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Reclaiming agency through film education

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Previously conducted research considers how learning practical filmmaking skills could contribute to addressing the social and emotional needs of displaced youth. It argues that learning practical filmmaking skills offered an avenue for young people to cope with displacement by serving as both a coping method as well as a method to acquire non-film-specific soft skills that may be useful growing up in the uncertain context of displacement. This paper focuses on a key theme that emerged from that research: agency and how learning practical filmmaking skills can help youth to develop and/or reclaim this. By examining two case studies, this paper argues that learning practical filmmaking can facilitate opportunities to develop and reclaim displaced youth's sense of agency by offering the opportunity to reclaim a sense of control through creative visual expression, as well as take ownership of their new environments and the future of their communities through activism.

Key words: refugee; international development agency, film education, creative expression, activism

Introduction

People need more than just food and shelter to survive. Though food and shelter are necessary to keep a person alive, human beings have more complex needs that go beyond the scope of basic subsistence; the experience of displacement also disrupts a person's social and emotional needs and this disruption must also be addressed (Sánchez- Puerta et al. 2016).

During my postgraduate studies in international conflict resolution at Trinity College Dublin, I quickly found myself bringing my film production experience into conversation with the conflict management and resolution principles I was studying. Two productive uses of filmmaking became apparent: film and filmmaking as an advocacy tool and practical film education as an occupational therapy-like tool for imparting soft skills useful to navigating the experience of being displaced. While a good deal of research existed around filmmaking's use as an advocacy tool, there was a significant gap in knowledge where the potential benefits of practical film education were concerned.

To address this, my 2019 research *Another kind of opportunity: Filmmaking education in the context of displacement*, considers how learning practical filmmaking skills can contribute to addressing the social and emotional needs of displaced youth. The research argues that learning practical filmmaking skills offers an avenue for these young women to cope with displacement by serving as both a temporally holistic coping method by creating the opportunity to reflect on the past, interpret the present and look to the future, as well as a means to acquire non-film-specific soft skills that may be useful growing up in the uncertain context of displacement.

This research was practice-based and combined multiple visual ethnographic methods with my professional competencies as a filmmaker. Data-gathering occurred in two phases: in the first, I worked directly with a

media-arts organisation on the ground in Jordan as a co-facilitator for two filmmaking workshop sessions, where I also conducted interviews with participants and staff and recorded class sessions. In the second, I analysed the audio-visual material created during the first phase, as well as extant material created before the start of my research, including raw footage, completed short films and additional interviews. The resulting output included a written thesis and accompanying documentary film.

The scope of that research is too broad to be considered in its entirety here; instead, this paper will focus on a key theme: agency and how learning practical filmmaking skills can help youth to develop and/ or reclaim this. This theme came up in two areas: as one of the soft skills useful in navigating the experience of displacement and as a component of activism when youth look and work toward their futures and the future of their communities. Their sense of agency has likely been stripped as they have been forced from their home to a new country and have had little say in what has happened to them along the way.

I will consider how learning practical filmmaking skills creates opportunities to develop and reclaim agency through two brief case studies taken from *Another kind of opportunity's* collaborating organisation, Another Kind of Girl Collective. This offers filmmaking and photography workshops to young women around the world and one of its projects included young Syrian women living as refugees in Jordan from 2014-2017. The first case study concerns Raghad, who found a refreshing sense of control in the process of directing her own short film. The second case study considers another young woman, Marah, who used her short films and filmmaking practice as tools for activism related to addressing concerns about a 'lost generation' of children in the Za'atari refugee camp in Jordan.

This paper argues that learning practical filmmaking can facilitate opportunities to develop and reclaim displaced youth's sense of agency by offering the opportunity to reclaim a sense of control through creative visual expression, as well as take ownership of their new environments and the future of their communities through activism.

Another Kind of Girl Collective

Both young women whose work is used as case study studies are members of the media arts collective Another Kind of Girl Collective (AKGC). AKGC started as a three-month workshop led by American teaching artist Laura Doggett in Za'atari refugee camp in northern Jordan in the summer of 2014. This initial workshop grew into a more cohesive group as Doggett – who has more than twenty-five years of experience facilitating creative arts and filmmaking workshops with young women around the world – and her colleagues were able to continue conducting annual workshops in Za'atari camp as well as the city of Irbid which, in turn, were attended by both previous participants as well as new young women.

AKGC describes itself as:

> ... a media arts collective through which young women living in displaced, migrant or transitory communities around the world connect and co-create. It is a space across geographies where they can express their stories, collaborate, and develop a collective process and platform through which their artistic work can be experienced by one another, and on a global level (Doggett and Brewer 2019).

