Knowing through human rights films

Film is an increasingly important medium for communicating knowledge about human rights, and human rights film festivals are growing in number and scope. How do feature-length films produce knowledge about human rights? The analysis here is based on close readings of the narratives and cinematography of films associated with human rights, supplemented by fieldwork carried out at human rights film festivals, and readings of film reviews and published interviews with directors and curators. The article identifies three key cinematic strategies encoded in human rights films to produce knowledge as justified belief: authenticity, reflexivity and ambivalence.

Knowing through human rights films

Feature-length films shown at human rights film festivals are part of projects to realise universal human rights that are undertaken variously by movements and NGOs as well as at the UN, through national states, in international courts and so on. These films - almost always documentary, sometimes docudrama, occasionally fiction - have a normative purpose beyond the artistic ideals and cinematic intentions they exemplify in their choice of themes, construction of narratives, use of shots, colour, music.

In general terms, human rights have a special relationship with the truth: human rights politics is often premised on revealing hidden facts – facts that those in power want to be ignored or to remain hidden. Documentary film also has a special relationship with truth. Although in an era of fake news and photoshop, it can no longer be taken for granted, the indexical quality of film as a technical medium - because it is the record of light falling on a lens – makes it unique as a source of objective knowledge. Bill Nichols argues that traditionally documentary film has been part of 'discourses of sobriety' (like science, economics, military strategy) that claim to represent the real and tell the truth. Discourses of sobriety position viewers of documentaries as knowing through capacities for reasoned, abstract understanding (Nichols 2017: 26). To this end, many human rights films use classic discursive techniques of documentary: facts are written as text; there is a voiceover that mediates viewers' experience of what we see; archive footage is presented and explained; experts are interviewed.

At the same time, uses of human rights are always political. Human rights films invariably intervene in controversies, and the audiences they reach are differentiated in terms of their viewpoints. Politics – contrary to common belief – does not necessarily involve lying (even if lying is incontrovertibly a political act (Arendt 1972)). But what counts as truth to one

group is misleading distortion if not downright lies and propaganda to another. The facts of what happened are invariably difficult to establish in cases involving human rights. And the facts of what happened are intrinsically linked to evaluative judgements. Human rights evaluations are themselves controversial. There is nothing settled in any particular case concerning how to apply human rights principles: individuals should be free to express themselves, and to choose their lives; states should be held accountable for the well-being of people in their care; unpopular minorities should be treated with respect; violators of human rights should be treated fairly before the law.

Human rights films are, therefore, political too. Feature-length human rights films have been analysed for their ability to move viewers to concern and action (McLagan 2003; Torchin, 2012). And it is indeed a feature of all film that, leaving aside intentional manipulation of facts, it is not only indexical but also cinematic: any sequence of moving images takes viewers beyond the literal, into the narrative and metaphorical, demanding an emotional and imaginative response. Human rights films are, then, a valued medium of knowledge production, but it is not of the neutral, objective or impartial kind over which so much ink has been spilled in communication studies. Knowledge created in feature-length films is better described as immersive knowledge. In addition to the sober knowledge traditionally associated with documentary, human rights films use techniques to draw viewers into knowing that is intuitive, emotional, imaginative, embodied. Often, they set up a 'being there' that is similar to ethnographic film, using long takes and synchronous sound that allow audiences to observe peoples' lives, the expressions on their faces, their gestures and movements; almost as if the observation were unmediated (1). Very often too, human rights films use mainstream film-making techniques that are the opposite of just observation: they try to create identification with a protagonist using close-ups and narrative and arouse feelings with music, animation, archive footage. Using both observational and emotive

techniques, film-makers position viewers of human rights films as knowing through capacities for empathetic understanding and active concern.

In this article I am interested in how, as interventions in political controversies, human rights films aim to produce knowledge in ways that avoid what Smith and Watson call a 'suspicious reading', one that would produce rather doubt and disbelief (Smith and Watson 2016). How do human rights films aim not only to 'suspend disbelief', but further to 'justify belief' in what is presented onscreen? To produce knowledge about human rights – rather than doubt, cynicism, accusations of propaganda and lies?

The analysis is based primarily on close readings of the narratives and cinematography of films associated with human rights. This research is supplemented with fieldwork carried out at the annual Human Rights Watch film festivals in London between 2016 and 2019, the Movies That Matter film festival at The Hague in 2017, the Karama-Beirut festival in 2018, and the Oneworld festival in Prague in 2019. The fieldwork involved interviews with 25 directors who showed films at these festivals and 24 organisers of festivals, including curators, as well as participating in Q and As and discussions, and reading programme notes and other materials associated with the festivals (2). In addition, I also read reviews of the films I have chosen to analyse, and published interviews with directors of those films.

