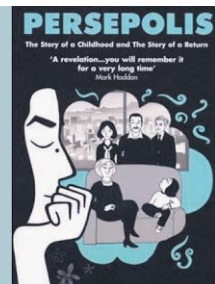


To revisit Persepolis, the graphic novels by Marjane Satrapi set in Iran during the Islamic Revolution, to help make sense of today's events. They have a magical ability to make the political personal. Dh36 (plus p&p) from [www.amazon.co.uk](http://www.amazon.co.uk)



The film *Burma VJ* was initially planned as a half-hour portrait of a man who reported on the suffering of the Burmese people, but it became a much different project when monks took to the streets in anti-government protests. Courtesy First Hand Films

# The inside story

In 2007, a documentary crew was following a young reporter in Myanmar when anti-government protests broke out. Ed Stocker on the resulting film and the undercover journalists who continue to defy the authorities

The monks, dressed in maroon robes, march down the road in silent protest. An assembled crowd begins to clap – tentatively at first, fearful of repercussions. Then, as the onlookers realise they are witnessing a significant moment in Myanmar's history, their confidence grows.

Young Rangoon residents cheer from surrounding tower-block balconies; others bow low towards the ground as the monks pass. The simmering undercurrent of revolt is palpable.

These powerful images from September 2007 caused a media stampede as they were picked up by news organisations and broadcast around the world. With no local press freedom and foreign crews banned from the country, it was a miracle that the defiant scenes were seen at all.

Myanmar remains one of the world's last outposts, shut off by a military junta that has wielded power for more than 40 years. It is practically impossible for international crews to film within the country, so it comes as no surprise that few films have been made about it.

The Danish producer Lise-Lense Møller was eager to redress this imbalance and, in early 2007, approached her compatriot and the renowned documentary filmmaker Anders Østergaard with the idea of making a documentary about the country's activist video journalists – courageous individuals using handycams and mobile phones to document the everyday abuses in their impoverished South-East Asian nation.

Østergaard was immediately attracted to the idea. He could not imagine the project would get caught up in one of the country's most important protests, sparked by the government's controversial fuel price hike.

"When we started discussing a film about Burma, it was very much because we felt that nothing had been made," Østergaard says. "It was as though the whole country had somehow gone missing."

The film was initially planned as a half-hour personal portrait of

"Joshua", a 27-year-old journalist (working under an assumed name) who provided the crew with small but unsensational reports about the suffering of the Burmese people.

After the project got under way, and in what Østergaard calls an "incredible coincidence", monks took to the streets and the film crew was suddenly gifted with unforgettable images.

"Initially, the film was going to be a very intimate, existential project about Joshua, the main character, and his day-to-day life. I felt that he was a bit of an alter ego of my own drive to make films," Østergaard says. "But you could say that the uprising took over the agenda of the film and suddenly it had another mission."

In 2007, the video journalists' footage – carried by stations such as CNN and the BBC – was visually arresting but accompanied by sparse information on what was happening. News trickled in piecemeal, often with little accompanying context.

In Østergaard's resulting film, *Burma VJ*, the jigsaw puzzle of what really happened during the uprising and subsequent military clamp-down is pieced together from the thousands of videos that Joshua and his journalists sent in. Østergaard and his crew spent eight months editing them.

But the film is much more than an extended news report about the situation in Myanmar, as the filmmaker is clear to point out. "*Burma VJ* is a documentary film about journalism – it's not a piece of journalism in itself," he says. "I look at documentaries as a complementary informer on reality, which means it goes side by side with journalism to tell you about the world."

The film provides this information through reenactments. Joshua serves as narrator, telling of his arrest and his subsequent move to Thailand, where he was fast-tracked from junior reporter to logistical co-ordinator. He begins to feed information to video journalists on the ground in Myanmar, telling them where to film and who to interview.

Joshua is a thread through the film, a device that allows the viewer to understand more than the mere facts of the uprising. The audience sees reconstructed telephone conversations between Joshua and his staff at key moments in the uprising, such as the military's shooting of the Japanese journalist Kenji Nagai. The conversations never actually took place but were made based on the testimonies of those involved.

"It helps the audience to decode what is going on but also to get an emotional insight," Østergaard says. "What state is the uprising in right now? What are the hopes? What is the atmosphere like?"

