

(Inter)(in)animation in Exile

(INTER)(IN)ANIMATING CONTESTED REALITIES OF WAR AND OCCUPATION

The attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, and the subsequent and controversial decision of the Bush Jr. administration and the UK to begin aerial bombardment of Afghanistan, launching the geographically and temporally sprawling “War on Terror” as a response to attacks committed by nonstate actors, immediately gave rise to a proliferation and looped broadcasting of documentary and fiction films foregrounding the plight of Afghan women and children.¹ Some of these had been made before 9/11, but they took on new meaning, purpose, and interest after it. As Martin Kramer wrote in 2002 in *The Middle East Quarterly*, “The Western publics hungered for images from inside Afghanistan. . . . Afghanistan had long appealed to a few adventurous filmmakers, and their work quickly began to fill television screens, engaging vast audiences that otherwise would not have given a moment of their time to a film on Afghanistan.”² Feminist media scholarship has highlighted the ways in which US- and European-funded media projects in Afghanistan, often themselves under a liberal feminist banner, mobilized and fetishized images of Afghan girls as silent, passive, and tragically doomed, of Afghan men as misogynists and religious extremists, and of Afghan women as a homogenous and isolated group of people incapable of helping themselves. Wazhmah Osman, a scholar of Afghan media and one of the filmmakers discussed below, describes Afghan women in these films as “caught between the ‘white saviours’ and Islamic extremists.”³ Such media descriptions imply comparisons with western European and North American contexts that posit an absolute separation between Afghan and other identities, occluding the

diversity and power of Afghan and Afghan-diaspora feminist resistance movements and disavowing the gendered, cultural, political, racial, sexual, and religious oppressions (among other forms of oppression) experienced by people in Western contexts. As Osman argues, “The reality is that Afghan women and Afghan women’s rights movements are not monolithic or singular entities. There are many different groups that range from communist to secular to moderately religious to more religious,” and she describes herself as working most closely with “feminist activist and media rights groups who are more on the left-of-center.”⁴

Postcards from Tora Bora (Kelly Dolak and Wazhmah Osman, 2007), selected for the Tribeca Film Festival in May 2007, is an eighty-five-minute film that is categorized as a documentary.⁵ Kelly Dolak, now a television production professor at Ramapo College, shot and coproduced the film. Prior to making *Postcards*, she had worked in television production and, with Liss Platt, had made the short experimental video *Purse*, which humorously explores the relationship between purses and two butch women.⁶ Dolak has gone on to make documentary films about a range of topics, including *Loyalty Code* (2017), which examines Penn State students’ relationship to football coach Joe Paterno.⁷ Osman’s story is quite different. She was born in Kabul into a secular Muslim family but came to the United States via Pakistan in her adolescence and grew up in New Jersey and New York.⁸ Prior to making *Postcards*, Osman, now a media studies and production professor at Temple University who specializes in Afghan media networks, worked for six years at Millennium Film Workshops and Cooper Union School of the Arts as a film technician, film instructor, and curator. She had also made several experimental Super 8 and 16mm shorts, as well as a human rights short entitled *Buried Alive: Afghan Women under the Taliban* (1999).⁹

At various moments throughout the predominantly live-action film, *Postcards* activates (inter)(in)animating effects done by Stephen Jablonsky, who was also a producer for the film.¹⁰ These effects, which invade and sometimes replace photorealistic, documentary images with graphic elements, catalyze explorations of the interconnectedness of personal and collective experience, memory and history, self and other, foreign and domestic. Throughout, the filmmakers juxtapose archival political news footage, family photographs, and Super 8 home movies with animated tourist brochures from the 1970s geared toward people the young Osman knew as “heepees,” animated Afghan children’s drawings of war experiences, and an animated masked superhero version of Osman’s childhood self who sneaks into a variety of photographed scenarios. *Postcards* pressures the category of documentary or nonfiction film through its visual experiments, particularly its use of animation, special effects, and intertextual references, and these experimental, intermedial occurrences often coincide with moments of unreliable memory and unstable source materials. This chapter asks what these playful and basic animation techniques created in Adobe AfterEffects and Apple Motion contribute to

the filmmakers' temporal, affective, and generic toolbox as they grapple with the challenge of filming the gendered and multigenerational experience of continuous war across the geographic spaces of the United States and Afghanistan.¹¹

Animation, which constructs time and space frame by frame rather than recording it continuously, can help to visualize these unruly and collaged experiences of war's fraught, fracturing, and amalgamating temporalities and displacing geographies. *Postcards* is made from multiple and hyphenated points of view, times, and places, and animation is mobilized by the filmmakers to convey something of the compound, taut, and straddling positionalities forged by the experiences and legacies of occupation. Here the filmmakers do not seek to mobilize a convincingly realist animated aesthetic but rather employ visually disjunctive animated effects to signal the impossibility of a smooth and coherent aesthetic for some lived experiences and memory landscapes. This film's use of intermedial and fragmentary animated disruptions to the coherence of the image thus represents not only a mode of talking back to post-9/11 totalizing media narratives but also a broader form of resistance to a much longer and more widespread use of documentary and ethnographic misrepresentational practices by colonial and imperial powers to manage, smooth, and control how the experiences of occupied people, practices, and histories are understood and transmitted across time and space.

For this chapter, it is useful to adapt the critical framework that Colleen Jankovic develops for thinking about animated and "hybrid animated/live-action" films within the Palestinian context. Though Afghanistan and Palestine have quite distinct histories, they have in common long and evolving violent histories of occupation. In the decades following World War II, these occupations have been in part driven and sustained, as Adam Hanieh recently argued, by the centrality of Gulf oil to global energy economies. Hanieh delineates how, with the shift from coal to oil, both the United States, as the new global power, and allied western European countries identified Middle Eastern allies to facilitate the ongoing suppression of Arab nationalist movements to protect post-World War II Western interests in "fossil capitalism."¹² Although the roles played by Palestine and Afghanistan in this economy are distinct, US and western European strategic interests in forging extraction-driven alliances with Israel and Afghanistan have inflicted massive numbers of deaths and maimings on both Palestinian and Afghan civilian populations.¹³ Afghanistan and Palestine share the experience of having histories marked by charged ideological differences that are often legacies of colonial and imperial projects, resulting in powerfully contested national narratives that shape the landscape of documentary filmmaking about these places. In both contexts, Western media outlets depict civilians as either helplessly incapable of resistance or, as Fathi Nimer argues in a discussion of the "enduring and racist trope of Palestinian rejectionism," participants in modes of resistance framed as "regressive," "rooted in a fear of ingenuity and prosperity," "intransigent," incapable of being "reasoned with," and "extreme."¹⁴

