Dealing With Sri Lanka’s Demons: Using Documentary Film for Peacebuilding

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Abstract
Documentary film is a popular resource amongst peacebuilding organisations and practitioners. Despite this popularity, research on documentary film is still emerging in peace and conflict studies. This article explores documentary film’s role in the study and practice of peacebuilding by examining the documentary *Demons in Paradise* and its engagement with issues of peace and conflict in post-war Sri Lanka. This article makes conceptual, methodological, and empirical contributions. Drawing from empirical research, I identify and discuss documentary film’s engagement along three analytical angles: documentary film as a text, within social processes, and within research processes. Under each angle, I explore how empirical observations and understanding of peace emerge through the visual, using diverse methods and data, including interviews, participant observation, visual elicitation in post-screening focus groups, and film analysis. I conclude that documentary film can contribute to the study and practice of peacebuilding by offering multiple analytical angles that elucidate plural, disparate understandings of peace in post-war societies.

Keywords
peacebuilding, Sri Lanka, peace research, documentary film, visual politics

Understanding how documentary film engages with peacebuilding is a timely and relevant inquiry that draws from and builds upon broader debates taking place in peacebuilding and development. The arts have gained increasing attention as an approach for peacebuilding and development, with art forms such as theatre and music being at the fore (Howell, this issue; Premaratna, 2018). Such participatory art forms have drawn academic and practitioner interest alike for their capacity to bridge conflict divides at an interpersonal level (Bang, 2016; Cohen et al., 2011) and for their development applications (Clammer & Giri, 2017; Cooke & Soria-Donlan, 2019). However, discussions within the visual turn in International Relations (IR) that explore the relevance of visual media like film and photography tend to focus more on war and violence than the study of peace (Möller & Shim, 2019).

The role of documentary film in post-war transitions has received limited attention within these debates. Images shape our understanding of politics and what is recognised as legitimate (Bleiker,
2018). They are part of the “archive” that constitutes our social and political worlds and enables representation (Foucault, 1972; Neumann, 2001). Scholars draw attention to film as a visual method to study and understand war and peace (Möller, 2013; Weber, 2013). Callahan (2015) and Harman (2019), respectively, examine documentary and feature filmmaking as critical methods in IR. Film’s analytical and methodological contributions can facilitate a nuanced, relational view of peace, and documentary film is of particular relevance here. van Munster and Sylvest (2015a) show documentary film’s ability to question “background beliefs people take for granted and act upon,” making a well-argued case for its use in teaching and studying politics (p. 230). This is not to say that documentary film cannot be problematic in its representations: the uncritical acceptance of documentaries to offer authentic portrayals of events or political analysis have been challenged (de Leon, 2020; Nichols, 2016; van Munster & Sylvest, 2015b). Thus, whilst documentary film needs to be explored for its role in the study and practice of peacebuilding, as with any other peacebuilding tool or strategy, documentaries also need to be scrutinised for their embedded politics.

The key objective of this article is to analyse how we can understand the role of documentary film in the study and practice of peacebuilding. To respond, I look at how the documentary film Demons in Paradise by the Sri Lankan Tamil filmmaker Jude Ratnam produces meanings around peace and conflict in Sri Lanka. Post-war peacebuilding in Sri Lanka follows a “peace through development paradigm,” where economic development is seen as the primary path to peace, with little attention to reform at the state or society level (Rainford & Satkunanathan, 2011, p. 103; Venugopal, 2018). This approach enables sustaining victory narratives and nationalist discourses (Goodhand, 2010). “Peace” and “development” thus produced are hardly value neutral. Demons in Paradise engages with these tensions through presenting an internal narrative of the Tamil liberation movement. By inviting reflection and contemplation upon how to move forward, the documentary questions development-oriented post-war peacebuilding and illustrates the complicated links between development and peacebuilding.

The key argument of this article is that documentary film contributes to peace research by offering multiple viewpoints that elucidate varied understandings of peace in post-war societies. I identify and discuss documentary film’s role along three analytical angles: documentary film as a text, within social processes, and as part of a research process. The case study illustrates how documentary film offers a site where nuanced understandings of peace emerge. Contextual factors affect the film’s reception and interpretation, and the resulting connections with peace. To adequately capture nuances of peace produced and elicited through documentary film under each angle, I draw from a variety of methods and data including interviews, participant observation, focus group discussions based on visual elicitation, and film analysis. In doing so, I demonstrate how divergent and at times contested meanings of peace emerge in response to, or are imposed upon, the film.

This article is structured as follows: First, I theorise documentary film’s political potential for the study and practice of peacebuilding, drawing from the visual turn in IR and other academic debates as relevant. Second, I outline the methodological approach for the study. Third, I provide a brief overview of the Sri Lankan conflict. Fourth, I interrogate Demons in Paradise from three analytical angles: as a text, within a broader peacebuilding process, and within a research process. This article makes conceptual, methodological, and empirical contributions to the area. I conclude that documentary film can contribute to the study and practice of peacebuilding by offering manifold analytical angles that elucidate plural, disparate understandings of peace in post-war contexts.

