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## Table of Contents

<b>Notes on Contributors</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Introduction</b> Celia Lam	<b>3</b>
<b>Interview with Charlie Targett-Adams: The Alternative Narratives of <i>PLACEBO: ALT.RUSSIA</i></b> Questions by Celia Lam	<b>5</b>
<b>More Than “Collaborative Rubber Stamps”: Cross-Community Storytelling in Transitional Northern Ireland</b> Laura Aguiar	<b>13</b>
<b>Conversational Storytelling in Community Context: Examining Talk on Transgender Radio</b> Kate Ames	<b>33</b>
<b>Media Portrayal of Street Violence Against Egyptian Women: Women, Socio-Political Violence, Ineffective Laws and Limited Role of NGOs</b> Rasha El-Ibiary	<b>49</b>
<b>“The Real Nasty Side of War”: Exploring the Embodied Experience of American Soldiers on the Frontline in Iraq through Their YouTube Videos</b> Noémie Oxley	<b>65</b>
<b>From Osaka to the Gion: Vernacular Modernism in Kenji Mizoguchi’s <i>Osaka Elegy</i> (1936) and <i>Sisters of the Gion</i> (1936)</b> Paul Spicer	<b>83</b>
<b>Tsai Ming Liang’s Alternative Narratives of Working-Class Life in Taiwan</b> Sarah Attfield	<b>93</b>





## Notes on Contributors

**Dr Laura Aguiar** is a Postdoctoral Researcher with the Keynes Centre, University College Cork, Ireland. She is a practice-based researcher and her interests range from collaborative media practices and interactive storytelling to gender representation and reading and watching films for change. She edited and co-directed the documentary film *We Were There*, about the women's experience of the Maze/Long Kesh prison in Northern Ireland, and designed the online interactive webpage for the *Prisons Memory Archive*. She also directed the interactive e-book *experience John Maynard Keynes: The Lives of a Mind* and co-curated the gallery exhibition *Flight of the Earls: 410 Years*. Her current work investigates how films and books can be used as levers to promote personal and professional development.

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**Dr Sarah Attfield** is a Scholarly Teaching Fellow in the School of Communication at the University of Technology Sydney, Australia. She has been teaching film studies at UTS for the past ten years and has a particular interest in the ways in which working-class people are represented on screen. She also researches working class representation (including self-representation) in literature, art and popular music. She is the co-founding editor of the *Journal of Working-Class Studies*.

**Dr Rasha El-Ibiary** is an Assistant Professor at the Political Mass Media Department, Faculty of Economics and Political Science, with the Future University in Egypt, Cairo, Egypt. She is also an Editor with Sage Open and a Senior Reviewer with the International Academic Forum. Her research focuses on media and politics, media and terrorism, media and conflict, and media-gendered violence. She has conducted a comparative analysis between Al-Jazeera and CNN International in their media coverage of the 2003 war against Iraq, later published in a book entitled, *One War, Two Televised Worlds*.

**Dr Celia Lam** is Editor of the *IAFOR Journal of Media, Communication & Film*, as well as Assistant Professor (Lecturer) in Media and Cultural Studies, School of International Communications, University of Nottingham Ningbo, China. She received a BMedia in Screen Production from Macquarie University, Sydney, and subsequently a PhD from the University of Sydney. Her research focuses on the cultural and aesthetic impact of digital technologies on media production and consumption, audience reception and fan studies. She also has an interest in mediated self-presentation, including online identity presentation and management. In 2012 she was awarded an Endeavour Award Post-Doctoral Fellowship from the Australian Government to undertake research in the area of online identity presentation in Hong Kong.

**Dr Noémie Oxley** is an Assistant Professor in the Global Communications Department at the American University of Paris, France. She is also a member of the Research Centre for Art and Language at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS). Her research focuses on amateur productions shot in situations of conflict, and covers their production and

circulation online. She has explored the role of the soldier on the modern mediated battlefield through the study of videos shot by American troops in Iraq and posted on YouTube. She currently investigates the transformation of protests in security states through videos shot by young protestors and independent journalists during France social unrests in Spring 2016.

**Dr Paul Spicer** is a Lecturer within the Faculty of International Liberal Arts, at Hiroshima Jogakuin University, Hiroshima, Japan. His research focuses primarily on Japanese film history and culture, but he has also presented and written on 1970s Japanese sub-cultures and popular music. He is currently working on a three-year, Japanese Government funded research project to investigate the films of Kenji Mizoguchi, exploring the director's work in both cultural and historical contexts. This project involves the promotion, across Japan and internationally, of Mizoguchi's films and their relationship with traditional Japanese arts, history and culture. The culmination of this research will result in a book publication in early 2021. In addition to his current research, he is also working on a chapter about British singer/songwriter Paul Weller, for a forthcoming book on spirituality/religion and the sacred in popular music.

## Introduction

The *IAFOR Journal of Media, Communication & Film* (IJMCF) is associated with IAFOR's annual MediAsia and EuroMedia conferences. IJMCF is committed to publishing peer-reviewed scholarship that explores the relationship between society, film and media – including new and digital media – as well as giving a voice to scholars whose work explores hitherto unexamined aspects of contemporary media and visual culture.

This fourth issue of the *IAFOR Journal of Media, Communication & Film* features contributions from the four corners of the globe, representing multiple nationalities. The aim of the journal is to gather interdisciplinary and international perspectives on global and local mediascapes, as well as communication practices that flow within and between national boundaries. The articles in this issue address the concept of alternative narratives, each exploring the forms, functions and effects of non-mainstream stories in contemporary media, film, politics and culture.

The issue starts its exploration of alternative cultures through the latest in the IJMCF series of interviews with the filmmaking community. Charlie Targett-Adams' film *PLACEBO: ALT. RUSSIA* (2016) uncovers the alternative cultures of Russia's artistic communities through the eyes of Placebo band member Stefan Olsdal. It is 2014, and while the world's attention is focused on Crimea, Placebo embarks on a ten-city tour of Russia to celebrate the band's twentieth anniversary. Targett-Adams and his crew are along for the ride. The film documents powerful concerts played to crowds of hundreds, and presents these alongside the stories of local craftsmen and women, artists and musicians. It is as much a celebration of the band's milestone as it is an artistic journey into the cultural fabric of contemporary Russia. It is a film that enables viewers, in the words of Targett-Adams, to "see a different side to Russia".

The first article of this issue, "More than 'Collaborative Rubber Stamps': Cross-Community Storytelling in Transitional Northern Ireland", explores the role of alternative media in fostering cross-community development in Northern Ireland. Through an examination of grassroots projects that challenge the official narratives of the conflicts of the late twentieth century, the article demonstrates the power of alternative stories for communities that need to at once record and reconcile the past. The second article continues an exploration of the potential of alternative media platforms to foster counter-publics. "Conversational storytelling in community context: Examining talk on transgender radio" locates 'conversational storytelling' in community radio program *TRANS\*Positions*, outlining how the participants construct identities within and without the transgender community through interaction between hosts, guests and callers.

"Media Portrayal of Street Violence against Egyptian Women" argues for changes in media representation of violence against women in Egypt, as a means to improve the status and image of women in society. Within that effort, alternative media adopted by non-government organisations, such as HarassMap, offer a means for citizens, victims and their supporters to provide up to date information and to document violence that is often ignored, or misrepresented, in the mainstream press. Next, the article "The real Nasty Side of War": exploring the embodied experience of American soldiers on the frontline in Iraq through their YouTube videos" explores soldiers' representations of

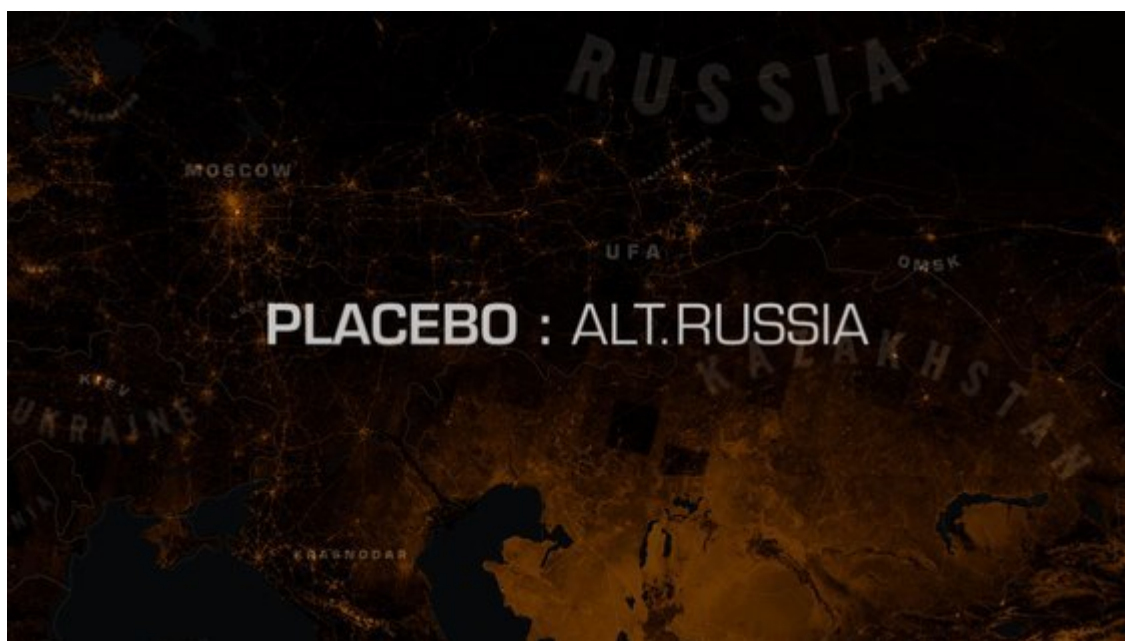
conflict in war zones through self-filmed videos. Drawing upon existant images of war in order to construct their own representations of war-time experiences, these videos reveal the contradictory position inhabited by soldiers between the realities of combat, media representations, and political rheoretic.

Finally, two articles offer alternative perspectives on the study of filmmakers Kenji Mizoguchi in Japan and Tsai Ming Liang in Taiwan. “From Osaka to the Gion: Vernacular Modernism in Kenji Mizoguchi’s *Osaka Elegy* (1936) and *Sisters of the Gion* (1936)” approaches Mizoguchi’s films from the theoretical perspective of Miriam Hansen’s (2000) notion of ‘vernacular modernism’, arguing that the micro-communities represented in the films and the context of the Japanese film industry are best understood through a culturally specific analysis of film. Through analysis of two Mizoguchi films, the article highlights the influence of modernity on the traditions and social organisation of Japanese society. This tension, it argues, is located between the melodrama of narrative and performance, and the detailed mise en scène constructed by the director. In “Tsai Ming Liang’s Alternative Narratives of Working-Class Life in Taiwan”, the representation of working class experiences offer an alternative perspective on a respected filmmaker’s body of work. The article argues that his depiction of working class narratives and stylistic approaches enables audiences to develop affective responses to working class life.

The IJMCF Editorial Board owes a debt of gratitude to our external peer reviewers, notably Dr Elizabeth Burrows (Griffith University), Dr Bertha Chin (Swinbure University of Technology, Sarawak), Ryszard Dabek (University of Sydney), Sarah Feinstein (University of Manchester), Dr Susan Hopkins (University Southern Queensland), Dr Zoran Lee Pecic (Roskilde University), Dr Simon Philpott (Newcastle University), and Dr Renee Middlemost (University of Wollongong). We would also like to extend our sincere thanks to the IAFOR Publications Desk, our authors and dedicated readership.



**Dr Celia Lam**  
**Editor-in-Chief**  
**19 July 2017**



**Interview with Charlie Targett-Adams:  
The Alternative Narratives of *PLACEBO: ALT.RUSSIA***

Questions by Celia Lam

The alternative is an almost ubiquitous notion that supports a variety of connotations. In opposition, the alternative presents subversive or resistive possibilities to political or cultural mainstreams. The alternative also represents choice: of direction; or of possibilities. The alternative is thus also innovative, signalling unconventional approaches to the status quo be they artistic, inventive or political. *PLACEBO: ALT.RUSSIA* (Targett-Adams 2016) explores the untold narrative of Russia's alternative cultures in an era when global attention is focused on Russia's politics and international relations. Taking the rare opportunity of documenting the band's twentieth-anniversary tour of ten Russian cities, the film follows Placebo's Stefan Olsdal as he encounters artists, architects, and musicians that comprise the creative cultures of Russia's major cities.

The film is punctuated by personal stories and Placebo's concerts, revealing the universal power of art. *PLACEBO: ALT. RUSSIA* has received exposure and prizes at international film competitions and was a category winner at the IAFOR Documentary Film Award 2016.

**Keywords:** alternative narratives, creative cultures, Placebo, Russia, documentary film, rockumentary

**Watch the trailer for *PLACEBO: ALT.RUSSIA* by Charlie Targett-Adams on [YouTube](#).**

**1. Please tell me about the concept behind *PLACEBO: ALT.RUSSIA*. How did you establish a connection with the band and what inspired you to tell this story?**

I have been working with Placebo since 2008 and my career has grown with them. I was brought in by their manager Alex Weston to make an EPK out of home footage they shot and little by little they have given me more autonomy on each project. Since 2009 I have made everything from online films, DVDs, live concert videos, a music video and the first documentary, *Coming Up For Air*, that was shown at the inaugural Sundance London Film Festival in 2012.

In April 2014, Alex emailed me about coming in to talk about making a documentary about the Russian tour. They were playing 10 Russian cities, eight of which they had not played before, and travelling on the Trans-Siberian express. It was a different tour for them, and a great opportunity to make something unique. At the time Russia was all over the news with Crimea so I thought we should not concentrate on the politics and instead reach out to the people and see a different side to Russia.

I went away and wrote a treatment for the film setting out the approach: going out into the cities and meeting creatives on the way. I had the name from the start, *PLACEBO: ALT.RUSSIA*, because I always see Placebo being labelled as an 'Alternative Rock' band and thought that would be a good hook to look into alternative culture in Russia; the culture we rarely hear about in the mainstream media.

**2. Please tell me about the technical process. How many cameras did you use during the shoot, and what was your plan for sound recording? Were there any challenging situations or interesting stories to come from production?**

A rockumentary like this has a very rock n roll approach – get the best camera you can for the little money you have and make everything look great. The film was shot on one camera by myself, except for some footage that was shot by an incredible DP called Vanessa Whyte. We were filming for Nowness about the Arena di Verona and she shot the section in the documentary where we go to Venice. Sound was also a one-man job; I would stick a wireless lapel mic on anyone who would talk and that was it. Therefore, because the technical aspect was so crude it was all about how you use the tools and how you tell the story.

Thankfully I managed to get a producer to go out to Russia with me – Stephanie Fyfe. Stephanie has experience in filming documentaries around the world and in how to reach out to contributors and set up interviews in far-off locations. Like always in the world of rock'n'roll, money and time weren't on our side, so we had two weeks for the pre-production to find out as much as we could about the places we were going and who we could meet up with. We spent every waking hour researching, emailing and picking up the phone trying to set things up before we left. We explored every angle we could and contacted everyone we came across including Placebo fans to help give us their ideas about their cities.

In the end a great resource for us was *The Calvert Journal* based in London. On their website they feature articles about the creative arts in Russia and Eastern Europe and it opened up a lot of angles on who and what to look out for. Once we had a list of people in each city we sent them over to Stefan Olsdal and Brian Molko from the band to ask who they were interested in

meeting. From there we narrowed down the choices and then the tough task of getting in contact with them. I think when we left to go to Russia we had only successfully secured three contributors – Fyodor Bukhtoyarov, Muddlehood and Recycled Group.

Some people we never managed to contact, others we did and they didn't show up at our meetings and others we met but we could not fit into the edit of the documentary. Thankfully, of the people we did meet, we were really blown away by what they did and each gave their own unique angle for the film. If we did this documentary again we could have ended up with completely different contributors. So for me it is about a time and a place that we capture in the film and a dialogue that Placebo had with the alternative culture in Russia at that time.

The band's touring format is normally one day travel, one day gig. Sometimes there are days off. Therefore, as soon as we arrived in each city we would either head straight out to meet someone or go in the morning before the concerts. Then for the first few cities we would leave straight from the gig venues onto the Trans-Siberian Express. The journey times would vary but it would normally mean an overnight journey to the next city. Stephanie and I would be preparing options and logistics of who to go out and meet. We would then shoot around the city, head to our contributor that day or the next and then I would shoot the concert footage. When I shoot a concert, I am always more interested in trying to capture what it felt like to be there than document what actually happened. Therefore, I normally make my way around the whole venue picking up moments from on or off stage, trying to capture people's reactions and emotions. Whilst I was doing this, Stephanie would be backstage continuing to contact people, trying to set up the next interviews. The tour lasted sixteen days and in total we covered just over 13,500 km.

### **3. Tell me a bit about the editing process. How did you find the narrative? Did the story of the band's encounters with Russian artists emerge after the shoot, or before?**

The beauty of a documentary is you never really know what you're going to come across and how it is going to pan out. You start with a set of ideas to guide you but as you go the film takes you in different directions due to an infinite amount of variables. We returned from the tour with thirty-five hours of footage. All of this is boiled down to the one hour and seven minutes running time. The first process was remembering and then looking through everything and starting to pick selects from the footage. I did this during the tour to start thinking about what we had and where we could take things.

The main concept of the documentary was set out in my treatment and script. We knew the premise was to go out and talk to creatives to find out about living and working in Russia. We aimed to get a diverse mix of people into the film and not just the obvious type of creatives that people would associate with Russia. We wanted to get different opinions on similar topics from each of our contributors.

The narrative naturally evolved as we went and guided us from interview to interview. As a director I'm looking to create an engaging story for the documentary, crafting something together that people can watch. There is a lot that was said in the interviews that I would have loved to have included in the documentary but the mass of information would have been overwhelming and made the film hard to digest.

Therefore, the edit in a documentary is incredibly important and I would say the editor becomes a second director. Jerry Chater was our editor. He had edited music documentaries about U2,

Radiohead, Oasis and Joy Division and I knew he would bring so much to our film. He had the task of seeing the wood from the trees, really refining and honing the narrative and digging deep into the footage we captured. This was the first time I had worked with Jerry so I spent the first two weeks going through the footage with him and looking through transcripts. Then I left him to start putting everything together and see how he interpreted what we shot and what I had explained to him. I would then head back in every few weeks to see what he had done, discuss and give notes, and he would continue crafting everything together. This went on for about four months on and off before we had a first cut. Stefan from the band came into the edit on occasions and helped craft the narrative as we went. The themes and topics were all there in the footage and we told the story in a linear fashion so the task was stripping out what we felt wasn't relevant and really refining what we captured. We sent the first cut to the band and management and in total they only asked for four changes.

#### **4. What inspired your stylistic choices for the film?**

A director's role is about constantly making decisions and choices. What influences these choices comes from everywhere and mostly your own experiences. When talking about stylistic choices for the film it is hard for me to analyse those. They are techniques and styles that come naturally to me, that I have embraced over time. What I would say about this film though is we thought it should be led by Stefan from the band. The previous feature documentary was all led by a narration from Brian. Therefore, this time we chose to have Stefan lead it and instead of it being a film that looked inwards to the band we thought it should look outwards and be guided by Stefan. He really embraced the project and was very involved at every stage of the production. He was the best champion and driving force to make sure it would see the light of day.

It was a constant dialogue on the road with Stefan, Stephanie and me about who we would meet, why and what we would talk about. However, when we got to each contributor we gave Stefan research and guidance but it was his own conversations and dialogue with the creatives that drove the interviews. From what I knew, he had never really done any work in front of the camera like this before, leading the conversation and giving personal insight into difficult subjects on camera. Usually people would be asking him questions instead of the other way around but I feel he managed to fall straight into the role and get his own naturally inquisitive and engaging character across on camera. Then when we came to do the voice over for the film, Jerry had written a guide dialogue and Stefan managed to spin it around into his own words to give it a real personal and engaging touch. I always love the collaborative nature of filmmaking. It is a great medium to bring many skills and talents together and the final piece is an evolution of all of those elements.

#### **5. A common theme throughout the film is the need for art and artists to persevere, particularly when faced with political pressures, or even as an alternative to the mainstream. Do you think art is inherently alternative? Is it important that societies nurture alternative artistic communities?**

To answer the first question, no. I wouldn't say art is inherently alternative. Art is in the everyday and is all around us. I feel art is impossible to define and comes in many forms. What can be alternative is how people engage and hear about art away from wider society. The internet age has given a voice to an incredible amount of people and alternative narratives are being pursued and told. This is what I feel the film is engaging with. Providing amplification of alternative narratives that make people think and engage. I feel it is very important that



societies nurture alternative narratives and alternative artistic pursuits. Life would be incredibly dull if everything was similar and the way we evolve and challenge ourselves is through alternative pursuits away from the status quo.

**6. The theme for this issue of the Journal is ‘Alternative Narratives’. How important are alternative narratives to the artists featured in the film?**

The arts are a great way to express thoughts that sometimes are too hard to directly say. Nothing is ever black or white so creating something that makes people sit up and listen and reassess what they know is something I’m always interested in. Being in the bubble of a band travelling through Russia we never got a real experience of what it must be like to live there but we asked everyone we met about it. Hopefully the documentary brings across what we found and what we thought.

From the limited time we spent with the artists we found each one led different types of lives. A country as vast as Russia has such a rich cultural mix and the lives of people like Rinat Kamalov, a Muslim traditional musician to Petr Pavlensky, a contemporary artist that uses his body as a form of political protest, could not be more different. What we did consciously seek out were people who were away from the mainstream. Hopefully by doing this we showed an alternative narrative to the mainstream reported in Russia. The film has gone down really well in Russia. I feel there is a great appetite for it because it is an alternative take on how Russians see their own country.

**7. How important are alternative narratives to the band?**

One of my favourite quotes from Brian is “Placebo attracts the misshapes, the square pegs in the round holes.” From hearing several interviews they have given over the years I would say alternative narratives are important to them. I feel they are writing their own one in the history of modern Western music. They are currently in their 20th year as a band and when they started Brit Pop had emerged, lad culture and crude rivalries between bands such as Blur and Oasis. Placebo decided to blur these false boundaries and were the antidote to that culture. Having come to fame in that way, I feel they are now put under that section of ‘alternative’ for people to easily categorize and digest their style in a single term. That is why I thought it would be good to play on that with the title of the documentary, *PLACEBO: ALT.RUSSIA*, and also the Alt on a computer keyboard that gives a nod to our internet age.

**8. Finally, where have you screened the film so far, and where will you take it next?**

The documentary has had a great response at several festivals and a theatrical release so far in Russia. We have won three film festival awards at present. To be recognised outside the world of music with the IAFOR award was incredibly humbling for us all. One aspect of a rockumentary that I love is how it is a document of that period in time. I remember the first one I watched was *Don’t Look Back* by D. A. Pennebaker about Bob Dylan’s tour in 1965 to the UK. Pennebaker was a pioneer of observational documentary filmmaking. Technology had appeared that allowed a film camera to sync sound and be light enough to film handheld for hours – it was still incredible heavy for today’s standards. When I watch that film now I am fascinated by the haircuts, clothes, accents, mannerisms etc. of the people. Every frame is rich in cultural history and it is presented in a topic that is incredibly interesting. I feel all music documentaries grow better with time as they capture the culture of that time. We want to get the film shown to as many people as possible all over the world through film festivals. We are

going to show it in as many festivals that accept us this year and then there will be a general release at the end of the year or next year.

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## **More Than “Collaborative Rubber Stamps”: Cross-Community Storytelling in Transitional Northern Ireland**

Laura Aguiar  
University College Cork, Ireland

### **Abstract**

Storytelling is one of the most cited means of dealing with the legacy of the past in transitional societies. Since the mid-1990s, with the peace process, Northern Ireland has witnessed a proliferation of official and unofficial initiatives dealing with the Troubles (1968–1998). Below the radar of official initiatives, there have been a number of grassroots projects challenging official narratives and recovering silenced accounts of the past. These range across photography, oral history, exhibition, theatre and film.

In this paper, I examine some of these initiatives and show how alternative media has played a key role in cross-community development and conflict transformation in Northern Ireland, despite the political sensitivities. As the conflict had several protagonists, the boundaries between victims and perpetrators have remained blurred and, consequently, stories about the past remain debatable. Interestingly, this has also brought opportunities for projects to develop collaborative storytelling frameworks.

Based on field notes and cross-examination of published studies about the projects, the findings show that by offering shared ownership and authorship these frameworks enable all parties to invest in and benefit from the projects and offer a supportive space for people to engage in discussions about the past. However, these projects are not immune to the paradoxical potential of storytelling to heal trauma and open old wounds – there is no guarantee that people will not re-traumatise or that stories will always be well received. Nevertheless, the findings demonstrate that when people have the opportunity to tell their stories through a collaborative process, the gap between media representations and people’s plural lived experiences is more likely to be addressed.

**Keywords:** alternative media, Troubles, Northern Ireland, storytelling, collaboration

## Introduction

From 2011 until 2014 I lived in Northern Ireland to undertake a practice-based PhD research on cross-community collaborative filmmaking. What I encountered was a place in the midst of transition from years of violence and division. At the centre of this (slow) transition I found a creative context for alternative media projects dealing with the conflict: over 30 such projects took place before 2005 and many more have emerged since then (Kelly 2005).

I begin this article with a brief overview of the current transitional scenario and the impact of the scars left by the Troubles to outline the context for this analysis. I then examine some of the alternative media initiatives and show how these have contributed to conflict transformation in Northern Ireland, despite the political sensitivities.

Drawing on my field notes taken while engaging with these initiatives through public events and on cross-examination of published studies about the projects, I finish with a discussion of the challenges the sensitive context brings to any media project. This article demonstrates how the projects have addressed these challenges through the adoption of collaborative storytelling practices and how their strength lies in the relationships formed with the participants through shared ownership or authorship.

## Northern Ireland Today: Post-Conflict?

Various paradigms have been used to interpret the conflict in Northern Ireland, or the ‘war’, or the ‘Troubles’, with the ethnic paradigm being the one most commonly used by mainstream media and politicians. This paradigm sees the conflict as a violent expression of animosities and unresolved issues about nationality, religion, power and territorial rivalry between republicans/nationalists (mostly Catholics) and loyalists/unionists (mostly Protestants). However, authors such as Graham Dawson go beyond this paradigm and incorporate a broader set of protagonists. For Dawson, the Troubles can be categorised by “systematic and sustained abuses of human rights by the British State, and a systematic blurring, by all protagonists of violence, of the categories of armed combatants and unarmed civilians” (Dawson 2007: 9).

The conflict left almost 4,000 people dead and over 40,000 injured during its 30-odd years (McKittrick & McVea 2002). Although these figures may seem low if compared to other conflicts, it is a considerable number for a population of only 1.5 million: “if a similar level of violence had taken place in Britain over the same period, there would have been 100,000 dead, one million shooting incidents and some half a million bombings” (Ryder 2000: xiii).

Apart from deaths and casualties, the conflict has also left psychological scars in Northern Ireland. In 2005, a study conducted by Queens University Belfast found that “one in five people has suffered multiple experiences relating to the Troubles” and “one in ten of those surveyed reported post-traumatic symptoms that are suggestive of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)” (Muldoon et al. 2005: 87–88). A more recent study has shown that children from deprived Protestant areas were worse off than those from deprived Catholic areas, particularly because of continuing paramilitary and criminal influence (Meredith 2015).

Although Northern Ireland seems to be slowly recovering from the economic downturn, with new restaurants opening and tourist attractions such as the Titanic Experience increasing their

visitor numbers,<sup>1</sup> within comfortable walking distance from the centre one is still greeted by so-called ‘peace walls’, murals and flags which clearly display the division between unionist/loyalist and nationalist/republican areas. One could argue that these displays show that Northern Ireland remains, as former loyalist prisoner Alistair Little points out, a place where inhabitants define themselves “not by what they shared in common but by what set them apart” (Little & Scott 2009: 26).

