CHAPTER 12

# Focus Pulled to Hungary

## Case Study of the OLIve Participatory Video Workshop

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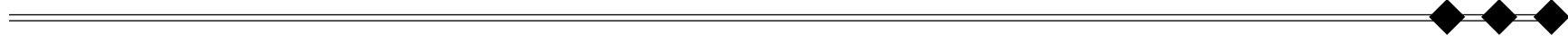

This chapter explores the curriculum, methodology and learning outcomes of the OLIve participatory video course to serve as a case study for other educators working with refugees and asylum seekers, and to encourage the use of participatory video tools. It describes the development of participants' visual and creative skills, with the goal of giving authorship to displaced persons over their own visual representations.[1]

In May 2016, during the opening session of the first participatory video course offered within the framework of Central European University (CEU)'s OLIve Weekend Program for students who have experienced displacement, participants were given their first assignment right away: record three shots of something you like, something you hate or something that makes you curious, in the university buildings or outside in the immediate vicinity.

By joining OLIve, its students became part of CEU's highly diverse community from all over the world and were able to escape the intrusive attention of the media and judgemental gaze of passers-by that refugees and asylum seekers often faced in Hungary. During the first day of the participatory video course, when refugees took cameras and tripods to the street in front of St. Stephen's Cathedral, one of the city's most touristic squares, tourists and locals became the focus of the cameras – the subjects of scrutiny – as the refugees viewed them through their lenses. This was precisely one of the main goals of the course tutors: to empower and create space for refugees' own narratives amidst the biased, authorial European media discourse.

When students returned from their first shoot an hour later, full of excitement, they brought back some stunning footage which represented both a symbolic and intimate snapshot of their stay in Hungary. The first crew went to the banks of the Danube and, going beyond

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the typical touristic images of the bridges and the Buda castle, shot close-up images of the muddy water. As they narrated the images while their film was played to the class, they talked about the river – a different river for the Iranian, Egyptian and Nigerian participants – which nevertheless turned out to be the same river of remembrance, taking them back to their homes through a flood of memories.

Another mixed crew of Ethiopian and Afghan participants shot in reverential silence in the multi-storey library of the university, an ultra-modern building with thousands of volumes. The third group of students had a Somali ‘news anchor’, stopping by the neo-classicist statue of Pallas Athene at the main entrance of CEU, explaining what the university and OLIve meant for him.

Watching the footage of their first shoot – some of them with engaging visuals, others that came to life as students added compelling stories while showing them – reinforced our hypothesis that they had a very strong vision about their host society and the desire to communicate their insights through images. We concluded that our students were ready to turn their cameras from the simple selfies they had been taking during their journeys to Hungary towards observing the world around them. In this way, the reversed gaze of the much discussed ‘refugee selfie’ (Zimányi 2017; Literat 2017), which had previously been for them a ‘mirror with memory’ (Frosh 2015), became a mirror of the society in which they live.

## The Pilot Project

CEU’s OLIve Program – Open Learning Initiative for Refugees and Asylum Seekers – was designed in autumn 2015 and established in 2016 to offer, initially, a Weekend Program and later full-time preparatory courses in various disciplines. The Weekend Program had been running for a semester when the participatory video course was first introduced, adding to OLIve’s range of courses in the social sciences, advocacy strategies and English language. The founding tutors of OLIve were Babak Arzani, Iranian editor and activist, Vlad Naumescu, a CEU professor, and documentary filmmaker Klára Trencsényi. The starting point for the workshop was to launch a pilot project to introduce students to the art of filmmaking and empower them to be authors of their own stories, thus offering an alternative to the biased Hungarian media reporting ‘about them’ through stereotypes and misrepresentation.

