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E-PAPER

Through a different lens

Examining women amateur filmmakers' narratives before and after the Taliban in Afghanistan

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Abstract

The experiences of women in Afghanistan, both prior to and following the Taliban era, are diverse and multifaceted. Unfortunately, since the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, there have been reports of mistreatment of women who oppose the Taliban's stringent policies.[1] Furthermore, as a result of the escalating isolation of the country following the Taliban's assumption of power, there is a scarcity of accessible information concerning the present situation of women on the ground. Notwithstanding these challenges, certain Afghan women have persistently resisted by documenting their experiences and expressing their dissent through digital platforms. Notably, activists and amateur women filmmakers have played a pivotal role in capturing the realities of life under the Taliban rule. They have utilised social media platforms such as YouTube and Twitter to obtain an unfiltered perspective of Afghanistan.[2]

This E-Paper explores the insights that can be gained from these films in our efforts to understand the current crisis that women in Afghanistan face. It is crucial to avoid stereotypical portrayals often perpetuated in Western media and consider the impact of the proliferation of amateur cinema and increased accessibility of cameras and internet connectivity in nations like Afghanistan governed by religious dictatorships. The article delves into the works of two young Afghan women, Shirin and Zahra, who are amateur filmmakers, to examine how their films have transitioned from the personal and familial to the public sphere and how this has influenced their documentary approach. The article also considers how these films have evolved since the Taliban's resurgence and how they function as a social and historical archive.

1 Stefanie Glinski and Ruchi Kumar, Taliban U-turn over Afghan girls' education reveals deep leadership divisions, The Guardian, 25 March 2022.

2 Taliban releases four women's rights activists but fear persists, France 24, 18 February 2022.

Introduction: Examining the nexus between women's status in Afghanistan and the Taliban government

In the wake of the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, Afghanistan remained deeply divided and unstable, with numerous factions vying for power.[3] During this epoch, numerous women actively participated in society and had access to education and employment opportunities. However, the situation still differed substantially based on the region and cultural context. After the Taliban ascended to power in 1996, their governance was characterised by severe oppression of women, who were prohibited from working, attending school, or leaving their abodes without a male escort.[4] Women who defied the Taliban's stringent codes of conduct risked severe punishment, including physical abuse and death.[5]

After the fall of the first Taliban regime in 2001, there was a period of relative progress for women's rights in Afghanistan.[6] Women were allowed to return to school and work, and many women held positions in government and civil society. However, progress was limited and uneven, and women still faced significant barriers and discrimination in many areas, including education, employment, and political participation.

Since the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, the situation for women in Afghanistan has witnessed a significant deterioration. Despite initial assurances from the Taliban regarding the observance of women's rights within the framework of Islamic law, the reality reveals a severe curtailment of women's rights, instilling widespread fear for their safety and well-being.[7]

Presently, women in Afghanistan confront substantial limitations on their mobility, as they are prohibited from leaving their homes unaccompanied by a male guardian. This restriction severely hampers their ability to engage in daily activities and participate in public life.

Moreover, in December 2022, the Ministry of Education, under the Taliban's authority, issued a decree effectively barring women from pursuing higher education in Afghanistan by denying them access to universities. This recent ban compounds the existing restrictions on women's education, as girls had already been denied access to secondary

3 John R. Allen and Vanda Felbab-Brown, The fate of women's rights in Afghanistan, 19A: The Brookings Gender Equality Series, September 2020.

4 Belquis Ahmadi and Scott Worden, The Taliban Continue to Tighten Their Grip on Afghan Women and Girls, The United States Institute of Peace, 8 December 2022.

5 Rubin, Barnett R. The Fragmentation of Afghanistan: State Formation and Collapse in the International System, Second Edition. Yale University Press, 1995.

6 Teresa Koloma Beck, Liberating the Women of Afghanistan, Socio, 11, 2018.

7 Alvin, L. P, Afghans struggle with humanitarian crisis, millions on brink of starvation, ABC News, 9 February 2022.

schools subsequent to the Taliban's resurgence in 2021.[8] These constraints exert a profound impact on the lives and freedoms of Afghan women.[9]

Furthermore, the Taliban has recently imposed a ban on women's employment within non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and it extends to female staff members working for the United Nations[10] and within the education sector. Consequently, women are effectively deprived of opportunities to work or engage in studies outside their homes.

