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YUFEI ZHU

*Goldsmiths, University of London*

## **THE ANONYMOUS MYANMAR DIARIES AND FILMIC ACTIVISM**

### **Cultural Trauma and Protest in Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Chile, and Vietnam**

#### ABSTRACT

This article investigates the role of documentary film in social activism, particularly in countering official ideological control and advancing human rights causes, using *Myanmar Diaries* (2022) as a case study. First, the article uses *Myanmar Diaries* and transnational protest art as a case study to understand the historical context of the junta's dictatorship in Myanmar. Second, the article examines trauma cinema and its audiovisual techniques by comparing three films from developing countries in Asia and Latin America: *Dheepan* (2015) from Sri Lanka, *Chile, Obstinate Memory* (1997) from Chile, and *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* (1989) from Vietnam. Third, the article concludes that trauma cinema, when integrated with activism, can effectively provide additional support for instigating social transformation.

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Myanmar has endured a prolonged period of turmoil, marked by significant internal conflicts, repression by the military government, and the resurgence of dictatorship (Ferguson 2012, 23). Since the war of independence from British colonial rule, the military has occupied the political space due to its critical role in the conflict. In 1962, the junta broke away from representative democracy and seized power, with its supreme leader, Ne Win, remaining in control for 26 years. “A new political era began with the militarisation of Burmese society. The political transition marked the end of parliamentary democracy and the beginning of military rule led by the Burmans” (Nehginpao Kipgen 2022, 36). The authoritarian politics of the military government not only intensified internal ethnic tensions but also eradicated the democratized political culture.

**1. The History and Practice of the Art of Protest**

The Myanmar military coup of 2021 profoundly changed the everyday life of the Burmese people. On 1 February, the Myanmar Defence Force, dissatisfied with the results of the vote in the 2020 parliamentary elections which the National League for Democracy had won, overturned the results and declared a year-long state of emergency in the country, putting in place a series of controls on culture and on various aspects of people’s ordinary lives. “They cut off phones and the Internet and arrested some of the most active members of civil society” (Bünthe 2023, 2). The coup continues to affect the Burmese people today, with the military government in power creating an even greater crisis for the

population. In the coup's aftermath, there were massive demonstrations, and many people took to the streets to fight against the military dictatorship. The Myanmar military responded by using violent means to suppress the demonstrations.

In *Media and Protests in the Myanmar Crisis* (2007, 53), Buck describes Myanmar's extensive cybercensorship and Internet control: the government has adopted a policy of cultural isolation, with no free media and a private press heavily regulated by it. Furthermore, during protests the government controls the inward flow of news and information from the outside world by denying visas to foreign journalists. In *From Contested Histories to Ethnic Tourism*, Jane M. Ferguson argues that despite Myanmar's considerable film production capacity, which peaked in the 1960s, its film industry lacks an international cultural voice and recognition even within Southeast Asia. This deficiency is caused by the government's stringent approach to culture and strict censorship. Ferguson notes, "The considerable dearth in international scholarly attention on the subject of Burmese cinema belies the fact that Burma has a nine-decade history of motion picture production, and active cinema production continues to this day" (2012, 23).

Over time, cultural control has intensified, especially with the military government back in power, further weakening Myanmar's cultural discourse and hindering the democratization of expression. Consequently, texts and images of protests that cannot be disseminated within Myanmar find potential dissemination through the Internet despite stringent journalistic constraints (Buck 2007, 51). Amorisa Wiratri argues that after the "Saffron Revolution" in 2007, online and offline opposition alliances facilitated the development and dissemination of protests. These coalitions leveraged the role of the

Internet in the context of globalization, thereby strengthening the links between democratization movements across the globe (2016, 232).

Many activists and artists collaborated with foreign sources, aiming to raise as much money as possible to support Myanmar's revolutionary resistance and gain greater visibility through art and media. In *Art is Happening in Myanmar, and Outside of It: Transnational Solidarity Art*, Susan Banki describes an example where paintings and designs about Burmese resistance art, which had been circulating online, were combined to create an online exhibition, "The Fighting Fear" (2023, 1052-1059). She argues that this exhibition offers the possibility to rethink the status quo for the general public and those outside Myanmar. Banki notes that Myanmar resistance art is organized differently than in other countries due to government censorship and repression, forming a solid network of transnational relationships.

