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present

**Burma VJ**

Reporting from a Closed Country



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**84 minutes**

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## Short Synopsis

Going beyond the occasional news clip from Burma, the acclaimed filmmaker, Anders Østergaard, brings us close to Burma's *video journalists* who insist on keeping up the flow of news from their closed country despite risking torture and life in jail. Armed with small handycams they make their undercover reportages, smuggle the material out of the country, have it broadcast back into Burma via satellite and offered as free usage for international media.

"Joshua", age 27 and one of the undercover VJs, is suddenly thrown into the role as tactical leader of his group of reporters, when Buddhist monks in September 2007 lead a massive uprising. Foreign TV crews are banned from entering the country, so it is left to Joshua and his crew to document the events and establish a lifeline to the surrounding world. It is their footage that keeps the revolution alive on TV screens all over. As government intelligence agents understand the power of the camera, the VJs soon become their prime target. During the turbulent days of September, Joshua finds himself on an emotional rollercoaster between hope and despair, as he frantically tries to keep track of his reporters in the streets while the great uprising unfolds.

With Joshua as the psychological lens, high-risk journalism and dissidence in a police state is made tangible to a global audience.

### FILMMAKERS:

<b>Directed by</b>	<b>Anders Østergaard</b>
<b>Written by</b>	<b>Anders Østergaard &amp; Jan Krogsgaard</b>
<b>Produced by</b>	<b>Lise-Lense Møller</b>
<b>Assistant Producer</b>	<b>Cecilia Valsted</b>
<b>Co-Produced by</b>	<b>WG Film / Mediamente / Kamoli Films</b>
<b>Director of Photography</b>	<b>Simon Plum &amp; The Burmese VJs</b>
<b>Editors</b>	<b>Janus Billeskov-Jansen, Thomas Papapetros</b>
<b>Editor Consultant</b>	<b>Anders Villadsen</b>
<b>Sound Designer</b>	<b>Martin Hennel</b>
<b>Music by</b>	<b>Conny Malmqvist</b>
<b>Sound Mixer</b>	<b>Niels Arild</b>
<b>Graphics Design</b>	<b>Paul Wilson</b>
<b>Media Consultants</b>	<b>Freddy Neumann and IMS</b>
<b>Outreach &amp; Int'l Rep.</b>	<b>Helle Ulsteen</b>

## Long Synopsis

Going beyond the occasional news clip from Burma, the acclaimed filmmaker, Anders Østergaard, brings us close to the *video journalists* who deliver the footage. Though risking torture and life in jail, courageous young citizens of Burma live the essence of journalism as they insist on keeping up the flow of news from their closed country. Armed with small handycams the Burma VJs stop at nothing to make their reportages from the streets of Rangoon. Their material is smuggled out of the country and broadcast back into Burma via satellite and offered as free usage for international media. The whole world has witnessed single event clips made by the VJs, but for the very first time, their individual images have been carefully put together and at once, they tell a much bigger story. The film offers a unique insight into high-risk journalism and dissidence in a police state, while at the same time providing a thorough documentation of the historical and dramatic days of September 2007, when the Buddhist monks started marching.

"Joshua", age 27, is one of the young video journalists, who works undercover to counter the propaganda of the military regime. Joshua is suddenly thrown into the role as tactical leader of his group of reporters, when the monks lead a massive but peaceful uprising against the military regime. After decades of oblivion - Burma returns to the world stage, but at the same time foreign TV crews are banned from entering the country, so it is left to Joshua and his crew to document the events and establish a lifeline to the surrounding world. It is their footage that keeps the revolution alive on TV screens all over.

Amidst marching monks, brutal police agents, and shooting military the reporters embark on their dangerous mission, working around the clock to keep the world informed of events inside the closed country. Their compulsive instinct to shoot what they witness, rather than any deliberate heroism, turns their lives into that of freedom fighters.

The regime quickly understands the power of the camera and the reporters are constantly chased by government intelligence agents who look at the "media saboteurs" as the biggest prey they can get.

During the turbulent days of September, Joshua finds himself on an emotional rollercoaster between hope and despair, as he frantically tries to keep track of his reporters in the streets while the great uprising unfolds and comes to its tragic end.

With Joshua as the psychological lens, the Burmese condition is made tangible to a global audience so we can understand it, feel it, and smell it.



## Director's POV

Burma is one of the worst countries in the world to work as a journalist. The country is ranked number 4 from the bottom of Reporters Without Borders' Press Freedom Index 2008, alongside countries like North Korea.

Anders Østergaard was originally planning to make a small half-hour portrait of a young Burmese video reporter, a member of an underground network of activists who daily risk their lives to document the oppressive conditions in the country. Then suddenly, in September 2007, chaotic events involving the rebellion of Buddhist monks against Burma's military junta not only threw the local video reporters into the assignment of a lifetime, but also forced the Danish filmmaker to retool his project.

