Focusing on the front line

Instant digital images lack the documentary's narrative, writes Burhan Wazir

The eruption of the Arab Spring sent shockwaves around the world as digital images of protest and violence provided an instant depiction of unfolding events. It continues to do so as distressing web videos expose the savagery of the Syrian army's continuing crackdown, and cameras in Tahrir Square capture clashes between ordinary Egyptians and the police.

A number of film-makers have tried to chronicle the changes sweeping the region. In recent months, documentaries from Egypt, Yemen, Morocco and Algeria have been shown at film festivals in Rotterdam and Berlin. Many reveal the aftershock of revolution and the numbing reality of people slowly enacting historic change against immovable state machinery. A number were filmed in the mayhem of the front line and have a YouTube quality to them. Hand-held cameras run through Tahrir Square; in Sana'a, the lens tracks protesting Yemenis fleeing gunfire from government troops across Change Square. Disciplined narrative is sometimes the first victim of this onscreen commotion. The films are impressions, rather than conclusive essays.

Directed by Petr Lom, *Back to the Square* visits Cairo one year after the departure of Hosni Mubarak. Lom, who has previously examined human rights issues in China and Kyrgyzstan, looks at the lives of Egyptians who have fallen victim to the tightening noose of army control. He begins the film by trying to track down a baby called Facebook, hastily named by her father Gamal Ibrahim to honour the role of the social networking site in fomenting protest, a quest that fails as the child proves elusive.

The film then shifts focus to examine the traumas of five Cairenes caught up in the chaos: an illiterate young boy who survives by selling decorative pyramids to tourists; a minibus driver arrested by the police who has acid scars from his interrogation; a young woman forced to endure a virginity test; an ex-convict tortured after being held in the police crackdown; and Maikel Nabil, a blogger sentenced to three years in jail for criticising the regime. As Mohammed, the former offender says: 'You removed the head, but the rest of the corruption remains. It's like a disease. You get rid of a part of it, but it keeps spreading all over your body.'

The Reluctant Revolutionary: Sean McAllister is unsure it will find an audience

Since the documentary was completed, Egypt has moved on, seeing renewed protests in Tahrir Square, attacks on Christians and an electoral victory by the Muslim Brotherhood. 'There is always a risk when covering a current affairs subject,' says Lom. 'I ended up choosing stories that are timeless. In the case of Egypt, these are also ongoing stories. These are unresolved issues that are shifting targets. In some cases, they have not been covered at all by the mainstream media. I was surprised not to have seen any in-depth reporting on the army, or the police, or the Ministry of Interior.'

The Arab Spring has provided unique challenges to documentary-makers. A dearth of available finance, exacerbated by the global recession, has had a detrimental effect. At the same time, the evolution of digital tools – lighter, more powerful cameras and affordable editing software – has seen documentary crews shrink in size. Directors who once travelled with teams now fulfil the role of camera person, sound technician, cinematographer and editor themselves. But the sheer scale of the protests, and the bloody reprisals, has meant documentary-makers, with little or no official affiliation to news organisations, face real dangers. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, 21 media professionals were killed in the Arab uprisings in the past year.

In the past decade, those once narrow streets of analogue film-making have been replaced by never-ending digital highways. News organisations now find themselves scrambling daily to respond to clips uploaded from Homs, Benghazi and Cairo; and why bother with trying to sell a new documentary to a finance-starved TV station, when its conception, creation and delivery can be shared across Twitter, Facebook and YouTube? Online channels such as Festival Scope function as TV stations, hosting hundreds of films from across the world.

The speed of events poses time challenges as well. *The Reluctant Revolutionary*, directed by British film-maker Sean McAllister, examines the story of Kais, a 35-year-old tour guide who is initially wary of the protests against Ali Abdullah Saleh, the President of Yemen. McAllister filmed the documentary on his own. 'The problem with the commissioning process is that you have to wait for other people ... then health and safety,' he says. 'When I went to Yemen, the revolution wasn't really kicking in. I went over as a tourist. And that is how Kais helped me stay there on a tourist visa.'

The Reluctant Revolutionary follows the transformation of Kais from a non-committal bystander to a critic of Saleh. The film's climax lies in footage shot on the 'Friday of Dignity massacre', during which government troops killed 52 protesters. 'It was more or less just me,' says McAllister, who witnessed the event.

So what will be the fate of his film? 'On one level it is getting harder to make documentaries pay. I have to be very creative when it comes to finding money.' *The Reluctant Revolutionary* will be screened at film festivals throughout the year and may also be shown to members of the Yemeni community in the UK – but McAllister is unsure if it will find an audience. 'These days, most people are looking immediately at instantaneously uploaded videos from an hour ago. There is a glut of it now from many of the Arab Spring countries – but it has no crafted style or narrative to it.'

McAllister may have hit on a point. The importance of a narrative thread was well understood by those at Thames Television who commissioned *The World at War*. The 26-part series took four years and an army of researchers to produce. It was first broadcast in 1973, nearly 30 years after the fighting in the trenches of Europe had stopped. Mobile phones have their limitations; history is not instantly uploaded.

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Richard Dalton

Iran: Empire of the Mind: A History from Zoroaster to the Present Day, by Michael Axworthy (Penguin, £9.99) is the most recent and accessible one-volume history of Iran. Axworthy's narrative provides a lively perspective on how the country came to be where it is, and a helpful guide to the prejudices of its people about the outside world.

Shah of Shahs, by Ryszard Kapuscinski (Penguin classics, £8.99) is brilliant reportage of the fall of the Shah in 1979 and the rise of the ruthless men who ushered in today's theocratic regime. In a series of despatches, the Polish reporter captures the tragedy of the Shah losing touch with the people. The memory of this murderous and destructive period still haunts many Iranians.

CELLULOID DREAMS

Persepolis, by Marjane Satrapi (Jonathan Cape, £14.99) is a wise and funny black-and-white comic strip, now made into a film, that tells the story of a young girl caught between tradition and modernity as she grows up during the revolution and the Iran-Iraq war. This deceptively simple book shows how the fate of individuals in Iran is so often determined by public events.

Let the Swords Encircle Me: Iran – a Journey Behind the Headlines, by Scott Peterson (Simon & Schuster, £11.51) is a book by a journalist I admire for his deep knowledge of Iran and penetrating observations. Peterson has been travelling to Iran for many years, and the result is a book which is right up to date. He lets the facts speak for themselves.

Le Turban et la Rose, by Francois Nicoullaud (Editions Ramsay, €18). This series of essays, by my former colleague, the French ambassador, seeks to strip away the veils of misunderstanding which envelop so many aspects of Iran. There are two themes: the theocratic Iran we see in the headlines, with its nuclear ambitions, and the immemorial Iran, which lives on in the courtly manners of the people and the breathtaking landscapes. Should be translated into English.

The English Amongst the Persians, by Denis Wright (Heinemann, out of print). Iranians like to blame Britain for what they see as the bad hand that history has dealt them. This book takes us through the unequal commercial treaties of the late 19th century, occupation during two world wars, and the removal of the elected nationalist leader Mossadegh in a 1953 coup engineered by Britain and the US. Many Iranians feel that foreign interference has left a worse legacy than outright colonisation.

My Uncle Napoleon, by Iraj Pezeshkzad (Modern Library, £10.50). Set in the 1940s during the Allied occupation of Iran, this novel lampoons the Iranian obsession that Britain is behind everything that happens in their country. An amusing tale of love and family life in Tehran, with characters who are still recognisable. Part of the mental landscape of middle-class Iranians.

Sir Richard Dalton was British Ambassador to Iran 2003-6