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2016

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/19432>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version  
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Radovic, Milja: Activist Citizenship, Film and Peacebuilding: Acts and Transformative Practices. In: *Journal for Religion, Film and Media*. "I Sing the body electric". Body, Voice, Technology and Religion, Jg. 2 (2016), Nr. 1, S. 73–89. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/19432>.

### Erstmalig hier erschienen / Initial publication here:

[https://www.jrfm.eu/index.php/ojs\\_jrfm/article/view/34](https://www.jrfm.eu/index.php/ojs_jrfm/article/view/34)

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# Activist Citizenship, Film and Peacebuilding: Acts and Transformative Practices

## ABSTRACT

In this article I explore film as a socio-political and artistic-transformative cultural practice through which acts and activism are performed. I am interested in how film embeds acts of peacebuilding and how this scene of imagery/imaginary is transformed by those acts, with the filmmakers transformed into activist citizens whose activism questions ideologies that surround them. I argue that acts of citizenship and activism, as a creative practice, do not solely involve the analysis of how activism has been represented in films, but also the understanding of what is beyond these representations and narratives. I look at a) how film auteurs emerge as activists through the narratives and the created scenes<sup>1</sup> in film; b) how these acts consequently represent the “answerability to Others”<sup>2</sup> and c) the link between (cinematic) performativity and activism.

## KEYWORDS

acts, activism, film, religion, transformative practices

## BIOGRAPHY

Dr. Milja Radovic works within the interdisciplinary field of theology, media and culture, and her research has spanned across the fields of transnational cinema, religion, ideology, citizenship, activism, nationalism, conflict and peace-building. She has most recently collaborated on three projects: CITSEE Project (The Europeanisation of Citizenship in the Successor States of the Former Yugoslavia), School of Law, University of Edinburgh; Peacebuilding through Media Arts, and Religion and Ethics in the Making of War and Peace projects. Milja is the author of the book: *Transnational Cinema and Ideology: representing religion, identity and cultural myths* (Routledge, July, 2014). Her current work focuses on radicality of freedom through acts of citizenship, otherness, and the issue of radicalization.

1 Engin 2008, 38.

2 Ibid., 19.

In this article I explore film as a socio-political and artistic-transformative cultural practice through which acts and activism are performed. I am interested in how film embeds acts of peacebuilding and how this scene of imagery/imaginary is transformed by those acts, with the filmmakers transformed into activist citizens whose activism questions ideologies that surround them. I approach the notion of acts from an ontological perspective and activism as an extension of acts. Furthermore, I claim that a specific form of activism expressed through film is directly related to peacebuilding processes.

For filmmakers the issue of how an individual act impacts society can be a matter of both peacemaking and religion in a wider sense. Although the films I discuss here do not address religion explicitly, they have religious motifs and symbols embedded in their narratives. Religion is rather implicitly depicted and is primarily related to the questions Who is my neighbour? and Who is the Other in society? Religion also has a significant role in shaping the socio-political context and cultural milieu in which these filmmakers work: in the Balkans it has had a crucial part in defining the “Other”, while in Saudi Arabia it is part of a societal codex and norms that determine the rights of citizens.

I argue that acts of citizenship and activism, as creative practice, do not solely merit a deconstruction of how activism has been represented in films, for they also require a deeper understanding of what is beyond these representations and narratives. In that respect, I explore activism as a creative act of the filmmaker.

My main research questions concern how acts of citizenship and activism are constructed and practised through film and how these acts consequently impact peacebuilding. To answer these questions I explore the cinematic narratives that encapsulate “acts of citizenship”<sup>3</sup>: I look at (a) how auteurs emerge as activists through the narratives and created scenes<sup>4</sup>, (b) how these acts consequently represent “answerability to Others”<sup>5</sup>, and (c) how performativity<sup>6</sup>, activism, and peacebuilding are linked. I consider acts and activism beyond their institutional meaning: I understand activism as an “extension of acts” or concretised acts, “deeds” that carry out certain praxis and practices of peacebuilding. These practices inevitably become political by being subjected to diverse interpretations.

