

Human
Rights
Film
Network

ONE
WORLD

MOVIES **THAT** MATTER

 **FiSahara**
INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL
المهرجان العالمي للسينما بالصحراء العربية

Setting Up a Human Rights Film Festival, vol. 2

An inspiring guide for film festival organisers from all over the world



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We Are Making a Change, Don't Forget:

Introduction

Written by Karol Piekarczyk, former WATCH DOCS International Human Rights in Film Festival organiser; former programme and festival coordinator at Document Human Rights Film Festival

I was fifteen years old when my father took me to see my first ever human rights film in cinema. It was December and the film was *The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo*. I remember the experience vividly despite being unable to recall any aesthetic merits of the documentary. I can't picture specific takes, the pace of the montage, nor what style it was shot in, or much of the plot for that matter. Funnily enough, some of those features are the ones that best imprint themselves on my memory nowadays. Back then though, for a teenage boy, it was much more about the emotional side of things and, in that respect, the screening left a lasting impression on me. Although I could not fully empathise with the Argentine mothers who wept for justice, I could understand the unique bond between a parent and their child. Most importantly, something so basic and unquestionable to me, especially as I was growing up, was being brutally taken away from them by what was a clear violation of fundamental human rights. The festival which showcased the documentary was WATCH DOCS, and a few years later I

found myself within its ranks, helping to bring important films to audiences in Poland.

When I was asked to write an introduction for this handbook I felt honoured, yet at the same time petrified at the prospect of doing so. I asked myself, how will I be able to fit in all the vital points about why we should be setting up human rights film festivals? How can I pass this on to readers around the world? Can I convince them of the powerful social impact that these films can have? The panic passed, however, as soon as I started to read the chapters that constitute this handbook—a collection made up of carefully selected practical advice on one hand, and a wide range of case studies from a variety of festivals on the other. My colleagues have been very thorough and at the same time comprehensible in their writings. I am confident that if you are seeking answers on how to organise a human rights film festival, regardless of whether you are located in a metropolitan or rural setting, in spite of what budget you have or what local obstacles you may face, you are very likely to find those answers here. Before I give you a short summary of what each chapter is about and what is unique about this version of the handbook, I would like to share with you my thoughts on

how, by setting up a human rights film festival, we can facilitate social change.

Human Rights Film Festivals

Since 1985, when the Vermont International Film Festival was launched as a part of the anti-nuclear movement, over fifty human rights film festivals have sprung up all around the world. Every year this number grows with the new millennium bringing a rapid rise of festivals. Human rights films and strands of human rights programming have also found their way into mainstream festivals, documentary festivals, or topic-specific festivals, such as indigenous, LGBT, women's, disability and health, or migration related festivals. Many festivals are associated with or have been formed by human rights organisations: Movies that Matter is a successor to the Amnesty International Film Festival, One World is attached to People in Need, the Refugee Film Festival was established through UNHCR Representation in Japan and the Human Rights Watch Film Festival was created over two decades ago by Human Rights Watch in New York City.

Frequently, the educational purpose of human rights film festivals is to bring the very concept of human rights to people and help them understand its meaning. The definition of *human rights* that I find most apt and straightforward is that they are "universal moral rights, of a fundamental nature, held by individuals in their relations with the state".¹ Human rights are a collection of legal rights, from a national level to an internation-

al one (such as *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights*). They are always viewed through the prism of a relationship between one individual citizen and the country that should guarantee his or her rights. On the other hand the practice of human rights is reflected in the actions of various entities. We can make a distinction between two kinds of actors that function on the global human rights scene. The first are those that operate within the legal frameworks of nation-states, whether it is within a country or in an international milieu. This would range from bodies created through national constitutions (such as parliaments) or through worldwide treaties (such as the UN). The second kind comes from the citizens instead of the authorities. It ranges from activities of specific non-governmental organisations, to human rights lawyers, to activists, to human rights film festivals, to diverse networks, to various social movements. We can perceive these actors, collectively, as a human rights movement.

In my experience with audiences in Poland, I could see them often associate human rights with something distant, something they would observe on the screen in far away lands but that would not necessarily relate to them. This made it important for us to make our audience see the concept in a different light by showing them that it applies to all citizens, regardless of where they are come from. Naturally, the intensity of the struggles against human rights violations differs greatly from one region to another. This is why the shape, the aims and objectives of your festival highly depend on your environment.