Jankovic writes,

I begin with the understanding that cartoons and animation have a specific historical and political relevance in the Palestinian context; this sets them apart from most Western animated cinema, which informs Western animation theory, and which has tended to dominate the field of animation studies. . . . Palestinian animation, especially the prevalence of documentary, political, and serious animation, foregrounds a unique Palestinian realist aesthetic, one born of conditions of occupation and visions of resistance, that confounds many definitions and theorisations of animation, and that both broadens and further unsettles the field of Palestinian cinema studies.¹⁵

Jankovic highlights the way that animation might offer Palestinian filmmakers “an alternative representational route” to modes of cinema that have denied Palestinian characters agency, or that, sometimes inadvertently, reinforce settler colonial paradigms as the only reality.¹⁶ “Animated, hybrid, and experimental modes,” Jankovic suggests, “provide the world with a new way to engage with diverse Palestinian stories, the ongoing struggle against Israeli occupation, and the struggle for justice for Palestinians.”¹⁷ *Postcards*, a film about a dispersed population facing similar challenges, explores animation’s possibilities for mediating a particular Afghan American person’s narrative within a hybrid form that combines 8mm home movies and contemporary live-action documentary and newsreel footage with graphic, often-playful, and at times even comical animated effects.¹⁸

CHILDREN’S MEDIA/WAR MEDIA AND THE PERIODIZATION OF VIOLENCE

To describe the film’s use of animation and special effects in *Postcards* as “playful” or “comical” does not underestimate these techniques’ aesthetic potential for intervening in how experiences of war are mediated. In this chapter, I am particularly interested in tracing how animation renders a world in which “childhood” and “war” threaten to collapse into each other. Numerous twenty-first-century animation scholars, including Annabelle Honess Roe, Donna Kornhaber, Tess Takahashi, and Stefanie Van de Peer, have challenged film historians’ and theorists’ tendency to deprioritize animation as a childish form of media and to favor documentary and live-action, realist cinema as more appropriate for the depiction of major events of world history, including war. Yet *Postcards* offers a view of life, often filtered through the perspectives of children and young people, suggesting that the conditions under which late twentieth- and twenty-first-century children in Kabul live begin to dissolve divisions between categories such as “children’s media” and “war media,” or “memories of childhood” and “memories of war.” Furthermore, the temporality of this state of being is inadequately expressed by habits of periodization that date “war” according to formal declarations of war and peace. These habits ignore the persistent life-destroying “aftereffects”

of war, the morphing of one violent conflict into another, and the future-oriented and unpredictable timeline and targets of unexploded munitions, not to mention the nonlinear operations of trauma on the mind and body, the day-to-day effects of community dispersal and fractured and leveled material infrastructures.

Children are the most vulnerable to all of the literal and figural as-yet-unexploded devices thrown into the future. As Brown University's "Costs of War" project reports on the contemporary situation in Afghanistan, "Even in the absence of fighting, unexploded ordnance from this war and landmines from previous wars continue to kill, injure, and maim civilians. Fields, roads, and school buildings are contaminated by ordnance, which often harms children as they go about chores like gathering wood."¹⁹ The fact that children as well as other civilians in the contemporary war context are being maimed and killed by devices from past wars creates perpetrator-victim relationships across massive temporal distances, and even at times across the line dividing the living and the dead, the born and the unborn, making nonsense of the ways in which war's agents, victims, and agendas, or the duration of its beginnings and endings, are calculated, recorded, and assessed.²⁰

LOCATION SHOOTING, HYPHENATED HISTORIES

While the opening of *Postcards* suggests that Osman is returning to Afghanistan to shoot the film after an absence of twenty years, in fact Osman had actually already visited Kabul both in 1997 and then again in January 1999, where she shot secretly during the height of the Taliban regime at a moment when the US government was still working closely with Unocal in the hope of building a trans-Afghan pipeline.²¹ The 1999 trip was funded by the US-based Feminist Majority Foundation (FMF), an organization that worked briefly with RAWA (the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan) from 1997 to increase awareness about the Taliban's treatment of women until differences ultimately divided the two feminist organizations, and the footage generated during this trip was employed to support the liberal agenda of FMF.²² This difference between how Osman, the character in *Postcards*, represents the timeline of her presence in Afghanistan and the filmmaker's actual history of return to the country might suggest a need to recategorize *Postcards* as something other than a nonfiction film. And yet even in this seemingly clear example of a discrepancy between fact and fiction, I wonder about the impact of shooting undercover, invisibly, on a filmmaker's sense of presence in time and place. In response to this observation, Osman describes the difference between the earlier trips, which involved being in Afghanistan during times of active war that were "filled with danger," and the later trip, which was the first time she found herself able "to reflect on [her] home and its destruction."²³ Such conditions introduce existential ambiguities and spectral presences into historical and film historical narratives, and the film's animated effects arise particularly at such moments when the very question of existence seems to be at stake.

What, the film seems to ask, does location shooting mean for a diasporic subject? How might (inter)(in)animated modes of filmmaking capture the condition of living simultaneously in multiple places? Such questions are brought into the foreground in a scene where Osman travels with Dolak and her aunt, an Afghan American doctor who has returned to do aid work, to Quar-Ga, a lake on the outskirts of Kabul. There they encounter slightly older male youths, and the film shows the aunt asking, "Brothers, why are you looking at us this way? We are all Afghan." One responds, "Where are you from?" to which the aunt replies, "We are from Kabul." When the man presses and asks, skeptically, "These other sisters too?," the aunt replies, "Almost, close to Kabul. . . . She's from New York." Although there is tension, they all laugh together as the man rejects the reality offered by the aunt, insisting, "New York is so far and Kabul's so close." Though the scene is clearly presented for its humor, this humor also makes space for the mutually imbricated geographical imaginations of diasporic subjectivity and occupation that complicate how subjects and geographic spaces are narrated in relation to each other over periods of time that are similarly complicated. The film's use of (inter)(in)animation, an intermedial, relational, still-moving experimental practice, works in parallel ways.

Postcards reflects not just the hyphenated and evolving consciousness of Osman, an Afghan American diasporic filmmaker, over the course of her life up to the point of filmmaking but also the specific experiences of Dolak, a queer, white, American filmmaker, and this further complicates the film's place of utterance. The two filmmakers collaborate to shoot a documentary about Afghanistan during a four-month visit to the country through a relationship involving a partnership that is both personal and professional. The film's experimental, (inter)(in)animating tactics, added during the inappropriately named "postproduction," occur within a landscape of broader resistance on the part of the experimental filmmaking team to certain industry expectations for a film on the topic of Afghanistan, even within the independent sphere. For example, in spite of pressure exerted by an independent publicist at Tribeca to market the film through a focus on the filmmakers' personal relationship for a North American audience growing tired of films about Afghanistan, the filmmakers refused. The film's associate producer, Elissa Federoff, confirms that this resistance added to the challenge of finding a publicist for the film, which she describes as having "just missed the window" for interest in films about Afghanistan by about a year, although she supported Osman's resistance to having the film be packaged on these terms: "I understand that [Osman] didn't want criticism of the film in Afghanistan; didn't want it to be an LGBT film—that's not what the movie was. It made no sense to have that as an angle."²⁴ At Tribeca, some film industry professionals further advised Dolak and Osman to shed Osman's voice and replace it with "a celebrity voice-over," which the filmmakers also refused to do (Angelina Jolie was suggested). Prior to the film being picked up by Documentary Educational Resources, HBO, IFP, Women Make Movies, and

the PBS documentary series *POV* looked closely at it, but perhaps as a result of some of the filmmakers' experiments and refusals, these all ultimately chose not to accept the film.

Historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot has highlighted the way that linear chronologies of "facts" produce historical silences, tending to erase process and context, as well as nonhegemonic ways of conceptualizing time and narrating experiences of the past.²⁵ *Undead* foregrounds work in which artists use animation-based techniques in dialogue with other media modes to create intermedial spaces that offer the viewer simultaneous access to competing ways of mediating temporality, place, and experience. In doing so, although there is no outrunning the historical impact of the history of representation, such works intervene into hegemonic and singular historical narratives and genres and make more room, through the formal layering of image types, for occluded aspects of hegemonic war narratives.

In *Postcards*, the animated pictures of, and drawings by, children combine with low-budget animated effects to become vehicles through which to express past and present Afghan children's experiences of war, experiences that may exceed the representational capacity of more conventional documentaries about Afghanistan. The filmmakers' (inter)(in)animations can be divided into three primary categories. First, they use animated special effects embedded within live-action footage and photographs to disrupt the selected images and to stage encounters between contemporary realities and prevalent fantasies regarding Afghanistan and its people. Second, Dolak and Osman cut up, collage, and animate drawings made by Afghan children orphaned by war to depict not only the child-artists' experiences of war but also Osman's own early childhood experiences of war in Afghanistan in the 1970s, as narrated by Osman's adult, Afghan American self. Finally, the filmmakers cut up and animate a childhood photo of Osman as a young child, introducing her as a powerful, fantastical, and superhero-like avatar of the filmmaker's childhood self into an otherwise realist narrative. This animated avatar crosses the boundaries of time, space, and medium, offering narrative and audiovisual possibilities that would otherwise have been harder to access in the documentary mode. This chapter focuses on understanding these (inter)(in)animating tactics individually, as they interact with other aspects of the film, and in the broader discursive context of war media.

(INTER)(IN)ANIMATING EFFECTS

Prior to boarding the plane at Dubai, Osman examines her ticket for the Ariana Airlines flight. Her voice-over explains the nationalist importance of Ariana Airlines, something reinforced by the map of Afghanistan hanging at the front of the plane. The camera zooms in on the dated tourist photographs that illustrate the back of the ticket as Osman points out the Intercontinental Hotel, explaining that "half of it is shelled." She then highlights the image of the Bamiyan

Buddhas, commenting, “And that doesn’t exist anymore either,” adding that it is “sad and funny at the same time” that the airline is using 1970s images for “selling Afghanistan.” These verbally articulated discrepancies between the idealized photographic images of Afghanistan on Osman’s plane ticket and the material reality of the sites in the film anticipate *Postcards*’ subsequent visual strategy of presenting the viewer with a variety of possible realities.

Once the filmmakers are on the plane and in the air, the camera looks out of the window onto Afghanistan’s mountain ranges. The film cues viewers to understand that this returning-exile story will differ from other, more nostalgic versions of the genre when the narration that accompanies this mountainscape does not foreground Osman’s longing for Afghanistan, although Osman will later describe such feelings. Instead, this aerial view of the mountains leads the filmmaker to discuss the media infrastructure of Afghanistan during the US occupation and the fact that the Americans have taken control of the higher airspace, causing civilians traveling with Ariana to fly uncomfortably close to these nation-defining peaks. This gesture positions the film between earlier media fantasies of Afghanistan and what Lisa Parks describes as the United States’ “broader struggles for aero-orbital domination since 9/11,” and underscores Osman’s performance of herself as a hybrid figure who is both a returning exile and a transnational feminist media scholar.²⁶

The tourist images on the plane ticket dominate the film’s first extended animation sequence, which brings to life these and other anachronistic views of major cultural sites in Afghanistan. In these early sequences, an animated Ariana plane flies ominously close to key landmarks, including the Intercontinental Hotel and the Minaret at Jam, built in 1165 by the Ghurid Sultan. The plane casts a shadow on the Bamiyan Buddhas as it sweeps past the rockface, but it fails to disturb a circle of hippies sitting around in canvas deck chairs as it flies, to the tune of an upbeat, electronic 1970s soundtrack, over their straw huts located somewhere on the hippie trail. But as the film cuts to a closeup of the nose of this animated tourist plane, the sky turns from sunny blue to black and cloudy. In the next mountainous scene, the hippies seem to have been replaced by a circle of Afghan men and children, playing and listening to music while animated flames dot the landscape behind them, as if an aerial bombardment has just occurred. The plane now circles past the same famous monuments that the viewer has just seen, as featured on the back of Osman’s anachronistic plane ticket. Although the tourists continue to sunbathe by the Intercontinental’s pool, fixed by the photograph’s static form, animated effects bring the scene into the twenty-first century (figure 16). A hotel marquee, some rooms, the hotel roof, and a distant building flicker with flames as smoke rises up to meet the Ariana plane flying overhead. At the moment the animated plane starts to climb up over the Bamiyan Buddhas, we see and hear a fiery explosion where the photographic Buddha was just a moment earlier. In a painfully ironic cut, the film returns the viewer to an inside shot of Osman and



FIGURE 16. Burning Hotel Intercontinental with plane, in Kelly Dolak and Wazhmah Osman's *Postcards from Tora Bora*, 2007.

Dolak's plane, as if nothing had happened, just in time for an announcement that thanks passengers for flying with Ariana and welcomes them to Afghanistan. This sequence conveys some of the structural damage done to Afghanistan's infrastructure and cultural heritage by decades of war and the disavowals required for "moving on" in the wake of wars that fail to end. It also prepares the viewer for an animated, temporally and spatially composited picture of this place and fosters a somewhat skeptical relation to the film's presentation of reality.

Osman's own authority as a returning exile similarly either falters or is contradicted throughout the film, but in ways that reinforce what the film achieves through its use of animation. Early on, Osman tells viewers that we are looking at her family photos, only later to reveal that her own family photos were stolen and that she has actually had to beg and borrow the images in the film from other relatives. The instability of the authority of the film's images is further undermined when viewers gradually realize that the film moves, sometimes in unmarked ways, between subjective and objective points of view, between personal images from the present shot by the filmmakers and archival footage that stands in for personal memories from the more distant past. For example, as Osman recalls memories of standing with her sister on the family's balcony, spitting or throwing plant pots at Soviet soldiers as they marched through the streets below after the 1979 invasion,

her voice-over acts as a bridge linking footage shot by the filmmakers on the balcony in the present with archival news footage shot from a similar angle. This suggests that remembered media images loop in Osman's mind and fuse with her personal memories as she stands on the balcony in the film's present, shaping her perception of the street in both the past and the present.