In this article, I am concerned above all with analysing three key strategies of human rights films to justify belief: authenticity, reflexivity, and ambivalence. I demonstrate these strategies through detailed exposition of films that are exemplary of each type (though as we shall see in the conclusion, strategies are not necessarily as discrete as this exposition suggests). I base my analyses on close watching of films, and on directors' stated intentions, which supplement, confirm or qualify my interpretations of narratives and cinematography in

each case. Because contemporary human rights films involve audiences' capacities for empathetic understanding and active concern, the justified belief they aim to produce may always fail. This is especially the case because the international audiences for whom these films are intended are multiply differentiated – even within the same cinema viewing sometimes: by experience and pre-existing knowledge. While this article is focussed on the strategies encoded in films, to understand those strategies, I also discuss what I have learned from viewers about how they fail (Hall 2006). Participation in human rights film festivals, interviews with directors, informal discussions with viewers, reading reviews and critical articles all enable insight into the strengths and the limitations of cinematic strategies encoded in human rights films. The methodology allows some understanding of how viewers interpret films against the preferred reading that is encoded by filmmakers. While it does not involve the study of audience reception as such, the methodology enables a more nuanced analysis of strategies of authenticity, reflexivity and ambivalence than one that relies solely on interpretation of what is encoded in human rights films.

Authenticity

Authenticity concerns the origin or source of knowledge shown in a film. As a cinematic strategy for justifying belief, it is related to theories of situated knowledge that have been most thoroughly developed by feminists (Haraway 1988; Frankenberg and Mani 1993), and taken up more recently in debates over decolonising knowledge and 'epistemologies of the South' (De Sousa Santos 2014; Stam and Shohat 2014).

Authenticity functions in two main ways to justify belief in human rights films. Firstly, the authenticity of a director contributes to knowledge as justified belief when they appear to have experienced at least some of what is depicted in a film. As Owra Nyrabia, Director of the International Documentary Film Festival, put it in 2019: 'The strong presence of films

made by northern filmmakers about the rest of the world is not enough anymore… We know today that we can't just be watching films *about* the Balkan war, *about* the Syrian war or *about* the Congo, without giving a serious platform and due respect to filmmakers from these societies who are telling the stories in their own way' (Petković 2019). In fact, as Nyrabia goes on to acknowledge, most films are still made by directors from the West. In such cases the authenticity of the director can still be validated, but it becomes more complex to create a narrative of shared experience and situated knowledge. We might consider, for example, the often told story of how Joshua Oppenheimer came to make *The Act of Killing* (Oppenheimer, 2012): as an anthropologist he worked alongside the people he was studying in Indonesia, and it was villagers who urged him to make the film about the murderers who were still their neighbours because they were too frightened to tell their stories (Oppenheimer 2014). Whilst some critics have taken issue with *The Act of Killing*, the director's national origin has not been a focus of criticism (Fraser 2014; Hill et al, 2019).

Authenticity in a human rights film is also, and much more commonly carried by the protagonist. Virtually all films shown in human rights film festivals follow an interesting character closely, in their everyday personal as well as their public lives, representing them as 'stunningly agentic' heroes who are also victims of human rights abuses (XXXX XXXX). They invariably combine narrative that drives the film forward with a more observational aesthetic that also contributes to authenticity. Protagonists are central to human rights films: how they deal with the immediate difficulties of their situation; their emotions, dreams, projects. At the same time, viewers of human rights films are invited to see for themselves the situation in which protagonists find themselves. The knowledge communicated in human rights films is sober – films shown in human rights film festivals invariably use text and voiceovers to underline facts. They also, however, create immersive knowledge: viewers are

invited to learn about lives that are very different from our own by observing and listening, interpreting and judging for ourselves.