Since their initial work in northern Jordan, AKGC has gone on to conduct workshops in New Orleans, USA and Lima, Peru, and now also acts as a network of young female filmmakers in addition to their workshop offerings.

AKGC has different goals than many organisations offering similar activities and thus takes a different approach to running sessions. Rather than focusing exclusively on the technical skills of filmmaking, AKGC workshops are as much about mentorship and developing self- expression as they are about imparting the technical expertise required to operate a camera; in this case the technical becomes a vehicle for the socio-emotional. It is how learning filmmaking with AKGC spoke to these young women's socio-emotional needs that is the focus of this paper. First, I consider how learning filmmaking can facilitate opportunities to develop and reclaim displaced youth's sense of agency by offering the opportunity to reclaim a sense of control through creative visual expression.

Agency and creative expression

People who have experienced a traumatic event often lose some or all sense of personal agency. In its most fundamental sense, 'the sense of agency is the experience that I am the one who is causing or generating' a given action (Gallagher 2012: 18). In later works, Gallagher goes on to note the multidisciplinary nature of research surrounding the concept of agency – spanning psychology, philosophy, neuroscience and psychopathology – as well as the necessary clarifications the resulting ambiguity may require. I will not include a discussion of this here as this research is more concerned with agency in the context of trauma and displacement, and what methods may be useful in returning a sense of agency to someone who has lost it.

More specifically, Oluchi Nwosu and Sandra Barnes (2014) highlight a school's focus on agency as part of a specific pedagogical approach to helping resettled refugees overcome the experience of displacement and adjust to their new home. They explain that the school's approach 'seeks to help students recognise their agency or ability to make choices despite outside obstacles' (Nwosu and Barnes 2014: 446). This is done via a curriculum that emphasises 'understanding and appreciation for conflict resolution' (ibid: 447) and encourages students to participate in various kinds of social action, such as petitioning administrators for additional elective classes or raising money for disaster victims.

This same idea can be considered in a different context via Julie M. Norman's (2009) work looking at a range of youth media initiatives in Palestine and what benefits these activities impart on to the participants. Norman's work identifies a correlation between arts and media education and re-establishing a sense of agency. She

argues that 'youth media initiatives have the potential to create change at different levels', and that 'youth media projects contribute to the development of individual agency and empowerment through processes of self- expression and identity exploration' (ibid: 257). According to Norman, youth media projects achieve this by imparting participants with both technical and artistic skills, as well as fostering 'a sense of creative expression that may be both empowering and therapeutic' (ibid: 258).

Given the above framework, I will now explore an example from AKGC where learning practical filmmaking skills helped participants develop an increased sense of personal agency. The first example is a young woman named Raghad and her experience taking on the role of film director.

Raghad: Directing as a sense of control

Raghad was one of the original members from AKGC's first workshop in 2015 in the city of Irbid, located about 60km from Za'atari camp. She has completed one short film and continues to take part in AKGC activities. It is common for AKGC participants to gravitate towards a particular filmmaking role over the course of their first workshop. In this case, Raghad took a particular interest in directing. Her preference was evident in both her raw footage and her short film, *Barriers of separation*, completed in 2015. Her raw footage consisted of a mixture of observational and directed clips. Within the period from 2015 (when she took part in her first workshop) to 2017, the number of shots where she had directed the subjects in her frame to perform a certain action increased relative to the number of shots that she simply recorded as the mood struck her, which suggests a preference for directing and controlling the images she records, as opposed to a more *cinema-vérité* style.

In her short film, only two shots were purely observational and not directed in any way; the remaining shots were all crafted or adjusted in some way by Raghad. I will discuss two of these shots below: in the first, three children (Raghad's siblings) sit in a vertical line, each covering their mouth, eyes or ears with their hands; and in the second, a man in dark trousers and a coat, and carrying two plastic bags, walks forward and backward repeatedly in an alley at night.

Raghad spoke about both these shots in an interview with an AKGC staff member in 2015, after she had filmed them, but before completing the short film. When the staff member asked Raghad about why she created the scene with the three children, she replied:

> I cannot express what's inside of me to people, so I express them through these movements. What I have inside of me, I wasn't able to express it to anyone. So [I took this shot] in the hope of being able to say something (Raghad Al Khatib 2015).

When the staff member asked how she directed her siblings. Raghad explained:

> I told one of them to sit, I told my sister to sit on the chair and my eldest brother to stand. Then one of them to put their hand over their mouth, one on their eyes and one on their ears. They all listened to me. ... For me I felt happy from inside – what I wanted, it happened (ibid).

