

Simulation at Wars' End: A "Documentary" in the Field of Evidence Quest

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Abstract

The release of *Muktir Gaan* in 1995 ended a long, politically induced drought in films about the 1971 war that created Bangladesh. Built by Tareque and Catherine Masud from repurposed "found footage" shot by Lear Levin, the film was received by most Bangladeshi audiences as an exact documentary. The film crew's explicit discussion of simulations and the inclusion of a "making of" section in the digital versatile disc (DVD) release a decade later have done little to change audience perceptions. This believing audience derives from a willing suspension of a skeptical eye, due to an absence of a moving image record of the war. The rewriting of story has been a crucial aspect of the documentation of, and debates around, national liberation wars. An initially declarative, and oral, culture around Bangladeshi war memories in the 1970s has been replaced by the search for evidence in the context of recent high stakes war crimes trials. What I want to suggest is that audiences have different modes of viewing specific to narratives that have become sacrosanct. They may be skeptical, rational, and evidentiary audiences for other objects, but with such sacred narratives they transform themselves, again, into a believing public.

Keywords

Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, 1971 war, documentary, simulation

I personally subscribe to this form of documentary more than the purist approach or the "talking heads" style. It just takes too fucking long and too much film/tape or disc memory to get people to say what you hope that they will say. That's why I always called my approach by the term theatrical documentary, so as not to bullshit anyone, but rather to make sure that I got my point across. (Levin, 2013)

Codirectors Tareque and Catherine Masud introduced the 1995 premiere of *Muktir Gaan* (Song of Freedom) with a reference to repurposing footage shot by Lear Levin in 1971. The end credits included a more formally rendered version of the same information. But these two qualifiers went unnoticed in the darkness of the auditorium, and that obscuring continued after audiences walked into the afternoon sunlight. At the

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Image 1. Musical troupe walking. Still from *Muktir Gaan*.

Courtesy Tareque Masud Memorial Trust.

Dhaka Public Library premiere, most of the audience accepted the film (see Image 1) as an exactly archival document of the 1971 Bangladesh war of independence from Pakistan. That confusion continued in the initial reviews, where critics described it as a record “exactly as it was” (Ahmed, 1995). A rare dissent came from a reviewer who doubted such cinematographic precision in a warzone, and challenged the splicing together of victorious Indian soldiers with Bangladeshi musicians (Jaigirdar, 1997). Whether responding to audience credulity, critical reviews, or their own evolving desire for more precision, the Masuds highlighted some acts of simulation in this iconic documentary in the digital versatile disc (DVD) edition, released for the tenth anniversary (Masud, 1998). Yet, in spite of these clarifications, *Muktir Gaan* continues to be read by many audiences as a documentary record of the war, and there is rarely any discussion of the simulations contained within this film.

In the four decades after 1971, the Bangladesh liberation war has transformed into the singular event defining the idea of this nation built from self-actualization and rejection. Bangladesh (formerly East Pakistan, and before that East Bengal) was a geography that insisted it was not India after 1947, and, not Pakistan after 1971. To place 1971 as the central, and even the only event, the 1947 partition was largely occluded in formal nationalist narratives. Instead of partition’s ravages, the brutality of the Bangladesh liberation war became the storytelling center, because it brought a psychological sundering from West Pakistan and a vanishing of the earlier trauma of partition. But what was the look and feel of this war, the defining event of a post-colonial nation? To many in that early audience, the film *Muktir Gaan* was exactly

muktijuddho—liberation war with color, sound, language, and gesture intact. Recent pitched debates around trials of accused war criminals have increased the premium placed on documentary evidence of the war. The continued paucity of such evidence, partially due to a lack of archiving in post-war years, has overburdened *Muktir Gaan* with the need to be read as an exact record. This political environment has curtailed any discussion of simulations in war films, even inside the frame of the Masuds' preferred term of "docu-fiction."

In spite of sustained international coverage of the war, a moving image record of that year remained largely unavailable to Bangladeshi audiences for the first two decades of independence. The few exceptions included *Nine Months to Freedom* (S. Sukhdev, 1972) and *Stop Genocide* (Raihan, 1971a), both in English and with limited circulation. Feature films of the first half of the 1970s contained some fictional reconstructions; this was followed by a period of silence as war memories became embroiled in a post-1975 (the year of a military coup that assassinated the founding prime minister) politics of compromise and forgetting. This amnesia extended through the military junta of the 1980s and early 1990s. In this gap, *Muktir Gaan* was greeted by audiences as a long-awaited "authentic" documentary. Two decades after its release, the film occupies a canonical position among films (fiction and documentary) about the war. It was followed by a trickle of films about 1971, but none had an equal impact on the memory industry in Bangladesh. The film's codirectors Tareque and Catherine Masud became leaders of Bangladeshi parallel cinema for the next two decades. Intervening in a range of situations (documentary, fiction, public talks, workshops, and festival juries), they were the most prominent of a post-1980s set of film directors who circulated internationally (others included Tanvir Mokammel, Morshedul Islam, and Yasmine Kabir). The film's reverberations were felt even in the subsequent reception of the Masuds' two fiction films on 1971: the Cannes award-winning *Matir Moina* (Clay Bird) (2002) and *Noroshundor* (The Barbershop) (2009). In these two subsequent films, the primacy of *Muktir Gaan* within the genre of 1971 storytelling emboldened the Masuds to force an opening into two sensitive areas within the war narrative—the position of madrasa-based piety (*Matir Moina*) and the Urdu-speaking "Bihari" minorities (*Noroshundor*). Indeed, two other films on these topics—Shaheen Dil-Riaz's work on madrasas (*Korankinder* [Children of the Koran], 2009), and Tanvir Mokammel's documentary on the stranded "Bihari" refugees (*Swapnabhumi* [The Promised Land], 2007)—are by filmmakers who engaged with the Masuds around the blurred areas of the war narrative.

In 2011, a road accident killed Tareque Masud and his cinematographer Mishuk Munier, just as he was beginning work on a film on the 1947 partition of Bengal. Masud's death not only truncated the parallel cinema movement, it also froze his work into institutional ember. Before his death, his newest film *Runway* (2010) was the first to receive mixed reviews in Bangladesh. But after the accident, the possibility of a critical conversation around his films ended.