According to a range of sources, asylum claims registered in Hungary in 2014 saw a twentyfold increase from previous years, and in the

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years leading up to that, the Hungarian government had already started to shape the ‘migrant image’. In the summer of 2015, they had put up billboards throughout the country to invite Hungarians for a ‘national consultation on Immigration and Terrorism’. By September 2015, when thousands of refugees were cordoned off by the Hungarian police in front of Keleti Railway Station for days, not allowed to leave the area or to continue their journeys, most Hungarian media covered the ‘migrant spectacle’ in a xenophobic way, showing people eating, sleeping and washing in front of the station.

Since the founding of OLIve, Hungarian and Budapest-based foreign media had been intrigued to cover its activities, but after experiencing the media coverage of refugees during the crisis of 2015, OLIve founders and tutors had turned down journalists’ requests. As tutors of the participatory video course, we offered refugees the possibility to experience how moving images are designed, captured and put into context through editing, hoping to equip them with the necessary tools to shape their own representation.

Course tutor Arzani had experienced displacement himself, being an Iranian refugee in Hungary, and had already led an art project which took place in 2014 in a refugee camp in Debrecen, Hungary. Naumescu and Trencsényi had been course directors in several documentary development workshops, working with both university students and researchers. As course tutors we all agreed that it was important to offer a rather informal class where students could talk about issues that matter to them using audio-visual tools and create space to bring in their personal experiences as well. When preparing the syllabus for the course, we also agreed that no formal training in film aesthetics and technology would be offered, so as not to impose the conventions of European and American filmmaking on participants. Instead, we gave the participants cameras from the first moment and encouraged them to experiment and try out unconventional ways of ‘talking’ about themselves and the world around them. The availability of simplified camera functions made this possible even for those participants who had no previous experience operating a camera.

Starting off by taking still photos, then shooting static, tripod-mounted video images, we guided our students slowly towards creating moving images and sequences edited in camera – which meant that students had to shoot all the images one after the other, in the order they wanted them to appear in the final film. After the second session, Arash from Afghanistan expressed his concern that the footage he shot ‘did not compare to the visuals seen in Hollywood films’. This opened up a

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vivid discussion about filmmakers' point of view and the significance of editing in film projects. Course participants realised that despite the original intention of the filmmaker, the edited footage can have multiple meanings, even harshly contrasting the original idea of the camerperson or going against the nature of the footage itself. This is a great example of how course participants opened up a discussion about filmmaking issues after, and in direct relation to their own experience with the medium.

During every session we sent participants out to complete exercises in small groups. Assignment topics included 'Film a process within the university building' and 'Make a portrayal of a person or an object', among others. They had to prepare in advance for these assignments in the classroom, by planning what they would film and preparing a short storyboard sketch. We also asked them to take turns fulfilling the roles of director, cinematographer and sound engineer, to encourage those who had never tried filming to do the camera work, and to allow the less assertive students to also take on the role of director. In order to involve everyone in the activity, we screened each project and asked other students to comment on the footage. This also helped demonstrate that the same image can have different connotations for people with different backgrounds and perspectives. The tutors' feedback – including explanations of camera angles, framing, camera movement and so on – was offered as part of the discussion, kept on a very practical level, respecting the insight and intentions of the maker of the image.

The active involvement of Babak Arzani also helped the group dynamics. In a lengthy post-course reflection, he said laconically in reference to their shared 'migrant experience': 'I didn't need to explain it to them and they did not need to explain it to me'. It was Arzani's suggestion also to follow OLIve's ethical and psychological guidelines and refrain from asking participants about their journey, their former home or the hardships of leaving it behind. Based on participants' accounts of their daily routines and the difficulties they faced, the workshop seemed to be a place where they could escape for a little while, and genuinely enjoy themselves. And as they felt more and more at ease with the presence of cameras, they also allowed us a glimpse into 'the topics and subjects that culturally and politically interested them', as Arzani put it (for description of the OLIve experience, see Al Hussein and Mangeni, this volume).