Visual IR offers a far more complex discussion on images than what I can hope to engage with here. Theorisations around perception, representation, and interpretation of images and aesthetics (Barthes, 1981; Berger, 1972, 1991; Rancière, 2004; Sontag, 1977, 2003) inform and shape the overarching
discourse. Discussions in visual security studies (Cooper-Cunningham, 2019; Hansen, 2011; Vuori & Andersen, 2018) and studies of emotions (Hutchison, 2016; Schlag, 2018) indicate more recent developments. *Visual global politics* (Bleiker, 2018), a key text in the area, advocates a pluralist approach and draws from diverse disciplines to speak on the political nature of images. The empirical investigation of this article also required engaging with several bodies of literature, including peacebuilding, development, and Sri Lankan studies. Thus, out of necessity, my engagement here is limited and primarily centres on documentary film.

**Framing Documentary Film**

Discussions on documentary film tend to approach film along three angles: documentary film as a text, within social processes, and within research. The first explores what film says, the second explores film’s role in praxis, and the third explores how film functions within research processes. Framing the discussion thus allows considering multiple ways in which documentary film’s role has been discussed—including interpretation, reception, and contextual factors—and how documentaries can contribute to peacebuilding. The conceptual boundaries between these angles can be blurry at times, but as demonstrated through application in the next section, the distinction provides analytical and operational value.

Debates within the visual turn in IR highlight the relevance of documentary film as a “text.” The focus here is to scrutinise the film for its content and politics or what is made (in)visible through its “saying and showing” (van Munster & Sylvest, 2015a). This particular use makes documentaries a resource in teaching and learning IR and politics: In contrast to popular cinema, documentaries are seen to offer a “clear-eyed” and an “unsentimental” view of the “disastrous consequences” of foreign policy conventions (Philpott, 2018, 144) and highlight peripheral perspectives (Shdaimah, 2009). Schiff (2019) illustrates the latter through a study where documentary film counters misconceptions about the Roma community, engendering fairer representations. van Munster and Sylvest (2015b) emphasise the relevance of documentary film in teaching IR: Supporting Weber’s (2013) call to frame and interrogate IR theory through film, they encourage considering documentary film as “visual theories that mediate a particular understanding of world politics” (p. 4). Using documentary film thus does not imply an uncritical acceptance of its truth claims (see de Leon, 2020; van Munster & Sylvest, 2015b). Instead, it indicates documentary film’s capacity to facilitate an affective learning experience, thereby emphasising the need to examine documentary film’s use as a text.

Documentary film is considered to play an inspiring role within social processes. Documentary filmmakers “bridge” the study and practice of peacebuilding (Townsend & Niraula, 2016). Organisations such as International Centre on Nonviolent Conflict (ICNC) and Peace Is Loud recommend documentary film as a key resource for practitioners. ICNC’s formation itself is connected to *A Force More Powerful* and *Bringing Down a Dictator*, two documentaries on peaceful resistance. Documentaries can mobilise communities for change: The executive director of Peace Is Loud notes they “take on a film” only “within a movement” (Chattoo, 2020, p. 91). Drawing from specific examples, Chattoo demonstrates how the “emotional lens” of investigative documentary when “combined with planned and organic public engagement and activism” can contribute to ground level social change (p. 91). Whiteman (2009) points to documentary film’s policy relevance, analysing its impact on policymakers and activists. Thus, documentary film plays a role in “constituting the social” as a visual medium (see Neumann, 2001) and is recognised for its role within social processes.

Documentary film’s role in research can be 2-fold: producing documentaries through research or eliciting data through showing documentaries. Whilst using the camera is a relatively recent practice in IR, it is an established tradition within ethnography and visual anthropology. Margaret Mead and
Gregory Bateson documented rituals and cultural practices in Indonesia through film in the 1930s (Henley, 2013). Auto-ethnographic documentaries, in contrast, can be a research inquiry in and of itself or form a part of research that explores one’s own group or a journey. Harman (2017, 2019) draws from her own experience to illustrate how film as a method expands the accessible toolkit for IR researchers and can “make the invisible visible.” Such reflections offer a powerful, internationalised means of learning and teaching and compels us to grapple with conceptual issues on “positionality, authority, and truth claims” (Hay, 2017, p. 569).

