REPRESENTATIONS OF THE 'OTHER' IN HUMANITARIAN DOCUMENTARIES:

THE COMMODIFICATION OF INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY AND ANTI-IMPERIALIST PARADOXES

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Abstract

Today's Western humanitarian documentaries aim to engage higher public awareness and evoke sentiments of international solidarity. They are classified under the genre of 'social impact' documentaries. This paper hypothesises that this terminology conceals the exploitative cinematic processes of representing the 'Other' and argues that these films are 'post-humanitarian.' Combining Stuart Hall's representation theory with a Marxist film perspective, this research challenges the dominant depictions of the 'Other' produced by First World entertainment institutions (i.e., Hollywood) and how these representations undermine the idea of 'international solidarity.' Three accoladed Western-made documentaries – 'Raving Iran' (2016), 'The White Helmets' (2016), and 'Winter on Fire: Ukraine's Fight for Freedom' (2015) – are examined in accordance with the ideological conjunctions of anti-imperialism, subaltern identities, and Western humanitarianism. The discussion concludes upon the representational power rendered to White filmmakers and the humanitarian paradox of the 'foreigner' depicting the 'foreign.'

Keywords: anti-imperialism; ideology; post-humanitarianism; Western documentaries; White gaze

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"The spectacle is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images" (Debord 2004, 7).

The longstanding power and design of First World entertainment institutions (i.e., Hollywood) continue to globally preside and filter normative ideals, humanitarian consensuses, and non-Western representations. Representation is a deliberate action, conveyed by mediums such as the individual, groups, visual or written discourse – literature, paintings, photographs, films. Its primary purpose is to depict 'realism.' The creation of reality is a goal for the one who intends to 'represent' especially within the field of documentaries, either through informing, performing, or appealing to aesthetics. Despite documentaries showcasing anti-imperialist narratives, the ideological underpinnings of invested Western interests and representational agency for the Other are often ignored.

The popular term to categorise the genre of political-humanitarian observational films is *social impact.* This genre assumes "a public interest foundation – an improvement of a state of affairs around a social issue" (Chattoo & Das 2014, 7). However, this research takes issue with the umbrella categorisation since not all documentaries correlate, i.e., pro-violence vs. anti-violence, domestic vs. international. Not to argue that genres should fit into a rigidity of prescriptive elements, but the descriptive factors shared by this wide documentary field has consequences for representation. The appeal of international humanitarian documentaries in this category markets itself as an acceptable educational format. Within Western cinema, documentaries have gained prominence in highlighting the Western obligation of aiding the helpless 'Other.' Despite attempts to positively provide more humanitarian coverage to those marginalised, the Western representation of non-Western victims continues to dominate global understandings of the 'distant sufferer.' Chouliaraki (2010) argues that we live in an era of *post-humanitarianism,* whereby Western public communication of humanitarian crises simultaneously reflects and reproduces pity and superiority. This mode of communication establishes an artificial emotional relationship between the Westerner and the "distant sufferer" (2010, 109). Her concept importantly acknowledges the way we understand international humanitarianism in our current age, leading this research to hypothesise that Western documentary cinema should develop a genre classification of *post-humanitarianism.* Seeking

to understand the power of representation documentaries hold within dominant Western capitalism, this brings us to the guiding research and sub-question:

- How do the representations of the spectacle in Western observational filmmaking reify notions of Western imperialism?
    a. How does the White gaze factor into the commodification of international solidarity?

This research will concentrate on the emotional and perceptual processes of the spectacle and how representation is established through ideological elements of filmmaking. Discussions of ideological features such as portrayals of subaltern identities, liberation, and violence will assist in analysing the documentary's treatment of 'Third World' resistance and anti-imperialism in Western cinema. Regarding the racial dimension as illustrated in my sub-question, the retributive actions of Western solidarity will be explored to unravel the dynamics of the White gaze and how its representative power relates to the racial dynamics between 'us' and 'them.' To substantiate my analysis, I will examine three accoladed Western-made documentaries made in the past decade; *The White Helmets (2016), Raving Iran (2016),* and *Winter on Fire: Ukraine's Fight for Freedom (2015)*; located in Syria, Iran, and Ukraine, respectively. Basing this research on countries which possess distinct cultural-political situations, this will provide further depth into observational filmmaking's ideological mechanisms and its representations. Using Stuart Hall's theory of representation to examine the cinematography of the spectacle combined with a Marxist film perspective, this thesis will investigate the paradox of representing 'Third World' suffering on-screen and how it renders power and normativity to Western imperialism.

Theoretical Framework

Two main theories will assist in guiding my research; Marxist screen theory deriving from critical film studies; and the second from a cultural studies perspective – Hall's representation theory. These strands contain various influences and definitions relevant to underscoring the core premise of this research, which I discuss in the following sections.

The Documentary Medium

Founder of the British documentary film movement, John Grierson, first coined the term 'documentary' in the 1920s. He defined it as the "creative treatment of actuality" (1926). In other words, instead of the average person recording a particular subject from a raw, neutral,

and uncut focus, a documentarian utilises ideological apparatuses such as editing, lighting, and framing to fabricate a compelling story. Thus, it is vital to reimagine what a documentary is and what purpose it serves. A documentary is not a representative medium of a false reality; instead, it is an "imaginative representation of an actual historical reality" (Eitzen 1995, 84). This paper argues from the standpoint that documentaries do not contain or involve any form of a 'neutral reality' as filmmaking itself is an ideological instrument. Through examinations of cinematographic techniques, we can begin to understand the purpose behind a director's choice of representation, how the 'unheard' are amplified, and how events are made to be remembered.

Comolli and Narboni's (1971) Marxian *screen theory* combines strands of psychoanalysis, ideology, feminism, and realism. For this research, I will focus on the ideological and realist aspects as it captures the essential characteristics of modern observational films. French writers, Comolli and Narboni, argue that "every film is political" insofar as is "determined by the ideology which produces it" (1971, 30). Their theory is conceptualised through an Althusserian lens and the mechanisms of realism and ideology. They view cinema as the language of the world and constitute the medium as a form of reproducing the world "filtered through the ideology" (1971, 30). The authors criticise the supposed 'depictions of reality' as "bourgeois realism," which is formulated through a mystified "blissful ignorance" by the director and audience's relationship (1971, 31).

Ideology is a powerful structural instrument within capitalist societies and conceives the foundations for political commentary embedded in cinema. Professor of literature, Heath (1981), critically describes the role of cinema having three distinct processes: *industry, text,* and *machine*. The *industry* is the "direct economic system of cinema," while the *text* is the industry's product – the film (Heath 1981, 7). Because the *text* involves high investment capital, there is no real freedom for expression as the industry maintains its establishment through acceptable and profitable genres (Heath 1981, 7). The *machine* is "cinema itself seized exactly between industry and product," where it becomes a realignment of ideological apparatuses (Heath 1981, 7). Comolli and Narboni (1971) similarly remark that films are a manufactured commodity "possessing exchange value, which is realised by the sales of tickets and contracts and governed by the laws of the market" (29). More importantly, they note that despite a filmmaker's political intent of forging their own cinematic radicalism, they cannot do so as their message will never penetrate the barriers of cinema's economic system – "deform it, yes, deflect it, but not negate it or seriously upset its structure" (1971, 29). Likewise, French critic

Bazin (2005) supports the argument that cinema's basic principle is "a denial of any frontiers to action" (105). For example, the annual Oscars ceremony markets itself as a global judge of the world's best films, yet the central ideological positioning is Anglo-American, which is inserted in its broad spectrum of categories not to upset the hegemonic structure. Meanwhile, the rest of the world's representation is restricted to the 'foreign film' category.

Modern documentaries largely depend on personal testimonies and background history of the person to make the story seem 'real.' Yet, immediately when one begins to record, "we are encumbered by the necessity of reproducing things not as they really are but as they appear when refracted through the ideology" (Comolli & Narboni 1971, 30). Documentaries appear as an authoritative source of information given the effect of *direct cinema.* As part of the 1950s 'film truth' movement, *direct cinema* aimed to convey subjects in the most objective light without "judgement and subjectivity" (Hassard 1998, 44). This genre-style particularly applied to the ethnographic approaches of working-class aesthetics. Hassard (1998) describes this philosophy as a reliable way for filmmakers to capture 'reality' without distorting truth nor controlling the direction. However, this itself is a paradox as subjects ultimately behave differently in front of the lens, and films only reveal a glimpse of the truth since the footage always shows a succession of edited material rather than a continuous recording.

French film theorist, Metz (1991), critiques the suggestive innocence of documentaries lending themselves to educational means or the ordinary protagonist, as it strategically conceals the film's propaganda. His argument is based on the literal sense of 'shooting' a film, which immediately implies a chosen angle hence the emergence of a 'narrative' (1991, 195). The irony of the medium is that the ideological apparatuses are already in possession: the camera, recordings, characters, and storyline. The director envisions the product and how the audience will consume it in accordance with studio authorities. Literature critiquing the medium of cinema and ideology postulate that the 'spectacle' is secondary, whilst the emotional and ideological affirmations of the film comes first. Some key issues and problems remain undiscussed in the literature, especially considerations for the prevalent ideological spread of Whiteness through the medium. Thus, we will begin to analyse these dimensions combined with a decolonial perspective.