The ability to act and to express one’s thoughts or opinions is basic to human nature and freedom. Denial of such rights represents the denial of the being, and of humanity itself, and reminds us of Hannah Arendt’s definition of totalitarianism as a system made and enabled by, Engin Isin writes, “a figure of a human being who could

3 See Isin/Nielsen 2008.

4 Isin/Nielsen 2008, 38.

5 Isin/Nielsen 2008, 19.

6 Isin 2012, 134.

not act”.<sup>7</sup> For Arendt, freedom meant the ability to act,<sup>8</sup> and the negation of this capacity to act<sup>9</sup> within totalitarian regimes is an attempt to deprive a human being of its existential and ontological meaning. The negation of freedom to act, or “zero liberty” through “totalitarian methods of domination”,<sup>10</sup> has been depicted in films such as Pier Paolo Pasolini’s *SALÒ OR THE 120 DAYS OF SODOM* (1975), perhaps one of the most controversial films made on this subject. Since “totalitarianism renders this capacity to act into isolation”,<sup>11</sup> disobedience becomes an act of citizenship, where subjects become citizens by escaping from this isolation. This disobedience, however, should be distinguished from the deliberate refusal to act within an oppressive totalitarian regime, where citizens chose the right “not to act” in the sense that they do not want to participate in the existing order of things.

There is a long historical relationship between activism and the arts. The very act of creation is inherent in human nature. Director Andrei Tarkovsky described the act of creativity as an unconscious act similar to confession, as an ability that we share with God.<sup>12</sup> The arts have always had a political dimension and through the arts both conflict and peace have been communicated and the figure of the activist citizen and non-citizen rethought. In the past decade activism increasingly has also been performed through social media (cyber-activism or “hacktivism”<sup>13</sup>) by whistleblowers and now well-known figures such as Julian Assange and Edward Snowden. It has also been expressed within collective movements such as the Occupy movement, which embraces a moral quest for the transformation of existing systems because “debt ceases to be a threat to active citizenship but a condition of it”.<sup>14</sup> Activism re-creates the socio-political conscience of citizens and the figure of the citizen itself. Activism can be individual or collective and can take place locally or globally, and often it is a shared experience in which citizens are “claiming the rights that they do not have”,<sup>15</sup> inevitably involving a distortion of the totalitarian order. Activism is also a novel creation whose final effects and consequences are yet to be realised. Equally, in film activism is a construction of something new. Although films do not always provide explicit political solutions, filmmakers often propose an alternative vision of society in which existing concepts and understandings of justice and rights are seen as corrupt and morally wrong.

When speaking about activist citizenship and film, we ought to acknowledge the significant number of international film festivals across the globe that communicate

7 Isin 2012, 114.

8 Isin 2012, 116.

9 Isin 2012, 116.

10 See Arendt 1961.

11 Isin 2012, 114.

12 Paraphrased; see further Gianvito 2006, 160.

13 Yang 2009.

14 Bretherton 2011, 367.

15 Isin/Saward 2013, 42.

different issues related to all sorts of rights. These festivals are “driven by intentionality, be it to increase awareness, to expose, to warn, to prevent and sometimes change the course of events”.<sup>16</sup> Their goal is to mobilise, and by means of communication they “generate *sui generis* activism”.<sup>17</sup> In other words, human rights festivals are defined not only thematically but also by their mission.<sup>18</sup> At such festivals and seminars the general audience has the opportunity not only to see films but also to participate, through forums and debates.<sup>19</sup>

A large number of films of different genres depict the struggle of a citizen (or non-citizen) in society, with themes such as belonging, otherness, and transborder identity running through their cinematic narratives.

I claim that a number of films that focus on human rights could not be categorised as expressing activism but rather as products of *active* citizenship for, broadly speaking, they are limited to operating within the existing hegemonic ideology and do not want to transform this ideological context. The problem, especially when it comes to what are perceived as “problematic” areas of the world – conflict and postconflict areas – is that often the narratives have been dramatised by “outsiders”. This outsider’s gaze is often understood as a “superior gaze”<sup>20</sup> and has been deployed especially in “global”, or popular Hollywood, cinema, where “the universality of human rights” has frequently masked forms of exclusion,<sup>21</sup> in a way that paradoxically allowed “freedom of others” to become “freedom from others”.

In order to avoid framing this discussion with different ideological definitions of activism, I have chosen to focus on creative and autonomous acts of filmmakers as an expression of their personal exploration of the topics of peace and otherness. The explorations of the filmmakers construct something new, something that is not necessarily intended to be political but that becomes subversive through the creative practice of film. Here is precisely the reason why in this article I focus on filmmakers (Haifaa al-Mansour and Srdan Golubovic) whose films represent a form of personal exploration of freedom (in not just a political but also an ontological sense), otherness, conflict, and peace. This article presents part of my current wider research on transnational cinema and activism, but here I consider only two films, in order to be able to provide in-depth analysis of the films and consequently of the wider topics at hand.

I have chosen to examine CIRCLES (Srdan Golubovic, SRB/D/F/SVN/HR 2013) because this film is a story about citizenship: it explores the issue of membership in a

16 Iordanova 2012, 13.

17 See Iordanova 2012, 14.

18 Grassilli 2012, 37.

19 In the 1950s the Robert Flaherty Film Seminar showed that “film education and activism ... as an art form was inextricably interwoven in the post-War period”, Zimmermann 2012, 175.