Death freezes the dialogue. The next generation of filmmakers needed to grow through debates, and even disagreements, with Tareque's films. But his untimely passing means we can only speak into the absence. (Mohaiemen, 2013a)

Wanting to move past this devotional lens, I recently returned to *Muktir Gaan* to look at its impact on memories of the 1971 war. I looked, in particular, at a few scenes that,

on second viewing, appeared to be scripted or recreated. When I first watched the film in the 1990s, like most in that Public Library auditorium, I had also taken it as an exact documentary. Looking back at the film after a long gap, I now saw telltale signs of recreation, not all of which were highlighted in the 2008 DVD. If the *ur*-documentary about 1971 contained simulations, I wondered how this might change the status of the war record? “Simulacrum,” in Jean Baudrillard’s sense, is that it is not only a copy of the “real,” but is “truth” in its own right. Baudrillard’s idea complicates the search for authenticity and truth in a narrative. But this concept travels poorly in a war narrative where these demarcations have sharp repercussions. Individual and collective roles during 1971 have the power to change current political fates in Bangladesh—dispensing execution or ostracism on the one hand, and rewards and insulation on the other. War crimes happened extensively in 1971 and were documented to some degree in the aftermath; but at a distance of four decades, documentation gathered for news reports and commemorations are not always adequate for legal proceedings. Such evidence was in high demand as the Bangladesh government began long-delayed trials against accused war criminals. Contestations around war crimes reached a peak in 2013, when the failure to reach a death sentence verdict in a case instigated Shahbag—a youth movement (with subsequent support of the government) that demanded the death penalty in all war crimes’ cases (Sabur, 2013; Sultan, 2013). These events transformed the viewing public of *Muktir Gaan*, but still produced a similar reading. The passage of time often produces a more skeptical, visually savvy audience that can parse documentary scenes for accuracy. This may indeed have happened with the audience at a two-decade remove from the film’s original 1995 premiere; yet events had shifted the ground so that newer audiences were willing to suspend their skeptical eye and continue to be a believing public for this war “documentary”.

Shahbag is the most recent expression of controversies around war crimes, but the issue has been on a high simmer for most of the last four decades (the difference is mainly whether advocates for war crimes’ trials are in government or opposition). This environment places excess weight on a film, such as *Muktir Gaan*, to function as evidence. In one example of the slippage between “docu-fiction” (as the Masuds described it) and documentary evidence (as trials require), the film was often screened in large outdoor setting during the Shahbag protests. Since the Shahbag movements’ best-known slogan was “*fashi chai*” (we want the noose), its participants could consider screenings of *Muktir Gaan* to be part of the collectively marshaled body of evidence against war criminals. At the least, the film was considered popular evidence that added to the concept of “*jana kotha*” (what everybody knows). The film’s forensic and evidentiary possibility was deepened when its 1999 sequel *Muktir Kotha* (in which villagers watch *Muktir Gaan* and then respond with their own testimonials) was admitted as legal evidence in the war crimes case against “Khokon Rajakar” (ICT-BD Case No. 04 of 2013, which resulted in a judgment of hanging). Therefore, any discussion of simulations within *Muktir Gaan* occurs in a political context where the film is subject to pressures larger than a cinema audience’s usual desires for felicity.

War and Forgetting

To understand the audience that was entranced by the possibility of the entire span of *Muktir Gaan* being documentary, we should first survey the state of films about the war in post-independence Bangladesh. In cinema halls, there was a sharp drop in representations of the war from the late 1970s. A mysterious disappearance in the aftermath of the war underscores storytelling absences in the new country's film industry. Prior to 1971, relationships between the two wings of "united" Pakistan—West Pakistan (today's Pakistan) and East Pakistan (today's Bangladesh)—were marked by the experience in East Pakistan of discrimination at the state, social, and individual level. Some of these tensions played out in East Pakistan through debates pitting Urdu (the state-encouraged, "more Islamic" language of the Pakistani state) against Bengali (the language of the majority of East Pakistan, and a linkage to pre-1947 united Bengal). In spite of these roiling tensions, Lotte Hoek (2014) argues that the 1960s saw significant Urdu language East Pakistani filmmaking. She tabulates the Bengali actors in "cross-wing" Urdu language films, including Shabnam, Robin Ghosh, Subhas Dutta, and Khan Ata, as well as directors Nazrul Islam, Baby Islam, and Ehtesham. One Bengali film director who prevailed in this environment was Zahir Raihan, making films in both Urdu and Bengali. In addition to working as second director on the iconic, but ill-fated, hybrid (featuring an invented Urdu patois for East Bengal) *Jago Hua Savera* (The Day Shall Dawn) (Akhtar J. Kardar, 1959), Raihan's Urdu language films included *Sangam* (1964) and *Bahana* (1965). Hoek argues that the dominant discourse after 1971 flattened these films into primarily a commercial choice driven by available funding, erasing the possibility of voluntary participation in creating hybrid forms that tried to speak to the two mismatched "wings" of Pakistan.

Raihan's feelings about the disputed position of the Urdu language in which he sometimes worked remain underexplored. However, once the war broke out, his filmmaking decisively focused on the Bangladeshi sovereignty cause. From exile in India, he made a crucial documentary about the war called *Stop Genocide* (1971). Tracing a lineage back to the German Holocaust, the film made an appeal that pushed outside the particularities of Bangladesh. Beginning with images of Lenin, the narration emphasized class struggle as well as, the usually highlighted, linguistic self-determination as inspiration for the war. The film's tone discarded Raihan's more allegorical pre-1971 voice, moving to a direct action script. In an interview given to a television (TV) journalist, he expressed outrage that the Pakistan army was also using cameras, to mount a counter propaganda offensive.

I'm Zahir Raihan. I don't belong to any political party. I'm a [*indistinct*] filmmaker. But I saw, in Bangladesh, the most surprising aspect of that was, while a military unit was moving for operation, after destroying and killing people, they were taking shots by a movie camera of the dead bodies. After burning a house, they were taking shots of the burnt house with a movie camera. After compelling people to loot a shop, they were taking shots of those looters through a movie camera. And later on, I heard and I saw that they edited those portions and relayed it to the world...telling and showing that the Bengalis were killing non-Bengalis and because of that chaos and confusion they "had to intervene." (Raihan, 1971b)

Stop Genocide's fate was initially uncertain after editing was completed in India. The opening shot of Lenin, rather than liberation war leader Sheikh Mujib ("*Bongobondhu*" or "Friend of Bengal"), worried some of the rebel war command. The messaging was also unnerving for a diverse war coalition that featured an uneasy cohabitation with leftist forces. A special screening was arranged for Tajuddin Ahmed, civilian leader of the exile government, and it was his nod that was rumored to have secured the film's release for raising awareness about the war. Raihan continued to work during 1971, completing *A State is Born* (1971c), and producing two other documentaries on the war—Alamgir Kabir's *Liberation Fighters* (1971) and Babul Choudhury's *Innocent Millions* (1971). He was also working on an English language feature film, *Let There Be Light* (1970), which was never completed. Raihan returned to liberated Dhaka after the war, but went missing in 1972 while searching for his missing brother, the novelist Shahidullah Kaiser.