Solidarity art is created and disseminated through the co-creation of various people. Tracing the history of activist documentaries in Myanmar, the production of such documentaries as solidarity art has helped people understand the situation in Myanmar and the experiences of its people, breaking through the official information blockade and documenting first-hand accounts. For example, Burma VJ documented the 2007 "Saffron Revolution" through the lens of Burmese video journalists. It captures the escalation of the movement when, after pro-democracy activists were violently suppressed, the involvement of monks brought the movement to a new level (Steehouwer 2014, 6). Julianne Pidduck recognizes in this example the supportive power of the media for revolution: "On an international scale, the rapid transmission of coverage galvanized awareness and political pressure that may have delayed or mitigated an even more violent crackdown by the regime" (2010, 476).

It was in this context that *Myanmar Diaries* (2022) was created. The directors formed an anonymous group, The Myanmar Film Collective, utilizing censored images to express a form of resistance against official media narratives. *Myanmar Diaries* depicts the traumatic experiences and emotions of the Burmese people after the atrocities they suffered during the demonstrations and the military's killing of their relatives. This article explores the utilization of trauma documentary films by social activists as a means to counter official ideological repression, as well as the strategies social activists employ to actively involve audiences in the medium.

First, this article uses *Myanmar Diaries* and transnational protest art as a case study in order to understand the historical context of the junta's dictatorship in Myanmar. It also explores the modes of anonymous filming and the means of disseminating international collaborations used in this film in extreme cases. Second, the article examines trauma cinema and its audiovisual techniques, introducing the concept and attributes of trauma cinema through *Trauma Cinema* by Janet Walker. This section compares three films from developing countries in Asia and Latin America: *Dheepan* (2015) from Sri Lanka, *Chile, Obstinate Memory* (1997) from Chile, and *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* (1989) from Vietnam. Third, the article concludes that trauma cinema, when integrated with activism, can effectively provide additional support for instigating social transformation.

## **2. Anonymous Production and International Cooperation**

Activists and scholars have found that film serves as a vehicle that facilitates the documentation and dissemination of ideas and events that differ from those under political hegemony. "Film as a cultural arena can be understood as a site where diverse cultural interests and discourses

are both contested and manifested” (Mahyuddin et al. 2017, 126). In some Asian regions where government censorship is in place, films produced with transnational collaborations are helping to document social movements. Film festivals and activist documentation and promotional methods, therefore, become even more significant. For example, Luke Robinson states, “Collaboration with overseas partners has historically been a feature of independent documentary film production in the People’s Republic of China” (2024, 1). Independent documentary filmmakers and social activists need to draw strength from the international community in order to secure more funding and manpower support, and to gain more exhibition opportunities such as special sections at human rights film festivals or international film festivals.

In *Myanmar Diaries* (shot in Yangon, Myanmar and in Thailand), the creators grappled with multiple dilemmas, including a media blackout and the threat of arrest by the military government. As Myanmar has faced intense censorship for many years, the individual filmmakers were unable to use mainstream media to produce content related to the revolution or get sufficient material for their reports. Furthermore, these creators needed to ensure the secrecy of their identity and safety. Due to the revolution and the constant struggle between the junta and the NLD, the public opinion environment in Myanmar is exceptionally hostile to free speech, and much of the power of expression is in the hands of the dictator. Therefore, because these creators’ documentation and expression are under significant threat, they have had to adopt unconventional methods and production strategies to get the film completed and seen by a wider audience.

The film is organized uniquely—none of the actors appears, and it is anonymous. The directors appear as a group, naming themselves

The Myanmar Film Collective, a form of collaboration that is common in Third World countries such as Myanmar, where “Myanmar’s solidarity art—like the solidarity art in a previous era—is characterised by collective self-representation, in which the art is produced not only for those suffering harm but by those affected” (Banki 2023, 12).