Though the level of violence diminished considerably with the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998,<sup>2</sup> some of the tension was still visible during the period I conducted my research: dissident republican groups targeted security staff in gun and bomb attacks and carried out bombings meant to cause disruption. In 2012 alone, there was an average of more than one security alert per day (Kilpatrick 2013). Tensions increased at the end of the same year after Belfast City Council voted to restrict the flying of the Union flag to 20 designated days. Part of the Protestant/unionist/loyalist community saw it as a threat to their culture and took to the streets to protest, in some cases through violence, against this vote (INTERCOMM & Byrne 2013).<sup>3</sup>

Their dissatisfaction increased in the following year, after the Parades Commission ruled that Orangemen could not march past the Ardoyne shops, a nationalist area, during the Twelfth of July parade.<sup>4</sup> At the end of 2013, a six-month inter-party talk chaired by Dr Richard Haass and Dr Meghan O’Sullivan attempted to reach an agreement on issues of flags, parading and dealing with the past (McDonald 2013). An agreement would only be reached a year later with the Stormont House Agreement, which sought to provide for a set of new institutions, namely The Historical Investigations Unit (HIU), an Independent Commission on Information Retrieval (ICIR), an Oral History Archive, and an Implementation and Reconciliation Group. However, its implementation remains delayed due to disagreements about welfare reform and paramilitary activity (BBC 2015).

In 2016 relationships between republicans and unionists deteriorated when the late republican Deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness resigned in protest over unionist First Minister Arlene Foster’s handling of The Renewable Heat Incentive scheme scandal and her refusal to step aside during investigations of the scheme’s flaws (Moriarty 2016). At the time of writing, new elections have taken place, but the parties have yet to form a new government.

The difficulty in addressing and reaching an agreement on issues about the past and the tensions between republicans and unionists evidence how “[d]eep division, sectarianism, segregation, suspicion, and the socio-economic deprivation that affects our wider community and economy are all legacies of the past” (Stormont Report 2011: 162). Dealing with any of these issues is highly problematic given the current ‘meta-conflict’ situation where there is no agreement on why the conflict happened and on how to deal with its legacy (McGarry & O’Leary cited in Moloney 2014: 13). As unionist politician Mike Nesbit illustrates, “We cannot agree on what happened, and we certainly cannot agree on why it happened. We cannot even agree on the

<sup>1</sup> The revitalisation of certain areas of Belfast, including the Titanic Quarter, has brought debates about gentrification, city branding and heritage. For more, see Murtagh (2011) and Neill et al. (2013).

<sup>2</sup> The Agreement “established the framework for transition to a new political dispensation and social order in Northern Ireland” (Dawson 2007: 261).

<sup>3</sup> For more on the protests, see Nolan et al. (2014) and Hearty (2015).

<sup>4</sup> These annual marches are a loyalist/unionist/Protestant event and celebrate the victory of Protestant King William of Orange over Catholic King James II at the Battle of the Boyne (1690). The marches have led to conflicts in interface areas between nationalist and loyalist communities, as the former sees them as intimidating while the latter regards them a celebration of their culture.

language that we use to describe it. Was it ‘the Troubles’, ‘the conflict’, or was it, as republicans like to say, a ‘war’?” (Stormont Report 2011: 167).

The question of victimhood has also been central to debates on the Troubles’ legacy. As the conflict had several protagonists, one person’s ‘victim’ may be seen as another’s ‘perpetrator’ and “even perpetrators claim to have been the victims of circumstance” (McLaughlin 2010: 144). This blurring of boundaries in the dichotomy of victim/perpetrator has led to numerous debates on the question of a “hierarchy of victims”, where “some deaths are held to be more important and so merit recognition more than others” (Dawson 2007: 286). This question is further problematised when the State and paramilitary organisations have yet to publicly take responsibility for past atrocities, such as the Ballymurphy massacre<sup>5</sup> and the ‘disappeared’. Hence, the manner and place in which perceived ‘perpetrators’, for example ex-prisoners or prison officers, tell their stories can become highly controversial issues (Mairs 2013: 251–2).

### **Dealing with the Past through Alternative Media**

Storytelling has emerged as one of the most cited means of dealing with the legacy of the past in transitional societies (Mairs 2013: 22). Whilst in some cases it has been termed “testimony-giving” and used to uncover the ‘truth’, such as in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in South Africa, in others, storytelling has been used as a medium to recover and make sense of neglected or silenced accounts of the past (Rogers et al 2004: 12–13). Indeed, storytelling has become the major conduit for “dealing with the past” in Northern Ireland as opposed to other mechanisms, such as tribunals or TRCs. As Claire Hackett and Bill Rolston note, this is because it “allows more room for the narrator’s interpretation of his/her experience” and, consequently, enables agency to the bereaved and victims of human rights abuse to be restored (Hackett & Rolston 2009: 369).

Moreover, memory has been favoured over ‘truth’ in Northern Ireland as it may provide “evidence of how people interpret their past at a personal level, which is an invaluable contribution to other documentary evidence and provides a rich texture to our understanding of historical developments” (McLaughlin 2010: 20). Through memory internal selves connect “with external environments, pasts with presents, and random experiences with unconscious routines” (Zelizer 1995: 214). Hence, storytelling based on memory may function as “a way of re-living, re-working, making sense of, coming to terms with, and integrating violent events” which may have altered people’s lives (Zur 2004: 51) and may offer an opportunity for individuals with different experiences to listen to each other’s stories.

Political transitions can sometimes “lead to an official story or memory that erases, downplays, marginalizes or formalizes and institutionalizes the stories of some or all victims” (Hackett & Rolston 2009: 357). For instance, the voices of women have often been neglected for war history that is highly male-centred (Adie 2003; Jelin 2003; Ward 2006; Alison 2009; Cohn 2013) with personalised symbols of pain and suffering often embodied in women, while institutional repressive mechanisms often connected to men (Jelin 2003: 76). As a result, there is a gap for alternative media projects to fill to give voice to absent, silenced or marginalised voices.

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<sup>5</sup> In August 1971, eleven civilians were killed by a British parachute regiment during Operation Demetrius which aimed at arresting and interning without charge anyone suspected of being members of the Provisional IRA (McKittrick & McVea, 2002: 67–68). At the time of writing, no independent inquiry reviewing the killings has been set up by the British government despite the victim’s families’ long campaign.



However, it is important to clarify what I mean by ‘alternative media’ as one could argue that saying that a medium is alternative to another may be rather trivial – everything, at some point, is always alternative to something else. Chris Atton and James F. Hamilton define it as alternative to the “conventions of news sources and representation, the inverted pyramid of news texts, the hierarchical and capitalised economy of commercial journalism, the professional, elite basis of journalism as a practice, the professional norm of subjectivity and the subordinate role of audience as a receiver” (Atton & Hamilton 2008:1).

Indeed, ‘alternative media’ is just one of the many ways to refer to the type of media independent from the agenda of constituted powers (such as religious and political institutions and journalistic corporations), more accessible and participatory to the citizens, and closely wedded to notions of social responsibility (Atton 2003: 267). Other terms include “citizen media”, “activist media”, “radical media”, and “participatory media” (Rodriguez 2003: 190). Notwithstanding labels, what is common to such media projects is their grassroots and participatory nature as well as their potential to transform “passive voiceless, dominated communities into active shapers of their own destiny” (180).

However, John H. Downing reminds us that we should not presume that alternative media will always be used in a positive way; it can also be used as repressive media, such as in Nazi campaigns which shut the public’s capacity of judgement and helped impose a hegemonic form of thinking. As he observes, “radical media, depending on the point of view of the observer or the activist, can represent negative forces as well as constructive forces” (Downing 2002: 27).

The ‘alternative media’ projects examined here allow for points of view and opinions to be expressed without having to attend the interests of media moguls, politicians and religious authorities. They contrast with mainstream media practices which manipulated public perceptions and marginalized the conflict in the minds of British public through vetoes, censorship of certain voices and careful choice of words (Miller 1994; Rolston & Miller 1996). These practices were so widespread that as early as 1994 David Miller noted that “...unless they [audience] have an alternative source of information, people in Britain are inclined to believe the distorted picture of life in Northern Ireland presented by television and newspaper reports” (11).

Consequently, these distortions have generated a general sense of discontent with media producers which continues to affect any storyteller coming to work with local communities until today. Journalist Susan McKay, for example, found that some people were so hurt and angry about media distortions that they decided not to be interviewed again (McKay 2008: 8). Michelle Moloney observed while researching community oral history archives that “there was a sense of researchers coming into communities, mining them and disappearing” (Moloney 2014: 280).

Therefore, as shall be argued later, alternative media projects have offered, and continue to offer, much welcomed ethical frameworks for telling stories about the legacy of the past, to promoting community dialogue, and finding ways to move forward together.

### **The Strengths and Limitations of Storytelling**

Scholars and practitioners in Northern Ireland have pointed out that understanding ‘the other’ is a crucial tool for the current transitional period (Dawson 2007; Hackett & Rolston 2009; McLaughlin 2010; Mairs 2013; Moloney 2014). The organisation Healing Through

Remembering (HTR), for instance, suggests storytelling as a cross-community project where people can share personal stories, actively listen to each other, and document what has taken place so that they are “available for future generations to learn from the past” (cited in Borderlines Project 2006: 6).

However, when examining the potential of storytelling we must take into account the well-established debate on its paradoxical potential to both heal trauma and to open old wounds (Felman & Laub 1992; Jelin 2003; Rogers et al 2004; McLaughlin 2010; Mairs 2013). Some authors argue that storytelling can aid an externalisation of internal trauma narratives that were previously difficult to articulate and may have a healing effect and a sense of closure. Psychoanalyst Dori Laub, for instance, in his work with Holocaust survivors and their children, found that not only did survivors “need to survive so that they could tell their story; they also needed to tell their story in order to survive” (Felman & Laub 1992: 78).

As traumatic events do not happen in a social vacuum, storytelling may offer an opportunity to gain understanding of how trauma impacted people’s lives, on both personal and social levels. For example, when working with Bloody Sunday Justice campaigners, Dawson observed that the sharing of stories among them “helped each other fill out the gaps and silences in their own recollections, and endeavored to piece together a more complete and adequate narrative of the truths behind the traumatic events” (Dawson 2007: 123). Similarly, Moloney found that cross-community oral history archive projects can “facilitate relationship building and create opportunities to explore both the consequences and the causes of the conflict” (Moloney 2014: 17).

However, even with such positive results one still cannot assume that speaking out will always be positive and unproblematic. Bhaskar Sarkar and Janet Walker remind us that there is no guarantee that the complex attempts to achieve reconciliation and justice through storytelling will work according to plan, or produce the intended effects because of the volatility of populations strained by violence and agony (Sarkar & Walker 2009: 18). Likewise, Dawson poses questions drawing out the inherent ambivalence of storytelling work: “Does the attempt to represent the traumatic past help a survivor to come to terms with it, perhaps to bear the pain? Or is it risking too much, ploughing up thing too painful or disturbing to remember, things that are best buried, consigned to silence, forgotten?” (Dawson 2007: 70).

Any alternative media project dealing with sensitive stories must consider the possibilities of dissemination and the implications that it may bring to producers, participants, audiences, and institutions that host the stories. As Sarah Pink observes, “people express some things in one context that they would not say in another; and in the apparent intimacy of a video interview an informant may make comments that he or she would not make elsewhere” (2007: 56).

Moreover, bringing people’s stories to the public may put participants – and even producers – in life-threatening danger, subject them to moral criticism, criminal proceedings, or simply damage their reputations. The controversy caused by Boston College’s Belfast Oral History Project offers a good example of the risks of dissemination. Headed by Irish journalist Ed Moloney and former IRA member Anthony McIntyre, the US-based project audio-recorded dozens of interviews with former republican and loyalist paramilitaries. Initially, participants were assured that their recordings would not be made public until their deaths. However, this was later undermined by a US court ruling, after the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) sought access to some of the recordings as part of their probing the IRA 1972 killing of Jean McConville, one of the Troubles’ “disappeared” (BBC 2014). The turning over of the

interviews has had a twofold consequence so far: it has put the researchers and participants of the project in real risk of physical harm and it has probably complicated future projects dealing with the Troubles, as people may become more reticent to share their life stories with researchers. This case draws attention to the need to discuss with participants potential consequences of having their stories made publicly available and how storytelling projects can have long-term effects in their lives.

### **Collaborative Storytelling in Northern Ireland**

Since the mid-1990s, with the beginning of the peace talks, Northern Ireland has witnessed a proliferation of official and unofficial initiatives dealing with the past. Early in the peace process, the government-appointed Victims' Commissioner Kenneth Bloomfield produced the report *We Will Remember Them* (1998) "to look at possible ways to recognise the pain and suffering felt by victims of violence arising from the troubles" (Bloomfield 1998: 8).<sup>6</sup>

There have also been other official developments, some consisting of legally based initiatives such as the Saville Inquiry, which looked at 1972's Bloody Sunday. Costing nearly 200 million pounds and lasting 12 years, the Saville Inquiry "was not only the lengthiest and most detailed but also the costliest in legal history and became a huge matter of controversy itself" (Murray 2012: 3). The inquiry established that the British army had shot and killed unarmed innocent civilians and led to an official apology by the British Prime Minister David Cameron.

In 2005 the Historical Enquiries Team (HET) was established by the PSNI, which aimed at re-examining all unsolved deaths attributable to the Troubles (Hackett & Rolston 2009: 365). At the time of writing, the HET held inquiries into more than 1,800 cold case killings and have yet to investigate another 900 killings. However, in September 2014 its closure was announced due to budget costs (Moriarty 2014).<sup>7</sup>

Below the radar of these official initiatives, there has been an increasing number of grassroots community projects dealing with the past, ranging across photography, oral history, exhibition, theatre and film. Below, I consider some of these initiatives to exemplify this proliferation.<sup>8</sup>

*An Crann* (The Tree) operated between 1994 and 2001 and was led by poet and playwright David Gorman. The project used drama, textiles, creative writing and photography to engage participants to talk about the past. *An Crann's* outputs include various publications, such as *Bear in Mind: Stories of the Troubles* (2000), and also the 60-minute documentary film *Night Rider* (1990), about a Belfast taxi driver and his daughter.

The Ardoyne Commemoration Project (ACP) collected testimonies from Ardoyne residents, a nationalist/republican working-class district, in Belfast, and gathered them in the book *Ardoyne: The Untold Truth* (2002). Established in 2000, the Duchas Oral History Archive is based in another nationalist/republican area, Falls Road, and contains 100 audio interviews and photography of republican and loyalist individuals who were affected by the Troubles.

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<sup>6</sup> To access the report, see <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/issues/violence/victims.htm>

<sup>7</sup> For an analysis of the HET's purpose, its effectiveness as a 'truth' recovery mechanism and the heated debates it has generated, see Lundy (2009, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> As will be seen later, this selected sample is based on projects in which I had direct engagement with producers and/or with participants through public events, as well as from cross-examination of the published studies generated by the projects themselves.

In Derry/Londonderry, Epilogues<sup>9</sup> holds 27 video-recorded personal testimonies which explore six key themes – Violence, Loss, Revenge, Forgiveness, Justice, and Human Rights. The project launched in 2005 a DVD and website-based educational workshop. In the same city, the Playhouse Theatre's Theatre of Witness Programme has been producing plays where people perform their own personal stories of trauma, which are filmed and turned into documentary films.<sup>10</sup>

Operating across Northern Ireland, WAVE Trauma Centre<sup>11</sup> has collaborated with its members to produce poignant accounts of the past, such as the 30-minute documentary film *Unheard Voices* (2009) and the series *Stories from Silence* (2013). *Unheard Voices* contains six five-minute stories of people who lost a loved one or were themselves injured as a result of the Troubles and was produced by Cahal McLaughlin and Jolene Mairs. *Stories from Silence* is a series of 25 audio recorded interviews produced by journalists Laura Haydon and Susan McKay. Both films are available online.<sup>12</sup> The travelling exhibition *Everyday Objects Transformed by the Conflict* used personal artefacts to tell different stories of the Troubles and after touring across Northern Ireland from 2012 to 2014 is now available online.<sup>13</sup>

The Prisons Memory Archive (PMA) was created in 2006 by scholar and filmmaker Cahal McLaughlin and holds 175 interviews with people that were connected to the Maze and Long Kesh Prison and Armagh Gaol during the Troubles in Northern Ireland. The PMA holds a wide range of experiences, from prisoners to prison staff and relatives, both men and women. Participants were recorded inside the empty prison sites by a single camera operator who followed them while they walked and talked around the buildings. The project is currently creating an interactive exhibition platform of all of the recorded material in partnership with the Public Records Office Northern Ireland (PRONI).

However, part of the material has already been brought to the public via three PhD projects: *Unseen Women* (2011) by Jolene Mairs, who took six five-minute self-contained narratives out of the Armagh Gaol recordings. These were shown as a 26-minute linear documentary as well as a multi-screen installation. I worked with the material from the Maze and Long Kesh Prison and made the 60-minute linear documentary film *We Were There* (2014) about the women's diverse experiences of this male prison. Jamie McRoberts created the multi-narrative interactive documentary *Maze3* (2016). In the same year McLaughlin released the linear documentary *Armagh Stories: Voices from the Gaol*.

What is common to all of the above projects is that they have employed collaborative storytelling methods that favour shared ownership and authorship when working with contested stories. Interestingly, despite these projects' methodological commonalities, there is to date no generic model of collaborative storytelling within Northern Ireland (Mairs 2013: 32). The evidence base for their use "has been drawn primarily from public consultation as opposed to studies that evidence its effectiveness" (82). Surprisingly, despite this wealth of

<sup>9</sup> For more, see <http://www.epilogues.net>

<sup>10</sup> For more, see <http://www.theatreofwitness.org>

<sup>11</sup> Formed in 1991, WAVE Trauma Centre offers support and addresses the needs of people (children and adults) traumatised by the conflict. See <http://www.wavetraumacentre.org.uk/>

<sup>12</sup> Available at <http://storiesfromsilence.com> and <http://www.wavetraumacentre.org.uk/about-us/wave-projects/unheard-voices>

<sup>13</sup> For more, see <http://healingthroughremembering.org/eoe-about/>

models, there are only a few Northern Irish-based studies that critically examine protocols employed by collaborative storytelling projects and their effect on participants and audiences.<sup>14</sup>

## Lessons from Northern Ireland

The analysis of the selected sample for this paper is based on field notes taken while attending public events, such as talks, launches, performances and screenings as well as on cross-examination of published articles and reports about such projects. The findings below offer valuable lessons to alternative media projects dealing with sensitive stories, such as the legacy of a contested past. As shall be argued, at the same time the projects offer a way of telling stories that is ethical, representative and inclusive, they are not immune to the sensitivities of the context and to the potential of opening old wounds.

### Co-ownership

Co-ownership is an important element of building trust and helps tip the power balance of a storytelling process back towards the participants (McLaughlin 2010; Mairs 2013; Aguiar 2015). This is in line with oral historians' notion of *shared authority*, a term coined by Michael Frisch in the 1990s and their concern with making oral history a more democratic cultural practice. Sharing authority requires interviewers to relinquish control over the product of historical inquiry and share power with their interviewees over the research, interpretation, and dissemination of the stories. It implies a “fundamental shift in perspective from ‘knowing about’ to ‘knowing with’, as psychologist Henry Greenspan has argued in relation to his own work with Holocaust survivors” (High 2009: 16). Sharing authority, thus, “is the sharing of a journey, it is the sharing of time, information, materials, claims, trust, and finally, public statements, among other things” (Parr et al. 2009: 56).

A starting point to sharing authority is giving participants co-ownership of the project – that is, they have the right to veto or withdrawal. And the benefits of co-ownership can be seen in many projects in Northern Ireland. For example, in Mairs' *Unseen Women*, she notes that “[w]here participants had the right to withdraw, the veto promoted involvement and therefore increased, as opposed to decreased, the likelihood that audiences would have access to contrasting narratives of Armagh Gaol” (Mairs 2013: 224). Likewise, in my work in *We Were There* co-ownership helped enhance the participants' sense of safety and control. Additionally, participants expressed a certain security that my “motivations and aspirations as a filmmaker aligned with theirs and, as a result, there was more a sense of trust rather than a desire to control the editing process” (Aguiar 2015: 109).

However, there is an inevitable drawback of giving co-ownership to participants: the risk of losing an important voice if a participant decides to withdraw from the project (McLaughlin 2010; Mairs 2013; Aguiar 2015). This is a risk that archives such as the Dúchas Oral History Archive or the PMA have to face on a yearly basis given the political uncertainties in Northern Ireland. For example, the loyalist flag protests in 2013 coincided with the period when the PMA got funding to make 25 interviews available interactively online.<sup>15</sup> As a result, McLaughlin and the team had difficulty negotiating consent with some of its loyalist participants and one of them even requested to have his recording withdrawn from the project. (Aguiar et al. 2014).

<sup>14</sup> See studies by McLaughlin (2010), Mairs (2013), Moloney (2014) and Aguiar (2015).

<sup>15</sup> See: <http://prisonmemoryarchive.com/archive-maze/>

Moreover, one has to be careful to think that giving the right to veto or withdrawal will always be beneficial as there is the risk of pushing participants towards accepting compromises which they may not be prepared to make: “[w]here participants value representation over no representation at all, or face losing the opportunity to present a contrasting narrative to the public, the option to veto may feel like a false choice: “if you don’t like it, you always have the option to leave”” (Mairs 2013: 227-228).

### Sharing Authorship

Co-ownership can be extended to co-authorship which means that participants have not only ethical but also creative control of the project (Aguar 2015: 33). The sharing of authorship can happen at two different levels: participants can work very closely with storytellers during the production of the stories, but in the end the latter holds technical control of this process; or storytellers can train participants to ‘do it themselves’ and act mostly as facilitators throughout the project. For example, with HTR’s exhibition *Everyday Objects Transformed by the Conflict* participants were actively involved in the choice of objects, interpretation and exhibition design. Likewise, co-authorship was at the core of the Theatre of Witness plays and films as participants not only told their stories, but they also performed them. These experiences reinforce Barbash and Taylor’s view that if a storytelling project “is about someone’s subjective or emotional life, it will probably only be enriched by their active participation” (Barbash & Taylor 1997: 86).

Interestingly, in the case of the projects coming out of the PMA material, participants’ roles ranged from co-directors to co-editors, which enabled them to regain a significant sense of power and control over their own representation. If during the filming the walk/talk approach adopted by the PMA enabled participants to decide what stories would be told, in *We Were There* the conversations between rough cuts gave them control over how their stories would be re-contextualised and re-told in a linear film. As a result, participants became more aware of how new meanings are created in the editing phase of filmmaking and had the “opportunity to reproduce and understand their world as opposed to the dominant representation depicted in the mass media” (Pink 2007: 111).

Co-authorship, thus, is a powerful bottom-up approach for building trust as participants feel ‘safe’ and know that their stories will be adequately represented. However, to maximize its potential it is important from the beginning to discuss with participants the inevitable unevenness of co-authorship and to make transparent each other’s individual and professional constraints, aspirations and roles (Aguar 2015: 124). We all belong to specific socio-economic classes, have certain predispositions and views, “breathe a particular ‘cultural air’, and choose that some things can be said and others had best not be said” (Carruthers 2000: 17).

For the Dúchas Oral History Archive, participants were given a contributor form before the interviews were carried out. This form enabled them to know from the very start what control they had, in this case to approve the recording and request amendments or impose restrictions. As Hackett recalls:

[w]e want to make people aware that the interview is a matter of historical record that could potentially be accessed by anyone in the future (...) The key issue in all of this is that we are as clear as possible about the control they have. They are then in a position to make an informed judgement about whether to take part in the interview” (2000: 91).

This highlights the importance of setting up parameters from the start to ensure feasible shared ownership and authorship.

Furthermore, if parameters of collaboration remain under-discussed and unclear, there may be the risk of one of the collaborators, most likely the one who holds a position of power, to adopt exploitative methods under the guise of ‘collaboration’ to obtain undue credit for the work. Thus, it is paramount at the outset of any collaborative project to discuss the terms of the collaboration and to clearly demarcate the boundaries of each role. This may help avoid misunderstandings or may make the process more transparent and, thus, less likely to be exploitative or unethical for any of the parties involved.

It is crucial to highlight that collaborative storytelling is about dialogue and not about implementing whatever participants wish. This can help minimise possible misunderstandings about the collaborative process and lead participants to trust the storyteller to make decisions on their behalf when necessary. This may also help mitigate feelings of disappointment when participants’ creative suggestions are not taken on board. This transparent approach avoids the sense of being brought as a “collaborative rubber stamp” (Barbash & Taylor 1997: 88) – the collaboration is genuine, not for pretend.

Co-authorship, thus, requires a considerable degree of patience, transparency and willingness to listen as well as dialogue throughout the whole storytelling process. These elements are particularly key in places like Northern Ireland, where people remain segregated from one another and are slowly getting accustomed to working alongside who was for so long perceived as the ‘Other’.

### **Time and Relationships**

Time and resource availability is an important issue to consider when working more collaboratively. Sharing ownership and authorship can be more time-consuming than initially thought and must be grounded in realistic and flexible goals (Aguilar 2015: 141). Whilst storytellers are under pressure from deadlines imposed by funders and institutions, participants have family, work and community commitments. As much as one can be as inclusive as possible, some participants will be more willing, or perhaps have more time, to collaborate than others.

For instance, Patricia Lundy and Mark McGovern note that for the Ardoyne Commemorative Project the handing-back phase – interviews were recorded and then handed back for approval and amendments – added years to the workload of the project. However, they point out that this was a key element in the whole working process: “the community in effect took “ownership” and control of the design, research process, editing, return phase, and production of the book” (Lundy & McGovern 2009: 115).

When determining realistic parameters of participation – whether as individuals or as a working group – one should thoroughly consider group dynamics, individual limitations, access to resources and socio-political context, since they all impact on how the project will unfold. The projects in Northern Ireland vary in their methodologies. Group dynamics have been used by projects such as the Theatre of Witness to trigger unique exchanges of experiences and ideas, produce inspiring plays and films and, subsequently, promote much needed cross-community understanding, cooperation and dialogue.

However, group dynamics may also “bring out the best and the worst in people” and “[t]he voices of the less confident, the poorer and the powerless, are less likely to be heard” (Slim et al. 2006: 147). This was experienced, for instance, by Peter Shirlow and Lorraine Dowler in their research on female partners of political prisoners in Northern Ireland. They eschewed focus groups when they found that some women felt uncomfortable speaking in front of others or that older women and more confident members tended to dominate the sessions. They also found that some of the women preferred not to share with the group “information on their relationships that would indicate that they were, as one respondent noted, “a bad wife”. Also, some of the younger women disagreed with the older women but did not wish to offend them publicly by saying so” (Shirlow & Dowler 2010: 388). Shirlow and Dowler’s experience reveals the difficulty of working with participants who are not part of a group with a shared identity and it also draws attention to the challenges that the context of Northern Ireland poses to any interview process.

Recognising this difficulty, for *We Were There* I opted to work with people individually and slowly build a sense of group. Participants first became familiar with each other’s journey through the viewing of rough cuts. By the time of the screenings, they already felt more comfortable to share panel discussions with each other and could even see themselves as part of a group. Moreover, meeting participants individually to discuss rough cuts of *We Were There* enabled us to get to know each other on a personal level and slowly build an ethical and transparent relationship (Aguilar 2015: 122).

Thinking carefully about working with people individually or as part of a group is paramount in places such as Northern Ireland where, as seen earlier, people have had negative experiences when working with media producers and researchers (McKay 2008; Moloney 2014).

### **Inclusivity**

As mentioned above, one of the key features of alternative media is that it creates the opportunity for access to voices that would otherwise remain hidden from or be misrepresented in mainstream media. Inclusivity, thus, is at the core of all projects under analysis in this paper and is a key tool for building trust.

Some projects have focused on intra-community inclusivity to generate local agency and empower residents to take ownership of their own stories. The Dúchas Oral History Archive covers a wide range of experience from many different perspectives: campaigners, combatants and activists, mostly from the republican Falls Road, though there are some loyalists interviewees. Likewise, the Ardoyne Commemorative Project contains testimonies of relatives, friends and eyewitness of this republican area’s victims. For Lundy and McGovern, a significant benefit of collaborative storytelling is “its capacity to get to the nitty-gritty of intra-community conflict, understand the local dynamics, create dialogue and be context specific” (Lundy & McGovern 2009: 119).

However, Hackett and Rolston point out to the limitations of intra-community projects, not only in terms of the size of the potential audience but also its nature:

...it is difficult for the story to break free from the community that produced it. There is a ghettoization of memory, such that even the most poignant stories lose their power when presented to those outside of or antagonistic to the community (2009: 369–370).