20 The “outsiders’ gaze” often deploys a stereotyped and ideological view on a specific area of crises or the issues related to that area. See also Žizek 2005.

21 See Radovic 2014.

political community that at the time was determined by ethnic and religious identity and belonging, and finally it asks, at a very personal level, Who is my neighbour? Set in the midst of the Yugoslav conflict of the 1990s, the film is not simply a historical reconstruction but rather a reflective piece on human belonging, as well as an exploration of how identity is constructed not by ethnicity but through a good deed, surpassing the category of otherness. In *WADJDA* (Haifaa al-Mansour, SA/D 2013), Haifaa al-Mansour uses film in a similar way, as a performative space that she occupies as both filmmaker and the Other simultaneously, and additionally as a reflection of freedom and what it means to be the Other – in this case a woman in Saudi Arabian society. Al-Mansour does not create conflict but uses film as her own space in which she becomes an equal citizen, creator, actor, and person.

## ON ACTS AND ACTIVISM

Isin's distinction between act, action, and actor is pertinent for my reading of film as a scene through which a filmmaker becomes an actor and activist. For Isin, "act" has an ontological meaning, in the sense that act has "virtual existence that can be actualized under certain conditions".<sup>22</sup> Drawing upon Martin Heidegger, Isin discusses the act as "the call of conscience" that "discloses my potentiality- as-being".<sup>23</sup> Being ontological, the *call* therefore "comes from and is directed towards the being that I am".<sup>24</sup> The caller to act is our own being, concerned over its own "thrownness",<sup>25</sup> and so "our own being is called forth to its potentialities".<sup>26</sup> In other words, acts precede morality in the sense that they are the very expression of the ontological questions of who I am and how the notion of the Other is inseparably intertwined with one's own Being, which through the Other relates to Self and through the love for the Other becomes Self, that is a person in the fullest sense of the word.

Act can be defined both as *dynamis* (δυναμις), internal power, the potentiality of a being, and as *energeia* (ενεργεια), an active state of being.<sup>27</sup> Perhaps this distinction between and interrelation of *dynamis* and *energeia* could also be understood as the capacity of a human being to become a person in the fullest sense.<sup>28</sup> We can say that through the act the nature of being is manifested.

22 Isin/Nielsen 2008, 25.

23 Isin here draws upon Heidegger and Bakhtin. Also, conscience should be understood here "beyond its everyday meaning of guilt as debt", Isin/Nielsen 2008, 32.

24 Isin/Nielsen 2008, 32.

25 Isin/Nielsen 2008, 32.

26 Isin/Nielsen 2008, 32.

27 Aristotle distinguished the concepts of *dynamis* and *energeia*. While *dynamis* stood for potency and capability – a reality capable of changing – "reaching the fullness of being it can become", *energeia* was for Aristotle "the completely realized dimension of a reality". See Richardson/Bowden 1983, 3.

28 Zizioulas 1985, 58.

Citizenship inevitably involves all sorts of acts, because the “ways of being constitute the existential conditions of possibility of acts”,<sup>29</sup> which, however, do not necessarily produce an action. Isin argues that acts cannot be reduced to calculability, that they are not inherently positive or negative, and that acts produce qualities not as causes but only as their effects.<sup>30</sup>

Action is the actualisation of an act. As a deed in space and time, action is praxis (πραξις). Action also represents a quality of acts, an effect of the act, and as such it is interpretative. Being ontological, acts do not necessarily originate in the name of anything; it is frequently our interpretation of the quality of action that gives meaning to the acts.

The actor is crucial, for the actor carries out the action, and, according to Isin, the actor “is constituted by the act itself and produced through the scene”.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore “subjects, constituted by acts, become activist citizens through the scenes created”.<sup>32</sup> Film is a particularly interesting site for this investigation because it is “a scene of a scene” by the very fact that it is reproducing reality. If “a performative utterance produces the event of which it speaks”, it is this event, as Isin points out, that “transforms a performative utterance into an act”.<sup>33</sup> This link between act and performativity is crucial for understanding the correlation between acts, activism, and peacebuilding in film.

Finally, it is important to bear in mind that acts are always related to the Other; in fact “acts are ways of being with Others”.<sup>34</sup> Isin makes the distinction here between, on one hand, answerability as an ontological orientation towards the Other and, on the other hand, responsibility as ontic, or calculable, orientation towards others.<sup>35</sup> It is doubtless that being-with-Others is the existential way of being.<sup>36</sup> The substance of being does not exist without a mode of existence.<sup>37</sup> This mode, through which a person exercises absolute freedom, is the mode of being-with-Others.