The creators of *Myanmar Diaries* were forced to choose this strategy based on the clear and present danger and considerations of the future. Instead of pointing the camera at any of the actors, The Myanmar Film Collective takes a pseudo-documentary approach to this non-fiction subject. The filmmakers adopted a method where they avoided revealing their facial features, opting instead to film hands, necks, and backs. The film also uses backlighting and various other techniques to blur the facial features of the actors. These actors could not accept the current situation in Myanmar and have chosen to leave the country. They adopted an online approach rather than a contemporaneous recording approach, and they efficiently used the new media information they collected to supplement their information. They did not disclose the names of any of their staff but instead used the name The Myanmar Film Collective to avoid the risk of information leakage. Ultimately, they created a unique aesthetic between fiction and non-fiction, between reinterpretation and authenticity. This principle of anonymity allows the viewer to feel both the storytelling and the urgency of the situation, making them empathize with the characters.

The two producers of *Myanmar Diaries*, Corinne van Egeraat and her husband, Petr Lom, are based in the Netherlands and had lived and worked in Myanmar for five years, from 2013 to 2017. In addition to *Myanmar Diaries*, she has made two other films with The Myanmar Film Collective, the short documentary *Sad Film* (2021), and *Letter to San Zaw Htway* (2021). Their website of their company, ZIN Documentary, states:

“ZIN Documentary produces creative documentary films on urgent social and political topics. We would like to leave the world as a little bit better place with our work” (Egeraat and Lom 2023).

*Myanmar Diaries* premiered at the 72nd Berlin International Film Festival and has been featured at the 27th Busan International Film Festival and the 95th Academy Awards, among others. At many of the screenings in which The Myanmar Film Collective participated, the audience gave the three-finger salute in solidarity with Myanmar. International film festivals offer an excellent opportunity for activist filmmakers. Many festivals already have a history of supporting and helping Asian films, such as the Berlinale World Cinema Fund, which announced in 2007 that it was expanding its focus to Southeast Asia to provide grants to documentary filmmakers and novelists.

As it is difficult for these films to be screened in their home countries due to the restrictions and censorship, the festival will help them reach an overseas audience, enhance their reputation, and get more private funding. The festivals also provide many resources, such as enabling the filmmakers to meet more producers and distributors who can give them financial assistance to promote their films and start other film projects. The availability of funds and accessibility to artistic resources would help artists create and confront hegemony, offering them greater possibilities to tell their history of resistance. As Tamara L. Falicov puts it: “This is undoubtedly a significant avenue of support to those filmmakers who come from countries with little state or private support for cinema, as well as to those who come from countries which have only fledgling film industries” (Falicov 2010, 18).

Collaboration between international filmmakers is essential for documenting events in countries with a weak presence. Such cooperation can combine the resources of filmmakers from different countries,



making Southeast Asian films accessible to European audiences. It can also help creators from developing countries gain a more international perspective and supportive power.

Documentaries transcend mere message conveyance; they serve as powerful tools for defending human rights and challenging oppression. As John A. Stover says: “Documentaries are a significant, successful way activists advance social justice causes via the framing of their messages” (Stover III 2013, 58). With the support of these international film festivals and human rights activists, documentary directors can access resources and support for filming and promotion within Myanmar. As Susan Banki points out, Myanmar’s art, characterized by its multiple transnational dimensions, facilitates public engagement and interaction with its themes (2023, 12). Moreover, the creation of Myanmar’s artistic works necessitates transnational collaborations to support their continued creation.

### **3. Trauma, Memory, and Audiovisual Techniques**

The internal conflict and dictatorship that Myanmar is facing is not an isolated, one-off event, but is the current situation in many Third World countries where such trauma is widespread. Jeffrey C. Alexander proposes a theory of cultural trauma, arguing that when collective members are permanently altered from their future identities after experiencing a horrific event, such trauma can be termed cultural trauma (2012, 6). In a collection of essays, *The Horrors of Trauma in Cinema*, Michael Elm draws on Alexander’s theory to emphasize that cultural trauma is socially constructed rather than a result of natural disasters (2014). Cultural trauma is associated with national societies or collectives, such as terrorist attacks, wars, military repression, etc. (47). In the same collection of essays, Hinderk M. Emrich utilizes the

psychoanalytic term “integration versus splitting” to depict trauma victims blurring the boundaries between the natural world and the world of the subjective self (2014, 177). The reality experienced by traumatized people is often a more subjective reality, the way things in the real world appear to their subjective selves, and traumatic memories often “intrude into the reality of the present moment” (177).

