Human Rights Film Festivals: Different Approaches to Change the World

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"You can ask whatever you want"

On the outskirts of Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso, the film festival Ciné Droit Libre had set up a huge screen for an audience of hundreds, maybe more than a thousand people. Directly in front of the screen were little children playing around. We sat on plastic chairs. Around the chairs was a human hedge of boys and girls on scooters. The full moon gave the spot a magical glow. On the screen, first there were music videos with popular West African musicians and clips of stand-up comedians commenting on freedom of speech to attract an audience. Then there was a feature-length documentary dealing with land issues in Burkina Faso. While the end credits were running, festival director Abdoulaye Diallo shouted out: "This is Ciné Droit Libre, you can ask whatever you want!".[1] Many participated in a fierce discussion.

"It is all about the popularisation of human rights", said Diallo later on, "that is the main target".[2] In his view, Ciné Droit Libre is only successful when it helps people realise that they have rights, human rights, and that they can claim these rights. At the Movies that Matter Festival in The Netherlands, where we work, one hardly feels the urge to make people aware of their own rights; it's more about the rights of *others*—those oppressed and marginalised by repressive regimes—and about being critical and knowledgeable about complex issues.

We have witnessed a rapid worldwide increase of film festivals that focus on human rights. In 2004, 17 film festivals founded the Human Rights Film Network. In 2014, the network comprises 39 member festivals. And many more countries, not yet represented in the network, have film festivals with a focus on human rights. These festivals screen films that portray the many facets of human dignity, including the suffering from violations of freedom of expression and personal integrity, the damages of armed conflict, the pain of deprivation and social injustice.

The festivals basically share the same goal: promotion of the observance of human rights through cinema. But to achieve more precise objectives, the ways these festivals position themselves, the criteria for film selection and the manner in which the films are

presented vary considerably. This chapter presents a structure that allows an assessment of goals, methods and results.

Moral Imagination

Cinema is pre-eminently the medium that has the ability to expand the moral imagination, the ability to imagine ourselves in the situation of others, despite the fact that the other is often far away. The process of being morally imaginative includes disengaging from and becoming aware of one's own situation, envisioning moral conflicts and dilemmas, and the ability to imagine new possibilities.[3]

However, we are not sure how images influence our ethical responses and moral behaviour, and what would be the most appropriate communication and response related to a film. One and the same film can appeal to different audiences, reach different layers of understanding, and evoke different kinds of experiences. For some, it is just a pleasant way of spending a night out. For others, it is an eye-opening film that will alter professional and political decisions. Some will be numbed, or bored and walk away, others will be inspired to do something. Some close their eyes when the images are too shocking, while others feel the need to be shocked so as to understand what it is all about. A film may have the effect of reinforcing the perceived "gap" between the self and the other, or it may create a sense of understanding and contact.

In its most general sense, what organisers of human rights film festivals have in mind is a process of raising awareness. But what does this imply? One way to approach this is to distinguish between "types" of conscience, or mental states. After having viewed the same film, one person's mental change may be quite different from another person's. Or one person can experience various mental effects.

We sketch five steps of the moral imagination that the spectator can experience after watching a film at a human rights film festival:

- "I'm touched". The film moved me, changed my mood, made an impression. I can't say whether that will have a more lasting effect on my perception, attitude or actions.
- "I know more now". I have learned things that I did not know before. I have become more aware of the depth, the character of an issue. This will have an effect on my perception, possibly more.
- "I am more critical now". I not only have learned new things, I also am more able now to analyse. I can see that things are more complex (or more simple). I may feel that the filmmaker has made good choices (or that it was mainly an attempt to manipulate me).
- "I feel concerned (responsible, guilty) now". I have become aware that issues in the film concern me. The distant suffering is something that people like me should do something about. It makes me think about my position in society, about my capabilities.

Human Rights Human Dignity IFF in Burma also focuses on young audiences. Photo courtesy of HRHDIFF.

- "I feel called to action". I am clearly aware that I should do something about the issues that concerned me in the film. I may change my professional choices, or initiate action, or donate money, or join an organisation.

Human Rights "Schools"

All festivals aim towards raising awareness, and many even aim at social change. But how do the festival organisers see the position of their festival? How can the festivals increase their impact? How can festivals optimise their role as powerful actors in a civil society? A phenomenological[4] analysis of human rights film festivals should include scrutiny of the activism generated by groups with social change goals. For that purpose we adapt the model of the four human rights "schools" as developed by Marie-Benedicte Dembour.[5]

The four human rights schools as proposed by Dembour are:

- The *natural or principled school* embraces the most common and well-known definition of human rights: rights one possesses simply by being human. The universality of human rights is derived from their natural character. This school has traditionally represented the heart of orthodox human rights defence.