'I recall our students proposed to make their final film at the end of the pilot project about homelessness in Hungary', said Arzani when

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reflecting on his experience during the course in the same conversation. 'I remember vividly how we tried to explain to them that it is the same intrusive gaze if they film the vulnerable homeless people in Budapest, that they normally receive as refugees and asylum seekers from the journalists and videographers that come to film them.' Despite the limited amount of time, we considered it important to discuss ethical issues apart from the technical and visual aspects of filmmaking. In this case, after lengthy discussions, we allowed the students to film and engage with homeless people living on the streets and in the metro stations of Budapest. By shooting sequences of homelessness, intolerance and the growing gap between rich and poor, privileged and underprivileged groups within Hungarian society, they began to use the camera to explore the world around them in new ways and find ways for potential solidarities to emerge.

As the last step in the filmmaking process, we gave students an introduction to the editing process through a general presentation and hands-on training, and after a full day shooting at a place of their choice in Budapest, we encouraged participants to edit their own footage. The level of sensitivity and keen sense of observation enabled them to record some arresting and compelling footage. Some experimented with editing techniques, such as breaking the chronological order of shots, and separating video and audio tracks, and managed to turn the footage into short films reflecting their own narrative. The group that shot about homelessness used one of the filmmakers as a sort of 'news anchor' who appeared in the shots, and made a statement about the way the Hungarian state treats marginalised groups of people (homelessness, like 'illegal migration', is criminalised in Hungary). However, when analysing the shots in the timeline of the editing program, they concluded that the news anchor could be removed as the images spoke for themselves. When another crew had seemingly finished their film, one member suddenly spoke up and asserted that he did not think it was finished. He asked for permission to spend extra hours in the editing room to produce 'his montage' of the rushes. He added his favourite music to the footage (which made the film look like a music video, a common choice of first-time filmmakers, regardless of background), and concluded the film with his own narration, letting his voice and story come through the footage of Budapest.

Through the practice of editing, our students found an answer to one of the key questions explored by the course: how, through montage, can raw footage become an interpretation of reality? Arzani summed up: 'By the end of the course we felt that all of the students would find

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**Figure 12.1.** Stills from participants' films, Budapest, 2016. Open Learning Initiative. Photos by the authors.

future benefits from the experience: few would become filmmakers, but more could use visual tools for their future employment, like one of the Afghan participants, who used to work as a journalist in print media. Moreover, all of our students could get a glimpse into how visual storytelling works, how news coverage works, and get an understanding of how video can choose a point of view'.

## The Second Workshop

Building on the experiences of the pilot project, in February 2017 we launched the second edition of the participatory video workshop, making a couple of key changes. First, we brought on board theatre-in-education expert Ádám Bethlenfalvy to include methods of applied drama pedagogy during the sessions. Bethlenfalvy had previously run a theatre course within the framework of OLIve, in which he used various drama pedagogical tools to work with the students' experiences. By doing so, we aimed to offer participants a wide range of methods and creative tools through which they could tell their personal stories. Many participants in the first workshop had expressed an interest in doing this, but mostly due to time limitations were unable to. To facilitate collaboration between all the participants and encourage a deeper personal engagement, Bethlenfalvy conducted icebreakers, warm-up exercises and drama games.

For the second course we received more than thirty applications, including some from participants in the pilot project. Among the students were several female participants, who were taking part in such an activ-

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ity for the first time. To get a sense of new students' visual imagination and to gather material for the warm-up exercises later on, we asked applicants to submit a photograph taken by them, about them – with the condition that they themselves should not appear in it. We received many interesting pictures, and used these as a criterion for selecting the final twelve participants for the course. It was not the technical level of the pictures but the creative idea behind the task that we took into consideration when making these decisions. This 'homework' was meant to create a distance from the usual selfies and to explore the innovative visual tools that participants might bring along from their own background.

With the help of Bethlenfalvy, we aimed to introduce a new element into our class activities: role play, and playfulness in general. Bethlenfalvy based his approach on the basic principle of drama pedagogy that never asks participants directly 'What happened to you?', but rather 'creates a fictional character, on whom we can project our feelings' – as he explained for the course tutors before the first session.