The traditional techniques of narrative film do not help trauma films express what happened to them and the emotions involved. That is why techniques in trauma documentaries are so important. Louise Spence and Vinicius Navarro describe the importance of structure in documentary films (2011). They point out that the structure of documentaries is often underappreciated. Still, the reality of time is chaotic, disorganized, non-linear, and even contradictory, and the effort to organize this material into linear, comprehensible images depends on the imagination and observation of the creators and ultimately, “documentaries create specific structures of meaning” (113).

Janet Walker further combines cinematography with elements of psychoanalysis and feminism to analyze the significance of the social impact of traumatic images and to trace the relationship between documentary and fictional cinema and between personal and public history (2005, 20). She states that since the 1980s, several documentary films depicting traumatic events have begun to emerge. In her book *Trauma Cinema*, she concentrates on analyzing the characteristics of films depicting the Holocaust and incest. She understands the trauma image thus:

By trauma cinema I mean a group of films that deal with a world-shattering event or events, whether public or personal. Furthermore, I define trauma films and videos as those that deal



with traumatic events in a nonrealist mode characterized by disturbance and fragmentation of the films' narrative and stylistic regimes (19).

Walker argues that trauma films are distinct from realist images and are incomplete and abstract with elements of fragility and subjectivity. Trauma films utilize several narrative and audio-visual strategies to draw the viewer closer and evoke empathy and identification with the viewer using highly evolved editorial techniques to uncover the realities of the world (Ibid). According to Walker, trauma cinema is, first and foremost, incomplete and abstract with elements of fragility, subjectivity, and illusion. Trauma films, first, use repetitive images to trigger memories and present a certain degree of pathological reactions, such as paradoxes brought about by dissociation, fantasies, and disaster reenactments. It implies the use of techniques different from traditional narrative films in order to invite the audience to participate in the revelation of these truths. Second, on an organizational level, "trauma cinema is an international and transnational phenomenon" (20). Trauma cinema requires different forces from different collectives and countries to help the victims speak out, be heard, and gain more influence. There is also the need to connect the various injuries through stories between different nations and races to see the connections. This strategy is to unite people in an atomized society, make people understand each other, and construct care for each other in images. "Trauma films and videos model a new and empathetic historiography" (193).

Dictatorships and social revolutions exist not only in Myanmar but also in Third World countries such as Vietnam and Sri Lanka, which will be discussed later in this article. In these contexts, the

documentation of social movements and protests is closely intertwined with traumatic memories. Therefore, as Janet Walker argued earlier, social activists must express and document these traumatic memories, which often exhibit more fragmented and nonlinear characteristics. As the creators of *Myanmar Diaries* say: “An extremely urgent film in a time when Myanmar has almost disappeared from news headlines around the world” (The Myanmar Film Collective 2022). It is a challenging task for creators because to document means that they have to face the traumatic memory again, and that they are subjected to violence and threats from the dictatorship. Nevertheless, the creators of *Myanmar Diaries* continue to express themselves courageously and use it as a means of confrontation. Lovatt Philippa argues in her PhD thesis that because people’s memories are quickly suppressed in front of the monolithic discourse of official ideology, people need to use cinema to document parts of history that differ from the official history by using film to destabilize censorship and monolithic ideology (2011, 8). In the face of a single official ideology, there is an urgent need for such documentation and emotional expression to help people understand and remember their violent memories.

Documentary creation, moreover, can remain an archive and be disseminated to a broader audience. In Myanmar, where the forces are constantly entangled, the memories of violence will be repeated and then suppressed again and again. Because of the presence of these dangers and repressions, how traumatic memories are represented becomes even more critical. The following section examines the similarities and differences in presentation techniques between the three films from Sri Lanka, Vietnam, and Chile and *Myanmar Diaries*.