- The *deliberative school* conceives of human rights as political values that liberal societies choose to adopt. Human rights come into existence through societal agreement, and they are elaborated through negotiations. The idea of this school is that one would like to see human rights become universal, but recognises this will require time. Human rights defenders offer their wisdom and expertise to improve the status of human rights.

- The *protest school* considers human rights as a platform from which to articulate entitlements demanded by or on behalf of the poor, the underprivileged, and the oppressed. Human rights are claims and aspirations. They oblige us to stand up for the humiliated and those in the margins. International treaties and rules can help, but should not get in the way. Human rights defenders are activists, fighting injustice as injustice and not because a treaty says so.

- The *discourse school* is characterised by its lack of reverence towards human rights. Human rights exist only because people talk about them. Discourse school adherents are convinced neither that human rights are given nor that they constitute the right answer to the ills of the world. Human rights defenders operate from the premise that the language of human rights, in their various interpretations, has become a powerful tool for expressing social and political claims.

Film festivals are virtually always a mixture of these different "schools". In response to a questionnaire

we developed in preparation for this chapter, Maria Carrión from FiSahara explains that we aim to combine two strategies. On the one hand, the "principled" approach helps to raise awareness among a wider international audience, and the other, the "protest" approach is a tool for the Sahrawi people to express their cultural identity and use film as a tool for cultural survival and social change.[6]

Uli Stelzner from the festival in Guatemala adds that "in the mixture of the different 'types' lies the key of the success of our festival".[7]

With this in mind, let's have a closer look at the festivals.

Principled Type

The principled type of festival starts from the inherent dignity of the human being and emphasises a universal humaneness that should appeal to the widest possible audience. In June 2013, for the very first time, the Human Rights Human Dignity International Film Festival was staged in Yangon, Burma. Afterwards, the festival toured through the country with the award-winning films, reaching large crowds and full houses. The organisers distributed a leaflet with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to all those in the audience. In Ukraine, a special program of "Docudays UA" consists of film screenings and discussions in prisons and jails with the objective "to teach people about the concept of human rights, including respect to the rights of prisoners".[8] That some festivals feel it is their duty to make people aware of their own rights can often be derived from the very name of the festival: Manya Human Rights International Film Festival in Uganda (*manya* means "get to know"), Derecho a Ver (the right to see) in Colombia, and Opin Yu Yi (open your eyes) in Sierra Leone including special sessions called Sabi Yu Rights (know your rights).

Deliberative Type

The *deliberative* type is a festival most of all serving as a forum for debate and catering to more specialised or more directly human rights-involved audiences. The deliberative type aims to convince the target audience to adopt human rights as political values because human rights are the best possible legal and political standards that can rule a society. Festival du Film et Forum International sur les Droits de l'Homme (FFIDH) in Geneva usually coincides with the UN Human Rights Council's main session. The film selection is adjusted when expedient to the themes that will be discussed during the council. *No Fire Zone* is an example of a film that was screened during the Council. This documentary about the armed conflict in Sri Lanka meticulously shows the war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by the government over the course of 2009. The filmmakers started a campaign targeting the UN and the governments of the Commonwealth. After huge international pressure on the Sri Lankan authorities requesting an independent investigation, in November 2013 that government announced a survey to determine the number of people killed during the

Live video-conference with Edward Snowden at FIFDH in Geneva and high-profile guests. Photo by Miguel Bueno.

country's 26 years of civil war. In this manner, festival organisers can foster a debate on topics that they would like to see high on the political agenda.

Protest Type

The *protest* type festival is strongly oriented towards social and political life, often springing from a movement that opposes the powers that be, and sees human rights as an instrument for overall change. An example is Cine Amazónico, a travelling film festival in Ecuador focusing on the rights of the inhabitants of the Amazon region. The festival screens films that would otherwise remain unseen, films that stir a debate and sometimes can even lead to non-violent protests. The government recently forced the organisation's office to shut down, accusing the NGO of interfering in political events, and "affecting the public peace".[9]

Many festivals have to operate with great caution to ensure the safety of their teams and visitors. Festival dates are chosen carefully not to coincide with elections, for instance. Also self-censorship is a recurring issue. Topics that are considered too sensitive are sometimes avoided in order to keep other important topics on the agenda and build support.