Disturbing reports of human rights abuses against women have also emerged, including forced marriages, sexual violence, and targeted killings of women activists and journalists.[11] Additionally, the closure of numerous women's shelters by the Taliban has left survivors of domestic violence and abuse with limited options for support and protection.[12]

Consequently, a considerable number of young women in Afghanistan face dire circumstances, characterised by extreme poverty and an uncertain future.

8 Ghazal Golshiri, Afghan women no longer allowed to attend university, Le Monde, 23 December 2022.

9 Afghanistan: Death in slow motion: Women and girls under Taliban rule, Amnesty International, 27July 2022.

10 Charlotte Greenfield, U.N. asks Afghan staff to stay home until May after female worker ban, Reuters,11 April 2023.

11 CONFLICT-RELATED SEXUAL VIOLENCE, REPORT OF THE UNITED NATIONS SECRETARY-GENERAL,29 MARCH 2022.

12 Afghanistan: Survivors of gender-based violence abandoned following Taliban takeover – new research, Amnesty International, 6 December 2021.

A. The representation of women in social media: A comparative analysis before and after the resurgence of the Taliban in 2021

Before the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, women in Afghanistan had increasingly been using social media platforms to advocate for their rights and raise awareness about issues affecting women in the country.[13] Women had also been able to use social media to connect with one another and share information, even in the face of social and cultural barriers to women's participation in public life.[14] One crucial example for this would be the #MeToo movement that gained significant traction in Afghanistan during the years 2017 and 2018, as women utilised various social media platforms to share their personal accounts of sexual harassment and assault. The adoption of the hashtag #MeTooAfghanistan[15] served as an effective tool to raise awareness and initiate meaningful conversations regarding these pervasive issues.

However, as time progressed, the potential risks and adverse consequences associated with revealing one's true identity, such as women receiving rape threats via Facebook, led women to adopt measures to protect their anonymity. Consequently, an increasing number of women began using either their first names or pseudonyms when sharing their stories. Moreover, to avoid potential reprisals, they often refrained from disclosing the identities of the perpetrators. Despite taking these precautions, the impact of the #MeToo movement on the public remained significant, as evidenced by its extensive coverage in international media. The initial stages of the movement fostered thoughtful discussions and stimulated critical thinking among the population.

Notably, the movement's influence resulted in several noteworthy developments. For instance, the Ministries of Interior and Communications responded by establishing a dedicated phone hotline. This hotline aimed to provide women with a secure platform to report incidents of sexual misconduct committed by law enforcement officials. The implementation of this initiative sought to address the issue more effectively and extend support to those who had experienced such misconduct. While this project was initially welcomed, over time, its follow-up and effectiveness were diminished.

Following the Taliban's takeover in August 2021, women's participation in social media has been severely curtailed.[16] The Taliban has enforced stringent regulations on internet usage, which involve the blocking of specific websites that they deem to be promoting

13 Sayed AsefHossaini, how social media is changing Afghan society, Heinrich Böll Foundation, 14 February 2018.

14 Afghan Women Reporters, Seizing on Global Trends, Empower Voices Aganist Abuse and Violence, The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, 25 Nov 2017.

15 Patricia Gossman, #MeToo in Afghanistan: Is Anyone Listening? The Human Rights Watch, 20 December 2017.

16 Afghan Women Fight Back on social media Amid Growing Concerns Over Rights, RFE/RL's Radio Azadi, 14 September 2021.

content deemed 'immoral' or 'un-Islamic'. They also required internet service providers to monitor users and report any 'offensive' content to the authorities. These restrictions are implemented as part of their efforts to control and regulate online information and align it with their interpretation of Islamic principles. Although Afghanistan Telecom Ragulatory Authority (ATRA) is officially recognised as a state agency responsible for regulating the telecom market in Afghanistan, the lack of clear enforcement mechanisms and the parallel involvement of various government bodies have resulted in confusion for users.