### 3.1 Sri Lanka: *Dheepan* and Surrealism

From 1983 to 2009, Sri Lanka endured more than two decades of civil war, forcing many people to flee and seek refuge abroad (Valančiūnas 2021, 37). The civil war caused thousands of casualties and left a substantial psychological impact on the population. More than a decade later, the country is still not in harmony for ethnic and religious reasons. *Dheepan* (2015) shows how the eponymously named hero, Dheepan, deals with traumatic experiences and the effects that memories of violence have had on him. The memory of his former involvement in the war is once again triggered when he is confronted with the execution of a gang member. This experience of war is synonymous with his execution of a drug dealer, forcing him to return to his repressed self (Valančiūnas 2021, 45). The film uses surrealism to portray the experience he perceives in a manner very similar to that of *Myanmar Diaries*, which also uses dreams as an introduction. The dreams are filled with surrealistic lighting and close-ups of elephants, creating a creepy atmosphere that reveals the effects of his trauma—the surrealism emphasizing the relationship between reality and unreality, as well as fiction and non-fiction.

As Bazin puts it, the surrealist erases “the logical distinction between what is imaginary and what is real,” fusing psychological “pseudorealism” with aesthetic “true realism” (Breton 1969, 14). Surrealism does not emphasize a complete detachment from reality but is referred to as “pseudorealism,” meaning surrealists still need to follow reality and contemplate the relationship between reality and imagination. Surrealism is used in trauma films to help creators better show the emotions and inner world of the characters, and to help viewers relate to their encounters and dilemmas. It is a non-realistic technique to showcase the reality. In *Myanmar Diaries*, surrealist techniques are

used to show the world the characters see when they feel fearful and the changes they experience when they transform.



Figure 1: The policeman cannot wash the blood off his hands, which is a metaphor for reality in *Myanmar Diaries*. Available at: <https://myanmardiaries.com/>

In *Myanmar Diaries*, these expressions of surrealistic content can be found in an episode where a policeman returns home and embraces his son who tries to avoid his father. The son says that his classmates at school no longer play with him because of his father's occupation. When the policeman goes to wash his hands, he looks up and finds himself covered by a black plastic bag, accompanied by rapid breathing in the background. The garbage bag symbolizes the officer's isolation and inner struggle, cutting him off from the outside world and serving as a form of self-punishment for his guilt. Through the sense of suffocation, the audience can experience his pain and transformation. Much blood appears on his hands, which he cannot wash off even when he puts them under the tap. As he sleeps, he has nightmares about the cries of people and their pleas for help. The director uses a montage to blend

many images of the people fighting and being injured, again with the sound of rapid breathing, as the policeman sits up, the black plastic bag once again covering his face. Later in the episode, he calls his superiors to inform them that he does not want to be a policeman anymore and wants to stand with the people. In this story, the film uses surrealism and editing techniques such as flashbacks to portray the immense psychological pressure on the policeman's character. This example illustrates how surrealist techniques depict traumatic memories, vividly portraying the characters' inner world by incorporating dream sequences. The audience can feel solid emotional changes in the detailed descriptions. They are able to substitute their life experiences to understand better what is happening to the characters and to feel their pain.



Figure 2. *Myanmar Diaries* takes a surrealist approach, with the policeman's face covered in a plastic bag. The audience is made to feel the character's inner struggle and pain through his rapid breathing and almost suffocating performance. Available at: <https://myanmardiaries.com/>

### 3.2 Chile, *Obstinate Memory*: Archiving Military Coup History

In the feature documentary, *Chile, Obstinate Memory*, Chilean filmmaker Patricio Guzmán returns to his home country for the first time in twenty-three years. In this lengthy gap, an entire generation of young Chileans have grown up lacking knowledge of the facts surrounding the military coup of September 11, 1973 that overthrew the democratically elected government of Salvador Allende. Guzmán's *Chile, Obstinate Memory* (1997) is about the broken biographical narratives of those whose lived experiences were erased from public memory in post-dictatorship Chile. On his return, Guzmán carried in his suitcase his 1976 film, *The Battle of Chile*, banned by the authorities. It toured the world but was never seen in Chile. Guzmán discreetly screened it for his friends and a small group of high school students, leaving them shocked. They craved to know the truth about what had happened.