Western 'Anti-Imperialism'

To properly position the understanding of this research, Stoetzler (2018) provides clarity as to how 'imperialism' is projected in the modern era. He argues that there are two distinguishable

outlooks of imperialism. The first derives from twentieth-century militaristic pursuits and geopolitical rivalry (2018, 1467). More relevant to this paper is the second point that imperialism "denotes the global spreading of the capitalist mode of production in all its economic, societal, political, and cultural aspects…through institutions of 'finance capital'" (Stoetzler 2018, 1468). The latter description emphasises that imperialism is imagined more ambiguously, and thus more difficult to reject than traditional militarism. Critical of Western liberal progression, Stoetzler (2018) argues that "Europeans railed about 'barbaric' cruelty" only when it suited Western imperialism and direct colonisation (1474). Conversely, Western anti-imperialism was only able to progress through the mere demarcation of "distinguishing itself from its colonial victims" (Stoetzler 2018, 1474).

A further comprehensive description is Rodney's Marxian conceptualisation of imperialism. In his book *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1973), Rodney contests the bourgeois notions of 'underdevelopment' and 'development.' His overall argument looks at how Africa developed Europe through the process of Europe under-developing Africa. Within a decolonial context, Rodney views 'development' as the means of increasing the ability to "guard the independence of the social group and indeed infringe upon the freedom of others" with regards to economic expansion (Rodney 1973, 7). He illustrates the issue of development through the different rates of competition for materials and the establishments of the state's "superstructures," which could never be equally parallel to other countries (1973, 16). And so, the clash of different state systems and power was born from this sense. Moreover, the term 'underdevelopment' relates to the relationship between colonial and imperialist exploitation and comparative systems of wealth and power (Rodney 1973, 24). He compares the asymmetrical relationship between industrialisation and technological advancement. Although his writings focused on the relationship between Europe and Africa, I find his arguments significant to the political and technological understanding of cinema's humanitarian functions.

In relation to this, cultural critic Rey Chow (2010) underlines the term 'Third Worldism' and explains it as the Western 'intellectual burglary' of:

"the terms of oppression of their critical and oppositional import, and thus depriving the oppressed of even the vocabulary of protest and rightful demand. The oppressed, whose voices we seldom hear, are robbed twice—the first time of their economic chances, the second time of their language, which is now no longer distinguishable from those of us who have had our consciousnesses' 'raised'" (40).

Chow's remarks reflect Said's (1993) notable argument of imperialism in which he argues that it is the continued process or policy of conserving an empire. Unlike the recent dissolution of direct colonialism, imperialism is a force that "lingers" in the general global cultural sphere, especially in "political, ideological, economic and social practices" (1993, 8). Concerning this, feminist activist, Hensman (2018), describes modern anti-imperialism as *pseudo-anti-imperialism.* She highlights the Western contradiction whereby Western political imaginaries oppose some forms of imperialism whilst supporting others (2018, 31). Likewise, Malreddy (2019) suggests that Western anti-imperialism is "narcissistic at its best, for it resorts to the navel-gazing of the imperialists to rectify the problem that was created in the first place" (312). The extensive scholarship critically highlights topical issues surrounding Western anti-imperialism and how colonial absolution seeks another extension of power, euphemised as 'humanitarianism.'

White Humanitarianism

As previous literature on Marxist film analysis lacked the contemporary element of racial dynamics and humanitarian debates of today, I will emphasise notable points brought forth by Chouliaraki and her idea of *post-humanitarianism.* Chouliaraki (2010) observes the contemporary phenomenon of 'humanitarian branding' and 'shock effect' in terms of how humanitarian organisations visualise crises (108). As previously stated, she argues that Western public communication of humanitarian issues simultaneously reproduces pity and superiority, whereby this mode of communication establishes an artificial emotional relationship between the Westerner and the "distant sufferer" (2010, 109). This idea parallels how Western documentaries are packaged to evoke a sense of performative humanitarian pity through 'shock' and 'horror.' The campaign is victim-oriented, where the 'sufferer' has no control over the exposures of naked flesh and blood. Instead, the supposedly objective nature of tormented bodies becomes a "pornographic spectatorial imagination between disgust and desire" normalised on-screen (Chouliaraki 2010, 110). She argues that the long-distance relationship between the spectator and spectacle becomes dichotomised through the "bare life of these sufferers and the civility of healthy bodies in the West" (2010, 111). The shock-effect of evoking Western complicity and awareness of the West's imperial past continues to serve Whiteness through the racialised conveyance of 'perpetual human suffering' in the distance. Her conceptualisation reflects how humanitarian documentaries package, process, and represent the Other in terms of conjuring a victim-oriented campaign and explicit portrayals of suffering.

In a recent study, Lawrence (2019) analysed the usage of United Nations children in Hollywood cinema. He revealed that the trope of displaced children works as an effective apparatus for a "new era of global humanitarianism" (15). This trope became popular through post-war sentimental discourses that "emphasised emotional, common bonds between Western citizens and distant others" (2019, 17), more importantly, to promote Western aid agencies. Supporting this remark, Neale's genre theory (2000) states that genres constantly evolve since following an itemised list of conventions bores the audience; hence sci-fi films from fifty years ago look nothing like today's production. Neale (2000) argues that genres are an "interplay between repetition and difference" (207). Hence, in relation to Lawrence's study, the displaced child trope intricately reworks itself into modern humanitarian films due to previous successful engagements but appears differently because of more advanced productions.

Critical race scholar Matias (2016) provides critical insight into the racial dynamics between the West and the 'Rest.' She argues that the only way for White people to restore their sense of racial identification and retribution of guilt is by repositioning "themselves once again as the victims" and putting it back "into the hands of whiteness itself" (Matias 2016, 71). Analogous to Hollywood blockbusters that have a primary White character and a person of colour as the 'sidekick' (to provide comic-relief and reaffirm Whiteness), Mattias extends the conjecture that films are furthermore complicit in shaping the general outlook of Whiteness. She argues that cinema perpetuates "White narcissism" to the rest of the society for the "need to have that sidekick who will stroke and fondle the White lead's ego" (2016, 73). Although humanitarian documentaries fixate upon a single character or plot where a White person is not visibly present, Western influence continues to be flexed through the power of editing, production politics, or as the backdrop of the character's allusion towards 'freedom.' Devoid of fully confronting Western guilt and imperialistic attitudes, this instead heightens the spotlight for the director rather than the 'spectacle' itself. Audience appraisal and award ceremonies justify the director's efforts of commodifying the Other as entertainment, thus decentralising the victimhood of the primary labourer - the one who helped garner the profit - the 'distant sufferer.'

Methodology

By examining observational filmmaking, this research will position itself based on interpretive accounts and cultural discourse analysis. Thus, the limitations of this paper may be subject to potential biases stemming from personal cultural experiences and differing interpretations.

Denzin (2004) argues that there are two layers of examination necessary for understanding visual representations of culture, the first being that "humans have no direct access to reality" (237). Taking a Barthian perspective, he argues that we live in a "second-hand world of meanings" mediated by society's institutions. If our understanding of reality is then shaped by ideological, racial, class, and sexist bias, this leads us to understand the second layer, which explains how visual representations are "interactional productions" (237). Supporting this, Becker (2002) explains that images are evidence of "existence" of specific types of people and places, not ambiguous entities (5). However, artistic renderings of an image do not personalise the story but instead provide the audience with a 'glimpse.' Thus, the 'glimpse' that is represented must be considered with great caution as to why the director chose to show Western audiences one particular aspect.

Hall's representation theory challenges traditional critiques that merely state media distorts reality by further elaborating that the original subject has no single fixed meaning against which accuracy can be measured (1997, 26). The subject then has no meaning until it has been represented, and so Hall (1997) argues that we must approach visual language by focusing on what is the privileged meaning out of all of them: "which is the preferred meaning?" (228). Therefore, it is important to examine who has the power to dictate such meanings. Within filmmaking, it is the director's subjective spectatorship of "movements, centerings, duration of shots," followed by the second spectator: the editor's "addition, subtraction, multiplication and division" of shots (Hockings 2009, 90; 91). The overarching power of global distribution, recognition, and investment stem from the Western entertainment industry (i.e., film festivals, award ceremonies, production companies). Hence, observational film representations ultimately reflect Western priorities – politics, social issues, gender, race. Comolli and Narboni's screen theory (1971) will be used in conjecture to Hall's theory to critically grasp the economic exploitation of the spectacle in terms of material livelihoods and, more metaphorically, their representative power and agency. Based on assumptions presented in the literature, I will analyse the cinematic representations of the Other and what ideological connotations lay beneath the denotative humanitarian aspects. We begin by examining how Western documentarians encode their visual text with meaning (i.e. colours, narratives, dialogue, the juxtaposition of imagery, location) to test the hypothesis' accountability as well as illustrating to what extent these dimensions can be viewed elsewhere.