Documentary film can also perform a visual elicitation role similar to photo elicitation (Harper, 2002). Visual elicitation as a method can go beyond verbal interaction, elicit embodied responses, access participants’ value, and belief systems (Bignante, 2010; Glaw et al., 2017; Richard & Lahman, 2015) and is particularly suited to tackle sensitive issues (Barton, 2015) and power imbalances (Van Auken et al., 2010). This particular use of documentary film assumes a polysemic reading of images where the visual is comprehended in plural ways through our personal lenses (Barthes, 1981), facilitating insights into disparate processes of meaning-making. Understanding attitudes, values, and beliefs is central to build sustaining peace. Thus, research through and on documentary film corroborates its sociopolitical efficacy and expands conventional boundaries of research.

The discussion above demonstrates analysing documentary film’s role in peacebuilding requires a nuanced approach. Like any other representation, documentary film too is open to contestations and multiple interpretations (see Bleiker, 2018). Factors such as time, space, authorship, and positionality affect these interpretations. The narrative and specific semiotics in a film can undergo significant changes depending on the “how,” “when,” “where,” and “to whom” applicable to a given screening. Studies of documentary film’s political impact have to conceptualise film beyond the individual viewer, as part of larger social processes (Whiteman, 2004). Thus, examining documentary film’s role requires a nuanced approach that can consider these complex interconnections.

Method

To understand the role of documentary film in the study and practice of peacebuilding, I adopt the three analytical angles identified above—documentary film as a text (what the film says), within social processes (film’s application to generate dialogue on peace/conflict), within research processes (visual elicitation)—and apply these to the feature-length documentary film Demons in Paradise’s engagement with the post-war transition process in Sri Lanka. Whilst the first analytical angle focuses on the film itself, the second and third focus on two distinct processes that generate discussion through film for different purposes. Thus, each analytical angle considers a different application of the film. They allow capturing what the film communicates, how it functions, and how it can be used to understand communal narratives. Data collection methods and analysis correspond to these angles and illustrate how competing meanings of peace emerge in response to each application.

First, to consider documentary film as a text, I explored Demons in Paradise for its take on peace, considered film reviews, and interviewed the director. Demons in Paradise is the first documentary film by a Sri Lankan Tamil filmmaker produced on the conflict during the post-war period. Valorisation of war and sacrifice, nationalist sentiments, and historical revisionism that positions the Sinhalese and Tamils in a continuing binary relationship tends to characterise post-war Sri Lankan cinema (Karunanayake & Waradas, 2013). Demons in Paradise’s character and content diverge, making it an apt case study. The film revolves around memories of the director and his uncle and explores the conflict trajectory through poignant personal experiences. Their narratives, supplemented by other interviews and discussions, present a rarely voiced internal account of the Tamil liberation movement. A former Vice President of the United Nations Human Rights Council and a Sri Lankan Permanent Representative to
the United Nations calls the documentary “the most honest, courageous and important piece of art... on Sri Lanka, done by a Sri Lankan” (Jayatilleka, 2017). *Demons in Paradise* therefore stands out from its contemporary post-war cinema and provokes nuanced discussions on conflict, peace, and peacebuilding.

Second, to understand documentary film’s use within social processes, I observed public screenings of *Demons in Paradise* organised by the Strengthening Reconciliation Processes in Sri Lanka (SRP). Funded by German Corporation for International Cooperation GmbH (GIZ), SRP organises moderated discussions around films to promote dialogue and public discourse on reconciliation and peace. Despite its timely content, *Demons in Paradise* is not yet released in Sri Lanka and therefore can only be seen at screenings organised by initiatives such as SRP. I observed two such screenings organised as part of public art festivals at University of Ruhuna in September 2018 and University of Peradeniya in April 2019. In the festivals, *Demons in Paradise* was the only production by a Sri Lankan Tamil artist and the sole documentary film to present an internal narrative of the Tamil community. Facilitated post-screening panel discussion included two academics and the film maker. The panellists located the film within its broader sociopolitical context before opening up the discussion to the audience. Except for the filmmaker, the others were Sinhala. The audiences were predominantly Sinhala students. Peradeniya audience (about 200) was somewhat more diverse than Ruhuna’s (about 600). The discussions were in Sinhalese with the exception of a handful of questions and comments in English and Tamil at Peradeniya.