As I have noted, although not every act is intended to be political, it becomes so through interpretation of our action that carries out the quality of our relation to the Other. Approaching activist citizenship on an interdisciplinary basis, Isin argues, implies a shift from the institution of citizenship to acts of citizenship – to an investigation of “collective or individual deeds that rupture socio-historical patterns”.<sup>38</sup> As these deeds do not need to be grounded in law, “activist citizens that acts produce

29 Isin/Nielsen 2008, 2.

30 Isin/Nielsen 2008, 37–38.

31 Isin/Nielsen 2008, 34.

32 Isin/Nielsen 2008, 38.

33 Isin 2012, 126.

34 Isin/Nielsen 2008, 19.

35 Isin/Nielsen 2008, 31.

36 Isin/Nielsen 2008, 34.

37 Zizioulas 1985, 41.

38 Isin/Nielsen 2008, 2.

are not a priori recognized in law”<sup>39</sup> On the contrary, as we will see in the film analysis, such “activist citizens” will often question the laws, and through these acts “citizens, strangers, outsiders and aliens emerge not as subjects already defined, but as ways of being with others”.<sup>40</sup> In this sense we can argue that activism produces a sort of κρισις, a crisis<sup>41</sup> that creates “a sense of the possible and of a citizenship that is yet to come”.<sup>42</sup> In that respect activism is unpredictable and creative but also visionary: it proposes what is to be, instead of participating in what it is. Activism implies exploration of “new social relations and practices, through which new forms of personhood and politics are being created”.<sup>43</sup> It is this creative exploration by filmmakers, which might seem to be “rupture in the order of things”,<sup>44</sup> that brings in the moral quality, as an expression of freedom in the ontological sense.<sup>45</sup> Their creative acts are not operating within totalitarian ideologies but are trying to escape the existing ideological constructs.

## PEACEBUILDING

“Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.”

– Matthew 5:9

As I have discussed, through transformative-artistic practices citizens and non-citizens claim the right to break the ties with the “existing social structures ... which are seen as corrupt”<sup>46</sup> and to rebuild more just and peaceful societies. Paradoxically, violent means can be required to achieve that peace, but often the acts of individuals can be performed in non-violent ways, and I focus particularly on the “ripple effect” of non-violent acts and on what we can define as “good deeds”. Peacebuilding, particularly in postconflict areas, involves having a “voice” and “being heard”. John Paul Lederach argues that “voice is the essence of being a person”,<sup>47</sup> as such a voice both represents the aforementioned answerability to Others and Self and is an expression of being, both inward and outward.<sup>48</sup>

39 Isin/Nielsen 2008, 38.

40 Isin/Nielsen 2008, 41.

41 κρισις has been defined as judgment (human or divine), justice, the concept of determining the correctness of a matter; negatively, punishment, condemnation; see Mounce, William B., Greek Dictionary, <https://billmounce.com/greek-dictionary/krisis> [accessed 28 April 2016].

42 Isin/Nielsen 2008, 4.

43 Nugent 2012, 281.

44 Isin/Nielsen 2008, 43.

45 Ontological freedom liberates from ideologies and oppressive systems that often impose identitarian politics and “othering” as a cultural model.

46 Nugent 2012, 281.

47 See Lederach 2005.

48 It is important to bear in mind that a voice can serve ideological purposes. Albert Hirschman argued that the greater the possibility of having a voice, the greater the chance of loyalty, and in this sense, having a “voice” is important as it serves as an alternative to “exit”. See Hirschman 1970, 36.



Peacebuilding involves a number of different acts, such as the act of forgiveness or the act of repentance, that have transformative potential and power. Peacebuilding therefore is intertwined with transformative practices that are embedded in these acts. All these acts that are pertinent to peacebuilding have moral and ethical value, but they can also be considered “beyond ethics”,<sup>49</sup> and as such carry an ontological and even religious quality. When “love for thy neighbour” (the foreign, alienated Other) is enacted, it is not “love out of obligation” but love “because of ontological affinity”.<sup>50</sup> Here is the religious aspect of love, for when love “is not preceded by any ethical must” but is ontological,<sup>51</sup> it becomes an expression of a mode of existence – of being with the Other. In going beyond being just a “voice of the oppressed”, the creative acts of the filmmakers are also transformative acts of peacebuilding.

## ACTS OF PEACEBUILDING AND ACTIVISM THROUGH FILM

Looking at activist citizenship through film means looking at both acts and performativity. Films re-create events that happened or could have taken place in real life. Often, when it is based on a true event, film represents what I call “a scene of a scene”, a re-created event through which actors are (re)created and acts realised. How does this happen? How does film encapsulate an act of citizenship, and does film simultaneously represent a product that is an act of citizenship?