In Spanish with English subtitles, *Obstinate Memory* not only explores the reactions of students to *The Battle of Chile*, it also records the reactions of those actors who appeared in *The Battle* to seeing themselves on screen after two decades. In one scene, Guzmán gets a group of Allende's allies to watch parts of *The Battle of Chile* and identify individuals who appear in the film (Godoy-Anativia 2007). Some of these people recount their friends who were killed or vanished after the military coup. One of the viewers recognizes a woman in a pro-Allende demonstration and identifies her as Carmen Vivanco. In the next scene, in an interview with Carmen, Guzmán asks if she is the one pictured in the film. She replies vaguely and ambiguously. "Maybe it is. I have my doubts," signaling her apprehension of being associated with the years of military repression and the fear of the wounds inflicted by memory itself. Nonetheless, Carmen reveals the full names of the five members of her family who had disappeared.



The past-present fissure appears again in the film. Guzmán juxtaposes an image of President Allende saluting crowds of supporters at a parade from a slow-moving car surrounded by personal bodyguards with a reenactment of the scene using the same bodyguards, who are now visibly older, marching beside an empty car on a silent and empty street with nothing but their personal recollections to make sense of their gesture (Godoy-Anativia 2007). “This staged juxtaposition between past and present performs the act of remembrance itself while simultaneously exposing a locality that has been emptied of all referents for collective remembrance” (Ibid).



Figure 3. An historical archive image used in *Chile, Obstinate Memory* brings the viewer closer to the context in which the story takes place. Available at: [https://www.nfb.ca/film/chile\\_obstinate\\_memory/](https://www.nfb.ca/film/chile_obstinate_memory/)

*Chile, Obstinate Memory* documents not only history and trauma but also the challenges that the traumatic experience brought to the people who lived through those times, and the torment they felt when confronted with those memories. Guzmán’s use of voice-overs and images give the

viewer a more realistic picture of historical memory. The film offers a way of confronting traumatic memories by using documentaries as archives to preserve their memory in the face of trauma and prevent them from being destroyed or altered. People's memories of history are often subject to external pressures of culturally repressive policies of dictatorial regimes when they are in power. The destruction and alteration of cultural relics and historical documents such as film inevitably leads to an eventual revision of memory (Rodriguez 2007, 7). The film has shown that Chilean dictators have attempted to erase the crimes of the past through the distortion of memory and documentation.

Documentaries painstakingly capture the facts and help us recall people's inner thoughts when confronted with these artificial disasters. These filmic archives break the hegemony of memory through the cracks of history. As Auguiste says, documentaries are becoming a disruptive force in support of social revolutions and the voices of people in struggle: "The ontology of the archive has a structuring presence in documentary cinema, which is in part determined by the historical tradition in which it is produced and in which it circulates" (2015, 22). Auguiste adds: "However, the invention is a process of disclosure of new possibilities, and archives are inventions of history. Culture and politics paradoxically can reveal the hidden construction of history."

*Myanmar Diaries* differs from *Chile, Obstinate Memory* in that it does not use traditional physical archival and documentary techniques such as photographs and testimonies to present the past. Instead, it is based directly on the directors' memories, with the addition of new media material. This is because the revolution and protests in Myanmar are still ongoing, and the localized war and lockdown made it difficult for the filmmakers to be on the frontline to record current information.

However, the similarity between the two films lies in the use of film to counter cultural forgetfulness and violent authoritarian domination.



Figure 4. A woman, in defiance, records a police car while doing aerobics in *Myanmar Diaries*. Available at: <https://myanmardiaries.com/>

For instance, *Myanmar Diaries* begins with a video that has received a million views on YouTube: a woman doing aerobics is recording a video at an intersection when several military vehicles pass behind her (the video, which the film references, has garnered over a million views and has been reposted on YouTube. The film was not shown on streaming, but more at film festivals). The military vehicles are a sign of the beginning of the social revolution. The contrast between the upbeat music, the crossroads without any cars, and the fast-moving black convoy gives the viewer a sense of absurdity and impending catastrophe. Much of the content in *Myanmar Diaries* is stored on social media, with people saying, “this video can be used by anyone,” as they record the archives of the Burmese people confronting the soldiers.