Third, to examine documentaries for visual elicitation within research processes, I used *Demons in Paradise* to elicit community-specific ideas of peace across four semi-structured focus groups in Sri Lanka, between November and December 2019. I screened the documentary without a detailed introduction and explored participants’ responses to the film. Specific questions examined whether participants felt moved, what emotions and memories were triggered, key themes they identified in the film, and how they perceived peace in their community and the path towards peace. Despite its limitations (Bignante, 2010), visual elicitation as a method allowed discussing sensitive information related to peace and conflict at participants’ own pace (Barton, 2015). Each focus group was chosen for their particular ethno-geographical history and language to enable a safe discussion space: a Muslim group from the Eastern province (Tamil language), a Tamil group from the Northern province (Tamil language), a Sinhala group from the Southern province (Sinhalese), and a group from the tea plantation sector in the Central province (Tamil and Sinhalese) with a dominant Upcountry Tamil identity. Upcountry group participants identified themselves as Tamil, Sinhala, or both. I conducted the Southern group and chose moderators from each community for the other groups to help participants feel at ease. Moderators were selected for their facilitation experience, familiarity with within-group dynamics, and cultural nuances. The four focus groups had 23 participants in total: Three groups had seven participants each and one had six. Participants were recruited through the moderators and contacts in the area, and a general representation of each community’s demographics was sought in the process. Female participation was encouraged overall. The Upcountry group had the highest female participation, with six of the seven participants being female. The Southern and Eastern province groups had the lowest, with two of the seven being female. The groups were diverse in age except for the Southern province group where most participants were between mid-20s to late 30s. Overall, the youngest participant was 19, and the oldest was in the early 80s. Education levels also varied. A few had no schooling beyond primary level. Most had secondary education, whilst some had attended university. The average participant engaged in farming or physical labour. There were also housewives, teachers, writers, and students. None of the participants represented civil society organisations. The Upcountry group mostly consisted of those who worked in the tea plantations. The documentary format was new to many in this and the Southern province group.
The material for analysis differs for each analytical angle. To explore film as a text, I analyse the documentary film, its script and reviews, and two in-depth interviews with the director. To examine documentaries within social processes, I analyse observations on the event, post-screening discussions, an interview with Upali Amarasinghe, Technical Advisor at SRP’s Art and Culture unit, and ten interviews with audience members. To illustrate documentary film for elicitation in research, I discuss how I used Demons in Paradise to elicit perspectives of peace across different communities in Sri Lanka. Ideas of peace produced in response to the film vary accordingly.

Fieldwork for data collection was carried out in three separate phases, primarily from September 2018 to December 2019. A zoom interview with the Technical Advisor at SRP’s Art and Culture unit was conducted in June 2020. Informed consent was sought and obtained at the beginning and at the end of each interview. I emphasised participants could terminate the interviews at any point or withdraw from the study by contacting me. I also offered participants the option of anonymising their data or choosing a pseudonym to ensure their safety.

Context

Demons in Paradise engages with the Sri Lankan conflict and provides an internal narrative of the Tamil community. Whilst defining the Sri Lankan conflict as an ethnic conflict has been debated (see Åkebo and Bastian, this issue), there is general consensus on the key conflict parties and their respective ethnolinguistic associations: the majority Sinhala-led Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) and the minority Tamil ethno-nationalist group Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE; see Kadirgamar, 2020). Policies of successive Sri Lankan governments supported by the majority Sinhalese-speaking South of the country resulted in institutionalising a Sinhalese state ideology (de Mel et al., 2012; DeVotta, 2003). This, together with sporadic anti-Tamil communal violence, contributed to consolidate ethnocentric conflict parties. The 1983 riots mark the violent turn of the conflict. As the documentary also records, the pogrom is noteworthy for the scale of violence and the government’s complicity (Tambiah, 1986).

The LTTE, which demanded a Tamil homeland in the Tamil-speaking North and East of the country, achieved hegemonic status by being framed as the “sole representative” of Tamil nationalism and by using coercion to eliminate dissent within Tamil community (Hoole et al., 1990; Hoole, 2009; Stokke, 2006). The internationally mediated Cease Fire Agreement in 2002 provided a brief respite to hostilities, but violence resumed by 2006 due to fighting within LTTE and between the parties (Högglund, 2005; see Åkebo, 2016). The subsequent war ended in 2009 with GoSL’s military defeat of the LTTE.

The post-war government promoted a “peace through development” strategy. Peacebuilding was conducted through major infrastructure development initiatives and included (re)building railways, highways, and airports; urban development projects in Jaffna and elsewhere; and promoting business and tourism in the former war zones. The post-war “peace through development” approach was problematic for neglecting the emotional trauma and the political character of the conflict. Protracted conflicts produce emotional cultures of war that perpetuate conflict unless transformed (Hutchison & Bleiker, 2008, Hutchison & Bleiker, 2016). Sri Lanka overlooked these in favour of development. Rainford and Satkunanathan (2011, p. 104) note the approach also failed to consider the “overwhelming political nature of both peace and development.” Drawing from post-war development initiatives in the North and East that increased securitisation and unfairly affected Tamils, they argue peace equated with development but devoid of political reform leads to increased tension. Post-war peacebuilding in the country thus exhibits characteristics of illiberal peacebuilding, where
development processes, instead of inclusive political structures, are considered the cornerstone of peace (Hedström & Olivius, 2020; Waldorf et al., 2020). The approach allowed the rifts and majoritarian politics fuelling the war to fester. Sri Lanka’s development-oriented peacebuilding thus led to a post-war phase characterised by rising ethno-nationalism, communal violence, and politicisation of peace. *Demons in Paradise* is received and interpreted in this context.