I have spent some time with Raihan's biography because I believe his death significantly altered the post-1971 film industry, shifting Bangladesh national cinema away from the socialist realism grain that he would have championed. Given the decision to begin *Stop Genocide* with Lenin's words, we can conclude that he would have resisted the uncomplicated view that emerged around 1971 of it being a war with a singular constituency. In the newly independent country under a reconstructed Film Development Corporation (FDC, where Raihan's portrait hangs in a central location), there was initially a surge of feature films about the war, including *Ora Egaro Jon* (They are Eleven) (Chashi Nazrul Islam, 1972), *Roktakto Bangla* (Bloody Bengal) (Momtaz Ali, 1972), *Bagha Bangali* (Tiger Bengali) (Ananda, 1972), *Dhire Bohe Meghna* (The Meghna Flows Slowly) (Alamgir Kabir, 1973), *Slogan* (Kabir Anwar, 1973), *Orunodoyer Ognishakhi* (Pledge to a New Dawn) (Subhash Dutta, 1972), *Sangram* (The Struggle) (Chashi Nazrul Islam, 1974), and *Megher Onek Rang* (Clouds have Many Colors) (Harunur Rashid, 1976). But after the first wave, the war started becoming a generic backdrop, often deployed only to underscore the original sin of the film's villain (who had evolved from wartime collaborator to post-war black marketer or thug). In an essay about war films, Masud cited this gap in representations:

Many of us carry this frustration inside: this many years have passed and still there is no complete film on the war. When we use the word "complete," we mean a complete war film. Are only representations of war all aspects of the liberation war?...Was the war fought only by *they (are) eleven*? If not, then how do you make those eleven representatives of the war? The liberation war does not have one face, one color—just as *the cloud has many colors*. This war had thousands of colors, thousands of lacuna—we have been able to bring very little of it to screen. (Masud, 2012, p. 133; translated by author, emphasis added)

Starting around 1976, war films received confusing signals from a fluctuating national environment. Although the 1971 war ended with the creation of Bangladesh, the narrative of who fought in the war from the Bengali side became a highly contested site. A 1975 military coup resulted in the assassination of founding Prime Minister Sheikh Mujib, and a period of instability and countercoups began. General Ziaur Rahman, a 1971 war veteran, eventually came to power and in an attempt to create his own power

base, included in his government those who had sat out the war or opposed independence. The two political parties (Awami League [AL] and Bangladesh Nationalist Party [BNP]) that have dominated Bangladesh's post-liberation politics both claim foundational links to 1971, although the AL's claim is far larger. The war was fought in the name of jailed independence leader Sheikh Mujib (AL), and Ziaur Rahman (BNP) made a radio declaration on behalf of Mujib. Both parties lay claim to the war, but because of the post-1975 political calculus, their investment in war narrative is striated by a desire for emphasizing their own sides' role. This manifests in pressure on formal and informal memory industries (e.g., textbooks, commemorations, and speeches), in a move I call the desire for "*shothik itihash* (correct history)" (Mohaiemen, 2014). War remembrance is now linked to a murky process of listing or erasing "treasonous" war-time conduct.

Dizzy from an unstable political pendulum, many filmmakers either moved away from war films or faced limbo in censorship. Journalist Shahidul Khokon referenced these problems in his witty vignette about the censor board:

Your film is submitted, the knowledgeable members look at it and say: cannot be released. You start doing *tadbeer* (request)—what was the issue, brother? "Hey *miya*, who did you show as the announcer of independence? Why is there so much 'Joi Bangla'? Are we Bangali or Bangladeshi...why go into all that nonsense? I could not get your film passed, sorry." Then it goes to Appeal Board. More *tadbeer*, another four months to get the appeal date. Appeal Board does not change the decision. Your film is banned. You are crushed. Meanwhile the producers who lent you four crore are slanging your head off. Then suddenly a ray of hope, the government falls. Again, you start *tadbeer*. (Khokon, 2009; translated by author)

Facing these uncertainties, the number of films about 1971 went into decline in the late 1970s, and even more so in the 1980s after the arrival of General Ershad's junta. For the first time, there was now an army officer in control who did not have a direct claim to the liberation narrative (Ershad had been stationed in West Pakistan when the war broke out). During this time (1982–1990), there was a further de-emphasis on war narrative in the cinema. A rare intervention came from the short film movement (itself deeply antimilitary), which premiered two fiction films on the war from its "cultural-modernist leaders" (Raju, 2007, p. 132)—Morshedul Islam's *Agami* (Tomorrow) (1984) and Tanvir Mokammel's *Hulia* (Warrant) (1985). Underscoring that 1971 continued to be a challenging subject for realist filmmakers, Mokammel's focus on this subject resulted in frequent run-ins with censors. His 1971 documentary *Sreeti Ekattur* (Memory Seventyone) (1991), and fiction feature *Nodir Naam Modhumati* (A River Called Modhumati) (1995) were both initially blocked by the Censor Board (Mohaiemen, 2013b). Meanwhile, in commercial cinema halls, the war remained largely offscreen, with the exceptions being *Ekattorer Jishu* (Jesus of 1971) (Nasiruddin Yusuf, 1993) in 16 mm local release, and *Aguner Poroshmoni* (Touchstone of Fire) (Humayun Ahmed, 1994) in wide release. Trikaldorshi ("witness of three eras") wrote, in a history of 1971 films: "[From 1981] was the long pause. This collapse of our film industry continued into the 1990s" (Trikaldorshi, 2011). This period of film silence around the war was finally pierced by the premiere of *Muktir Gaan* in 1995.

Bookended Newsreels

Over 70 percent of Bangladesh's current population was born after the war. A majority of this population has no personal memories of 1971, and, in most cases, no recall of either the Mujib (1972–1975) or Zia (1975–1981) period. A generation came of age in the 1980s and 1990s, during a long pause in production of war films. When *Muktir Gaan* was released in 1995 after a prolonged tussle with the censor board (Jai Jai Din, 1996, p. 1), it was the first glimpse of war images for this generation. The film industry had in the meantime moved away from the brief possibility of “*jibon mookhi* (life facing)” work, such as *Surjo Dighal Bari* (The Ominous House) (Sheikh Niamat Ali & Masihuddin Shaker, 1979), focusing instead on commercially successful “*dhishoom-dhishoom*” action pictures. The city middle class embraced the new ubiquity of television, especially enjoying *natok* (drama) by authors, such as Humayun Ahmed, who focused on their own middle-class family milieu. Cinema halls were patronizingly, and erroneously, considered the province of the “rickshaw class.” The Masuds responded to this transformed situation by organizing their own screenings at venues, such as the National Public Library.

The release of *Muktir Gaan* fulfilled two roles in the Masuds' mind: the return of the 1971 war as a focus of film and the reformation of a middle-class cinema audience. Tareque Masud wrote enthusiastically about the premiere, “People waiting in line to watch a film. Such a sight was beyond imagination in Bangladeshi cinema halls” (Masud, 2012). Of course, lines for cinema tickets were not “beyond imagination” at all, but Masud was pointing to the missing middle class and cultural elite viewers. I posit that most of that audience came to the film with the expectation of finding the actual war on screen, not a recreation. The two feature films about the war released prior to 1995 (*Aguner Parashmoni* and *Ekattorer Jishu*) were stylized fictions that did not claim documentary forms in the same way as *Muktir Gaan* (*Jishu*'s crucifixion scene is a particularly hallucinatory sequence). The Masud film's 1995 reception as a document can be seen in the film reviews of that time, for example, in Syed Shamim's contrast between what came before and the *Muktir Gaan* moment.