A good example of authenticity as a cinematic strategy is *Sonita*, directed by Roksareh Ghaemmaghami (Ghaemmaghami, 2016). *Sonita* has shown at many festivals, been on general release in several countries, and won many prizes, including the Sundance Grand Jury prize for World Documentary and the Audience Award in 2016. The film shows a young Afghan refugee in Tehran making her way as a rapper – though it is illegal to sing alone as a woman in Iran. The dramatic turning point in the film is when Sonita's mother arrives to persuade her to come back to her village in Afghanistan, to be exchanged in marriage for $9000, which will in turn enable her brother to pay for a bride. In the film viewers see Sonita's daily life: in the one room she shares with her sister and niece in Tehran, at her cleaning job, in the recording studio, discussing her song 'Brides for Sale' with her young relatives in the village, and trying to find a way through her problems. Finally, she escapes to attend a College in Utah where she is able to develop her music career and she continues to campaign against child marriage.

In *Sonita* viewers are invited to follow a unique, and uniquely heroic individual – a human rights defender - through a dramatic story. We are invited to experience for ourselves very concretely how Sonita fights the human rights abuses to which she is subjected. At the same time, we are offered a rich account of the context of her daily life: an opportunity to experience for ourselves, through the medium of the film, the situation in which she finds herself. Through the film's dramatic narrative, we are offered identification with Sonita: with close-ups of her face and her voice speaking her thoughts over poignant imagery, we are invited into Sonita's subjectivity, the inner world of her hopes and fears as they unfold in the story. In addition, in terms of the ethnographic 'being there', we are offered long shots that show Sonita as a person who is embedded in social relations very different from those of

most viewers. For example, there are a number of scenes in which Sonita sits and discusses marrying too young and for money: with her mother in their room in Tehran, and then later in the village in Afghanistan with her whole family. In the village, maybe 40 people, adults, men, women and children of all ages sit on the ground together. In each case we see discussion: calm, gentle, smiling. Through long, still camera shots, viewers are invited to see how people sit close together, their gestures, how they look at each other – to 'be there'. We are invited to observe and assess for ourselves how it is to be 'at home' in such a family and such a community? Is it constraining? Is it only constraining? Does it feel comfortable? Dangerous? How does it feel to leave and come back?

The authenticity of the protagonist, the representation of her subjectivity, and the observational style of the film create immersive knowledge in *Sonita*. They work together to construct a kind of ethnographic, situated knowledge of Sonita's situation. Ultimately, however, the success of authenticity depends on audiences. It is audiences who decide if the belief a film creates is justified.

As a cinematic strategy to create justified belief, authenticity has its limits. What looks authentic to some may always be read as inauthentic by others. The lack of authenticity of the director is very often used to discredit a film. When I gave a paper about *Sonita* at Stockholm university on November 16 2017, three well-dressed, middle-aged men, who introduced themselves to the group as Muslims, were highly critical of the film and told us that Roksareh Ghaemmaghami, an Iranian national, 'now lives in America' (3). The comment seemed to be a way of suggesting that Ghaemmaghami had made the film to please white Western audiences, to secure herself a place in filmmaking in the US. Indeed, Ghaemmaghami herself worries that the film conforms to what Westerners expect: that the film was celebrated because it conforms to a formula that has been criticised as 'white men saving brown women from brown men' (the phrase comes originally from Gayatri Spivak

(Spivak 1993)): '[If] Sonita wouldn't end up in [the] West, would they like this movie that much? If [the] West didn't save her? If America wouldn't save her?' (interview with Roksareh Ghaemmaghami, January 8 2018).

Directors are aware that constructing authenticity is not simple. When I interviewed directors of films on women's rights in the Middle East, they often spoke about having left out aspects of the story that would confirm Western stereotypes of 'brown men'. Directors understand the stereotypes audiences bring to films on particular topics, and they also understand the importance of a strong, interesting, original story. As they aim to make a compelling film, so they generally aim to <u>avoid</u> reproducing certain expectations and stereotypes. As Ghaemmaghami puts it:

> I got interested in [Sonita] because she was a strong woman. You hardly can meet an Afghan woman with that kind of passion and determination and that kind of self-confidence. And not that they don't exist but you know most of the time you don't see one… Because often they are so abused that they lose their, the imagination, the ability of dreaming. … *I don't think I reflected the horrible situation in the movie because it was a bit <u>too much</u>*. And also it was a bit too private sometimes to talk about all that misery… (interview January 8 2018. Italics mine) (4).