The case studies include:

- *'The White Helmets' (2016), directed by Orlando Von Einsiedel.*
- *'Raving Iran' (2016), directed by Susanne Regina Meures.*
- *'Winter on Fire: Ukraine's Fight for Freedom' (2015), directed by Evgeny Afineevsky.*

Situated in Aleppo, Syria, Von Einsiedel's *The White Helmets* showcases the graphic nature of war. The storyline follows the volunteers of the White Helmets organisation as they face constant battles rescuing civilians from derelict buildings and the intense trauma they endure. The film won an Oscar for Best Short Documentary despite Von Einsiedel nor the producers setting foot in Syria. The entire footage was captured on mobile phones and GoPro cameras by one of the White Helmet volunteers commissioned by the director, Khaled Khateeb, (who currently remains in Syria). This film will be used to examine how the precarious life of civil unrest is represented for the Other, the normalisation of violence and racial signifiers.

Meures' documentary of two young up-and-coming male Iranian DJs in *Raving Iran*, provides us with a modern depiction of young life in Tehran and how music forms their resistance against the regime. The overarching theme touches upon migration and the newfound cultural revelations of Western liberties in contrast to Iran. The viewer is given an 'insider's' glimpse through secret recordings and hidden cameras of how migration, oppression, and raving collectively characterise Iran's youth of today. More importantly, this documentary will assist in analysing the ideas of 'subaltern' representations and how regime oppression is defined for the Other.

Finally, Afineevsky's Oscar-nominated *Winter on Fire* details the entire duration of the 2014 Euromaidan unrest in Kyiv. Much of the historical and cultural context is removed and focuses solely on the protest narrative to symbolise national unity. The film relies on footage of riots, anti-Russian imperialism, and child martyrs to articulate pro-EU sentiments. In contrast to the racial categories of the previous cases, this film is important for understanding how Western liberation is imagined, the character-functions of children, and how the director justifies nationalism.

Analysis

'Anti-Imperialist' Representations

Invisible Power

Film historians Chapman and Cull (2009) indicate that Hollywood was conceived as the primary vehicle for American imperialism (9). In relation to Neale's genre theory, foundations are crucial to consider since it undoubtedly contributes to the cultural processes we continue to consume. As Rodney (1972) notes, the development of Europe was established through the underdevelopment of Africa, and we continue to see this parallel in the mass control continuously celebrated through internationally renowned Western actors, directors, franchises, production agencies, award ceremonies, streaming platforms, and media reportage. Therefore, we must remain aware that mainstream humanitarian documentaries are produced, distributed, and awarded by the very same hegemonic institutions that produce non-documentary films that subscribe to the racial outlooks of locating white heroes and racialised antagonists.

Figure 1.

In this section, I will examine how *The White Helmets* represents humanitarianism. The opening sequences shown in figure 1, places us within the immediate disaster as two men run

into a smog of destruction carrying a bright orange stretcher, the very few instances of vibrancy we see in this film. The sacrificial characteristics of figure 1 immediately convince the viewer of the volunteers' heroism and suffrage against the war. The camera is rapid and abrupt, instilling the threat of imminent danger and raw action footage. Following this, powerful sounds of bombing cluster figure 2, communicating who the film's 'villains' are - the Russians - as we are confronted with their low-flying planes carpet-bombing Aleppo. Gross (2001) argues, "when previously ignored groups or perspectives do gain visibility, the manner of their representation will reflect the biases and interest of those powerful people who define the public agenda" (4). The White Helmets, described as the Syrian Civil Defence, was founded by James Le Mesurier – a former British Army officer and UN peacekeeper in Yugoslavia. The organisation is funded by the US, UK, the Netherlands, Denmark, Germany, and Japan (SCD 2016). With this background context, we can better understand why the narrative depicts one country, specifically Russia, as the antagonist despite the global political interventions involved.

Figure 2.

If we take a broader look at *The White Helmets* and invested Western interests, it merely appears that a cinematic proxy war of ideology is being fought through the medium against Russia. The symbolic value of the bombings in figure 2 depicts the evil imperialist nature of

Russia juxtaposed to the innocence of life-saving missions in figure 1, captured by the single orange stretcher to highlight the precarity of their situation. An anti-imperialist paradox arises from the humanitarian exposure we see as the director strategically organises images of chaos, civilian suffering, and city collapse to enhance the vision of Western virtuosity (mediating Western power through the cameraman's equipment and orange stretcher) against imperial Russia. Therefore, accessorising the spectacle's crisis. Hensman (2018, 31) calls this *pseudo-anti-imperialism* where Western political imaginaries oppose some forms of imperialism whilst supporting others. Aside from the geopolitical debate, the humanitarian discourse of Syrians as merely 'victims' remains a prominent trope within media coverage, negating the political and social dimensionality of the war illustrated in figures 1 and 2.

Subaltern Representations

During the time of colonial empires, the culture of cinema authorised the pleasure of capturing transient glimpses of the 'subaltern' through colonial conquests, travel, and tourism. With a new recording photographic device, its power allowed Western filmmakers to visit "natural and human 'wonders' and unearthed buried civilisations" (Shohat & Stam 1994, 104). However, the pioneers inventing representations of the Other never confronted themselves with the embedded network of power relations that enabled their freedom in representing non-Western cultures. Thus, this began to normalise the Oriental audio-visual tour that Western cinema embarked upon. Historically, imperialist cinema conveyed the triumphs of Western development through reels of colonial world fairs, and more importantly, through the camera device itself – symbolising technological advancement. Shohat and Stam (1994) traced the origins of Western cinema back to "popular sideshows and fairs, ethnographic cinema and Hollywoodean ethnography," which enacted the tradition of objectifying the 'subaltern' human (107). Today's observational filmmaking adopts a reversal strategy by documenting the 'underdevelopment' of the spectacle to commodify their socio-cultural differences as an appeal for 'international solidarity.'

For this part, I will examine *Raving Iran* and how identities of the Other are conceived on film. Representation theory allows us to explore what is the most 'privileged' connotation, or what Hall (1997) considers *"the preferred meaning"* (228). Direct cinema's style is embedded within the protagonist, whereby it appears that the character is leading the story rather than literal narration from the director's voice. Removing the director's visibility obscures the idea

that the story could be controlled or manipulated. Hence the reality is considered to depict and voice the 'unheard' through an objective lens. But is this as innocent as it appears? In *Raving*

Figure 3.

Iran, the basic premise of the film follows two techno DJs, Arash and Anoosh, who characteristically symbolise youth resistance against the Islamic Republic of Iran. Meures' narrative details the obstacles they face in holding illegal underground raves, the anxiety of women dancing without hijabs, and dreams of life in the West. Figure 3 shows Arash and Anoosh preparing to sell their hardcopy CDs to music stores by laying their materials orderly on the ground in a sepia-tone soot-stained room. The body language, mood, and depiction of artistic survival communicate alienation and secrecy from society. Iranian film critic Haidari (2017), highlighted the banality of selling physical CDs and not using the Internet to share music since we see them using it throughout the film. She argued that this scene in figure 3 must have been contrived by the director to establish the protagonists' 'distance' from civility and advancement. Moreover, the economic precarity and conditions of their life are very personal. Yet, the enhancement of dark shades and muddy tones suggest the director's 'preferred meaning': how poor and depressive their standard of living is.

In this documentary, liberation is imagined through colourful shots of the West. The circulation of meaning necessitates power when mediums intervene in face-to-face contact.

And so, when Arash and Anoosh are browsing Google Images of music festivals in the West, we are shown a stock-like generated image of the location in figure 4. They gasp as the camera
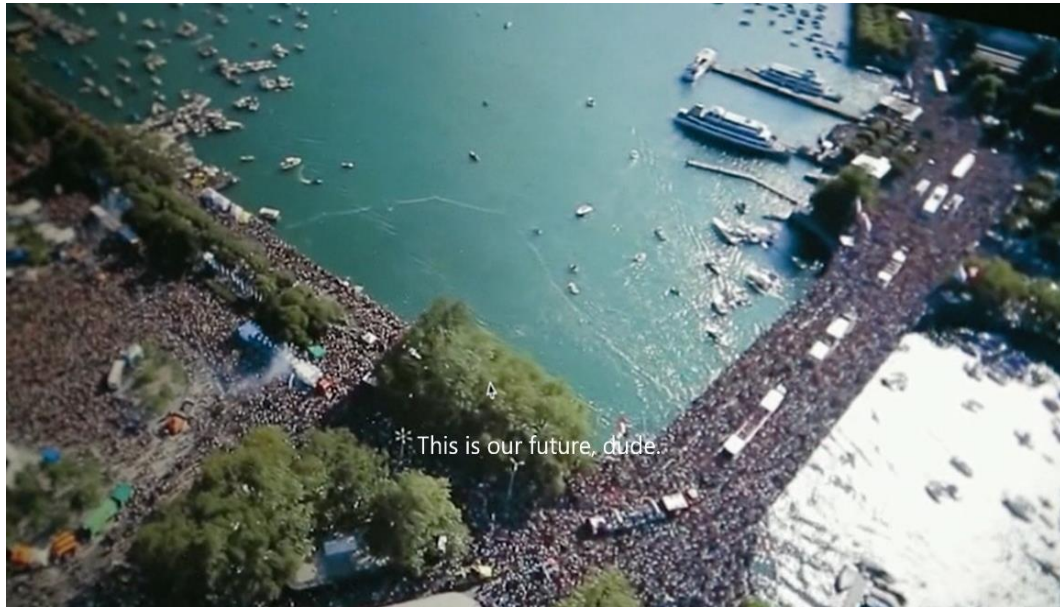

Figure 4.

zooms in on the image. The contrast of 'development,' clear blue waters, and crowds symbolise the freedom they hope to chase within their Internet imaginary of the West. Further emphasised in figure 5, the wide-angle shot of the desert horizon suitably depicts the foreign nature of the Other and the system of underdevelopment distinct from figure 4. This juxtaposition as *post-humanitarianism* describes is a paradoxical rejection of negative victim imagery to conjure a 'positive appeal' by focusing on the "sufferer's agency and dignity" (Chouliaraki 2013, 61). This strategy aims to instrumentalise the power of 'authenticity' through realist aesthetics to "deepen the crisis of pity" and superiority from Western spectators (Chouliaraki 2013, 64).