"To begin with, I was mainly interested in Joshua, my central character, as a young documentarian. He and his friends were filming with their cameras concealed in bags, which obviously is a major restriction on what they are able to document. My interest, then, was more about why they were even doing what they were doing. And why do they expose themselves to such risk? What are their thoughts about it and how are they affected by what they do? I was fascinated by Joshua's almost instinctive need to document the world, which apparently came before any considerations about what political goals they might serve. My film was a small, intimate, psychological affair. Then came the rebellion and the dramatic turn of events in Burma was giving the film a whole other potential as an epic tale of high-political drama. At the same time, the material presented an obligation."

Østergaard and the filmmakers now had the opportunity to tell the story of the rebelling monks from the inside – the people's eye perspective. While everyone else had only pieces of the story, Magic Hour Films suddenly had an impressive volume of footage that allowed them to more or less reconstruct the whole sequence of events, becoming the chronicler of world history.

For obvious reasons, Østergaard couldn't disclose the identity of his 27-year-old video reporter known as "Joshua," or name any of the other activists supplying this rich material. Accordingly, the film revolves around a person whose face we never see. The filmmaker answered that challenge in part by concluding that, even though we can't see the main character, Joshua, we can still see *with* him.

"Once we'd figured out how we were going to experience Burma through Joshua's eyes, we started debating how to connect all his footage and how to depict the circumstances he was working under. To be sure documenting things, but what happens just before or just after these shots is just as exciting."

Østergaard didn't actually ask Joshua to leave his camera on. Instead he decided to recreate a truthful representation of the situations around the authentic shots, like telephone conversations in close collaboration with Joshua and the people involved.

## **Interview with BURMA Video Activist/Journalist “Joshua” October 2008**

### **How you did get involved in Video Journalism and the fight for democracy in Burma?**

I was a political activist before I became a journalist. I was just 16 years old. I wanted then to become a journalist, but the first place I got in as a journalist was in a government newspaper, because this is the easiest way to get into the field. So I tried to get the experience of how to report, but I wasn't happy there because I was not making real news at the time. I was forced to make up and spread propaganda! But I tried to learn as much as I could about the knowledge of journalism.

After one year I got fired from the paper since I refused to attend the official training school. I believe this training is a propaganda mechanism. It is the school for brainwashing all the government employees. I refused to go to this training and they fired me for just that reason. So I quit the job and then I moved to another paper.

The next paper I worked for I thought was a paradise for any journalist in Burma. This paper owned by an Australian was published once a week in English and in Burmese - with real stories. But then I discovered that the Australian was only doing this as a cover story. His true business was investing in a copper mine in central Burma and profiting a lot from that. And in order to maintain his business he had to deal with military intelligence at the time and in return run this paper to legitimize the situation in the country?

Whenever I made a good story, the news story was rejected with the reason that they were not allowed to write things like that. And we had to put all our stories to the censorship board before being published. I later found out that they were putting spy wares in all computers in our office and they had each and every password of all employees working for the paper. So they would be going through my mails to check and reach every of my contacts. And they just fired me.

I then decided to get in contact with Democratic Voice of Burma. When DVB started its television program I was one of the two guys who they recruited first. And all though I don't know every person, I know how we are operating - so the secret Burmese police are trying hard to get me.

We are not only trying to change the regime, but also trying to build up a democratic society. So...in the battle to fight for and built up a democratic nation - Media is the most important to take back and win.

### **How would you describe the general media situation in Burma? How does the press work since all news, papers, TV, and the Web are government controlled?**

In Burma news comes as a rumor first. People talk about the news and later we can know it is true. Since the media in Burma cannot cover the real stories. They are not allowed to publish daily newspapers, except for the government controlled ones. But the government controlled ones are just a propaganda, so you will see only what they are doing. You will not find what is really happening in any of the so-called newspapers.

So people rely on the weekly journals. And also they have to have censorship board before they publicize a story. This way Burma people get the news 'too late'.

People have to rely on the radios broadcasting from outside Burma. And some people from foreign countries they read the web sites and then they distribute them from Internet. And now they can get the television - that I am working for - which is Democratic Voice of Burma.

### **The Internet - can the citizens in Burma access information via the Web?**

Internet usage is very limited in Burma, because people in general don't know how to use computers and they are not very familiar with the Internet. But a lot of young people have g-

mail accounts and they use the Internet frequently. But we believe that they (the system) are using some software to monitor what we are writing and reading in the cyber cafes. So people don't feel very secure when they are in cyber café. Most websites are banned. We cannot google about human rights. We cannot google about Aung San Suu Kyi or other things that are censored in Burma. And you cannot access yahoo messenger nor yahoo mail or Skype. Skype is using encryption - they block it. Sometimes we can access Google talk, but we don't feel secure (until now).

**So is this the reason why you started doing this kind of work?**

This is one of the reasons why I work for Democratic Voice of Burma as a cameraman – video reporter. Because we cannot get any information from our newspaper in Burma and since we don't have access to the Internet and other media. So the only thing is to, you know, show them what is happening in the television. So I try to work with DVB for those reasons.