Members of Human Rights Film Network meet every year at IDFA in Amsterdam. Photo: Archive of Movies that Matter.

Some festivals were created with the purpose of advocating and human rights campaigning by positioning themselves alongside international legal bodies, as with *Movies that Matter* in The Hague, FIFDH in Geneva, or *One World's* edition in Brussels. A festival such as *FiSahara* works in a displaced community of refugee camps; it not only aims at bringing the concept of human rights to the audience but also becomes a part of an effort towards social justice and international recognition. Meanwhile, the *Bujumbura Film Festival* (Burundi) and the *Rwanda Film Festival*, known as *Hillywood*, focus on using film as a means to heal communities traumatised by armed conflict and genocide. Many festival organisers highly value working with youth and frequently set up school programmes: this might mean preparing toolkits for teachers, or helping students run film clubs. A number of festivals have launched a travelling section in order to reach more remote places in their countries or regions. All of these activities lead to an increased audience reach, often targeting a variety of people who might not otherwise have a chance to see a human rights film.²

With the idea of a human rights movement spreading from the local to the worldwide in the era of globalisation, a number of human rights film festivals decided to join their efforts in reinforcing a global civil society. The Human Rights Film Network, founded in 2004, brings together nearly forty interconnected festivals from a wide range of countries and regions. When the Network was established, we never dreamed that it would grow to be so vast. From South Korea, through

Burkina Faso, through Ukraine, to Bolivia. From Buenos Aires, through New York, through Vilnius, to Kuala Lumpur. We share our experiences, we exchange ideas on how to educate and campaign and we co-operate with each other. In 2009 the Human Rights Film Network published a handbook that was aimed at film festival organisers-to-be. It contained our knowledge and experience in a form that was boiled down to empirical advice and know-how on how to set up and run a human rights film festival.

The question that many of us may ask ourselves is whether human rights films can transform our society in a positive way. Throughout the years of working with festivals, I have found that we tend to take this question in stride, downplaying the role played by human rights films and festivals. Whether this comes from a hesitation to speak too fondly of the work that is being done, whether we fear that by putting forward a claim about our role the spotlight of expectations will then be shed upon us, or whether some of us are actually sceptical, the fact remains that the activities of festivals around the world can, and will continue to, make a change. Without any modesty, we should praise human rights films and festivals that do so.

The Impact

Ever since *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory in Lyon*, which is said to be the first movie ever made, film has been preoccupied with and focused on that which is social. From early on after the Second World

War, the impact of films dealing with human rights has been clearly visible. In Cannes, German diplomats ran around doing all they could to prevent the screening of *Night and Fog*; in Venice, similar efforts were engaged by representatives from China trying to cancel Antonioni's documentary *Chung Kuo*. These examples carry on throughout history all the way to the present. Authorities sometimes feel threatened by filmmakers and by festivals—from Jafar Panahi to the Side by Side festival in Russia—and the Human Rights Film Network responds by showing support to many repressed artists and organisers who are a part of our global civil society. If government officials are scared of films that we screen then, clearly, they acknowledge the social impact that they can have. As I'm writing this, our friend from the Freedom Film Festival in Malaysia is being persecuted over the screening of the documentary *No Fire Zone: The Killing Fields of Sri Lanka*.

Nowadays such reactions not only come from wary ambassadors but are also expressed by multinational companies, as in the recent example of the film *Big Boys Gone Bananas*. The documentary describes how the filmmaker Fredrik Gertten was being sued by the Dole Company for making his previous film *Bananas*. Dole not only filed a lawsuit against the filmmaker, which they subsequently lost, but also threatened to take legal action against the Los Angeles Film Festival if they were to screen the film. Some films are so scrupulous in their investigations and willingness to uncover hidden aspects of social reality that

they have proven to be more effective than the justice systems. The most famous of these films is *The Thin Blue Line* by Errol Morris, which led to a release of a wrongly convicted prisoner. Similar results have been seen after screenings of *El Rati Horror Show* (shown by our friends at Festival Internacional de Cine de Derechos Humanos in Buenos Aires) whose main character was also unjustly imprisoned, and yet, thanks to the film, finally discharged.

