Affection: Documenting the potential
Politics has concerned documentary filmmakers and theorists ever since Grierson’s days and it continues to be one of the attributes with which the documentary genre is set apart from others. On the one hand, there is a strong general consensus that the documentary is politically committed and that it is even capable of changing the world; on the other hand, there is no fundamental agreement on how political dedication is transferred to audiences and how documentary film participates in larger socio-political transformations.

Common faith in the documentary’s capabilities to inspire political action and to produce social change has, in recent years, crossed paths with the neoliberal program of impact measurement. Along with cultural initiatives, academic arguments, and social policies, the success of a documentary work can now be evaluated according to its measurable impact. With the changes in contemporary media environment, the documentary’s measurable impact often intertwines with its lifespan in social media. In addition to the box office and international sales, impact is now assessed in the number of tweets, shares, and Facebook likes. Data mining provides the industry with statistics to evaluate the reach and patterns of user engagement, but it does not say anything about the qualitative influence of documentary films. Instead, social impact graphs turn easily into blueprints for how to make a successful documentary.

In response to impact measurements, the following chapters focus on qualitative outreach. They elaborate on the experiential dimension of documentary works that are politically committed to the Lebanese situation and post-Soviet Eastern Europe. The analyses of Jayce Salloum’s *everything and nothing* (2001), Chantal Akerman’s *From the East* (1993), and Kanerva Cederström’s *Trans-Siberia* (1999) postulate affection in relation to politics.

The experiential in the documentary is often linked to discursive argumentation. Audiovisual strategies that contribute to a qualitative experience are approached in relation to the claims the documentary
work in question puts forward and the debates it participates in. Here, the
discursive terrain of iconographies, cultural practices and social policies
outlines the experiential field of the documentary. The discursive frames
the available experiences and enables their modification and transmission.
A remarkable example of this can be found in Leshu Torchin’s discussion
about creating the witness in screen media. Her approach significantly
complicates the straightforward model where “revelation contributes to
recognition, recognition demands action, and representations throughout
transform audiences into witnesses and publics.” Instead, she maps the
textual, formal, and visual strategies with which genocides are installed
into popular imaginary and thus posits how audiences are turned into
witnessing publics in contemporary screen media. Moreover, she elaborates
on how filmmakers and media activists appropriate their films in justice
movements that work toward particular responses and goals. Here, the
representations of genocide enter into and operate in a complex set of
political imaginaries and social practices.

Torchin’s witness relates to Jane Gaines’s conceptualization of a politi-
cized spectator. Drawing from Linda Williams’s influential essay on body
genres, Gaines notes that seeing a body convulsed in political action on
the screen causes bodily reactions in the viewer. Documentary footage
of political action can lead to a bodily swelling in a politicized spectator.
In her essay, Williams specifies that the ecstatic excess exhibited in porn,
horror, and melodrama causes bodily responses in the viewer. She continues
that the success of these body genres is measured in the extent the viewers’
sensations mimic what is seen on the screen.

The corporeal turn Gaines carries over from Williams is significant,
as it postulates documentary experience in terms of inarticulate bodily
sensations: visual representations of revolutions and riots – bodily actions
– trigger “ecstatic excess” in the viewer. These bodily effects, following
Williams, depend on an “agreement” on the part of the viewer to comply
with the strategies of representation on the screen. A politicized experience
may come about as the viewer negotiates the politics on the screen with the
discursive framework of his or her own bodily existence. Here, experience
depends on the discursive organization of film as a signifying system and
the viewer’s complacency within that system. In this way, the mimetic
sensations are not simple reproductions of the sensations represented on
the screen, but entangle with such cultural and historical power relations
as gender, race, and class that play a part in the constitution of experience.

In a later essay on melodrama, Williams clarifies her idea of “inarticulate
sensations” by arguing that linguistically coded experience and moments
of sensation operate in different registers. The distinction is crucial for the present discussion of qualitative experience and affection for it draws attention to sensations that are separate from, yet coexistent with, the narrative logic of film. However, although Williams distinguishes between melodrama’s “big sensation scenes” and the narrative pathos of the genre, she nevertheless keeps the moments of sensation within the norm of the narrative. Similarly, Bill Nichols notes that “to term something ‘excess’ is to concede its subordination to something else. Like the concept of marginalization, excess forfeits any claim to autonomy.” The moments of inarticulate sensation offer one way of defining affection in documentary experience, but in this model they remain a necessary footnote to narrative logic.