Other projects have sought to offer the widest range of experiences as possible in terms of genre, age, geographic background, religious and paramilitary affiliation. *An Crann* was one of the first to include a wide range of stories about ‘ordinary’ people’s experiences of the Troubles, from members of the police, emergency services to children. Epilogues worked with people from nationalist and unionist backgrounds to gain insight into the underlying causes of conflict and to use their multimedia stories as a tool for equipping communities to play an active role in peace building. WAVE has focused on the daily struggles of victims and survivors while Theatre of Witness has worked with groups of men and women in developing their plays and films such as *Release* (2013) and *I Once Knew a Girl* (2010).

The PMA projects sought to go beyond the nationalist vs unionist dichotomy by not only offering a myriad of experiences of imprisonment during the Troubles, but by also finding film editing strategies that would enrich the effect of inclusivity. As can be seen in *Unseen Women* and *We Were There*, the filmmakers adopted strategies that privileged human stories over historical contexts and factual information. Both films offer very little historical context, eschew archival footage and images of the conflict, and only uses material from the PMA. Moreover, they identify their interviewees by their names, and not by their paramilitary or religious affiliations. As a result, both films promote what unites their participants – being women – rather than by what separates them – being Catholic or Protestant women, republican or loyalist women – and highlight the diversity of people’s experiences.

As cultural memorial practices in Northern Ireland have often fostered division (Rogers et al. 2004: 22), these ‘minor’ editing choices, and the films resulting from them, can potentially “create shared commemorative practices that allow for reparative remembering” (Mairs 2013: 142) which may help reduce, rather than reinforce, the sense of othering.

As positive as these experiences indicate, the included projects are not without their complications, particularly in divided societies such as Northern Ireland. As Cathie McKimm, from *An Crann*, reminds us: “[t]he stories will at times be offensive, painful and difficult to hear and for that there is no inoculation, only openness and integrity to begin judging ourselves before we begin judging others” (McKimm 2000: 102). However, this also offers the opportunity for “more than learning to accept our differences – it means learning to recognise our similarities – even when we find them in the faces and the stories of our enemies” (102).

### Dissemination

Collaborative practices of recording and exhibiting offer safe spaces for unheard and underrepresented stories to be remembered and shared with other people. If dissemination strategies are developed together with participants and managed thoughtfully, they can “provide truly unique openings for individuals to have a voice and claim space in venues that may have been previously off-limits” (Miller & Smith 2012: 345). Moreover, a collaborative process that continues right up to exhibition can also be regarded by participants as constructive and therapeutic. As McLaughlin recalls in regards to *Unheard Voices*, the ongoing consultation “provided some control and reassurance to those who placed themselves in the vulnerable position of being in front of the camera and microphone, telling their painful stories to an unknown public” (McLaughlin 2010: 132).

However, when working with sensitive stories the risk of re-traumatisation and non-validation of one’s story cannot be ignored, particularly in transitional societies like Northern Ireland. Shaun Henry, who funded a variety of storytelling projects, observes that:

[t]here is a danger we could become involved in an intergenerational transfer of all our hang-ups about the Troubles to a younger generation, who are, in fact, much more open-minded to things’ and he urges us ‘to ensure that somehow our storytelling, and our remembrance of the past, are firmly embedded in a notion of moving forward’ (cited in Mairs 2013: 221).

One way of doing this is to thoroughly consider dissemination strategies so that these can create safe dialogues that will potentially promote mutual understanding and ideas for moving forward. Epilogues received funding to both collect the testimonies and to conduct a multimedia workshop education programme with seven target groups: victims of political violence; ex-prisoners; former members State Security Forces; youth; teachers and adult education providers; community groups; and students of Peace & Conflict Studies. The project also offered a ‘Training the Trainer’ programme. In the evaluation of the project, Michael Arlow notes that while there were significant achievements in terms of delivery and in building relationships with the target groups, the project was not immune to the difficulties of dealing with the past (Arlow 2008: 37).

Whilst first-hand storytelling can be a key tool to promote dialogue and broaden advocacy initiatives, a dissemination strategy must consider the individual versus collective needs and the public/private boundaries of sensitive stories. Some experiences may be too personal to be shared and can lead to further trauma, embarrassment, harassment and even life-threatening situations for participants. While collecting the stories for *Ann Crann’s* Bear in Mind project, McKimm recalls that her support staff often found it difficult to hear certain stories that participants would have described as “‘political’ rather than ‘personal’”:

[t]here was even a questioning on some occasions as to whether stories with a strong political bias should be included in the book. We did publish them however, because the paradox is, stories that are perceived as ‘political’ by a listener, may be experienced as personal by the teller (McKimm 2000: 97).

Therefore, before each interview question and each selection, storytellers should consider the purpose of sharing this information and the potential risks for participants when this is made publicly available. Participants may not be aware of all risks, so it is the storyteller’s responsibility to make sure that these are clearly understood.

It is also important to think about the speed in which stories are shared. Slowly moving participants’ stories from the private to the public sphere can minimise the risks of traumatising and offer “opportunities for reflection, negotiation, and a relationship building so that participants are fully prepared to step into the public realm” (Miller & Smith 2012: 346). For *We Were There*, we decided to screen it first at Queen’s Film Theatre to a private audience of family and friends; this offered participants a less threatening environment and helped them build strength and group cohesion for the next screenings with a diverse audience, at the Belfast Film Festival (Aguir 2015: 101).

As *Challenge for Change* former director George Stoney observes, “it is necessary to ensure that participants get used to seeing themselves on film” and that “they experience the film in the company of others to witness its impacts and address initial defensiveness or embarrassment” (cited in Miller & Smith 2012: 337). Slowly moving people’s stories from the private to the public realm is more likely to enable them to slowly feel comfortable and empowered to face larger and more diverse audiences.

## Conclusion

What is unique about the frameworks developed in Northern Ireland are the relationships formed with the participants and the shared sense of ownership and authorship. As argued above, these frameworks have both strengths and limitations, but based on my observations and the observations of the storytellers it is clear that there is more to gain when working closely with the people whose stories we tell. Northern Ireland offers many models of storytelling practice that are inclusive, ethical, transparent, and acutely aware of contextual circumstances and of people's life experiences, and sensitive to minority issues.

However, as Hackett and Rolston note, "there is no easily available blueprint that can indicate the best way in which to realize the potential benefits of story-telling in transitional societies" (Hackett & Rolston 2009: 372). In this paper I outlined the lessons that could be drawn from these projects' methods and techniques. These lessons should be taken as a continuous process of reflection instead of a "one-size-fits all" ethical framework (Clark 2012: 25).

Where the boundaries between victims/perpetrators are blurred, where there is a debatable meta-conflict scenario, and the risk of re-stimulation of pain cannot be ignored, "then each political and psychic circumstance of community, group and individual will need to be addressed in the future film-making of this genre" (Mairs & McLaughlin 2012: 41).

I demonstrated how collaborative practices can be deployed to minimise these risks and to maximise participants' positive experiences of alternative media. In societies coming out of conflict, such as Northern Ireland, frameworks such as these are much needed as they encourage processes where people who tell the stories can do so in safety. And those who listen to these stories can potentially be motivated and mobilised into dealing with the complexity of the past, into understanding and acknowledging the diversity of people's experiences and into working together to create a future away from violence.

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## **Conversational Storytelling in Community Context: Examining Talk on Transgender Radio**

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### **Abstract**

This paper considers the role of co-participatory storytelling within the framework of community radio, radio talk and transgender media. It considers this by examining storytelling by participants on an Australian radio program, TRANS\*Positions, which is broadcast on JOY FM, a successful and well-known Australian community radio station. The paper reveals the ways co-participatory conversational storytelling, a dominant form of talk on this program designed for a transgender audience, informs listeners and fosters a sense of community. It analyses the very localised form of interactions between hosts, guests, and callers and reveals the way in which participants make relevant topics that are considered potentially controversial if spoken by a non-transgender audience. The interactions demonstrate the way in which co-participants in localised talk for an overhearing audience represent “ourselves to ourselves”. While it is an Australian case-study, there are implications more broadly for broadcasters wishing to create space for very localised, community-oriented talk.

**Keywords:** transgender media, broadcast talk, community radio, storytelling, community

## Introduction

The transgender community internationally is associated with high levels of risk for social exclusion, mental health issues, discrimination, suicide, and homelessness. Social isolation is noted as a common theme in transgender-based research, and it is linked to poor mental health within the transgender community (Bariola et al 2015; Hyde et al 2013). In Australia, a number of reports since 2010, including *Private Lives* (Pitt et al 2006), *Private Lives 2* (Leonard et al 2012), and the *First Australian Trans Mental Health Study* (Hyde et al. 2013) have highlighted the role of community and access to support in promoting mental health for gay, lesbian, and transgender people. Connection to community is noted as potentially more important for GLBTI people who may be alienated from their original family (Pitt et al. 2006: 53).

While media has a potentially important role to play in connecting GLBTI communities and promoting community connection to reduce social isolation, these reports have not specifically examined the role of media in facilitating community membership, reducing social isolation, and in constructing and negotiating identity. Pitt et. al briefly noted that gay media can provide a form of access to community in *Private Lives 2* (2006: 54) but transgender people are not necessarily gay, and being transgender is not about sexual orientation. There are also differences between gay, lesbian and transgender people's response to what constitutes community connection (Pitt et al 2006). Additionally, stories in mainstream media are generally not written for transgender people or by transgender people. Organisations like GLAAD in the US, and LGBTI Alliance in Australia have attempted to address issues associated with representation and use of language, more often within a broader homogenous lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) perspective but specific analysis of transgender media is limited academically.

Questions therefore remain about transgender representation in the media. Who, for example, is entitled to speak on behalf of a community? How do we speak about issues of importance? How do we know what is important? What is the right way to talk about issues? These questions drove a desire to initially understand how a community represents itself to itself, and one way to explore this is to analyse talk *within* a community. Examining the way participants orient to topics within talk can reveal moral order and common sense understandings. These are taken-for-granted assumptions about the way the world works or should work within a particular group of participants in interaction (Fitzgerald & Housley 2002). An ethno-methodological approach to discourse, based on conversation and membership category analysis, can reveal in situ orientation to action and role. It reveals, through talk-based action, what is relevant to members of a community. This type of analysis has not been done within a transgender media context.

This paper examines talk between hosts and callers on a transgender-oriented community radio program broadcast in Melbourne, Australia. The research question on which the study was based was: What forms of interaction occur between listeners and hosts on a transgender-oriented community radio program? This question aimed to investigate how members of a marginalised group communicated with one another on issues of relevance to them in a public way. Conversational storytelling emerged as the dominant form of host and caller interaction, whereby personal stories of experience were shared publicly, and this is the focus of this particular paper.

First, the paper introduces the analysis with discussion about representations of transgender people in the media generally, and the relationship between conversational storytelling and

community radio. This paper does not theorise about transgenderism more broadly. Rather, it reveals the way transgender people speak of their personal transgender experience, and highlights issues that are specifically relevant to them and potentially the broader community. Finding the answers to the questions aims to contribute knowledge about how to communicate more effectively with groups who are traditionally marginalised or homogenised in mainstream media. For example, the analysis may provide possible lessons for media practitioners when trying to use inclusive language.

### **Media Representation and Transgender People**

Globally, we know media play a role in increasing transgender people's awareness of gender identity (Capuzza 2014, 2016; Moscovitz 2010). Olympian and celebrity Bruce Jenner's transition to becoming a woman, Caitlyn Jenner, was profiled extensively in mainstream media globally during 2015. Additionally, the success of *Transparent* and *Orange Is the New Black* (2013–), US-based television programs that feature a transgender character and actor respectively, generated discussion about representation and acceptance of transgender characters and people (see as examples Avery 2014; Molloy 2015; Riggs 2015).

Media representation can strengthen and manifest awareness of identity, but negative portrayals can be detrimental (Ringo 2002). In one of the few pieces of transgender research that specifically examines how transgender people feel about representation, Mullen & Moane argued for the need to identify sources of affirmation for transgender people at interpersonal, personal and sociocultural levels (2013). Participants in their study expressed desire for transgender issues to be covered more positively in mainstream media and to be normalized rather than problematized (Mullen & Moane 2013). This problematization contributes to the public perception that transgender people are unusual, simply expressing a fetish, and follow a tragic narrative (2013: 151). Mullen and Moane argued for research that explores transgender identity formation and affirmation, specifically "in exploring how supportive and non-supportive factors in interaction have an overall positive or negative impact on individuals" (153).

In Australia, the already high risk of mental health issues, discrimination, suicide, and homelessness within the trans community is compounded by physical isolation thanks to geographic distance between regional areas and metropolitan centres where services may be located. This geographic isolation brings with it further challenges as local definitions and understandings of what it is to be a trans person can remain unchallenged and influence the experience of members of isolated communities. For example, Costello and Nannup noted differences in the use of the term 'sistergirl' within the Australian indigenous communities, arguing that sistergirl terminology is influenced by the diversity of communities, and often defined within a community depending on geographical location (1999: 6). The lack of transgender role models and transgender networks has also been noted as an issue for the transgender community (Kerry 2014) although it needs to be noted that much of the research was conducted in the pre-digital era prior to the rise of the internet or ability to access virtual networks.

### **Access and Community Radio**

Providing opportunities for connection is a potentially supportive factor in accordance with Mullen and Moane's arguments about transgender identity formation (2013). Community or public radio has traditionally been associated with access to the public sphere as an enabler to a community that may otherwise have difficulty being heard (Bosch 2007; Law 1986). It has

played an important role in the Australian radio environment since the 1970s. Research into community radio in Australia has tended to frame it as a cultural resource that allows for increased access to the public sphere and means of democratic participation for community members at a local level (see Forde, Foxwell & Meadows 2002; van Vuuren 2002). This access is not necessarily equal, but it is able to reflect local cultures in ways national or commercial broadcasters can't achieve (Forde, Foxwell & Meadows 2002: 65). Community radio stations may be funded by local sponsors, subscriptions, and government grants. Licences are often geographically restrictive which limits transmission range and therefore impact in a country like Australia, although many stations are now broadcasting digitally to expand their reach. Most stations are run by volunteers, and programming is driven by what is of interest to those who volunteer or the station's local audience.

The specific role of community broadcasting in the emotional and social well-being of its audiences has been established in Australia (Thornley 1999; van Vuuren 2003, 2006). Meadows and Foxwell (2011) reviewed studies of the role of community radio and argued that community media creates an environment that supports an engaged and participatory culture with the proviso that the culture is driven by an existing will to communicate (95). Empowerment has been cited as the reason most Australian audiences give when describing why they engage with community broadcasting, which is seen as a hub where ordinary people are able to engage with other ordinary people to experiences, problems, and solutions (96). In this way, community media allows people who may otherwise have limited access to the public sphere to communicate and stories play a particular role on via the medium when it comes to emotional well-being (96). For some, simply having the opportunity to hear fellow members of their community talk is significant, as noted by Meadows and Foxwell who cited a participant: "Talking to people...just the Murri way of talking and communicating; that's what I see as really important in that way so people understand what you're talking about" (102). That simply listening to "the Murri way" of talking and communicating helps someone feel connected highlights the connective role of community radio.

Talk that occurs on community radio involves interaction between hosts, and hosts and callers. It provides an opportunity for community members to tell their stories in local contexts. Before we proceed to analysis, it is important to consider conversational storytelling as a specific form of broadcast talk because of the dominance of this form of talk in the corpus.

### **Storytelling to Making Sense of the World**

People use storytelling to make sense of the world. Storytelling as narrative theory was pioneered, and is today still often framed, by research conducted by Labov and Waletzky in the late 1960s (Labov 1972; Labov & Waletzky 1967). This research was based on a series of interviews, and highlighted the narrative structure of stories and the reliance by individual storytellers on remembered sequences of events. Conversational storytelling, however, is very different. It is fragmentary and co-participatory by nature. It reveals the moral order of participants and what is relevant to speakers at the time and place the conversation takes place (Norrick 2000). In conversation, stories can surge up and recede again in topical talk, and stories in this context may consist of "fragments produced by separate speakers among extraneous talk and random interruptions, so that it is often difficult to say just where they begin or end" (2000: 17). The co-participatory nature of storytelling means it takes place between a number of people, and reveals what is immediately relevant to those participants.

As a form of public talk, storytelling in a community setting generally has a civic purpose, although there is some debate about what form that storytelling takes. For example, Wilkin and Ball-Rokeach (2006) argued that storytelling has an impact on civic engagement, and that for a community to thrive, it must have a “strong network of such storytellers using mediated and interpersonal types of communication to building a discursive community for the identification and resolution of issues of concern to the residents” (Wilkin & Ball-Rokeach 2006: 304). The stronger the storytelling network, the more likely residents feel like they belong to a community (Wilkin & Ball-Rokeach 2006). In a specific example of application, Wilkin and Ball-Rokeach noted the importance of geo-ethnic (or in an Australia context, community) media and interpersonal communication to Latinos. They argued that health storytelling would be improved by becoming integrated into a health storytelling network, and that this could be achieved by framing health stories to encourage interpersonal discussion (Wilkin & Ball-Rokeach 2006: 313). In an Australian transgender example, the opportunity to share stories of personal histories within Australian indigenous communities by transgender people “provided all participants with a greater understanding of the history of sistergirl existence and promoted much peer and self-respect, generating a sense of self-worth and self-esteem” (Costello & Nannup 1999: 7).

The opportunity to share stories on radio occurs during talk-based segments facilitated by a host and significant attention has been paid to radio interactions generally to understand host/caller interaction. However these have tended to focus attention on talkback or genre-specific talk (as examples see Hutchby 1991; Hutchby 1996; Montgomery 1986; O'Sullivan 2005; Rendle-Short 2005). We do know that conversational storytelling is a feature of chat-based radio programming which is a specific genre and relies on an orientation to personal, the risk of transgression, and use of humour or wit (Ames 2016; Tolson 1991). The seemingly casual conversations occur between hosts, and hosts and callers, but are broadcast for the specific purpose of being heard (Scannell 1991). Stories told between participants in this context are performed for a community of listeners in the form of multi-party talk (Korolija 1998).

Conversational storytelling on chat-based radio assists in fostering a sense of community with a clear orientation by participants (including hosts) to being social rather than being argumentative (Ames 2012a). The way hosts engage with guests and listeners, and the way stories are prompted or emerge from talk also reveal a social worldview and moral order to which all participants orient (Ames 2012b; Jayyusi 1984). Multiparty talk, which is talk than includes more than two people, is particularly interesting to analyse. This is because it reveals the way participants within a social setting orient to social norms because orientation to stereotypes demonstrate moral order in action (Ames 2012b; Bergmann 1998; Korolija 1998, 2009). A stereotype in talk is demonstrated as being based on formulations and displays of category-bound activities by participants in talk (Jayyusi 1984), and how these may be “treated by” speakers. Analysing co-participatory storytelling for an overhearing audience on community radio can therefore reveal *what* is important to a community and the way in which stories can help members of that community make sense of experiences.

## Data and Method

JOY94.6 FM is a community radio station broadcast from Melbourne, Australia, with approximately 330,000 listeners. It promotes itself as “an independent voice for the diverse lesbian and gay communities”, and is staffed by over 200 volunteers. It states, as its mission, that it is: “providing a voice for the diverse lesbian and gay communities, enabling freedom of

expression, the breaking down of isolation and the celebration of our culture, achievements and pride” (About us 2017). JOY94.9 programming does not rely specifically on breakfast and drive time regulars, as is the case in mainstream commercial radio. Breakfast and drive time slots are allocated to host teams, with different teams featuring each day. The specific program under analysis, *TRANS\*positions*, was broadcast at the time of study every Tuesday between 9 and 10 pm on JOY94.9 and promoted itself as a:

Radio program for and about the Trans communities produced by Melbourne's JOY 94.9.' *TRANS\*positions* discusses what it's like to be trans\* with honest discussions on the issues facing our trans\* communities across all areas of our lives. A diverse range of voices will be here to educate, inspire and engage. *TRANS\*positions* is a safe place for you to share your story, opinions, and healthy feedback. (*TRANS\*positions* 2014)

The article derives its findings from a content analysis of the show's first eight programs conducted between 8 April, when the program first aired, to 28 May 2014. The podcasts ranged from 33 minutes to 48 minutes, and were available for download via the Joy94.9 website. Analysis was based on a mixed method approach to discourse analysis of a chat-based radio program.

Accepting that radio is a mixed mode media that now incorporates social media, video, and print as supplementary/back channels, the moment of broadcast remains immediate between a listener and the program. Examining transgender radio provides a unique opportunity to review the way in which a community speaks to itself, and the way in which issues such as race, class, and gender conformity are (or are not) specifically relevant. Although radio programs are routinely supported by social media, in that moment of listening we do not see the participants. We may not know whether the hosts are transmen/transwomen/indigenous/ cisgender; all we know is what the hosts or participants say they are/feel. There is an opportunity, therefore, to listen closely to what is relevant. The tenets of conversation and membership category analysis are that relevance emerges from the data – as opposed to critical discourse approaches, which are looking for evidence or proof to support theories of power, ethno-methodological approaches simply explore what is evident (see Hutchby & Wooffitt 1998).

The first step in analysis was to categorise calls, topics, and types of interaction between hosts and listeners to determine what would be analysed in further detail and identify possibly themes. Categorisation was based on previous research that has identified four types of calls to chat-based programs: competition, storytelling, promotion, and community (Ames 2012a). In this genre, storytelling is a dominant means by which hosts can foster a sense of community. In this type of talk, hosts enact roles as “friends telling stories” in their daily interaction with listeners (Ames 2012a). In doing so, they perform familiarity that aims to include the overhearing audience. This familiarity may or may not be real – that is, the hosts may be friends off-air. The dominance of storytelling was evident in the *TRANS\*positions* broadcasts and storytelling-based segments were therefore chosen for more detailed analysis because it was in these segments that co-participatory interaction was most evident.

## Discussion

Listeners, guests and hosts were encouraged to share their story in a number of ways on this radio program. During the period of analysis, there were 20 overt calls for interaction by hosts, and these calls for interaction were often framed by a request to help keep the show on the air.

This suggested to the listener that a lack of response would place the program at risk of being discontinued as this was its first year of broadcast. When the origin of the response was identified, most were SMS/text messages as per Table 1.1.

	Phone	SMS/Text	Email	Unstated
<b>Total</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>8</b>

Table 1.1: Response to calls for interaction from hosts and callers, TRANS\*positions, programs 1–8.

In eight programs, 19 responses were broadcast by hosts, meaning that the texts or emails were read aloud for listeners or explicit reference was made to them by hosts. There were often multiple guests in the studio with hosts. However, those who contacted the program by phone were not put to air to interact directly with the hosts/guests. Whether this was by request for anonymity, or lack of knowledge by hosts as to how to do this given the volunteer nature of the station, is unknown.

The first show had the most potential for interaction between hosts and listeners, and this program included a Question and Answer (Q&A) session, whereby listeners were encouraged to make contact with the station to ask questions of hosts and in-studio guests from a community group supporting people undergoing transition. Most of the topics on this particular episode were generated by a question from a listener (via SMS/text/phone) that was read by the hosts. Topics included whether the trans community in Melbourne was growing; places for trans people to gather and dance; deciding on your trans name; referring to gender labels and misgendering; considering the needs of lesbian partners of female-to-male (FTM) trans; and supporting trans friends through high school.

In following programs sessions included: host/guest discussion about coming out whereby the guest tells his personal story; a checklist for transition, whereby the hosts [one FTM and one Male-to-Female (MTF)] talk about a checklist for those considering transition based on their personal experience; chest surgery, whereby the host's flatmate and partner are guests in-studio, and talk about their experience and views on chest surgery for FTM trans; anxiety management, whereby the host and a guest tell personal stories; and steps to medical transition.

While interaction was encouraged by calls to action from the hosts, there were no more Q&A sessions as was the case in the first program. Seven of the eight shows featured in-studio guests, and one show featured speeches and stories told at a specific promotion day that were recorded on the day and played back to listeners during the program. Most of the storytelling was by hosts and in-studio guests, or by listeners' texting or emailing short remembered narratives. Information in the form of 'advice talk' was also evident but this was often done within the context of telling a story. The types of stories, and the role they play in interaction, will be the focus of the next section.

### Types of Stories

The way stories are told in host/host and host/guest interaction was conversational in nature. The focus of host/guest interaction was on personal narrative – “what happened to me”, but there was diversity in this approach. As per Norrick's reflection on the fragmented nature of conversation (2000), the stories were not linear – they surged and receded throughout the interaction. They were not necessarily told by one person, but told collaboratively and responsively. Overall, there were two main ways stories were elicited or integrated into talk:

in response to questions by listeners or hosts which acted as a transition to co-participatory storytelling; or whereby stories from listeners or hosts acted as a prompt or transition to comment or contextual reference.

**Response Stories.** While there was a fairly low level of participation by listeners to the public conversation within the program *TRANS\*positions*, the possibility of interaction was used as a transitional sequence to talk or opportunity to tell a story. Multiple channels of interactional possibility were available but most interaction by listeners was via text. That listeners may be reluctant to participate in a more overt way is not surprising – having to hide one’s status until one comes out and/or transitions is often part of the journey of a trans person. The way in which hosts dealt with this to keep the narrative flow of the program going was to therefore integrate interactions and comments with storytelling. An individual’s story, shared via SMS, therefore became part of the co-participatory storytelling because it was part of a collective remembered narrative as a contribution to the overall program.

Many of the stories were ‘response stories’, whereby one participant constructed a second story to parallel the first (see Norrick 2000), usually based on personal experience. For example, the following interaction occurs between two hosts (H1 and H2) after H1 interrupts discussion between H2 and a guest about transition:

- 1 H1 ((interrupting)) I just wanted to briefly talk about my experience with being
- 2 misgendered. It did happen with my old friends. I hadn’t seen them
- 3 for ages, so I would occasionally get misgendered, but I have never been
- 4 misgendered by any of my new friends, and sometimes when I even talk
- 5 to them about the fact that I am trans and used to have a different gender
- 6 they sometimes feel a bit strange about it. H2 and I were talking about
- 7 this the other day, and while we were talking, I was thinking, but H2
- 8 you never could be anything else. I can only see you as a masculine man.
- 9 H2 That’s because you never met me before pre.
- 10 H1 That’s right. So I kind of got a good sense of what it must be like for other
- 11 people when I say those sorts of things to them. Occasionally I get misgendered
- 12 on the telephone and I’m actually so comfortable with myself now that I try
- 13 to turn it into something that’s quite humorous. So today I was ringing up to
- 14 get a car – I need to rent a car for something, and the guy on the other end, on
- 15 the phone, misgendered me. He called me Sir, and I said, No it’s Madam. And
- 16 I said, wait until you see me tomorrow and then you’ll freak out that you
- 17 thought about calling me a Sir. That was my response to that one.
- 18 H2 Nice.

This interaction starts as a response story (H1 talks about what happened as “my experience”) in general terms but becomes a two-way conversation with the other host when H1 specifically directs the conversation to H2. It becomes specific as a story in lines 13–17, where the host recounts a story about being misgendered when trying to rent a car by phone. The response by H2 in line 18 (“Nice”) indicates approval for the way H1 handled the issue. The hosts are members of the community they are addressing – they aren’t just being hosts, but also active participants in a conversation about being transgender. This interaction then precedes a conversation between hosts and the guest on the need to be assertive when misgendering occurs, whereby the hosts return to their hosting role by eliciting responses from the guest. The shared experience of being misgendered then becomes something the participants have in common – it is normalised for the overhearing audience, who may have had similar experiences.



Response stories also occurred collectively. The following is a co-participatory interaction whereby the host (H1) reads out a question sent into the station (the method by which this happened is unknown). There are four people in the studio – two hosts (H1 and H2) and two guests (G1 and G2) from a local community organisation.

- 1 H1 ((Reading a question supplied by a listener)) How did you get to decide on
- 2 your new name as trans?
- 3 H2 G1, what about you?
- 4 G1 It was given to me by an old girlfriend.
- 5 H2 I like that story.
- 6 G2 One guy in (organisation) actually asked his mother to rename him.
- 7 I thought that was so cool...and my name was the name of my best friend
- 8 and my partner. I think you just find some name you like.
- 9 For me it was a name that sounded like my old name, which is something I react to.
- 10 G1 It's helpful when you turn around when someone calls your name, isn't it?
- 11 H1 When I was born, I was fostered out for a little while, and the gorgeous wonderful
- 12 family that fostered me hated the name that my parents gave me and I did too, and
- 13 they decided to call me ((name)) and every time I've caught up with them over
- 14 the years, they've always called me ((name)) so it's always been my name. It just
- 15 wasn't officially.