**So what has happened since last September 2007 with the uprising - when the monks started marching? What would you say the current situation is now and what is the hope for the future?**

I'm optimistic about the movement because I can see that people now change a lot. Before September 2007 they were even scared of speaking. Now they are much more outspoken. We had a cyclone this year in May and people talked to journalists. They are now daring to say what they believe. And they know their rights now although they are not fighting for it yet. So I think we are moving forward.

And in terms of the government they understand that they need to move. Before September the transformation had stopped for many years. And now they have to do many things like meeting Aung San Suu Kyi and accepting UN representatives. So we see it like a progress and we just need to go on. But what I fear the most is that people now have seen a lot of things in television and read the stories about Burma and they then forget it and go and have their dinner.

I really hope to have the international community to help us by paying attention more than this. If you feel something to Burmese people as international community please pay attention and try to work out something from the situation.

**It must affect you when you see all sudden international attention, media attention, on Burma when something like the uprising last year happens, to be gone and forgotten once media lost its interest? Do you then feel abandoned by the international community?**

It is more difficult to work in Burma now with a camera, but I still keep going on with this because I need to say Burma is still here. And we are still having a lot of problems too. So I don't want to let people forget about us. I just want to repeat what I always say - we need your support.

**How much do people inside Burma actually get to see what you are shooting and what the international community is reporting?**

In terms of the international community, most of the people have satellite receivers now in Burma. And now they are watching our channels and they share it with other people. Not only when we [DVB] are broadcasting, but also when they meet at the teashops and other places. People discuss the stories. They exchange what they have learned. I think that many people are getting interested in what we are doing.

**Would you say that human rights problems still exist in Burma today? That people are suffering on an everyday basis.**

I do not know what is the worst - human rights violation that we face in daily life or the poverty and corruption they use to control people. You don't give enough salary to a government

employee, so he will have to become corrupt to feed his family. Corruption is the tool they use to control the people. And you know we cannot rely on our police, because they are corrupted and just a tool of the regime. So we cannot rely on them. And there are so many other things like this.

**So could you help us understand the dangers you go through when you are trying to do your job? How would you describe a typical working day for you?**

The most dangerous part of our job is the shooting with the camera. Editing can be done in a safe room - you are not in the public. To get the pictures we have to go into the public and you have to let other people see you are filming something. So it is the most dangerous part in our daily job. But we have other things like having no larger city, and when we are close to deadline and uploading a photo or video in a cyber café. We have security problems. Everybody can see it so we need a lot of safe and secure places to work on these things. We operate in small units and don't meet each other.

**What about your family? You don't really see them very often. And what about local authorities – do they create problems for them?**

After September 2007 one of my friends had to tell where I live. Because he was tortured very brutally. So they know where I stay and they go to my local authority and pressure him to monitor my family. But before that time I didn't go very often to see my family. I could sneak out and drop in around midnight and then I'd come back early morning, like 4-5am, so that nobody noticed. Now I haven't seen them for about 2 years. Because now they are monitoring my family and my home - they are having pressure now. But it's okay, because I know that they will be proud of what I am doing.

Actually I'm really worried about my family. They have no political background, they don't know anything about politics or all these things I am doing. But they need to be prepared and know how to answer when somebody comes and ask questions about me. People (from the secret police), that pretend to be my friend or from my job. In these cases my family need to know what to answer.

**In your film Burma VJ you got arrested when they saw your camera. What happened with that? And how was it you managed to be released?**

It was the first initial demonstration. They were waiting to arrest the demonstrators and they are really exhausted at the time. And they did not have any orders about the cameramen (video-journalists), so they don't want to do any extra job (work too hard). So they just take my ID card and let me go. They believe that since they have my address, they can just arrest me any time. But it was not the real address I was staying in, so I managed to escape at the time.

I learned from the senior activists because, although we are journalists, we have to work like underground activists. Security matters are the first things we have to learn when we work with DVB. We learn the do's and don'ts in the field and in the daily life as well. We use fake ID sometimes. I always have a story to tell them if I am questioned - always prepared. I do not take off my shoes when I sleep in a place. I keep everything ready – my IDs, my words, my coat, my sweater is always with me.

It is stressful, but it is the same for other people. Everybody is feeling insecure in Burma. So maybe I have to take care a little more because I am doing some kind of sensitive issues, but even for the other people they don't feel secure in their life.

**Is there anything you want to add yourself at this point?**

I really appreciate most of the things you are doing, all though I am not satisfied. Without your support we cannot go on. The support from the international community is not enough. For our broadcasting organization we have to spend most of the funds in satellite service or other things. It is like a very expensive service for Burmese people. But we will go on. But in terms

of security and in terms of finance we cannot be on our own without the support from the international community.