Similarly, Stefanie Brockhaus, co-director of *The Poetess* (Brockhaus and Wolff 2017) - a film about a Hissa Hilal, a Saudi woman who takes on male contestants in an immensely popular poetry competition that is broadcast across the Arab world as a kind of TV game show - also talked about what she had left out of the film. At a Q & A in the Human Rights Watch Film Festival in London the evening before I interviewed Brockhaus, a young woman who appeared to have a background in the Middle East asked the director why she had not shown more of how men were supporting women's rights in Saudi Arabia, and why she had

not focussed explicitly on the support Hissa's husband had given her to appear on the show. In our interview the following day Brockhaus said:

> Afterwards I was thinking, of course we considered this and of course… it's not the truth. He seems to be supportive and we also chose scenes where he is coming across as a gentle, very friendly guy. Which he is. But he's so limited in his… he's afraid. He's not taking the risk. He's not going anywhere that would really liberate Hissa. Because he feels the pressure of his family. He would lose his face (interview with Stefanie Brockhaus, March 10 2018).

It's a truism that what appears to a film audience as authentic is <u>constructed</u> as authentic. Cinematic constructions that appeal to the curators of festivals encourage viewers to suspend taken-for-granted assumptions sufficiently to learn from the film about the lives of people we would be very unlikely to encounter in any other way. Films that employ authenticity as a strategy combine immersive and sober knowledge – with a greater emphasis on the former. They encourage observations, interpretations and evaluations that construct what viewers see as real, true, and of value in relation to controversies over human rights. As a strategy, however, authenticity is vulnerable to charges of inauthenticity. Criticisms of inauthenticity are a way to discredit the interpretations and evaluations on which justified belief is built in a film. They challenge the knowledge the film produces with some audience members as untrue and self-serving.

Reflexivity

A second strategy through which knowledge is produced in human rights films is reflexivity. Reflexivity represents awareness of the conditions of knowing as necessarily contingent, unstable, incomplete. Often associated with critical and emancipatory

qualitative research in the social sciences, reflexivity involves the examination of the truth-seeker's own beliefs, judgements and practices as contributing not only to the research process by which truth is discovered, but also to the validation of knowledge as such (Woolgar 1988).

Reflexivity as a cinematic strategy is very evident when the filmmaker puts themselves in the narrative of the film. Their perspective and their methods of investigation are foregrounded: why they asked the questions they did and how they uncovered findings that answered those questions. Films that employ reflexivity aim to justify viewers' belief in the truth they discover by narrating how it has been uncovered, taking us beyond the film-maker's own initial misunderstanding or puzzlement to a conclusion that is satisfactory in terms of the facts of the case – even if it may be deeply uncomfortable or disturbing emotionally. As such, reflexivity creates both sober and immersive knowledge.

Waltz with Bashir (Folman, 2008) is perhaps the best-known human rights film that employs reflexivity. It has won many prizes, including an Oscar for best foreign-language film in 2009, and it has been widely – if not universally – celebrated, including in Israel. Told through animation, the story dramatizes the attempts of the film's director, Ari Folman, to find out what happened, what he did as a 19-year-old soldier 20 years earlier, during the massacre of Palestinian refugees in Beirut in 1982. Sober knowledge of what really happened that day is crucial to the narrative of the film. In the film, Folman interviews other soldiers who were there, including one who is now a psychologist, and another who is a TV reporter. As a result of his discoveries, he realises he facilitated the massacre – by being amongst the soldiers who prevented people fleeing the camp, and who fired flares to provide light to enable them to be shot. He also realises that he had completely forgotten the events of that night, he had repressed what he had done because he felt he had been as guilty as those who had actually shot the hundreds if not thousands of civilians who were killed. The

immersive knowledge of Folman's personal story is what drives the narrative of *Waltz with Bashir*. The film ends, famously, with animation dissolving into actual footage of the aftermath of the massacre.

Waltz with Bashir creates sober and immersive knowledge by mixing a personal quest to find out the truth of what happened with interviews with experts – often the young soldier's now older friends - who are presented not as 'talking heads', but as themselves very personally engaged, and troubled. Animation is used to enable multiple versions of possible truth: memories (Folman remembers himself bathing in the sea by the light of the flares, not sending them up on that night) are shown on the same level of reality as representations of reality (re-enactments of what he is learning) and eventually actual footage of the massacre, all of which are put together as equally valuable in Folman's quest for the truth of what happened. The film is at the same time a very personal and painful uncovering of hidden memories and an uncovering of facts that Israeli society as such prefers not to know. Viewers are called on to share experiences with the director/protagonist as fellow human beings who already know that peoples' memories are fallible and that our own minds can play tricks on us. In addition, we are invited to meet an expert in the film who explains what 'denial' involves, that the mind can hide something shameful it does not want to know really happened, and that the nightmares Folman experiences are surely a result of this repression of the truth. The truth revealed does indeed fit the psychological theory. The Israeli army was not just responsible for the massacre because they were the occupying force of the camp ('indirectly responsible' as an Israeli commission put it); they helped their allies, the Christian militias who carried out torture, mutilations, rapes and killings. Murder, rape and torture are certainly worthy of repression by anyone directly and personally involved, and very likely to be repressed as a

shameful episode in Israeli society's national history, especially because the acts have 'live' consequences in the continuing conflict.