Moreover, lack of reliable electricity and IT infrastructure are significant barriers to internet access for many Afghans, especially those in rural areas. However, social norms and restrictions also contribute to gender disparities in internet access, with women facing additional challenges.

A nationwide survey conducted in 2021 revealed a significant gender disparity in internet access in Afghanistan. Only 6 per cent Afghan women had internet access compared to 25 per cent Afghan men.[17] This unequal distribution limits women's opportunities for online engagement, information access, and participation in the digital sphere. Factors such as economic challenges, infrastructure deficiencies, and social norms contribute to this disparity. Women in urban areas have higher access compared to those in rural regions.

Under the Taliban's rule, women are not allowed to post photos or videos of themselves online, and they are prohibited from engaging in any online activity that could be deemed as 'immoral' or 'anti-Islamic'. Women are also required to cover their faces and avoid any kind of social media activity that could lead to 'un-Islamic' behaviour. Furthermore, the Taliban has been closely monitoring social media platforms and apprehending individuals who criticise their regime or express support for the previous government. This surveillance extends to men[18] who share content pertaining to non-profit activities or content that falls outside the Taliban's legal regulations. This has resulted in many Afghan women self-censoring their social media activity or deleting their accounts altogether out of fear for their safety. Despite the prevailing restrictions, Afghan women are adeptly employing social media platforms to overcome obstacles. To ensure their safety and anonymity, they utilise strategies such as adopting pseudonyms, sharing content through secure channels, and gravitating towards social media platforms that are less susceptible to monitoring by the Taliban.[19]

Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube have emerged as notable platforms for Afghan women, as they facilitate anonymous commentary.[20] Consequently, amateur videos on

17 Khorshied Nusratty and Steve Crabtree, Digital Freedom Out of Reach for Most Afghan Women, Gallup,8 March 2023.

18 Sayed Jalal Shajjan, Navigating Taliban rule as a YouTuber - one year on, Al Jazeera,18 August2022.

19 Michal Kranz, Afghan women, undeterred by Taliban, secretly network for change, Al Jazeera, 28 Nov 2022.

20 Weeda Mehran, The Evolution in the Taliban's Media Strategy, George Washington University, 18 August 2022.

YouTube and other platforms have become potent tools for documenting and disseminating narratives about the daily lives and challenges faced by women in Afghanistan.[21]

YouTube has long held appeal for users within Afghanistan, as well as members of the Afghan diaspora. Many young individuals have taken to producing content on this platform. Furthermore, Zabihullah Mujahid, the spokesperson for the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and deputy director of the Ministry of Information and Culture, stated that YouTubers could continue broadcasting as long as their content adhered to Taliban-approved guidelines.[22]

Despite the new government's imposition of restrictions on YouTube channels, users persist in their operations by utilising the aforementioned tactics. A compelling example is the November 2021 social media campaign launched by a group of Afghan women, known as #DoNotTouchMyClothes. This initiative aimed to challenge the Taliban's limitations on women's clothing and garnered significant international attention. It underscored the resilience and ingenuity of Afghan women in the face of oppression.[23]

21 Afghanistan – Targeting of Individuals: Country of Origin Information Report, European Union Agency for Asylum, August 2022.

22 Sayed Jalal Shajjan, Navigating Taliban rule as a YouTuber – one year on, Al Jazeera,18 August2022.

23 Olivia Bizot, *do not touch my clothes: Afghan women rebel against Taliban strict dress code*, France 24, 15 September 2021.

B. Transforming amateur films in digital media into socio-cultural documents

In the field of film studies, Patricia Zimmermann's research has emphasised the significance of amateur filmmaking as a way for individuals and communities to present alternative viewpoints on social issues. Zimmermann argues that amateur filmmaking should not be regarded as an "inferior film practice" compared to Hollywood standards. Instead, it reflects a "historical process of social control over representation" that has frequently reinforced and sustained the supremacy of professional aesthetic forms.[24] Similarly, in his work on family films, Roger Odin argues that "It is now clear that family films are neither a trivial nor an innocent production (...) At a societal level, they have their place within this vast collection of texts."[25]