Recently, the documentary *The Act of Killing* gathered a great deal of momentum and, putting aside the success it achieved internationally, it is helping in an unprecedented way to catalyse social transformation in Indonesia. The National Human Rights Commission of Indonesia gave a statement saying that “if we are to transform Indonesia into the democracy it claims to be, citizens must recognise the terror and repression on which our contemporary history has been built. No film, or any other work of art for that matter, has done this more effectively than *The Act of Killing*”.³ The documentary is now available online for all Indonesian citizens to watch free of charge.

More and more often, films, by bringing attention to particular social issues, become connected with wider campaigning for the improvement of the situation that they depict. It can be linked with setting up an NGO, by raising funds or pressuring the authorities. This can be especially powerful when the film uncovers stories that are lesser known to the general public. The human rights film festival is invaluable in these

processes, often becoming the middleperson as well as a platform for such activism.

The Education

The greatest power of human rights films undoubtedly lies in education, consciousness raising and attitude shaping. This strength can be transmitted directly through human rights film festivals. Paradoxically though, it is a power that is often hardest to measure. Film as a medium can reverberate amongst audience members on a personal level; unfortunately changing individual perceptions of the world, inspiring people or inducing empathy cannot be simply quantified and turned into numbers and graphs. I've spent a vast amount of time talking to film directors and festival organisers about how human rights films can influence their viewers.

When I spoke to Hanna Polak (co-director of the film *Children of Leningradsky*)⁴ about the notion of how powerful human rights films and festivals can be, she recalled a time when she was at a screening of her film in Mexico. After the screening, a woman walked up to her and said: "Thank you so much for this film. From now on I promise myself to be a better mother". This story embodies how films can, similarly to human rights themselves, be both universal and immensely poignant. A film made by Polish documentarians, filmed around a train station in Russia, made an everlasting impression on a mother in Mexico. Just because a film has been made on the other side of the globe doesn't mean that it will not have as much

relevance to our own audience as it would to people living many miles away. It's important to keep that in mind whilst programming your event. If you come from a country where there is scarce respect for human rights or where censorship applies, there may be no films directly addressing the pressing human rights problems in your region. From my experience, the universal nature of human rights films is a powerful tool against such obstacles—so long as it is accompanied by a meaningful introduction, commentary, a Q&A session or a debate.

To try and at least grasp how audiences might feel about human rights films, I have conducted research during the WATCH DOCS festival in Warsaw. Here are some of the findings gathered through questionnaires, which were filled out by 100 participants:

Audience Research

- 92% of people believe that human rights films can, in some way, change our world
- 74% of audience members felt that these films affect their own worldview
- 64% of people said that their knowledge on topics portrayed in the films has changed or has been enhanced
- 40% of respondents came to the festival for the first time, whereas 60% were returning

These responses demonstrate a substantial belief in the power of films held by people who come to our

festivals; this is something we should hold most dear whilst organising our events. Some might be tempted to assume that at a human rights film festival in Warsaw, the audience is already acutely aware of the issues they will encounter; however, as the results of the research show, over half of the audience said that some of the opinions or knowledge they had prior to entering the cinema had changed after the film. Moreover, a number of new people come to these events, which not only is reflected in the statistics, but also in the fact that festivals are increasingly trying to reach a variety of audiences, by holding travelling editions, by screenings in schools or local communities, among other activities. Human rights film festival audiences are not homogeneous. At your festival, you might be screening films for people far less familiar with human rights films or the concept of human rights itself. Conducting a questionnaire is something I would highly recommend. You'll find out more about your audience, and will gain valuable feedback from the people who should be at the heart of your activities.

I believe that, ultimately, evocative human rights films can engage with their audience in a way that no other form of art can. The documentary *Jai Bhim Comrade*, directed by Anand Patwardhan, follows the struggle of the untouchable Dalit caste in India. It begins after the poet-activist Vilas Ghogre committed suicide (in the light of the police shooting ten unarmed Dalit in 1997). When I spoke about the documentary with Anand Patwardhan at a screening in London, he passionately described showing it back in India: "We

had screenings of the film in the community, for the working class people, for Dalits. We had white sheets on which we projected in the open air, with people squatting on the floor, many people even stood for three hours. They sang, they clapped, and they interacted with it". A very powerful bond can be forged between human rights films and their audiences, one that can be experienced on a collective and on a personal level, one that sometimes imposes change and one that is often too difficult to describe unless you are sitting amongst the participants.