Something complicated is happening here in terms of the way that images mediate authority, truth, and time throughout the film. By using archival footage of the Soviet presence in Kabul to visualize a personal memory, the filmmakers risk undermining the historical index and truth claims of these images they present. In *Postcards*, Osman's private experience of her youth in Kabul and Peshawar is set against and interwoven with key moments from the political history of Afghanistan. On numerous occasions, personal and political memories are narrated chronologically over newsreel montages of political events and regime changes. Although the film plays with narrative linearity, it is not indifferent to historical time, and at moments it slips into the register of a more traditional documentary, providing viewers with thumbnail historical overviews. Shortly after the film intercuts Soviet footage from the 1970s to the present, Osman's narration takes viewers systematically through a series of political disruptions to government stability from the late 1970s on. The filmmakers use matches on action and sound bridges to bring archival footage from different moments along this political timeline spanning several decades into dialogue with the subjective space of Osman's memory landscape. This effort seems to mediate Osman's inner and outer vision for the film viewer, occasionally injecting Dolak's perspective, perhaps as a reminder of the film's present and of points of view that exist beyond Osman. Jablonsky's experiments with animation and special effects reinforce the film's pervasive disruption of coherent relationships among time, space, and authorial identity, which is also achieved through the juxtaposition of different points of view, moments in time, and image formats.²⁷

After a roll call of "Soviet puppets" that coincides with the merging of Osman's present-day vision with that of her six-year-old self, the character of Osman begins to separate into adult and childhood selves. This splitting further multiplies the already-complex authorial point of utterance and uses a combination of animation and feminist humor to resist the ways in which Afghan children, and especially Afghan girls, have historically been used in liberal human rights documentary films and photographs. This mode is exemplified in Steve McCurry's photograph *Afghan Girl*, which first appeared in *National Geographic* in June 1985 with the caption, "Haunted eyes tell of an Afghan refugee's fears."²⁸ Such images introduce Afghan girls as aestheticized victims, as puppets for ventriloquizing American foreign policy priorities as if they were the personal dreams of the appropriated, decontextualized, and anonymized girls. Such images and their framing, which often demonize Afghan men as they render Afghan women and girls helpless, exemplify Spivak's succinct formulation of gendered colonial

fantasy—“White men are saving brown women from brown men.”²⁹ *Postcards* tries to refute these clichés, which influence Afghan identities across the spectrum of gender and time.

(INTER)(IN)ANIMATING UNSTABLE WAR MEMORIES

The temporal compression of the balcony scene dissolves into a view of Afghan children playing on a climbing frame (one child is dressed in camouflage pants, visualizing the banal and early permeation of militarization into everyday life). Osman's voice-over describes the split from which her animated avatar springs: “My six-year-old self is forever stuck in Kabul. It's a part of me that I left behind. I may have moved on as an adult, but my six-year-old self is still searching, trying to make sense of what happened. Maybe I'm trying to make sense of something that doesn't make any sense at all, because how does one make sense of war?” (Inter)(in)animation becomes a tool for mediating this memory landscape that is dynamic and static, and for visualizing, albeit incompletely, the interactions among parts of a nonsingular self that exists simultaneously in multiple temporal and geographic locations. From the space of her childhood living room, Osman recalls her misperception of an aerial bombing as fireworks until her balcony windows shattered, a moment that marks her awareness of the beginning of decades of war. Speaking over archival footage and photographs, Osman's narration illustrates the challenge of disentangling personal and national histories as she describes the Soviet installation of Nur Muhammad Taraki (1978) in what she calls a “bloody coup” alongside the imprisonment of her father.

In her scholarly book *Television and the Afghan Culture Wars: Brought to You by Foreigners, Warlords, and Activists*, Osman provides a specific and linear narrative about how her family was affected by the Soviet-Afghan War. She writes:

My father, Dr. Abdullah Osman, a physician, was actively involved in helping different sectors of Afghan society in exile. During the Soviet invasion, the Soviet-backed government imprisoned my father, and my family fled Kabul to refuge in neighboring Pakistan. While most of our extended family and other Afghans moved from the refugee camps of Pakistan to other countries, when my father was released after serving a year and a half as a prisoner of war he stayed in the camps to help with efforts to assist an estimated three million Afghan refugees of all *quowms*. He set up multiple free health clinics and medical training workshops. He along with my mother, Mina Osman, a teacher[,] also established the first girls' school in the refugee camps, Nahid-I Shahid (Nahid the Martyred) School, which my sisters and I attended. With the help of the Inter-Aid Committee he also started the collective Union of Muhahid Doctors and became its director. He is well known and respected as a humanitarian and human rights advocate for all Afghans.³⁰

I quote this passage at length because it provides a striking contrast to the audio-visualization of the family memory Osman offers in *Postcards* in a scene that takes

place in front of the family television. Rather than narrating a full and accurate personal and political history, the film mediates the point of view of a child's only partially comprehending experience of the impact of war on her life. As Osman states in the film, "I didn't understand the details; all I knew was that Boba [Osman's father] had disappeared."

The historical narrative of the film is unstable not only because of its focus on Osman's and other children's confusing experiences and memories of war in Afghanistan but also because of the broader historiographic challenges posed by a lack of collective consensus on the history of Afghanistan. Here it is helpful to consider the work of another Afghan American artist, filmmaker, and teacher, Mariam Ghani. In her experimental film *What We Left Unfinished* (2021), which addresses the state-run Afghan Film Archives, as well as in the research-based collaborative workshops she runs, Ghani stresses that any Afghan national memory project attempting accurately to reflect shared experiences of war is necessarily fraught. Of the period of communist rule in Afghanistan, for example, Ghani insists that there is "no fixed history of this time" because it was experienced as a civil war. The "ways of telling" that time, Ghani states, are internally "contested and conflicted." Thus the filmmaker sees her own work as seeking, not to close the "historically unsettled epistemic gaps," but rather to consider Afghanistan *through* what Najrin Islam describes as "the gaps between lived realities and totalizing aspirations."³¹ For Ghani, "Art is a really powerful space both to recover forgotten histories and to imagine possible futures. . . . Afghanistan's artists should be encouraged to play that role, and to play it to a much greater extent than they have so far."³²

Postcards' (inter)(in)animating effects often underscore how Osman's personal experiences shape and misshape her understandings of the past and present too, and she acknowledges that the way this happens at times eludes her grasp. The film repeatedly experiments with how the simultaneous use of different filmmaking modes might mediate what Judith Butler describes as "the subject opaque to itself."³³ For Butler, this opacity is not first a symptom of war trauma but rather an inescapable general condition, fundamental to being. Yet their illuminating discussion of this opacity, which asks readers to consider "what it might mean to continue in a dialogue where no common ground can be assumed," has important consequences for thinking about what Butler describes as "the determination of agency and the possibility of hope," particularly in contexts where seemingly perpetual war challenges the possibility of shared understandings of the past.³⁴

Even in the absence of the film's animated effects, the status of Osman's voice-over is somewhat slippery as it moves across remote childhood memories and adult observations in the film's present. But the film's use of animation gives visual form to these narrative instabilities and foregrounds the operations of fiction, fantasy, adaptation, and desire in the historical and mnemonic landscapes of and around war. Although grainy archival news footage imposes an authenticating reality effect throughout the film, Osman repeatedly undercuts this authentication

by drawing attention to her failures to grasp accurately what she sees and hears as a child. In one humorous example of the discrepancies between perception and reality in her youth, she describes confidently singing with her sister along with Joan Jett's "A LO MAMA LO," only later to learn that the actual lyrics were "I love Rock 'n' Roll."