In plays or films about the freedom fight, we are used to seeing women as rape victims, or breaking into helpless tears after losing their husband and children in the war. But *in reality*, women came into that war with a very specific characteristic...*Muktir Gaan* is the rescued *archeology* of their achievement. It is a *preserved fossil* of glory tales. (Shamim, 1995; translated by author, emphasis added)

Similarly, both Jahid Rahman (1995, p. 61) and Shakil Jahid (1996, p. 20) called the film “a live document,” Saifullah Mahmud Dulal (1995, p. 18) found “accurate scenes of the war,” and Anisul Huq (1995) praised “the truth [has been] presented with ease.” Clearest of all was Tarek Ahmed's (1995) praise for the film: “The benefit of photography and film is that if a scene is captured on this medium, you can see it *exactly as it was* 39/40 years, or even later” (translated by author, emphasis added).

The film followed a musical troupe that toured refugee camps inside India, trying to raise funds for the Bengali guerrilla forces (see Image 2). Several of the musicians



Image 2. Musical troupe on truck. Still from *Muktir Gaan*.

Courtesy Tareque Masud Memorial Trust.

were leading cultural activists in the 1990s, which enhanced the audience's receptiveness. The footage was shot in 1971 by filmmaker Lear Levin. He was never able to finish the film, and two decades later the Masuds tracked him down in New York and convinced him to allow the use of his footage. The scaffolding of the film is Lear's 20 hours of raw footage, repurposed by the Masuds. It is not quite "found footage" as the entire project happened with Levin's permission, but it is certainly material that was in hibernation. The beginning and finale of the film contains archival material from the Film Division of India, Bangladesh Department of Films & Publications, Independent Television News (ITN) (UK), and the United Nations (UN) archives. The film begins with the footage of Sheikh Mujib's famous 7th March "this time the struggle is for independence" speech (see Image 3), followed by footage of guerrilla fighters superimposed on the audio of the broadcast of Major Zia's radio announcement (see Image 4). Both of these clips were "new" in 1995: the first newsreel sequence stopped circulating after the 1975 assassinations, and the second reconstructed newsreel had never been "seen" in Bangladesh. The film's ending included two more sequences of archival footage. In the first, from the UN archives, Pakistani Foreign Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (the main political beneficiary of the war on the West Pakistan side) is seen tearing up the Security Council resolution that ratifies the end of the war (see Image 5). In the second, Indian soldiers are seen entering liberated Dhaka to rapturous cheers and crowds. I contend that the impact of these two bookended archival



Image 3. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's March 7, 1971 speech. Archival clip from Department of Films and Publications (Dhaka) in *Muktir Gaan*.

Courtesy Tareque Masud Memorial Trust.



Image 4. Ziaur Rahman's March 27, 1971 radio announcement. Audio recording paired with archival clip of Bengali guerrilla fighters (from Bombay Films Division) in *Muktir Gaan*.

Courtesy Tareque Masud Memorial Trust.

segments was to recast the entire film as exactly indexical to events over the 9 months of the war.

The script of the film follows the musical troupe as they travel and sing. Although all the scenes of traveling did happen, they were edited to make a coherent story that spanned the war. As Tareque Masud highlighted, the Indian authorities suspected Lear Levin to be an American spy (the Nixon White House was on the wrong end of this conflict). As a result, his access was severely limited, and he was forced to return to America when the fighting heated up. An accurate representation

of Levin's shooting experience would have reflected a corralled period of only 3 weeks in November 1971. However, the editing of the film radically lengthens the on-screen timespan, intercutting the March declaration of war with the troupe's first

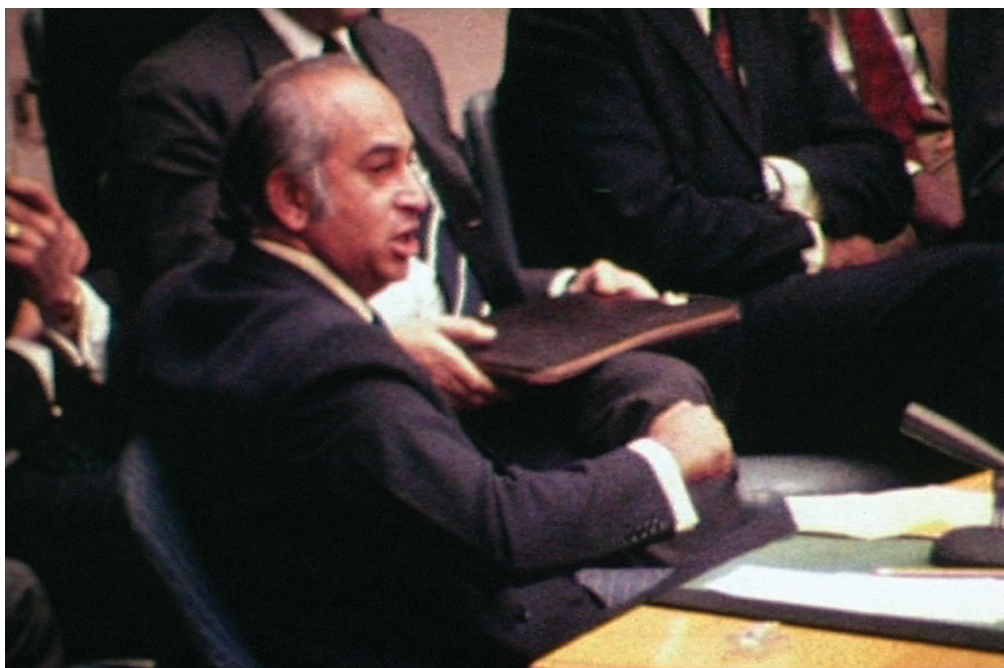


Image 5. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto at United Nations, December 1971. Archival clip from United Nations Archive (New York) in *Muktir Gaan*.

Courtesy Tareque Masud Memorial Trust.

appearance, and the December entrance of victorious Indian soldiers into liberated Dhaka with their final musical goodbyes. In this manner, a 3-week shoot was telescoped outward, on the editing panel, to stand as a record of a 9-month war.

When *Muktir Gaan* was released, the post-war generation received it primarily as a “documentary” representation of the war. This audience did not always parse scenes as being scripted, because they had no object to compare it with. Catherine Masud (2015) highlights that even for the actual footage, this was the first time viewers were seeing war material in color with synchronized sound, further enhancing the “real” effect of the visual. Even those old enough to have seen films released in the 1970s would recall celluloid representations played out in artificial settings. My review of the film on its first release contained some signs of an unease that had not properly identified its source:

The subtext that is not explored in the film but is nevertheless clearly present on screen, are the class differences among the Bengali refugees and freedom fighters. The troupe members are, for the most part, from middle-class backgrounds. Yet, here in the course of the film, they mix with village refugees, farmers, and foot soldiers. There is *some awkwardness in these interactions*, as when the troupe embraces a group of soldiers at a liberated zone. In these few moments, one of the fundamental contradictions of the war effort is visible on screen. (Mohaiemen, 1997; emphasis added)

Not every audience member accepted the film as a document. In a response to the film written by Obaid Jaigirdar, questions were raised about how Levin received filming access at close range, and the presence of Indian soldiers (see Image 6).