Compelling as it is for some audience members, however, reflexivity undoubtedly has limitations as a strategy through which belief is justified. They are well-rehearsed in the case of *Waltz with Bashir*, which has been banned in Lebanon (as are all exchanges with Israelis), and which has been received very differently by different audiences in the Levant. Perhaps the most damning criticism of the film's reflexivity is that it puts the distress of the perpetrator at centre stage morally and epistemologically. If reflexivity in *Waltz with Bashir* facilitates the production of knowledge for some audience members, enabling viewers to experience something of what it feels like to be a perpetrator of human rights abuses and at the same time establishing incontrovertibly that Israeli soldiers actively participated in the Sabra and Shatila massacre in 1982, it also has the effect of marginalizing the voices, the feelings and the stories of victims who are the main focus for other audience members. Naira Antoun puts the case well, arguing that the film commits violence against Palestinians by depicting the perpetrators of the massacre as victims:

> To say that Palestinians are absent in *Waltz with Bashir*, to say that it is a film that deals not with Palestinians but with Israelis who served in Lebanon, only barely begins to describe the violence that this film commits against Palestinians. There is nothing interesting or new in the depiction of Palestinians — they have no names, they don't speak, they are anonymous… Instead, the victims in the story that *Waltz with Bashir* tells are Israeli soldiers. Their anguish, their questioning, their confusion, their pain — it is this that is intended to pull us. The rotoscope animation is beautifully done, the facial expressions so engaging, subtle and torn, we find ourselves grimacing and gasping at the trials and tribulations of the young Israeli

soldiers and their older agonizing selves. We don't see Palestinian facial expressions; only a lingering on dead, anonymous faces. So while Palestinians are never fully human, Israelis are, and indeed are humanized through the course of the film (Antoun 2009).

Reflexivity as a strategy for producing justified belief is necessarily partial. Indeed, it is a strength of reflexivity that findings are presented not as complete, as a 'view from nowhere', but interpreted from somewhere and in the light of pressing concerns. This does not mean that a reflexive film privileges immersive over sober knowledge. Although *Waltz with Bashir* does favour immersive knowledge in that the narrative is driven by the protagonist's distress and his compulsive desire for the truth, ultimately the sober knowledge of what the Israeli army really did that night in Beirut is what viewers want to know. However, viewers' involvement in the quest for knowledge through reflexivity in a human rights film depends on sharing the protagonist's concern to find the truth. Given that premise, reflexivity is a convincing cinematic strategy for validating knowledge. Without it, however, given the deliberate partiality of a reflexive account, reflexivity is surely quite likely to produce a suspicious reading. Rather than the suspension of disbelief that is needed for the creation of knowledge through film, for viewers hostile to the protagonist's quest, the partial perspective privileged by reflexivity distorts and obscures the truth.

Ambivalence

Ambivalence plays with the idea that uncertainty is an inevitable aspect of any search for truth, a part of the human condition with respect to creating and communicating knowledge that cannot be eradicated. Belief that is justified by ambivalence goes beyond reflexivity. While reflexivity is intended ultimately to uncover (and in some emancipatory research, at

the same time to create) a coherent, if partial, worldview, ambivalence embraces uncertainty not only as inevitable, but as productive. As I am using it here, ambivalence necessitates judgement on two specific and detailed alternatives, each of which requires the other and neither of which can ever be completely satisfactory because it depends on the other as its condition of possibility (5). As such, ambivalence opens up rather than closes down possibilities of knowledge as justified belief.

Directors of contemporary human rights films quite often favour ambivalence as a cinematic strategy to validate knowledge. This may be surprising if we think of the focus of documentary film as sober knowledge. In many interviews, however, documentary film-makers described what they do as a form of art, where art is seen as enabling access to deeper forms of truth than merely reporting on facts. As Andreas Dalsgaard, director of *Life is Sacred* (Dalsgaard, 2014), told me in an interview: 'life is ambiguous' (Interview with Andreas Dalsgaard, November 15, 2017). Similarly, the director of *Cold Case Hammarskjöld*, Mads Brugger, said emphatically: 'I don't like certainty: uncertainty, doubt, mystery, that's much more interesting.' (Interview with Mads Brugger, October 4 2019).