As Osman and Dolak repeatedly try and fail to locate idealized sites from Osman's childhood memories, Osman acknowledges that she is "beginning to think that I had made it all up in my head . . . the good old days." Eventually, she finds "evidence" of the "Kabul of my past" in a tourist brochure from the 1970s aimed at what Osman, as a child, used to call "heepee" tourists. But here too, the viewer wonders how many of Osman's childhood "memories" derive from, or at least are blurring with, these recently discovered images of the past. Osman shows the brochures to bemused taxi drivers, asking them, as if they were time-machine pilots able to traverse the space between the past and the present, to take her to these idyllic-looking places, to (inter)(in)animate these static and obsolescent tourist photographs using the kinetic energy of their vehicles. One driver simply refuses; another tries to help the two filmmakers with their seemingly hopeless and somewhat surreal quest. After the filmmakers are dropped off on a hillside, they try without much success to match what they see with the brochure's images. Signaling the disorientation of this moment of arrival and the failure of this effort to animate an Afghanistan that is simultaneously remembered and fantastical, we hear Dolak's uncertain voice from behind the camera asking, "Where's the river?" "Where's the mosque here?" Many of the sites they seek turn out to be either prohibited by the American military occupation, rubble-strewn, or simply unidentifiable. Recalling Reid Kelley's poetry recitals at the graves of World War I's fallen soldiers, the filmmakers' search risks being an exercise in futility, except for what these performances of mnemonic desire render visible and thinkable: the interaction between people and places bound together by long-lasting experiences of perpetual, if evolving, war contexts.

Throughout *Postcards*, Osman and Dolak focus less on how epistemic gaps play out in Afghanistan's national narrative than on how to mediate the contestations, contradictions, and fusions of childhood memories of war and place as they play out within a single person's interior landscape. As memories invade Osman's present and future, the film collages and (inter)(in)animates different types of images to visualize how fusions and contradictions in memory can shape war survivors' interactions with the exterior world, resulting in complex and abstract mediations of time and space that challenge existing scholarly frameworks for conceptualizing and analyzing historical images.³⁵ Osman describes longing to return to Kabul, but once she is there, she repeatedly performs her uncertainty about where she is and what she's looking at, an uncertainty brought about both by the impact of war on the city and by the role that she documents fantasy to play in her memory of home. Though this might undermine Osman's authority as a reliable or objective

guide through Kabul, Afghanistan's political history, and perhaps even the "facts" of her own biography, this dynamic also sets up a relationship between live action and animated/drawn images that cannot simply be mapped onto simple binaries that separate subject and object, self and other, home and away, fact and fiction, past and present, war and peace, living and dead. In this film, as in many of the other works discussed in *Undead*, (inter)(in)animating effects exist not in isolation but in an amplifying continuum with other experimental techniques that make available for thought war's impact on subjective integrity, semantic stability, and the possibility of life.

Donna Kornhaber describes something akin to this in her reading of a different hybrid film that combines animated and live-action footage, *Waltz with Bashir* (Ari Folman, 2006, Israel). She argues that "the nature of war's *unmaking* involves a fraying of set narratives and a destruction of normal boundaries: a making real of the unthinkable."³⁶ Both *Postcards* and *Waltz with Bashir* combine documentary footage and animation to grapple with the instability of subjective war memories and narrative, and this invites comparison. Yet in other ways, these films might also be understood as opposites to each other, and it is worth taking time to explore some of the crucial differences between them, and how those differences advance understanding about the potential uses of animation in films about war memory. *Postcards* is an experimental documentary that primarily uses live-action footage, with only occasional animated effects, to foreground the multigenerational experiences of children of war in Afghanistan over a period of decades. By contrast, *Waltz with Bashir* is a feature-length animated docudrama that turns only in the final minutes of the film to live-action news footage of a specific event: the 1982 Sabra and Shatila massacre, in which members of the Phalange, supported by the Israeli military, killed as many as 3,500 Palestinian refugees and Lebanese civilians. The United Nations General Assembly declared the massacre be "an act of genocide."³⁷ While Dolak and Osman foreground the experiences of children of war, Folman focuses on his own landscape of memory and forgetting as a former Israel Defense Forces soldier struggling to establish his degree of complicity as a perpetrator.³⁸

Kornhaber highlights Folman's audiovisualization of war's "total unmaking," the "total victimization of all involved in war," and the way Folman "found himself turned into a *thing*—not a casualty or a victim but a person stripped of agency nonetheless."³⁹ This does not exempt Folman from his culpability, and Kornhaber acknowledges this. Yet as I compare these two films' related aesthetic strategies, it is necessary to distinguish this temporarily thinged combatant Kornhaber describes from the "thinging" that occurs when civilians are rendered corpses by war. It is also necessary to distinguish Folman's inaccessibility to himself in this particular situation not only from Osman's confused memories as a child survivor of war but also from the different visibility problems Jankovic identifies within the context of Palestinian documentaries that turn to animation. Jankovic writes, "If

traditional documentary modes fail Palestinians due to insurmountable representational and visibility problems like those described by Said—animated, hybrid, and experimental modes provide the world with a new way to engage with diverse Palestinian stories, the ongoing struggle against Israeli occupation, and the struggle for justice for Palestinians.”⁴⁰

Yet in spite of these delineated differences, Folman’s use of the interaction between animated images and documentary footage highlights an important arena for the unending work of unmaking war. For *Waltz with Bashir* renders visible and available to thought not just the perpetrator’s “thinging,” militarization’s ability to transform living agents into seemingly automated actors operated by forces beyond themselves, but also the claimed inability of the “thinged” perpetrator to become aware of this process of “thinging” as it happens. There is some kinship, in spite of many other differences, between Folman’s film and the (inter)(in)animating war projects of both Mary Reid Kelley and Patrick Kelley and Yael Bartana, which use animated effects alongside other tactics to explore not only the relationship between victims and perpetrators of war but also the mechanisms by which perpetrators are able to move into that world-destroying role in the first place. While perpetrators may lose agency in the context of militarism, Bartana’s comparison, in the preceding chapter, between her own generation and contemporary Israeli “draft objectors,” young people she describes as being “super conscious of what they do,” having “the ability to object,” and being “at a different place from [Bartana’s] generation when [they] were recruited to the IDF,” testifies to the possibility of disrupting collective delusions of an obligation to militarism.⁴¹ Art, activism, and forms of education that are fully disentangled from militarism have key roles to play in realizing this possibility. As Mariam Ghani insists,