When in prison and being interrogated by a military colonel, one statement from international community is useful for us. Because if he is under the eyes of international community, they cannot torture him too much I can say. It is the real experience - If you are not noticed by anybody you can easily be killed.

**The generals don't seem concerned by their reputation? They promise to release Aung San Suu Kyi and then they don't. They promise to release political prisoners and then they don't. They make a lot of promises and then they just wait a little time and then they don't . This pattern has been repeated over and over again...**

The political prisoners, Aung San Suu Kyi and all the Burmese people, are like this hostage for them, - Burma to compromise with international community. But according to the situation now, it is like international community has nothing to compromise with them. There are a lot of things they could do - like threaten the Burmese military regime or their position and legality in the United Nation or international community. You know...then they have to change.

The international community has to think about their legal status in UN or ASEAN or everywhere. Because they are really afraid of it, you know. But now they feel certain it will never happen - so that is why they are cracking everything down in Burma.

The people are ready for the change now. But we need military to change sides, you know. They need to understand that their employers are the public, not the generals. Our military was brainwashed and they are not really educated. So they don't understand the difference between the state and the government. So when people in the army begin to understand all these things there will be a change. And I believe the change will be in combination with the people, the army itself and the international community. So we need to work together. The military personals are not happy with the situation. So if they have a chance they will do what they should do.

**How do you cope with loosing a colleague that is working with you, either through imprisonment or their disappearance. How does it affect you or your work?**

I faced a lot of difficulties to go on with my job when they arrested my colleagues. I even thought that I cannot go on the job anymore. I lost my very best guys in my company - I'm really upset with their arrest. But more people came and joined us. Many from the young generation contact us to unite and work together. Because they believe they can do something. They were 'inspired' because of the imprisoned. My imprisoned colleagues have done the very best thing they can do and I am very proud of them - it encourages me. But I also lost the best people in my job. I really want them to survive and come back.

**But when you experience these actions of the military, do you see them as being...evil? Do you hate them? Or how can you understand the way they think when they can do this to their own people?**

Actually I can understand the lower rank, because they are trained to do what they are ordered. They are not trying to think. So I can understand them, but I cannot understand powerful generals who are in the military cabinet. On a daily job basis they are happy to do what they are asked for.

But I don't hate them because we will need the army as long as we are independent. We will never neglect the role of the army in a country, but an army should be in the military position only, not like a government. If they want to govern the state, they should join a political party without using the power or anything from the state. Now they are stealing everything from the country, and they say they are saviors. I really hate the words.

Singapore is the dream place for most young people like us. Because eh...the income is totally different and Singapore is getting cheap labors from Burma, so they are willing to

welcome the Burmese workers. And a lot of engineers, designers and computer programmers go to Singapore to work there. But the sad thing for us is that they try to get permanent residence card. They really hate the situation in Burma, but the only way they can think of escaping is to go to another place and be the citizen outside Burma. I do understand the people who come out for security reason.

**And where do you see the country in say 5 years time? Is there hope?**

I cannot predict the future for sure, because Burma's political landscape is always difficult to foretell. Nobody expected the uprising in 2000 September or 2007 September. I believe somebody is doing something. The more we work, the faster the change will come.

But Sometimes I feel really unhappy when I think about my colleagues in prison. In Oslo, I encountered a night which was very cold. I got up to close the window. I turned on the heater and found a blanket, so I got warm. And in that moment when I was warm I immediately remembered my friends in prison. You know - I have everything I need. At least a blanket, but I don't know what they are facing. I don't know what situation they are facing now. I feel very sad and sorry for them. I could easily be in their position now. We did the same job. Until now I am lucky. But whenever I eat good food, whenever I visit a nice place, I think about them. Most of them are in the same prison. And their families can visit them twice a month. But sometimes the visit gets rejected.

One of my friend was very brutally tortured and he is even paralyzed. He broke his nose in the torture. The VJs actually don't know much about the operation, they know only their job. Camera men know only the job about getting the footage, getting the picture, editors know only how to edit a story, he doesn't anything about other things. Because if not they would get the complete image of the DVB's operation. And I'm not scared.

I always remind the younger generation that what you are having known is the result of the people who sacrificed before you. We have everything ready now. We have cameras when we want to make a story. We have computers when we want to edit a story. And this is...not because of me. And this is not because of DVB even, we can say. This is because of every Burmese people. It is because of the situation in Burma. So we have to be respectful, whenever we are using all these things. And we have to remember all the time that we need to fight for their freedom.

**What drives you to keep doing this very dangerous job that you are doing?**

Everybody needs to do something at a time. If we want to be free, we have to do something. Everybody is saying, you know, they want democracy, they want freedom and do nothing at the same time. I want it, so I fight for it. That's all!