Furthermore, the rise of digital media platforms like YouTube has given individuals the ability to create and share amateur videos on a global scale.[26] Amateur videos offer a diverse range of content and perspectives, including entertainment, education, and social and political activism. While there are certainly limitations to their use in certain contexts, they have become an important part of the media landscape in the 21st century.[27] These videos are created by anyone with a smartphone or camera and an internet connection, and they can vary greatly in terms of content, quality, and style. [28]

On the other hand, in Afghanistan, a country where traditional media outlets often experience censorship or encounter coverage limitations, amateur videos on platforms such as YouTube have emerged as a potent tool for documenting and disseminating narratives pertaining to women's struggles and daily experiences.[29]

The widespread availability of advanced mobile cameras, combined with universal internet access and free online education, has made amateur filmmaking more accessible and popular than ever before.[30]

In countries with limited access to liberal media or in less developed countries and those with totalitarian governments, amateur filmmakers have become important

24 Patricia Zimmermann, Reel Families: A Social History of Amateur Film, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995.

25 Roger Odin, Le film de familledansl'institutionfamiliale, Le film de famille : usage privé, usage public, Paris, Méridiens Klincksieck, 1995.

26 Joseph B. McFadden, Understanding Media and Culture: An Introduction to Mass Communication, adapted edition: The University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing, 2016.

27 Knut Lundby, Digital Storytelling, Mediatized Stories: Self-representations in New Media, Media and Communication, Digital Formations, Volume 52, 2008.

28 Anthony Giddens, and Philip Sutton, Sociology, 9th ed. Wiley, 2021.

29 Afghanistan – Targeting of Individuals: Country of Origin Information Report, European Union Agency for Asylum, August 2022.

30 Rebekah Cupitt, The Routledge Companion to Media Anthropology, Routledge, September 2022.

documentarians, chronicling significant events and social movements. This has resulted in the expansion and popularity of amateur and semi-professional cinema, even though these videos were initially intended only for digital media.[31]

Considering the challenges that semi-professional and professional filmmakers face in Afghanistan today, including financial constraints and restrictions on obtaining permissions to make films, the situation is even more difficult for women amateur filmmakers, especially with the new regulations announced by the Taliban.[32]

31 Dan Hunter, Ramon Lobato, Megan Richardson and Julian Thomas, *Amateur Media: Social, cultural and legal perspectives*, Routledge, 20 June 2013.

32 Zahra Joya and Rukhshana, *I was a policewoman. Now I beg in the street': life for Afghan women one year after the Taliban took power*, The Guardian ,14 Aug 2022.

C. Afghan women behind the camera: A tale of resilience and creativity under Taliban rule

In the aftermath of the Taliban's rise to power in Afghanistan, a considerable number of professional and semi-professional filmmakers found themselves compelled to leave the country.[33] However, for the purpose of this research, my objective was to identify and study women amateur filmmakers who were presently living within Afghanistan. Consequently, I was able to locate a group of semi-professional filmmakers – Tayebeh, Aniseh, Shohreh, Ziba, Nasrin, Maryam, Soraya, and Malaleh –based in cities like Kabul, Bamyan, and Herat[34] These individuals have made the decision to stay in Afghanistan or were unable to depart due to various circumstances. Notably, prior to the Taliban's regime, each of these individuals actively maintained a YouTube channel, primarily featuring videos that introduced different cultural and historical aspects of Afghanistan. Additionally, they were considered semi-professional filmmakers with training, producing short fiction and documentary films using relatively advanced equipment.

However, due to the prevailing fear and unstable legal conditions, their channels have either been forcibly closed or have witnessed a substantial decrease in content production. There are instances where, when the situation becomes relatively safer, they temporarily restore the videos from their archives for public viewing. Nevertheless, for this research, my aim was to find younger amateur filmmakers with limited experience and training who are at the initial stages of their amateur filmmaking journey. Through comprehensive investigation, I successfully identified and established contact with two talented young amateur filmmakers, Zahra and Shirin – both aged 21. These individuals have been actively creating amateur videos since their teenage years. Following Roger Odin's theory, their films can be classified into two distinct categories: Family films and independent films.[35]