This interaction here starts with a question posed by a listener (lines 1–2). One of the hosts defers to a guest in response (line 3). From here, two response stories are offered – one from a guest (G2 in lines 6–9) and one from a host (H1 in lines 11–15). From a narrative perspective, this overall story about how we got our names becomes something co-created – small fragments of experience that built up to a bigger picture; the guest tells his/her personal story in response to a question from a listener, and the host responds with his own parallel personal story. This collaborative storytelling is conducted in the “presence” of an overhearing audience, and this type of storytelling “lays claim to parallel experiences, and often to shared values and feelings as well” (Norrick 2000: 115). Norrick refers to collaborative retelling of a familiar story as a way to ratify group membership and modulate rapport (2000: 154): “It allows participants to re-live salient common experiences...because it confirms the long-term bond they share, and... because the experience of collaborative narration itself redounds to feelings of belonging” (157). In this case, the stories aren't exactly the same – the storytellers are telling of individual experiences, but the narrative is familiar to others because of the common experiences. In a sense, the speakers are collaborating to tell “a story” (about “how we got our name”) but from different perspectives. This use of a text or interaction from a listener was very common on the program (despite the number of overall interactions by listeners during the period of study being limited).

**Stories as Comment or Advice Prompts.** A second common feature of interaction was whereby hosts used stories as presented by listeners as the basis for transition to comment. For example:

- 1 H1 We've just had a lovely text here from ((name)) and he's written ((reads SMS)) When
- 2 I was 17 I had a friend (name) who was androgynous and we were both gay. Years
- 3 later I'm at a club and a gorgeous girl says, “Remember me”? ((name)) is now a girl,
- 4 and she looks great and is really happy as (name). Amazing to see the
- 5 transition which is so positive. I admire the courage. ((completes reading))
- 6 Thank you (name), that's so great to hear from you and that's a nice

- 7 little story you've got there and it's great that ((name)) has had such a great transition.  
 8 I myself have had a positive transition and it looks like ((name)) here  
 9 has had a positive transition=  
 10 G1 mmm  
 11 H1 =It's so good when there are positive stories coming out around transition  
 12 because we do hear a lot of sad stories about the hard lives that transgender  
 13 people so, yeah, it's great that there are happy people out there. So, anyway  
 14 back to testosterone.

In this interaction, the host reads the text (SMS), and then makes a comment that pays attention to wider social context, in this case to counter the “sad stories about the hard lives that transgender people have” (line 12). The hosts did not simply read the text as a comment; rather, reading the text aloud introduces the listener as a co-participant in conversation without that person actually being present, and the response (line 11) serves to ratify the listener's comment and inclusion.

In this way, stories were used to provide information for listeners through conversation between hosts and guests. Hutchby (2006) refers to the way an overhearing audience is constructed as an ‘advice recipient’ in advice-giving radio shows which he argues is a specific sub-genre of broadcast talk. However, in the case of *TRANS\*Positions*, hosts and guests often stated explicitly that they are not giving advice; rather, they are sharing their experiences in a way that can help. The purpose, therefore, is to assist others and this is clearly oriented to repeatedly by hosts. However, the structure of the talk as co-participatory storytelling to achieve this differs from normal counselling talk which has been well-considered in broadcast talk (Peck 1995). Previous research has overwhelmingly focused on caller/expert interaction. The following example, however, demonstrates a clear orientation to ‘informing’ an overhearing audience but one that is not a response to a call. Rather, it is a topic considered of interest by the host or producers, indicated in the collaborative way the participants contribute to a story:

- 1 G1 There were complications with me but that's totally my fault because  
 2 I didn't really look after myself before my surgery. There were a couple  
 3 of things that I was supposed to do that I didn't so I don't hold ((name))  
 4 responsible for that at all. I had a haematoma on my left pec which means  
 5 I was in surgery for a little bit longer than I was supposed to – I think four  
 6 hours instead of three – and then I came back out. A haematoma is essentially  
 7 like I just started bleeding.  
 8 H2 It's like a blood clot isn't it?  
 9 G1 Yeah, it's like a blood clot so I had to go back in. I had to be opened up, and  
 10 they stopped the bleeding and stitched me back up and I was fine, but yeah,  
 11 I did have a haematoma.  
 12 G2 That can happen to anyone, can't it?  
 13 G1 It can happen to anyone yes. They advise you not to smoke and not take aspirin  
 14 and certain medication for about three weeks before your surgery and, um, I let my  
 15 guard down a little bit.

In this interaction, the host is talking about surgery with two guests. G1 is telling his story about having breasts removed, and the telling of the story is for the purpose of informing the overhearing audience. The clarifying questions from the host (H1, line 8) and guest (G2, line 12) result in further expansion of the story whereby G1 provides details in responding to the

questions but closes with a personal reflection (G1, lines 14/15). This is not “expert” talk as noted by Hutchby, but articulated as “experience talk” that is spoken explicitly for the purpose of providing information.

That these experiences were shared amongst a community is reinforced through familiarity as a common theme. Many of the respondents were personally known to the hosts, as indicated by supporting narrative or comments from the hosts as they read the message from the listener. As an example:

- 1 H1 ((Reading a message from a listener, source unknown) Hi ((H2 name))
- 2 Great show. Just a quick story about being misgendered. When (name) and I
- 3 were a newish couple, he had a pigtail and we both wore overcoats. So at a
- 4 suburban Italian restaurant a waiter approached us from behind, and said:
- 5 “So ladies, what can I get for you?”
- 6 ((Laughter))
- 7 H2 (Name) used to work for me so this is quite funny.
- 8 H1 ((Continues reading the message)) We didn’t make any issue of it, ordered, and
- 9 he went away. He never came back. He swapped tables with another waiter
- 10 in the kitchen, and we never saw him again. (Name) was very amused.

In this instance, the listener’s story is re-told collaboratively by the hosts. The story is interrupted by H2 (line 7) who confirms for the audience that the listener is known and familiar. By telling the overhearing audience that “this is quite funny” (line 7), H2 is setting up suspense as to what might come. This type of familiarity reinforces a sense of closeness (and thus community) between the listener who has contacted the program with his/her story, and the hosts.

Stories, it appears, are therefore elicited and incorporated into this community radio program in a way that works to build rapport, share information, and foster a sense of belonging. This is important because this particular program targets a population known to suffer from discrimination and generally poorer states of mental health than the general population (see Bockting, Knudson & Goldberg 2006; Mustanski, Garofalo & Emerson 2010). In these examples we see evidence that telling stories reflects Hochheimer’s view that community media is an “extension of the desire to communicate to establish a sense of personal and community power” (Meadows et al 2005: 180). Stories are told collaboratively by in-studio members and demonstrate an orientation to sociability and rapport (see Norrick 2000) although the way in which stories are told could differ between host/listener interaction, and host/guest interaction. This appeared to be associated with the way in which interaction occurs – via SMS and e-mail as opposed to via phone.

Most interestingly and importantly, the orientation to storytelling and the topics addressed by participants (hosts and audience members) are counter to advice provided for mainstream media. For example, GLAAD recommends that media “move beyond the coming out narrative” and “avoid focusing on medical issues” (GLAAD 2017). One of the recommendations by GLAAD is, however, that transgender people are experts at talking about transgender people. So while most of the stories told within this program are around the coming out narrative and focus on medical issues, the program represents an opportunity for transgender people to talk about their experience to other transgender people. It therefore represents the program as being something “more” than just a radio program – it is a source of information and support.

This is a reminder for program makers of the importance of creating a space for interaction, not just between hosts and callers, but also between hosts and guests. Enabling talk on a program such as this helps listeners share common experiences and learn from one another, and is potentially important. However, we do not know the impact it has on the audience. For example, do transgender listeners want to listen to this type of talk? Does it help them feel more connected or does it serve to alienate people? This analysis provides the basis for further research that could gather personal perspectives from those involved in producing and hosting the program, and members of the community who listened or contributed to the program.

## **Conclusion**

This article has reviewed talk on a community radio program *TRANS\*Positions*, which targets the transgender community in Melbourne, Australia, and more widely through its digital streaming. It specifically explores the way conversational storytelling as told by members of a particular community for a particular community – talking “for ourselves to ourselves”. Conversational storytelling between hosts and guests was a key feature of this program but the way in listeners and hosts interacted differed slightly from previously published studies of host/caller interaction on radio in Australia. It highlights the uniquely personal approach to sharing information between hosts and guests on a chat-based radio program and demonstrates the way members of a community speak about issues that are pertinent to that particular group. Analysis of this type of talk can highlight in great detail how members of a community orient to and are affected by issues. Research of this type, which teases out features of talk-based media genres such as chat-based programming, is useful because it becomes replicable – that is, if it is effective and we know how it is done, we can teach people how to do it. This has significance in community-based radio which relies on volunteers at all levels of production. Conducting further research along these lines as the next step would assist to identify challenges and considerations for co-participants in multi-party talk that appears to serve a greater purpose than simply to “entertain”.

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## **Media Portrayal of Street Violence Against Egyptian Women: Women, Socio-Political Violence, Ineffective Laws and Limited Role of NGOs**

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### **Abstract**

“Often ignored in media coverage of the Egyptian revolution is how protests led by labor unions – many of them women based labor unions in the manufacturing cities of Egypt – catalyzed the revolution,” says Nadine Naber. Women are at the heart of every social movement that happens in Egypt and the Arab world. Nevertheless, the local media predominantly keeps attacking victims of street violence and sexual harassment, holding them responsible for being harassed. Portraying women, in general, as submissive or oppressed directly and indirectly feeds into the continuing practice of street violence and sexual harassment against women in Egypt. With the alarming statistics of violence against women documented by local women’s NGOs in recent years, this research argues that the negative, unethical and unprofessional media coverage of violence against women feeds into the systematic societal and state violence exercised against women, both in public and private places. It attempts to document the nature of local media portrayal of violence against women, outline its reasons and repercussions, and figure out attempts and possible solutions/recommendations to improve women’s image in the Egyptian media. Through analyzing significant instances of media attacks against victims of sexual harassment in 2011 and 2015, and conducting in-depth interviews with anti-harassment experts, media professionals and renowned figures, it aims to find ways to counter the unfair socially-accepted justifications, and thus help limiting the actual violence exercised against women.

**Keywords:** Egypt, violence against women, harassment, sexual harassment, media representation, NGOs, political violence

## Introduction

For more than a decade, Egypt has witnessed alarming levels of violence against women and girls, especially with rising numbers of street sexual harassment incidents and mob sexual assaults. The involvement of women's rights NGOs in countering this phenomenon, together with the proliferation and large scale impact of peer-to-peer media – in the form of pictures and videos via YouTube and various social media – has propelled local mainstream media to cover physical and sexual violence against women, especially since the uprisings of January 2011. The role of social media, together with local women's rights and anti-sexual harassment NGOs could reframe issues and amplify problems that the mainstream media will find difficult to continue to ignore. Nevertheless, Egyptian media coverage of violence against women remains occasional and limited to grand/significant incidents of sexual harassment and, by-and-large, are biased against women, which negates the essence of ethical journalism in democracies. This quality of media coverage arguably feeds into the continuous practice of violence against women and leads to exclusion and stereotyping of women in political life.

Violence against women in Egypt is a socio-cultural political phenomenon, due to a male-dominated culture and a patriarchal authority, as well as deteriorating economic conditions and a widening gap between social classes and categories. It is also integral to the wider context of political violence, the struggle over power, as well as the societal acceptance of violence against women. So, we can safely argue that violence against women is used in politics to strangle women's participation in all politics and political events. According to a UN Women study, *Violence Against Women*, sexual violence and harassment affected 53 percent of Egyptian women; of this, political violence aimed at stereotyping and exclusion from political life made up 27 percent and domestic violence 20 percent (Badran 2014). According to the Egyptian Center of Women Rights, 12 percent of women do not report harassment for fear of societal attacks. In addition, Egypt is ranked 6<sup>th</sup> in the 10 most unsafe countries for women in the world (Khan 2016).

Violence against Egyptian girls starts in the form of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) in their childhood, which is socially accepted and encouraged by women and men. According to the 2015 Egypt Health Issues Survey (EHIS), around 9 in 10 women aged 15–49 have undergone the procedure. This number is only 4 percent lower than statistics from a 2008 survey. FGM continues to be a widespread practice in Egypt, despite being banned in 2008. Article 242 of Egypt's Penal Code criminalizes the circumcision of girls, and the punishment for performing FGM is a prison sentence ranging from three months to two years or a fine of EGP 5,000 (The DHS Program). Nevertheless, the law is obviously ignored, which encourages the continuous exercise of this crime against girls and women in Egypt.

“Street sexual harassment is an endemic social problem that harms women both physically and psychologically and violates their basic rights to safety and mobility,” says a report by HarassMap, a local NGO (HarassMap.org 2017). According to UN Women, 99.3 percent of Egyptian women say they have been subjected to street sexual harassment at least once in their lives, 49.2 percent of them say it happens daily and 48 percent of them say it has happened more since the 2011 uprising. In addition, there have been 500 reported cases of mob sexual attacks in Tahrir Square since January 2011 (Egypt Keeping Women Out 2014). If we link them to the significant incidents of street sexual harassment by political forces in 2005 and 2010, we find that violence against women in public has been systematically practiced to halt women's political participation and stereotype them to a limited number of roles where they

do not compete with men (Guenena 2013). The predominantly state-controlled mainstream media plays a crucial role in stereotyping women as well.

Especially after the fall of the Mubarak regime, attacks against women participating in the demonstrations have been on the rise. In the early days of SCAF (the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces) rule, women protesters were arrested and forced to undergo “virginity tests” and reports of rape by mobs in Tahrir square emerged. The local media was completely silent about this until reports of international NGOs were published in the foreign press, so that they had to admit it had happened. Then, under Mohamed Morsi’s presidency, in 2012, sexual attacks were continuously reported during Tahrir protests. Witnesses and survivors reported:

Tens of men surrounded the survivor tore off their clothes and groped their bodies. Some were raped by multiple perpetrators, who were often armed with sticks, blades and other weapons. Security forces failed to intervene to protect female protesters, prompting citizen movements to set up their own security patrols. (Egypt Keeping Women Out 2014)

With the alarming statistics of violence against women documented by local women’s NGOs in recent years, this research argues that the negative, unethical and unprofessional media coverage of violence against women feeds into the systematic societal and state violence exercised against women, both in public and private places. This research attempts to counter the unfair socially-accepted justifications for such a phenomenon by outlining its roots, and figuring out ways to delimit its growth through alternative media, the law and the NGOs.

The methodology used in this research include both conducting in-depth interviews with 15 media experts and professionals, women’s NGOs, and social psychologists, and analyzing two prominent case studies, the Blue Bra Girl (2011) and the Mall Woman (2015), in which the mainstream media bias was evident and social media played a central role in countering the unfair/unprofessional coverage. The in-depth interviews were primarily centered on asking them their opinion about the quality of mainstream media coverage, the role of the alternative media, both online and social media, in countering street sexual harassment in various ways and figuring out their views and recommendations for dealing with this issue.

The research starts by consulting the current and contemporary status of mainstream media coverage of specific incidents of violence against women in Egypt. Views of the interviewees are included in this part, to give a first-hand account on the current situation. The case studies are then analyzed to demonstrate by example the nature of media coverage that needs to be eliminated. The research then explains the effort exerted to combat this phenomenon at grassroots level, including local NGOs efforts as well as pushing for a law that criminalizes sexual harassment. Then the interviewees recommendations for improving the media coverage are outlined at the end of the research.

### **Status of Local Media Coverage of Violence against Women in Egypt**

To make sense of the local media coverage of violence against women in Egypt, we need to understand the status of the media in Egypt in general first. The local media in Egypt has historically been predominantly government monopolized and controlled by various laws. In addition to the Constitutional Law and the Press Law, media is also regulated through multiple legal texts such as the Penal Code, the Journalism Regulation Law, the State Documents Law, the Party Law, the Civil Servants Law and the Intelligence Law. This media includes print

media, broadcasting and news agencies, along with their online versions. Even private media outlets, such as newspapers, TV channels, and radio stations are operating under strict legal regulations and bureaucracy, and they continue to meet their personal agendas rather than the public interest (Mendel 2011; Constitute Project 2017; Elissawy 2014).

The mainstream media coverage of violence against women in Egypt has always been biased against women, holding them responsible for this violence in direct and indirect ways. This is mainly because the media in Egypt is fully state controlled by law. Even though the mainstream media negatively report on sexual harassment against women at work and in the street, the media discourse on the issue of political involvement of women is divided between supporting and opposing women in politics (Abu Youssef 2009: 1). This negates the universal principles and fair, balanced and objective reporting, as well as the basic ethics of media practice.

Violence against women in the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, issued in December 1993 (resolution 48/104), adopted by the UN General Assembly, is defined as “any act of gender-based violence [that] results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life” (Article One). Article Two specifies that “Violence against women shall be understood to encompass, but not be limited to, the following:

- a. Physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring in the family, including battering, sexual abuse of female children in the household, dowry-related violence, marital rape, female genital mutilation, and other traditional practices harmful to women, non-spousal violence and violence related to exploitation;
- b. Physical, sexual, and psychological violence occurring within the general community, including rape, sexual abuse, sexual harassment, and intimidation at work, in educational institutions and elsewhere, trafficking in women, and forced prostitution;
- c. Physical, sexual and psychological violence perpetrated or condoned by the State, wherever it occurs. (Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women 1993)

Considering those three criteria, a comprehensive study of print and broadcast media coverage of violence against women, by Enas Abu Youssef, indicates biased, sporadic and superficial coverage. The print media discourse does not reflect in-depth coverage or regular campaigns combating different forms of violence against women. Rather, most coverage was in response to particular incidents or as part of the coverage of public events, not a newspaper’s initiative to combat violence as a social phenomenon. Print media tackle issues of domestic violence hesitantly and neglect issues considered taboo and not to be addressed (Abu Youssef et al. 2009).

In this study, a detailed analysis of the coverage of community violence confirmed that print media discourse has contributed to creating a type of psychological violence against women. This happens by demeaning women’s image in discussions of crime-related issues, diminishing them through caricatures, or objectifying them as mere bodies or sex advertisements. Commenting negatively and denigrating the image of women when reporting on community violence brings into question the journalists’ awareness of the forms of violence against women. As a result of the sporadic and insufficient awareness of violence against women, the

journalistic discourse is very general and does not reflect unique environments or social classes (Abu Youssef et al. 2009).

The print media coverage, primarily oriented to the elites, the upper class, and upper segments of the middle class, with rare exceptions, marked complete absence of forms of violence that are prevalent among the poorer social classes. These include sexual harassment in factories and fields, incest in slum areas, and trading of girls through so-called summer marriages, are absent from the print media discourse agenda. Print media did not offer solutions to the issues addressed by either domestic or community violence against women (Abu Youssef et al. 2009).

Television, the most important means of affecting awareness among the Egyptian population, due to its significant viewership rates directed to the predominantly unliteral Egyptians, addressed issues of violence only periodically, and avoided discussions of critical issues such as domestic violence, the last on its agenda of interests. Egyptian television programs typically opposed community violence, and addressed domestic violence as a result of the general spread of violence, unemployment, and disintegration of the family. They did not suggest solutions to these problems nor encourage society to combat violence (Abu Youssef et al. 2009).

### **Outcome of In-Depth Interviews**

This comprehensive media research by Abu Youssef reflects the volume of media bias against women up to 2009. Such unfair and even unethical reporting on street violence against women continued through the January 25 Revolution and up to the present. This research consults the media coverage of two recent case studies of and analyzes them. It also draws the outcome of in-depth-interviews conducted with 15 media professionals, women activists in Egypt and women NGOs about their opinion and experience with the media coverage of violence against women, the role of alternative media and social media in countering this phenomenon.

The vast majority of interviewees pointed to a very limited coverage in terms of local television, both state and private, as well as print media and their official websites. The media coverage they noticed is limited both in terms of the space allocated to women's issues and the volume of incidents of violence against women as well. They also noted that there is a great deal of bias against the survivor in terms of the mainstream media coverage, whether it is a state or a private media. Most interviewees had great hopes that social and alternative media push off the lines of free media expression for mainstream media and enforce women issues and a favorable line of coverage into the news agenda. Some interviewees, however, were unsure about the effectiveness of the role of alternative and social media in combatting this phenomenon in a country where the great majority of people are under the poverty line.

Shahira Amin, Independent Reporter (Personal Interview 2017), pointed out that the ethical role of the media must go beyond fair and objective reporting into what she called "the reporter activist" in case of reporting about the amount of alarming violence to which women in Egypt are subjected to since their childhood, such as FGM, despite being attacked by everyone for reporting on a sensitive/taboo issue. Amin, who was a board member and reporter for Nile TV International (a state television channel), kept reporting on an annual basis for ten years, shedding light on the physical and psychological dangers to which girls in rural areas are exposed including losing their lives until a law criminalizing FGM was issued by the government. In 2010, she was honored by Ambassador Moshira Khattab, former minister of Family Affairs, for bringing this issue into public attention. "This is the kind of media coverage that we need," says Amin.

According to Amin, journalists should use their journalism to promote or further a cause. It is ok to be biased in favor of the weak or vulnerable, or those who have been subjected to injustice:

I've used my journalism to try and make a difference in the society. When I first reported on FGM in 2000, it was not publicly talked about much. The state security asked me why I was tarnishing Egypt's image. I told them that if it was not happening I would not be reporting it. After revisiting the story several times, a law was finally passed criminalizing the centuries old practice. I received a certificate from the national council for motherhood, thanking me for my efforts in helping to bring about the law. So, being persistent, and continuing to spotlight the weaknesses in the society, yields fruit in the end. The same thing happened with the virginity tests, when I broke the story in May 2011, after getting the first admission from a senior general that the tests had been performed. Critics said I was trying to defame the military. Local websites said I was being tried in a military court. A few months later a law was passed banning such humiliating tests in Egypt altogether. That is the role of journalists, to effect change in their communities. (2017)

The following two case studies are typical examples of how the media has dealt with two video recorded incidents that millions in Egypt have watched and condemned online using famous hashtags. These two significant incidents, The Blue Bra Girl (2011) and the Mall Woman (2015), indicate how local media coverage of street violence against women Egypt was deliberately unprofessional and unethical.

## Two Recent Case Studies

### **The Blue Bra Girl (2011): Why Did She Go There?**

In December 2011, footage of an anonymous woman, dragged and beaten by Egyptian soldiers, became a symbol of Egypt's political turmoil. During the attack, the unconscious woman had her abaya pulled up over her head, exposing her blue bra. After a few seconds, she appears to be unconscious as the beating goes on. According to Issander El-Amrani, despite the professionally shot video and picture, the military rulers of Egypt and their supporters in the media denied what everyone was seeing on video (Gladstone 2011).

First we had a picture that came out, then eventually the video, says El-Amrani. The video was popular on social media then later made it to private stations, where guests on political talk shows tried to deny what happened, saying this is not possible. The army does not do this, they declared, pledging that the pictures of the video were in some way doctored. A couple of days later, about 10,000 protesting women came onto the streets bearing that picture for the army to acknowledge it has happened (Gladstone 2011). Despite surviving the attack, the woman was demonized on talk shows and blamed for the violence she endured. Commentators accused her of deliberately wearing a blue bra to invite the attack. "The question they asked was how she could dare to wear such a bra, rather than how soldiers could attack a defenseless woman in such a way. Some accused her of being a whore, while others asked why she did not wear multiple layers of clothing under her robe," says Armanious (2013).

Egyptian commentators on talk shows and in newspaper editorials often posed the question, "why did she go there?" Posing such a question reproduced already existing hegemonic gender norms that delegitimized women's participation in political protests and blamed the victim for the assault. It also legitimized the soldiers' violence against women. Such attitudes were not

only expressed on state-owned media, but also in private media, which have been equally invested in promoting counterrevolutionary narratives. Ironically, the “blue bra” incident also illustrated the significance of popular culture in challenging official narratives of the mass media. There was an explosion of graffiti on the streets of Cairo, as shown in Figure 1 and Figure 2, celebrating the bravery of the unknown woman, smashing the paradigm of shame and guilt about the female body and subverting the hegemonic norms of gendered respectability (Pratt & Salem 2017). While street graffiti art and social media hashtags raised awareness about the incident, they failed to hold the attackers to account or prevent the occurrence of more incidents.



Figure 1



Figure 2

### **The Mall Woman (2015)**

In October 2015, a closed television circuit captured a college student, Somaya Tarek, at the entrance of a Cairo mall being followed and harassed by a man in a very busy public space. She stopped and confronted the man and threatened to call security; he slapped her twice across the face. Tarek, wrote Salma Abdelaziz, “made a rare and even dangerous choice in Egypt: She decided to speak up and call for justice” (2015). The video went viral on social media the following day.

Somaya Tarek agreed to speak out as a survivor of sexual harassment in a popular talk show on Al Nahhar television with a woman host, Reham Saeed, but found an aggressive and accusatory presenter. “I see you were wearing a tank top and tight jeans,” Saeed says of the CCTV footage of the assault. “Don't you think that these clothes were inappropriate?” “There is no justification,” Tarek responds. “Women in hijab and niqabs all get harassed. There was nothing inappropriate.” Saeed then started raising doubts about Tarek's story before showing the victim's pictures, taken in a private setting and stolen from her mobile phone – which she had to leave with the production team while recording with Saeed – to accuse her of lewd behavior. “Just as there are harassers in the streets, some girls have really gone beyond the limits. You won't like this, but this is the truth. Keep your girls in check and nothing will happen to them,” continued Saeed (Abdelaziz 2015).

Anger about Saeed and the taboos used to justify sexual violence against Egyptian women overwhelmed social media in support of Tarek. An Arabic hashtag translated as #die\_Reham went viral on Facebook and Twitter calling for the boycott of products advertised on Saeed's program. More than 14,000 messages using the tag were posted in 24 hours. Other Arabic hashtags including “Reham Saeed” and “Prosecute Reham Saeed” also trended in Egypt, with many calling for a boycott of her program and the network that broadcasts it, the privately owned Al-Nahar TV channel (Wendling 2015).

An Egyptian court has sentenced television show host Riham Saeed to six months in prison for airing private photographs of a sexual harassment victim and claiming her personal choices warranted the assault. The Giza Court also ordered Saeed to pay EGP 15,000 for violating Somaya Tarek's personal freedom. Somaya Tarek initiated court proceedings after Riham Saeed aired private photographs, allegedly taken from Tarek's mobile phone without her knowledge or permission, on the television show Sabaya El-Kheir (Egyptian Streets 2016).

Following the outrage, Al Nahar television suspended the program temporarily to contain public resentment and five sponsors withdrew their advertisements and issued public apologies to keep their credibility. However, despite numerous advertisers pulling out, Saeed returned to television less than two months later. This indicates the power of social media in countering the unprofessional practices of conventional media. It also points to a general public anger about the media pushing for sexual harassment against women rather than exposing and countering this phenomenon.

Hala Mostafa, a women's rights' activist and a coordinator at the ‘I Saw Harassment’ initiative, said the local media's coverage of sexual harassment is problematic in general. For Mostafa, the media does not care about such cases. “Sexual harassment of women has become a media topic related to seasons, such as Eid celebrations, to the extent that it has become an inseparable theme from other practices of the occasion,” Mostafa explained. During Eid and other public holidays, ‘I Saw Harassment’ issues regular reports on sexual harassment incidents, making the issue more visible in the media (El Fekki 2015).



“The second situation where a case would get media attention would be ‘scandalous’ incidents,” Mostafa said. She referred to the case of a woman who was severely harassed in Tahrir Square during the inauguration of President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi in June 2014. As for how the media tackles and portrays victims of sexual assault, Mostafa said this occurs either through “denial or going off-topic”, without serving the case justice or objectively discussing its circumstances. “Sexual harassment is a crime that affects us all as a society. It should be covered properly, all year long, not with indifference, or in the manner Saeed did. I strongly believe she should face strict punishment,” Mostafa concluded. Meanwhile, despite an increase of libel cases against local TV hosts such as Ahmed Moussa and Mona Iraqi, for similar ethical cases, and despite even imprisonment verdicts issued on libel charges, none of them have been sanctioned (El Fekki 2015). These cases demonstrate that social media attempts to combat unethical media coverage have a limited impact. Despite pushing strongly for legal actions against the attackers, under the current regime they can easily be surpassed. Evidently social media fails to hold the state-controlled media to account completely.