More than any dispute over which objects end up on the walls or plinths and which names are included in the curricula, the questions of where and how museums and universities choose to expand, and which compromises they are willing to make along the way, will determine how culture is preserved, distributed, and extended. If we are to have any say in this debate, the workers who provide the currency for this sector of cultural trade and services must hold our institutions accountable, and we must begin now.⁴²

If war unmakes the contours of familiar narratives and boundaries of the self, the process of unmaking war seems to require inventing ways of writing and teaching histories, including film histories, that are better capable of accommodating the world-obliterating changes and various forms of opacity that war inflicts. Kornhaber suggests that *Waltz with Bashir* aesthetically establishes two worlds—one animated, one documentary—to facilitate at least the viewer’s experience of this world-rupturing violence, even if that experience remains “totally inaccessible” to the character of Folman.⁴³ Her reading of the film concludes on a personal note that recognizes the film’s unfinished business, observing, “There is tremendous

work that still remains for Folman beyond the film, work that will likely take the rest of his life. The ending of *Waltz with Bashir* is in this sense just the beginning of his journey to reclaim some sense of his self and to understand his past.⁴⁴ But the project of feminist un-war making asks for more than this. Beyond personal confrontation with one's own complicity with past acts of violence—although this too—feminist un-war making seeks to identify and disrupt the steps and structures—often, perhaps unavoidably, from within those structures—that precede and enable the world-annihilating massacres that make things of us all.

(INTER)(IN)ANIMATING CHILDREN'S IMAGES OF WAR AND IMAGES OF CHILDREN

For Osman, family memories and popular media are closely intertwined. The opening line of the filmmaker's book on Afghan television confirms this sense as Osman reports, "One of my fondest memories as a child growing up in Kabul in the 1970s was gathering with my extended family to watch television at my grandparents' house."⁴⁵ In *Postcards*, after cutting swiftly across a variety of media formats, including home movie footage, a photograph of Osman's parents, and blurry footage of prison cells, the film settles on a photograph of Osman as a purple-clad child while Osman continues to narrate her experience of everyday life and war: "Although my Boba was in prison, life moved on. I was at school one day playing on the jungle gym one day with my classmates when dust clouds rose all around us." At this point, the whistle of approaching missiles and explosions appears on the soundtrack as the voice-over describes bombardments occurring during a school day. Throughout this description, the film remains fixated on the childhood photograph of Osman, which at this point is located in a family photo album. This still photograph of Osman as a child becomes inundated with childish crayon drawings of animated rockets, which start to fly and explode across the surface of this still photograph. Animated crayon fire burns at the feet of the smiling child, who seems hyper-rigid, frozen in time in comparison with the missiles' movements and Osman's description of those around her: "Everyone was running and screaming." Later in the film, in a reversal of this scene's choreography of the frozen child and the animated machines of war, this photograph becomes unmoored from its context to make a comedic animated comeback, which I will discuss below, in the supercharged form of a masked superhero version of Osman's younger self.

Following more archival news footage, extended animated sequences depict Osman's subjective experience of the night of December 24, 1979, a date that marks the official invasion of Afghanistan, after which follows the installation of Babrak Karmel (1979) in what Osman describes in the film as another "bloody coup" (figure 17). This animated scene is preceded by a composite image in which a hand-drawn television is added to a cozy family photo depicting Osman watching



FIGURE 17. Hand-drawn TV watched by Wazmah Osman's family, in Kelly Dolak and Wazmah Osman's *Postcards from Tora Bora*, 2007.

"a variety show" with her Aunt Maryam's family, asserting Afghan people to be modern consumers of everyday media and not just subjects of documentary or victims of war. Indeed, one of the distinctive elements of this film is that Afghan people, and especially women and children, repeatedly appear as viewers and image makers rather than only objects to be observed and spoken for. This view of Afghan people as makers, controllers, and consumers of images and narratives is reinforced throughout the film. The scene of family relaxation and popular entertainment in front of the TV begins about thirteen minutes into the film. As Osman describes her memory of the broadcast beginning to flicker, the photograph of the family watching a hand-drawn television starts intermittently to feature screen "snow." The voice-over is similarly disrupted by "white noise," conflating past and present experiences of broadcasting failure in a way that creates an intersubjective time and place now shared not only between Osman's past and present selves but also with viewers. This intersubjective entangling of the operations of memory and mediation has the potential, as Vivian Sobchack has argued, to prevent the physical body from being regarded "primarily as an object among other objects," perhaps offering ethical and political alternatives for better ways of being in the world and with each other.⁴⁶ Three hand-drawn, animated cutout paper planes fly across photographic footage of a dark and cloudy sky as Osman's voice, talking over the sound of the plane, describes how the family heard "military plane after



FIGURE 18. Child's drawing of war landscape with animated figures, in Kelly Dolak and Wazhmah Osman's *Postcards from Tora Bora*, 2007.

plane after plane roaring in the late night sky." Soon the sky fills with hand-drawn, multicolored animated paper helicopters that make their way across the screen to the rhythmic sound of propellers as Osman narrates her memories of that world-altering Christmas Eve.

At this point, photorealist images disappear entirely as the landscape gives way to a series of crayon-drawn, brightly colored Afghan landscapes brought to life by a soundscape that combines Osman's voice, drum music, and the sound of bombardment; by camera movements and zooms; and by the animation of cutout drawings of red tanks, shooting rockets, planes, helicopters, exploding bombs, and human and animal figures that make their way across the surface of this two-dimensional landscape. As special-effect bombs explode within the crayon-drawn landscape, cutout animated figures scurry between the buildings of this town that is nestled at the base of a green crayon mountain range. One front-facing crayon figure with a drawn fixed smile seems to run toward the camera and away from the bombs, the combination of frozen expression and rapid movement conveying something of the experience of war trauma, until the crayoned face almost fills the screen (figure 18). Eventually, an explosion vaporizes the figure along with this scene into a cloud of smoke, leaving the viewer to decide the appropriate affective response to the loss of this piece of paper.

The animation here immerses twenty-first-century spectators in the six-year-old's remembered sensations of an earlier war and visualizes the perpetuation

of childhood war trauma into adult life. But giving visual form to Osman's past experiences of war in the present is not the only way in which animation here bends or confuses war time and historical time. It soon becomes clear that Osman's "remembered" animated images of the Soviet invasion have in fact been drawn, presumably in response to the post-9/11 US aerial bombardment and invasion of Afghanistan, by children in a school for orphans that Osman visits in 2004. This substitution raises questions about the difference between one agent of bombing and another as well as about how the decision to use these twenty-first-century images positions Osman, who at this point in the film is already a composite entity, in relation to the child-artists.