**Demons in Paradise**

In the following, I discuss *Demons in Paradise*’s engagement with issues of peace and conflict in post-war Sri Lanka along three analytical angles: documentary as a text, contextualised within a social process for peace and reconciliation, and as visual elicitation in research.

**Documentary Film as a Text**

*Demons in Paradise* presents a reading of peace on its own: It questions the development-oriented peacebuilding deployed during the post-war period by showing the embedded emotional cultures of violence within the Sri Lankan Tamil community. The juxtaposition reveals the disjuncture between the two and suggests envisioning a less violent future requires a process of critical self-reflection and a re-examination of the Tamil liberation movement.

*Demons in Paradise* is a 94-min feature-length documentary film by Jude Ratnam. It premiered at the Cannes Film Festival in 2017 and was nominated for the best first feature length film (*Caméra d’Or*) and the best documentary film (*L’Œil d’or*) awards. It won the best documentary film award at the Asia-Pacific Film Festival in 2018. *Demons in Paradise* charts the conflict trajectory through personal perspectives of the filmmaker and his uncle and their relationships to the Tamil community’s armed struggle. Ratnam’s narrative starts with fleeing to Jaffna by train during the 1983 anti-Tamil riots as a 5-year old. His uncle, a former member of a Maoist Tamil militant group, returns to Sri Lanka from Canada and travels with Ratnam tracing significant memories, people, and places in his transition from civilian to militant to émigré. The narrative returns to Ratnam in the end, where he talks about the war’s ending, post-conflict phase, and future. The film fluidly switches between English, Tamil, and Sinhalese, in keeping with the interviewees.

The documentary questions the post-war peacebuilding approach and its exclusive focus on development. Reconstructing the overland road to Jaffna was a significant step in post-war peacebuilding, connecting the North with the South. Resumption of travel, however, led to an influx of war tourism from the South. Ratnam captures ensuing complexities through a voice-over in the film: “Today, this land is exhibited to Sinhalese tourists, who come from the south to contemplate the triumph of war.” The camera shows elderly tourists pay homage at a war memorial: The headstones of veterans and an enemy bulldozer are set alongside Sinhalese and English placards about the heroic deed, whilst an advertisement for a supermarket chain stands in the background. Ratnam further clarifies: “doing things or building this and that doesn’t necessarily mean peace,” and the commonly held notion that “once the war is over, if you build roads and buildings and if there is opulence, then you are at peace” is “facile.”

Again, a voice-over at the end of the documentary sums up the post-war peacebuilding phase and what it entails: “Today, in our country, we’re asked to move forward, forgetting the past. Almost all traces of the war have been wiped out. Everyone wants to believe the country will develop, whatever that means. We are asked to deny our identities in order to move forward.” Thus, *Demons in Paradise* problematises seeing peace as infrastructure development.

The film shows the pervading emotional cultures of fear that need to be addressed to “move forward” in the Tamil community. *Demons in Paradise* reveals multiple layers of violence the Tamil community underwent through personal accounts and interviews. Ratnam’s and his uncle’s experience with anti-Tamil riots
introduce external violence from the Sinhalese into the documentary’s narrative. However, Ratnam comments that “as the film progresses you [Tamils] fear yourself.”8 Towards the end of the documentary, contemporaries of Ratnam’s uncle who were active in various political and militant groups discuss how things changed once the LTTE gained control over the liberation movement. They present personal accounts of how dissenting citizens and members of political and militant movements were tortured and killed by the LTTE. Ratnam’s uncle comments how he “fled the South, wiping out my identity, and then back here to wipe it again . . . out of fear.” Ratnam further emphasises the role of fear by naming fear as the “fundamental emotion” he wanted to express through Demons in Paradise and defining peace as a feeling rooted in being free of fear.9 The film captures the level of violence and fear the community had to undergo through powerful imagery and re-enactments and indicates how the end of war and the subsequent infrastructure development failed to translate into peace. Thus, the documentary shows that the post-war approach to peacebuilding failed to address emotional cultures of violence within the Tamil community.

Demons in Paradise suggests “moving forward,” or sustaining peace, needs to emerge from a process of critical self-reflection and re-examination of the Tamil liberation movement and through confronting and transforming emotions such as fear. Character transformation and the ending of the film emphasise this point. Political standpoints of both Ratnam and his uncle undergo transformation during the film, from being supporters of the cause to becoming disillusioned and acting in ways considered “treachery” during the war. These two main narratives and former militants who speak in the documentary model a reflective, open approach towards peace and post-war transition. The ending of Demons in Paradise also emphasises self-reflection as key to envision future transition. Ratnam narrates how he gave his son who was born at the end of the war “a Tamil name”: “Nethran. The third eye of Lord Siva.” A symbol of Tamil culture. I gave him this name as a promise, to look beyond all fears.” Lord Siva’s third eye can penetrate illusions and symbolises wisdom. The metaphor alludes to the need for internal reflection within each community as a first step towards sustaining peace, instead of fixating upon external elements such as development. Such a critical, reflective process may open up unexpected paths for the future. The idea of peace and post-war transformation conveyed through the documentary, therefore, diverges from the prevailing solution-oriented liberal framing of peace: Demons in Paradise invites a notion of peace emerging from reflection and contemplation, going beyond the ethno-nationalistic-linguistic dimensions of the conflict.