Shohat and Stam note that cinema's "ability to 'fly'" transformed "European spectators into armchair conquistadors, affirming their sense of power while turning the colonies into spectacles for the metropoles voyeuristic gaze" (1994, 104). These snippets of their lives intentionally reflect the oppressive and foreignisation of the characters' culture and background. In figure 6, the still of White naked bodies does not afford any negative connotations, as their race and bodies signify 'liberation.' Representations of dominant groups in society are not concerned by skewed portrayals since they possess a myriad of depictions

within their power. Shohat and Stam (1994) give the example of a corrupt White politician whose image would not be viewed as "an embarrassment to the race" since scandals of power do not necessarily hinder the dominance of Whiteness (183). Instead, it works to affirm and exacerbate racial dominance. In contrast, negative depictions of underrepresented groups such as figures 3 and 5 aggressively drive the surplus of inferior values attributed to the oppressed.
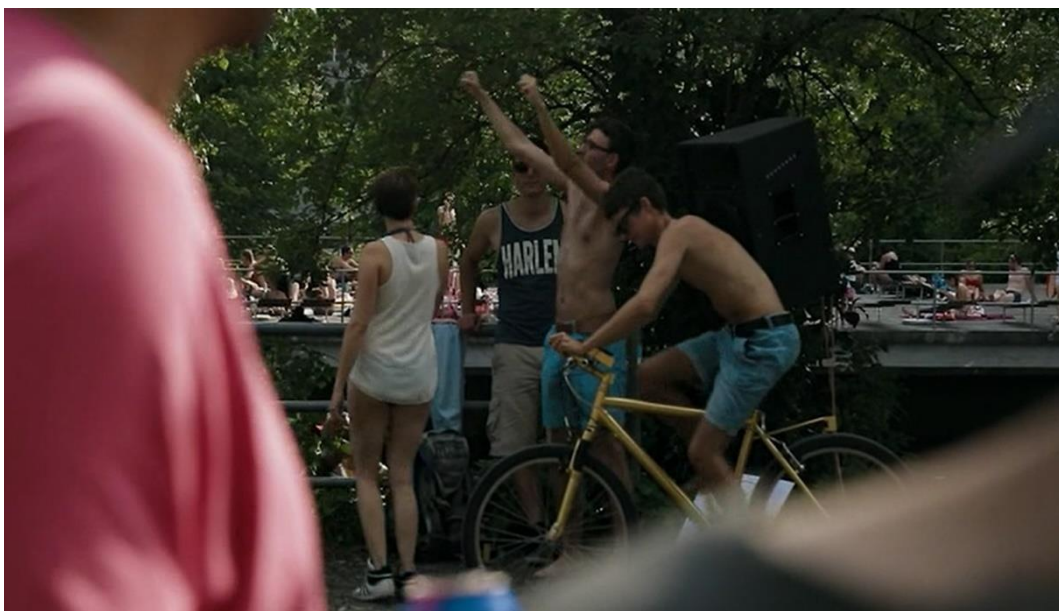

Figure 5.

Figure 6.

When asked about why she was interested in pursuing a story of Iranian techno, Meures answered (Syfret 2016):

"After reading a short article in an English magazine about techno parties in the Iranian desert, I couldn't get the picture out of my head: an image of ecstatic, colourful kids in the desert, partying under the bribed eye of one of the most oppressive political systems in the world. I was fascinated and intrigued by the willpower of these young people."

Meures states that the "English magazine" sparked her fascination with the story, and so, the story travels through a double re-contextualisation within the White gaze. Bribery, deserts, oppression, and willpower are her prescriptive ideas of how youth disillusionment looks like in Iran. She further attaches her ideology through the film's tagline: "two DJs defy the Islamic regime." Her observation reflects a position of 'exoticism' in which she has no interest in elevating her perceived subjects. She interpretively misuses the realities of the protagonists to establish her image that they are defying their own reality through means of 'raving.' Therefore, the imperialist attitude is signified through the evocative language of her interview and film's storyline, deliberately arousing Western reactions of praise and admirableness as it capitalises upon the ideology of Middle Eastern oppression.

Exploitation and Ideology

Precarious Livelihoods

The direction across the case studies seemingly challenge imperial structures by highlighting civilian dissent against the ruling polity with a heavy focus on perilous survival. What is missing from the acknowledgement of Western humanitarian documentaries is the consideration of economic exploitation. In 1948, Grierson believed that the issue with present-day documentaries of his time was the camera's focus on the "graveyards" and the "interminable shots of the fire and the fury" rather than capturing the "what happens when a town has to start literally from scratch again" (56). It is interesting Grierson made this remark during the wartime era of the 20th century, yet this narrative technique continues in today's observational films. His statement evaluates how films intentionally recorded chaos and terror to represent the working-class as mere rioters. Therefore, the camera's dismissal of class solidarity during and post-destruction reveals the bourgeoisie mentality behind the lens. What is the interest in shaping and controlling the economic hegemony of media? If a director solely engages with the underdevelopment of the Other whilst omitting wider socio-cultural varieties, the implication suggests that the director's ideological purpose is to strengthen his own cause

whilst perpetuating one-dimensional stereotypes of the spectacle. A classical Marxist perspective argues that labourers only deliver a certain amount of their labour and energy in exchange for a wage. The result of this is 'alienation' since the labourer is distanced from the process of production and the product manufactured (Marx & Engels 2009). Within the film economy, this is exemplified through the post-production praise, power, and profit given towards the Western director's craftsmanship. If we take, for example, *The White Helmets*, director Von Einsiedel and his production team were never present when the footage was shot but relied on White Helmets volunteer, Khateeb. After Von Einsiedel and his team won an Academy Award, he stood up to receive the Oscar and called upon the star-studded room to "stand up" and hope that the war "ends as quickly as possible" as they held their golden trophies (Oscars 2017). This optical of White humility, while Khateeb continues to endure the reality of war, emphasises the sentiments of racial-class exploitation as Khateeb is separated from what his labour produced. Meanwhile, the Western production team reaps the rewards, and as Matias (2016) describes, Khateeb is the coloured sidekick who "strokes and fondles the White lead's ego" (73). This communicates the preferential treatment of whose life is worth more under the guise of Western humanitarianism.

Marxist cultural studies argue that culture is a superstructural condition which conceals within it the actual nature of power relations. In cinema, power in operation is not visibly noticeable at face-value. This perspective relates to the concept of ideology, where the factors of production remain invisible through dominant institutions to justify authority over information. Thus, this is where power and ideology operate invisibly during one's observance of cultural representations in documentaries, when in fact, we are reading the reflections of power. This point of contention is illustrated in *The White Helmets*' repetitive scenes of bombings, derelict buildings, and graphic bloodshed, making the viewing almost unbearable. After the beginning sequences, these scenes become more normalised as we see it continuously occurring and are more accustomed to the shaky handheld camera, ominous soundtrack, and civilian screams. At this point, the audience accepts the tyranny, and thus, the film establishes the distance between 'us' and 'them.' In figure 7, the volunteers reiterate their call for sacrificing themselves. The romantic characterisation of Arab martyrdom establishes a prejudicial connotation that this scenery is an indefinite reality for the Other since there is no clear sign for development but instead, tumultuous underdevelopment. In figure 8, the protagonist gleamingly speaks about his daughter's future. The testimonial realism of figure 8 instrumentalises acts of solidarity through the personal vulnerability of the protagonist's
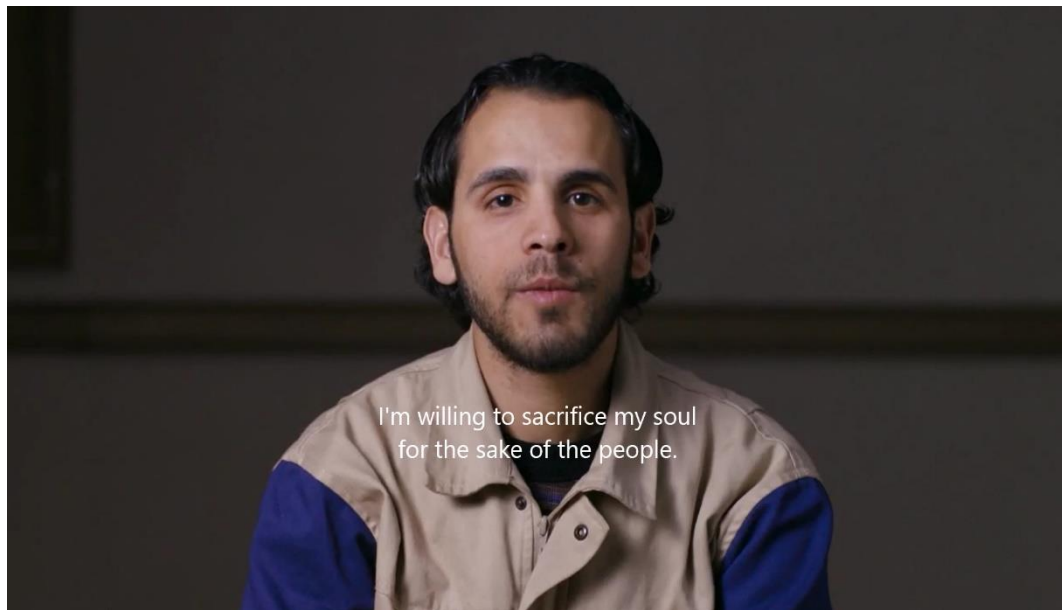
Figure 7.