The full drawings from which the earlier animated planes and bombs are taken show detailed depictions of children's lived experiences of war, including tanks rolling through streets, houses being bombed, and people being shot, mined, and stabbed, and they are, even without Osman's recontextualization and animation of them, complex artifacts in their own right. The presence of Dari writing in some of the images prevents them from being fully available to those unable to read that script. The text inscribes mountains with their names, such as the Fairoz Koh, a twin range that is an extension of the Hindu Kush in Chaghcharan, a region of Afghanistan. The writing also inscribes buildings and drawings with the names of fathers and sons (Moharram and his father Jom'eh, Mohammadreza and his father Ibrahim) or with boys' nicknames, as with the inscription that reads "Qandaghah," which means "Mr. Sweet" (*Qand* is sugar cane, and *Agha* is mister), a name often given to nice kids.⁴⁷ The presence of the name of a sweetie-pie kid on the roof of a building in the midst of a scene of aerial bombardment reminds those who can read it of the civilian loss of life and human specificity that goes along with so-called collateral damage.⁴⁸ The writing that is cut out of the animated uses of the image serves to situate the depicted experiences in relation to very specific people, cultures, and places.

In relocating and animating these contemporary children's images to illustrate war memories from Osman's earlier past, the film risks generalizing, or appropriating, individual experiences of war and removing their specificity, transforming them into what Susan Sontag describes as "plangent denunciations of war."⁴⁹ That risk is real; but the film also provides other ways to make sense of the blurring of Osman's story into that of the children she documents. In the earlier scenes, the use of animated parts of the children's drawings visually illustrates the phenomenon Osman describes of feeling a kind of dissociation when she notes that her six-year-old self is stuck in Kabul, fixed in time, left behind by her adult self. Part of the work of animation in the film seems to involve in-animating or stilling these cut-up drawings and returning them to their original state, to their own authors and stories, while simultaneously reuniting the adult Osman with her own, animated, six-year-old Kabul self.

During a filmed scene in the orphans' school that Osman's father helped to found, a scene that documents the production of the children's drawings that

Postcards cuts up and sets in motion in new (old) contexts, Osman seeks to put the pieces into their proper place. First, she names the specific agents of violence that have affected distinct generations of children at different moments in Afghanistan's modern history of war, and only after that does she establish a cross-generational kinship among those children of war. She states, "I was part of the first generation of war. Unfortunately, the legacy continues with these children. They are the second or third generation who have experienced the hellish aftermath of the Soviet invasion, the bloody civil wars for control of Kabul, the Taliban, and now the US War on Terror." Though Osman and Dolak posit an affinity across generations catalyzed by the childhood experience of war, here too it is perhaps useful to recall Marianne Hirsch's distinction, noted in chapter 3, between a "feminist connective" reading and "comparative" readings, as well as her question, "How can divergent histories that expose children to danger and abandonment be thought together but without flattening or blurring the differences between them?"⁵⁰ Such distinctions seem particularly important to make within a context in which a neoliberal feminism and anti- or ahistorical rhetoric of helpless women and children in need of saving has been instrumentalized to justify US military actions that have further destroyed life and the infrastructures that support it.⁵¹

Instead of "flattening" historical differences, *Postcards* juxtaposes animated effects and live-action documentary footage to experiment with "feminist connective," or perhaps (inter)(in)animating, mediations of young life in and after war. The film does not pretend to offer solutions to the political situation in Afghanistan. Instead, it focuses throughout on presenting a variety of ordinary Afghan people across generations involved in different ways as active producers, consumers, and circulators of images, images that depart from those created and circulated by mainstream Western media infrastructures. Within the context of the orphanage, the film foregrounds crayon drawing as a low-budget and easily accessible form of image production that gives the war-orphaned children an opportunity to mediate war as they see and feel it and thus to assert some control over their own, violated stories.

MEANING IN MOTION: OSMAN TO THE RESCUE!

In a scene following Osman's father's release from prison and his family's attempt to follow him to Pakistan, a red line on an animated map traces Osman's route from Kabul to Peshawar. Over this is superimposed a reenactment of a young child, presumably Osman, dragging a suitcase of family photos up a mountain. The film connects this depiction of Osman's remembered journey as a refugee with contemporary children in Afghanistan when, a few minutes later, it shows a little boy walking through "Chicken Alley," a market street lined with walls of Afghan images for sale. The boy calls out to the filmmakers to buy his "big map" of Kabul and they discuss, off-camera, whether or not they should. Osman and Dolak film the boy removing the map from its plastic casing and opening it out fully until the

map almost seems to have legs of its own as it is moved through the street, another case of embodied animation, this time in the form of an animated map. Perhaps this scene offers one embodiment of the queer global cinema that Karl Schoonover and Rosalind Galt suggest requires us to approach cinema as “meaning in motion” in a way that “resists hierarchies of production value, taking seriously cheaply made films and the political economy of perpetually minoritized audiences.”⁵² Osman reinforces this sense of a refugee cinema, a cinema of, for, and animated by the children of war, a few scenes later. As she describes her mother’s decision to take her children to America, a suitcase appears on screen and becomes a provisional mobile screen across which indistinct moving images of refugees flicker. Perhaps this is even the same suitcase that Osman discovers in Kabul, full of family photographs, the personal archive now turned inside out in this film where private images become part of transnational histories, setting both images and histories literally and figuratively in motion.

As Osman describes losing her personal relationship with her father during the collective struggles he engaged with in various capacities, she narrates a recurrent dream she has of entering Kabul and other Soviet strongholds to save Afghanistan so that the family can return. This dream generates one of the most extended, jarring, and often comic sequences of (inter)(in)animation in the film. Here, once again, photographs of the Afghan landscape taken from 1970s tourist brochures form the backdrop for a variety of animated scenarios. Humor and horror, stasis and motion, history and imagination, warriors and children, coexist. After the photograph of Osman as a young girl begins to be bombarded by animated paper bombs, as if by contagion, the young Osman depicted in the image seems to absorb the energy of the weapons assaulting her childhood photograph to fuel a fantastical animated life of her own. With the young Osman now sporting a black stealthy eye mask drawn over the photographic image with marker, first one and then multiple animated photo-puppets of the child-superhero parachute into the image (video 5), raining down from the sky. She sneaks between rocks and in rivers, popping up suddenly and comically between child and adult male soldiers as she calls out to her absent father through the intertitles, “Boba! Boba! I’m saving Afghanistan!” If these sequences poke fun at the delusions and false narratives of supposed-heroes and drop-in saviors, they also express the child of war’s desires—for political agency, for home, for proximity to family, and for home: “Boba! Boba! We can go home now!” the masked super-Osman cries out.