I was very inspired by my teachers that taught me English, computer, painting and others - but also how to think. And I believe in hard persistent work. We cannot demand only from shouting. I really embrace Min Ko Nyi (a student leader in the 1988 uprising) and can see him as a future leader of Burma. But I, for sure, don't want to be a politician - I am a journalist! Some people believe that I will be somebody when Burma becomes independent or a democracy. I just reply them that I don't want to be in any government. I will watch them and bark at them - bark whenever they make mistakes. Even a democratic elected government needs journalists to keep an eye on them? That is why I want to improve myself all the time.

**Have you made your mind strong so that you would be able to deal with this, if it became real that you were imprisoned and tortured?**

I have in my mind that I can get arrested at any time. But it is difficult to say before I really face the situation. But until now I have had a story to tell. They think I know everything, but they are also not sure if it is truth or not. But people change once the situation change so I cannot say I was sacrificed. I will try my best to protect my organization and will never compromise with them, for sure. I will never betray my people. Sometimes they negotiate to work for them as informer or others in return of the release. But I will never be like this.

But I still feel very unhappy sometimes going and doing something, maybe a short documentary or a story and then when I edit it I feel like, oh my god, how stupid I am. I should have done this or I should have done this, you know. It is like I'm not satisfied with my job all the time and I know I still need to improve my quality. Because even in a difficult situation I know that I'm...sometimes I can make better story in the same situation. Many times I have an idea, but I don't know how to construct the story. And sometimes I have the story and I don't know how to make it interesting, so I just have to learn a lot more. I feel that I have to tell how to make stories to others because I'm the senior, but still I'm not satisfied with myself. That's one of the things that upset about me.

One of the good things about my trip outside Burma is that, I can learn from other people. I know how other people are doing in the same field. I know how international media is running so that I can make my stories useful for them to promote important Burmese issues.

**Do you think there is anything that the international media should be doing differently?**

I understand one thing about independent journalism now. They will never report a story that is not interesting just to promote the issue. So you need to be interesting to be in the headline. I always meet people asking me: "You have reported this issue many times but you are not reporting about us. Why?" People ask me this. I just don't know how to explain to them, because they don't understand much about independent journalism. So I understand now that if you want to be in international media, we really need to do something to get attention.

I still think that right now they are covering only 10 percent of what they could around Burma. I noticed a lot of things about Iraq, Afghanistan, because they are tightly related with the interest of the big countries. And Burma is still long away. There is always news about bombing in Afghanistan, but we also have bombings. People are dying whenever there is a bomb. But international media doesn't know this, so they should pay even more attention. I do feel that international media can pay more attention to our country, and not only strictly relate to the interest of big countries.

And pay attention to China. The Chinese, internationally speaking, is one of the biggest problems facing the Burmese democratic process, They always veto any UN decisions. And they continue to support the Burmese militarily, despite any other economic sanctions and they are training the regime. China is also training the government military what to do in demonstrations and other things. How to brainwash people or how to block the news in and out. China is the worst example for Burmese military government.

**Anything you'd like to add ...**

Yes - I have expressed a lot of bad things about Burma, but actually it is not Burma that is bad. It is only the Military Regime that is bad. Burma and Burmese people are really nice and they are just in this manner, because they need to survive. I was once in the countryside and I experienced the Burmese peoples nature in terms of hospitality and generosity. I grew up in the countryside – no regime people there. No officials or officers visiting our village. We did not have any administration office in the village, but we are still okay with each other. We have elders to guide the village. They decide in any cases ... It's like we are with the democratic model, in the family. That is why I can say people are ready for the change, because they can practice this even in daily life. Although we are poor we will always be happy to help other people who are in need.

## **VIDEO ACTIVISM IN RETROSPECT**

The network of independent video reporters operating in Burma today, coordinated by the Democratic Voice of Burma, is far from unique. The phenomenon of video activism has been around almost as long as portable video equipment itself. It wasn't long after Sony launched its so-called PortaPak, the first portable video recording device for the consumer market, in 1965, before a whole new type of media activists sprang up in the US. The actions of political groups, including the Videofreex, Video Free America, Paper Tiger, Television, Global Village, Top Value Television and, prominently, the Raindance Corporation, helped create alternatives to the commercial media companies that had been enjoying monopoly-like status. The phenomenon of guerrilla television triggered an out-and-out media revolution. As video camcorders kept getting cheaper and better over the years, alternative footage also began to penetrate the established media.

One of many small breakthroughs in that direction came in New York in 1988, when the video artist Paul Garrin used his Hi8 camera to document police officers with covered badge numbers harassing and beating homeless people living in Tompkins Square Park, right outside Garrin's windows. The harassment, it turned out, was a step in a larger plan to stimulate real-estate prices in the hip East Village neighbourhood. Circulating on network news shows, Garrin's footage not only shined a light on the background of the events, but also contributed to charges being brought against the officers involved.

While Garrin's effort mainly caused a stir in the US, a similar event a few years later, in the spring of 1991, drew the world's attention. George Holliday was a plumber who, by coincidence, aimed his camcorder on a group of Los Angeles police officers beating up an African American man, Rodney King. Holliday submitted his tape to the local TV station, KTLA, and within days no one would ever again doubt that documentary video recordings originating outside the media circuit could change the world.