Figure 5. *Myanmar Diaries* uses footage captured by a citizen on his mobile phone of a clash between the police and the public. Available at: <https://mvanmardiaries.com/>

### 3.3 Surname Viet Given Name Nam: Collective Narratives between Fiction and Non-fiction

*Surname Viet Given Name Nam* (1989, directed by Vietnamese-born Trinh T. Minh-ha) investigates the role of Vietnamese women historically and in contemporary society. Trinh's film challenges official culture with the voices of women by using dance, printed texts, folk poetry and the words and experiences of Vietnamese women in Vietnam from both North and South and the United States. This personal documentary offers a way for documentary films to express traumatic memories, to push the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction, to lead the viewer to reflect on them, and to integrate personal memories into collective ones.

In the first half of the film, a stark contrast is established with the traditional depiction of Vietnamese women dressed in ethnic garments, sitting in a non-modern setting for interviews, following a conventional anthropological documentary style. In the second half, the true identities of the four women in the interview are revealed, showing that they are in

fact non-professional actors living in California, and subverting the first half to ironic effect. This shift presents a recording method that shows subjectivity rather than an Orientalist perspective. Through a postmodern approach, the film contrasts truth and falsehood while focusing on the intricacies of female identity to address broader issues of colonialism and identity formation, prompting reflection and questioning from the audience.



Figure 6: At the beginning of *Surname Viet Given Name Nam*, a woman is interviewed dressed as a traditional Vietnamese woman, a scene that contrasts with the authenticity of the second-half of the film, and, through this contrast, provokes the viewer's reflection. Available at: <https://www.kanopy.com/en/product/surname-viet-given-nam-nam>

The interview footage from the film's beginning is shot in a pseudo-documentary style. The director reminds us that interviews can also be rehearsed and disguised. The audience is deliberately confused between real and unreal scenes to lead them into critical discourse (Duong 2009, 526). Janet Walker points out that trauma films "complicate the reliability of historical memory and material documentation by way of

other qualities of memory, including repression, silence, ellipses, and elaboration... These texts are traumatised” (2003, 111). It demonstrates that the creators’ memories of the past are not complete but fragmented and subject to emotions and reality. Therefore, trauma films often do not tell a story through direct documentation but present a fragmented, fictional and non-fictional combination. Similarly, the creators of *Myanmar Diaries* explain on the front page of their website as “moving back and forth between documentary and fiction” (The Myanmar Film Collective 2022).

Furthermore, in *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* the faces of Vietnamese women make up an enduring image of Vietnam. It is no longer their memories but a collective memory of Vietnam. Ann Kaplan discusses the difficulty of distinguishing between individual and collective trauma in her book *Trauma Culture*, arguing that no traumatic event can be isolated (2005, 41). These traumatic experiences are not only personal narratives but also represent the history experienced by the wider population. *Myanmar Diaries* is a collection of short stories about different aspects of life, covering topics such as family, love and even the transformation from police to civilian. The directors’ personal experiences make up the details of every aspect of the lives of Burmese people. These encounters are problems that the Burmese people protest will encounter and what people in other countries experience in their struggle for democracy. As individual stories are placed together, the content transforms from the directors’ personal experiences to the experiences of the Burmese people, from personal narratives to public memories.

#### **4. Trauma Documentary Film and Activism**

The three examples above demonstrate multiple meanings of documentary filmmaking and reveal how documentary film can support

activism. The first example, comparing *Dheepan* and *Myanmar Diaries*, shows how documentary film uses audio-visual linguistic techniques to construct an understandable text for the audience, making the audience more intuitively aware of the traumatic experiences of the characters and actively engaging them in the text.

The second example shows how documentary film can exist as an archive to dissolve the single official ideological narrative and form a more democratic text. The last example demonstrates how documentaries can increase audience reflection through a mix of documentary and fictional techniques and respond to larger social and historical issues by focusing on the individual.