Animation enables Osman at least visually to take control of her young self in the form of a puppet in a context where she, like the other children around her, many of whom lacked her class privilege, had their lives, educations, and support structures blasted, and sometimes ended, by war. Osman’s puppet may also serve as an act of (inter)(in)animated resistance to the way Afghan children have been weaponized like objects, treated by all sides as pawns in a war game, including through educational and development-funded institutions. Mahmood Mamdani, for example, cites Pervez Hoodbhoy’s research on children’s textbooks



VIDEO 5. Masked Wazhmah. Kelly Dolak and Wazhmah Osman, *Postcards from Tora Bora*, 2007.

To watch this video, scan the QR code with your mobile device or visit DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.228.5>



designed for the mujahideen's Educational Center for Afghanistan "by the University of Nebraska under a \$50 million USAID grant that ran from September 1986 through June 1994. A third-grade mathematics textbook asks, 'One group of mujahidin attack 50 Russian soldiers. In the attack, 20 Russians are killed. How many Russians fled?'"⁵³

Postcards seeks out other types of classrooms. In the wake of young Osman's animated puppet adventures, the film shows Osman visiting the orphanage classroom where the children's drawings are produced. The film refuses to sentimentalize these children, instead affirming them as agents in their own lives and stories by listening to their illustrated war stories, however strange or surreal they may be, and by documenting their drawn experiences in synch with their narratives. Cutting between talking head shots in which each child is named, and shots of each child's drawing, brought to life by camera movements, zooms, sound effects, and the child's own narration of events, the film returns the drawings to their original creators, as if to establish a new level of stability in the landscape of childhood war memory. Akeem explains that his drawing depicts a plane that fired a bomb which hit the truck driver and caused the truck to crash. One man shoots another

dead. Someone else is blown up by a mine. This is a world of weapons, helicopters, and planes. Naqeebullah, son of Sader Shah, explains that his father was working at his vegetable stand when he was “martyred by a rocket.” Mohammad Wasser Waled Mohammad reports on the death of his father, an engineer. He explains that his father died by a poisoned orange. The camera zooms in on a drawn orange that has arms and legs, conjuring up associations, at least for me, with Agent Orange and a longer history of US imperialist violence. But for this boy, this image gives a face to the agent of his father’s death. He explains, “[My father] ate it, and he couldn’t make it home.” As the drawings move across the screen, we recognize green helicopters and red rockets from the earlier scenes depicting Osman’s own childhood memories of war. Though these sequences make clear that these are particular images that belong to these particular children, with Osman in the role of witness and listener, the film’s experiments have set in motion something like a transgenerational community of children of war that evolves out of the combination of childhood experiences of war and the process of making images about those experiences and animating those images by sharing them with others. As the principal distributes art supplies that the filmmakers have brought to the school, the children scramble for materials. “Calm down, calm down,” she says. “It’s as if I’m handing out food.” This is image making as a mode of staying alive, of sustaining and animating oneself in the face of war.

It matters that the children Dolak and Osman film in the orphanage are all boys, for the film’s resistance to imperialist Afghan stereotypes of femininity goes hand in hand with its reimagining of how a documentary film might represent Afghan masculinity differently for an international audience. The children’s drawings of aerial bombardment and landmines depict the death of fathers and the losses of sons. In contrast to fetishized media images of silent and helpless Afghan female victims of repressive Afghan men, *Postcards* depicts sons as young artists who express and mourn their losses and who are proud of the drawings they share.

This commitment to dismantling associations between Afghan masculinity and violence, including but not limited to violence against women, persists throughout the film. This occurs in numerous ways, including through the visualization of an international community of war makers and through its development of complex and nuanced frameworks for the film’s male characters, including Omar, who runs a mine museum, and Osman’s father, known as Boba. The scenes shot in Omar’s Mine Museum systematically resist conflations of Afghanistan and Afghan men with violence. Omar provides a tour of the bombs and other war materials in his collection, as if the children’s drawings have taken on three dimensions, explaining for the filmmakers how cluster bombs work and highlighting the bombs’ diverse points of origin as the camera pans over Soviet, American, British, Israeli, Czechoslovakian, Iranian, Pakistani, Italian, and Chinese weapons. He comments on one bomb that has been turned into a plant pot on which is painted in Persian, “Peace, not war,” and affirms that he is antiwar. Osman subsequently asks whether

it is the mine museum that has made him antiwar, to which Omar responds, “No, from the beginning I was a lover of peace. There shouldn’t be wars in Afghanistan. The mines created by the wars should never have been in Afghanistan. We had a program called the ICBL. Countries came together to petition that landmines be banned. To be banned forever. Many countries have signed this request.” A title appears to supplement Omar’s narrative, stating: “China, Israel, and the United States have refused to sign the petition banning anti-personnel landmines.”

The film’s depiction of Boba, Osman’s father, further challenges rigid stereotypes of Afghan masculinity as aligned with violence. “Boba” signals a greater range of possible identities than any other character in the film, for over the course of his life he has been an elite psychiatry professor, a frontline surgeon, a resistance fighter against the Soviets, a prisoner of war and torture victim, an often-absent father and husband, and a long-standing leading figure in the fight to build free orphanages, schools, and hospitals in war-torn Afghanistan. A scene depicting Osman interviewing her father about his experiences in Pulcharki prison shows the inadequacy of separating identities such as victim, guerrilla fighter, and aid worker. Although a closeup shows Osman at one point with a tear in her eye as she listens to her father’s report, this tear is not the abstracted and universalized tear of the Afghan girl type but rather the specific, empathetic, and (inter)(in)animating response of a daughter listening to her father as he describes experiences of solitary confinement and torture.

While Osman, like her aunt, appears as a technologically and educationally empowered woman, her performance in the film also resists the trope of the indefatigable and empire-affirming returning exile. Occasionally we see a shot of her looking depressed as she lies on her bed, just as her aunt declares wearily in the film’s epilogue, “No good news from Afghanistan.” But this heaviness is held in tension by (inter)(in)animating scenes of togetherness, intimacy, and filmmaking. Osman seeks out sites of memory and longing together with Dolak, albeit with little success. Meanwhile, the aunt keeps herself going by cooking traditional meals in inadequate circumstances and by fostering community conversations about gender roles and expectations in which she articulates her thoughts on these topics with a blunt humor. Osman seems to survive in the face of rolling war through recourse to acts of imaging alternative worlds, while rigorously trying to understand the world as it is. A visit to the open-air pool that she used to visit as a child generates the only other scene in which we see Osman shed tears. The pool is empty, dilapidated, and graffitied with cartoon images of tanks, here stilled by the act of drawing. Osman states that she keeps on imagining the water and that it is better sometimes “not to see what used to be,” adding that this is the reason she cannot walk across the pool. But in the following sequence, she begins traversing the pool in spite of her stated inability to do so. As if by magic, but in fact by the same special effects that have been activated as a tool of visual transformation throughout the film, beautiful blue tiles appear and the animated water rises.