The Handbook

At the end of the foreword to the first edition of the handbook we have written that any feedback we would get could hopefully contribute to an updated version. And here we are, five years later, with a second edition that, more than anything, was born from the events that have taken place in the meantime. The boom in human rights film festivals is not slowing down. Since the first publication, the Network has been contacted on numerous occasions by people from around the world, eager to create their own festivals. New members have joined the Network from countries such as Jordan and Papua New Guinea. We have partnered with new human rights film festivals springing up in a multitude of places such as AfricanBamba in Senegal, Human Screen in Tunisia, the first travelling festival in Burma, or FiSahara in the Sahrawi refugee camps. Many more have sought advice on how to start and how to keep going.



Q&As with festival guests are an integral part of One World Film Festival in Prague. Photo by Lukáš Bíba.

Frequently, organisers who have contacted us come from countries where there may be little regard for freedom of speech, from developing regions or from post-conflict zones.

We came to understand that we took many things for granted. Organising a festival in a relatively wealthy democratic country is one story. If we ever considered setting up and running a film festival to be tough, the stories of how our friends who are trying to stand up and create a festival against all odds were a wake-up call for all of us. Many of the human rights violations which we observed on the screen suddenly became pressing matters for us, not only as citizens of a global civil society, but as colleagues of fellow festival organisers who face discriminatory authorities, who struggle to finance their event and who are often the only alternative source of information in their region. Although we try to give ongoing assistance, we realised that it was high time for a second edition of the handbook to address the needs of people under these circumstances: a manual carefully crafted with an understanding of diverse geographical, political, social and cultural issues that could address questions unique to developing, transitional or post-conflict countries.

The handbook is divided into two parts. The first part offers practical guidelines that are, nonetheless, interlaced with revealing examples from a selection of international festivals. The latter part is a collection of fascinating case studies, selected to include nar-

ratives that readers from developing and transitional countries might find particularly helpful.

A Summary of What Awaits You in this Handbook

Firstly, we look at the *typology of human rights film festivals*. This chapter entwines the description of varied types of festivals with specific accounts, from around the world, of how they can instigate social change. This may help you conceptualise where you want to start with your festival as well as inspire a choice of a most effective structure. Next, you'll verge into the vital notion of *programming a human rights film festival*. Here it will become clear that programming is about much more than just films. Enriched with examples from festivals in Uganda, Malaysia, the Western Sahara and India, the chapter on programming lays a foundation for building a successful event. The chapter on *security and censorship* represents the core reason for this handbook; we found that these issues are persistent for many of you. Hence, in this chapter you'll encounter not only cases from human rights film festivals facing oppression, but most importantly, advice on how to safely plan your activities. The chapter on *debates and Q&As* underscores the notion that the power of human rights films can be enhanced through an insightful discussion. From this section, you can learn not only how to augment the social impact of your programme by incorporating debates and meetings, but you'll also be able to consider the practicalities of holding accompanying events. The

next chapter of the handbook relates to the *production and team* of a human rights film festival. Whatever your finances and your resources might be you should ensure that you have a strong team in place and, what follows, that you can collectively oversee and deliver an exceptional festival. The chapter on *technical production* is of twofold importance, primarily, because the technical side of preparing a festival is one that should never be underestimated and requires great attention to detail. Secondly, with the medium technologically evolving so rapidly, there may be choices that you can make to improve the quality of the screenings or to save money, both of which are not necessarily mutually exclusive. *How to successfully promote your festival* is an imperative question to ask when launching a human rights film festival. From thinking visually about the promotion of your event and broadening your media contacts to planning and executing a PR campaign, this section is filled with ideas and suggestions that could help attract attention and audiences to your new festival. The chapter on *raising funds to support a human rights film festival* takes into account different circumstances in which you might find yourself; offering financial alternatives such as in-kind donations, partnerships and many more. The aim is to propose a creative way of fundraising, and as it accurately says to showcase the possibilities of “doing a lot with very little”. *Evaluating a human rights film festival* is a phase, again never to be underestimated, that is significant for the future of your festival. This chapter gives you examples of evaluation that can best suit your needs and help you make potential adjustments.