Contrary to the theorizations described above, phenomenological takes on film experience emphasize the subjective contribution of the viewer. When experience is conditioned on the discursive organization of narrative modes, the viewer is in a position of being affected by the film. As Williams notes, this is not a position of passively mimicking represented sensations, although experience is nevertheless conditioned on repeating what is seen on the screen. In phenomenological theorizations, the focus is on the subject’s capacities to affect the structuration of meaning on the screen. Vivian Sobchack gives a potent form to this idea in claiming that “documentary is less a thing than an experience.” It is a subjective relation to a cinematic object. For Sobchack, experience is not conditioned on the discursive forms and relations that construe the narrative modes and the subjective positions of viewing, but on the levels of consciousness with which the viewer identifies with the cinematic object. The viewer co-constitutes the cinematic object and this relationality induces a “charge of the real” in the film experience. Significantly, phenomenological takes on film experience do not reduce the subjective relation to vision, but foreground the tactile and haptic qualities of experience.

The present discussion on affection is indebted to phenomenology in so far as it places the emphasis on the relationality between a filmic body and a viewing body. However, contrary to the investment in subjective levels of consciousness, I am interested in inarticulate sensations as pathways to a political documentary experience. Rather than considering these sensations as subservient to a political narrative, my focus is on excess as potential that is not reducible to narrative arrangements. To be precise, in the following chapters affection designates the encounter between a documentary work that depicts bodies at the throes of potential – in a state of becoming – and the ways in which the film in question facilitates the viewers’ tapping into the bodies’ passages from one experiential state to another. Whereas
fabulation coined the ways in which documentary observation captures and expresses filmed subjects in a state of becoming, affection names becoming as the political potential in a documentary experience.

The background to this line of argument is in Deleuze and Guattari's take on Spinoza's ethics, where the body's powers of acting are increased or decreased by way of affections.¹³ Whereas affect (Spinoza's affectus) refers to the body's ability to change, affection (affectio) describes a situation where a body's capacity to affect and to be affected is enacted in relation to other bodies on a pre-individual level of intensities. In Spinoza, the ethical in affection has to do with the idea that "no one has yet determined what a body can do."¹⁴ From this point of view, affection coincides also with Deleuze's insistence on individual life giving way to an impersonal singular life, freeing it from distinctions of objectivity and subjectivity in favor of a singularization in the event.¹⁵

The distinction between excess as subservient to narrative and excess as potential can be clarified with the notions of potestas and potentia. In the translator's notes to Deleuze and Guattari's A Thousand Plateaus, Brian Massumi explains that potestas (pouvoir) is associated with dominance whereas potentia (puissance) is a force of life. The former is in close proximity to Foucault's notion of power and it designates actual instituted and reproducible relations, the "selective concretization of potential." The latter, on the other hand, refers to "a capacity for existence." Potentia pertains to the virtual while potestas is part of the actual.¹⁶ In terms of potestas, excess asserts the dominance of the prevailing system by challenging it. Despite building awareness of what remains beyond the narrative's grasp, excess nevertheless positions the narrative as the only pathway to this outside. As potentia, however, excess is the force of life or a capacity for existence captured and expressed in the documentary's frames and offered to the viewer without narrative mediation.

Following this line of thought, "documenting the potential" refers precisely to the ways in which the three documentaries capture excess as potential and how potential becomes politically charged within the documentaries. Affection outlines the setting where the political charge is passed on to the viewer. In this context, it is important to bear in mind that although potential is not subservient to narrative means, individual lives or actual bodies, it is nevertheless not universal. Excess as potential is relative to actual ways of telling a story, living a life or having a body. The difference is that it presses on actual forms and undoes their contours, while the actual forms also push back and harness the tensile forces in action. Chapters 5 and 6 investigate how documentary films that bear
witness to actual political events in Lebanon, Eastern Europe, and Siberia nevertheless affect the viewer on a level that is not acquiescent to these historical instances.