## **Effort to Combat Violence against Women**

### **1 Grassroots Effort: Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)**

At the grassroots level, local NGOs play a significant part in combatting all forms of violence against women in Egypt, but their role remains limited in the absence of a clear media strategy and effective legal frame. Various NGOs conduct large-scale awareness campaigns, but their biggest challenge remains in rural and slum areas, and indigenous communities, where people are deeply insecure and feel suspicious towards any development effort.

Women’s rights NGOs put much focus on combatting street sexual violence, specifically the 2005 incidents known as “Black Wednesday” when female activists protested in front of the Press Syndicate about the referendum to amend the constitution that would pave the way for Mubarak’s son to follow in the presidency. Female protesters were sexually harassed and assaulted by the security forces and state hired thugs. One of the protesters reported that some of these thugs penetrated her with their fingers. In 2011, after a five-year investigation instigated by the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR), the African Commission for Human and People’s Rights found the Egyptian government culpable in the mass sexual assaults of female protestors (Abdelmonem 2016).

This event was a turning point in the history of Egypt’s sexual violence against women. “Black Wednesday led to the vitalization of the women’s movement, where women were determined to start speaking out for their rights,” writes Sepulveda (2015). On June 1, 2005, the Egyptian Mothers group articulated its mission to give “voice for the silent majority of women”. They called on all Egyptians to wear black in support of the women who were harassed and assaulted. As stated in their call, “We have decided to go out next Wednesday, for the first time, in defense of the honour of Egypt’s women citizens...and demand the resignation of the Interior Minister.” Emphasizing its independence from all political groups, the Egyptian Mothers were the first civil society group to lay the foundation for the eventual Anti-Sexual Harassment movement (Sepulveda 2015).

Anti-harassment NGOs exert much effort to combat the mis-conceptualization of sexual harassment, in particular, and violence against women in general. They attempt to combat the common underestimation of sexual harassment as flirting, through various awareness campaigns helping society to become more and more intolerant towards such practices (Noora Flinkman 2016). Many of those campaigns, conducted by various anti-sexual harassment

movements, encourage people to report, expose and volunteer in tracking harassment cases, via social media. They train and send teams of volunteers to intervene in mob assaults to protect women from harassers in public places. According to Mosleh (2015), they encourage people to use social media to expose harassers, employing a number of hashtags—among them #AntiHarassment and #ExposeHarasser. The goal is to speak out against the daily sexual harassment they witness or experience, breaking the silence surrounding these crimes.

NGOs also use mobile technology and alternative media to spread awareness of women's rights and improve women's image. Two significant cases are HarassMap and ACT-Egypt. HarassMap, launched in 2010, makes use of digital media technology to spread awareness and collect data via crowdsourcing means. Taking advantage of social media and the widespread use of smart phones in Egypt, HarassMap encourages women and men to report incidents of sexual harassment as they experience or witness them. The website "maps" the reports online and in real-time. HarassMap.org is an "interactive mapping interface for reporting incidents of sexual harassment anonymously and in real time." According to Grove (2015), the project uses "spatial information technologies for crowd mapping sexual harassment." Trained volunteers encourage people in public places to take a "zero-tolerance" approach towards sexual harassment.

Another alternative medium countering the lack of awareness of conventional media to convey equality and present women as capable human beings is the project developed by ACT-Egypt, which produced a film "In the Mirror" exposing this lack of awareness. The film tells the story of a woman on her 50<sup>th</sup> birthday searching for her "true" self after having lived her life seeing her reflection through a "mirror" called "media". She remembers her life since childhood, and goes through the changes that happened in Egypt, and compares and contrasts them to the women's image in the media during the same period. Featuring interviews with media experts, and specialists in psychology, sociology, advertising and celebrities to explain women's image in each historic era, the film analyzes the nature and characters of filmmakers, to illustrate how their ideologies and social and political attitudes influence their vision of women's role, and in re-enacting this vision through the media (Media and Gender Justice 2014).

"In the Mirror" has been adopted by some human rights and women's organizations as "an advocacy tool" to fight violence directed towards women through the media. Some independent filmmakers expressed their intention to begin a series of productions and deliberations with media monitoring organizations. Overall, there is now a core of civil society organizations, academics and writers who take the issue of gender-focused media monitoring more seriously, as seen through their work (Media and Gender Justice 2014).

According to Hala Mostafa, Political Activist at Shoft Taharosh initiative (I saw harassment), who appears occasionally on television, since 2005 the Egyptian regime has used sexual harassment as a tool for political repression. Ever since the 2011 revolution, it has become systematic and very frequent. The first sign of this was the eve of Mubarak's stepping down, when a gang of anonymous thugs raped the American reporter Lara Logan of CBS, during the celebration of Mubarak stepping down in Tahrir Square. Later, there has been widespread waves of harassment against women activists or even any women participate in any street actions. On March 8th of the same year, the International Women's Day march was held then in downtown was harassed, and the women participant were harassed and violently beaten again with anonymous gangs, in the very next day the famous incident known as "virginity tests" against some female protesters which happened under the supervision of the army forces

and General Abd Elftah Elsisi the head of military intelligence at the time. When asked about that crime, he said it is a routine procedure by the army (Interview 2017).

Mostafa adds that the line of similar incident can go forever to cover everything that happened until nowadays. But let's talk about social media and its role in spreading awareness against this crime and covering and following the news of those crimes. In the period following the 2011 revolution, the media and press had a long period of freedom, a lot of news websites launched, and every single breath that happened anywhere can be published immediately, and of course TV shows that last most of the night and cover everything. At that time, lots of activists launched pressure groups, support for survivors and voluntary initiatives to combat sexual harassment. Social media, and the media in general, was an important tool to reach the largest number of people in the shortest time, to highlight sexual harassment and inform people about the facts and the incidents, launching campaigns to define what is sexual harassment to women and how to deal with harassment, educating men on the danger of harassment against society, and at the same time, monitoring and documenting all the cases and trying to pressure or push the governments to take action to combat the disaster. However, the most important thing about using social media tools (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube) was spreading knowledge about the danger of harassment, and maybe that there is something named sexual harassment the first place (Interview 2017).

## **2 Legal Effort: Political Violence and the Anti-Harassment Law**

Street sexual harassment and political violence in Egypt are directly linked to women's participation in public life and political events. Norms of gender and sexuality are encoded in gender violence legislation in Egypt. In their 2008 report, "Clouds in Egypt's Sky", the Egyptian Center for Women's Rights (ECWR), for the first time, placed on the state the responsibility for women's security in public. Within the report, ECWR urged the state to design a new law that would "define and criminalize" sexual harassment and to set new regulations for police and legal procedures. Essentially, ECWR called on the state to increase efforts toward managing the problem of sexual harassment, even as it focused its work at the community level (Abdelmonem 2016).

The lack of legal framework to protect women from street sexual harassment was further demonstrated in a study for ECWR, which indicated that police tended to mock women filing reports, that women did not believe the police would help them, and that foreign women identified police officers as harassers. Effective enforcement of the law depends on the police believing something wrong has been done. Here the study writer claimed that belief in the wrongness of certain actions stems from social roots and that police officers themselves are no different from other members of their society who do not always know or believe in the law (Abdelmonem 2016).

In June 2014, and on the day of the inauguration of the current president, nine women were raped by mobs while celebrating in Tahrir square, with one assault caught on video causing widespread outrage as it went viral online. Sisi visited the woman who was assaulted while she was in hospital, and made a public commitment to tackling impunity towards sexual violence and harassment in Egypt, which was widely praised by the predominantly pro-government state-controlled media (Sexual Violence 2014).

This act was met with much skepticism from the women's rights campaigners and activists as just a media show more than anything else. First, the issue was politicized by the media "to imply that the sexual violence has solely been perpetrated by the Muslim Brotherhood during

the post-revolutionary period since 2011, rather than an epidemic in which the police, the military, and the judiciary (through widespread failure and willingness to prosecute) have all been complicit.” Second, Sisi was responsible for the forced ‘virginity tests’ when he headed the military intelligence during the SCAF period in 2011 (Sexual Violence 2014).

The law introduced in 2014 that criminalized sexual harassment for the first time was criticized by anti-harassment activists for “not going far enough in its sanctions against harassment, and not being practicable”. Activists were concerned by “who will be prosecuted under the new law: namely, that it will be deployed to make sexual harassment and sexual assaults ‘apolitical’, by punishing the crime when it is committed by civilians but not providing oversight to ensure apparatus of the state such as the police and the military do not, themselves, also commit sexual violence and harassment” (Sexual Violence 2014). A deep-rooted cultural problem cannot be resolved just by a law that is applied by the same people who reportedly committed this crime repetitively.

Sexual assaults against women protesters in Tahrir Square put the issue of political violence against women into the public and media spotlight. It has been a long-standing and systemic problem in Egypt, representing a major obstacle to women’s participation in politics and political events. According to the report “Egypt Keeping Women Out,” these crimes have been constantly met with “almost complete impunity,” with successive governments failing to address the crisis. Violence targeting women protesters is “aimed at silencing women and preventing them from participating in protests. Many of the survivors and witnesses interviewed believed that attacks are coordinated and seek to break the opposition.”

While the Egypt Keeping Women Out report documents numerous cases of harassment over the last few years, no one has been brought to justice since March 2014: “no investigation has been opened”. Impunity by both the state and society contribute to the continuation of such crimes, as the perpetrators know they will not be held accountable. Labelled as an “epidemic”, such violence is met with absolute impunity and a climate of tolerance.

However, a May 2015 report released by the International Federation for Human Rights (IFHR) shattered much of the optimism of rights advocates, dashing their hopes for quick progress. According to the report, security forces were themselves routinely using sexual harassment and abuse against political prisoners and detainees. While the report does not identify victims by name, it nonetheless paints a grim picture of widespread, systemic sexual violence against prisoners in the country (Amin 2016).

In addition, the lack of legal definition of sexual harassment, which covers a wide range of actions, from flirting to rape, also contributes to this. NGOs which work on raising awareness report that women do not know what constitutes harassment; verbal and visual harassment, such as name calling or sexual invitation, are not recognized as such. There is a social tendency to downgrade the actions, so that the survivor reports, for example, sexual assaults and rape as sexual harassment (Egypt Keeping Women Out 2014). This minimization of such crimes, by the state and the predominantly state-controlled media, makes them invisible and socially accepted.

The state failure to address the violence against women, according to the Egypt Keeping Women Out report, is well reflected in the widely spread discriminatory political and religious discourse reflected in the mainstream media, which blames the survivor and implies that women should not be in public places. Several religious clerks blamed women for their own

harassment, arguing that they wear provocative clothes intentionally to be harassed. In the meantime, there is an increasing number of youths, males and females, volunteering to prevent sexual harassment, to protect survivors, expose perpetrators, and document incidents. The factors fueling this persistent violence include the lack of security, blaming the survivor with shame and stagnation, the climate of impunity and the lack of accurate data and statistics (Egypt Keeping Women Out 2014).

Nevertheless, Amin (2016) contends that change is happening, albeit slowly. The women are no longer tolerating such crimes and are speaking out. Youths are also raising public awareness through their engagement in dozens of grassroots initiatives fighting sexual harassment. What remains is for men to realize the extent of the damage and pain they inflict on the women they harass and assault. But first and foremost, the state has to come to terms with the magnitude and gravity of the problem, admitting that these are not isolated cases but a cancer that has spread from police stations and prison camps to university campuses and public transport.

### **Research Outcome and Recommendations**

To determine solutions to the endemic issue of violence against women and, specifically, sexual harassment, in-depth interviews were conducted with 15 media professionals, media figures, human rights experts, women's rights activists. The results of the interviews included the following recommendations:

- The media should use positive terms, such as survivor not victim.
- Not to ask or use information that implies ethical judgments that hold the survivor socially responsible, such as what she was wearing or what time of the night the event occurred.
- There should be a balance between the audience's right to know and the survivor's privacy.
- Sexual harassments are not individual incidents; they are part of a socio-political/cultural context. This must be the reporting context.
- The media should be able to provide the survivor with information about rehabilitation or legal centers that can help them.
- The media should not downgrade the violence, and report rape as harassment and harassment as flirting and so on.
- The media should stress the principle of equality between men and women designated in the constitution.
- Ethically the media should be on the side of the survivor not the criminal. This does not negate the principle of media objectivity.
- To combat the problem, the government and the media people should synchronize efforts with anti-harassment NGOs, women's NGOs, rehabilitation and legal centers to raise awareness at grassroots level, and to report accurately and regularly on the issue.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, this study demonstrates the strong correlation between media-aided state violence and societal violence. Societal acceptability and justification of violence against women is backed by the systematic violence exercised by the state along with the favorable mainstream media coverage for such crimes. To counter this, the state must adhere to and enforce the anti-

sexual harassment law and the penal code to prevent violence against women, and raise societal awareness about women's rights in equality and freedom.

NGOs and civil society organizations are exerting their utmost efforts to combat violence against women in various formats, through documenting violence on their websites and conducting awareness campaigns as well as training teams of volunteers to combat street sexual harassment. Those teams act as body shields for women in large gatherings and social celebrations, such as the two Islamic feasts. NGO members bring to people's attention the amount of violence exercised against women by reporting and documenting it on social media. The availability of such information in social media and making it available in the public sphere, forces the mainstream media to cover such news, invites them to speak and, thus, spread awareness on a wide scale when there are grand violations.

In addition, NGOs use alternative media, such as HarassMap, which uses crowdsourcing technology to gather and map accurate and up to date information to document violence. At the same time, they encourage women to report what they come across anonymously. ACT Egypt, also, has produced a film that grabbed significant attention towards the amount of violence to which women are subjected.

All such efforts, however, will not be effective enough in combating this phenomenon unless there is a concerted effort from the side of the government to enforce laws protecting human rights, along with the mainstream media, together with the NGOs to improve the status of women and the image of women, and thus the level of awareness in society.

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## **“The Real Nasty Side of War”: Exploring the Embodied Experience of American Soldiers on the Frontline in Iraq through Their YouTube Videos**

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### **Abstract**

This article examines four amateur videos shot by American troops in Iraq. Posted on YouTube, they depict the bombing of installations by military close air support. This article relies on a careful examination of these videos, observing its detail and describing as fully as possible the content of the footage as well as the visible marks of the video apparatus. It explores the complexity of the role of infantrymen facing their removal from actual combat on the Iraq war counterinsurgency battlefield. It looks at these productions by the yardstick of the CNN footage of the bombardment of Baghdad on the first day of the “Shock and Awe” campaign. Using this comparison, this study stresses the strong influence of traditional representations of war on the soldiers’ videos. The videos of installation bombings reproduce the official war imagery conveying a spectacular and highly aestheticised version of the war. This article further demonstrates the similarities between the television viewer of the bombardments and the soldiers witnessing the bombings. By analysing the war watcher’s participation in the military’s exercise of power, this article addresses the contribution of the soldiers, as spectators, to this demonstration of force that takes place without their direct involvement. It shows the different ways in which the soldiers use their practice of filming to assert their supremacy over their enemy. Yet this study also explores the limits of such power, since the soldiers’ representations are marked by the absence of the enemy on the counterinsurgency battlefield.

**Keywords:** Iraq War, Shock and Awe, counterinsurgency battlefield, soldiers’ amateur videos, trophy-pictures, pornography, CNN

I loved to just sit in the ditch and watch people die. As bad as that sounds, I just liked to watch no matter what happened, sitting back with my homemade cup of hot chocolate. It was like a big movie. (Anonymous soldier<sup>1</sup>)

## Introduction

This article examines four amateur videos shot by American troops in Iraq, posted on YouTube and showing the destruction of infrastructures by military close air support. It focuses on the video *US Army Destroys Iraqi Mosque*, filmed by unknown servicemen witnessing the bombardment of a mosque at a close distance. By comparing the soldiers' video with three similar amateur productions – *Close Air Support in Iraq*,<sup>2</sup> *Dec 25<sup>th</sup> 2007 JDAM in Mosul Iraq* (BlueCoconuts 2008), and *Iraq Combat Footage Extremely Close Air Support* (DailyMilitary (2013) – with CNN footage of the destruction of Baghdad (CNN 2003; Ytykg 2013), this analysis explores the complexity of the role of infantrymen as they deal with their removal from actual combat on the Iraq war counterinsurgency battlefield. It examines the way the soldier participates as a combatant in missions conducted against insurgents, while relying largely on airpower technology to kill, thereby replacing him and the arsenal he carries.

The amateur productions reproduce an iconography of war promoting the conflict's spectacular and entertaining character. These news media images of the bombardments are also intended to provoke the war watcher's participation, astonishment and seduction by the demonstration of overwhelming power deployed by the military. By analysing the television viewer's participation in the military's exercise of power, this article will examine the contribution of the soldiers, as spectators, to this demonstration of force that takes place without their direct involvement. In the case of *US Army destroys Iraqi Mosque*, our study analyses the way in which the soldiers film the different stages of the bombardments – the explosion of the main building and that of the minaret – to emphasise the military supremacy of the US military over the enemy. By capturing the destruction of the building, manipulating the image through editing and insulting his undifferentiated adversary, the camera holder marks his cultural and racial supremacy over the enemy, identified, in the context of both the War on Terror and a racialised clash of civilisations, with his religion.

In order to understand the nature of their participation in these installation bombings, this article examines the sense of pleasure experienced by the soldiers witnessing the explosions. It relates this experience with the satisfaction of the spectator watching the unfolding of Shock and Awe on television and cheering the bombardments of Baghdad. Drawing on porn studies, we will understand the visible as an "extension of the physical body" (Melendez 2004: 403) to explore the active involvement of the war watcher and the soldiers in the military's exercise of power. In the case of the soldiers' productions, this satisfaction will be analysed as the mark of the soldiers' engagement with the image and against the enemy. Considering the invisibility of the insurgency on the guerrilla warfare battlefield, we will address the different strategies deployed by the soldiers to overcome the absence of his adversary and confront him through the use of images. Yet, by questioning the soldiers' videos through debates focusing on war trophy images, we will see how the absence of the insurgent's body limits the significance of these productions in asserting their power over their adversary, who is invisible yet omnipresent on the guerrilla warfare battlefield.

<sup>1</sup> Cited in Joanna Bourke (1999: 15).

<sup>2</sup> Video removed from YouTube.

## Methodology

This article was partly inspired by the comments made by an Iraq and Afghanistan war veteran in interviews conducted in New York and Philadelphia.<sup>3</sup> During a screening of amateur videos of installation bombings, the infantryman noted the strong relationship between the satisfaction expressed by the soldiers watching the mosque being bombed and the pleasure experienced by the porn viewer. This testimonial, at an early stage of my research, helped me in elaborating knowledge on the experience of soldiers coping with airpower-oriented strategy on the guerrilla warfare battlefield.

This study is primarily a documentary study of images. It combines a cross-examination of four soldiers' productions depicting installation bombings and images from CNN news reports at the beginning of Shock and Awe with bibliographical research. In the soldiers' videos, I find elements revealing the complexity of the soldiers' role on the battlefield as they witness airpower operations. This analysis examines the soldier's vision of a particular situation on the modern mediated battlefield, in which he shares, to a certain extent, the position of a spectator attending a live show. It also attempts to unveil the manifestation of this vision in the soldiers' videos. This involves taking into consideration the strong influence of the official imagery of the Iraq War, especially the spectacular and exhilarated television reports of Baghdad under the bombardment. It also analyses the soldiers' comments, which stress their complex relation to the enemy on the guerrilla warfare battlefield.

The selection of the soldiers' videos was thus not guided by the popularity of the soldiers' videos, their number of hits or the comments they have received. The productions were not chosen for their spectacular or violent nature, or because they were posted or produced by specific users. The decisions related to my interest in understanding the soldier's role on the frontline. To explore accurately the soldiers' experience of war during these particular missions, twenty videos were initially chosen. They all captured one specific event, and used as little editing and post-production as possible. In this sense, documentaries, music videos, photomontages of war images overlaid by music or videos shot by off-duty soldiers were dismissed (Christensen 2009; Andén-Papadopoulos 2009). This continuity is fundamental in maintaining the unities of time, place and the actions of the soldier's battlefield. It spontaneously and immediately conveys the soldier's movements and voice and his reaction to the battlefield, with no mediation other than his camera. The films all conveyed, to different extents, the actions, reactions and behaviours of soldiers confronting the technological and virtual counterinsurgency battlefield. For the most part, and when they could be traced,<sup>4</sup> the videos presented were shot between 2006 and 2009, during the counterinsurgency phase of the war in Iraq. From this first selection, videos emphasising the spectacular nature of explosions were privileged, this allowing the author to examine the strong imprint of the official reports of Baghdad bombardments on the soldiers' videos. In this article, the four videos convey thus a clear contrast between the rough and direct statements of the soldiers' role and conduct as they film close support operations, and the influence of television representations of the bombardments during the first week of the Iraq war.

Furthermore, in order to understand the way soldiers cope with airpower operations on the counterinsurgency battlefield, this article undertakes an in-depth analysis of one particular video, *US Army Destroys Iraqi Mosque*. This video was chosen because it combines and enlightens four essential features of the soldiers' videos focusing on close air support missions:

<sup>3</sup> Interviews conducted between May and June 2009, in New York and Philadelphia.

<sup>4</sup> The dates of the videos are unclear since the productions have often been posted and reposted several times.

(1) the soldiers focus essentially on the destructive power of the bombardment and emphasise its spectacular nature; (2) the point of view of the camera and the exhilarated voices of the out-of-frame soldiers, placing them in the safe position of spectators watching a war show; (3) the soldiers' emphasis on the destructive force of the explosion, underlining the absence of the enemy, the latter systematically invisible in all the productions; and (4) they participate in the military operation by filming it and directly addressing the adversary, who is often racialised and confused with Islam.

In this context, this research differs from earlier debates focusing on amateur videos or photographs taken by servicemen from the coalition in Iraq or Afghanistan. Indeed, I do not analyse the soldiers' productions in order to illustrate specific aspects of official media or reconsider the role of amateur imagery in the transformation of news media. I do not wish, for instance, to analyse these productions' impact on US propaganda in light of the online media age (Christensen 2008), the role of their violent representation in threatening "the frames of media and military elites" (Andén-Papadopoulou, 2009), or the influence of soldiers' productions on the democratic debate on war (Mortensen 2009). Neither do I explore the new practice of mediating the war through innovative camera technologies or reflect on the soldiers' use of YouTube as a "dematerialized" memorial, a place to "mark their place in history" (Christensen 2009: 214). In other words, this study does not *use* the videos to illustrate or explain phenomenon beyond them, but finds, *within* the videos, traces of their ways of seeing, experimenting, or showing the frontline.

Instead this research examines the soldier's production, observing its detail and describing as fully as possible the content of the footage as well as the visible marks of the video apparatus, including the framing, sound, camera movements and editing. These salient elements within the images are viewed as clues relating to a deeper knowledge of the modern mediated battlefield. The interpretation of *US Army destroys Iraqi Mosque* is linked to an analysis of repetitive motives, patterns, figures and themes that reappear in other soldiers' similar productions and in the CNN reports of the bombardments of Baghdad. Debates focusing on the orchestration of the war by the military and the media during Shock and Awe, on Abu Ghraib pictures or on porn spectatorship ultimately put these elements in perspective. They stress the different ways in which the soldiers participate to these military operations. This includes their satisfaction as spectator of the explosions. It also includes their practice of filming the destruction of these building, which will be understood as a belligerent act conducted against his enemy. This multi-layered analysis introduces a new dimension to the soldiers' representations. By placing the soldiers' videos in dialog with other representations or texts, the article aims to go beyond their apparently entertaining and spectacular character to reveal the soldiers' paradoxical powerlessness against an invisible foe and the failure of airpower to efficiently combat the insurgent.

### **The Military-Entertainment Complex Orchestration of the War in Iraq: Sanitising the Battlefield**

The victorious, rapid, bloodless and clean version of war in Iraq broadcasted at the beginning of the conflict by traditional and 24-hour news channels could be understood as the result of the chain of transformation in official war representations, beginning in the aftermath of the Vietnam War.

The Vietnam era underlines the disastrous effect of the disruption between official discourses minimising casualties (Page 1996: 97), the power of the guerrilla in destabilising the military,

and the media's brutal images of death and injury, civilian despair and soldiers' disorientation. The images of civilians massacred at Mai Lai by American soldiers, the iconic photograph of the young Phan Thi Kim Phue heavily burned by a napalm bomb dropped by the South-Vietnamese Army shattered the imagery inherited from the "good wars" of World Wars One and Two presented as a "democratic power crusade against evil enemies" (Chattarji 2001: 65) and produced by the media in complete accordance with established military and political positions (Hallin 1986; Freedman 2004). In these conditions, the Vietnam War became the first "postmodern conflict" by increasing the structural discrepancy between the language used to describe war and its disturbing visual reality (Kellner 1999: 199).

Heavily restricted by the military, the First Gulf War coverage constitutes a major attempt to channel conflict-related information. Generalising the use of censorship, limiting access to the frontline (Andersen 2006: 56) and encouraging journalists to rely exclusively on military sources, the Department of Defence used the press and television as conduits for its discourse on military operations. With the compliance of the media, the military used the latest technologies and media innovations, such as advertising techniques, CNN's 24-hour channel format, and public relation strategies (Kellner 2004: 141; Andersen 2006: 169) to calibrate the war for television. The thrilling vision of night pictures of the aerial bombing of Baghdad underlined the superiority of smart, long distance weapons as well "as the near nonappearance of the 'enemy'" (Daney 2006). These versions became the frame of reference for the representation of the war, and guided the elaboration, ten years later, of Shock and Awe news coverage. Yet, locked down by the military and the media, television "could show *only* images which, as it is clear today, *were already part of the victory*" (Daney 2006). Reduced to a "passing advertorial", the coverage did not ultimately satisfy the advertisers financing media corporations as it failed "to establish a suitable epic story at the heart of total television" (Engelhardt 1992).

From this perspective, the military-entertainment complex in the Iraq War attempted to restore such a narrative and produce enough images to create a hyper-visible war. To control and orient information gathered largely from an insider perspective, the military used embedded journalists as the vehicle for an "information operation in the public domain, [...] both as an operational platform and as an instrument of war" (Rid 2007: 195). Yet, far from hijacking the media, in 2003 the military-entertainment complex strongly involved them in the production of this clean and "friendly information" from the very beginning of war's preparation (Calabrese 2005). As for the first Gulf war, military communication strategists attempted to convey a spectacular vision of the conflict. They designed a thrilling battle, which was intended to be short and antiseptic enough to encourage patriotism and support.

Reporting side by side with the troops deploying on the ground, the journalists provided live pictures of the invasion of Iraq and conveyed the exhilarating character of the triumphant "blitzkrieg" through Iraq. Not only were media corporations co-opted into the military-entertainment apparatus, presenters and reporters relied mainly on the intelligence services (Keeble 2004: 44) and military and government sources (Calabrese 2005: 166), without questioning their information. According to Stuart Allen and Barbie Zelizer, for "rolling news" in particular, their "incessant drive to be the first to break the story [...] sacrificed 'due care' and accuracy in the heat of the moment" (Allan & Zelizer 2004: 8).

Hours prior to and during the intense bombardments of the principal Iraqi cities, reporters, analysts and presenters on 24-hour news channels such as CNN reminded viewers constantly of the military's technological undisputed power against the enemy in terms of their lethal

power and precision. Beyond the embedding system and as the war unfolded, representations staged by the military and the media helped to construct “canonical” representations, reflecting “deeper cultural needs for symbolic catharsis [as well as] more immediate needs of the propagandist” (Aday, Cluverius & Livingston 2005: 318), thus providing a synthetic image of the conflict. For instance, the CNN and Fox News coverage of the fall of the statue of Saddam Hussein was designed to convey “a seminal moment in a nation’s history” (2005: 321), recalling the fall of the Berlin Wall. Aired every five minutes on Fox News and eight minutes on CNN, its fall provided the visible symbol for the end of the war, since “this is the image that sums up the day and in many ways the war itself” (321). This event, along with George W. Bush’s performance on the U.S.S. Lincoln aircraft carrier three weeks into Shock and Awe campaign, were intended to pronounce the end of the war. These events occurred, paradoxically, at the same moment an insurgency was emerging. The news media for the most part thus conformed to the official storytelling of the Iraq invasion by building a narrative that was adapted to the television format and, similar to the First Gulf war, was intended to satisfy the audience’s desire for closure.