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**Documentary Film Within Social Processes**

Demons in Paradise has been used within peacebuilding processes. I explore how SRP screenings of Demons in Paradise at Universities of Ruhuna and Peradeniya engaged with the peacebuilding discourse through moderated post-screening panel discussions, and how theorisations and narratives of peace articulated therein contributed to inform public discourse and question prevailing peacebuilding approaches.

The screening process influenced the documentary’s interpretation and perceived relationship to peace. A documentary’s interpretation is “shaped not only by its composition but by who is responsible for its circulation, when and where the film is screened, and the contextual information provided to the audience” (Schiller, 2009, pp. 499–500). GIZ’s SRP program organised the screenings I observed. SRP is part of a larger European Union initiative supporting post-war transition in Sri Lanka. In an atmosphere where there is little hope for transitional justice and reconciliation through formal mechanisms, SRP facilitates inclusive dialogue and public discourse on peace and reconciliation through the arts and culture. SRP works with universities for two reasons: the presence of a “ready-made audience”
and the “absence of sufficient exposure” to a range of perspectives and dialogue. Post-screening discussions opened up to the audience after the panel. Thus, SRP’s aims, the panellists, and the university setting framed Demons in Paradise’s engagement with peacebuilding at these screenings.

The facilitated post-screening discussion located the documentary within the conflict history and promoted specific readings that informed audience responses and general discourse on peace. Three pertinent framings emerged from academic panellists in both venues: the interconnection between power and oppression, the need to highlight and acknowledge atrocities by both sides, and the relevance of empathising with the “other”—the suffering of the Tamil community. Acknowledging the level of suffering and the victimisation of the Tamil community also emerged as themes from the primarily Sinhala audiences at both the venues. The scene where Ratnam’s uncle meets a Sinhala family which protected him during the 1977 riots in particular triggers “a strong response from the audiences.” The audience in Ruhuna also appreciated the documentary for showing the LTTE’s violence. Panellists critiqued the documentary’s limited portrayal of state violence. Audiences also agreed, demonstrating the viewers expected Demons in Paradise as a “documentary film” to convey a “balanced” picture of the Sri Lankan conflict. Thus, whilst the film was recognised for its authenticity, its legitimacy was questioned for not conforming to prevailing peacebuilding’s normative boundaries and practices. However, the screenings succeeded in generating debate, allowing the moderated discussions to inform and shape public discourse on peace.

Audience members conceptualised peace in individual post-screening interviews. The notion of peace as freedom—freedom to walk, opine, dissent, be themselves—was prominent. Several considered it an eye-opening film allowing them to see “another side,” and one in particular commented on how it brought home the fact that “peace” is subjective: “What is peace for me is not peace for them . . . what we enjoy now as peace and what we thought we got is not really same for everyone.” Another observed how the film “problematised the mainstream notion of peace” by showing “the people from the South coming to worship the monuments in Jaffna . . . . It has become like a tourist attraction—other people’s suffering has become someone else’s circus.” She also questioned the authenticity of the post-screening discussion for being implicated within a liberal reconciliation discourse and emphasised the need to tolerate “conflict in the level of ideas before we go to proper peace.” Thus, Demons in Paradise elicits multiple—and at times competing—narratives of peace, in response to the film and the broader peacebuilding process.

Demons in Paradise also triggers tension and controversy and invites us to reassess the character of prevailing peacebuilding. Universities and other counterparts can be reluctant to screen the documentary. SRP tends to receive two paradoxical reasons in such cases: “the film provides space for a violent organisation [LTTE]” and “the film undermines the LTTE’s cause and highlights their violence.” Thus, the documentary is simultaneously accused of supporting and undermining the LTTE; of highlighting and inadequately highlighting violence. The contradiction invites rethinking our positions and the beliefs we hold on peace, violence, and conflict.