Image 6. Indian soldiers entering liberated Bangladesh. Archive clip from ITN News Archive (London) in *Muktir Gaan*.

Courtesy Tareque Masud Memorial Trust.

Considering the time of events, it seems astonishing that such a technically flawless shooting could be done at a time of destruction such as 1971...At the end of the film, we see Indian armed forces advancing slowly along Bangladeshi streets, followed by tanks and other artillery. Where did the [Bangladeshi] freedom fighters go? Those whose blood brought victory, they are missing from this victory scene. Why? (Jaigirdar, 1997; translated by author)

In the post-premiere journey of the film, and especially in the tenth anniversary DVD, the Masuds took steps to emphasize the scripted nature of the project. But in spite of intentions, audiences breathed a different meaning into the film through an insistence on accuracy.

There is a level at which people don't want to believe, Even if they are told, they don't want to believe that a film like *Muktir Gaan* is fiction at any level...Even now, after so many years have gone by...We made a documentary about the making of *Muktir Gaan*. We deconstruct in detail the way it was, in some sense, very much an artificial construct...Still, people don't want to believe that...Because *Muktir Gaan* has a symbolic value which is beyond its entity as a film, and that symbolic value lent it a kind of abstract value. Which has, in some ways, little to do with the film itself...So at that level, since it's an abstraction, maybe all this doesn't matter so much. It certainly does not matter to the people who believe in the representations of *Muktir Gaan*. (Masud, 2013)

War and Reenactment

An early example of a constructed documentary is Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922), which Lear Levin cited as an inspiration in conversation with the Masuds. Flaherty had mastered, in a break with previous documentarians, the "grammar" of fiction films (Barnouw, 1974, p. 39). Shooting from multiple angles, a "surrealistic privilege, unmatched in human experience," was a core part of this film. Flaherty's focus was "authenticity of result," and the means to get there (e.g., shearing away half an igloo to get a well-lit shot) did not disturb him. In a "mock" review of *Nanook*, Bill Nichols harpooned this process:

[In] the scene where Nanook and other men (where did they come from, Central Casting?) spear a walrus, Flaherty is nearby, filming. According to Flaherty's own account, the men

begged him to use his rifle to kill the walrus, but Flaherty pretended not to hear them. This forced them to risk their lives unnecessarily, but it also allowed Flaherty to “observe” an “authentic” hunt as if he wasn’t there...Flaherty’s whole effort is a form of fraud. (Nichols, 2010, pp. 268–269)

The process of reconstructions within a documentary was regarded, post-*Nanook*, as part of the “ingenuity” of filmmaking (p. 38).

Long before *Nanook*, simulations were mixed into documentaries, including Doublier’s insertion of unrelated footage in his film on the Dreyfus affair in *Actualités* (1898), the Méliès’ intercutting of genuine and “reconstitution” material in *The Coronation of Edward VII* (1902), the staging of volcano explosions in Biograph’s *Eruption of Mount Vesuvius* (1905), William Selig’s use of a Roosevelt look-alike in *Hunting Big Game in Africa* (1909), and the use of a soundstage in *Night Mail* (1936) (Barnouw, 1974, pp. 24–27; Nichols, 2010, p. 125). In his biography of Selig, Andrew Erish (2012, p. 106) points out that the faked footage in *Big Game* left such a vivid impression on audiences that Cherry Kearton’s subsequent, factual documentary *Roosevelt in Africa* (1910) suffered in theaters because it was “boring” in comparison. The technical difficulties and dangers of war zone shooting meant that simulation was in frequent use in war films. Among early war simulations were Albert E. Smith’s recreation of the “battle of Santiago Bay” on a tabletop, staged battles in James Williamson’s *Attack on a Chinese Mission Station* (1898), and New Jersey standing in for distant war zones in Biograph’s *Battle of Yalu* (1904) and Edison’s *Skirmish Between Russian and Japanese Advance Guards* (1904) (Barnouw, pp. 24–25).

A significant shift came during World War II, when there was actual footage in abundance. André Bazin, in his discussion of the film series *Why We Fight* (1942–45), describes facts during wartime as having “exceptional amplitude.” The conditions of war are so exceptional, he argued, that the audience and critics have reified facts, such that any recreation is seen as “dubious, indecent, and sacrilegious” (2001, p. 60). Bazin found a simulation of a different register in *Why We Fight*—an “*a posteriori* editing” of the film (p. 61), taking footage shot for a different purpose and attaching it to a different script. This more sophisticated mode of simulation is visible in post-1945 films, for example, where sequences from Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph des Willens* (Triumph of the Will) (1935) were reappropriated to establish the crimes of the Nazi regime. What Riefenstahl had constructed as a paean to Nazi masculinity and order had become, after appropriation by anti-Nazi filmmakers, evidence of fascism and brutality. The reenactments in *Muktir Gaan* were not unique to a post-colonial context, but common in the history of documentary.

A Rustling Newspaper

Andre Bazin argued, in his discussion of *Bullfight* (1951), that it was the editing that created a new kind of realism. More important than the “camera eye” was what Bazin called, after Alexandre Astruc, *caméra stylo* (camera pen) (2003, p. 28). This *caméra stylo* was deployed by the Masud’s editing of Levin’s original footage, as well as the insertion of new, recreated scenes. At the same time, Bazin insisted on the significance of

“real time” on film, something *Muktir Gaan* contravened. Zakir Hossain Raju (2011) has described the struggle inside *Muktir Gaan* as one of “weaving story out of a non-story” of found footage. Repeat viewings of *Muktir Gaan* revealed that what I referred to as “some awkwardness” in my 1997 review were actually signs of staging, which I had not recognized two decades ago. In the scene I had commented on, one of the peasant soldiers looks directly at the camera and smiles. This stilted half-smile is what I had read, a little too literally, as a sign of discomfort with class tensions. Looking at it again now, this moment possibly derived from the soldiers’ awareness of the staged nature of that embrace. Also stilted were the scenes of a musician (played by Tariq Ali, who later became a trustee of the Bangladesh Liberation War Museum) trying to join the guerilla force, and being interviewed by a Major Gyas. Ali’s monologue in the film is presented as a diary entry, but was also written by the Masuds. The most scripted scene comes during a break in travel, when troupe members are reading newspapers.