The military-entertainment complex thus attempted to establish undisputed authority over the representation of war. In the case of television news coverage, this representation pervades the actual battlefield and, as we will see in our analysis, is indivisible from the soldiers’ direct experience of warfare. The official images of war, while imbued with ideology, are naturalised and “de-politicized” by the strength of the dominant modes of representation of the war in Iraq. The representation of the conflict, as displayed in the CNN news coverage of Shock and Awe, is deprived of the political, ethical, cultural, geostrategic and economic contingencies of war. The military-entertainment complex orchestration of the war thus impoverished its signification, reducing it to a technophilic, bloodless and highly aestheticised spectacle. This sanitised version of the war not only removed the vision of dead and injured bodies from the battlefield; it also dehumanised the enemy, invoking the “clash of civilisations” (Kellner 2004: 145) model as an explanation for the war. Journalists, for the most part, reproduced George’s Bush’s “binary dualism between Islamic terrorism and civilisation” while conflating Saddam Hussein and terrorism (Carpentier 2007: 105). These features constituted the architecture of the hegemonic definition and vision of war, dismissing alternative perceptions of the conflict through hyper-visibility and image overflow. This spectacle, stripped of war’s negative aspects, engages the participation of the spectator. It invites them to contribute to combat from home, whether they witness highly seductive images of the technologically overwhelming power of the military arsenal, or they follow the troops from the point of view of embedded journalists. The orchestration of the war by the military and the media is thus intended to shape not only the spectator’s beliefs, but also his understanding and conceptualisation of the war. The next section exposes, by this token, the fundamental power of these representations in constructing the soldiers’ own visions of war.

### **Videos of Installations under Bombardment and War Porn: Participating in Combat at a Distance by Filming It**

#### **Before the Explosion: Raising the Suspense**

The video *US Army destroys Iraqi Mosque* video begins with a wide static shot of a mosque, taken from a camera fixed on the ammunition box of a Humvee situated next to an asphalt road. This premise is common to many other videos conveying similar operations: voluntarily placing their camera in front of the building, the soldiers clearly show their intention to focus on the explosion, and invite the spectator to do the same. By zooming in, the camera holder in *Dec 25<sup>th</sup> 2007 JDAM in Mosul Iraq* (BlueCoconut 2008) even ensures that he films the right house

and that it is in the centre of the frame. His colleagues evoke the explosion about to happen. They sarcastically comment on the smell of the explosion preceding their filming: “Smells like burning” – “Burning what? –... marshmallows... all of the above.” Straight to the point, the camera holder in *Iraq Combat Footage Extremely Close Air Support* exposes the aim of their presence and the reason for filming: “Yeah, I’m recording... Let’s watch this place get fucked up!” (2008).

The camera, fixed on the military vehicle in *US Army Destroys Iraqi Mosque*, also offers a vision which does not directly reflect the point of view of the soldier, but that of the machine. As a result, no camera movement betrays the presence of the soldier filming, a presence which could divert us from the imminent demolition. Nothing in the video apparatus prevents us from identifying with the spectator attending the event live. The static shot, in this sense, provides complete space to its spectacular, shocking impact.

The video apparatus recalls the stage-managed representations of cities being heavily bombed, including frontal and stable shots of destruction. As CNN’s footage of the bombing of Baghdad in March 2003 demonstrates, these shots bare no mark of the camera holder’s experience under fire. In doing so, they prevent the spectator from connecting with the deadly consequences of the bombing and, by extension, empathising with those civilians enduring the attack. Here the nature of the act of identification with the image differs from the footage taken from smart bombs broadcasted during the First Gulf War. The military, to prove the precision of smart bombs, placed cameras on missiles to capture – and broadcast – their trajectory as they homed in on their target. Sharing the dehumanised point of view of the bomb, the spectator could watch a target about to be destroyed. A second before the bomb exploded, the camera would shut down.

By inviting the television spectator to identify with the nose of the missile in motion, the military hoped to convey an entertaining representation of the conflict, encouraging the viewer to “‘enjoy’ (at a safe distance) immense destructive power”. Yet the military could not foresee the inevitable negative impact of his identification with what was happening within the frame. The viewer, while watching, was simultaneously “being led symbolically to imagine itself blown to smithereens” (Stam 1992: 104). Keeping this in mind, the military-entertainment complex abandoned “filming-bomb” images during the Second Gulf War (Farocki 2004: 21). In the case of news media representations of the bombardment, then, the viewer only identifies with a point-of-view situated outside of the action; he shares with the cameraman the secure position of a spectator attending a live show at a distance.

The static framing in *US Army destroys Iraqi Mosque* thus conveys, like the CNN images, a disembodied representation of the ensuing destruction. It reflects the soldiers’ lack of physical involvement on the battlefield. Yet, their decision to film the explosions just to capture the destruction differs fundamentally from the story told by traditional media. US news reports, especially traditional television and 24-hour news channels, aimed to propagate the myth of heroic, spectacular warfare to create support for the war and dismiss the bombardment’s lethal impact. By focusing on the impact of the bombing, the soldiers claim their participation in the destruction.

The exhilaration of the soldiers anticipating the explosion in this sense contrasts with the discourses of CNN reporters prior to the bombardments. The soldiers here lay bare what the media attempt to keep out of frame: the blunt demonstration of technological power deployed for its own sake. On the other hand, minutes before the beginning of the bombardments,

reporters from CNN rationalised the upcoming destruction and emptied it of its lethal consequences.<sup>5</sup> Over a split screen made up of different shots of different places in Iraq – including images from Arab broadcast networks – the reporters and the anchorman announced the “unfolding” of Shock and Awe, using their discourse to stress the operation’s legitimacy. The lack of relationship between the images – frontal shots of urban zones and night visions of places that are barely distinguishable – and the voices commenting on the upcoming operations, help to anchor and increase the power of the discourse sanitising the military operations. Through the reporters’ live stories of soldiers’ victories and their comments on the overwhelming power of the military, the bombing becomes a large-scale interdiction campaign, conducted with such precision that the word “killing” is never used while death is minimised. The countdown, conveyed by all the reporters throughout the programme, raises the suspense before the upcoming attack, while emptying it of any anxiety-provoking facts: “What you didn’t see was major buildings that had been damaged. No homes or any signs of collateral damage...clearly that may have happened but there was no overwhelming indication of that” (2008). The headlines, repeating comments made by the Iraqi Minister of the Interior calling George W. Bush “the president of the International Gang of Bastards”, completes the legitimization of the war and prepares the spectator for an enjoyable, exciting and fully-justified manhunt.

### **“The Five Seconds out of Every Day That I Actually Enjoy Being in the Army”: Exulting While Watching the Explosion**

In its live report, CNN relayed more than seven minutes of uninterrupted, undisturbed images of the bombardment of Baghdad. These images, echoing the soldiers’ representations, are decontextualised. The demand of the programme anchor was “I want our viewers to listen to it”, and indeed the reporters stop commenting on the war and the bombardment, leaving the sound of the bombing to pervade the frame. The succession of shots emanating from television channels other than CNN – including Arab networks – focus on different parts of the city under attack that are never precisely identified. CNN segment alternates explosions in different parts of the city and conveys different colours – green, pink, yellow – according to the nature of the missiles or bombs used, with only one soundtrack, that derived from CNN’s footage. Coverage focuses on the explosions that hit and destroy entire buildings, shown at different distances to increase the astonishing character of the military operation. From afar, Baghdad can be seen burning, the flames illuminating a city otherwise obscured. The producers of the segment edited the images in order to capture every explosion within seconds, airing certain locations several times to film them being destroyed. Highly aestheticised, the spectacle of the bombardment reduces the representation of war to a flow of decontextualised colourful visions. The absence of comments from the reporters and the hypnotic succession of explosions – over seven minutes in total – convey a representation of power produced via a highly seductive vision of war. Staged as the climax of the war’s orchestration by the military and the media, the representations of the bombardment of Iraqi cities were produced to cultivate the enthusiasm of the television spectator. These images were meant to provoke the amazement of the viewer cheering each explosion (Mirzoeff 2005: 8) while involving, as a consequence, their participation as television spectators in the destruction of Baghdad.

In *US Army Destroys Iraqi Mosque*, as in the CNN footage, the static shot of the bomb falling from the top left of the frame does not allow us to see (nor does it follow) the bomb’s descent. The fixity of the camera, by preventing the spectator from visualising the position of the plane and situating the action locks the frame and therefore excludes the out-of-frame from the

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<sup>5</sup> See for instance the first forty minutes of CNN live news program.



*diégèse*. This decontextualisation increases the surprise effect of the bomb hitting the mosque, as well as its intensity: the explosion appears as an overwhelming demonstration of technological power, which can hardly be countered. The implacable and de-humanised character of the bombing recalls the words of a Taliban fighter, acknowledging the supernatural power of drone-delivered bombs, namely that they “cannot fight” them (Bearak 2001).

As the dust completely covers the mosque in the YouTube video, victory shouts celebrate the explosion. This manifestation of joy and victory echoes the other soldiers’ representations, in which they share their amazement at the destructive power of the bomb and express the intense pleasure provoked by the event. As the deflagration and dust begins to cover the whole frame, the camera holder of the *Close Air Support in Iraq* video shouts over the sound of the explosion and the laughter of his colleagues: “This is... this is fucking beautiful!” “Goddam!”. The reaction of one of the soldiers witnessing the event in *Dec 25<sup>th</sup> 2007 JDAM* ultimately summarises the intense satisfaction experienced by the soldiers in all the videos. He states: “That would make the five seconds out of every day that I actually enjoy being in the army”. One could understand this joy regarding the explosion as a response to the general frustration endured by soldiers confronted with an invisible, elusive enemy. The bombings, from this perspective, appear as a reward, a proof of the soldiers’ supremacy over the enemy.

What, then, differentiates the joy expressed by millions of spectators reproducing the “exercise of power” (Mirzoeff 2005: 8-9) conducted by the military while watching the unfolding of “Shock and Awe” from the exhilarated reactions of the soldiers on YouTube, especially since their representations follow the same process? The television viewers’ “exulting triumph” (8-9) in front of such representations can be related to the soldiers’ joyous exclamations during the explosion. A US veteran,<sup>6</sup> discussing these videos of bombardment, related the shouts of the soldiers witnessing these explosions to the pleasure felt by people watching pornography. “This guy”, he insisted, “does the ‘porn yeah’... what I mean by the ‘porn yeah’ is the ‘yeah’ of satisfaction” (2009). The pleasure of the soldiers here recalls the pleasure of the television spectator watching the war. If we consider the television spectator in a more general sense, this pleasure invokes the “twin pleasure of looking (scopholilia) and hearing (Lacan’s *pulsion invocante*), [yet] without being seen [and] without being heard”. This condition as a “protected witness” triggers in the viewer a “fictitious sense of superiority” (Stam 1992: 107). This sense of superiority could easily be attributed to the soldiers, who can watch and enjoy the explosion from a safe position.

In pornography, this omnipotence comes alongside the fulfilment of the spectator’s desire for “panoramic vision” (Mirzoeff 2005: 113). Linda Williams, commenting on the Iraq war, has claimed that the war coverage resembles porn as it “attempted to show the viewer everything that happened, in the manner of hard-core pornography” (Mirzoeff 2005: 80). Both soldiers and television spectators, while located in radically different environments, enjoy the “frenzy of the visible”, which Williams has identified as at the heart of pornography’s production (Williams 1989). Pornography, as a genre, is indeed concerned by the imperative “to make visible, document, and bare witness to bodily pleasures, body parts, and sexual acts”. The frenzy of the visible, in this sense, is concerned with representational conventions such as “meat shots” (shots of the penis entering the partner’s body), “money/cum shots” (ejaculation on the partner’s body), or “creampies” (shots of ejaculate in a vulva or an anus) (Paasonen 2011: 77). In this sense, one can understand better the satisfaction expressed by the soldiers who manage to capture on camera the momentum of the explosion. In all four videos, soldiers ask their

<sup>6</sup> Interview with a US veteran, Philadelphia, 23 June 2009.

colleague wielding the camera if he “filmed that”, to be answered proudly that they “got all of it”,<sup>7</sup> “every second of this shit”.<sup>8</sup>

The contentment of the television spectator and the soldiers can be understood further as a form of active participation in these events. Pornography, as an “art rooted in bodily effect” (Dyer 2002: 140) helps us to envision the ways in which the soldier and the television spectator’s bodies are invested and affected by the explosions. The soldiers’ shouts and the television spectator’s cheers could thus refer to a “carnal density of vision” (Crary 1992) that defines the visible, as in the case of pornography, as an “extension of the physical body”. This is interactive inasmuch as the “viewer experiences video pornography as a *mediated* image of undeniable *immediacy*” (Melendez 2004: 403). In these conditions,

the viewer alternates between the two types of pleasure derived from occupying a particular position in a viewing structure; the act of viewing vacillates between the active pleasure of possessing (consuming) the image as object/commodity (the viewer as gazing subject), and the passive pleasure of being moved by the image (the viewer as object). (Melendez 2004: 414)

Alternating between disembodied and embodied models of visibility means that pleasure, therefore, unfolds “like a pulse in this interaction between embodied observer and mediated image” (Melendez 2004: 414). Through their bodily engagement, the soldiers filming the explosions shatter the distance separating them from the actual frontline. Their camera in *US Army Destroys Iraqi Mosque* may (unlike other amateur productions) be fixed on an ammunition box, the pleasure they express underlines their involvement in the event happening before them. They are thus far from passive. Their desire to “possess” the image and literally capture through their filming the destruction of the buildings is a participatory action and even appropriation of the explosion. Like the spectator watching and celebrating the bombing of Baghdad on television, the soldiers’ productions can be seen as an exercise of power against the enemy by taking into account their reactions of blunt joy.

Yet, while one could relate the image of the explosions to “money shots”, thus proving the ability of the media to show everything happening on the battlefield, these representations of bombings only make more acute the absence of visual accounts of “war’s ultimate transgression of the taboo: death” (Mirzoeff 2005: 113). As evoked above, the media, in accordance with the military, bases the success of its representation of war on the careful avoidance of gruesome images of bombardments’ results. Throughout the CNN broadcast bombardment sequence, the rolling news and headlines only give general information on the war. Including, amongst other items, the position of the troops in Iraq, the evolving hunt for Saddam Hussein, the declaration of the Iraqi Minister of the Interior, or the presence of Weapons of Mass Destruction, these elements carefully avoid relating the images with more contextual knowledge. They prevent the spectator from understanding precisely what is unfolding before his eyes. The headlines, in the same way, only refer to a very general extent to the situation displayed on television, for instance stating that the “northern war seems to have started”. The program, ultimately, juxtaposes vague facts with images linked to de-contextualised explosions and deflagrations. The text here encourages the spectator to connect what he sees with a general narrative of the war’s rationale and the tale of the victorious campaign conducted by the military. This lack of contextualised information and the “sheer relentless persistence of explosions” (Mirzoeff 2005:

<sup>7</sup> In DEC 25<sup>th</sup> 2007 *JDAM in Mosul Iraq*, the soldiers’ joy increases as they learn that the camera holder captured the debris flying on camera: “Tell me you got that s...” – “Oh yeah, I got it! I got every second of it.”

<sup>8</sup> *Close Air Support in Iraq*: “I got all of it too... I got all of this shit”.

104) leaves space for the images' seductive power, while ensuring that the perception of the bombardment remains bearable and even positive.

Herein lies the difference between CNN's images of the bombardment and the soldiers' amateur productions: the soldiers, in their videos, refer directly to the targets of the bombing. The camera holder, in *US Army Destroys Iraqi Mosque*, exposes the bombings' results while sarcastically apologising to potential victims and adds, as if to underline the impact of the deflagration: "What mosque?". The soldiers filming in *Close Air Support in Iraq* and *Dec 25<sup>th</sup> 2007 JDAM in Mosul Iraq* also capture and celebrate the explosion. By recording the slowly disappearing smoke, they stress the damage caused by the bombardment and its lethal intent, beyond the politically correct descriptions of an "interdiction campaign" targeting the enemy's capacity.

However, the soldiers' productions reproduce television news media iconic images of the bombardment, as if these money shots constituted for them the ultimate expression of war. By claiming, for instance, that the strikes mark the best moments of his time in the army, the camera holder who filmed *Dec 25<sup>th</sup> 2007 JDAM in Mosul Iraq* underlines the absence of the enemy and the lack of confrontation between both parties in the context of the counterinsurgency, a key element of all of the productions studied here. The soldiers filming participate to the military operation through the act of filming and by commenting on the explosion. Both actions are used to attack the enemy identified with the buildings under bombardment. The soldiers, in doing so, go beyond the enemy's physical absence to wage war against him through images.

### **Waging War with Images**

In the different YouTube videos' final moments, the camera holders keep insulting the explosions' imaginary targets, simultaneously celebrating the power of the military arsenal. The words of the soldier filming the demolished mosque, "Did you see that, turkey?" echoes the camera holder's remark in *Close Air Support in Iraq*: "It sucks to be your ass you fucking 'muj' motherfucker!" Then, a bit later, "See you in fucking hell dog, see you in fucking hell." The uncut footage in *US Army Destroys Iraqi Mosque* exposes furthermore the power and violence of the explosion. The comments, in this particular video, stress the aggressive nature of the soldiers' discourse towards an enemy, who is generalised and racialised. Through their words, the soldiers conduct an attack on the very existence of their religion, reducing the complexity of the war in Iraq to a clash of civilisations.

This clash, in the context of the War Against Terror, is "not the product of particular historical circumstances that can change" but relates instead to "the essence of Islam as a religion [considered] antipathetic to the fundamental core values of the West" (Qureshi & Sells 2003: 2). The soldiers thus convey "Bush's rhetoric", which simplifies the multi-dimensional conflict by "moving from Al Qaeda to the Iraqi regime" thereby arguing that "mad terrorists and tyrants are equally undeterrable" while talking of the alleged links between these "shadowy networks" and "rogue states" such as Iraq (Cole 2005: 145). Through their words, the soldiers reproduce official discourses produced after 9/11, which reduce international mujahidin fighters, Iraqi Shi'a and Sunni combatants, tribal powerholders or regime loyalists to "a transnational threat" (Thussu & Freedman 2003: 2). They repeat the binary opposition between the West and these groups, the latter being "'simply anti-American', envious of the US's affluence and power and opposed to its core democratic ideals" (Downey & Murdock 2003: 81). Hence, they embody the discourse of television channels such as Fox News that disseminated, from the beginning of the Iraq war, a "hostile, even insulting portrayal of their opponents" described as "rats", "terror goons", and "psycho Arabs" (Thussu 2003: 127).

To a general extent, this archetypal vision of the “muj” prevents the soldiers from acknowledging and understanding the complex nature of the enemy. The soldiers’ comments here reflect the failure of the US military strategy in Iraq, especially in the first years of the conflict. While the insurgent attacks increased right after the collapse of the Iraqi state army, the military kept encouraging an enemy-centric, technological force, thus undermining the need to better understand the nature, the intentions and the *modus operandi* of their opponents.<sup>9</sup> The soldiers’ words, then, mirror the military’s inability to control the battlefield and overcome the insurgency, despite the technologies of intelligence and surveillance deployed at the end of the twentieth century through the Revolution in Military Affairs.

From this perspective, one can understand the soldiers’ use of the camera in the different YouTube videos as an attempt to overcome their powerlessness against the insurgency taking place on the battlefield. Filming the explosion while directly calling out at the enemy – “Oh sorry...did you see that, turkey?” – the soldier in *US Army Destroys Iraqi Mosque* uses the camera to capture the humiliation inflicted on the insurgent, whether he watches the video or is the victim of the explosion. From this perspective, one can consider the soldiers’ four productions as a form of image-trophy recalling the “aberrant form of collecting” of the mutilated body parts of the enemy collected for trophies (Harrison 2012: 3). This practice is intended to produce the “souvenir of a collective action whose participants felt perfectly justified in what they had done” (Sontag 2004; Steuter & Philips 2008). Trophy-taking can relate to the soldiers’ video practices, inasmuch as this act is a “specifically racialized form of violence” (Harrison 2012: 5) against adversaries almost exclusively represented “as belonging to ‘races’ other than their own” (5). However, their practice differs from the classical understanding of the military trophy. Susan Sontag’s reflexion on the photographs of torture inflicted on detainees taken by servicemen investigates this distinction. While trophy pictures were by convention “collected, stored in albums, displayed”, the case of Abu Ghraib marked “a shift in the use made of pictures – less objects to be saved than messages to be disseminated” (Sontag 2004). The soldiers’ videos seem to follow the same process. Although the Abu Ghraib photographs were originally meant to circulate within the army, their purpose was, like the videos of the destruction of the building and particularly in *US Army Destroys Iraqi Mosque*, intended to annihilate and exterminate the other symbolically (Baudrillard 2004).

Inserted for a few seconds, a still shot of the mosque before its destruction stresses the damage done to the building. Through this manipulation of the footage, the soldiers in *US Army Destroys Iraqi Mosque* not only express the supremacy of the military in destroying entirely the infrastructure. They also mark their ability to play with the representation of the mosque, which can appear or disappears at their convenience, through their use of editing. Disrupting the real-time unfolding of the event, the shot of the untouched building destroys the mosque a second time, multiplying the effect of technological military power. The soldiers elaborate here a narrative of power, claiming “American global dominance punishing the inferior Oriental enemy” (Steuter & Wills 2008: 91; see also Tétreault 2006). This weaponized image shares the same objective of deterrence with the official representations of the bombardments of Baghdad during the First and the Second Gulf Wars. As formulated by General Norman Schwarzkopf (1992) during the First Gulf War, these spectacular images were intended to ensure that Saddam Hussein “got that message” (400). In both wars, the spectacular visions of the destruction of Baghdad aimed “to overwhelm any response” from the enemy, while any opposing viewer would be annihilated by these “weapon images” (Mirzoeff 2005: 104–105).

<sup>9</sup> See David Kilcullen (2010): “Fields operators realized clearly and early that they were in a counterinsurgency fight, but for political reasons [...] and through institutional inertia, the Defense Department refused to recognize this. Senior commanders would not even use the words ‘insurgency’ or ‘counterinsurgency’” (p.19).

Notwithstanding this, the pictures of Abu Ghraib were powerful and disturbing precisely because their producers “heighten[ed] their sense of reality by videoing themselves in the act” (Harkin, 2006). When they confessed their stories involving trophy taking, soldiers from the Second World War and Vietnam have invoked the need to desecrate the body of the enemy to “prove that a man had seen active combat and thus had proved himself on the field of battle” (Bourke 1999: 26). The soldiers’ videos, on the contrary, lay bare the absence of the insurgent’s body. The soldiers may wage war through their productions, yet the absence of the enemy, dead or injured, reduces to a certain extent the impact of their power over him.

Their productions, in this sense, do not transgress the taboo of the representation of death imposed by military doctrines and official war communication. The Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) and Network Centric Warfare (NCW) doctrines, elaborated and applied between the 1990s and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, designed a dehumanized and hygienicised battlefield, involving smart and long-distance weapons destroying targeted infrastructures. Enemies in this context are conceived as “targeted human subjects”, converted into digital data coded as a “‘pattern of life’ [...] that can effectively be liquidated into a ‘pattern of death’ with the swivel of a joystick” (cited in Gregory (2014: 13). Traditional news media reproduces the technological dominance of the military, while removing blood, death and injury from televised images. As we saw with the CNN footage of Shock and Awe’s beginning, these representations, especially in the early phase the war, dismissed visual accounts of enemy casualties. The soldiers’ videos, in this sense, underline the limits of the military and media orchestration of war in asserting the supremacy of the US military. The soldiers may wage war through their videos, yet the first images of corpses that were broadcasted on television were of US infantrymen killed by the insurgency. These images, released by Al-Jazeera at the very beginning of the war, provoked huge controversy (Mirzoeff 2005: 114). They marked the power of the insurgency in attacking the soldier’s body, as well as its capacity to thwart the strategies of communication established by the military-entertainment complex, intended to assert the technological supremacy of the US arsenal.

Just as the second bomb destroys the minaret entirely, the last words of the camera holder – “And the guys still want to fuck with us!” – come to undermine its destructive power and the joy expressed by the soldiers. his sentence, directed at himself and his team as well as to a potential enemy viewer, affirms the overwhelming and lethal power of technology in destroying the mosque. It shares a similar purpose with the Abu Ghraib pictures since the fundamental role of these images is to “abolish the enemy” (Baudrillard 2004) symbolically through the negation of his identity and culture. On the other hand, his words express his incomprehension in light of the powerlessness of these technologies to overcome the insurgency. Viewed as a confession, ultimately, of the failure of the image to deceive the foe, this last sentence marks the irreducible limits of the power of the image and, as a corollary, the strategies of deceptions deployed by the military-entertainment complex on the guerrilla warfare battlefield.

## Conclusion

In the four videos presented, the soldiers exploit the performative nature of the images they film, thereby overcoming their distance from the frontline, engaging with the enemy and, to a certain extent, confronting him. By exploring the CNN representations of the “Shock and Awe” campaign against Baghdad, we explored the complex position of the spectator, who contributes to the exercise of power designed by the military and the media. The comparison between the television footage and *US Army Destroys Iraqi Mosque* shows that the soldiers and the television viewer both engage with the image. They participate, to different extents, in the

bombings they are witnessing. By exulting in front of the explosion and manipulating the video in the post-production phase, the soldiers furthermore film the explosion as an act of war.

However, the irreducible absence of their adversary – dead or alive – in these productions ultimately reveals their struggle to make sense of combat. The soldiers' attempt to construct, through images, their relation to the foe, is hampered by both technology and the very nature of insurgency strategy, privileging the "skirmish and the ambush" over conventional battles and face-to-face combat. In their productions, the deflagrations and acts of destruction replace killing, thus avenging the random attacks the soldiers' experience daily. In these conditions, the enemy is reduced to an archetypal representation of Islam.

And yet, this recognition of the enemy is fundamental for the soldier. Joanna Bourke recalls in her analysis of military trophy-taking the "search for souvenirs [that] enabled men to link death of the 'other', the enemy, with love of themselves". Leaving souvenirs "such as photographs of themselves, on top of the corpses or cards representing their unit in lifeless hands" reflected the reciprocity of peril faced by both participants, "a universal condition" ultimately diminishing the "terror of death" (Bourke 1999: 29) experienced on the insurgency battlefield. In the soldiers' production, the visions of explosions reveal the absence of "pathogenic life forms" (Gregory 2011) on the battlefield, aside from them filming. The soldiers' dehumanization of the enemy in the four videos presented here echoes the US military project to "sanitize the battlefield" (Gregory 2014: 11). However, the voices of the soldiers addressing an unknown, generalised enemy expose the failure of such project. Meant to make up for the absence of the enemy, these images of destruction paradoxically stress his pervasive, omnipresent nature on the counterinsurgency battlefield, and the soldiers' failure to overwhelm him.

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**From Osaka to the Gion: Vernacular Modernism in Kenji Mizoguchi's *Osaka Elegy* (1936) and *Sisters of the Gion* (1936)**

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**Abstract**

One of the most innovatory models for re-appraising the way in which popular cinema is able to articulate social and cultural change has been provided by Miriam Hansen's idea of 'vernacular modernism' (Hansen 2000). Hansen examines how cinema provided a popular, quotidian modernism in the context of western industrial influence upon East Asian culture. However, her definition does not explore the notion of vernacular as an embedded discourse, one which combines both traditional and modern forms. In an article entitled 'Vernacular Culture' in the Journal *American Anthropologist*, Margaret Lantis uses vernacular to connote 'the culture-as-it-is-lived appropriate to well-defined places and situations' (1960: 205).

This paper will examine how Kenji Mizoguchi deploys this 'regional vernacular style' through two of his seminal 1930s pictures. This will be explored through two areas where this style might be most obviously articulated; contemporary culture, and *mise en scène*.

