

## Impact case study (REF3)

<b>Institution:</b> University of Essex		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> 33		
<b>Title of case study:</b> Transforming Perceptions of the Middle East through Film Curation as Practice-based Research		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> 30 June 2014 – 7 September 2019		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b>	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b>	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b>
Shohini Chaudhuri	Professor	1998 - present
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> 15 April 2015 – 24 July 2020		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> N		
<b>1. Summary of the impact</b>		
<p>Western perceptions of the Middle East frequently rest on popular media stereotypes, especially of terrorism, Islam and repressive states. To tackle this, Professor Shohini Chaudhuri extended her scholarly expertise in Middle Eastern film into the public realm, developing film curation as a form of practice-based research. Her film screenings and discussions have reached over 10,255 people in the UK and UAE, among other countries, and have resulted in <b>1</b>: more nuanced public understanding by offering perspectives that are usually invisible and unheard in dominant representations; <b>2</b>: a higher international profile for underrepresented filmmakers and a platform for them to reflect on their practice; <b>3</b>: larger audience reach and policy improvements for The Mosaic Rooms, Index on Censorship and the Hubert Bals Fund; and <b>4</b>: impact on pedagogical practice at New York University (NYU) Abu Dhabi.</p>		
<b>2. Underpinning research</b>		
<p>The underpinning research consists of curatorial practice developed through a series of film screenings and discussions between April 2015 and September 2019. A film event at Amnesty International UK in 2015 was followed by a substantial collaboration with The Mosaic Rooms in the form of a two-month long film season and a one-day public symposium in 2016 and 2019 respectively, the latter co-partnered with Index on Censorship, and a film screening series at NYU Abu Dhabi in 2017. In all these instances, key decisions about film choices and discussion formats drew directly on Chaudhuri's scholarly expertise in Middle Eastern film. The following concerns and challenges were particularly important to her curatorial choices:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- How do Middle Eastern filmmakers build new perceptions of their region, rather than merely confirming existing ones fostered by mainstream media? <b>[R1]</b></li> <li>- How can films make visible what was previously invisible in people's everyday lives and struggles? <b>[R2, R3]</b></li> <li>- What are the different kinds of limitations, apart from state censorship, on freedom of cinematic expression in the region? <b>[R4]</b></li> <li>- What benefits could filmmakers gain by sharing their experiences of these constraints and how can a safe space be created for them to discuss these sensitive issues? <b>[R5]</b></li> </ul> <p>As an Amnesty International activist, Chaudhuri organised awareness and fund-raising film events on the NGO's behalf. She selected films that gave insider perspectives of marginalised communities at a time when they were facing renewed discrimination, such as the Palestinian documentary on Israel's bombardment of Gaza, <i>Where Should the Birds Fly</i>, which she screened in 2015. These choices were motivated by Chaudhuri's awareness that films that focus on people's lived experiences under crisis can alter conventional perceptions, as explored in her publications <b>[R1, R3]</b>. From this scholarly work, she also knew that one of the pitfalls of awareness-raising</p>		

events is that they generate emotions that dissipate when audiences leave the screening. And so, to encourage longer-term critical reflection, Chaudhuri supplemented regular activist practices (such as petition-signing) which typically accompany such events with discussions highlighting how media perceptions normalise violence against marginalised groups and accommodate us to their unjust reality.

It was Chaudhuri's book *Cinema of the Dark Side* [R1] that motivated The Mosaic Rooms to commission her to curate a season of film screenings and talks with an accompanying blog on their website. The Mosaic Rooms is a London gallery dedicated to contemporary art from the Middle East that aims to promote cross-cultural understanding and shift preconceptions about the region by revealing aspects neglected by Western media. Held in 2016, Chaudhuri's programme *Crisis & Creativity: A Season of Contemporary Films from and about the Arab World* highlighted problems in mainstream reporting on the Middle East that she had established in her published research [R1, R2, R3] and introduced Arab films offering more nuanced and subtle views. The season comprised three events that were themed to make visible what is often invisible in news coverage of the region: *Space and Memory in the War-Torn City*, a showcase of eight short films exploring inhabitants' experiences of Arab cities destroyed and altered by conflict; *Politicising Tourism in Palestine*, which considered the everyday effects of the Israel-Palestine conflict on Palestinian lives from the novel angle of tourism, with a screening of the documentary *Open Bethlehem*; and *Social Media as Archives of the Arab Uprisings*, which gave an alternative perspective on the Syrian War through reflection on the use of social media archives in the featured documentary *Silvered Water, Syria Self-Portrait*. Chaudhuri's research into cinema's ability to construct alternative perceptions of events, people and places [R1, R5] shaped her choices of films and her framing of the events in the publicity, blog, panel briefings and introductions – all aimed at people who were not specialists in the region. Additionally, she wrote an article for *The Conversation* which selected five of these films to encapsulate the season's key concerns for a wider audience [R6].