The scene begins with the troupe traveling in their truck. One group of women playfully comb and tousle a friend’s hair. She yells “*dhuttori* (drat)” at her tormentors, and everyone starts giggling. The lead singer is asleep on top of a Bangladeshi flag. In one corner is another singer (we presume this is “the serious one”), and we glimpse the cover of the book she is reading: *Cancer Ward* (see Image 7). This is a semiautobiographical novel by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, published in 1967, and seen here in an English translation. It is a glimpse that hints at the class background (English fluency) and political orientation (somewhat contrary to Raihan’s use of Lenin) of some members of the traveling troupe that could complicate the viewers’ reading of a monolithic “Bengali culture” (e.g., the repertoire of Tagore and Nazrul songs). When the car breaks down, the women start reading a newspaper from the war front, dividing up segments and reading English headlines slowly (see Image 8). Through the snatches of dialogue, we piece together that one singer’s father is on the front, that her brother Nadeem is also fighting, and that she has not heard from them for months. There are reaction shots and close-ups, but all throughout the sound stays synced.

I had known Lear Levin for some time in New York, and finally approached him to ask about the scene. He was forthright about the scene being scripted:

I needed a certain amount of exposition. Explaining things without having to put in subtitles. So, that was a scene where we felt we needed to explain a certain amount of stuff. I studied with the great theater actress, Uta Hagen, at her HB Studios in Greenwich Village. In acting, there is Object Exercise—you give people a point they have to get to, and then any actor will know how to get there through the dialogue. “Who am I, where am I?” I gave them those directions and then they went from there. I had to shoot it maybe three to four times. I did a master shot, and then moved around to get reverse angles. Then I would shoot cutaways: people looking, or shots of newspapers, over the shoulders, cutaways to objects, all of that. (Levin, 2013)

Dancer and theater director Lubna Marium was one of the musicians in that scene. However, in contrast with Levin, she does not recollect the recreations in the scene.

This was a genuine conversation. It was forty years ago. I don’t remember repeating it. I just remember Lear and his group were quite unobtrusive. There are scenes where I am combing



Image 7. Naila Khan (sister of Lubna Marium) reading *Cancer Ward*. Still from *Muktir Gaan*. Courtesy Tareque Masud Memorial Trust.



Image 8. Newspaper reading scene. Still from *Muktir Gaan*. Courtesy Tareque Masud Memorial Trust.

my hair, picking flowers from the pond. They shot all that unobtrusively. They might have asked us to repeat this one scene—I have no memory of that. But they were filmmakers, they might have. And we also became friends. So they might have asked Naila and me to repeat it. (Marium, 2013b)

Night Moves

Muktir Gaan has one scene that was recreated from scratch in 1994. This is the water fight in the third half of the film. A group of guerrillas swim through dark water full of *kochuripana* (a regular film motif of Bangladesh's rural landscape), arriving at a Pakistani army camp and beginning a night battle. The scene is filmed with skill, and there are no obvious signs of reenactment. Codirector Catherine Masud highlighted the scene, urging me to view the "extras" section of the film's DVD. In that section, there is a "making of" documentary in which Tareque Masud talks about recreating the scene. As Masud described it, his priority was to have at least one actual night battle scene, which was absent from Levin's footage. The scene was based on an actual skirmish that took place in Dhamrai to capture a bridge, and shooting was done on the actual site (see Image 9) with former guerrillas as technical advisers. To film the scene, the filmmakers recruited members of a local political party—men who would perhaps be known as "mastans" (local gangs) but here had become "actors."



Image 9. Mishuk Munier filming recreated night battle scene in 1994 for *Muktir Gaan*. Munier also perished in the 2011 accident that killed Tareque Masud.

Courtesy Tareque Masud Memorial Trust.

Those so-called local gang leaders, they were so dedicated to this. They were filled with the spirit of the liberation war. They slaved for two nights in that cold poisonous water, side by side with actual freedom fighters. (Masud & Masud, 2008)

Lear Levin points out that this scene would have to be a recreation, because he could not have done a night shoot:

I had a 0.95 lens for my 16mm camera, and that was the fastest lens made at that time. I could shoot by lantern light, but that was the most it could do. The fighting was at night—were I to turn on the lights, forget it! I would become a victim. There were corpses all around in daytime, but not fighting. (Levin, 2013)

The technical challenges of the equipment also made the water scene impossible in 1971. Levin explained the complicated technical setup he worked with:

I had a 16 mm NPR camera, one of the earliest cameras to shoot super 16. I rented it at Samuelson's in London. Frank Gell brought it over when we met in Calcutta. I called Haskell Wexler just before we left to ask if there's anything we should look out for. I woke him up in the middle of the night. His advice: "Just watch out for dirt in the gate, because that would be magnified. Keep it clean. Good luck, keep your head down." The only lights I had were two portable stun guns, 12 volt battery operated lights that last for thirty minutes. The downside was, there were so many moths and mosquitoes, whoever held it at night would get swamped. My assistant was holding it and shooting, and all these moths gathered and crawled all over Frank—my assistant—and they covered his body. He was fearless in all other aspects, but mortally afraid of bugs. Without turning, I said: "Frank for Christ's sake, you're ruining the soundtrack." Finally, when I turned I realized he was whimpering, but would not put the light down. So then I gave him a hug because I was so touched. I felt bad about not realizing what was happening. After that I gave the light to someone else who was not afraid of bugs. (Levin, 2013)

These constraints would limit *verité* filmmaking by Levin. In his interview, he also described night shoots as solo processes: "When I went on patrol, I would not take my assistant with me" (2013). When Levin shared the few location shoot photographs he had, I found only one photo where he was shooting alone (see Image 10). In other photos, he is usually accompanied by at least one crew member (see Image 11). We can deduce that the minimum crew Levin needed was two people: himself as cameraman, and at least a lightman (if night shoot), or sound recorder (if recording dialogue or song). Yet, in Lubna Marium's recollection, Lear's shooting is described as unobtrusive. In this essay's opening quote, Levin said his default mode was recreation. Yet in an earlier interview, he had also told me, "I didn't have the heart to prompt in the refugee camp. They were going through so much" (October, 2013).

Was there then a degree of recreation of action that was now forgotten, both by Levin and by his actors? I was no longer certain after interviewing Levin and viewing his photographs. I went back to the DVD and watched *Muktir Gaan* again, going frame by frame for certain scenes. This time, several more moments seemed one step closer to staging: not only the awkward embrace I had noticed in 1997, but more quotidian moments. From the pause before applauding a song (perhaps waiting for the camera



Image 10. Lear Levin filming in refugee camp, 1971
Courtesy Lear Levin personal collection.



Image 11. Lear Levin filming in 1971,
with assistant
Courtesy Lear Levin personal collection.



Image 12. Mahmoodur Rahman Benu waiting for a scene to begin, next to Lear Levin's clapboard.

Courtesy Tareque Masud Memorial Trust.

cue (see Image 12)) to the tentative stepping off from a boat. All these moments seem to carry the possibility of recreation.