Figure 8.

family-life, however, this does not seek to engage solidarity of conviction but affirms the emotional cognition of Western morality and virtues through his 'shared hope.' Thus, the act suggests 'White narcissism.' This 'narcissism' is further demonstrated in the final scene, where

further shelling confronts the screen. Von Einsiedel juxtaposes the feelings of empathy from figure 8 to a fast-paced closing scene of screams, terror, and emphatic sounds of air-raids, imprinting a violent final image we have of the war in Syria. The editing choice depicts figure 8's protagonist as naïve by inferring that his hopes are misplaced despite his position as an 'insider.' This method confers the director with a 'higher authority' by showcasing the 'truth' in the final scene.

We don't want to go to the airport.

Figure 9.

Similarly, in the closing scene of *Raving Iran,* the shot cuts to black in figure 9, and Anoosh utters the final words, *"we don't want to go to the airport,"* bringing the taxi to a dramatic halt. Symbolically, the scene speaks of the newfound cultural freedom in the West and rebellion against their past repressive lifestyle. The film climatically ends on high hopes. We are left to imagine Western liberation rather than the harsh reality of migration in the West during the height of Islamophobia and anti-migration policies. Post-film, Arash and Anoosh described in an interview that they spent years living in a Swiss refugee camp and seeking asylum (Lloyd 2017). The film centres upon the Swiss music festival as their beacon of hope, but that space of focus is so limited that the documentary ultimately conjures a mythical imaginary by patronisingly celebrating their newfound liberties and providing a false representation of what migrant-life entails.

<u>*Oriental Realities*</u>

Rodney (1972) defines development as the means of increasing one's ability to protect the independence of a social group which entails infringing "upon the freedom of others" (1972, 4). Applying Rodney's conceptualisation, we can argue that the ideological structure of Western documentaries presents the 'us' vs. 'them' dichotomy through actions of ceremonial justifications, and box-office profits generated from the spectacle's loss – both literal (in terms of their material livelihoods) and metaphorical (that communication to the West involves a 'White filter'). Take, for example, figure 10's film poster for *The White Helmets*. The colour-grading of an ominous sepia-tone immediately signals a smog-like atmosphere and visually evoking prejudicial ideas of 'apocalyptic terror' and 'gloom.' The cinematographic element of colour schemes is crucial to understanding the visual impact of images as this image reinforces a one-dimensional reality of Syria as bleak and chaotic. The protagonist looks towards the distant light for 'hope.' Likewise, this symbol of light and hope is shown in the movie-poster of *Raving Iran* in figure 11, alongside the brown-muddy sepia shade. Contrastingly, the Eastern European colour representation of *Winter on Fire* in figure 12, presents a stereotypical Soviet reminder of a faded blue-greyscale filter to indicate its depressive and despotic conditions. The security forces blend in with the background of the grey shadows contrasting against the vividly crowned child, suggesting the clash between old imperial Russia and the optimistic progressiveness of the EU. If we take a look at the taglines of all the posters - 'to save a life is to save all of humanity' in figure 10, 'two DJs defy the Islamic regime' in figure 11, and 'the next generation of revolution' in figure 12 - there is a consistent theme: a constant struggle follows the 'distant sufferer.' Connotatively, poverty, desolation, and repression are the marketable attraction of these films.

In contrast, the vivid full-colour spectrum attributed to the West implicitly communicates a nuanced three-dimensional reality. This difference is achieved by "presence-through-absence," where the implicit meaning of 'us' vs. 'them' has "already been conferred" (Dallow 2008, 94). For example, the child in figure 12, symbolises the next generation's conquest for nationalism and European independence. More obvious is figure 13's *Hoop Dreams* (1994), the famous basketball documentary set in Chicago. Immediately, the depiction of the American dream and exceptionalism is set by the city backdrop, vibrant warm hues, and the symbolic upwards reach for success, articulating an empowering and uplifting spectacle.

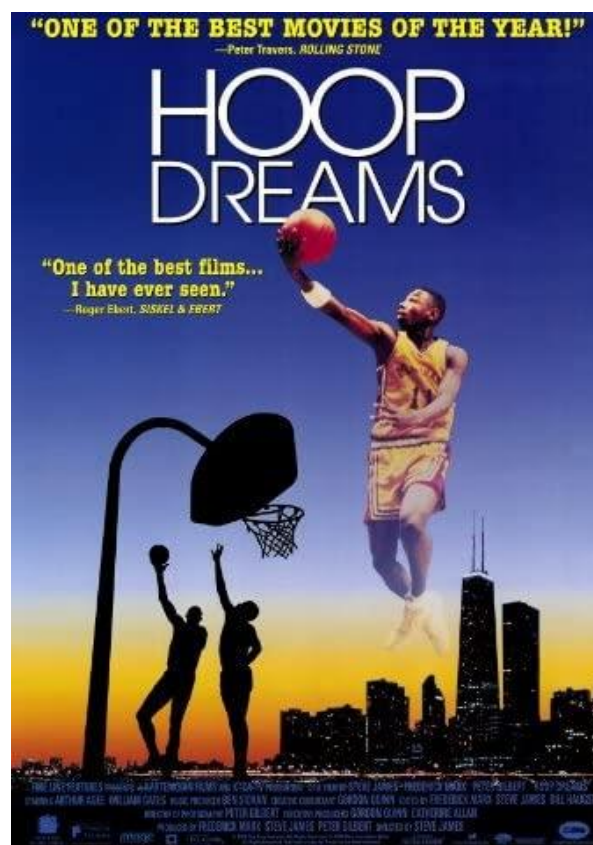**Figure 10.**

Figure 11.

Figure 12.

Figure 13.

By incorporating indirect methods from the outset, we notice a purposeful tactic of inserting Western exceptionalism into the visual landscapes of observational documentaries. Stereotypical location filters most notably remark the signifier of subpar living conditions and poor rule of law – imagined either as the "mysterious East," the "stormy Caribbean," the "cold Eurasia," or "darkest Africa" – in stark contrast to the three-dimensional colour palette representative of the West (Shohat & Stam 1994, 109). Comolli and Narboni (1971) remind us that there is no clear differentiation between fictional and non-fictional films as the methods of cinema's "traditional ideologically-conditioned" depictions remain the same (33). In other words, the style of these films parallels the same ideologies of fictional Orientalist films (i.e., the James Bond franchise) through sounds, colours, heroic empowerment, and martyrdom.

Figure 14.

The economic structures of cinema exercise suffering as an entertainment narrative which plays a tremendous effect on how we 'gaze' at representations. In figure 14, we are presented with the wide-angle backdrop of Tehran from *Raving Iran*, while in the right-hand frame encompasses a luminous blue poster of Iran's figureheads, the Supreme Leader of Iran, Khameini aligned in front of Ayatollah Khomeini. Contrastingly, we see the youth located on the left, discussing their yearn for freedom. The framing of their bodies below the poster symbolises their distance from regime conformity, reflecting the dynamics of youth resistance

and the expressive motif of edging towards liberation. Likewise, the immediate denotative meaning we see from figure 15 is the immediate tragedy of war as two characters walk past and look at the destruction. We see a far-reaching wide-angle shot of the horizon of the buildings that are still in stable conditions in contrast to the direct disaster shown to us in the frontal frame. Figures 13 and 14 communicate a patterned 'schema' (the categorisation of behaviours, objects, and the relationships among them). The schema is a simplified way for audiences to categorise and recognise the situation and context; however, the perpetuated stereotype of unsettling gloom and oppression depicted in these cases alludes towards the legitimisation of Western saviourism and advanced development. The 'foreigner' trope reinforces the idea of danger attached to the nation and bodies, perpetuating the stigma held by

Figure 15.

Western politics and 'pitied solidarity.' Moreover, these documentaries intentionally overlook the West's political liability and how it contributes to these 'pitiful' situations. The restrictive Western sanctions against Iran and Europe's weaponry exports to Syria, for example, economically benefits the West. Yet, dominant representations in cinema further benefit the ideological wealth of Western humanitarianism by showcasing a singular narrative of oppression. Thus, there is no depth or extensive representation for the Other except for the

characterisation of being a constant 'foreigner' in their own land (because they do not subscribe to conventional values) and abroad (because they are negatively stereotyped).