Raghad was pleased that her siblings did what she asked; by simply saying something, she made it happen. Gallagher's (2012) definition of agency is at play here: Raghad is experiencing being the one who has caused a certain action, in this case her siblings posing themselves as directed. This may be considered a secondary form of agency – she is not the one posing herself but, instead, it is her action of instructing her siblings that causes them to create the pose. Ultimately, however, Raghad's combined actions of directing her siblings and capturing them on camera directly result in the creation of the final shot.

In the other shot, a man in dark trousers and a coat carries two plastic bags while walking forward and backward repeatedly in an alley at night. The voiceover that accompanies this shot in the film makes it seem as if this is some random, crazy man walking back and forth in the dark, but it is in fact Raghad's uncle, and he walks back and forth because she jokingly directed him to do so. In the same interview as above, Raghad recalled:

> I was just joking around with him – I wanted to see what he was going to do, will he listen to me or not? And he did! So I did it and we were laughing in the middle of the street; the people walking by were looking at him like he's a crazy man. I would tell him to go forward, he would go forward, go back, and he would go back. It was nice. We were just walking in the street (Raghad Al Khatib 2015).

Again, we see Raghad express how much she values people listening to her and having what she imagines made to happen simply by speaking it. It is an element of control in a wider situation where she has little control. Raghad clearly enjoys directing and the level of control it offers her. It provides a space to reclaim her agency despite her displacement as a refugee in a camp, a context wherein she has essentially no control over what happens to her family or herself.

Having considered how learning practical filmmaking can facilitate opportunities to develop and reclaim displaced youth's sense of agency by offering the opportunity to reclaim a sense of control through creative visual expression – in this case through directing a short film – I will now shift focus to another way learning filmmaking can facilitate opportunities to develop and reclaim a sense of agency: by creating opportunities for displaced youth to take ownership of their new environments and the future of their communities by engaging in activism, which can in turn increase their self-confidence.

Filmmaking and the agency of activism

As demonstrated above, aspects of the process of creating a short film, in this case directing, create opportunities to reclaim and further develop a sense of agency. The processes of creating a film, and the

completed film itself, also lend themselves to activism which, in turn, offers additional avenues to reclaim agency.

As young filmmakers become accustomed to their new circumstances, they are likely to discover elements that they find problematic and want to see changed. Learning filmmaking provides an opportunity to follow through on this desire to address social issues; working for positive change, in turn, can provide goals and a sense of purpose which may help displaced youth move more confidently into their own futures.

Filmmaking can provide opportunities to address social issues by acting as a tool for activism. Two existing studies exemplify how filmmaking can function in this way: Julie Norman's work (2009) also 'examines the extent to which participatory media function as tools for youth expression, empowerment, activism, and advocacy' (2009: 251). She argues:

> ... first, youth media provide opportunities for creative expression and civic engagement in spaces in which youth participation is often marginalised. Secondly, youth media offer alternative information sources to potentially challenge dominant discourses (ibid).

Likewise, Livia Hinegardner's (2009) work on human rights-focused documentary films created in Mexico at the turn of the 21st century also finds that activists who use documentary film as a means to advocate for human rights see the act of making the films as a form of direct action in its own right. She argues that 'rather than being solely a conduit for communication, human rights films also make up a field of organization and action' (ibid: 182). She says:

> In this case, films open a *de facto* legal space not available through formal institutional channels, and provide a platform through which political actors can transform themselves from bystanders to active participants (ibid: 172).

Below I consider how another AKGC participant's activism-focused activities relate to Hinegardner and Norman's findings. Her film work focused on a topic that several AKGC participants highlighted as being of concern: the future of the children growing up in Za'atari camp.

Marah: Increasing confidence through activism

Marah, like Raghad, is also one of AKGC's founding members, having participated in the first workshops in Za'atari camp in 2014. She has participated in every Jordan-based workshop since then, has released two short films, co-directed a feature documentary and now co-runs AKCG workshops for younger women in Za'atari camp. This case study looks at the progression between her two short films, *Children*, released in 2015, and *Girls behind the lens: Za'atari camp*, created in collaboration with Liz Mermin and the Reuters Foundation in 2017. Her development in style, technique and intent offer insight into how the activism-related components of learning filmmaking also contribute to developing the filmmaker's sense of agency.

Following the 2015 AKCG workshops, seven participants had their short films accepted for entry by international film festivals, giving them access to wide audiences via both screenings of their films and interviews with international press. Many members took this opportunity to speak to the discrepancies they had seen in dominant Western narratives about their lived experience as refugees.