## **THE DOVE FROM CHECHNYA**

Naturally, video activism has also played a part outside the US. In the years around the break-up of the Soviet Union, countless video reporters were thorns in the eye of the crumbling empire, as they brought the totalitarian state's secrets to light and documented dramatic events in the transitional phase following the fall of the Berlin Wall in autumn 1989. This would be a good time to mention Juris Podnieks, a Latvian filmmaker who time and again risked his life to document the revolts leading to Latvia's independence in 1991. The project culminated in tragedy when two cameramen were killed during the occupation of the TV station in Riga, an event described in the film *End of Empire* (1991). "Film me, film me!" Andris Slapins called out to a colleague, as he collapsed – demonstrating even, in this ultimate moment, his commitment to documenting for posterity the Soviet oppression of his people. Other cases abound. Notable among them is the secret group of Chechen women who for years have struggled at considerable risk to video-document the high toll that Russia's "dirty war" is taking on Chechen civilians. Heading the initiative is Zainap Gashaeva, known as Coca ("The Dove"). Born in exile in Kazakhstan, this self-employed woman and mother of four continually gathers video footage, which is then smuggled to the West, to raise the international community's awareness of the situation in Chechnya. Moreover, she hopes the tapes will be useful in a possible legal aftermath.

## **NO EFFECT WITHOUT DISTRIBUTION**

Since the mid-1990s, Gashaeva has been working with a human rights organization, Echo of War. This is a typical pattern in recent video activism. The early pioneers often faced the problem that their footage, no matter how sensational, had limited effect unless they got access to distribution channels. Consequently, the years around 2000 saw the emergence of a number of international organizations that are primarily dedicated to organizing and coordinating the activities of the usually independent video reporters, and making sure their

footage is processed and distributed. One high-profile organization is Witness ([www.witness.org](http://www.witness.org)), which hands out camcorders to grassroots organizations around the world in order to prevent or document human rights abuses. Based in New York, Witness was established in 1992 by initiative of the Reebok Human Rights Foundation, in partnership with the musician and activist Peter Gabriel, largely as an effect of the Rodney King episode in Los Angeles the year before. In this respect as well, George Holliday's documentation of police brutality made an impact far into the future.



## **INTERVIEW WITH PRODUCER LISE LENSE-MØLLER**

### **What were the origins of the film and when did you begin?**

In January 2005, Jan Krogsgaard, a Danish video artist living in Asia, came to me with the idea to make a documentary in the border region between Burma and Thailand. The initial idea was to try to make a shadow portrait of the military regime through its 'footprints' – in the shape of refugees, rebels, barefoot doctors etc. crossing in and out of the country along the border. I was immediately interested as so little has been made about Burma. I choose 'my films' based on a number of different evaluations, but my own curiosity and urge to know more about a suggested story or topic plays into this equation. I definitely wanted to know more about this closed and almost forgotten country – but I also understood, that it had to be *the* film, rather than a film about Burma, as so few are being made. So one of my first initiatives was to couple Jan with acclaimed Danish documentary director, Anders Østergaard, who has made it his special trademark to film the invisible – and brilliantly so, in my opinion. Anders too was interested and we then started to look for a story and an angle. It was in this development process we came across the undercover video journalists, who were filming reportages and news stories in Burma, smuggling their tapes out, and sending them to Oslo to be broadcast back into the country.

### **How were you able to make and keep contact with the video activists in Burma?**

Our first main character was a Burmese journalist living in Thailand that Jan knew from before. However, after a while, he emigrated and we had to start all over. We followed a training course in Thailand for a group of new VJ 'recruits' and found our new main character through this initiative. It was through him and his network, through DVB in Oslo, and through helpers on the ground in Burma and Thailand that we managed to keep in contact during the entire production process. I can't give you all the details of how, as I don't want to jeopardize anybody, but I can say that it has been difficult at times, not least after the uprising and after the cyclone.

### **What sort of footage were you sent and did this present particular problems for your director and editor?**

In the beginning we received very little material – and that was a problem. We might get a little reportage about child labor or HIV or poverty. It was not bad reportages, but they resembled material that could have been made in almost any poor country. It simply was not significant enough to really portray the military rulers. Later, after the uprising in September 2007, much more material started trickling in and in early 2008 we suddenly received many, many hours of material from a lot of different sources and in many different formats – tapes, DVD's, uploads etc. That was also a problem, yet a positive one, of course. The material was very, very fragmented, and a lot of it was unmarked. We had to spend vast amounts of time just to find out what we had and where it belonged. I can best describe it by saying that it was a bit like receiving a truckload of broken glass with the obligation to glue it back together, but without knowing if the glass bits had originally been 10 windowpanes or 100 crystal vases. The interview with our editor describes the registration process very well.