As previously mentioned, their passion for cinema and their desire to express themselves through film has motivated them to invest more time and effort into learning and enhancing their filmmaking skills. According to Roger Odin, the transition to the status of 'amateur' filmmaker generally occurs in two stages. The first stage involves 'making movies' with and for one's family.[36] We can observe these conditions in the films of Shirin and Zahra. The second stage is to become a 'true' amateur filmmaker, which requires a more radical departure from the family sphere.[37] Zahra and Shirin have come

33 Roxana Azimi, Troiscinéastesremuentciel et terre pour sauver des Afghans menacés, Le Monde, 9 octobre 2021.

34 Please note that all names mentioned in this article have been changed due to security reasons.

35 Roger Odin, *La question de l'amateur*, Communications 68,1999.

36 Roger Odin, "La question de l'amateurdanstroisespaces de réalisation et de diffusion", Le cinémaen amateur, Communications, n° 68, Paris, (1) p.54

37 (2) p.56

much closer to achieving this goal in the videos they have created for their YouTube channel and other platforms. Their films possess characteristics beyond those of simple family films, as described by Roger Odin: "The family filmmaker is driven by a simple desire to capture family memories, whereas the amateur filmmaker demonstrates a desire to engage in cinema or pursue professionalism. The filmmaker in this space is motivated by the desire to express themselves through filmmaking."[38]

Before the arrival of the Taliban, both Shirin and Zahra created a range of films that showcased different aspects of their lives. Some of these videos captured playful moments spent with friends, while others depicted everyday activities and experiences. Although after the arrival of the Taliban, these two filmmakers closed their YouTube channels many times and continued their activities on different platforms with new accounts and pseudonyms.

Zahra is a 21-year-old, who lives in Herat. She holds a bachelor's degree in psychology and is presently working in the same field. Until recently, she was working in an organisation affiliated with UNICEF. They offered free counselling to people who could not afford to visit a psychologist in remote areas and villages. She has not received any formal training in filmmaking, but she is passionate about cinema, especially screenwriting, and is also a talented painter. Her films can be initially classified as family films falling under the 'amateur film' category. After the Taliban came to power, she decided to keep her social media accounts private to avoid any sensitivities or possible risks to her job. Nevertheless, she lost her job due to the new ban that prohibits women from working in NGOs. She attempted several times to make films on the topic of the ban on girls' education. However, each time her projects were halted due to various reasons, such as fear among actors and crew members, changes in decision-makers or differences of opinion with authorities responsible for granting necessary authorisations. Despite these setbacks, Zahra remains optimistic. She has managed to save some money to fund her projects and intends to pursue it on her own expenses. This trajectory exemplifies her inclination towards transitioning from an amateur to an independent filmmaker, gradually immersing herself in the domain of semi-professional cinema.

Shirin is a 21-year-old and lives in Kabul. She studied computer science and has not received any formal training in filmmaking, though she has a keen interest in cinema and media. She is also a skilled photographer. Her films can be classified as independent films in the 'amateur film' category. Prior to the Taliban's takeover, she had a YouTube channel with her friends, which had gained a substantial following and increased their hopes of making a profit. Her videos primarily highlight the cultural and historical aspects of Afghanistan, including the presentation of local foods. However, the arrival of the Taliban changed everything. The filmmaking style and content of Shirin necessitated her to shoot in public spaces and engage with individuals. But due to restrictions on

38 (3) p.73

the free movement of women in the streets and the rise of Taliban agents who oppose filming and exhibit violent behaviour, even with a permit, concerns about the Taliban's surveillance and use of cameras mounted. These concerns ultimately led Shirin to close her channel. Nonetheless, as previously mentioned, she demonstrates remarkable resilience in capturing and documenting her daily experiences despite these setbacks. It is noteworthy that she consistently takes proactive measures, such as launching new independent YouTube channels anonymously or making changes to her content and structure, in order to explore other avenues for sharing her videos. While the primary audience for these channels comprises Afghans living inside and outside the country, it is important to highlight that certain videos, which prioritise visuals over language, have the potential to attract viewers from abroad.