Marah was one of those who expressed a desire to correct outsiders' perceptions of the camp. She was particularly interested in addressing the misconceptions about the youth now growing up there. In her interview for the press in 2016, she explains:

> People outside of our world view the children [youth] in the camp as homeless, beggars, hungry – we don't think, we don't study, etc. People must know that all of the children in the camp, despite the suffering we've suffered from events that have taken place, we have matured during this time, our minds have increased with knowledge and awareness, we have become more responsible individuals (Marah Al Khatib 2016).

Commentators reporting on the Syrian refugee crisis at that time expressed concern about the creation of what they called a 'lost generation' – that the generation of Syrians growing up and being born as refugees could lack important opportunities to develop into adults capable of taking up the mantle of Syrian society. Marah's own concerns fell in line with this, though she disagreed with the way outsiders communicated this. When asked why she decided to make her first film about children, she replied: 'I wanted to show the changes when we came to the camp ... like the things that changed in the students, how they changed. Their behaviour and everything' (ibid). Though not explicitly addressed in the films, in interviews Marah has expressed concerns about the number of children who have dropped out of school since arriving in the camp; the number of young children who have started working; the fact that teenagers are getting married even younger than was traditional in Dara'a and the resulting divorce rate.

Alongside her desire to address misrepresentations of Za'atari's youth as lazy, pitiful and without agency, neither does she want the significant hardships these children face to go ignored. No level of persistence can enable the young people to face the challenges of displacement alone, and international support could ease many such challenges. Once again Marah is reacting to common themes in the reporting of the camp, but only this time instead of simply wanting to correct perceptions, there is an implicit call to action. This is similar to what Hinegardner's study found in her study of small-scale farmers threatened in Mexico with displacement from their land (*ejidatarios*) and their oppositional group, Frente de Pueblos en Defensa dela Tierra, or the People's Front in Defense of Land. As she notes:

> In part because of the symbolic dissonance between the message *ejidatarios* were striving to communicate in their street protests, and the messages that commonly appeared in news media, the Frente and its sympathisers began making their own media (2009: 175).

The protestors found that the messages they wished to impart and the way these were being reported on in the local news media conflicted. And this ultimately inspired the feature documentaries they produced. In the Frente's case, however, they did not expect their films to result in change at the institutional level; instead, for them, it was the act of making the film itself that was important. One activist Hinegardner interviewed was 'not concerned with any formal structural political change. Instead, for him, picking up a camera is a direct action against the virtual reality of mass media' (182). For Marah, the act of being able to speak out about issues she cares about and wants to see improved may serves a similar function, with the act of conveying her story having meaning in its own right.

Beyond making films about living conditions Marah would like to see changed, she uses the act of filmmaking itself to try to influence the changes she wants to see, regardless of any specific story she is telling. She does this by trying to become a positive role model for her peers and those younger than her while she is out recording footage for her projects. When children ask her what she is doing and why while she is out filming in the camp, she encourages them to investigate the many learning centres in Za'atari camp – this way they can learn new, practical skills such as sewing and computer use, even if they are no longer attending school.

Returning to Marah's filmmaking, her desire to correct the record is also evident in her two short films, *Children* (2015), which was shown in festivals, and *Girls behind the lens: Za'atari refugee camp* (2017), completed two years later. Her first film, *Children*, is composed of long, slow shots of children around Za'atari, observing them as they live and play in the camp. Many of the clips highlight small details, such as a little girl wearing mismatched shoes, or a little boy cautiously wading across a large puddle, holding up his shorts even though they are nowhere near the water.

Her selection of shots in *Children* offers a very specific look at the life of Za'atari's youngest residents. They do not play with conventional, store- bought toys – instead, they play with what they find: paper plates on pencils as pinwheels, kites made from plastic bags, tools that have been left lying around, such as wheelbarrows and hammers. They also make use of their own bodies, playing clapping and circle games.

Alternatively, *Girls behind the lens* is a combination of scenes created from footage Marah took in 2016 and material Mermin filmed in March 2017 with Marah and three other AKGC members. As a result of the collaboration, there are four scenes that represent Marah's work as a filmmaker; the first of these four scenes makes a more direct nod to the experience of growing up amidst war than her first film.

This segment runs from the start of the film to 01:20 and features Marah's neighbour Abu Awad, along with his wife and the birds they care for. The segment begins with establishing shots of Za'atari camp, its children and Abu Awad's home. In a brief interview, he shares his wish that he and his children return to Syria. This is followed by shots of children playing in the camp at dusk, with Marah providing a brief poetic voice-over about the war's presence in all their childhoods. The final shot is a high angle, hand-held clip of Marah's feet walking down the dirt road, as if she is setting out to learn more about these ideas. The next two sections

consider other aspects of her family's lived experiences in the camp, but she bookmarks the film by again returning to the children. The final segment repeats the same footage from the first segment, only with slightly extended voice-over and a manual fade to black.