Another key change we made for the second workshop, based on our previous experience and at the request of students joining the course for the second time, was to offer participants more formalised training in filmmaking techniques. In this respect, we changed our approach, recognising the students' desire to gain a basis for developing filmmaking skills they may use later in their professional lives, and incorporated instruction on such subjects as composition, lighting, basic camera movement and editing. To this end, we involved CEU media education specialist and film instructor Jeremy Braverman, who offered presentations on these subjects, as well as hands-on instruction throughout the process as a full-time participant in the course. Nevertheless, we kept the same structure as during the pilot project: we first encouraged participants to experiment with the cameras prior to receiving formal training, and answered the questions they raised afterwards in the form of analysis of their own footage. In this way, we offered a limited amount of instruction, which we did not frontload but distributed further along the process. For class activities we applied a wide range of participatory video exercises inspired by earlier participatory projects and adapted them to the needs of our course.

For this iteration of the workshop, we encouraged participants to shoot footage at home as well as giving them homework. First, we asked them to bring in five pictures about their current home, and later used these in a photovoice exercise. Seventeen-year-old Shafi from Balochistan made a highly evocative photo essay about the Fót Child-

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care Centre, where he was hosted along with other under-aged refugee children who arrived in Hungary unaccompanied. Arash from Afghanistan made pictures from the window of his rented room, reflecting an amazing contrast between his balanced inner self and the chaotic world surrounding him. David from Nigeria, who was still staying in a refugee reception camp, took pictures of his life spent in a metal shipping container, which he called home for months.

As a next step, we printed out the images and handed out to each participant the photos of another, without revealing who they belonged to, and asked them to invent the backstory of each picture. By doing so, the storytelling exercise not only triggered participants' imagination and let them travel through various genres – fairy tales, crime stories and docudrama – but it also created an emotional distance from their actual situation. In addition, participants learned through this exercise how objects, people and feelings represented in the picture can be decoded in different ways or recontextualised by outsiders.

As part of the expanded training in cinematic techniques, we introduced a basic editing exercise that we have found extremely effective in demonstrating the potential of film editing to beginning filmmaking students. The exercise was based on the original Kuleshov experiment from the 1920s, in which a shot of a man's face with a neutral expression is intercut with three different images of what he may potentially be considering, allowing the audience to imbue his image with various moods and emotions. After watching it, participants had to shoot three

**Figure 12.2.** Participants' homework, Budapest, 2017. Open Learning Initiative. Photos by the authors.

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images and a close-up of a face, edited by them in the camera – in proper length and order so that we could watch it as a finished work right after shooting. Even though the task was simple – to shoot something that each participant was longing for, fearing or sad about – it was an efficient tool to develop students' visual skills, and reveal their subtle and sensible insights.

Next, we asked participants to prepare short interviews with each other in groups of three. This was a logical next step in fulfilling the main goals of the course: furthering the students' technical skills, while also providing them with a forum to express themselves. Students were required to switch roles to allow all of them to fill the role of the cameraperson, interviewer and subject. Based on our assessment, they seemed to find value in each role – of the interviewee because they felt honoured to be given space and time to talk; of the interviewer because they enjoyed being on the other side of the camera, asking instead of being asked; and of the cameraperson because they were eager to experiment with the technology. Because we did this exercise relatively early on in the course, only a few groups moved beyond the superficial interview format and made a more in-depth piece. In some cases, the interview questions (and answers) remained rather simple, which could also be interpreted as tactfulness towards each other's experiences. In a course extending over several months, we recommend repeating this exercise to illustrate how a longer interview could create mutual confidence, allowing the participants to reveal more of their personal feelings and thoughts, as opposed to the hurried, conventional news reports of the media. But the interviews that 'worked' taught the participants that simple, non-stereotypical questions could launch an intimate, even compelling interview. In one example of this, Majida, a Yemeni woman, was asked about her daily routes in Budapest. She opened up and explained how she was raising her three children mostly alone while her husband was working, and talked about the institutions – nursery, hospital – she encounters in her daily life in Hungary, and the attitudes of those with whom she interacts. When Didar from Afghanistan was asked about his favourite food, we were offered an insight into the life and traditions of Afghans living in Iran and the measures of nostalgia lived through food sharing. While making the interviews and by switching the roles, participants managed to offer reciprocity and handle each other's stories with respect and responsibility, as suggested by Glanville in this volume.