The discussion indicated a lack of space for alternative views within the prevailing peacebuilding discourse itself, somewhat similar to how it is with nationalist discourses. An audience member captured the dilemma:

Watching the movie and the discussion after I think we don’t really engage with the issues . . . . The people who work on reconciliation . . . repeat it so many times so it has become just another thing we say. There’s not much conflict in reconciliation. The people who work in that have a dominant liberal take that they want you to take and if you don’t take that, there’s a tendency to silence or ignore those voices. We are afraid of conflicting ideas . . . . We tend to see things from the side of the victim, no one wants to be the perpetrator.
We focus on those who died and tend to downplay our own complicity. If peace and reconciliation focus on the victims, it tends to lock us in a blame game. Instead of seeing there are multiple sides to a story, we keep to our own ideas. Political correctness helps silence dissent. Therefore, the documentary and the post-screening discussions reveal insularities within the peacebuilding discourse, where liberal values tend to regulate what is permissible. This is evident in how the prevailing peacebuilding discourse in Sri Lanka adheres to the dual categories of victim/perpetrator, inhibiting space for dissenting expressions of and pathways to peace. Demons in Paradise, screened within a broader reconciliation process, shows how documentaries can generate dialogue and inform public discourse. The process invited reflection and enabled grounded theorisations of peace.

**Documentary Film as Visual Elicitation in Research**

Finally, I discuss how documentary film can be used in research to elicit collective understandings of peace. I screened Demons in Paradise to four ethno-geographically bounded communities in Sri Lanka who are differently positioned towards the conflict, so as to elicit prevailing notions of peace within each community: a Muslim group from the Eastern province, a Tamil group from the Northern province, a Sinhala group from the Southern province, and a plantation sector group from the Central province. Documentary film as visual elicitation provided a shared, creative referent to discuss sensitive topics, engendered participatory practice, and elicited plural ideas of peace.

Demons in Paradise offered a creative referent to broach sensitive issues within focus groups. Peace is highly politicised in Sri Lanka (Orjuela, 2008; Uyangoda, 2007). Personal perspectives, vulnerabilities, and character transformations in the documentary embrace integrity, contemplation, and reflexivity. The shared experience of watching the film invited the same from the participants and produced a sense of community within focus groups. The discussion revolved around and responses were articulated in relation to the film’s narrative. Thus, participants could choose the extent to which they connected the documentary with their own ideas or experiences of peace and conflict.

Providing a shared referent through Demons in Paradise engendered participatory practice. The groups were diverse in age, gender, and education. Such diversity can lead to within-group dynamics and power hierarchies (Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999). Visual elicitation and its focus on personal responses can alleviate these concerns and invite participation (Barton, 2015; Van Auken et al., 2010). Consider the Muslim focus group from the Eastern province: The youngest in the group, female, had just finished high school. The oldest was a respected Islamic scholar in his 80s. Both were articulate but drew from different sources in their engagement. The latter referred to the rhetoric around the conflict, whilst the former used the film to express and legitimise her opinion: “The film shows a problem between two ethnic groups, but it does not show how the other minority community [Muslims] is affected by these events.” “One lady [in the film] says that she helped some Tamil families... even we have done these things.” Thus, using documentary film for visual elicitation helps mitigate power imbalances within focus groups.

Focus group discussions were designed to elicit plural ideas of peace. As an art production, documentary film is open to multiple interpretations. I refrained from introducing or reviewing the documentary film in the group to enable participants to form their own interpretations. The structure of the
discussion encouraged participants to conceptualise their own ideas of peace in response to the documentary and mediate these notions with others in the group. Consequently, the focus group discussions allowed unanticipated readings of peace—and novel interpretations of the documentary—to emerge. For example, consider two separate inquiries from the Southern group: one was puzzled how the documentary could have anything to say about peace because there was no military in it and another interpreted the film’s narrative as a call for the younger Tamils to take up arms. This particular approach allowed participants to interpret the documentary within their own worldviews and conceptualise their own understanding(s) of peace through the process.

Accordingly, the groups showed marked differences in how they connected with the film and its engagement with peace. Each community’s views reflected how they relate to the conflict from their own positions. Two male participants in the Northern province focus group contended the documentary does not connect with or contribute to peace: One maintained “when we think of peace in the Sri Lankan context, it is when there is no ethnic discord between communities,” and the film is irrelevant because it “portrays the infights between different Tamil militant groups.” The other reasoned “[p]eace is built upon consensus among everyone concerning a particular issue” but the “film has not created such a consensus even among ourselves [focus group].” Defining peace thus implies conformity and contrasts with the previous section’s theorisation of dissent as a key element of peace. The Southern group had a strong association of peace with the military: “if this film had anything to do with peace it has to have military in it; and it doesn’t. So this film has no connection with peace.” The documentary did connect with peace, according to some others. All the groups commented on the intercommunal nature of peace in relation to the scene where Ratnam’s uncle meets the Sinhala family which protected him during the 1977 riots: the interaction with “the Sinhala people...paves the way for peace between communities.” The groups also commented on how the nationalist discourse from Sinhala and Tamil politicians’ fuel discord.