### CIRCLES (KRUGOVI, Srdan Golubovic, 2013)

One film that captures an act of citizenship is *CIRCLES* (Krugovi, 2013; Serbian, Croatian, Slovenian, German and French co-production), made by Serbian director Srdan Golubovic. Golubovic was inspired by the real-life story of Srdjan Aleksic, a Bosnian Serb from the town of Trebinje in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Before the war, Srdjan had been an actor in the local theatre and a sportsman. As war escalated in the 1990s, Srdjan was recruited by the army of Republika Srpska. In 1993, a group of his fellow Serbian soldiers in the city centre of Trebinje attacked his neighbour Alen Glavovic because they identified him as a Bosniak and not a Serb. Srdjan stood up against the soldiers, so they turned against him. The citizens of Trebinje observed the event without taking any action. Glavovic was saved, but Srdjan died from his injuries; he had protected his neighbour, the foreign Other, who was attacked precisely because of his ethnicity and religious affiliation.

The story of Srdjan Aleksic inspired the director, who wanted to explore in his film the meaning of a good act and the performance of a human deed that in the given circumstances could only have a fatal outcome. The film depicts this real-life event in

49 If the highest value is existence, then ethics stems from that value. Zizioulas 1985, 12.

50 Zizioulas 1985, 8.

51 Zizioulas 1985, 11.

a non-linear way, for it does not focus on the event itself or on the political aspects of the story, but looks instead at the effects of the tragic event on the characters. Golubovic's non-linear approach, combined with cold colours and slow, measured takes, typically of lone individuals or deserted landscapes, enabled a focus on the character's individual plight, for by breaking with the temporal dimensions of human interaction, Golubovic was able to explore the divide between "myself" and "the Other". The aesthetic forces active spectatorship by generating a pensive mood that in addition to serving as a point for reflection – for filmmaker and spectator alike – enriches the borderless space of *CIRCLES* by revealing a paradox: characters and ideas are products of human belonging and time, but the film's aesthetic employs an extratemporal unidentifiable "space" precisely to subvert the imposed identitarian ideologies that led to the conflict. This story, the director has said, moved him on a personal level and inspired him to explore the ripple effect of Srdjan's act, "a heroic deed" that was not calculable, not even political we might say, because Srdjan had only moments to decide how to act. Although this act was not premeditated or intended to be political, as an act of self-sacrifice it inevitably became so. By protecting his neighbour's life Srdjan became a symbol of the activist citizen, and his deed has relevance and importance in the present day.

This, however, is not what intrigued the director, who was drawn instead to the questions of what it means to be human and whether a good deed has meaning and significance in reality. Through his film, Golubovic explores not only the "circles" of turmoil and the regret of each character engaged in this tragic event, but also "circles as a ripple effect" of a good deed and its effect on others.

Golubovic also explores the theme of forgiveness. He is interested in the possibility of restoring peace on two levels: peace within and peace with one's neighbour. By depicting the main characters from behind, the director visualises through camera shots the burden that all the characters carry; equally the camera records the same scene from different perspectives in order to provide clarity.<sup>52</sup> The difficult process of forgiveness and reconciliation in which the meaning and effect of Srdjan's act is questioned is embodied in his father's "Sisyphus work",<sup>53</sup> which takes place after Srdjan's murder. The father is rebuilding a church on a hill, carrying it stone-by-stone from one site to another. The site of the church becomes a symbolic expression of the father's own struggle to understand his son's act and of his ability to reconcile with and forgive his son's murderers.

52 Paraphrased; see "Circles by Srdan Golubovic", Empty Kingdom, <http://www.emptykingdom.com/featured/circles-krugovi-%E2%95%B3-srdan-golubovic/> [accessed 28 April 2016].

53 Srdan Golubovic: *Moja lična pobjeda*, VREME 1155, 21 February 2013 / KULTURA <http://www.vreme.com/cms/view.php?id=1099587&print=yes> [accessed 28 April 2016].

