in the violent conflict, and the Dziga Vertov Group disbanded in 1972. Two years later, Jean-Luc Godard and Anne-Marie Miéville used the visual material in their film "Ici et Ailleurs" (Here and Elsewhere, 1976), which thematised the ambivalent relations related to filmic involvement in a political

struggle: elsewhere and within the personal context. They self-critically questioned the techniques of image production favoured by the Dziga Vertov Group in service of the liberation struggle. The off voice in "Ici et Ailleurs" explains that the problem with "Jusqu'à la Victoire" was that the sound was turned up so high "that it almost suffocated the voice which it was supposed to be retrieving from the image"<sup>9</sup>

So how can a film be militant without becoming propaganda, and without the image closing itself off in terms of meaning? In this context I would like to recall the differentiation noted by Godard between political film and the act of making film political. The former represents political issues, whereas political filmmaking questions the arrangement of pictures and sounds, lends visibility to ideological conditions, and disrupts conventions. Political filmmaking challenges the viewers to become political beings, to question power relations, and to think for themselves. If we transferred this differentiation to making film militant, then it wouldn't deal with the representation of militancy either. So what would it actually mean to make film militant? In this context, I understand militancy itself to be a radical, emancipatory process, rather than simply a means towards achieving the goal of emancipation. Here the question arises as to how film could become part of such a process. And what implications would arise for the filmic form if the objective were to make films militant?

#### Too Lacerated and Fractured to Fit into These Neat Scenarios

How tightly interlaced filmic form and political context are in militant filmmaking is evident in the filmic work "Leila and the Wolves" (1984) by Heiny Srour. She made her movie in 1980–81 during the civil wars in Lebanon. From the perspective of the Lebanese student Leila living in London, a multifaceted narrative unfolds about the various struggles



Heiny Srour, *Leila and the Wolves*, 1984. A portrait of the main character Leila. Displeased by the official, colonial, male dominated version of history Leila—a student living in London—crosses history on the trail of women who participated in the wars of resistance in Palestine and the Lebanon.

women have been going through since the early twentieth century as part of the civil and independence wars in Palestine and Lebanon. Heiny Srour traverses history and sketches, based on fictional scenes and historical

television footage, a contradictory and fragile picture of this history that eschews any sort of chronological order. In an interview with the filmmaker John Akomfrah, Srour describes the ways in which filmic form and lacerations within societal relations due to colonial influences are mutually dependent: "Those of us from the third world have to reject the ideas of film narration based on 19th century bourgeois novels with its commitment to harmony. Our societies have been too lacerated and fractured by colonial power to fit into those neat scenarios. We have enormous gaps in our societies and film has to recognise this".<sup>10</sup> Historical battles are activated in the present, and the filmic characters pass through history/stories. Militant filmmaking as a co-investigation rediscovers its form again and again. Nonetheless, the question arises as to whether the concept of militancy is still appropriate today—in view of the Islamic state and other militias—for describing radically emancipatory processes. Perhaps other terminology is necessary for describing radically emancipatory methods, even in the context of image production.

- 1 Antonio Negri, "An den Ursprüngen des Operaismus: Die 'Roten Hefte' (Quaderni Rossi)", *TheKla: Material zur Karlsruhe Stadtzeitung* 30, *Militante Untersuchung*, 5 (1984), p. 8.
- 2 The film deals with a young village blacksmith's resistance against the intimidation methods used by the occupying Soviet forces. The man survives a murder attempt thanks to the care demonstrated by Shah Ahmad Massoud's mujahideen warriors. Three actors were killed while the film was being shot when a Taliban rocket struck the film studio. The premiere was held in a Kabul cinema in December 1995, and the film was later shown in the United States and Germany. Directed by Nour Hashim Habir; screenplay by Siddiq Barmak; performed by Homayoun Paeez, Walli Tallash, Assad Tajzai, Majeed Ghiazi, Gadder Ariffi, Mohaidin Saffa, Nassim Saheer, Scharif Kheirchor, Schkuri Khetri; Afghanistan, 1995, 128'.
- 3 Butler calls the normative societal processes playing out here "frames". These frames, which are also reflected in the normative processes of countless other societies, must be re-established again and again in order to sustain a state of hegemony. Image production is part of such processes that are especially active in war situations. See Judith Butler, *Frames of War* (London: Verso, 2009), p. 31.
- 4 Siddiq Barmak in conversation with the author in Kabul, July 2004.
- 5 "In such affective economies, emotions *do things*, and they align individuals with communities—or bodily space with social space—through the very intensity of their attachments." Sara Ahmed, "Affective Economies", *Social Text*, 79, vol. 22, no. 2, (Summer 2004), p. 119.
- 6 This gave rise to the short film "The Making of a Demonstration" (2004), which is included as an extra in the German-language DVD edition of the movie "Osama".
- 7 Windu Jusuf cites the journalist Andrew Sarris in "Beatriz's War and us", *The Jakarta Post*, (updated 21 December 2014), <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2014/12/21/beatriz-s-war-and-us.html>, accessed 21 December 2014.
- 8 The name is an allusion to the Russian filmmaker Dziga Vertov, the inventor of the "cinéma vérité". Besides Godard and Gorin, members of the group included Jean-Henri Roger, Paul Burron, and Gérard Martin. They made their films in 16mm, the documentary and television format, and declined to name individual authorship.
- 9 Jean-Luc Godard, Anne Miéville, *Ici et Ailleurs* (Here and Elsewhere, 1976).
- 10 Heiny Srour in conversation with John Akomfrah, in *City Limits* (October 10, 1983), cited in the film description of "Leila and the Wolves", Cinenova Feminist Film and Video Distributor archive, London.