When Chaudhuri was invited to NYU Abu Dhabi as a Visiting Professor in 2017, she developed the themes of the *Crisis & Creativity* season into a course for their core curriculum. The course was accompanied by a public programme of three screenings and filmmaker Q&As, which Chaudhuri curated for both university students and staff and the wider Abu Dhabi community (which consists of 80% foreign nationals) introducing them to filmmaking under crisis and constraints in the Middle East. For the course and the public programme, Chaudhuri drew on her emerging research on creative constraints [R4] which aims to transform understanding of freedom of cinematic expression in the region.

Chaudhuri returned to The Mosaic Rooms in 2019 to collaborate on a public symposium, titled *The Paradox of Creative Constraints*, this time also partnering with Index on Censorship, a leading NGO in the defence of free expression. Her developing research had shown her that, while human rights defenders, academics and the general public tend to focus exclusively on state censorship, there are many different types of constraints affecting filmmakers in the Middle East [R4]. These constraints include funders and festivals' stereotypical expectations of the region which filmmakers themselves experience as de facto censorship. Therefore, Chaudhuri invited six filmmakers from the region to present their films and discuss the different limitations on their freedom of cinematic expression with film funders (the Hubert Bals Fund and Arab Fund for Arts and Culture) and human rights defenders (Index on Censorship). The symposium was designed to foster dialogue between these different sectors, so that participants (fourteen in all) could learn from one another's experiences. Chaudhuri's research into constraints had made her aware of security risks for filmmakers in the region [R4]. Therefore, in her briefings to participants, she strove to maintain a balance between encouraging them to talk openly about these sensitive issues and ensuring their safety. For this reason, the audience was restricted to physical attendees and panel discussion audio-recordings were not made public.

### 3. References to the research (Available from HEI on request)

**R1.** Chaudhuri, S. (2014), *Cinema of the Dark Side: Atrocity and the Ethics of Film Spectatorship*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.. Listed in REF2. Quality indicators (QIs): Peer-reviewed;

reviews hailed it as ‘an exceptional study ... deeply rooted in the ethical discourse of human rights’ (*Film & History*). ‘Chaudhuri does all this with a clarity and authority that enables readers to engage with emotionally and intellectually difficult material, and the result is an essential read for anyone engaged in the study of contemporary cinema, neocolonialism, media ethics and human rights’ (*Times Higher Education*). DOI: <http://doi.org/10.3366/edinburgh/9780748642632.001.0001>

**R2.** Chaudhuri, S. (2017), “Nine Cinematic Devices for Staging (In)Visible War and the (Vanishing) Colonial Present”, in *Disappearing War: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Cinema and Erasure in the Post 9/11 World*, ed. Christina Hellmich and Lisa Purse, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 170–190. QI: peer-reviewed. ISBN-13 9781474416566.

**R3.** Chaudhuri, S. (2019), “‘Telegenically dead Palestinians’: Cinema, News Media and Perception Management of the Gaza Conflicts”, in *Global Humanitarianism and Media Culture*, ed. Michael Lawrence and Rachel Tavernor, Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp. 103–21. Listed in REF2. QI: Peer-reviewed. Based on her keynote address at Global Humanitarianism and Media Culture, University of Sussex, January 2015. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7765/9781526117304.00013>.

**R4.** Chaudhuri, S. (2019), ‘Cinema of Constraints: Continuity and Change in Contemporary Filmmaking from and about the Arab World and Iran’, Keynote conference paper, MeCCSA annual conference, University of Stirling. QI: This research informed a successful application for **[G1]**.

**R5.** Chaudhuri, S. (2018), “The Alterity of the Image: The Distant Spectator and Films about the Syrian Revolution and War”, *Transnational Cinemas* 9.1: 31–46. Listed in REF2. QI: Peer-reviewed. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20403526.2018.1444929>

**R6.** Chaudhuri, S. (2016), “Five films that will help you understand the modern Arab world”, *The Conversation*, <https://theconversation.com/five-films-that-will-help-you-understand-the-modern-arab-world-59348> and *Middle East Eye* <https://www.middleeasteye.net/features/five-films-will-help-you-understand-modern-arab-world>

**G1.** Chaudhuri, S. *Creativity and Constraint: Contemporary Cinema in Iran and the Arab World*, Leverhulme Research Fellowship, 1 September 2019 – 30 April 2021. £44,749.