The development of the media today can help to reverse the monopoly of discourse by official ideology in some countries. As Aguayo explains, “Contemporary documentary audiences are engaged in recording life, addressing publics, exposing exploitation, performing media witnessing, and wrestling back the means of media production from the hands of the powerful” (2020, 86). Activists can use documentary filmmaking as a weapon to document the injustices they have suffered, and as a tool to fight official violence and the oppression of power structures. The creation of human rights documentaries gives a voice to the weak and marginalized and prevents them from being altered or forgotten. As archives, documentaries can exist as witnesses and recorders, exposing overlooked content and hidden truths for these marginalized collectives. Aguayo adds, “Cinematic representation creates empathetic pathways to a more inclusive public commons” (2019, 1). In conjunction with the first point, the capture of emotion in documentary film allows people to be drawn into its content, giving voice to suffering. Transmission through audio-visual language is the key to the documentary film becoming an activist (2021, 53).

Finally, through the particular techniques of documentary film, it is possible to trigger a shift from an individual narrative to a collective one. Trauma documentary film connects to the broader world, allowing Third World wounds to be effectively combined. In the article “Collective Trauma and the Social Construction of Meaning,” Gilad Hirschberger states that although collective trauma brings grief, people can also construct identity and collective cohesion, and people can, through such narratives, transform suffering into motivation (2018, 3). By progression, documentaries can link people with similar experiences when conveying collective pain.

It is not the first time such a military coup has taken place in Myanmar, and there have been few documentaries on the resistance. A film like this would surely reach out to more Burmese who have experienced traumatic events, to those of Burmese descent abroad, and to those in the Third World who share a common experience of control and repression, and because of such a connection, gain more support and the possibility of continuing to generate action in the real world. The audience’s identification with the characters and their emotions can lead to an awareness of the urgency of the social issue and they can be more actively mobilized for social change. Only when people become aware of their identification with the collective can they contribute to the possibility of public participation in social change (Aguayo 2019, 21).

In *Trajectories of Memory: Documentary Film and the Transmission of Testimony*, Roxana Waterson reaffirms the value of film as a bearer of social memory. Waterson argues that in extreme situations, such as dictatorships and violent repression, film can serve as both a tool and evidence for documenting traumatic events, countering forgetfulness, indifference, and silence caused by political repression. Waterson states, “It must be acknowledged that filmmakers have often played significant



investigative roles in digging up the evidence necessary to break official silences” (2007, 56). Similarly, in *Documentary Testimonies: Global Archives of Suffering*, Bhaskar Sarkar and Janet Walker combine documentary film and testimony to broaden the scope of documentary film studies (2010). They argue that documentary film is a representative type of audiovisual testimony, presenting a direct reproduction of reality and allowing another medium to be involved in the narrative besides the narrator’s account (7). By describing trauma, studying history and suffering in different countries, documentary films demonstrate their potential to mobilize others and their value as archives, strengthening the connection between people and these traumatic experiences. Sarkar and Walker point out that “these new assemblages compel us to bear witness, move us to anger or tears, and possibly mobilize us to action for social justice (5).”

## 5. Conclusion

As a relatively small Southeast Asian country, Myanmar often disappears from the media’s radar. The neglect shows that making documentary films about this social revolution is essential because it demonstrates the determination of the people who faced a considerable threat to their lives and still decided to resist because it was necessary for such a voice to emerge, both for Myanmar and from the international perspective. Social activists’ commitment and the documentary’s significance are regarded as testimony, truth and archive. These filmmakers and artists, using portable devices and simple equipment, create films that deserves to be remembered. By exposure to international film and documentary festivals, they are spreading their thoughts so that they can be heard and watched by as many people as possible across the geographical boundaries of Southeast Asia. These individual expressions come

together to become a testimony of social revolution and a voice for their aspirations for democracy. The stories in Myanmar Diaries are not just a record of the memory of social revolutionaries, but also represent the Burmese people's memory.

### **Note on the Author**

Yufei Zhu holds a Bachelor's degree in Theatre, Television, and Film Studies from Chengdu University of Science and Technology, China, and a Master's degree in Film and Screen Studies from Goldsmiths, University of London. Her academic interests encompass post-film theory, media studies, and Asian cinema. Zhu's paper, which reviewed the origins and evolution of Auteur Theory and its impact on mainland Chinese cinema, was published in the September 2021 issue of *Global Premiere*. Zhu also explored the new cinephilia phenomenon through video essays and bullet screen commentaries on Bilibili, which will be presented at the 15th Asian Conference on Cultural Studies in May 2025.

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