### **How much reconstruction filming was involved?**

We filmed a lot more reconstruction than we ended up using. Before the uprising, the material from Burma was scarce and quite fragmented, and we developed a method that we called 'the open camera.' We decided to prolong some of the events that our VJs had filmed by asking: What would have been filmed, if they had never turned off their cameras? Through this method we were able to better visualize some of their stories. However, when large amounts of material started flowing, the focus shifted to finding ways of making this material accessible to the audience on an emotional level. The VJ material is the substance - our material is the glue. We have made some recreations for security reasons, so that we could change names and locations etc. in order no to put any of the VJs at additional risk.

### **Has it been a difficult film to finance?**

Yes and no. It was very hard in the beginning when we did not know exactly what we would be able to make. We went out at first saying that we could only promise a half hour, but we thought it would be a one-hour, and if things developed it could even end up being a feature-length. That is not exactly what a financier wants to hear. But after the uprising, we were relatively sure that we would at least have a one hour and there was a lot of interest – and a desire for a finished film while the subject was still ‘hot’. Ironically, the pressure we felt to hurry up and get the film made, did not quite equal the speed with which we managed to get from LOL’s and LOC’s to real contracts and the TV-money is only just beginning to trickle in now that the film is finished. Without the DFI, Fritt Ord in Norway and Danida, we would probably not have been able to continue. It has been both tricky, risky – and unproductively time-consuming - to be in financing during the entire production process of a film of this nature, where next to nothing on screen is controllable. You cannot ask a revolution to pause while the film waits to get on the agenda of some TV station’s programming committee. Luckily, I am very stubborn, and I also have a strong sense of obligation to follow through when somebody trusts me with their story, like the Burmese VJs have done in this case. It is also a bit like child birth: however painful it may be – the minute the baby is born – you forget and you are ready to do it again. Now we have a film that we are very happy with and we can concentrate on putting it behind us.

**What are your distribution plans? Do you have special strategies to reach audiences?**

Yes, we have a number of strategies and we are still developing more. First of all, we are trying to go to the most important festivals – which seems to work very well. First Hand Films is working very hard to sell the film as widely as possible to TV and we also want to set up special event screenings and cinema tours in as many countries as possible, e.g. in cooperation with initiatives like Movies that Matter, Human Rights Watch, NGO’s, IMS and of course Democratic Voice of Burma and their partners around the world. We have set up a web-site ‘supportfreemedia.com’ and we would love to do some major fundraising events coupled with screenings – e.g. in the US, if we can get somebody to cooperate with us on that. We are also working on a DVD with the film and some very interesting extra features. We will donate a royalty from the sales income to DVB and Free Media in Burma.

**Do you aim to get the film to influential politicians and organisations ?**

Absolutely. First we want to create the widest possible awareness of the film and then we will start sending it out or inviting politicians and organizations to take part in screenings and debates.

**Will it be possible to find ways to show the film in Burma?**

We are considering it. In theory, we could let DVB transmit it into Burma via satellite or we could smuggle DVD’s into the country, but we do not want to do anything unless DVB greenlights it and says that it is safe to do so for their people inside Burma.



## **Burma: Censorship, propaganda and detentions**

The Burmese military regime provides a perfect example of a dictatorial system that leaves little room for private initiatives, resting as it does on a heightened paranoia that involves keeping control of the media. The official press has the role of endorsing the inter-dependence of the military and the people and asserting the junta's legitimacy.

Scores of privately owned publications do their best in this situation, but have to cope with advance censorship on the part of the military. The State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) has kept going the censorship system established by Ne Win in the 1960s: every article, report, book or song must secure the approval of the feared information ministry, through the Press Scrutiny and Registration Board (PSB), to be published or broadcast. Access to new technology remains very restricted.

Burma has two Internet Service Providers (ISP), the Myanmar Post and Telecom (MPT) and Bangan Net/Myanmar Teleport (formerly Bagan Cybertech). Each has about 15,000 subscribers, putting the rate of Internet penetration at 0.6%. The Burmese have access to a restricted Internet. Anyone connecting illegally can be punished with a heavy prison sentence and the very few cyber cafés only provide access to a limited number of websites: Hotmail, Yahoo, the BBC and all websites relating to Burma are banned by the government, which blocks them.

Burma is ranked 170th out of 173 countries in Reporters Without Borders' 2008 world press freedom index and the situation is worsening. A crackdown launched after September 2007 demonstrations continues to this day: Scores of journalists have been arrested or threatened and military censorship is severe.

Popular demonstrations, led by Buddhist monks in August and September 2007 shook the military government which has ruled the country for more than 40 years. Despite pressure from the international community, the junta's reaction was brutal: at least 100 people were killed, thousands arrested and a climate of fear and denunciations took hold. Burmese Internet-users were restricted to just a few hours online a day during in October and November. The regime ordered access providers to limit exchanges between the Burmese people and the rest of the world. The junta aimed to prevent the spread of film on sharing sites such as YouTube, Dailymotion, and Flickr. Cutting off the Internet isolated the country, with rumour replacing news and reducing footage to that taken by foreign media.