The subsequent part of the handbook is filled with compelling case studies. We hope that in conjunction with the practical advice offered in the first section, they will help you formulate the groundwork for setting up a noteworthy human rights film festival, one that is capable of galvanising social transformation. Here you’ll be able to read the story of how the *Karama Human Rights Film Festival in Jordan* is fighting to dismantle the preconceptions of human rights being a term connected only to Western culture. Then you’ll be taken to Malaysia, where with the motto of “Dare to Document” the *Freedom Film Fest* became an igniting force inspiring native productions of socially engaged films—something that had been ever so rare in their country. You will visit Burma, where the *Human Rights Human Dignity International Film Festival* grew from a small seed planted in the organisers’ hearts, to an event that often treads a thin line of law but that, nevertheless, continues screening inspiring films. In Burkina Faso you might find a city crier standing on the main square announcing that the *Ciné Droit Libre* mobile cinema has arrived in town, providing people with means enabling them to become advocates for their own rights. This journey will take you to the land of infinite sands, where in the middle of the Sahara desert thousands of refugees have made their home. Their resourcefulness helped build a society in which the *FiSahara International Film Festival* not only works to empower, but also to bring the long forgotten conflict to international attention. The next stop will be Ukraine, where through creating a network of



Screening at Seoul Human Rights Film Festival in South Korea. Photo: Archive of Movies that Matter.

NGOs the *Docudays UA International Human Rights Documentary Film Festival* reaches various regions of their country; despite the notorious efforts aimed against them, such as police raids or bomb threats, the festival strives to build a strong civil society in their motherland. There will also be a chance to travel to Guatemala where the *International Film Festival Memoria Verdad Justicia* is courageously facilitating a social conversation in a nation that is trying to raise

itself from the ashes of killings, disappearances and torture. Then you will arrive in Sierra Leone, where the steadily growing *Opin Yu Yi Human Rights Film Festival* not only has to prevail over the brutal legacy of the country's past, but also, most importantly, tries to help the citizens look forward to a socially just future. At the end, different festivals share their experience in *educational activities* for children and youth. All of these case studies are extremely captivating and

were selected to illustrate the power of human rights film festivals: to overcome, to educate and to ignite a spark of change.

Thank you and good luck!

We would like to thank all those who contributed to the creation of this handbook: by coordinating the process, by writing, by editing, by providing consultations and by designing the book. Most importantly, we would like to dedicate this handbook to all the future festival organisers who might find its contents helpful.

Please take our recommendations and conclusions with a grain of salt. We have never been in your shoes. We don't know what social, economic or political climate you are operating in, nor what donor options are available to you. We have never been able to test the advice that we are offering under the same conditions you face. Above all, this handbook shows our readiness to aid setting up festivals around the world—ones that can enhance local civil societies as well as strengthening the global one. Thus, if anything here

requires more detail, or if there is any way in which we can help make your event happen, please contact us and we will do our best to give you a hand.

Filmography:

Bananas (dir. Fredrik Gertten, 2009).
Big Boys Gone Bananas (dir. Fredrik Gertten, 2011).
Children of Leningradsky (dir. Andrzej Celiński and Hanna Polak, 2005).
Chung Kuo (dir. Michelangelo Antonioni, 1972).
El Rati Horror Show (dir. Enrique Pineyro and Pablo Tesoriere, 2010).
Jai Bhim Comrade (dir. Anand Patwardhan, 2011).
Night and Fog (dir. Alain Resnais, 1955).
No Fire Zone: The Killing Fields of Sri Lanka (dir. Callum Mcrae, 2013).
The Act of Killing (dir. Joshua Oppenheimer, 2012).
The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo (dir. Susana Blaustein Munoz and Lourdes Portillo, 1985).
The Thin Blue Line (dir. Errol Morris, 1988).
Workers Leaving the Lumiere Factory in Lyon (dir. Louis Lumiere, 1895).

¹ Wiktor Osiatynski (1998) *Introduction to Human Rights*, Helsinki Foundation Publications

² You'll find more about the types of film festivals, later in this handbook, in the chapter on the *typology of human rights film festivals* as well as through a number of *case studies*.

³ Joshua Oppenheimer (2014) *The National Human Rights Commission of Indonesia*. (<http://goo.gl/VWd5gw>)

⁴ *Children of Leningradsky* was a film which itself made a great impact. After winning several international prizes and being nominated for an Academy Award, through its disturbing images, it was able to reach millions of people and pressurise legal changes in Russia.