**Keywords:** Japanese cinema, culture, Mizoguchi Kenji, Isuzu Yamada, Vernacular Style, *mise en scène*, Miriam Hansen, Margaret Lantis, tradition, modernity

## Introduction

In her article ‘Fallen Women, Rising Stars, New Horizons: Shanghai Silent Film As Vernacular Modernism’ (2000), Miriam Hansen argues that the dominance of classical Hollywood cinema, both at home and abroad, can be explained in its ability to enable audiences to negotiate the profound social and cultural changes wrought by 20<sup>th</sup> century modernisation:

I take the study of modernist aesthetics to encompass cultural practices that both articulated and mediated the experience of modernity, such as the mass-produced and mass-consumed phenomena of fashion, design, advertising, architecture and urban environment, of photography, radio, and cinema. I am referring to this kind of modernism as vernacular (2000: 11).

Hansen uses the term “vernacular”, in preference to “popular”, as a way of distinguishing mass cultural production from the avant-garde of high modernism. She explains that, “The dimension of the quotidian, of everyday usage, combined with the connotations of language, idiom and dialect, makes me prefer the term vernacular, vague as it may be, over the term popular” (2000: 11). However, we need to ask what additional value does substituting the term vernacular for popular have in identifying the cultural and aesthetic functions of cinema? From her article, the precise use of the term vernacular is still vague (as Hansen admits) and is employed to describe an experience of modernity, and a function of Hollywood narrative cinema, which she describes as universal.

However, Hansen’s ideas of the vernacular are most useful for this study. She observes that Chinese culture had developed responses to modernisation in a wide range of media, and on a mass scale, spawning a recuperated or internalised vernacular. Moreover, she continues, “this modernist vernacular may not always have tallied with the ideals of national culture formulated in literary and political discourse at the time, but it clearly represented an idiom of its own kind, a locally and culturally specific aesthetics”. Hansen elaborates on this point, noting that:

Shanghai cinema of the 20s and 30s represents a distinct brand of vernacular modernism, one that evolved in a complex relation to American – and other foreign – models while drawing on and transforming Chinese traditions in theatre, graphic and print culture, both modernist and popular (2000: 13).

While Hansen’s attention to the discursive formation of local cultural practices is useful, her attribution of vernacular modernism to the international hegemony of classical Hollywood cinema may be problematic. The reception of classical Hollywood film is not exclusive to Chinese (or Japanese) cinema, and although Hansen admits to the tension between tradition and the influence of western modernism, her emphasis seems to focus much more on the reception of Hollywood. However, beyond Hansen’s usage, there is another suggestive application of the term vernacular in anthropology.

In an article entitled ‘Vernacular Culture’ in the Journal *American Anthropologist*, Margaret Lantis uses the word to connote “the culture-as-it-is-lived appropriate to well-defined places and situations” (1960: 205). Her definition offers a way of interpreting local speech acts, mannerisms, and gestures associated with particular regional, sub-cultural, or event-specific behaviours. Lantis suggests that:

Vernacular culture, like any functional, unitary segment of the total culture, has the following components:

Values and goals, especially those that bring people to the situation

Appropriate time, place and artifacts

Common knowledge, e.g., regarding an industry, a sport, or hospitals

Attitude systems (including emotions) of participants

System of relationships (this subsumes social identification) or at least a pattern for relationships (in cases of transitory ones)

Sanctions Communication, including but not limited to special terminology and manner of speech (1960: 206).

This taxonomy may be usefully appropriated in order to interpret the local communities' "cottage industries", along with the bohemian and artisanal sub-cultures, which Mizoguchi so favoured in his films. It is crucial, when exploring the local, that any analysis of *mise en scène* should pay attention to these measurements of social behaviour, their rules and transgressions in the discreet milieux of the teahouses and the Gion. The concept of vernacular culture enables us to discover, further, the importance of film within a tightly controlled creative environment. It allows us to be sensitive to the particularities and subtleties of these micro-communities as rendered in Mizoguchi's films, and draws attention to the importance of diverse, local histories, mannerisms, customs, and speech.

Both Hansen and Lantis' models provide a way of negotiating the complex cultural and political influences (from inside and outside Japan) upon the Japanese cinema during the career of Kenji Mizoguchi. It allows us to address his films' thematic concerns, their *mise en scène* and visual style, their formal strategies of narration, including modes of performance, character construction, and spectatorial identification, and the films' address to, and function within, a specific horizon of reception.

In this article, I shall examine two of Mizoguchi's mid-1930s films, *Osaka Elegy* (*Naniwa Eregi*, 1936) and his follow-up, the Kyoto-set *Sisters of the Gion* (*Gion no Kyōdai*, 1936). Using both Hansen and Lantis' ideas, we will discuss how these two films, above all of Mizoguchi's 1930s work, represent a unique brand of vernacular modernism. This can be witnessed on multiple levels, from speech, to costume, to film style, and served to highlight a cultural struggle between tradition and modernity.

### **A Modernist Film Style?**

Taking both Hansen and Lantis' notions on board enables us to identify in Mizoguchi's work an evolving cinematic discourse which was essentially popular in its modes of address (Shimpa melodrama) and cultural reference (traditional arts and practices). But it also allows us to examine the influence of a modernity which bluntly challenged the established social order and, in regard to Mizouchi's work, forced him into a dramatic change of creative direction, none more so than in the manner in which he presented his work.

Certain writers on Mizoguchi have argued that it is possible to identify a specific film style in the director's early 1930s films. It is argued that his style reflects the classical mode, but also displays its own discursive characteristics (see McDonald 1984; Kirihaara 1992). Burch (1979) notes that although there are elements of a more "exotic" manner of film-making; "all the basic principles of the Western system are observed" (1979: 217). Burch goes on to suggest that within this stylistic framework Mizoguchi was never comfortable, noting that elements of the

classical style, such as the “complementary close-ups”, are included in a way which seems to “‘bother’ Mizoguchi”, and the director would “prefer to keep his distance” (1979: 217). Burch further discusses this idea when analysing Mizoguchi’s 1933 film *The Water Magician* (*Taki no Shiraito*), noting that although the drama develops in a style which is within the framework of Western editing, Mizoguchi keeps his camera at a distance, neglecting the requirement of shot change (1979: 218). Burch’s comments are clearly witnessed when watching Mizoguchi’s work of the mid-1930s. Made for Daiichi, the films were conventional Meiji period pieces which came in the form of *The Downfall of Osen* (*Orizuru Osen*, 1935) *Oyuki the Madonna* (*Maria no Oyuki*, 1935), and *Poppy* (*Gubijinso*, 1935), all of which were relatively unsuccessful, both commercially and critically. He recalls of the time that, “somehow, everything went wrong” (1954: 52), and his views are compounded by critical reaction. In a 1935 review of *The Downfall of Osen* for *Eiga Hyoron*, Kurata notes that Mizoguchi “obviously expended great effort in expressing the historical period of the narrative of this film, but he appears to have failed to depict everything as well as he had intended” (1935: 115–116). Murakami goes one step further, and in a review of the same film, insists that Mizoguchi is “one of the most established directors in Japan, one who has experimented with many kinds of subject matter and technique, though he has recently fallen into a rut of meaningless Meiji era films” (Andrew & Andrew 1981: 167). It is difficult to surmise why Mizoguchi returned to such films, especially since at Daiichi he was working with producer and long-time friend Nagata Masaichi. This partnership had promised a fresh start and creative latitude. Some evidence about this may be gleaned from a 1954 interview with *Kinema Junpo*, where Mizoguchi discusses the problems that he had overcoming “poor adaptations and bad scripts” and how he found it difficult to accurately portray his characters and their situations, as well as the distinctly regional vernacular in which they existed. (1954: 51–52)

It is clear from Mizoguchi’s *Kinema Junpo* recollections that the director was frustrated. Struggling to portray society with any meaning or accuracy and devoid of any artistic challenges, he found himself directing ‘comfortable’ pictures that proved unpopular and were widely criticised. The uneven filmic balance between an older, Edo era inspired director who was living in a modern and changing world can be seen clearly in these films. Although there was no doubt about his knowledge and passion for Japanese tradition and art, which can be seen in these early films, he had in the early 1930s films, struggled to portray modern life successfully. Hansen notes that negotiating the relationship between foreign and traditional art forms was complex, and Mizoguchi’s films of the period, a confusing mix of both, saw unspectacular returns both in terms of critical and commercial acclaim.

It is clear from these early failures that a traditional director was trying to come to terms with a modernising culture, but struggling to find a balance. Mizoguchi highlights this problem in an essay written for *Nikkatsu Cinema Magazine*. He notes:

I am fascinated by the Edo era and feel that we have seen a small influence from it on modern art ... I always tried to put this Edo culture, or at least this interest in Edo, at the heart of my filmmaking. On one hand, I try to maintain this challenge of Edo, but, alternatively, as a man who lives in the modern age, I am also attracted by contemporary society, such as the decadent life in the cafés and dancehalls (1926: 33).

Although Mizoguchi highlights the challenges that modern directors faced, representing the modern age was an issue that had blighted him. As long-term screenwriting partner and collaborator Yoshitaka Yoda recalled, although Mizoguchi was attracted to contemporary

society, he could not portray it, and had always struggled to understand this world or its inhabitants (1970: 205–206). But as a director of over thirty pictures, the criticisms prompted – we may say shamed – Mizoguchi into a stringent reassessment of his work, especially following the failures of his films from the first half of the 1930s. Andrew and Andrew note that “He decided to limit the risks by sticking strictly to areas of Japan he knew intimately, and so planned films in the cities of Osaka, Kyoto and Kobe” (1981: 10). The return to the sub-cultural underbelly of Kansai, a world that Mizoguchi knew intimately, resulted in two landmarks of 1930s Japanese cinema, *Osaka Elegy* and *Sisters of the Gion*.

In terms of the social context, both *Osaka Elegy* and *Sisters of the Gion* are striking in their portrayals of Kansai society, albeit from contrasting social perspectives (those of a modern girl in Osaka, and a trainee geisha in Kyoto). The euphoric integration of all things western, that had accompanied the country’s modernisation during the early part of the twentieth century, had now given way to a much stronger nationalistic drive, and modes of thought which strayed from this path were swiftly suppressed, or, in the case of cinema, ended up on the cutting room floor. So, what do these two films in particular tell us about the period in regard to both social attitudes and modernisation? Remarkably, considering the period, both films heavily question traditional methods, keenly observing a more individualistic, modern, and liberal way of thinking. The films are not subtle in their handling of the way such thoughts are delivered, and both involve a lone female protagonist fighting against the accepted norms of society.

Mizoguchi enabled Japanese audiences to find stimulus and solace in respect for their desires and fears in response to twentieth-century social and political transformations. He did this by situating these contradictions of tradition and modernity within recognizable social milieu and regional *demi-mondes*. For example, western costumes and hairstyles, cafés, and technology, seen throughout *Osaka Elegy*, are in stark contrast to local language and colloquialisms, traditional architecture, costume, and familiar cultural symbolism, which is seen in his follow-up film, the Kyoto-set *Sisters of the Gion*. The latter is particularly rich in modernist representation, as Mizoguchi begins to introduce specific ideas which would have been unrecognisable and particularly ‘foreign’ to a contemporary audience.

### Familiar Locales

*Osaka Elegy* is set in the modernistic metropolis that is 1930s Osaka, where Ayako’s (Isuzu Yamada) behaviour is accentuated alongside the modern and vibrant cityscape which incorporates corporate offices, modern stores and cafés. However, in *Sisters of the Gion*, the emotional outbursts of Omocha (again played by Yamada), are often located in more traditional locales and offer direct confrontations between tradition and modernity, youth and maturity, male and female. As previously mentioned, this is achieved through the verbal register, however Mizoguchi achieves further discomfort through a carefully crafted mise en scène. In order to fully appreciate the radical nature of these characters, we first need to be able to understand how Mizoguchi visually presented different modes of individualism, and, secondly, how he positioned these within the *demi-mondes* of modern and traditional landscapes. Although *Osaka Elegy* and *Sisters of the Gion* represent different social worlds, both introduce aspects of modernity in settings that Mizoguchi could confidently portray. Crucially, these films, told through the story of feisty females, reveal much about Mizoguchi’s response to processes of modernisation, and its effect on those who either embrace or are wary of it. Both films portray their locales with accuracy and sensitivity. In order to recreate the distinct manners and customs of Osaka and Kyoto respectively, it was crucial that Mizoguchi paid close attention to the details of mise en scène, as well as the authenticity of dialogue, the local architecture characterisation, regional humour and social practices.

We shall now focus on key elements of both *Osaka Elegy* and *Sisters of the Gion*, to test the appropriateness of Hansen's concept of vernacular modernism, and further adapt Lantis' anthropological approach. The work will highlight some of the key methods by which Mizoguchi dealt with social conformity when faced with cultural modernity. In this way it may be possible to identify the constitutive elements and aesthetic function of what we might call a vernacular film style.

***Osaka Elegy.*** Of the two Kansai films it is *Osaka Elegy* that displays a city at the height of a modernistic revolution. Ayako (Isuzu Yamada) resides in a busy and vibrant Osaka, she is the young, fashionable *moga* (modern girl), observed by the newspapers of the day as: “A woman with domestic aspirations [...] and romantic goals” (Kiriwara 1992: 36). The neon lights of the cityscape are captured evocatively, and as Toshie Mori indicates, “*Osaka Elegy* sets out to show the same mixture of the modern and the traditional that existed in the time and place in which the film was set” (Phillips & Stringer 2007: 40). It is useful to refer back to Hansen's model of vernacular modernism: Hansen's ideas regarding Chinese, and specifically Shanghai cinema, is key, as we can see a similar relationship. In *Osaka Elegy*, Mizoguchi highlights the struggle between traditional Japan and the unfamiliar modernist ethos. There are many examples: the telephone is an icon of 1930s modernity, and Ayako is an integral part of this evolving, technically rich landscape, working as a receptionist for Asai Pharmaceutical. This mixture is highlighted further by the costumes. Throughout the film we see western-style business suits alongside traditional Japanese yukata and kimono, as well as the soundtrack of big band jazz, indicating that we are in a city which is embracing a range of influences. The set design of the Asai Pharmaceutical offices is also indicative of western style, and although the period is not obvious from a single signifier, the *mise en scène* as a whole establishes that this is contemporary Japan. It is also important to note Ayako's work; as a receptionist, she is dealing with various parties, judging the callers, and responding appropriately. Lantis notes that such a position within vernacular culture is a good example to examine the characteristics of metropolitan life, as well as the effective differences. The receptionist must address people from both the inside and outside of the organisation, and respond to these people accordingly (1970: 202). Ayako, like Mizoguchi, is struggling to come to terms with this role, as a conduit of information between contrasting groups in her culture, “a complex of values and behaviours” (1970: 203).

In addition, it is also crucial to note the verbal vernacular. The *hōgen*, or colloquial accent, is an important signifier of local community and milieu, and the language spoken throughout *Osaka Elegy* is an accurate representation of the language of the city. Communication is more direct than in standard Japanese, and deeply expressive in terms of personal emotion. The film also contains the famous elements of regional humour, particularly in the dialogue between Asai (Benkei Shiganoya) and his wife Sumiko (Yoko Umemura), during the film's opening sequences. This, along with location signifiers such as Osaka wan (Osaka bay), Kōraibashi (Korai bridge), the socially diverse district known as Dōtonbori, and the Osaka neon, enables us to experience the city topographically.

Within this world, Ayako is the product of a modernising Japan; she is strong-willed and independent, and exhibits passionate desires without restraint. Mizoguchi deftly places her on the cusp of the old world and the new, in such a manner that a contemporary audience would immediately recognise. She experiences the frustrations of a modern female who is in conflict with societal expectations and rules. Her actions and reluctance to conform, especially during the latter stages of the film, would have no doubt agitated many older cinemagoers. Such struggles do, as Hansen herself admits, highlight the “pressures of modernity through their



thematic concerns, through particular oppositions and contradictions” (2000: 14). Ayako is a conduit for such conflict; she is impatient, tempestuous, and, despite the problems she encounters with her relationships, society, and her family, is determined to reach her goals at any cost, even if this involves conflict with her surroundings. Her direct language, flagrant disregard for social hierarchy, and scheming manner, seems outrageous in a contemporary society which frowns upon such selfish outbursts. Hansen notes that such stark contradictions (visual and verbal, traditional and modern) are “enacted through the figure of the woman” who “serve as the focus of social injustice and oppression ... thwarted romantic love, rejection, sacrifice” (2000: 15). These experiences are emphasised through their failure to adhere to societal rules, and subsequent codes of behaviour, all of which occur in traditionally familiar surroundings. A contemporary audience would immediately recognise these important cultural signifiers and specific social milieux, which are being violated by the most un-Japanese outbursts. Here, there is no place for personal expression, and characters such as Ayako, as Hansen mentions, must serve as a warning for others who dare to question the social order.

***Sisters of the Gion.*** If *Osaka Elegy* is set in a modern, bustling centre of modernism, *Sisters of the Gion* relies heavily upon recognition of more local practices, and the rules and expectations within a specifically Japanese sub-culture. Mizoguchi recreates the mood and atmosphere of the Gion through his accurate recreation of the area in which the film is set. Architecturally, the labyrinth of alleyways, narrow buildings, and streets full of teahouses, portrays the Gion perfectly. Let us now build on our awareness of how visual style is deployed alongside traditional artistic forms, as part of the vernacular style, working with architectural features and other elements of the production design. Such a study works in tandem with Hansen’s ideas of performance to incorporate what Lantis calls “local variants” (1960: 204). Mizoguchi does not just represent the inner sights and sounds of the Gion, but also recourse to more traditional and culturally ingrained Japanese traditional art. Here we shall examine another key scene from the film which utilises such art, but is used alongside regional architecture and local business practice. Lantis’ anthropological approach serves us well, and, by exploring the local rule systems, we discover that societal restrictions are even more conspicuously drawn. They are, in fact, even more rigid than in broader sections of society, and hence the rebellion of characters, such as Ayako and Omocha, become more intense, communicating with an audience at a sensory level.

This anthropological approach is helpful in assisting us to identify the importance of local setting, and the visual elements that enhance the claustrophobic, closed social world. This localisation helps to reinforce the local rule-systems, and makes certain themes, such as female emancipation or sexual freedom, even more shocking. Mizoguchi’s framing, his camera-work, and the way he constructs his *mise en scène*, ensures that when his characters break out, the audience immediately recognises the magnitude of this rebellion. This is further achieved by Mizoguchi’s recourse to a more traditional and culturally ingrained Japanese traditional art, which in-turn has a dramatic effect on his *mise en scène*. Here we shall examine another key scene from the film which utilises local architectural features of the Gion, as well as a traditional Japanese art style.

This scene prefigures Omocha’s outburst, and we are witness to the resulting circumstances of a merchant’s bankruptcy. In this opening scene, the camera tracks slowly from right to left, past rooms with scattered door panels, into an area where a group of men are frantically bidding at an auction. The camera tracks on, through an empty room, past windows covered by wooden frames, before finally embarking on a 180-degree pan into a fade and cut, to a room occupied by two men. Lantis calls this the “organizing principle”, and that our first question should be

“What are these people doing here? Or, formally, why are they here? When we can answer the question, even partially answer it, we can begin to understand the roles of the participants” (1960: 206). In this case we can still hear the shouting, indicating locale, and then realise, through the anguished expressions of the on-screen characters, that the auction was forced, and we are in the company of a bankrupt merchant. However, we can gain so much more information with knowledge of the locale. Keiko McDonald notes how, during this scene, camera movement works in tandem with the building’s interior, to give the audience information on both the profession of the owner and our location. These buildings act as a signifier, indicating location and business type. McDonald notes that such shots were not accidental, and that “Mizoguchi takes full advantage of the typical architecture of a merchant’s house in the Kansai area: narrow in front and deep in back”. She adds that “the camera work piques our curiosity: we want to know what kind of merchant has gone bankrupt, and all the more so, since the single travelling shot has exposed us to the extent of his wealth” (1984: 46). This is an important observation. An empathetic reading relies on Japanese cultural and geographical knowledge to build a picture of the merchant’s situation. With knowledge of local culture and business practices, the viewer is immediately part of a narrative which unfolds through the lateral dolly-shot and recognisable architecture. However, the privilege of a culturally informed perspective is restricted by the manner in which the camera places the viewer to the action. The scene ought, through Japanese eyes, to be familiar, yet this establishing sequence is a process both of recognition and de-familiarisation. Keiko McDonald, as a shrewd Japanese commentator on Mizoguchi’s work, calls this the “shock of recognition” (1984: 165), which is arguably a function of the tension which has been described above.

This kind of camera work was a stylistic trope in Mizoguchi’s work, from this period onwards. Both the opening and closing scenes of *Sisters of the Gion* deploy camera movement reminiscent of the unrolling of the *emakimono*. Emakimono are painted hand scrolls which depict stories containing themes such as the supernatural, love, hardship, war, and traditional folktales. The scrolls are illustrated stories, which are read from right to left, at arm’s length, and are revealed as the reader winds the scroll, exposing the next section of the tale. Emakimono reveal an uninterrupted narrative, which unfolds at the will of the reader. It may be salutary to relate this narrative unfolding to the apparatus of cinema. Incorporating the structure of the emakimono with the architecture of Kansai and the images of wealth, Mizoguchi constructs a dramatic tension between the familiarity of the subject matter and the distantiation of the viewing perspective. Again, the impact of these techniques through the *mise en scène* is evidence of Mizoguchi’s development of a distinctive vernacular style, which arguably reached its apotheosis in the 1950s, in *The Life of Oharu* (*Saikaku Ichidai Onna*, 1952), *Ugetsu Monogatari*, (1953) and *The Woman in the Rumour*, (*Uwasa no Onna*, 1954). *Sisters of the Gion* marked the end of Mizoguchi’s Daiichi period, and the Nagoya project which would have completed the trilogy was never realised due to Daiichi’s collapse in 1936. Nonetheless, the legacy of the two Kansai films endures. Both films highlight the conflicts of modern thinking female protagonists, living in a modern yet traditionally rich culture; and the director’s committed renditions of the vernacular particularities of distinct local communities enabled him to examine human relationships and social conventions with unflinching candour but sympathetic integrity.

## Conclusion

Both Hansen’s and Lantis’ different disciplinary perspectives upon the concept of the vernacular have been adapted in this article in order to better appreciate Mizoguchi’s use of a dynamic field of *mise en scène*. A close analysis of visual style in two of Mizoguchi’s most

celebrated 1930s films reveals a rich quotidian vocabulary, by which, it was argued, he enabled audiences to confront contemporary anxieties attendant upon social change. By analysing local architecture, regional practices, and colloquial language, I was able to offer readings of specific regional milieu, which proved a dynamic site for the exploration of culturally informed influences. Furthermore, I was able to identify the ways in which Mizoguchi elaborated and developed this vernacular vocabulary across a variety of different subjects, combining traditional motifs and contemporary styles.

Similarly, this study has documented the dominant role of the female protagonist in Mizoguchi's films: an individual who is frequently the catalyst of change, the victim of exclusion, and the embodiment of irreconcilable impulses. The tension in Mizoguchi's films exists between the narrative impetus and *mise en scène*. It is the historical process of narrative which frequently destabilises the aesthetic composition. And, as we have discussed, it is his women who are the agents of change. This is no accident, nor should it be read simply as a manifesto. Woman is the catalyst in the arduous struggle between tradition and modernity. Her narrative function is to stimulate discord and to create upheaval, yet, because of her subordinate position in society, she can also be recuperated in order to maintain the status quo.

Both films reveal the tension between the traditions of social organisation and the intervention of modernity. And this tension is played out in the juxtaposition between finely observed *mise en scène* and melodramatic performances. A contemporary audience would doubtless be attuned to the specificity of this emotional landscape, which would intensify their recognition of the characters' individual personal rebellions. Throughout the intensely constructed and specific worlds within their narrow social strata, an audience can recognise a specifically local emotional landscape in which the human drama unfolds. Mizoguchi's fine attention to detail in creating these specific sub-cultural worlds emphasise their rules and codes of behaviour. A Japanese audience would recognise these regional *demi-mondes* and understand the rules, beliefs, and clues that underpin society. This is what makes any transgression of those rules shocking, daring and revolutionary. Mizoguchi creates his worlds in fine detail, so much so that when a character challenges its order, it makes the questioning of her surroundings more radical and dramatic. The director's concerns about the social and political transformation of Japan can be identified most readily and most powerfully in the precise details of local culture and customs within distinct *demi-mondes*, and modernity's effect upon their agents.

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## **Tsai Ming Liang's Alternative Narratives of Working-Class Life in Taiwan**

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### **Abstract**

Taiwanese filmmaker Tsai Ming Liang is celebrated for his slow, poetic filmmaking and the philosophical treatment of time in his work. Tsai tends to eschew linear narrative and his films consist of scenes, each capable of standing alone as an individual art work. The one constant in Tsai's films is his lead actor, Lee Kang Sheng, who embodies Tsai's ideas in his intensely physical performances. One aspect of Tsai's films that tends to be overlooked though is his representation of class – the character played by Lee and the scenarios that unfold, focus on Taiwan's working classes and contain a sensory and physical depiction of class in Taiwan's cities. The everyday of Taiwan's working class is visible, but the approach taken by Tsai is an alternative one, creating art house films that, I argue, offer an intense and insightful portrayal of working class life. Tsai also blends fantasy with realism in a number of his films, and the fantasy elements compliment the working class realism by tapping into Taiwanese popular culture. While admired as an auteur, Tsai's films arguably offer an artistic but also realistic representation of working-class Taiwan.

**Keywords:** Tsai Ming Liang, working-class representation, Taiwanese cinema, embodied viewing, phenomenology, Marxist analysis

## Introduction

How does an art house auteur evoke working-class life and bring working-class experience to audiences while also creating slow, sometimes abstract, experimental and always unusual films? I would argue that Tsai Ming Liang does just this – his films offer audiences a taste of working-class life in Taiwan and south-east Asia, and he does this through techniques that create a sensory and physical viewing experience. In this way, Tsai's films recreate the lived experience of class.

Tsai Ming Liang<sup>1</sup> is a well-regarded auteur whose work is celebrated for its slow, poetic style (Rapfogel 2004). There is much written on Tsai's films and scholars have commented on many aspects of his work such as his adherence to slow cinema (Lim 2014), the artistic value of his work (Saint-Cyr 2011; Bordeleau 2013), his exploration of marginalized sexualities and challenges to heteronormativity (Martin 1999; Lee 2007), his use of allegory (Chow 2004), the rejection of linear narrative and his philosophical approach to time (Rapfogel 2002; Martin 2003).

Other analyses of Tsai's films foreground themes of loneliness, alienation, isolation, urban life and urban decay (Rapfogel 2002). There has been discussion of his use of realism and his favoured techniques of static shooting, long scenes, "still and minimalist images" (Chow 2004: 130), minimal dialogue, and use (or not) of music (Wood 2007; Bao 2014). His references to Taiwanese popular culture have been examined and his European cineliteracy explored (Lim 2007). Scholars point to the enigmatic qualities of Tsai's work and note how his films take viewers outside of their comfort zones and leave many questions unanswered (Chow 2004: 125).

Although some reviewers have noted Tsai's preference for characters from marginalised and "lower class" backgrounds (Carew 2015: 60), Tsai's depiction of class experience is not often considered by scholars, and I would argue that many elements of Tsai's work mentioned above are also used effectively to depict the lived experience of class. The physicality of Tsai's films has been examined, and the sensory effects of his use of sound design have been highlighted (Birtwistle 2015; De Lucia 2011), but it has not been linked to how these particular devices provide the viewer with a sensory experience of the characters' class positions. Tsai himself has stated that he has always been interested in films about ordinary people (Leopold 2002) probably due to his own "humble" background (Tsai in Rehm et al. 1999: 83). During his first ten years in Taiwan he would walk around the working-class districts of Taipei, observing local people and noting the rapid changes occurring (Tsai in Rehm et al. 1999: 83). According to Yeh and Davis (2012: 235), Tsai lived a working-class life both in his native Malaysia and adoptive Taiwan and has maintained a closeness to working-class life. This was how he discovered Lee Kang Sheng, the young "bike boy" (Stephens 1996: 23) who would become his principle actor and muse. The characters played by Lee are based on Lee's own life (this was certainly the case for Lee in Tsai's first feature, *Rebels of the Neon God* (1992), in which Lee plays a young working-class lad who frequents video arcades and hangs around on the streets), and it follows that Lee's working-class background informs the characters and performances.