The direction of these films imagines the spectacle as helpless and innocent, thus dependent on Western exposure and salvation. Inevitably, through such conditioning, these countries become both an object of exotic adoration and an object of invisibility – whitewashed of its own ideologies and cultural legacy which are somehow both entangled through a scope of romanticism and disqualification. The issue with this, as Chow (2010) notes, is that the power relations structurally governing 'white redemption' enact performative actions such as indiscriminately utilising tropes of victimhood and subalternity to spotlight the Westerner's own sense of political virtue (40). Touching upon Chouliaraki's *post-humanitarianism*, the depictions of human suffering in the distance is maintained by depriving the Other's representation of humanity to insert the agenda of Western humanitarianism, thus reifying Western imperialism.

A Post-Humanitarian Genre?

Neoliberalism's 'International Solidarity'

As previously discussed, Neale's genre theory (2000) assumes that genres remain grounded in their foundations yet continue to evolve to adapt to new trends and norms. Although genres "possess their own individual identity," they nonetheless belong to a "larger generic-and cultural-system" (Neale 2000, 209). It is essential to acknowledge that genres are not only definitions for film styles, but they also operate under specific codes and values embedded within the film's production (Neale 2000, 27). Today, modern documentaries focusing on humanitarian issues are categorised as *social impact* films aiming to engage higher public awareness surrounding social issues. However, the idea of 'impact' means that it is dependent on influencing audiences. Therefore, revelations of shocking images to ignite emotive sentiments from the audience relies on the neoliberal structures of post-humanitarianism, as the spectacle's issue becomes commodified for the sake of 'impacting' Western spectators. The paradox of international solidarity, as Chouliaraki (2013) puts it, is the Western institutionalisation of humanitarianism, which ultimately reproduces rather than disrupt the economic subordination between the "wealthy West and the poor South" (7). By maximising Western funds, engagement, and accountability, this legitimises the neoliberal attitude of Western democracy and "turns the cosmopolitan aspirations of humanitarianism into the corporate aspirations of the West" (7). Consequentially, this further enacts harm against those

vulnerable while the idealism of Western civil society becomes enhanced. The case studies'
protagonists depict an ideological refusal of emancipation from the West for the sake of total
liberty, whose system of wealth accumulation is paradoxically dependent upon the
underdevelopment of the spectacle themselves (Rodney 1972**;** Chouliaraki 2013)**.**

Figure 16.

In line with these assumptions, we will look at how the 2014 Euromaidan protests in
Afineevsky's *Winter on Fire* instrumentalises international solidarity. Likewise, with the other
case studies, the film shows what is happening on the ground, but the limit of its scope is the
historical context that has culminated in the situation we see on-screen. *Winter on Fire* alludes
to Western liberty and independence through violent scenes of riots against President
Yanukovych for allying with Russia and stepping away from the EU Association agreement.
Ukrainian pride and nationalism depicted by the clothing and flags in figure 16**,** romantically
gestures the people's fight for EU recognition while opposing the state's oppression, reigniting
the Cold War dichotomy. In figures 17, 18, and 19, the director uses images of children to
signify Ukraine's new generational glory for independence and outlook towards the EU. The
choice of tokenising children to represent Ukraine's emerging revolutionary identity politically
expresses 'solidarity as salvation.' Chouliaraki argues that this form of solidarity is a

perpetuating force of reproducing "the very suffering it sets out to comfort" (12). Afineevsky

characterises children as bastions of new hope, such as figure 17's colourfully dressed girl

Figure 17.

playing the violin amidst the grey snowy landscape in front of St Michael's Golden-Domed

Monastery. Lawrence (2019) highlights the usage of representing "vulnerable foreign children"

on-screen intentionally functions to "represent miniature international societies," triggering

"sentimental modes of internationalism and humanitarianism" (18). The evocative emphasis of

Ukrainian freedom relies on the violent and explicit realism in the film's cinematography. The

grittiness of the teenager against a backdrop of fire in figure 18 emits the propagandistic values

of presenting youthful idealism to veil the dangerous fiery conditions seeping in the

background, offering a form of consolation and sense of importance to remedy the intolerable

situation. In this context, Eurocentrism gains presence by articulating that freedom from

violence is dependent upon European redemption, more specifically neoliberalism as a form of

salvation from the eviller Other - Russia. The emotional dialogue in figures 17, 18, and 19

provide Western audiences with morale for healing, as the next generation are represented as

pioneers of spreading Western civility and democracy.

Figure 18.

Figure 19.

What Afineevsky purposely omits is the heavy presence of far-right politicians (the Right Sector), alongside neo-Nazis present in the crowds of children, activists, and religious groups, presenting a utopian-like revolution. Strategically, Afineevsky inserts characters that any Western audience can relate to or stand in solidarity with. He creates the imagination that the protests erupted from a grassroots civil movement as the opening sequences show people

marching out from their homes to the square. The storyline emphasises that ordinary people ignited the event despite high levels of far-right political mobilisation. Since the protest's success, White supremacists have gained higher traction as Euromaidan garnered them the privilege to mobilise fully, America's presence has increased as well as far-right paramilitaries gaining power. When asked why he ignored any recognition of far-right extremism, Afineevsky stated that he is "a filmmaker, not a journalist" (O'Connor 2016). Given the mass recognition he received for his Oscar-nomination, wide Netflix distribution, and statement of being a "filmmaker," the disregard of wider ramifications for the sake of 'social impact' demonstrates the profit-scheme behind these documentaries, and more importantly the exploitative power of privileged representations. Despite the whitewashing of events, this introduces a more problematic aspect: the 'foreigner' depicting the 'foreign.' Films are no strangers to omitting information as the tactic is to organise the most absorbent and entertaining narratives. Nevertheless, considering the general direction observed in the cases, the main criterion seems to be authenticating Western 'modern society' through oppositional imagery. Therefore, the self-defeating paradox of Western humanitarianism and solidarity lies in political interest, which despite the filmmaker's 'objective mission' will nonetheless make compromises for "corrupt regimes in order to remain operational in specific world regions" (Chouliaraki 2013, 12). As Afineevsky's intentions suggest, we see that "humanitarianism tempts to hubris, to an idolatry about our intentions and routines," thus empowering hegemonic representations of the Other (Chouliaraki 2013, 12).

Controlling Violence

A notable theme that runs across the documentaries is violence. Jhally (McMaster Humanities 2014) explains that when stories revolve around identity, cultural violence, and who is affected by intimidation, it also controls our formational attitudes towards who can do what to whom and get away with it. Using violence as a means of representation for those in the 'Orient' not only means inscribing their deaths with the director's own idea of order, but it also means that "there is an interest in representation only when what is represented can in some way be seen as lacking" (Chow 2010, 41). Considering this, the ideas associated with pain, death, and salvation descending from the colonial era remain connotative of countries within Western humanitarian agendas and solidarity outreach. M'charek (2013) highlights how race does not materialise within one's body but is instead enacted and engraved through the practice of various entities (434). Within humanitarian documentaries, the reproduction of racism remains quite nuanced through the euphemistic concealment and decorative terms that are used to praise

political strife in non-Western countries, i.e., the 'admirable' depictions of martyrdom. The representation of non-white bodies being physically mutilated, scarred and bloodied are advertised as acts of 'bravery,' normalising the idea of 'human suffering' as a concept that is racially coloured (and not white). The directors connote anarchy and chaos as racial markers of those outside the Western borders, permeating deeper than skin colour, thus characterising their national narrative solely by violence and death. Nevertheless, the physicality of non-White bodies remain indexes of the various violent representations reinforced by humanitarian rhetoric. In figure 20's *Raving Iran*, the hidden camera records a meeting the protagonists have at a legal office, where the lawyer urges them to seek asylum and stay abroad once they get their visas to Switzerland, emphasising a constant threat of survival within the 'Orient.'
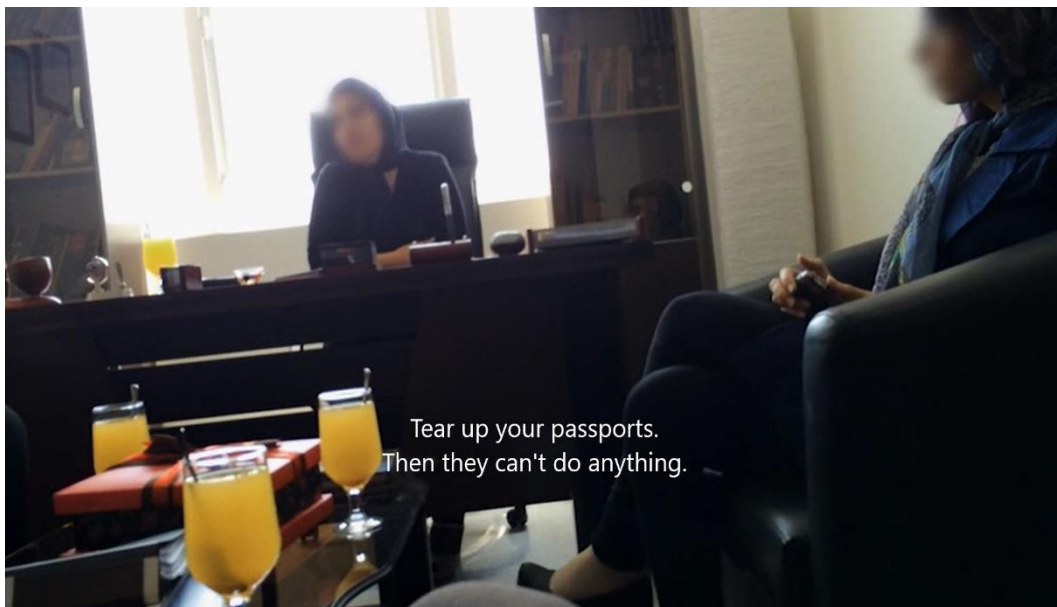

Figure 20.