When she was creating *Children*, Marah would not have been aware of the potential size of its audience as the decision to submit the film to festivals did not happen until a year later; as such, I do not want to suggest that correcting perceptions was an overt goal behind that film. By the time she was working on *Girls behind the lens*, however, she had started to see the impact her filmmaking could have via the international film festival circuit. Her knowledge that she could reach a broad and interested audience is evident in the different ways she portrays children in the two films. In her earlier film – which she essentially made for herself – she simply observes the children and invites her hypothetical audience to see them the same way. In the second film, however, she uses voice-over to take a clear stance on the experience of growing up in a refugee camp. The different ways she portrays children in the two films also suggest that her self-confidence grew in the two years between their creation.

The contrasting observational vs. investigative styles of *Children* and *Girls behind the lens* are reinforced by the way Marah uses human voices in each piece. *Children* does not include any dialogue; there are no interviews, nor is there any voice-over to guide the story – it is simply a snapshot of children's lives in the camp. Instead, some shots are tied together with visual and audio correlations: one child clapping cuts to two girls playing a hand clapping game; a football flies across the edge of the frame in one shot, immediately followed by a shot featuring a group of girls playing football. The only instances of human voices in the film are the children communicating with each other and the song one little girl sings that carries over into the shot that follows it.

In contrast, *Girls behind the lens* uses human voices in a variety of roles: Marah's personal voice-over, formal interviews and informal conversations that took place as she filmed. In using voices in this way, she is able to be more explicit about what she wants to communicate through the film.

The different styles featured in these two films seem to be a result, at least in part, of the increase in confidence Marah experienced between their productions. AKGC founder Laura Doggett recalls that Marah was not very talkative during her first workshop in 2014 (Durrett 2019); Marah describes herself as being very shy at that time: 'Anytime I would see a camera facing me, I would feel like there was a whole crowd watching me. I was very shy, and I did not like interviews either' (Marah Al Khatib 2017).

During my interview with her in 2017, she was proud to report that this is no longer the case:

> I sense that filming changed a lot in my personality. I had a weak character [before] ... now my personality has improved, kind of. ... Now I have the ability to film and conduct interviews ... and now I

> have the ability to speak in videos. In the beginning I used to be shy to put my voice in the video, but now it's okay OK (ibid).

This increase in confidence allowed Marah to progress from simply observing the world around her to feeling comfortable commenting on it. Early on, she was too shy to interact with most of her subjects, or even include her own voice in her film. Later, once her confidence had increased, she was able to interview her subjects, interact with them informally and be comfortable narrating parts of her footage; this, along with her new understanding of the impact her voice could have on an audience, resulted in work that takes a very specific and personal stance on her experience of displacement.

Marah's increase in confidence can be read as an increase in her sense of personal agency for it was through the process of developing her craft and sharing with an audience that she discovered the impact she can have on the world around her through her filmmaking. Her early observational style reflected a passive approach to interacting with her new home, while the investigative style showed how she had acquired agency manifest in an active – and interactive – way to understand and communicate her lived experience.

Conclusion

As we have seen, learning practical filmmaking facilitated opportunities for Raghad and Marah to reclaim their sense of agency – Raghad through creative expression in directing her short film and the sense of control it offered; and Marah by taking ownership of her new home and community and advocating on their behalf through her films, which in turn increased her self-confidence.

Reclaiming and further developing their sense of agency is one of many opportunities learning practical filmmaking offers to refugee youth – existing research suggests that learning filmmaking can also provide displaced youth opportunities to develop critical thinking, creative problem solving and cooperation skills, as well as provide a space to process the experience of displacement by reflecting on the past, interpreting the present and looking to the future (see Durrett 2019). Each of these tools can help address socio-emotional gaps left in the wake of forced displacement. It is my hope that continued research and implementation of these techniques and ideas will contribute to addressing the social and emotional needs of young people whose lives have been violently disrupted.

Finally, in addition to the socio-emotional benefits young adults may receive from learning filmmaking, the global community can also benefit from continued implementation and research into programmes such as these: not only do they create opportunities to build the capacity of youth living as refugees, but they also create a platform for voices directly impacted by displacement to share their first-hand experiences with the world. The sorts of stories these young people can tell are both unique and important, as they offer an understanding of the world only they can share – a perspective those working to address the needs of displaced populations must listen to if they hope to be effective in their endeavours.

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