



Burma VJ Discussion Guide

Director: Anders Østergaard

Year: 2009

Time: 84 min

You might know this director from:

Gasolin' (2006)

Tintin and I (2003)

Malaria! (2001)

FILM SUMMARY

Oscar-nominated BURMA VJ follows the 2007 Saffron Revolution where more than 100,000 people staged peaceful protests against fuel prices that doubled overnight. The protests were met with a violent crackdown by the brutal Burmese military regime, leading to multiple beatings, arrests, and deaths.

BURMA VJ is told from the point of view of 'Joshua,' one of 20 undercover video journalists (VJs) who risked torture and life in prison in order to document events on the streets as they were happening. The footage is smuggled to the Democratic Voice of Burma in Norway, one of the only conduits for the flow of information outside of this otherwise closed country. The highly-respected Buddhist monk join in, leading a massive uprising, and conditions for the VJs become increasingly dangerous. Eventually, Joshua is forced to flee to neighbouring Thailand, where he helps coordinate action on the ground in Burma and transfer video footage from afar.

As the military and the 'thugs' go after the monks with extreme brutality, viewers watch with helpless horror while Joshua wonders if the protests will lead to any real change. Narrating the film as a journalist and dissident, he is the psychological lens through which viewers understand the revolution.

As the film draws to a close, the military discovers the VJs' headquarters. It's unclear who has survived, but Joshua is determined to continue to fight for democracy and faces rebuilding the team from scratch. It is their footage which keeps the revolution alive.

FILM THEMES

An unvarnished study of bravery and fear, dedication and democratic freedom, this film reveals a ground-up movement built on a need to make a person's homeland a better place, no matter the cost.

BRAVERY AND FEAR

The VJs risk their lives in order to document the events happening in their country. Witnessing their bravery, we might ask ourselves, would we be willing to risk our lives for a cause larger than ourselves? Would we sacrifice our own personal freedom – and perhaps our life – in order to help our fellow citizens find a better future? Selflessness is easy to talk about from the comfort of our living rooms but how would we react – and act – if faced the same real-life circumstances?

DEDICATION TO TRUTH

It's often said that truth is subjective and perhaps it is, even when talking about Burma. The VJs are driven to shine a light on truth as they see it. This same dedication to truth is what drives political dissidents all around the globe. Many of us have never lived under such openly repressive conditions, but if we found ourselves in that situation, would we be willing to expose the reality of our circumstances, no matter the cost? Or would we silently accept our fate in the name of personal safety and expediency and find ways to explain away the falsehoods we might face?

DEMOCRACY AND FREEDOM

The fight for democracy has been ongoing since Burma's 1962 coup d'état, with protests flaring up over the years. Movements usually have and/or need a charismatic leader to be the 'face' of the cause. Nobel Peace Prize winning opposition leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, has been the public face of Burma's fight for democracy, but it's the Burmese people who have continually fought for freedom every day. The value of Aung San Suu Kyi cannot be understated, but if democracy and freedom are to be won, if they are to be planted in the soil like trees that take root, then the fight must be taken up by the masses. We are apt to rely on those in power to create revolutions or protect our freedoms without realizing that it is our responsibility – all of ours – to create the world want.

CITIZEN JOURNALISM

The internet has given rise to citizen journalism allowing anyone to document the world around them. Important stories are often missed or ignored by major media outlets, and so it's the people on the ground who are helping to bring those stories to the forefront. While the internet and social media have been instrumental in allowing the spread of information, often with great results, one must consider that citizen journalism doesn't normally go through the checks and balances that would be present in a traditional media outlet, and that the result can be its own kind of skewed reporting.

“If they catch me with a video camera I know I will go to prison. If people tell me what they think they will go to prison too. So they keep silent. Our stories are silent.”

'Joshua' VJ

“It is just too much. It is like something has been broken that cannot be repaired. But I will keep on doing my job because it has to be done.”

'Joshua' VJ

FURTHER DISCUSSIONS:

1. How do you think inexpensive video equipment and access to the internet has impacted the flow of information around the world?
2. Do you think citizen journalism is a viable and reliable source of information? Why or why not?
3. How much impact do you think the Burmese VJs had on subsequent events in Burma?
4. If you found yourself living under similar circumstances to those in Burma, do you think you would take up the fight for democracy in an active way, as the VJs have?
5. The monks claimed they were joining the protests on religious grounds. Do you believe that was their motivation?
6. Parts of the film were reconstructed, which caused some controversy. How do you feel about the filmmaker’s choice? Do the re-makings help tell the story?
7. Joshua says that people have to be arrested and people have to die, no matter how hard that is to accept. Do you agree that lives must be sacrificed in order to achieve the ultimate goal of freedom?
8. Would you be willing to sacrifice your life to make your world a better place, either for your loved ones or for society at large?
9. Opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi’s presence hovers over the film, yet she is not the focus. How important do you think a figurehead is to movements such as the democracy movement in Burma?
10. At the end of the film, the team is scattered and Joshua faces having to rebuild from scratch. Why do you think he keeps going despite the dangers, the setbacks?

NOTES:

FILM FACTS:

- The majority of the footage in BURMA VJ was filmed in August and September 2007.
- The Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB) was started by a handful of Burmese expatriots living in Oslo, Norway. It continues to act as an independent global news source providing video and other information to news organisations worldwide.
- The Democratic Voice of Burma trains and equips citizen journalists, then makes their material available to news organisations around the world. Their work has appeared on such global organisations as CNN, BBC and Sky News.
- Joshua was 27 years old at the time of filming.
- The scenes of Joshua at the safehouse in Thailand were mostly recreated, causing some controversy upon the film's release. Critics felt that it took the film, to an extent, out of the realm of documentary.
- Director Anders Østergaard originally met Joshua and the other VJs prior to the 2007 uprising when they were on a training mission in Thailand. He originally planned to make a half-hour human interest documentary about Joshua, but when the Saffron Revolution struck, the cameras were luckily right in the middle of the action.
- While every effort was made to conceal the identities of the VJs, everyone involved in the project were aware of the risks involved and were willing to take the risks in order to keep Burma in the eye of the world.
- BURMA VJ was the first film to be screened at 10 Downing Street. The film was screened on the eve of the 64th birthday of Burma's pro-democracy leader and Nobel Peace Prize winner, Aung San Suu Kyi.
- BURMA VJ was nominated for a 2010 Academy Award for Best Documentary feature.
- Joshua has been in exile in London since the 2007 Saffron Revolution and continues to work towards a free Burma, as well as journalistic freedom.
- Joshua was able to get into Burma after 2007 and rebuild an even stronger network of VJs and citizen journalists.
- 17 detained Burma VJs were released in 2012. The Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB) continues to campaign for press freedom and the right to report the news without censorship or other governmental interference.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Share this film. Give other the chance to be educated and inspired by the story of Joshua and his fellow VJs.
2. Consider supporting Democratic Voice of Burma by making the organisation known to your network.
3. Support other democratic efforts around the world. One voice joining many others can truly make a difference.
4. Grab your camera or phone and start documenting your life from the point of view of a citizen journalist. Find things that no one else is seeing, stories that no one else is telling.

We believe a good documentary is just the beginning...

In a world of sound-bites, documentaries provide an opportunity to think, understand, share, and connect with the world.

They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.