One notable aspect is that prior to the Taliban's takeover, Shirin had adopted a distinct approach to directing, which involved utilising two different styles of filming. On one hand, she often filmed herself directly to create an immersive experience for the audience. This approach was characterised by a frank and instinctive gesture that allowed viewers to feel present in her various activities. At the same time, she used editing and music to embellish and add rhythm to these videos. The video, Kabul Market, is one of Shirin 's notable works. The film starts with a self-portrait of Shirin and then takes the audience through the narrow alleys of the market. The filmmaker utilises quick cuts to showcase the different products and flavours available in the marketplace while accompanying her camera movements with music. The resulting video creates a strong aesthetic experience for the audience. In other films, Shirin takes on a quasi-journalistic role, as seen in Playing with the Working Child, in which she holds a microphone and speaks directly to the camera like a TV news journalist. This video is more sophisticated because it is built around a scenario, that of a game with a child. The style of filmmaking employed by Shirin not only showcases her artistic talents but also reflects her commitment to social justice and advocacy. Through her films, she aims to give voice to marginalised groups, particularly working children, who are often ignored by the mainstream media. This technique also enables her to engage with her audience in a dynamic and thought-provoking manner.

Generally, there is little aesthetic apparent in Zahra's videos. Instead, she seemed to focus on capturing happy moments spent with loved ones. In some cases, her videos were blurry with poor sound quality, potentially due to less advanced technical equipment compared to Shirin's. However, despite these limitations, her work exuded sincerity and authenticity.

Upon reviewing the exclusive videos that they shared with me, I was struck by their dedication to documenting the changes in their lives after the Taliban takeover. While some of their videos may not be shareable at the moment, Zahra and Shirin hold hope that as the status of women gradually shifts, they will be able to share all of their films on social media platforms with their audiences. In fact, these amateur films serve as a valuable historical archive of the present era, and their significance will become even more apparent as time progresses. Zahra's videos may lack the technical finesse of her

earlier work, but they make up for it with their sincerity and honesty. The Road of Herat and Mother's Surprise are two such films that showcase her ability to tell a story through visuals, despite the restrictions imposed by the Taliban. In The Road of Herat, Zahra contrasts the mood on the road with her colleagues before and after the Taliban takeover, highlighting the stark visual difference. She also discreetly records her movements on foot, careful not to draw unwanted attention. Furthermore, in Mother's Surprise, Zahra captures precious and rare family moments that have become even more significant due to the limitations on freedom of movement. Her footage of two reunion moments between family members hiding from the Taliban is a testament to the fear experienced by Afghan citizens during these turbulent times. Through her films, Zahra provides a valuable documentary account of a significant period in Afghan history.

Zahra and Shirin serve as exemplary figures of the experiences of middle-class Afghan women who have used their education and resources to become agents of change in their society. As filmmakers and advocates for social change, they have challenged stereotypes and pushed for greater gender equality and social justice. Before the Taliban took over, these two filmmakers mostly depicted the lives of middle-class Afghan women and their daily routines, showcasing unique cultural perspectives from their personal and public lives, and sharing special moments with a global audience. In doing so, Zahra and Shirin made their school life, career, and family publicly known. As Afghans themselves, they offer viewers an authentic look on what life is like in Afghanistan, particularly for Western audiences who may have little knowledge of Afghan life.

In general, and especially in the media, Afghanistan has been characterised by its conflicts and violence. This prevalent narrative on Afghanistan existed even before the Taliban's takeover, and led to a one-sided and biased portrayal of the country and its society, with little focus on other aspects. It seems that the darker the image of Afghanistan the greater the media coverage and attention. While it is essential and valid to acknowledge the shortcomings, there has been relatively less focus on Afghanistan's achievements during these years, particularly the resilience of women in constructing lives amidst various challenges. Therefore, it is crucial to recognise their profound aspirations to bring about incremental changes, even in their day-to-day existence.