Ambiguity and ambivalence are related, but they are not the same. David Bordwell has famously argued that ambiguity is crucial to art cinema, to keeping audiences interested in the director's authorial vision when the narrative meanders and protagonists' motivations and goals are unclear and uncertain: what is central to the plot is that there are always different ways to judge what happened, what it means, and how what happened should be evaluated (Bordwell 1979). While ambiguity of meaning is crucial and truth is treated as perspectival rather than as a reflection of reality for the cinematic strategy of ambivalence, it nevertheless does not lead to relativism. Ambivalence does not mean 'anything goes', but rather a judgement to accept one alternative that can never be freed from the other alternative with which it is twinned. As I am using it here, ambivalence – 'on the one hand, on the other

hand' – is a cinematic strategy to justify sober and immersive knowledge created in human rights films within the limits of a principled approach to human rights.

A good example of cinematic ambivalence is *The Other Side of Everything* directed by Mila Turajlic (Turajlic, 2017). The film has been shown in many human rights festivals, and widely celebrated: it won the IDFA award for best feature-length documentary in 2017, it won prizes both in Serbia and in Croatia, and it was picked as one of the best films of 2018 by Richard Brody in The New Yorker (Brody 2018). Ambivalence is presented in the very title of the film and it is central to the narrative. Turajlic's family apartment in Belgrade is the starting point of the film. It was split in half 30 years before Turajlic was born, when communists came to power in the former Yugoslavia at the end of World War Two. Viewers are invited to see that on the other side of the dining room door, which has been locked since 1945, lives a very old woman. The film makes use of text and voiceover to establish sober knowledge: the facts of the context of the film in the Former Yugoslavia, as well as footage from TV archives. The knowledge created in the film is overwhelmingly immersive, however, as it consists mostly of conversations with the film-maker's mother. Viewers learn that Mila's mother, Srbijanka Turajlic, is a prominent intellectual and political activist, and her family has been central in Yugoslav politics for generations. The family was anti-communist before Tito, and the mother was very active against Milošević, and against the break-up of Yugoslavia. Eventually we meet the woman on the other side of the door during a census-taking – Nada Lazović. She is ancient, an invalid. She describes herself as Serb – by nationality - and as a 'true proletariat', and then she laughs. Srbijanka in contrast gives her citizenship as Serbian, and refuses to give her nationality.

The narrative of *The Other Side of Everything* is constructed around ambivalence. Viewers continually see the closed door, and we see, very briefly, that there is a whole 'other side' to the pro-democracy, anti-nationalist movement that has been Turajlic's mother's life: the 'true

proletariat', who now support Milošević and Serb nationalism. The film's narrative focuses

viewers' sympathies on 'this side' of the door: it is Srbijanka's story that is being told.

However, we learn that there are two very different versions of history and political positions

in Serbia, and we are invited to see – from within the film, from interviews with Srbijanka,

conversations between her friends, and footage of recent demonstrations Turajlic shoots

through the window of the apartment - that 'the other side' of militarism and nationalism is

very active, probably dominant in Serbia today. Moreover, although viewers barely see

Nada, we are given some insights into her life that inspire sympathy: she is old, bed-ridden,

alone, and we get the impression from conversations between Mila and her mother that their

family, 'the true bourgeoisie', did not always treat their next-door neighbours with respect.

In addition, throughout the film viewers are also invited to see the personal, often painful,

relationship between the filmmaker and her mother. Srbijanka wants Mila to stay and fight;

Mila is planning to leave. Mila tells her mother that she does not know how to fight for

democracy now, and throughout the film she continually asks how it is that Srbijanka became

so committed to the cause of democracy in Serbia. There is ambivalence here too, then, in

terms of the emotional, personal knowledge that is created in the film. If Mila with her

family history and her inspiring mother - but actually by extension anyone, including viewers

of the film - does not feel practical commitment, if we are not willing to fight for what we

value, if we take sides only in our heads, then which side are we really on? What does

democracy and human rights really mean to us?