Similarly, figure 21's *Winter on Fire* showcases a stand-off between six visible protestors on the right side of the frame, and the edges of the left show a compact row of black-dressed riot police. The differences in figure 21 in comparison to figures 20 and 22, is the acceptance of their Whiteness and inclination towards Western democracy. However, the Soviet stigma of the country's history of state and civil violence connoted in figure 21, reinforced by the snowy landscape, remains an indicator of distinguishing them from the West. Within *post-humanitarian* discourse, their Whiteness does not compensate for the representation of their

anarchic resilience due to the "bare life of these sufferers and the civility of healthy bodies in the West" (Chouliaraki 2010, 111).

Figure 21.

Before cameras had video recording functions, photographs became a powerful tool to affirm Western scientific beliefs of the nineteenth century that races could be organised by a distinct hierarchical measure of human value (Farrar 2005, 8). The likelihood of visual racialisation becomes concerning when the medium is adopted by a White person controlling the camera, establishing the power dynamic between the double-sided lens. In *The White Helmets,* the majority of scenes repetitively exhibit bombing catastrophes, but why does the director depend on this repetition, and what meaning is implied? Figure 22 contains twenty-one visible men heavily covered in debris attempting to carry a wounded body out of the carnage. Apart from illustrating the collective unity of the men, the scene invokes anxiety from the overwhelming amount of people trying to save one person. The inscribed meaning connotes the helplessness and fragility of the Other, in comparison to the singular White saviour figure represented in Hollywood action films, for example. The cluster of chaos, dirt, lack of protective equipment, and intense mobilisation politically packages 'Syria' as one single object. The director may feel compelled to exhibit these images to achieve an authentic' grasp

of the Syrian War, however, this itself patronisingly celebrates the Other through the White gaze of 'authenticity.'

Figure 22.

Rather than exploring the socio-political dimensions or possibilities of resolve for regime unrest, these cases exhibit violent outcomes of impoverished circumstances, establishing a cinematic binary between the powerful and powerless. Ethnographic representations of the Other typically relay 'safe' and 'authentic' Western-appropriate depictions, as not to upset the hegemonic structure. The Western rhetoric of 'Third World' authenticity similarly embodies the discourse surrounding human zoo expositions of the 19th and 20th centuries to satisfy colonial fetishisations of the Other's 'real' and 'uncivil' culture.

Undoubtedly, skin colour is an immediate signifier of identifying whether they are one of 'us' or 'them.' Farrar argues that "hyper-individualisation in the rich, post-industrial countries has been accompanied by excesses in the fetishisation of bodies" where skin colour has become the new 'hot commodity' of contemporary humanitarianism (18). The representations of non-White bodies receive a sub-human treatment by the White gaze, in the sense that they continue to retain racialised and predictable narratives, rather than showcasing depictions which could normalise them. There is a continuous pattern of violence displayed in the case studies implicitly communicating that it is an acceptable cultural product of the Other. The idea of

'salvation' is expressed by portraying events and characters as if they are still repeating the same monotonous cycle of never-ending pain. Their lives continue to look 'backwards' and undeveloped in comparison to the modernity and technological advancements of the West.

Conclusion and Discussion

The emotional representations of *Winter on Fire, The White Helmets,* and *Raving Iran* are intensely personal. In some instances, it feels that we are intruding too much into their lives of sorrow and pain. The main issue confronting documentaries, as Rancière (2006) explains, is that "instead of treating the real as an effect to be produced, treats it as a fact to be understood" (158). The verisimilitude of the documentaries capturing the protagonist's natural emotions, live footage of brutality and weaponry destruction, establishes the documentary's authority as a carrier of factual realities, overshadowing other 'realities.' As Eitzen (1995) previously remarked, documentaries are an "imaginative representation of an actual historical reality" (84) which suggests that the artistic aesthetics of documentaries constitute a "refraction of a refraction" whereby all visual texts are nothing more than "a meaningless play of signification" (Shohat & Stam 1994, 180). And so, what does this mean for the reifications of imperialism in observational films and the Western conception of 'international solidarity?'

Hall's representation theory shows how the case studies claim the spectator's sympathy through features of realism: visceral sounds of violence, loose handheld camera-shots to signify the secrecy and anxiety of the records we are watching, and most importantly: the choice between life and death. Observational filmmaking's responsibility of humanitarian reportage becomes problematic especially when we see a recurring formulaic narrative of violence acting as a mediator for Western saviourhood, which manipulates the idea of 'solidarity.' The terminology of *social impact* to classify humanitarian documentaries euphemistically functions as a normalised definition for exhibiting violent representations of the Other. It maintains the threshold of justifiably detailing calamities to Western audiences expressing that the spectacle is a threat to order given the catastrophes attached to their depictions. The conflict of representation emerges from Western authority commodifying the pain of non-Western political strife to spotlight humanitarian efforts through virtue signalling and White imaginaries of the 'Other' (Chow 2010). Ellul (1965) explains that films provide the Westerner with a "chance to experience self-esteem by identification with the hero…only propaganda provides the individual with a fully satisfactory response to his profound need" (149). Therefore, if these documentaries are made primarily for Western audiences, they must be engaged through

identification with their 'own' representation. This identification is achieved in *Raving Iran* by migrating to the West to imply the importance of Western civility. Parallel to this, *Winter on Fire* employs allusions to European acceptance and integration. Finally, in *The White Helmets,* the suggestion for Western solidarity is expressed through the spirit of martyrdom and the vulnerability of personal testimonies. The main difference with these cases is the non-racial atmosphere of Ukraine's representation. Instead, they are depicted as 'almost acceptable' within the West's reach given its strong message of European integration. Still, they remain subordinated through their markers of violence and patronising celebration of their struggle.

Conversely, the dominant function of these 'authentic' representations ensures 'crowd control' by means of heightening the audience's fear and prejudice of the Other to establish distant artificial solidarity. These elements constitute a better understanding of how these documentaries fit under the classification of *post-humanitarianism.* Humanitarian documentaries classed under *social impact*, follow a linear narrative of material impoverishment, regime disillusionment, and the quest for democratic civility, similar to traditional missionary films. In contrast to direct propaganda films such as Riefenstahl's Nazi film *Triumph of the Will* (1935), *social impact* documentaries establish a barrier between the film's display of second-hand pain and propaganda. Therefore, humanitarianism is merely enacted ideologically rather than through real political mobilisation. These dimensions relate to *post-humanitarianism* in the sense that Western humanitarianism capitalises upon violence to suggest that martyrdom is the Other's way of achieving 'political liberation,' further subordinating their humanity. As a category, the term provides a critical landscape of understanding the production's narration of spotlighting pain and suffering, whilst implicitly reminding us of the exploitative and neoliberal realities embedded in the storytelling.

Critically observed from these cases is the lack of acknowledgement for Western accountability. Instead, the filmmakers document the endurance of survival under non-democratic oppressive regimes. Neale (2000) articulates that humanitarian issues tied to America's political accountability found expression through Hollywood's "war, spy, musicals, westerns, and horror films" to reinforce ideologies about patriotism and justification of subordinating the Other (212). Maintaining Hollywood's profit and attraction depends on generic formulas that remain vital to its productions despite its adaptative nature to each generation's socio-cultural values. We see the values of imperialism recontextualised through the spectacle's character development and storyline of deviating from societal norms to seek liberty in the West. Although the dressage of Western hegemony appears different, Akala

describes that the "narrative and Machiavellian mentality have remained much the same. No one refers to the 'white man's burden' anymore, as it's just too crude a phrase, so instead, we speak of spreading democracy and human rights and of saving people from dictators" which essentially euphemises what the 'white man's burden' claimed to do during nineteenth-century European colonialism (2018, 137).

This leads us to wonder whether there can be any form of reconciliation facilitated by the medium of documentaries between White filmmakers who formulate narratives about the non-Western subject. In 1976, Godard produced an 'inverted' documentary about Palestine and questioned his own positionality, titled: *Here and Elsewhere.* The original film intended for release was titled 'Victory,' but Godard pulled it from distribution as all subjects had been killed post-production. *Here and Elsewhere* shifts the premise of a political documentary into a self-scathing critique of Western filmmakers like himself, and the assumptions that lay beneath their self-asserted righteousness to speak for those *elsewhere* from their convenience *here*. He admitted to his inclination of filming deaths and torture to ignite emotions of solidarity and achieve his artistic vision of how Palestinian revolutionaries should be represented. With this insight, we grasp that cinema is purely manipulation of thought with sounds and images, and freedom of the 'elsewhere' can never truly be represented by the other 'Other' – the Westerner. The wider ramifications of the dominant representing the inferior are reflected by the structural and systemic oppression against marginalised communities. In cases of marginalisation and oppression, the victim who is given a platform to voice their powerlessness, in turn, gains power and momentum through this act. However, this becomes blurred by the medium of documentaries. Like a vacuum, the lens absorbs the power of the voiceless into the hands of the director, establishing an anti-imperialist paradox within Western observational filmmaking. The power a camera affords to the White director inevitably results in colonising the bodies, pain, and anguish as they do not hold the position to convey the actual pain. However, their privilege allows them to commodify the spectacle unchallenged. Instead of imagining abstract symbolic gestures of anti-racism and -imperialism where resources are privileged to White people, the idea of even beginning to 'reconcile' and build solidarity should adopt actions of conviction by giving space for minorities to shape representations about the *minority*.