The junta unsurprisingly also strictly controlled the sale of foreign publications within the country. Magazines Time and Newsweek and Thai newspapers disappeared from the newsstands in the first few weeks. At the end of December, Burmese authorities raised the price of a satellite licence by 167 times, from 6,000 to one million Kyats (from five to 800 dollars). This was aimed particularly at DVB TV whose deputy director told Reporters Without Borders "The military junta knows the power of an image. They are not going to let DVB TV and foreign televisions become the principal source of news in Burma. Even if 90% of satellite dish owners don't have licences, this decision is perhaps the first step to imposing control".

So it has been "ordinary" Burmese who have made up for the absence of the journalists. Equipped with mobile phones, digital cameras and memory cards, they have played a vital role in covering events and sending news, pictures and video to foreign and exiled media, while the government has done its utmost to maintain a news blackout.

## FILMMAKERS' BIOS

### DIRECTOR ANDERS ØSTERGAARD

Born 1965. Graduated from the Danish School of Journalism in 1991. Awarded Best Documentary at Odense International Film Festival in 1999 for *The Magus*. Writer-director on the internationally awarded *Tintin et moi* (2003), and the documentary *Gasolin* (2006). 2008: *Burma VJ*, Joris Ivens Award and Movies That Matter Award IDFA, Amsterdam 2008 and *Dox: Award and Amnesty Award, cph:dox, 2008*, Editing award Sundance 2009- . *Så kort og mærkeligt livet er*, about the Danish poet Dan Turèll, was selected for the opening gala at CPH:DOX.

Anders Østergaard made his first big impression on Danish cinemagoers in 2006 with *Gasolin'*, a documentary about a singularly popular Danish rock band from the 1970s. Though *Gasolin'*, fronted by charismatic singer Kim Larsen, never gained a following outside Scandinavia, in Denmark they enjoyed years of Beatles-like stardom. Following its 1978 break-up, the group became part of the Danish cultural heritage. The *Gasolin'* film drew 223,000 Danes to cinemas, an exceptionally high number, not just for a documentary but by any standard.

Mixing documentary footage with staged shots has been a hallmark of Østergaard's films almost from the beginning. A rare exception was *Gensyn med Johannesburg* (1996). In this relatively conventional documentary, Østergaard follows the Danish filmmaker Henning Carlsen on a trip to South Africa to revisit some of the people who appeared in Carlsen's *Dilemma*, a pioneering 1961 docudrama based on a novel by Nadine Gordimer and shot without the consent of the South African authorities. In his next film, *Troldkarlen* (1999), about the Swedish jazzman Jan Johansson, who died on an icy road in 1968 at the age of just 37, Østergaard truly came into his own as a documentary filmmaker wielding a remarkably wide repertoire of filmic ideas, including the use of staged shots. Notoriously, he recreated Johansson's fatal car accident with a stand-in behind the wheel. This tendency was accentuated in *Tintin et moi* (2003), a film about Hergé, the creator of Tintin, that became Østergaard's international breakthrough. Adding 3D effects to Hergé's cartoons let the camera explore an otherwise two-dimensional universe, while a special animation technique brought the deceased cartoonist back to life. Hergé, whose real name was Georges Rémi, was almost as famous for being tight-lipped about his thought and feelings as for his comic adventures about the intrepid reporter Tintin. Accordingly, it caused widespread surprise in 1971 when an interview by a French student, Numa Sadoul, spontaneously evolved into a four-day talk. Without warning, the cartoonist had opened the floodgates, casting his 23-year-old listener in the role of psychoanalyst and commiserator. Østergaard wanted the audiotapes of this legendary interview to be the core of his film and, after long deliberation, the trustees of Hergé's estate finally released them. But the Danish filmmaker wasn't content simply to include Hergé's voice on the soundtrack. Using so-called sketch-line animation, he resurrected his subject as a speaking cartoon character, breathing life into material that, in the hands of a less inventive filmmaker, could easily have become just another dusty archival montage with talking heads.

### EDITOR JANUS BILLESKOV JANSEN

Born 1951. A director and editor, Janus Billeskov Jansen first started working in the Danish film industry in 1970. He has edited a large number of internationally acknowledged feature films and documentaries and directed numerous Danish documentaries. Since 1979, he has taught editing and narratology at the National Film School of Denmark. Billeskov Jansen has worked with influential Danish directors, most significantly a lifelong creative collaboration with the Palme d'Or and Academy Award-winning director Bille August. Billeskov Jansen is the editor of *Family*, a documentary that won the Joris Ivens Award in 2001. He is also the recipient of Danish Film Academy Awards in 1984, 1988 and 1995, and an Honorary Bodil Lifetime Achievement Award in 2005.