From another perspective, in the current situation in Afghanistan, filmmakers face numerous challenges, such as the difficulty of accessing equipment like cameras, limited resources, and the risk of violence or censorship. However, despite these obstacles, many are still finding ways to produce films using minimal resources and creative solutions. The emergence of amateur and autonomous cinema in Afghanistan has allowed filmmakers to explore different possibilities and express themselves through the medium of film. In this context, the term 'amateur film' can be problematic, as it may unconsciously undermine the technical and cultural value of a film. André Huet's argument that designating a film as amateur can be detrimental to its perception is relevant here. While these films may be made with limited resources, they should not be dismissed solely based on their production value. Instead, they should be evaluated based on their

artistic merit and cultural significance, as well as the unique challenges faced by the filmmakers in the context of Afghanistan's current situation.[39]

One of their strengths is that these films are the work of an internal perspective and, therefore, faithful to reality. This is also emphasised by Susan Aasman: "The amateur film can be an extremely fruitful source for regional history (...) these amateur images provide a fascinating perspective on the world of a group, a class or a particular individual."[40]

Furthermore, these videos are not only useful on an international level but can also document the social and political past of Herat and Kabul on a national or even local scale in a few years. In this sense, the productions of Zahra and Shirin not only move from private to public space but also become useful archives for both politicians and historians. They choose to continue their filmmaking despite the risks they face. Although their videos are not overtly political, the act of filming has now transformed into a form of activism. "The interesting thing about this amateur film is that there is a contradiction between the initial object and the meaning that can be highlighted by content analysis," explains Susan Aasman about an amateur film. In fact, both women are engaged in a peaceful struggle against Taliban repression. Their films have also become valuable historical archives that show the difference in the real life of the Afghan people after the arrival of the Taliban in August 2021. Although they may be temporarily removed from public view due to the mentioned restrictions, these archives remain as significant documents that hold value for today and future generations.

Also, Jacques Vanderlinden, a Belgian historian, has stated that amateur films play a role in "restoring collective memory, even if they are necessarily composed of particularly subjective worldviews and are linked to the media used".[41]

However, these films can also be effective in recovering the collective memory of those who are not solely influenced by current events and are seeking to explore events beyond the news. According to philosopher Gilles Deleuze, where information is often presented in the form of slogans, amateur cinema can be seen as counter-information that provides nuances and corrections to the initial presentation, which contemporary historians must consider.

Of course, it is important to express this fact: Since the arrival of the Taliban in Afghanistan, films made by both Shirin and Zahra have had to adapt to the repressive regime. For instance, Shirin no longer films outside her home, and there are only a few films filmed in the mountains where she shows her face because she is outside the city and in a safer location. The other two videos take place at her home, with one showing her new haircut and the other demonstrating how she is coping with the Taliban's oppression. In one

39 André Huet, *Propos d'un passeurd'images,* Presses de l'Université Saint-Louis, 2019.

40 Susan Aasman*, Le film de famillecomme document historique*, Le film de famille : usage privé, usage public, Paris : MéridiensKlincksieck, 1995.

41 Jacques Vanderlinden, *Les documents familiaux : regards d'un historien*, Colloque de SPA, March 1989.

of the films, Escaping Depression, Shirin organises books and other items in her personal library, emphasising the importance of feeling comfortable at home. She adds her voice to a soft musical track that complements the visuals, and her artistic expression transforms history into a form of visual poetry.

Michel Foucault, in The Archaeology of Knowledge, has also stated that history can be viewed as a work of representation and an institution of power. Thus, the study of amateur images contributes to distinguishing between memory and history, and amateur archives may provide an alternative vision or discourse.[42]

From another point of view, the headlines of news reports can at times be perplexing and may lead to confusion among international audiences. The media often portrays Afghanistan as an unfamiliar and enigmatic nation, contributing to a distorted perception of the country.

This can lead to fictitious and lazy portrayals in mainstream films or reports. It is important to recognise that such portrayals may not accurately represent the multifaceted identity and diverse aspects of Afghanistan's rich culture, history and people.