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Appendix A.

Figure 1. The opening scene from The White Helmets. Two male characters run into the smog of a recent bombing as one man carries an orange stretcher to rescue a civilian.

Figure 2. Horizon shot of Aleppo as the city is bombed.

Figure 7. Interview sequence of one of the protagonists as he states, "I'm willing to sacrifice my soul for the sake of the people."

Figure 8. Interview sequence from one of the protagonists stating, "I have a lot of hopes for my own daughter."

Figure 15. Two of the protagonists walking past the destruction of the building against the backdrop of the remaining intact buildings.

Figure 22. Twenty-one visible men covered in dust in the frame, trying to rescue someone out of the collapsed building.

All retrieved from: Natasegara, J. (Producer), & Von Einsiedel, O. (Director). (2016). *The White Helmets* [Short Documentary]. United Kingdom: Netflix.

Appendix B.

Figure 3. Protagonists lay out rows of CDs on the ground, preparing to sell them.

Figure 4. Google Image shot of the Swiss summer music festival while protagonists speak to each other: "this is our future dude."

Figure 5. The aftermath of the protagonists' rave in the desert.

Figure 6. White partygoers at the Swiss music festival.

Figure 9. The final scene of the black frame as the protagonist states, "we don't want to go to the airport."

Figure 14. The protagonists and their friends sit on a ledge positioned next to an overarching poster of the leaders of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Figure 20. Secret recording scene in the lawyer's office as she says to the protagonists, "tear up your passports, they can't do anything."

All retrieved from: Frei, C. (Producer), & Meures, S.R. (Director). (2016). *Raving Iran* [Documentary]. Germany, Iran: Christian Frei Productions.

Appendix C.

Figure 16. Mass protest gathering at Maidan filled with Ukraine's national colours and flags.

Figure 17. Young girl playing violin in front of St Michael's Golden-Domed Monastery in a snow-filled landscape.

Figure 18. A teenager in protective gear interviewed amidst fiery backdrop asked: "say something to Mom."

Figure 19. The final scene of a mother and carrying a baby holding a sign while the background chants "glory to Ukraine, glory to the heroes."

Figure 21. The resistance between Euromaidan protestors and armed security forces dressed in riot gear on the city streets.

All retrieved from: Afineevsky, E., Ivanyshyn Y., Peleshok, P., Tolmor, D. (Producers), & Afineevsky E. (Director). (2015). *Winter on Fire: Ukraine's Fight for Freedom.* [Documentary]. Ukraine, United Kingdom, United States: Netflix.

Appendix D.

Title Cover Image. Godard, J.L., Miéville, A.M., Rassam, J.P. (Producers), & Godard, J.L.,
Gorin, J.P., Miéville, A.M. (Directors). (1976). Ici et Ailleurs. [Documentary]. France:
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Figure 10. Official movie poster for The White Helmets. The White Helmets. (2016,
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Figure 11. Official movie poster for Raving Iran. Raving Iran. (2016, August 07th).
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Figure 12. Official movie poster for Winter on Fire: Ukraine's Fight for Freedom. Winter on
Fire: Ukraine's Fight for Freedom. (2015, October 09th). Retrieved April 20th, 2020,
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Figure 13. Official movie poster for Hoop Dreams (1994). Hoop Dreams. (1994, October
14th). Retrieved April 20th, 2020, from
https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0110057/?ref_=ttmi_tt

CHECKLIST ETHICAL AND PRIVACY ASPECTS OF RESEARCH

INSTRUCTION

This checklist should be completed for every research study that is conducted at the Department of Public Administration and Sociology (DPAS). This checklist should be completed *before* commencing with data collection or approaching participants. Students can complete this checklist with help of their supervisor.

This checklist is a mandatory part of the empirical master's thesis and has to be uploaded along with the research proposal.

The guideline for ethical aspects of research of the Dutch Sociological Association (NSV) can be found on their website (http://www.nsv-sociologie.nl/?page_id=17). If you have doubts about ethical or privacy aspects of your research study, discuss and resolve the matter with your EUR supervisor. If needed and if advised to do so by your supervisor, you can also consult Dr. Jennifer A. Holland, coordinator of the Sociology Master's Thesis program.

PART I: GENERAL INFORMATION

Project title: Representations of the 'Other' in Humanitarian Documentaries:

The Commodification of International Solidarity and Western

Anti-Imperialism Paradoxes

Name, email of student: Aileen Ye, 550345ay@eur.nl

Name, email of supervisor: Willem Schinkel, schinkel@essb.eur.nl

Start date and duration: February 2020-June 2020

Is the research study conducted within DPAS.   **YES** - NO

PART II: TYPE OF RESEARCH STUDY

Please indicate the type of research study by circling the appropriate answer:

1.   Research involving human participants. YES - **NO**

      If 'YES': does the study involve medical or physical research? YES - NO

Research that falls under the Medical Research Involving Human Subjects Act (WMO) must first be submitted to an accredited medical research ethics committee or the Central Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects (CCMO).

2.   Field observations without manipulations that will not involve

      identification of participants.   YES - NO

3.   Research involving completely anonymous data files (secondary data that has been anonymized by someone else). YES - **NO**

PART III: PARTICIPANTS

(Complete this section only if your study involves human participants)

Where will you collect your data?

N.A.

Note: indicate for separate data sources.

What is the (anticipated) size of your sample?

N.A.

Note: indicate for separate data sources.

What is the size of the population from which you will sample?

N.A.

Note: indicate for separate data sources.

1.   Will information about the nature of the study and about what participants can expect during the study be withheld from them?   YES - NO

2.   Will any of the participants not be asked for verbal or written 'informed consent,' whereby they agree to participate in the study?   YES - NO

3.   Will information about the possibility to discontinue the participation at any time be withheld from participants?   YES - NO

4.   Will the study involve actively deceiving the participants?   YES - NO
      Note: almost all research studies involve some kind of deception of participants. Try to

think about what types of deception are ethical or non-ethical (e.g. purpose of the study is not told, coercion is exerted on participants, giving participants the feeling that they harm other people by making certain decisions, etc.).

5.   Does the study involve the risk of causing psychological stress or negative emotions beyond those normally encountered by participants?   `   YES - NO

6.   Will information be collected about special categories of data, as defined by the GDPR (e.g. racial or ethnic origin, political opinions, religious or philosophical beliefs, trade union membership, genetic data, biometric data for the purpose of uniquely identifying a person, data concerning mental or physical health, data concerning a person's sex life or sexual orientation)?   YES - NO

7.   Will the study involve the participation of minors (<18 years old) or other groups that cannot give consent?   YES - NO

8.   Is the health and/or safety of participants at risk during the study?   YES - NO

9.   Can participants be identified by the study results or can the confidentiality of the participants' identity not be ensured?   YES - NO

10.   Are there any other possible ethical issues with regard to this study?   YES - NO

If you have answered 'YES' to any of the previous questions, please indicate below why this issue is unavoidable in this study.

N.A.

What safeguards are taken to relieve possible adverse consequences of these issues (e.g., informing participants about the study afterwards, extra safety regulations, etc.).

Participants know in advance of the study and questions I am asking, and it is more about collecting opinions of current situations related to my research rather than personal conflicts.

N.A.

Are there any unintended circumstances in the study that can cause harm or have negative (emotional) consequences to the participants? Indicate what possible circumstances this could be.

N.A.

Please attach your informed consent form in Appendix I, if applicable.

Part IV: Data storage and backup

Where and when will you store your data in the short term, after acquisition?

Digital media files will be stored on a computer hard drive.

Note: indicate for separate data sources, for instance for paper-and pencil test data, and for digital data files.

Who is responsible for the immediate day-to-day management, storage and backup of the data arising from your research?

Myself.

How (frequently) will you back-up your research data for short-term data security?

Weekly.

In case of collecting personal data how will you anonymize the data?

N.A.

Note: It is advisable to keep directly identifying personal details separated from the rest of the data. Personal details are then replaced by a key/ code. Only the code is part of the database with data and the list of respondents/research subjects is kept separate.

PART VI: SIGNATURE

Please note that it is your responsibility to follow the ethical guidelines in the conduct of your study. This includes providing information to participants about the study and ensuring confidentiality in storage and use of personal data. Treat participants respectfully, be on time at appointments, call participants when they have signed up for your study and fulfil promises made to participants.

Furthermore, it is your responsibility that data are authentic, of high quality and properly stored. The principle is always that the supervisor (or strictly speaking the Erasmus University Rotterdam) remains owner of the data, and that the student should therefore hand over all data to the supervisor.

Hereby I declare that the study will be conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the Department of Public Administration and Sociology at Erasmus University Rotterdam. I have answered the questions truthfully.

Name student: Aileen Ye   Name (EUR) supervisor: Willem Schinkel

Date: 20/06/20   Date: 20/06/20