#### 4. Details of the impact

##### Audience reach

In 2015, the Amnesty International screening of *Where Should the Birds Fly* had 150 attendees, a mix of activists, film enthusiasts and general public. In 2016, 157 people altogether attended the *Crisis & Creativity* season at The Mosaic Rooms. Visitors were largely newcomers to the gallery with varying levels of prior knowledge and experience of the Arab World. Demographic data shows that the season attracted new, younger and more diverse audiences to the gallery **[S1]**. As its Director attests, “We found the interest in attending was much higher than expected, with the screenings all selling out, and were delighted with the attendance. We were particularly pleased to see from the audience questionnaire a potentially higher attendance from an audience under the age of 35, who we are keen to target and expand on, and that many were first time visitors” **[S2]**. In 2017, the three public film screenings and filmmaker Q&As at NYU Abu Dhabi were attended by over 280 people, including students, staff and Abu Dhabi residents, with all three screenings fully booked. In 2019, The Mosaic Rooms had 90 attendees (excluding participants) for *The Paradox of Creative Constraints* symposium, creating a full house at the gallery for the entire day.

Furthermore, Chaudhuri’s article, “Five films that will help you understand the modern Arab world”, which accompanied *Crisis & Creativity* at The Mosaic Rooms, was shared 8,406 times on Facebook and Twitter via *The Conversation* and *Middle East Eye*, enabling a wider community to engage with the season’s insights. It led to Chaudhuri being invited to discuss her research findings on portrayals of Arab women and filmmaking constraints to a live audience of 146 people on the BBC World Service programme *The Cultural Frontline*, broadcast in March 2019 to 79 million worldwide and uploaded as a podcast on the BBC website with 1,026 downloads in the first six weeks **[S3]**.

##### Impacts for beneficiary groups

###### (1) Impact on the understanding of attending audiences

Responding to the choice of film and its contextual framing, audience members at the Amnesty International screening and panel discussion of *Where Should the Birds Fly* confirmed that the

event broke previously-held prejudices and stereotypes derived from mainstream media, commenting that the film was “[an] eye opening” insight into the lives of Palestinians in Gaza [S4].

Audience surveys for the *Crisis & Creativity* season at The Mosaic Rooms attest that attendees connected with what they saw as a shared humanity in the films, taking them beyond the frequent dehumanisation of Arabs in mainstream media (via a prevailing association with terrorism) and towards empathy with people affected by conflict [S1]. At *The Paradox of Creative Constraints*, although some attendees came from or had worked in the Middle East and were therefore already informed, the symposium universally deepened their understanding of freedom of expression in the region. One attendee stated, “I was glad of a space that didn’t presume a ‘Middle East states are repressive’ neo-colonial stereotype & instead gave over to the complexity of how art markets (markets generally) & transnational currents might be just as repressive as forces” [S5]. The audience gained detailed insights into the challenges that filmmakers face, overturning received wisdoms. Many were surprised to discover how much the production and distribution of Middle Eastern films is affected by Western stereotypes, remarking that: “the process of filmmaking is more fraught with difficulty than I previously assumed”, with these difficulties owing to “very diverse factors”; “I now recognise finding funding sources as a big challenge while censorship may carry less weight!” [S5]. Some resolved to change habits, to “work on making a difference myself to encourage people to challenge the social norms/constraints set by colonial rules and limitations” and “as an audience be open to new fresh stories and not expect the old exotic stories” [S5].

## (2) Benefits for filmmakers

Chaudhuri’s film screenings, panels and interviews/short articles published on The Mosaic Rooms blog and *The Conversation* have helped independent filmmakers from around the world, giving them greater exposure. She has supported their activist goals by directing attention to their work and encouraging audiences to stretch beyond mainstream fare. One film that she curated at NYU Abu Dhabi in 2017, *Little Gandhi: The Lost Truth of the Syrian Uprising*, with the director attending for a Q&A, was subsequently selected as Syria’s entry for Best International Feature Film in the 90th Academy Awards. It was chosen by a committee of artists in exile recognised by the Motion Picture Academy, bypassing the Syrian government. In June 2019, the director stated that “The film screening at NYU Abu Dhabi contributed to raise the profile of the film and assisted in increasing our film’s international outreach” through a screening circuit that included the US Congress, Canadian Parliament, United Nations, Yale, Harvard, Sorbonne and Essex – Chaudhuri facilitated the Essex screening as well – and he says this “impactful profile” led to the film being “the first SYRIAN film ever to be officially selected” for this Oscar category [S6].