Ambivalence is at the heart of the immersive knowledge created and communicated in *The
Other Side of Everything*. Turajlic is very clear that, even if emotionally viewers are drawn

to Srbijanka's energy and optimism, and even if intellectually we are drawn to her values, for

Turajlic ambivalence is emphatically not a strategy for justifying the truth and the validity of

Srbjanka's side over Nada's, nor over Mila's doubts about her personal stake in building

Serbian democracy. In an interview I asked Turajlic if her film is a way of living up to her mother's expectation that she should carry on the family tradition of serving Serbian democracy. Turajlic insisted it was not: she rejects a utilitarian analysis of her film; it is art, and absolutely not a political statement. In Turajlic's view, what is most interesting about documentary film today is the place it is making for itself in cinema, not politics:

> I have to confess that I have a slight resistance to towards this utilitarian view of documentaries, which is where they can be situated in a social campaign, oh they can be used for engagement or for specific impact, because I think it takes away from the ultimate struggle, which is to situate documentary within the world of cinema (Interview with Mila Turajlic, April 20 2018)

Turajlic's sentiments were echoed by a number of directors in the study. At least as far as filmmakers who construct the knowledge produced by films around ambivalence are concerned, these films are not for campaigning. Indeed, many of the directors who favoured ambivalence as a cinematic strategy for producing knowledge were also wary of their films being pigeonholed as 'human rights films' at all, of being constrained in their artistic imaginations. At the same time, and in relation to screening in human rights film festivals, those same film-makers felt somewhat ambivalent about their own certainty that their films should be seen only as art. Again, Mila Turajlic's thinking on *The Other Side of Everything* is interesting here. As we have noted, Turajlic was clear that she had made the film as an exploration, a piece of cinematic research, rather than to take a political position and to communicate a message:

> Traditionally the way political scientists analyse the ideological spectrum of Serbia today is to say well there's a "first Serbia", which is like this nationalistic Serbia, then there's a "second Serbia", which would be this democratic opposition… It's funny

when I arrived back in Belgrade from IDFA with the award, and there was a press

conference, and the first question I was asked at the press conference was, "Finally

the second Serbia gets its story told". And my – a thing of real importance to me was

to say, "Absolutely not. This is not a film made to speak in the name of second

Serbia. Or to vindicate the role of second Serbia."

However, Turajlic then went on to say:

For me this film is trying to bridge that gap. This is a film that's trying to say, while

we continue to divide ourselves into first, second and you know third and fifth

Serbias, we're not going to make any progress. So for me it was always about trying

to open that door.

Creating *The Other Side of Everything* as art, did not mean giving up on politics or human

rights altogether for Turajlic. In fact, she felt that the film had had some success in opening

the door to dialogue across political differences that might help address the problem of

growing extremist nationalism in Eastern Europe. As she toured festivals doing Q and A

sessions, she said she was finding that the film touched people, especially young people in

Eastern Europe; they trusted the story of the film, and they were beginning conversations that

she found hopeful. For example, she recounted how, at Oneworld in Bucharest:

[A teenage girl in the audience] said, "I want to ask you if you think you're a patriot,

and what you think a patriot is."… Because all of these concepts of "the motherland"

and "fighting for the motherland" and "defending the motherland" and patriotism are

being invoked in a way that's very similar to the way the concept of patriotism to my

mind has been hi-jacked by nationalists in Serbia and beginning to face being hi-

jacked pretty much all over Eastern Europe… And it gave me hope that this film has

opened the door to consider again a legacy that's being forced on them… And it's

kind of given them the space to debate that, debate those expectations. Or at least…

analyse them from a more intimate perspective.

In 'opening the door', opening dialogue, Turajlic, who was hostile to the idea of 'creating impact' through her film, was finding that it might be having impact – precisely because it is a more personal vision, a less didactic account of recent history. In this respect, then, it is possible that ambivalence is not only a cinematic strategy for avoiding a suspicious reading of a film, it may also be a way of raising awareness, of creating dialogue beyond a film that could be more effective in changing hearts and minds, at least for some audience members, than making a direct argument or an appeal to human rights facts and values.

Conclusion

In this article I have explored how filmmakers adopt cinematic strategies to enable viewers to suspend disbelief, to validate the sober and immersive knowledge they create that intervenes in human rights controversies. Knowledge is not just represented <u>in</u> these films. It is created by how films tell stories, how they show protagonists struggling with dilemmas and difficulties, how they show people living in ways that are generally unfamiliar to viewers. Directors' strategies of authenticity, reflexivity and ambivalence require viewers to engage actively with human rights films, to observe, question and evaluate, while at the same time we are encouraged to follow narratives along the lines of the films' encoded intentions. Cinematic strategies help persuade us to accept that what we have experienced in watching a film is real, true, and of value to controversies over human rights.