For the director, the creation of this film was not political work but the reconstruction of a “high moral and human deed”.<sup>54</sup> The ripple effect of Srdjan’s deed has been reflected through the director’s own quest and search for answers on goodness, neutrality, action, and the giving of one’s life for one’s neighbour. Golubovic’s film does not simply describe a scene in which an act happened at a certain point in time; it creates a new scene through which the director investigates the meanings of human acts. According to Golubovic, “The main question is if there is sense in being a human being and a hero. The film is hard but offers catharsis and an affirmative reply: yes, there is sense in being a human being.”<sup>55</sup> The question that the director explores is also an answer: acts have a ripple effect, which runs counter to Arendt’s view that “when the actions ceases, the meaning ceases”.<sup>56</sup>

The figure of the activist citizen has been constituted here in two ways: through a real-life event and through the film. By giving his own life for the Other, Srdjan becomes an activist citizen and a political figure, non-deliberately perhaps, by disrupting the practices of a conflicted society. His act surpasses the friend-enemy distinction<sup>57</sup> typical of the oppressive nationalist-religious ideology of the time, and of identitarian ideologies of the present. Srdjan’s deed that inspired the director is one that shifted the existing practices of political communities divided by ethnicity and religious belonging. The film functions in a similar way: it shifts the practice of the “feel good” film or mere political-historical reconstruction by putting before the audience the question, What can I do? The director asks, Who is my neighbour? and Does it mean anything to give one’s life for another? Golubovic’s film thus becomes political, even if it is not intended to be.

In this way film becomes a medium for carrying out the transformative and visionary practices of (re)creation and for testifying what citizenship should be. The director focuses on the universal right of every human being to live as a free person, and the peacebuilding dimension comes as an effect of the original deed. Peacebuilding as an act is not possible without an act of forgiveness and without responsibility for Others, who are in this process transformed from alienated Other into a neighbour. The film is itself a personal exploration of existential questions by the director, a creative act that was an effect of Srdjan Aleksić’s real-life heroic deed. Both are authentic acts that break normative boundaries and established divisions, and both are visionary, for they surpass the immediate socio-political context.

54 “Golubovic’s ‘Krugovi’ Scoops Sundance Award”, *Balkan Insight*, 29 January 2013, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/golubovic-wins-special-sundance-award> [accessed 28 April 2016].

55 “Golubovic’s ‘Krugovi’ Scoops Sundance Award”, *Balkan Insight*, 29 January 2013, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/golubovic-wins-special-sundance-award> [accessed 28 April 2016].

56 Isin 2012, 117.

57 Bretherton 2011.

## WADJDA (Haifaa al-Mansour, SA/D 2013)

WADJDA is well known as the first film by the first female director from a country where cinemas are officially banned. In Saudi Arabia women have been segregated and are prohibited from mixing with men, from driving, and from riding bikes. The rules are often regulated by the religious police, who take action against those who violate the laws of the country. Instead of debating the numerous issues related to the position of women in Islam and in Saudi society, director Haifaa al-Mansour chose to concentrate on a simple story about a girl and a bike. For al-Mansour “bicycles represent a lot, such as freedom of movement for one”.<sup>58</sup> The bicycle here becomes a symbol of transformation, life, and ultimately freedom, as in Vittorio De Sica’s *BICYCLE THIEVES* (1948).<sup>59</sup> The film combines an urbanised *cinéma vérité* style with the editing conventions of classical Hollywood cinema, which when united with subject matter and socio-political symbolic undertones reveals the real complexity of al-Mansour’s aesthetic. The aesthetic subtly brings together elements of realism and naturalism, with characters represented true to their natural circumstances. Life is depicted with little distortion, yet at the same time al-Mansour subtly focuses on the individual’s social and political role in society, transforming seemingly insignificant elements of society (a bicycle) in order to question wider elements of reality and the human condition. This is one of the crucial elements in what I define as activist transformative practice in cinema.

Wadjda (fig. 1) is a ten-year-old girl who wants to have a bicycle to compete with her neighbour and friend Abudallah, with whom she is not supposed to play because



**Fig 1:** Wadjda decides to participate in a Qur'an-reading competition so she can buy a bike (WADJDA, Haifaa al-Mansour, SA/D 2013)

<sup>58</sup> Harrod 2013.

<sup>59</sup> McGill 2013.

she is entering adolescence. Her mother, who is at the same time faced with a difficult emotional situation in her marriage, is initially opposed to her daughter's having a bicycle, and Wadjda therefore decides to enter a Qur'an-reading competition to raise the money she needs to buy a bicycle (fig.2).



Fig 2: After winning the competition, Wadjda announces her plans to buy a bike. She gets told of and the prize money is withheld (WADJDA, Haifaa al-Mansour, SA/D 2013)

She is faced with a strict teacher whose hypocrisy she rejects. At the same time her mother realises that her husband, Wadjda's father, will have to marry another woman who will give him an heir because Wadjda, as a girl, does not count on the family tree, which is symbolically displayed in their living room. When her husband marries another woman, Wadjda's mother embraces her daughter's "rebellious" and authentic spirit and buys her a bicycle (fig. 3).

