Film Festival Activism: Actors, Spectators, Social Change

If we take as departure the idea that film festivals are knowledge-sites *and* communal spaces that call forth a specific type of spectator, then we can begin to ask questions about the particular spaces and spectators created by activist/ human rights film festivals. As these sorts of festivals negotiate a variety of discourses, most particularly ‘film festival’ and the social/ human rights issues that organises them thematically, one of the most central discursive features is that which centres on ‘social change’. Through this idea[l] the spectator is hailed as an active participant, the films are to act as motivators, and discussions that usually follow film screenings are to expand on the issues raised by the film and motivate further. In this way gazing at others’ troubles is expected to be more than a passive watching of trauma, but involve an ethically and politically engaged spectator who will traverse the world of the screen and that of material being through social action. Although much has already been written about the mediating and distancing effects of witnessing ‘distant suffering’, in this volume we wish to interrogate this idea as one that has productive elements but also quite distinctly politico-cultural dimensions that, in the space of activist/ human rights film festivals, configures its viewing publics in quite definite ways.

Following on from the recent work by Leshu Torchin (2012) in her book *Creating the Witness: Documenting Genocide on Film, Video, and the Internet,* we want to begin thinking about these dimensions within the context of visual activism in a film festival, and to do it from a discursive perspective. In that book Leshu explores notions of testimony and witnessing as performed through the media-saturated documentation of two genocides to interrogate the ideological work of images proliferated via various form of media. But we also wish contributors to consider Lilie Chouliaraki’s book *The Ironic Spectator: Solidarity in the Age of Post-Humanitarianism* (2013) where she discusses the creation of a detached viewer of media generated humanitarian suffering who is more concerned about their own self-image than the plight of others. In a film festival a specific type of spectating takes place, one that is more selective (because audiences self-select, must physically attend, as well as outlaying resources to do so – time and money), and thereby premised on greater levels of agency and activity; as well as being communal-like encounters. And these are sites where audiences are being reformulated through the performance of various discourses – for example, in human rights film festivals the discourses of film festivals (cinephilia) and human rights (internationalisation/ cosmopolitanisation).

Perhaps one way in which the work of the two above scholars can be extended is to consider that as these discourses are being negotiated in the space of a film festival, they may be occurring differently according to the relative geopolitical positioning of the spectator. So, for example, in recent research by one of the co-editors of this tome, human rights in Argentina are read as a highly-charged frame for political actors to use domestically. This is related to the history of modern human rights: who has developed and therefore ‘owns’ them. Another may be to read these festivals through the theoretical frame of Third Cinema, in which ‘the film act’ is a political act of engagement with the material world of being mediated by film but acted on by people. The film act considers films to be in a relationship, intersected by power and culture, but ultimately mediated by people who must act in the world of being. The post-screening discussions which are mandatory as part of the film act, and other activities that now take place as part of many activist film festivals (post-festival stalls; education modules for e.g.) must be taken into account in the creation of a more active, engaged, and concerned spectator, even if always intersected by geopolitical forms of power and discourses that position them differently. In this sense, human rights/ activist film festivals can enact a political program for cinema, one which is based upon the relations between filmic signification and the social. To put this in the terms espoused by the Third Cinema manifestos that came out of Latin America in the late 1960s, early 1970s, human rights/ activist film festivals attempt to integrate art and the cultural spaces that spectators inhabit.[[1]](#footnote-1) Arguably, this means that any challenges such festivals seek to pose to the idea of the passive or inactive spectator, are challenges that can only be meaningfully undertaken in relation to particular viewing audiences – the ones attending the festivals – and to the shape and dynamics of their reception.[[2]](#footnote-2)

It might therefore be important to ask whether a given festival takes into consideration the particular social worlds its audiences inhabit when it goes about the business of trying to provoke spectators into action. Another related issue is to what extent there is a tension or conflict between treating cinema as a tool for change – whether this change has to do with consciousness raising or modifying behaviour – and seeking to procure commercial and/or popular success. Are there individual human rights festivals that face having to risk audience pleasure and satisfaction in order to show socially pertinent material? Or is this not an issue for many festivals, and if not why? Alternatively, the focus could be on examining how human rights film festivals constitute particular kinds of public spheres – whether proletarian or bourgeois, mainstream or alternative. Such public spheres facilitate specific forms of citizen expression, association, and knowledge-production, and they often do so in a way that connects the virtual world of Internet social networks with the physical world of city, urban or rural space.

Contributors can consider the following topics as possibilities, but others can be proposed:

- theoretical engagement with humanitarian spectatorship as it applies to human rights/ activist film festivals
- human rights/ activist film festivals as discursive sites
- Critical engagement with the idea of 'social change' and what this means for the spectator in a human rights/ activist film festival
- How does 'the political' enter into the construction of an active spectator as filtered through human rights discourse?
- What are the political dimensions to be considered in the creation of the human rights spectator that are different to other forms of activism? e.g. the global/ internationalising dimension
- in what ways is human rights discourse being recreated differently in different national contexts subverted, or modified?
- If film festival discourse relies on elements of cinephilia, how is this present/ absent in human rights/ activist film festivals?
- Film festivals were originally established to subvert the dominance of Hollywood and promote national cinemas, while human rights demand an internationalising gaze; how do these apparently opposing imperatives converge in a human rights film festival to encourage the spectator to create social change?

- How is 'the film act' apparent in activist/ human rights film festivals?

Time frames:
Abstract of 500 words must be received by Monday 30th September, 2013
A short bio and publications to be included
Acceptance/ non-acceptance will be sent out by Monday 14th October, 2013
Proposal to publisher immediately after
Chapters of 5 500 - 6 000 words to be received by Friday 28th February, 2014

Abstracts/ bio to be sent to:

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1. For an overview of the key ideas in the manifestos produced in Latin America, and also in regions such as North Africa, see Paul Willemen's (1989) The Third Cinema Question: Notes and Reflections. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The issue of how socio-political formations shape both the production and reception of cinema is discussed by Paul Willemen in his analysis of Third Cinema's aims and practices. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)