The strategies I have explored here are not exhaustive. And within each category there are variations. Ambivalence can be comic, for example, as it is in *Cold Case Hammarskjold*. Or more experimental, as it is in *The Maribor Uprisings* (Maple Razsa and Milton Guillén

2017), in which audience members are invited by moderators in the cinema to choose a path through the film that will enable the audience as a whole to explore the possibilities of violent and non-violent protest – with one possibility being that violence is necessary (Interview with Maple Razsa, March 30, 2018). In fact, human rights films often also fit more than one of these forms. This evident in *The Other Side of Everything*. Here I have emphasised ambivalence in this film, but it also involves authenticity – the story is centred on the director's own home and family; and reflexivity – we see the director struggling with the personal implications of her family history and her country's destiny. And *Waltz with Bashir* involves not just reflexivity but also authenticity – it is Ari Folman's own story that drives the narrative, and the film reflects on his and his friends' experiences as young soldiers.

Authenticity, reflexivity and ambivalence each have their limitations. It may be that some are better suited to certain purposes than others. Although *Sonita* is much more than a campaigning NGO film, the Strongheart Group sponsored Sonita's scholarship to the College in Utah that enabled her to escape her situation, and she worked with them subsequently on their campaigns against child marriage: 'serving as a Girls Not Bride Champion; participating in high level events; collaborating with organizations across sectors; elevating the issue with music and media all over the world; and raising the global collective consciousness' as their website puts it (https://strongheartgroup.org/sonita-ending-child-marriage). Authenticity, foregrounding Sonita's own experience of escaping forced child marriage in the film *Sonita*, works to amplify Sonita's voice and fits very well with the NGO campaigning in which she is now involved. Reflexivity may also be relatively easily linked to campaigning insofar as – like *Waltz with Bashir* - it involves investigative journalism and takes up a partial and at the same time eventually unequivocal position on truth. In contrast, although *The Other Side of Everything* could be linked to campaigning ("Finally the second Serbia gets its story told"), it is inherently resistant to the moral and political certainties required for advocacy. It is for

this reason I have suggested that ambivalence is perhaps also the most resistant of the strategies we have explored here to the suspicious reading that is always a possibility where human rights films are concerned.

Notes

1. The importance of observation has been well-established in the history of cinema: initially by Andre Bazin, especially with regards to neo-realism (see Grimhaw and Ravetz 2009); and more recently by Lucien Castaing-Taylor, who recasts the multi-sensory experience of watching film as a form of ethnography (Taylor 1996). I am also influenced by James Baldwin's reflections on his experience of cinema, in which he emphasises how an expression on a black actor's face, or a gesture, observed by a black audience, means so much more than the text of the film supports (Baldwin 2011). In terms of human rights films, however, where international audiences are multiply differentiated, the question of interpretation (as compared to direct experience), and therefore of what is encoded (to be decoded) in a film has also to be taken into account (Hall 2006).

2. As such, this article may be understood as a contribution to the small body of existing work on human rights film festivals – though the article is not on these festivals as such (see Tascon 2015, Tascon and Wils 2017; Bowles Eagle 2019; Colta 2019).

3. Although Ghaemmaghami is from Iran (where Sonita is living) not Afghanistan, she herself sees herself and Sonita as 'coming from the [same] pain' of trying to make a difference in the region from which both originate (Interview with Ghammaghami, January 8 2018).

4. In an interview with The Guardian, Ghammaghami said that one of the things she left out was the violence of Sonita's brother, a drug addict who, when released from prison, tried to sell Sonita's niece into marriage, and to kill Sonita; another was the violence of the state, which responded by trying to deport the whole family (Khaleeli 2016).

5. There is not room here to go into the literature on ambivalence that informs my
   approach. Perhaps the most well-known theorist of knowledge as necessarily
   ambivalent ('undecidable' – 'a determinate oscillation between possibilities') is
   Jacques Derrida (Derrida 1988: 148). I have also been influenced here by Marie-
   Bénédicte Dembour's (2001) account of ambivalence as necessary to knowing human
   rights as both universal and relativist. Clare Hemmings outlines a valuable treatment
   of ambivalence in epistemological and methodological terms as a way of opening up
   political horizons (Hemmings 2018).

Acknowledgements

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