Al-Mansour chooses a subtle way to reveal the oppression and restrictions that women face on a daily basis, from an early age, because of their gender. The film shows the world from the perspective of a child, a young girl, as a world that although restricted is full of changes and possibilities, which allows al-Mansour to bring more energy to the subject at hand than would be contained in a simple statement about oppressed women. Looking out from within, from the local perspective, and through the eyes of a young girl, she provides a picture of a world that is yet to come. Behind the main story about a child who wants a bicycle, the film shows "non-kind actions as a result of society's pressure", such as the story of Wadjda's mother, whose relationship with her husband is distorted because "the pressure and the culture itself does not allow that kind of love to grow ... Because it allows polygamy, for example",<sup>60</sup>

60 Lapin 2013.



Fig 3: Wadjda's dream finally came true (WADJDA, Haifaa al-Mansour, SA/D 2013)

and who asks another woman to fulfil what seems to be one of her main duties, to provide a male heir for the family. In many ways, al-Mansour's film "calls the laws into question",<sup>61</sup> in terms of the right of women not just to perform usual tasks as do men, such as work or drive, but also to live as equals, freed from their exclusion and segregation. However, al-Mansour does not victimise women of Saudi society,<sup>62</sup> but instead cleverly reveals that patriarchal rules are often backed by women themselves: through the character of the strict schoolteacher, she shows that women can be the ones who (re)enforce these rules and support them. In a similar manner, she does not question Islam per se; Islam is not necessarily in conflict with the feminist perspective on gender equality and freedom, as we can see in the scenes when Wadjda prays with her mother.<sup>63</sup>

The girl, Wadjda, is resisting the pressure of a male-dominant, patriarchal society from within, by pushing at boundaries in order to change established norms and patriarchal rules on a micro level, just as al-Mansour is doing with her film. The first female director from Saudi Arabia, al-Mansour had to study abroad because the country does not have an academic programme in film studies. She managed to get approval for the filming of WADJDA, but as it was being shot she had to direct parts of the film from a van, to avoid possible protests for breaking the law and mixing with men in a public space. She also followed censorship guidance and did not shoot scenes showing a woman and a man sitting together on a sofa for instance.

61 Isin/Nielsen 2008.

62 See Shabi 2013.

63 See Shabi 2013.



In her own words, al-Mansour wanted to be “respectful”, but at the same time she wanted to tell the story from inside and make it close to a Saudi Arabian audience.<sup>64</sup> She is aware that change is needed, and she is pushing for those changes with optimism, like the character in her film. Her personal views on liberties are that women should not be marginalised and that their body and gender should not be used as a site of ideology.<sup>65</sup>

What is interesting about *WADJDA* is precisely this process of film creation and the ways that al-Mansour chose to deal with her subject. For the director, the creation of the film was both an exploration and an expression of an act. Through her film, al-Mansour wanted to find a voice of her own: “I was trying to find my voice; I was trying to find a space that I could inhabit as a person and express my opinions.”<sup>66</sup>

Furthermore, while *Wadjda*, a girl and therefore a second-class citizen, transforms into an actor, precisely through this process of creating a scene al-Mansour becomes an actor who claims rights and at the same time offers the possibility of a new society in which women are not marginalised because of their gender. The fact that the case is made subtly and that the film won over the Saudi Arabian committee that nominated *WADJDA* for Oscar entry shows that claiming rights and peacemaking can be, and are, part of the transformative practise of activist citizenship, perhaps because the film embraced the local perspective and claimed rights from that very same position. *Wadjda* and her creator al-Mansour show that marginalised voices as subjects who turn into activists can subvert ideologies without creating physical conflict. The director’s search for her voice turned into an act of claiming rights that do not exist, which is activism. Coincidentally or not, in April 2013 Saudi Arabia lifted the ban on women riding bicycles. Al-Mansour evokes the need for recognition of women’s rights, a quest specific to the context from which she speaks, but she also reminds the audience of women’s ultimate worth as human beings, which has a universal dimension. This quest for recognition of full humanity in the marginalised Other is ontological.

## CONCLUSION – CONSTITUTING THE FIGURE OF AN ACTIVIST CITIZEN

The films discussed in this article (1) explore acts, activism, and the concepts of peace and reconciliation, (2) claim the right to act, and (3) are an expression of an artistic director’s autonomous act. In so doing, I argue, films capture and express activism. I further argue that the films are creative scenes through which filmmakers emerge as those who act. Through film – in the “scene” and in new subjects – actors are

64 Liston 2013.

65 Zoomin TV, 2012, First female Saudi Arabian director Haifaa Al Mansour provokes with *Wadjda*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=umTezaSioKA> [accessed 28 April 2016].

