

Burma VJ

Denmark/Sweden/Italy/UK/
Germany/Netherlands/Norway/
Israel/Spain/Belgium
Cert 12A 89 m

Crew

Director	Anders Østergaard
Producer	LiseLense-Møller
Script	Anders Østergaard & Jan Krogsgaard
Cinematography	Simon Plum
Editors	Janus Billeskov Jansen Thomas Papapetros
Composer	Conny C-A Malmqvist

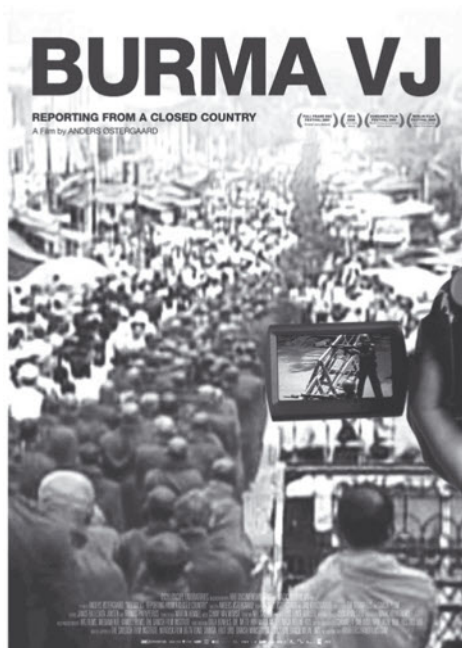
with

Joshua, Ko Maung, Tun Zaw, Aung Win

Synopsis

A documentary charting the efforts of Burma's underground network of video journalists to capture footage for foreign news agencies of the September 2007 uprising by Buddhist monks and civilian; against the ruling military junta. Using a mixture of real recording and reconstructions, the film follows Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB) reporter 'Joshua' as he attempts to coordinate his crew of jour- nalists and evade arrest, while the military response to the protests grows increasingly brutal. When the uprising fails, police detain many of the journalists. Joshua goes into hiding, but vows to form a new network in the future.

Sight & Sound August 2009



Reviews

Burma is under a repressive military regime. To a Western mind, it's hard to imagine plain clothes agents of the government arresting anybody holding a camera (who's not another agent), or soldiers shooting protesters in the streets then airing TV messages like "RFA, AFP, BBC [free press] saboteurs, watch your step!" Almost all images from inside Burma come from a few brave Burmese "reporters" with Sony Handicams. They leave them rolling in their bags, then briefly unveil the lens to capture a piece of an event without being discovered, which is the extent of their reporting. They upload the footage over the Internet or smuggle it to Thailand. From there it goes to Oslo, Norway where it's broadcast back into Burma. Burma VJ is Anders Østergaard's documentary about the anonymous cameramen known as The Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB). Without them, the world does not see what happens in Burma.

Having the emotional effect of a thriller because each action anticipates a truly brutal response by the government, to actually use the word "thriller" cheapens the power of the footage and the sacrifices made to get it out. "Joshua" is the narrator of the story. He was compromised during a very small protest in 2007 and went into exile in Thailand. The footage he and his VJs caught of that small protest was played over and over on national media. Something changed. Since 3,000 Burmese were killed during massive protests in 1988, the country had been oppressed in an airtight silence. For 19 years, Joshua says "our stories were silent," meaning they filmed silent people, restrained from any political expression. VJs themselves questioned whether anybody that wound up in front of their hidden lens was an agent who was onto them. Then the small sidewalk protest that sent Joshua to Thailand inspired thousands of monks to step out of monasteries in peaceful protest. At that point, bravery spread like a virus. For a week in September 2007, the brief clips captured and smuggled out by the DVB to Joshua in Thailand and on to Oslo changed world politics. This is not a traditional film and it defies a traditional review. Director Anders Østergaard does a compelling job re-stitching the events in chronological order. Re-enactments of Joshua in his office in Thailand, gives the film a personal point of view as the story unfolds before him, like it does us, in the footage coming in from the reporters he handles. But the story of the events from the start of the protests to their inevitable demise was a matter of simply telling what happened, rather than the sporadic bursts of information broadcast news provided at the time. The bulk of the footage is authentic, real people doing something truly brave. Real bravery, not being retold by people or re-enacted with actors, is inexplicably beautiful.

As tens of thousands of people who've lived for 19 years stifled by fear begin to clap, shout and march down the street knowing they may not see nightfall, watching the movie feels like a privilege to see an authentic record of our capacity for courage. It's a pure decision, to set aside fear and say "I want to be free," even if it means death. Witnessed with wonder and then with despair as the inevitable response from the government comes, there's a palpable feeling that watching Burma VJ is an amazing cinematic experience that somehow becomes an act of solidarity.

Taken from a review by Paul Moore, Sundance 2009