Uncle Sam

While reaching the film's climax, we encounter a remarkable song on the moving truck. As the flag waves, and the camera jumps from person to person, singer Swapan Chowdhury goes into a trance and dissolves the chorus into applause (see Image 13). The song's lyrics are a direct reference to the role of the Nixon administration in trying to send the Seventh Fleet to the aid of Pakistan:

But now the Pak army flees for their lives
 And with them flees the Seventh Fleet
 Then Yahya Khan cries out
 Tell me, oh tell me,
 where did Uncle Sam go?
 But now the thugs flee,
 And with them flee the collaborators
 Then General Niazi cries out



Image 13. Swapan Chowdhury singing “Where did Uncle Sam go.” Still from *Muktir Gaan*.
 Courtesy Tareque Masud Memorial Trust.

Tell me, oh tell me,
 where did Uncle Sam go?
 (Masud, 1997)

This climactic scene connects the musical troupe to superpower politics within the war, in the form of a duel between the Nixon White House and the Indira Gandhi administration (and behind her, the Soviets). Yet, this song did not exist in 1971; Tareque Masud wrote a new song to dub over the filmed scenes, as he explained in an essay:

Lear had filmed the scene so beautifully. The visuals were amazing. But what could I do with the *kirtan* song? It did not go with the subject. So I inserted contemporary concepts with the newly written lyrics; I wanted to explain through this song that independence was finally at our doorstep. These musicians didn’t return to liberated Bangladesh on December 16th, they actually returned in February 1972. I took creative license to show that they sang their way victoriously into liberated Bangladesh. (Masud, 2012; translated by author)

Theater scholar Sudipto Chatterjee was a graduate student in New York at the time of the film’s editing. Like other Bengalis in New York at that time, including translator Alam Khorshed and UN official Hasan Ferdous, Chatterjee was recruited to help with

the film. Initially his brief was to reproduce dialogue in Urdu, as a stand-in for Pakistani army officers in conversation. Chatterjee had grown up in India and could, therefore, simulate Urdu better than many who had grown up in Bangladesh (where Urdu became unacceptable after 1971). Eventually, he became the singer for this scene, dubbing in his rendition of the “Uncle Sam” song over the shots of Swapan Chowdhury.

The song is of a different register of recreation than other moments in the film. For example, the newspaper scene was stage managed by Levin himself. The water fight scene was recreated in the 1990s, to make up for the technical limits of the 1971 shoot. In a third example, two scenes were intercut to suggest spatial and temporal contemporaneity of the musicians on the truck and the victorious Indian army. For the “Uncle Sam” song, the scene is with the original footage, but the gentle folk song has been replaced by something with a harder edge. The song’s political references evoke Vietnam war protest songs, such as Country Joe and the Fish’s “I Feel Like I’m Fixin’ To Die Rag” (Well, come on all of you, big strong men/Uncle Sam needs your help again/He’s got himself in a terrible jam/way down yonder in Vietnam). Masud may also have been channeling Allen Ginsberg, whose poem about the 1971 war—“September on Jessore Road”—he translated into Bengali, but finally decided not to use in the film (Masud, 2012, p. 20).

Reviewing the decision to create a song that had not existed in 1971, Chatterjee considered the line stretching from Baudrillard back to the epic *Mahabharata*:

Baudrillard is talking about simulation and the existence of something called the simulacrum, which hangs between live contact and virtual contact. [This] I would like to label as the “virtuative”—it’s not life, it’s not virtual, it’s something in between. In *Muktir Gaan*, Tareque is trying to address a bigger truth that goes beyond historical factualness... [Now], the *Mahabharata* is referred to as *itihasa*, or history. As opposed to *Ramayana*, which is *kabya*, or poetry. Why is *Mahabharata itihasa*, although it’s written in meter? It’s the world’s longest existing poem, a few million verses. It calls back a time when the lines between factuality and literature were fuzzier. Why is it that the lines are not fuzzy any more? Why do we ask that if it is not verifiable, it did not happen? Why do we need a concept like simulacra when it already existed before? (Chatterjee, 2013)

In a new book on the 1971 war, Nayanika Mookherjee has documented “recaptioning” of photographs (2015, p. 163), used during the war by Pakistani authorities, and both during and after the war by the Bangladeshi forces. The first trend we already encountered in Zahir Raihan’s interview about the redeployment of footage by the Pakistani army. Mookherjee parses a photograph taken by Kishore Parekh of a soldier peering inside the *lungi* of a villager. In Parekh’s book, *Bangladesh: A Brutal Birth* (1972), the caption identifies the soldier as Indian, and the villager as “Pakistani spy.” In the Bangladeshi post-war media, this photograph was widely reproduced with the soldier identified as Pakistani, and the villager as a Bengali (the object of the exercise was to look for absence of circumcision, which would mark out Bengali Hindus). Mookherjee considers this an example of the “open semiotics” of the object, making it available for different readings by audiences. Chatterjee argues that *Muktir Gaan* has a “bigger truth” that extends beyond the factual, rendering it irrelevant whether a scene is misinterpreted as factual or not.

On Brutality

Lubna Marium believes that the Masud's film should be considered a "Herculean effort" of recreation, but she added the cautionary note that audiences may take from it the idea that the 1971 war was glorious and orderly.

The Bangladeshi Mukti Shongrami Shilpi Shangstha was totally based in Calcutta. Troupes or singers were sent to refugee camps in India, on day trips mostly, to motivate and inspire the demoralized and heart-broken refugees...A far cry from the battlefields of the war. Never once was any member of the troupe in any danger of shedding a single drop of blood... War is not beautiful. It is about brutality and death. War is about your baby brother telling you how scared he is to face death. It's about the trembling of a teenager relating the horror of the gouging of an enemy soldier's eyes. War is about standing in front of the lifeless, blood-stained, bayoneted body of someone you loved dearly. It's about crying and crying till you think your heart is actually going to break into two. Sadly, war is about coming home to disillusionment. (Marium, 1996)

In 1937, Joris Ivens decided against using Orson Welles' voice in *The Spanish Earth* (1937), because he felt his voice was "too beautiful" for a film on the Spanish civil war. In an essay for a 2007 art exhibition, *Beautiful Suffering: Photography and the Traffic in Pain*, Mark Reinhardt pointed out that one consistent critique, starting from the Frankfurt School and going up to the late Allan Sekula, has been that aestheticizing suffering is "politically reactionary" and invites "sadism" on the part of the viewer. Reinhardt pushed back against this position, arguing that Sekula's charge of "retinal excitation" (Emerling, 2012, p. 106) makes an error by forcefully separating the purely visual impact from the critical possibilities. For Reinhardt, images have far more possibility than this binary, as he asked, "Is there not something in images that resists or eludes every effort to fix meaning through language?" (Reinhardt, 2007, p. 24).