Moving forward from the conventional interview situations, we asked participants to stage a short scene based on a memory of their

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**Figure 12.3.** Role play and shooting exercise, Budapest, 2017. Open Learning Initiative. Photos by the authors.

original home. We divided the group into two, so one of the students could act out their memories, with others playing roles in their story, while another three students filmed these scenes using one camera each. During this exercise, participants learned to ask questions about small details that developed each story further and to cover these often emotional stories with their cameras in a tactful way.

The drama pedagogical methods and the participatory video exercises had a common denominator in suggesting that we start our classes by 'ventilation', discussing the emotional, social and political issues at the beginning of each session. Towards the end of the workshop, the engaging and often tense exchange of ideas had become even more intense, reflecting the worsening political climate. A few days before our third session, the Hungarian government passed new legislation demanding that asylum seekers be kept in detention during the entire length of their asylum procedure, thus restricting participants' free movement, taking away their financial allowance and food provision. At this point class sessions were completely overtaken by discussions of the situation, with participants sharing plans among themselves for the deepening crisis. This essentially derailed the

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planned curriculum, yet also created an important safe place for the participants to discuss personal and political issues and find mutual support. However, as a result of this new legislation and numerous prior punitive measures against asylum seekers, OLIve participants started to flee the country.

As we accumulated more and more footage, we quickly realised we had far more than the students could ever fit into the short films we had planned for them to complete. We started considering the possibility of using this in a longer work that would extend beyond the framework of the course, developing a participatory documentary with our students in the roles of co-directors, cinematographers and editors. During the last class, participants discussed the workshop and the film project they had been a part of. Some participants had just been granted refugee status, while others were about to be sent back to closed camps until a court decision was made about their fate. When the session turned to a discussion about what our common film should look like, David from Nigeria presented the idea that 'the true story should be told', and that it 'should be a film about how racism feels'. But Justin from Cameroon reminded him that 'such a film could be dangerous, since the (Hungarian) government is against even the head of the Central European University' (a reference to the university's founder George Soros). So half-jokingly they agreed that our final film should be a comedy or a love story instead.

A week later, the government set the deadline to implement the new legislation regarding closed camps. As a result, within a few days the number of participants in the workshop decreased dramatically. Some had to remain in the refugee camps and could no longer come to filmmaking classes, while others tried to continue their journey towards the West, hoping for more welcoming societies. Soon after, in autumn 2018, further legislation was passed criminalising and penalising all entities 'supporting migrants'. This was interpreted at CEU as a risk for university structures, and led to the suspension of the OLIve programme by the university's administration. OLIve members and students stood in solidarity, remaining committed to the programme and the projects already started: those who left started to send video letters to those who remained in Hungary, and continued filming even after having left Hungary. This showed the cohesion within the group and the impact of the whole programme on some of the refugees' lives, extending far beyond the frames of the course or their presence in Hungary.

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## Conclusions

Due to the abrupt end of the course, we unfortunately did not have the time or space to get to the final step in our last workshop: the editing session, where participants could have handled their own footage and organised it in a creative, personal way. Another final phase of the participatory action, organising public screenings in the presence of course participants and filmmakers, could not happen since only a few participants remained in Budapest by the time we held our first screening (within the framework of a conference in March 2019).