*The Paradox of Creative Constraints* symposium enabled filmmakers to share their experiences of constraints and learn from each other’s creative solutions which they could take back to their work in their respective countries and tackle those challenges more effectively. The safe space that Chaudhuri created for participants to reflect on their practice led one filmmaker to acknowledge that the symposium helped them find the “courage of my voice” as a way of handling self-censorship, a prevalent problem impeding artistic expression in the Middle East [S5]. The symposium enhanced the filmmakers’ networks by connecting them with peers from the region as well as funders and human rights defenders whose support they can now access more effectively through personal contacts [S5]. As Index on Censorship’s Associate Arts Producer attested in 2019, for her it led to “an ongoing dialogue with a particular film-maker exploring in depth the nature of self-censorship in this context” [S7]. The symposium also aided filmmakers by increasing public awareness of the difficult conditions under which they operate (see (1)).

## (3) Impact on policy and audience reach of participating organisations

The *Crisis & Creativity* season pioneered a new format of visitor engagement for The Mosaic Rooms, and *The Paradox of Creative Constraints* symposium was the first time that it had hosted a day’s film event. Both enabled the gallery to expand the issues with which it engages and its networks. Following the high turnouts and consistently positive audience feedback on format and content, The Mosaic Rooms Director affirmed in December 2019 that “These results demonstrate a need and interest for such film events from a wider audience and we very much hope to bring these elements into our programme moving forward” [S2].

For Index on Censorship, an organization that tends to focus on state censorship in other countries, the symposium helped them to understand that filmmakers also self-censor themselves as a result of Western stereotyping, in order to get their films made and distributed internationally. The event led to a policy shift to expand their remit to address this, as Index's Associate Arts Producer testified, "*For me, the key take-away from the symposium was that this form of constraint has to be acknowledged as a significant and pervasive factor in the field. The predominantly white, middle class cultural institutions in the West, including Index on Censorship, that promote and support freedom of expression as a universal right, must engage with the full significance of this form of censorship as a vital component of our work*" [S7].

The Hubert Bals Fund (HBF), designed to support filmmakers from countries on the DAC-list of the OECD and low-ranking countries on the World Press Freedom Index, benefited by hearing filmmakers speak about their challenges. The symposium led to a restructuring of their funding processes. Like many funding selection panels, the HBF's committees had previously consisted mostly of Western consultants whose choices, the filmmakers at the symposium argued, tend to reflect regional stereotypes. In July 2020, HBF's Manager stated, "*The panel provided me with input that I used in the fine tuning of our selection procedure ... from now on we are going to include new committee members in every committee, focussing on committee members from Latin America, Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe (the regions in which we support film projects)*" [S8].

#### (4) Impact on Pedagogical Practice

Chaudhuri's course influenced the design and delivery of curricula in disciplines across NYU Abu Dhabi. As NYUAD's Vice-Provost for Undergraduate Academic Development testified in June 2019, it "*was so well-conceived that I've used it over the last three years to help new faculty members approach their own course development with imagination, specificity, and high standards*". The University sustained the practice of curating Arab cinema to the general public: "*In the wake of the series' success, our Film and New Media program, in collaboration with the university's Arts Centre and the Sorbonne's campus in Abu Dhabi, has curated an ongoing public program in Arab cinema on the same model*" [S9].

#### 5. Sources to corroborate the impact

References to impact themes in Section 4 are in round brackets.

- S1.** Demographic survey of The Mosaic Rooms audiences prior to the *Crisis & Creativity* programme and audience surveys from the three *Crisis & Creativity* events, May and June 2016. (1, 3)
- S2.** Testimonial by the Director of The Mosaic Rooms, December 2019. (3)
- S3.** Table of audience attendance at film events, podcast downloads and social media shares during the impact period, and PDFs of *The Conversation/Middle East Eye* article indicating social media shares. (Audience reach)
- S4.** Audience survey for the screening and discussion of *Where Should the Birds Fly*, Amnesty International UK, London, April 2015. (1)
- S5.** Audience survey for the Paradox of Creative Constraints: A Public Symposium, The Mosaic Rooms, London, September 2019. (1, 2)
- S6.** Testimonial by the Film Director of *Little Gandhi: The Lost Truth of the Syrian Uprising*, June 2019. (2)
- S7.** Testimonial by the Associate Arts Producer, Index on Censorship, October 2019. (2, 3)
- S8.** Testimonial by the Manager of the Hubert Bals Fund of the International Film Festival, Rotterdam, July 2020. (3)
- S9.** Testimonial by the Vice-Provost for Undergraduate Academic Development, NYU Abu Dhabi, June 2019. (4)