Although the critique of aestheticized suffering has validity, the possibilities of war images probably lie somewhere between Sekula's concerns and Rheinhardt's flexibility. What impact does a film like *Muktir Gaan*, which has no scenes of on-screen brutality, have on the ongoing debates around the 1971 war in Bangladesh? Aestheticized and sanitized war stories erase particular realities—something that can be gleaned from the words of Marium, a person who inhabits the war's trauma in a deeply individualized form. In her 1996 op-ed, she worried that, "there is an insidious movement to intellectualize the war of 1971. It was not an intellectual's war. It was a war fought by a people totally defenseless and unprepared" (Marium, 1996). In 2013, the Shahbag protests polarized liberal groups that were previously united on the issue of justice for war crimes of 1971. The rupture came because portions of the former liberal alliances within *shushil shomaj* (civil society) disagreed on tactics for pressing for trials. In the middle of these intense debates, many of us finally learnt, from an article by Marium, about the fate of Nadeem, the "baby brother" referenced in *Muktir Gaan*.

My younger brother, Nadeem, at the age of 15, was a Muktijoddha (freedom fighter). As a young person he used to read philosophy all the time—Buddhism, Marx, Sartre. And then a machine gun was placed in his hand. His most horrifying experience was when our Muktijoddhas caught a Pakistani soldier and gouged out the soldier's eyes. Nadeem was

never able to overcome the horror of war, and later committed suicide. Think about it, that's all I ask. (Marium, 2013a)

The violence that Marium referred to, repeatedly, is absent from *Muktir Gaan*, and the audience's presumption of accuracy risks erasing the brutality she wanted viewers to remember. Marium's recollection of her brother's traumatization from the war evoked angry responses from young activists in the Shahbag period, reflecting a population that considered descriptions of brutality by Bengali soldiers (in response to the Pakistan army's scorched earth strategy) to be unacceptable, even from a war survivor. *Muktir Gaan* may have played a role in vanishing the chaotic reality of war, in its use of simulation to indicate the full scope (as well as time span) of the war.

Conclusion

At a distance of two decades, I now reread *Muktir Gaan* as a composite of the actual (the musical troupe's performances at refugee camps), the staged (the newspaper reading scene), the fiction (the water fight), and the recoding (the "Uncle Sam" song). Cinematographer Lear Levin, codirector Catherine Masud, performer Lubna Marium, and singer Sudipto Chatterjee all acknowledge the simulated scenes. Masud pointed to the "making of" chapter of the DVD, although we should note that this came a decade after the film's release. Lubna Marium referred to the op-ed she had written after the film's release, highlighting that she had not spent months with the traveling troupe.

If I hadn't been honest about the fact that I had not been on the truck more than five days, it would always be a lie. I had to say it. We have been taught to be honest about history. My being honest does not lessen Tareque's work. (Marium, 2013b)

What emerges from the documents provided by the production team is that the film's simulated portions were made public after the film began its screening journey. Yet, Catherine Masud highlights that the Bangladeshi audience chose not to focus on the newly added disclaimers of recreation. My argument is that this happens because their relationship to the film was initially framed (in 1995) through joy and discovery after a long drought of visual images, and today (after the events of 2013) through a search for evidence. Sandy Flitterman-Lewis observed that, in the context of the German Holocaust, any rendering of the past evokes the future within a continuum "whose constant is social responsibility" (1998, p. 205). Such a "responsibility" question weighs on public viewings of *Muktir Gaan*, in the context of war crimes trials framed by national yearning and international isolation. The facts of 1971 are legally admissible as evidence in the trials, and visual material (including films and newsreels) have been submitted by lawyers for the prosecution. Prior to the accident of 2011, both Tareque Masud and his longtime cinematographer Mishuk Munier (whose father was killed by pro-Pakistan death squads in 1971), were scheduled to give testimony to the war crimes tribunal. As mentioned earlier, the film's sequel *Muktir Kotha* (1999) was submitted as legal evidence in the tribunal case against "Khokon Rajakar"; that

second film is testimony generated by audiences after viewing *Muktir Gaan*. With the trials continuing to be a live issue with strong material consequences, pressures on films about 1971 to function as much more than cinema will continue and grow.

My reading of audiences' responses to *Muktir Gaan* depends partially on an idea of the naïve or believing viewer, just as I myself was in 1995. Tom Gunning's view of early film opposes this idea of an audience that is hypnotized by cinema's illusionist power (2004). Rather, he argues that a certain kind of magical vision was possible precisely when the belief in the marvelous declined. Audiences inhabited a space of rationalism, and yet held on to the power to be charmed by that which they knew to be untrue. This is Gunning's "aesthetic of astonishment" and "cinema of attraction," where the audience does not get lost in a fictional world, but remains aware of the act of looking and its fulfillment. Gunning thinks that the audience could believe in magical illusions due to a desire to test the limits of intellectual disavowal: "I know, but yet I see" (p. 80). I am however unsure if such a rationalist audience is what was filling up Dhaka theaters in 1995. Recent events in the backdrop of Shahbag, such as the misidentification on social media of an image from Belsen 1945 as the Rayer Bazar killing fields of 1971, demonstrate that audiences do suspend visual skepticism when reading images related to sacralized history.

Audiences evolve over time, but that transformation does not always alter their desire to believe what is onscreen. In 1995, Bangladeshi audiences were responding to a political context where war images had been moved offscreen by censors and political meddling. In 2015, they are in a situation where war images are in high demand as evidence for the war crimes trials. The viewer, therefore, has a continuous desire to believe what is on screen; the reasons for it have shifted, even while the film has remained the same. The rewriting of story has been a crucial aspect of the documentation of, and debates around, national liberation wars. An initially declarative, and oral, culture around Bangladeshi war memories in the 1970s has been replaced by a contemporary search for evidence in the context of war crimes trials. The Bangladeshi audience could possibly have transitioned from a believing to a skeptical viewer—especially with the increase in visual literacy. But political events around the juridical process of war crimes trials has meant that, at least in the area of 1971 memories, audiences have consciously, or subconsciously, kept themselves in a more trusting frame of viewership. Kajri Jain (2007) has parsed different modes of viewing of the popular practiced by South Asian audiences. What I finally want to suggest is that audiences also have different modes of viewing specific to narratives that have become sacrosanct. They may be skeptical, rational, and evidentiary audiences for other objects; but with such sacred narratives they transform themselves, again, into a believing public.

There is no second Lear Levin, with an undiscovered cache of film footage lying in a New York basement, waiting to be discovered. Any future film on the 1971 war, by necessity, will have to depend on recreation. The layout of 1971 on screen will now be more actively and visibly framed by simulation and scripting. Perhaps future films can occupy a different space, since in recreating the scene, it may be able to go deeper into the trauma of the film. The final word comes from the late Tareque Masud, whose absence is the void into which I write, looking for answers to the film's unresolved questions. Masud had preemptively replied, as far back as 1997, when he wrote about the scene where victorious Indian soldiers are spliced in with the musicians on the truck:

That scene where the Indian army is entering, and the musicians are smiling as they look on...*The truth is more important than the facts.* Perhaps that scene did not happen in real life. Perhaps they were actually laughing with some children. This may not have happened, but this is a historic truth within the liberation war. (Masud, 1997; translated by author, emphasis added)

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