Some of the participants, when asked to evaluate the course, noted that they expected to 'learn an entire profession' and 'become trained cameramen or directors'. We think that the scope and the possibilities of such a workshop should have been communicated more clearly at the start of the course so as to not create false expectations among the participants. Francis from Cameroon noted, however, that the course 'taught us to work in teams, like in real filmmaking and take account of each other's opinions and input'. Mahak from Afghanistan recalled that there was a 'nice atmosphere' which helped participants 'share many different topics each student had', like 'home' or how students were thinking about their 'new life, about Hungary and the European peoples'. He also underlined that he learned 'how the movies are powerful and depend on the topic, and how we can send messages nicely to people'. Most participants underlined that during the filmmaking activities they felt comfortable talking about their past and present, their home left behind – which was also a crucial issue for the course organisers. Our approach, however, remained very much rooted in that of the ethical starting point of drama pedagogical methodology. As Bethlenfalvy summed up after the course: 'We offered them an opportunity to talk about their hardships, and all the participants treated this chance in a different way. Some opened up, some gave us hints about their experiences'. He added: 'In any case, for us it was important to create this safe space where it is legitimate to talk sincerely about the issues of migration'. He concluded: 'My colleagues and I have been fighting against the old dogma that if somebody brings up a trauma in a drama workshop, it is only a psychologist who can handle it. Traumas are more frequent than ever, so our challenge is to find up-to-date forms to deal with it'.

Another key issue was the participation of women. Bethlenfalvy said: 'During my first OLIve course there were no women participants in the group, and I was really concerned at the beginning when I was

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planning the exercises for the second one. How close can we go to each other? Can we play the games we usually play in workshops in Hungary – where physical touch is not a taboo?' But during the first sessions we quickly realised that, after getting past their initial timidity, the female participants got really involved during the course and made a more balanced, exciting workshop possible. Their presence, their focus and sometimes their intuition helped the course organisers to handle more delicate situations. At one point, Majida from Yemen, who was among the shyest students at the beginning, decided to share all the footage she had been shooting at home with her children, letting us into her family life and daily struggles. This inspired other participants to open up too.

The tutors set out to offer an emotionally building experience as well as a form of empowerment for all the students. As an active documentary filmmaker familiar with the current trends at documentary film festivals, and the representation of refugees and 'migrants' in major festival hits, Trencsényi also thought that it was high time that refugees' own footage was included in the discourse about the European 'migrant crisis' (Trencsényi and Naumescu 2021). The goal of the course was therefore twofold: to offer a creative skill and activity to the refugees interested in learning the visual language; and secondly, to lay the foundation for a documentary film that would challenge the majority of Hungarian (and European) society's view on refugees. However, tutors and participants all agreed that the course was too short to take any kind of artistic process to its completion. So, just like the short trailer we edited to find further support for the film, the course remained a teaser for the participants as well. Unfortunately, neither the 'love story' that participants proposed making in their last session, nor the in-depth creative documentary that course tutors had in mind were made. The sudden closure of the OLIve programme and funders' fear of supporting the project, despite their belief that it could have a significant impact on European and Hungarian audiences, interrupted our project.

Nevertheless, we believe that the participatory video exercises, short film studies and drama games completed their initial task: empowering the participants to express their thoughts through visuals, and at the same time to be more conscious producers of their own image in the mainstream media. As opposed to the much discussed 'refugee selfie', the participants learned to hold a 'mirror with a memory' to a specific time and space: a print of their experiences while being in Budapest.

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**Jeremy Braverman** has spent most of his life working in film, both as a filmmaker and educator. He has been teaching filmmaking at university level for the past twenty years, currently as Media & Visual Education Specialist at CEU Vienna, Austria, and prior to that as an Associate Professor and Department Chair in the Department of Cinema Arts at Point Park University in Pittsburgh, USA. As a filmmaker he has directed short films including *Take Care*, *Squared*, and *The Dirt on You*. Recent works include collaborations with faculty on projects that incorporate documentary films.

## Note

1. Despite the fact that our course participants have given their consent to include their stories and the visuals they have produced during the sessions, we prefer to use pseudonyms in our chapter to protect their identities.

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