Both Northern and Eastern province groups commented on the ability to talk about past violence from both (or all) the sides as an important element for peace. The Eastern group reflected on how open discussions on what is generally seen as “internal issues” within specific communities—or views that dissented from the collective community metanarratives—are key for peace, indicating peace means the freedom to engage with these competing viewpoints. Some ideas from individual post-screening interviews at universities resonate with this particular notion. Structuring focus groups around Demons in Paradise to understand collective narratives of peace, therefore, elicited plural notions of peace. Documentary film offers a creative referent and an insightful avenue to elicit a given community’s understandings about peace and ways of relating to peace.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this article was to explore the role of documentary film in the study and practice of peacebuilding. To do so, I interrogated documentary film along three angles and conducted an empirical analysis of Demons in Paradise in Sri Lanka along each. Analysed as a text, Demons in Paradise unsettled the notion of “peace through development.” It questioned the efficacy of post-war peacebuilding through infrastructure development sans inclusive politics. Having portrayed the pervasive emotional cultures of fear characterising the Tamil community, the film presented self-reflection and contemplation as vital first steps for sustaining peace. Analysed within a social process for peacebuilding, facilitated post-screening panel discussions on the documentary generated public discourse on peace. Liberal notions of peace and nationalist sentiments characterised the discussion, whilst
alternative conceptions of peace were expressed in private. Analysed within a research process for visual elicitation, documentary film provided a shared, creative referent for focus group participants to discuss sensitive issues and prompted distinct intra-communal perceptions of peace. I concluded documentary film offers multiple viewpoints that can highlight diverse notions of peace in post-war societies.

The article made conceptual, methodological, and empirical contributions to the study and practice of peacebuilding. I established documentary film as a site to theorise peace and showed how documentary film engenders plural, disparate conceptions of peace through the three analytical angles. The article made a methodological contribution and responded to Bleiker’s (2015) call to adopt pluralist methods in visual politics by drawing from an array of methods and materials. The analysis juxtaposed these varied applications and charted new pathways for research on and through documentary film. Each angle facilitated empirically informed theorisations of peace in relation to Sri Lanka at varied levels. Identifying community-specific notions of peace supports developing appropriate, responsive peacebuilding initiatives. What peace means for a place where peace is unimaginable without the military, is different from where reflection is seen as the way forward; that again is different from a place where peace means development, dissention, or freedom. Ideas of peace and development vary, be they shaped into collective narratives or expressed as personal viewpoints. Peacebuilding and development approaches need to engage with these communities at where they are. Documentary film offers versatile pathways through which we can understand, elicit, and inform plural visions of peace in post-war contexts.

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Notes
1. For a further discussion on peace as a nuanced, relational concept, see Söderström et al. (2020).
2. I thank an anonymous reviewer for highlighting two ways of framing the visual that inspired my own discussion. These are Cooper-Cunningham (2019)’s tripartite text–image–practice model to analyse image and its interactions, and Vuori & Andersen (2018)’s proposal to study visuality as modality, practice, and method.
3. A few alternative cinema examples that challenge the binary depiction of ethnicities exist (e.g., Thundeneck), but these are largely overshadowed by the more popular and robust nationalistic cinema that valorises war.
4. Strengthening Reconciliation Processes in Sri Lanka uses the arts as one approach in their work.
5. Except for one panellist, the moderator and panellists stayed the same for both discussions.
6. I thank T, J, and P, for moderating the Tamil language focus groups, and K and S for providing me with onsite translation.
7. Interview with author, March 6, 2019, Colombo.
8. Interview with author, March 6, 2019, Colombo.
9. Interview with author, March 6, 2019, Colombo.
10. In Hindu mythology, Lord Siva is considered the creator and destroyer of the world.
11. Upali Amarasinghe, Interview with author, June 23, 2020.
12. Upali Amarasinghe, Interview with author, June 23, 2020.
13. Amarasinghe and Ratnam both noted that the insufficient focus on state violence emerges as a common critique to the documentary from almost all urban and/or intellectual audiences.
14. Amarasinghe observed that Demons in Paradise invariably generated a lively debate with diverse audiences.
15. Post-screening Interviews 1, 3, and 4: April 5, 2019, Ruhuna; Interviews 5 and 7: April 5, 2019, Peradeniya.
16. Post-screening Interview 7: April 5, 2019, Peradeniya.
17. Post-screening Interview 9: April 7, 2019, Peradeniya.
18. Several attempts to publicly screen the documentary in Jaffna had failed. I also faced challenges in organising the Southern province focus group.
19. Interview with author, June 23, 2020.
20. Post-screening Interview 9: April 7, 2019, Peradeniya.
21. Focus Group Interview—Eastern Province, F1, December 1, 2019.
22. Focus Group Interview—Southern Province, M, December 5, 2019.
23. Focus Group Interview—Southern Province, M1, December 5, 2019.
24. Focus Group Interview—Northern Province, M, December 8, 2019.
25. Focus Group Interview—Northern Province, M2, December 8, 2019.
26. Focus Group Interview—Southern Province, M, December 5, 2019.
27. Focus Group Interview—Northern Province, F1, December 8, 2019.

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