66 Lapin, Andrew, *Wadjda* director Haifaa Al Mansour, September 2013, <http://thedissolve.com/features/interview/168-wadjda-director-haifaa-al-mansour/> [accessed 28 April 2016].

constructed. These actors are defined and constituted by their authentic acts of creation. Their creation represents the aforementioned answerability to Others and to own-being.

I argue that acts have a ripple effect: as described in CIRCLES, an act by Srdjan Alekšić, for instance, represents what Isin calls “an act with performative force”,<sup>67</sup> showing that an act “cannot be reduced to the moment of its performance” but “must include its subsequent interpretation and description”.<sup>68</sup> Isin argues that acts are performative descriptions,<sup>69</sup> and therefore acts are inevitably subjected to interpretation, also because “all mental phenomena are ontologically subjective”.<sup>70</sup> The films do not represent a mere descriptive statement; I argue that their power is in the aforementioned “performative utterance” (which through the scene is transformed into an act). Performativity is directly linked with transformative practices and activism in film: the transformative practice of film is a result of the director’s creative performative act, which brings acts and activism into focus not just thematically (as a denial of rights) but also through the creative process of the filmmaker. Performative force communicates the issues at hand non-violently, which is pertinent for sustaining peace. The directors transform acts of violence and “non-kind actions” by focussing on non-violent acts such as the act of forgiveness. *WADJDA* represents a non-violent quest for recognition of ultimate worth. The peacebuilding dimension of films is a product of individual creative acts that surpass existing ideological divisions.

In that respect, films are not just interpretations of the acts and deeds of activism; they are novel creations, produced in specific conditions and societies in which different ideologies prevail and where these acts are not fully accepted. Film discloses the filmmaker to be a claimant of rights who breaks with the ideological discourse of a society, in itself a subversive act, even if not intentional. Through film demands are made for new ways, practices, and ethics. Embedded in the narrative of the film is the quest for recognition of the equality and humanity of those with different rights. This quest is purposive for both the subject – the one who creates – and the environment in which the creator creates. The transformative dimension of film works on two levels: through answerability to Others and through a personal act by the filmmaker that embodies their quest for a just society, which transforms them into the activists.

Peacebuilding is not necessarily intentional (although broadly speaking it can be) but is rather a purpose of creative activism, whose “outcome is not predictable”.<sup>71</sup> Peacebuilding is an ongoing process that continues in space and time and has an ethical and moral quality because it reveals how subjects are engaging and relating to Others. But if we take peacebuilding as an outcome of activism with moral quality, how

67 Isin 2012, 134.

68 Isin 2012, 135.

69 For more detailed discussion see Isin 2012, 126.

70 Searle 1995, 12.

71 Isin 2012, 129.



are we to measure it, and whose morality does it represent? We need to remember that when it comes to “othering”, the foreign Other does not need to be morally evil but has to be different so that some kind of conflict is possible.<sup>72</sup> Both films discussed here search in different ways for the alternatives to the practices of “othering”.

WAJDJA and CIRCLES come from very different socio-political and religious contexts. Neither film deals with religion per se, but both nonetheless include religious elements and symbolism to illustrate the characters’ quest for their own identities. This lack of what is usually perceived as “religious” in films is precisely what makes these films strongly religious – in other words, the implicit presence of religion works very well, allowing both filmmaker and audience to explore existential questions related to otherness and freedom and also to religious belonging.

In exploring the meaning of the Other, the films move beyond the usual political representations of the issue by imposing ontological questions – who is my neighbour and who am I? In WAJDJA and CIRCLES, the relationship to the Other is demonstrated as “being-with-the-Other”, not only by moving beyond the othering of one’s neighbour and imposed ethnic and gender differences, but also by recognising the equal human being in the Other, who precisely because of this equality cannot be denied the same right to act. The right to act is seen as an existential right: it is the right to live freely, liberated from religious, ethnic, and gender-based exclusion. This right is the right to ontological freedom, and in that sense, even unintentionally, the filmmakers impose moral law as normative, by demonstrating that it is “not my enemy who defines me”<sup>73</sup> but my neighbour – and how I relate to the foreign, marginalised Other.

The films explore this universal aspect of Otherness in both ontological and ontic senses, and their claim for equal rights in circumstances in which divisions are still part of the social and political reality disrupts existing political practices. The concepts of activist citizenship and, consequently, peacebuilding have been re-created and reconstructed through the scene of film, through a creative and authentic practice, and activism therefore has been constructed in film not only by depicting the issues at hand but also by the very process of creation.

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72 Bretherton 2011, 368; “Enemy can be economic competitor, which is de-politization of public life” (369).

73 Bretherton 2011, 369.

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