*Burma VJ* shows that no matter how closed a country is or how oppressive a regime is, you can't stop information leaking out. In the 21st century, citizen journalism is king: everyone is a blogger, social networker or amateur director. Most major news stories are now accompanied by shaky mobile phone footage that a viewer has sent in. Traditional news sources have lost their dominance – a situation made startlingly clear during the Myanmar protests.

While the video journalists who captured the 2007 events are professionals working for the Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB), an exiled news organisation based in Oslo, authoritarian conditions force them to make themselves indistinguishable from the populace.

Østergaard calls Joshua and his crew "guerrilla reporters who can throw themselves into the masses". It's from the masses that they can contradict the official line provided by state-sponsored media.

These journalists are continuing a tradition of activist journalism that dates from the earliest hand-held cameras of the 1960s. Juris Podnieks pioneered it during Latvia's fight for independence from the Soviet Union and, more recently, Zainap Gashaeva documented the war in Chechnya.

Filming on the streets of Rangoon means risking arrest and imprisonment, Joshua explains over the phone from an undisclosed loca-

**The film shows that no matter how closed a country is or how oppressive a regime is, you can't stop information leaking out**

tion in Thailand. "I always have fear whenever I do something," he says. "But when I get into the mood and am working, I forget everything."

The journalists' ability to avoid the authorities is testament to their intelligence in staying one step ahead. "I had expected possible arrest, so I'd planned what to answer," Joshua says of his run-in with the establishment. "So I have my fake name, fake address and fake story, and so I can give the authorities several answers."

Getting good images, though, is only half the struggle, according to Khin Maung Win, the deputy executive director of the DVB: "Even though you may have material, sending it is still a burden."

Websites are monitored; e-mail and social networking services are blocked. In 2007, the panicky regime shut down the country's entire internet network, but the video journalists had already planned for this, setting up their own satellite links to send images to the outside world.

Win says that the video of soldiers shooting Nagai only took a couple of minutes to upload via satellite, but cost them about \$1,000 (Dh3,673). It was clearly a price worth paying. As more negative images are aired around the world, the international community rallies against the dictatorship and its grip on power begins to loosen.

"Twenty years ago [in 1988, during other pro-democracy demonstrations], authorities had a free hand to kill the people," Win says. "Nowadays the situation has changed. Through the democratic movement, the people have reduced the space for the generals. At some point there will be no more space. In 1988 they killed 3,000 people, but in 2007 they couldn't kill similar numbers because there were cameras."

Despite this whiff of optimism, the film's closing sequences give a mixed message about the future of Myanmar. Joshua's network is broken up as the regime closes in on the journalists. Three of them are arrested and sent to jail. Win says that there are currently 10 DVB journalists in prison in Myanmar, and of the three arrested

at the end of the film, all are serving draconian sentences – one a staggering 55 years.

But Win refuses to see the negatives. "A higher number of political activists or journalists in prison indicates that there is strong resistance within the country and that the regime is not winning," he says.

Joshua, too, is keen to talk about how the network of journalists has been rebuilt since filming was completed, with more Burmese than ever wanting to join the ranks. Win talks with pride about the number of undercover journalists in Myanmar – more than double those working in 2007 – but asks that the figure not be published, for fear of playing into the junta's hands.

Nevertheless, the situation in Myanmar has arguably taken a turn for the worse in recent months with the arrest of the political leader Aung San Suu Kyi, who is facing trial over trumped up charges of breaking the rules of her house arrest. It shows that, despite a glimmer of hope, the generals aren't ready to relinquish power just yet.

What is certain, though, is that *Burma VJ* has helped maintain interest in the Burmese issue at a time when, faced with so many competing international news stories, it threatened to disappear from view. The junta simply can't control the media – whether it's video journalists sending images around the world or the DVB beaming a TV channel back into the country.

With it, an increasingly mediated Burmese population no longer fears talking to journalists representing an increasingly emboldened sense of democracy.

"People now find journalists when they want to say something – whenever they are oppressed by the authorities or the government," says Joshua. "In *Burma VJ*, I said that our stories were silent. But now, our stories aren't silent anymore."

● ***Burma VJ* is released in UK cinemas July 17 and will be shown at Abu Dhabi's Middle East International Film Festival in October. For more information visit [burmavjmovie.com](http://burmavjmovie.com) or [www.supportfreemedia.com](http://www.supportfreemedia.com).**