In contrast, amateur films can offer a more accurate and nuanced perspective by showing the lives of ordinary people, particularly the middle class, and countering the simplistic and misleading portrayals that dominate the mainstream media. These films provide a more authentic representation of the country's social and cultural landscape. Amateur films are a crucial source of historical information, and the historian's first task is to restore to society the history that institutional devices have dispossessed. However, it is worth noting that even authoritarian and fascist regimes have sought to control not only professional cinema but also amateur cinema, which they view as a melting pot of filmmakers.[43] Authoritarian and fascist regimes have recognised the power of amateur cinema in shaping public opinion and controlling the narrative. The Taliban, as a religious totalitarian government, was particularly interested in controlling amateur cinema to reinforce its ideology and suppress any criticism or opposition. Gilles Ollivier raises a pertinent question: "At this moment of technological evolution, is it not time to show that studying the history of amateur cinema is participating in the understanding of the history of images and societies?" Therefore, by providing a voice to those who have been silenced and marginalised, the videos by Shirin and Zahra also demonstrate the power of visual storytelling as a means of resistance and a tool for social change.

42 Gilles Ollivier, *Histoire des images, histoire des sociétés:l'exemple du cinémaamateur*, 1895, Revue d'histoire du cinéma, n° 17, 1994.

43 Marc Ferro, *Cinéma et Histoire,* Édition Gallimard, Paris, 1993.

Conclusion

In a context characterised by the mass production of propaganda films by a religious totalitarian de-facto government such as the Taliban, the significance of amateur films as authentic and reliable sources of insight into life in Afghanistan becomes evident. These films offer a nuanced portrayal that surpasses simplistic narratives, thereby facilitating a deeper comprehension of the multifaceted realities and intricate complexities that exist within Afghan society. These films provide a valuable platform for both international and internal audiences. For international viewers, they facilitate empathy and understanding, challenging preconceived notions. For the internal audience, the films foster a sense of shared humanity and help challenge internalised biases. Although the initial intent of amateur filmmakers may not have been to provide a professional and official narrative akin to that of journalists reporting on the occupation of Afghanistan, their films have nevertheless emerged as invaluable sources that offer a unique lens into the contemporary realities of life in the country. In addition, these film archives are valuable resources for academic researchers, uncovering lesser-narrated aspects within Afghan families and revealing hidden experiences beneath the burqa. They contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexities within Afghan society and enrich scholarly discourse. Therefore, despite their limited resources, amateur filmmakers play a crucial role in documenting present-day Afghanistan.

With the announcement of new stringent laws by the Taliban, the conditions for Afghan women have become increasingly challenging. As a result, experienced journalists and activists fighting for women's rights face growing difficulties in digital social networks, and incomplete narratives are needed more than ever. Furthermore, with many women now unable to utilise their abilities in their previous fields and confined to their homes, it is likely that we will see an increase in amateur filmmaking activity. This trend is already evident in the growing number of YouTube channels that have emerged recently. This situation presents a unique opportunity to reshape the method of resistance for middle-class women with talents. By offering proper guidance, this path has the potential to reignite the collective spirit within this group. One effective strategy is to provide women with training programmes and educational opportunities in media and journalism. These initiatives aim to enhance their skills and knowledge in the field, preparing them for entry into the semi-professional space. Online workshops, seminars, and vocational training programmes can be organised specifically tailored for women to facilitate their professional growth. This, in turn, will help attract a larger audience and foster positive change. Moreover, by creating networking platforms and fostering collaborations among women in the media industry, we can establish a supportive community for sharing knowledge and experiences. Implementing these measures will empower women in the media sector, allowing them to make valuable contributions and become influential voices in society. Furthermore, these strategies will provide women with improved access to media platforms, enabling them to actively shape the

future of Afghanistan, promote democratic values, and garner extensive support from the community in their endeavors to overturn discriminatory laws against women.

Therefore, it is essential to support and amplify the work of amateur filmmakers such as Shirin and Zahra, as their videos not only provide important historical documentation but also inspire hope and solidarity in the face of adversity. By recognising the importance of amateur cinema, we can contribute to a more diverse and inclusive representation of the world and its people.

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Biography

Fatemeh Moosavi, an Iranian artist, completed her undergraduate studies at Paris Nanterre University, where she obtained a bachelor's degree in Film and Drama Studies. She then pursued her postgraduate education at Sorbonne Nouvelle University in France, where she attained a master's degree in Film and Audiovisual Studies. Over the past 14 years, she has produced over 50 documentaries and short films in various countries. Furthermore, Fatemeh Moosavi has actively participated in numerous international festivals as a jury member and lecturer.

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