Tsai represents the physicality of class experience in his films – particularly the experience of being working class, of poverty, homelessness and the accompanying marginalisation and

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<sup>1</sup> For biographical information on Tsai Ming Liang, see <http://sensesofcinema.com/2003/great-directors/tsai/>

isolation. Tsai's films reveal the difficulties sometimes faced by working-class people in Taiwan, but he also injects humour into his work – there are many amusing moments in Tsai's films, usually as a result of the absurdity of human existence (it is funny watching a character urinate into a plastic bag in real time). The humour (often based around bodily functions) is characteristic of working-class culture, and the inclusion of funny scenes shows that Tsai does not take his work too seriously, a trait that would likely be frowned upon in many working-class communities.

### **Theoretical Approaches**

The theoretical framework adopted in this paper is broadly Marxist, and informed by a phenomenological and embodied approach to film reception. A Marxist approach considers the filmmaker's class background and explores how class is represented on screen and how a class background impacts on a filmmakers' creative decisions. Films made by filmmakers who are self-consciously Marxist in approach offer critiques of capitalism and highlight class inequalities – they also acknowledge that the creation of films requires capital, but attempt to create works that Mazierska and Kristensen (2014) suggest, avoid “serving the god of capital” (22). While Tsai Ming Liang may not have described himself as a Marxist filmmaker, there is a strong sense in his body of work that he is critiquing capitalism (and the inequalities it creates). Tsai's work, despite being art cinema, also avoids privileging “form or style over the referent”, which is a Marxist critique of some avant garde work (Wayne 2005: 16). Additionally, the work of Vivian Sobchack (1992) is also influential. Her phenomenological approach fits in well with my own experience of watching film. Her attention to the role of the senses in viewing film is very useful in understanding the embodied experiences of watching film, and how this can then be applied to the embodied experience of class. Steven Shaviro's (1993) work on embodied viewing is also helpful, particularly when he describes the visceral effects of watching films as “being assaulted by a flux of sensations” (46).

These approaches are tied together via working-class studies. This is an interdisciplinary field committed to study of working-class life, with a focus on the lived experience of working-class people and analysis of how class works in everyday life (Linkon & Russo 2005: 11). The study of the representation of working-class life is an important aspect of working-class studies (Linkon & Russo 2005: 11) and film provides a wealth of material. Zaniello (2005) states that film reveals much of how class works, both in terms of how working-class people are represented on screen, but also because the particular inclusions and exclusions within film tell us much about whose stories and experiences are privileged and which voices are suppressed (152).

In working-class studies, autobiographical approaches are valued (Strangleman 2005: 140) and it is therefore relevant to mention that my interest in the work of Tsai Ming Liang comes from my own working-class background and the experience of living in Taiwan from 1992 to 1995. The Taiwan neighbourhood I lived in was working-class – situated in a town just under an hour's drive southwest of Taipei (Taoyuan). The town consisted mainly of blocks of apartments with cheap rent. There were video arcades, street food, pavement hawkers, illegal gambling dens, barber shops (brothels), betel nut stands and an old cinema in the centre of the town. I am aware that when I watch a film, I do so with an acute sense of how class works – my working-class background has made me very aware of class issues. Tsai's depictions of working-class life appeal to me and I am impressed with his affectionate but astute representation of working-class culture. A poetic style, slow approach and rejection of traditional narrative is not antithetical to a representation of working class experience and in

this essay I will argue that there is potential for working class viewer to identify with the experiences of Tsai's characters on various levels, regardless of connections or lack thereof with Taiwan.

According to Yeh and Davis (2012), the “working-class element is a highly visible attribute in Tsai's characters” (213). Lee plays the same character (usually known as Hsiao Kang) who drifts around various cities (mainly Taipei) taking on any work that he can find (street vendor, movie extra, store manager, film projectionist, porn actor). With the exception of *Visage* (2009), where Lee plays a film director, Hsiao Kang lives a working-class life. He lives in small and run-down apartments; he rides a motor scooter rather than drive a car. He eats at street stalls or at home, he dresses in casual clothes and often wears Taiwanese flip flops. Yeh and Davis (2012) suggest that Tsai's films display a specifically Taiwanese working-class culture (234), which is interesting considering Tsai is not Taiwanese born. They point to Tsai's inclusion of the Taiwanese sensibility of earthiness – a way of behaving (and an aesthetic) that is brash, street wise and considered tacky or vulgar by the middle class elite (2012: 209). Yeh and Davis (2012) describe Tsai as an “ethnographer” (235) who manages to combine “experimental avant garde...with queer issues and...the Taiwanese working class” (234). This treatment of working-class Taiwan also includes elements of camp which Yeh and Davis suggest challenges middle class sensibilities and privileges instead a “kitsch” (219) and “tawdry” (224) aesthetic, providing the films with a “distinctly shabby working-class aura” (214), an “aura” that I would suggest can be celebrated rather than dismissed as inferior.

## Working-Class Themes

### Work and Home

In *What Time is it There?* (2001), the action takes place in two cities, and follows Tsai's recurring character, Hsiao Kang (Lee) in Taipei and Shiang-chyi (Chen Shiang-chyi) in Paris. In this film, Hsiao Kang is a street vendor, selling watches from a suitcase on one of Taipei's (since demolished) pedestrian bridges near the main railway station. We watch Hsiao Kang at work, standing on the bridge spruiking his wares and demonstrating an “unbreakable” watch by banging it repeatedly on the metal railings of the bridge. Tsai foregrounds the sound of the watch clanging on the metal and it creates a sense of repetition akin to the timepiece itself, and also the repetitive nature of Hsiao Kang's work. It is as if the banging of the watch is marking time for Hsiao Kang, counting down each minute of his working day. The scene provides a tactile auralty that evokes the nature of repetitive work and arguably brings the viewer closer to Hsiao Kang's experience. There is much of the everyday in *What Time is it There?*, and the everyday is mainly that of working-class people. While the scenes set in Paris offer a different perspective (of a lonely tourist apparently not enjoying her experience), the Taipei scenes depict the small family apartment of Hsiao Kang, working-class neighborhoods, street food, betel nut stands and sex workers. Although Hsiao Kang does drive a car, and splurges on French wine, he is still living at home and seemingly scraping a living from his watch sales. Hsiao Kang's obsession with all things French suggests a working-class ‘misunderstanding’ of high culture – he asks for French films at the video store and buys French wine, but he doesn't consume these products in a bourgeois fashion. After initially drinking the wine from a glass, he eventually abandons the glass and gulps the wine from the bottle while sitting in his car eating snacks from the night market. He sits on the floor in his bedroom, smokes a cigarette and sleepily watches the classic art film (François Truffaut's 1959 *Les quatre cents coups*) on a small television in his working-class apartment. The scenes from Truffaut's film that the audience can see on Hsiao Kang's screen contrast strongly with the other objects we have seen in his bedroom – the kitsch objects such as soft toys.



In Tsai's 2013 *Stray Dogs*, the character of the father, played by Lee Kang Sheng, works as a sign holder for a real estate company in Taiwan. In a number of scenes, we watch him stand at a busy Taipei intersection holding his sign up for passing motorists as he battles with driving rain and strong wind. Next to Lee's character is another sign holder also fighting to stay upright and the two of them stand silently at the mercy of the elements as they persevere with their work. The sound of their flimsy plastic rain ponchos rustling violently in the wind is foregrounded and creates a sense of "affective tonality" (Birtwistle 2015: 82) – we can *feel* the battering wind and muscles tensing as the men hold tightly to their signs. We lean into the wind, and for the duration of the scenes, stand at the same intersection gripping our only source of income. In the last of these scenes, there is a shift to a close up of Lee's face as his character starts singing, and the image reveals tears in his eyes. In this moment the physical and mental endurance required to do the job has finally overwhelmed the character and his song is a lament, made poignant not just by Lee's understated depiction of distress, but also because in previous scenes we have observed dozens of other sign holders trying to make a living in the city (Lisiak 2015: 837). The physicality of the work, the impact on mental health is made acute – and Tsai privileges the working-class experience through such scenes.

*Stray Dogs* (2013) is the story of a homeless father and his two children (played by Lee Yi-cheng and Lee Yi-chieh) and a supermarket employee who helps them. The film has many of the usual features of Tsai's filmmaking. His favoured use of static camera long scenes reaches new heights, with the penultimate close up shot of the father and woman staring at a mural for almost fifteen minutes, followed by a final six-minute medium long shot of the pair leaving the scene individually. There is no narrative to speak of; the film is a series of scenes depicting the family and the woman going about their daily activities. There is very little dialogue and no non-diegetic music. Disorientation occurs due to the character of the woman being played by three actors at different stages of the film (Lu Yi-ching, Chen Shiang-chyi and Yang Kuei-mei). Strange things occur with no explanation, and there are the Tsai's trademark scenes of urination and public toilet moments. Because it is the epitome of Tsai's style, it is interesting to note that *Stray Dogs* is his most explicit treatment of class thus far, demonstrating that working-class experience and class inequalities can be explored in non-narrative forms.

The family in the film is homeless; the father's job is grueling and presumably low-paid and insecure. The children squat with their father in an abandoned building and wash themselves in a public bathroom. Although the father does provide food for the children, they also make use of the numerous food samples dished out in Taiwan's large supermarkets. The son takes extra toilet tissue from the store toilets and the children seem to spend time just hanging out in the supermarket.

The long scenes allow the audience to experience some of the characteristics of homelessness along with the characters. With no home to go to, the children and the father have to kill time. Days are long and there is little opportunity to rest comfortably. Tsai, as an expert in films that "last" (Rapfogel 2002: 6), creates the sense that time is lengthened for people in physically and mentally demanding but low paid work (such as sign holding), and for people trying to get through a day on the streets. In one scene, the girl sits in a food court watching a man eat a large bowl of noodles. The girl doesn't say anything, but she slumps on the table and rests her head on her arms, expressing the fatigue that comes with hunger and homelessness. The scene is shot from above and the long wide shot situates the girl within the food court and reveals her isolation from the shoppers around her. She doesn't belong in this world of consumption, she is an anomaly – young girls should be with their parents, not staring at a stranger's meal. The brightness of the scene adds to this sense of isolation. The scene is bathed in supermarket

fluorescent light, and she can clearly be seen in the centre of the frame. While her hunger and poverty are on display, she is ignored by the other customers. It is only when she encounters the woman that we realise she has been noticed and her situation acknowledged. The woman has an interest in waifs and strays and spends her evenings feeding stray dogs. She extends this charity to the family and tries to help them (albeit in a surreal and strange manner). While the characters seem abandoned by society and left behind by capitalism, they are assisted by a working-class person. It isn't the authorities that "rescue" them, but a supermarket employee. There are moments of humour amid the bleakness – the girl purchases a cabbage from the supermarket and uses it as a doll. The sight of the vegetable with a painted face is absurd and amusing and the desire to have a doll is endearingly childish. The amusement later takes a despairing turn though, when the father "attacks" the cabbage doll in a drunken rage. The family's situation, experienced mainly in stoic silence, feels real despite the strange elements and distancing techniques employed by Tsai. Certain scenes in the film add to this effect, particularly those involving food. We watch the family or the father eat meals in transient spaces such as a bus shelter or waste ground. Tsai often shoots characters eating in real time, and food is a "pervasive" element of his films (De Lucia 2011: 168), and in *Stray Dogs*, the combination of observing characters eating cheap food from takeaway containers in uncomfortable locations creates a visceral effect – there is a great sense of loss in these moments; due to being homeless, such a simple part of family life as eating together is out of reach to this family.

### Life and Love

In *Vive L'Amour* (1994), Lee plays a burial site salesman who begins squatting in an empty apartment. The apartment is being used by a real estate agent, Mei-Mei Lin (Yang Kuei-mei) as a place to have sex with street seller, Ah-Jung (Chen Chao-jung). The film evokes Tsai's often noted themes of urban alienation and loneliness (Rapfogel 2002). Despite the characters' physical proximity and intimacy, each appears to be completely alone, attempting to make a living and to find some joy in life (although Hsiao Kang does attempt suicide at one point). Although Mei-Lin works as a real estate agent (a job that can be very high paying), she doesn't appear to be enjoying much success and we see her struggle physically and emotionally. At one point we observe her trying to fasten "for sale" signs to trees – a task that is difficult and requires her to dangerously stand on top of her car. There is a sense here of her character's lack of power, although she is attempting to make money from Taiwan's speculative property boom of the 1990s, she is one of many agents in a similar position, unable to sell properties that have been built for investment and are likely to remain empty and eventually abandoned.

According to Birtwistle (2015), the characters in Tsai's film display a "sense of exhaustion, powerlessness and acceptance" (87) and this can be seen in Hsiao Kang's attempt to end his life and in Mei-Lin's uncontrollable crying at the end of the film. In the final six-minute scene, she sits on a bench in a new Taipei park (at that time, still under construction) and cries. This is a particularly affecting scene – the close of up her face as she sobs allows the audience to clearly see her tears, the snot running from her nose and the hair that blows into her face sticking to the wetness in what has been described as an example of "hyperbolic realism" (Berry & Lu 2005: 89). The viewer can feel the texture of her hair and bodily fluids, made more acute by the foregrounding of the sounds of her crying, sniffing and blowing her nose. This is an example of what Laura Marks calls "haptic visuality" (2000:162) where the "eyes function as organs of touch" (162). This creates an embodied viewing experience which according to Sobchack (2004) allows the audience to relate bodily to what is on the screen – we can feel, smell, hear, taste what is on screen, because the images on screen are projected onto our bodies in a "rebound" (Sobchack 2004: 78). This technique brings us closer to the

emotions experienced by the characters and makes us feel their loneliness and distance acutely. The particular distress displayed by the characters in *Vive L'Amour* is connected to their marginal class statuses – Hsiao Kang as a seller of burial plots, Ah-Jung as a street hawker and Mei-Lin as a failed real estate worker who is victim to the effects of capitalism at the same time as being complicit in a system that demolishes working-class neighbourhoods to make way for new developments and city beautification schemes (such as Da'an Park where she cries).

Tsai's next film, *The River* (1997), also contains characters who are dislocated and transient. Lee's character Hsiao Kang doesn't have an identifiable occupation and he is easily persuaded to take a role as film extra after bumping into an old friend. Hsiao Kang develops an acute torticollis and is unable to move his neck. We watch him struggle at home in the small Taipei apartment he shares with his parents and follow him as he visits various practitioners who try to cure him. Again, the narrative here is sparse and the film (like its character) drifts from one scene to the next. The focus becomes Hsiao Kang's pain, but there are themes here of marginalisation, particularly in terms of sexuality as both Hsiao Kang and his father hide their homosexuality. The scenes in the apartment and on the streets reveal working-class Taipei. The characters do not live in luxury apartments or drive expensive European cars, they are not Taiwan's elite (those made rich by property development and business). Instead we see what Berry and Lu (2005) describe as the ruinous side of Taipei, "demolished buildings, construction debris...the family home...cramped and drab...also plagued by substandard plumbing" (118). For Berry and Lu (2005), and other scholars, this representation of Taipei (characteristic of most of Tsai's films) reveals a "bleakness" (Stucky 2014: 34) associated with the negative impact of capitalism on the city's inhabitants – people who are "set adrift" (Stucky 2014: 37) and constantly challenged by "urban alienation" (Martin: 2007, 83) brought about by modernity. There is a sense of 'absence' within the urban setting too – absence of the comforts enjoyed by bourgeois city dwellers. The cities of Tsai's films do not include the expensive neighbourhoods of luxury apartments, fancy restaurants and high end stores. What they do include are the ways in which working-class people negotiate the spaces of the city and deal with the often harshness of "contemporary urban space" (Lisiak 2015: 840).

While it might be true that Tsai is critiquing modernity in his films, the settings also offer an insight into everyday life in working-class Taiwan, and the social and political reality of the characters' lives are expressed through details in the mise-en-scene. These details include Hsiao Kang's family home (despite being an adult, he still lives at home which suggests his lack of income). The family home is a small apartment, typical of the older style of Taipei apartment buildings. There are stairs, no elevator, and the apartment has a very small kitchen (not big enough for the fridge, this is situated in the living room). There is a small balcony where washing can be hung and every space is used. The living room is where the family eat and the dining table (often complete with rice cooker) also sometimes serves as an altar when loved-ones pass away. There are kitsch objects placed within the apartment which take on a significance, described by Yeh and Davis (2012) as an aestheticisation of working-class objects (217) which indicates the aforementioned "camp" sensibility as Tsai "defamiliarises...the familiar and the everyday" (217). In other words, filming ordinary everyday working-class objects and décor is unexpected in an art house film. The apartment is quite dark due to the overshadowing of neighbouring buildings and there are often problems with the plumbing. In *The River*, Hsiao Kang's father battles with a persistent leak, and while Tsai has commented on the symbolic use of water in his films – representing the characters' desires (Tsai in Rehm, et al. 1999: 114), the problems with plumbing are common in old and run-down buildings. There are also particularly working-class behaviours, described by Yeh and Davis (2012) as

“practices of Taiwan’s folk rituals” (221), which include superstitious behaviours and visits to traditional medicine practitioners and faith healers.

### Popular Culture

*The Hole* (1998) is less straightforwardly realist and contains fantasy musical numbers incorporating lip synching and dancing to popular Taiwanese songs. The film depicts two characters played by Lee Kang Sheng and Yang Kuei-Mei as neighbours living in an apartment block that has been evacuated due to a mysterious virus in the city. The man upstairs (Lee) and the woman living below him (Yang), seem to be stuck in their low rent building (Chang 2008: 28). with nowhere else to escape to. The mostly abandoned city, and the apartments that become linked by a growing hole in the floor/ceiling between them, operate as a liminal space typical of Tsai’s penchant for “places no longer in existence or doomed to be torn down” (Davis & Chen 2007: 57). These places, while having a metaphorical function, are also not atypical of working-class neighborhoods (albeit in a less surreal way). Working-class neighborhoods often have low-rent housing, waste grounds, transient areas awaiting redevelopment and old, decaying buildings. Amid the strangeness of the scenario in *The Hole*, there is also a class reality on display. The musical numbers are interesting – Tsai uses popular culture to express his stoic characters’ feelings (there is very little dialogue in Tsai’s films). There is something very Taiwanese too in the choice of songs and staging, creating what Yeh and Davis (2012) describe as “gaudy, vulgar...smelling of the street” (224). In these scenes the songs used are by Taiwanese singer Grace Chang, a popular artist with working-class Taiwanese people. At the end of the film there is an epitaph which states “we still have Grace Chang’s singing to keep us company” which suggests the importance of working-class popular culture in difficult times. The privileging of working-class songs over ‘high art’ demonstrates Tsai’s immersion in working-class culture.

Popular culture references occur quite frequently in Tsai’s films and in *Goodbye Dragon Inn* (2003), Tsai presents a strong sense of intertextuality, particularly in relation to popular forms of Chinese cinema. The film is set in an old cinema earmarked for demolition and redevelopment. In any big city, it is the working-class residents who lose out when areas are redeveloped. This occurs when people are evicted to make way for new high-end homes or commercial buildings, and when areas become gentrified. Working-class spaces – those that have served to entertain the local people are not valued by developers and city planners. It is significant that the building is a cinema, due to the popularity of film in working-class communities. There is a sense of nostalgia in *Goodbye Dragon Inn*, of a social haunting as the remaining patrons of the soon to be closed cinema watch a final film in an attempt to resist “modern homogenous time” (Stucky 2014: 40). The cinema is haunted by a history of popular film (particularly *wu xia*), but also by the presence of working-class cinema goers, who would have enjoyed the spectacles on screen while eating water melon seeds and chewing sugar cane. For Chan (2007), the film captures a “structure of feeling” (93) and the remaining patrons represent a “lingering” (90) – they are attempting to resist the changes brought about by capitalism that will destroy the working-class space they have enjoyed. There is also a sense here too of a working-class queer space, with male patrons using the cinema as a way to find partners for sex. In a way, the cinema provides a sanctuary for working-class gay men who might not have the means to seek partners in other gay spaces (such as city night clubs). Yeh and Davis (2012) point to Tsai’s interest in “remnants” (237) of working-class life that are not seen as desirable to the middle classes. In *Goodbye Dragon Inn*, Tsai places value on the heterotopic space of the old cinema and provides it with a “stateliness” (Yeh and Davis 2012: 238) despite the run down nature of the building and the possible salubrious behaviour of some patrons.

Elements of popular culture are prominent in *The Wayward Cloud* (2005), but this time “cinema” is in the form of pornographic films alongside lip-synching musical numbers. Tsai takes a stigmatized form of popular culture (pornography) and combines it with an often undervalued form (the musical) in what has been described as an avant garde treatment (Bao 2007: 41). The ever-drifting Hsiao Kang turns to porn acting to make ends meet and Tsai normalises this occupation by making the porn scenes quite matter of fact (for the most part – the role of porn actors becomes more complicated when Hsiao Kang’s Japanese porn colleague, Sumomo Yozakura, appears to be unconscious during filming in the final scenes). Lim (2011) suggests that musical numbers and porn are both “spatially constructed to deny human interaction, intimacy and agency” (143) and this can certainly be seen in *The Wayward Cloud* as the characters struggle to find meaningful connections. But it’s possible to extend this idea to suggest that the sorts of meaningful connections that might be associated with love and romance are made more difficult within a backdrop of financial hardship and insecure employment. When faced with precarious modes of employment and a transient life of drifting from city to city to find work (*The Wayward Cloud* is set in Kaohsiung rather than Taipei), it is difficult to commit to love and relationships. Human relationships are affected and put under strain by economic insecurity and the seeming inability of Tsai’s characters to connect with one another or have satisfying sexual encounters can be linked to their social and economic positions of powerlessness.

### Spaces

This sense of intransience is further explored and made more acute in *I Don’t Want to Sleep Alone* (2006). This film is set in Tsai’s country of birth, Malaysia, and filmed in Kuala Lumpur. Lee Kang Sheng plays two parts in the film, that of a homeless worker in Kuala Lumpur who is attacked in the street and taken in by a migrant worker, and a comatose man attended to in his family home by a paid carer (Chen Shiang-chyi). The migrant worker, Rawang (Norman Atun), who tends to Lee’s character’s wounds and provides him with food and shelter is a Bangladeshi labourer sharing a dwelling with a number of other men and barely earning enough to feed himself. The kindness he shows Lee points to the ways in which people on the bottom rungs of the social ladder will often go out of their way to help others. There is a sense here of class solidarity as Rawang cares for a fellow worker. This is emphasised in scenes where Rawang is washing Lee’s body – he cleans Lee with extreme tenderness and does his best to make him comfortable. Closeness is created through Tsai’s attention to small detail in the mise-en-scene and his “representations of the intimate bodily practices of individual everyday life” (Martin 2007: 83). The long scenes of Rawang caring for Lee challenge the impulse in conventional film to avoid “empty cinematic time” (De Lucia 2016: 32) and to only focus on propelling the plot. Tsai allows the viewer time to watch every small move and observe the scene – small details such as the posters on Rawang’s wall, presumably placed there to add some colour to the drab concrete walls of his room, the mismatched bedding and the very basic washing and toileting facilities used by the migrant workers. The treatment of Lee by Rawang is contrasted with the care administered to Lee’s other character, the comatose man, by his paid carer. A scene where the carer is washing the comatose man appears to contain none of the tenderness displayed by Rawang. The carer wears plastic gloves and seems to be rough in her actions. She scrubs the man vigorously and completes her work in silence. The sound of her cleaning is foregrounded, the squishy sound of soap lather on skin combined with the plastic rustling of her gloves and apron creates affect. The audience can feel for the man in this scene – he is passive except for sadness in his open eyes as the carer rubs at his face and cleans his ears. It is also possible to feel for the carer, who works for an abusive boss and is forced to engage in tasks that leave her distressed. The carer is trapped in her job, presumably relying on

the income and accommodation the job provides. I'd suggest that her actions are not cruel, she isn't being deliberately rough with the comatose man, but she is trying to complete her tasks as quickly and efficiently as possible, a characteristic of workers in difficult and physically demanding occupations. The discomfort felt by the viewer due to the visceral nature of the scene, provides a sense of the embodied nature of class.

Tsai's next film, *Visage* (2009), is somewhat different in terms of its representations of class as there is inclusion of bourgeois characters. In *Visage*, Lee plays a Taiwanese film director, Hsiao Kang, making a film in Paris. The film within the film is a strange and lavish affair based on the story of Salome and includes lip synching musical numbers and scenes of filming in underground basements and Parisian parks. The French characters appear to be bourgeois in contrast to the director who, despite his current position as a filmmaker, has come from a humble background. This is made evident when Hsiao Kang returns to Taipei when his mother dies. We enter the family apartment, the same apartment that has suffered from bad plumbing (as evident in the film's opening scene when Hsiao Kang fights with a raging burst pipe in the kitchen). The green rice cooker sits on the dining table, the fridge is in the living room and the rooms are small and sparsely furnished. Hsiao Kang takes his French producer with him to Taipei and she seems extremely out of place – not because she is not Chinese, but because her bourgeois presence seems at odds with the working-class surroundings. In one scene, she sits at the dining table which has been set up as a shrine for the deceased mother, and proceeds to eat the food piled up on the shrine as offerings while casually flicking through a book on the French director Truffaut. Her indifference to her environment reveals a sense of class arrogance. The bourgeois characters in the film are depicted as ridiculous; they display diva behavior and talk much more than Tsai's Taiwanese characters. Their eccentric behaviour doesn't appear to have any reason behind. In contrast, in *What Time is it There?*, Hsiao Kang's mother (Lu Yi-Ching) begins to obsessively darken her apartment by placing black tape and sheets over the windows. She has a reason for this behaviour, she is convinced that her recently deceased husband is reincarnated but can't return home because of the light. Her actions are explained by grief and by her belief in Taiwanese folk lore. In *Visage*, the actor playing Salomé (Laetitia Casta) also begins to tape over windows, but there is no apparent reason for her strange behaviour. She is beautiful, lives in a large bourgeois home but behaves erratically. She seems to want Hsiao Kang (who doesn't reciprocate) and in the manner of Salomé, demands his attention. This indicates a sense of bourgeois entitlement not evident in Tsai's working-class characters.

### A Note on Audience

Although I am suggesting that there is a working-class sensibility that runs through Tsai's films, one of the contradictions that should be acknowledged is that of audience. Tsai's films are generally considered art house and do not enjoy a wide distribution. Lim (2007) suggests that audiences for Tsai's films tend to be "cultural elites and aficionados" (227). The filmmaker himself acknowledges the majority of his audience are likely to be university students (Rapfogel 2004: 29). The films are popular at international film festivals and among critics and scholars but do not reach the audience arguably represented in the films themselves – working class Taiwanese and immigrant workers (Yeh & Davis 2012: 238). This is a perennial problem of independent and art house films globally that engage with working-class themes and offer interesting and nuanced representation of working-class life that is not often seen in conventional and mainstream film.

## Conclusion

Tsai's films demonstrate that working-class life can be the subject of art films and that the experience of class can be conveyed through cinematic devices and non-conventional narrative techniques. There is a sense in Tsai's films of an interest (possible obsession) with the daily lives and routines of working-class Taiwanese, in what Yeh and Davis (2012) describe as an "insistent pull towards the routine, the quotidian" (239). The everyday in Tsai's films is mainly that of working-class people, amid the more avant-garde elements of his films, working-class characters eat at street stalls, visit cinemas, hire videos, use public bathrooms, hang out in public spaces, ride scooters. They eat, sleep, piss, shit, vomit and have sex in a working-class setting. Although there are examples of art film that deal with class issues (Zaniello 2005: 163), these earthy activities are not often the subject of so-called "high art" but, despite his position as an auteur, Tsai brings the working-class experience into the world of art house cinema. According to Wayne (2005), the bourgeois notion of the auteur has the effect of potentially removing any sense of collectivity in the film making process and therefore obscuring "the role of culture and collective systems of representation and society" (21), ultimately leading to class being "evacuated from cultural discourse across film studies" (27). It's possible therefore that the distance that some critics might feel while watching Tsai's films is due to a lack of connection or understanding of working-class life. The cinematic techniques he uses actually evoke working-class life and culture and his "ethnographic" approach (Yeh & Davis 2012: 234) reveals an insider's eye. Tsai provides the audience with a lived and acutely embodied experience of class that challenges the readings of his films as merely intellectual exercises in existentialism. Class is experienced in the mind and the body simultaneously and Hsiao Kang's daily struggles take us into the heart of working-class experience.

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