Invitation-only screenings can be a way to get around censorship boards. For the Indonesian distribution of *The Act of Killing*, the filmmakers did not choose to present the film in regular Indonesian cinemas, as the censorship board would most probably prohibit the screenings. Instead, they provided DVD copies of the film to NGOs so as to enable them to organise invitation-only screenings. The documentary has since been screened several thousand times, along with millions of downloads. The filmmakers made the film available for free inside Indonesia, which is another way around the censors.

Discourse-Steered Type

The *discourse-steered* festival has a largely post-modern position: if offers films and debate in great variety and pretends to be no more than a venue where people come to agree or disagree on human rights issues and what they are related to. Discourse-steered type festivals preferentially screen films that raise questions and stir discussion. Isabelle Gattiker, general director of the FIFDH in Geneva, explains: "We organise high-level debates after the main screenings with international speakers giving different views on the subject. We highly encourage contradictory discussions".[10]

One World similarly sees itself mainly as a discourse-steered festival, as it serves as a debate platform for the often highly educated audience, but also has the ultimate goal to inform, encourage and motivate people to change "even small and everyday things around them".[11]

Kumjana Novakova from Pravo Ljudski in Bosnia Herzegovina adds:

"Most important is an open dialogue, not criticism towards a certain group or towards the government.

Especially in our country where the past is not so easy. We need to provide safe places for discussion. We simply pose questions, not only to other people but also to ourselves".[12]

Festivals are usually open to everyone, allowing human rights issues to be discussed outside the government buildings, universities, or NGO offices. Our colleague from the Karama Human Rights Film Festival in Jordan explains:

"There is currently a debate here as to how democratic the country truly is, and whether it could be more democratic. That debate is primarily taking place amongst academics. A film festival is accessible to everyone, which benefits the discussion".[13]

Conclusion: Choices and Impact

All four types of festivals as outlined above are valuable and important, each with their specific strengths in engaging the audience's fascination and mobilisation. The principled type will often offer films that deal with local issues and opt for open-air screenings at popular places.

Deliberative screenings for a specific target audience pick venues that work best for each group. To redress injustice, protest-type festivals may be geared to using their festival as a platform for action, facilitating workshops on film making or non-violent activism, distributing petitions, or providing suggestions on how to further promote the observance of human rights. Discourse-steered events will be most effective when opposite views and observations can be tabled.

A festival that limits its concept of human rights to one "school" can easily become a one-sided event. Pressing the message in mass screenings, as in many festivals of the principles type, will not create the intimate setting that allows for free exchange of knowledge and ideas. Film screenings solely for the sake of social and political change can turn a festival into propaganda.

Deliberative-type screenings may hinder the popularity of the event for the general audience. Discourse-steered kind of screenings can become non-committal or too intellectual. Different approaches towards human rights can perfectly exist next to each other within the same festival. Indeed, festivals optimise their impact by shifting between different strategies for different objectives.

Most importantly, human rights film festivals reinforce the moral imagination and so help us to connect with other people and reflect on our own position and behaviour. Sometimes this is accomplished by a festival that positions itself as a cultural event; at other times it may best be presented in an educational or political setting. In the words of Sridhar Rangayan from Flashpoint, India: "We feel it is crucial to make the festival not highly academic and didactic, but to combine

Creative street art workshops about human rights at Derecho a Ver in Colombia. Photo: Archive of Movies that Matter.

elements of advocacy and entertainment with a judicious mix of documentaries and narrative films".[14]

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Filmography

No Fire Zone: The Killing Fields of Sri Lanka (dir. Callum Mcrae, 2013).
The Act of Killing (dir. Joshua Oppenheimer, 2012).

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1 Abdoulaye Diallo (Coordinator Ciné Droit Libre), festival screening (Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, July 2012).

2 Abdoullaye Diallo, 2012.

3 Mark Johnson, *Moral Imagination* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1993): xi–xii.

4 We use *phenomenological* in the sense that we analyse these festivals not for internal consistency or deontological position, but in terms of how they have become a phenomenon in the present-day worlds of film and human rights. "Phenomenological" as used by Maurice Merleau-Ponty in his *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) implies that we perceive intersubjectively and intentionally. It's not the logic or reality of a phenomenon, but our perception of it, that we analyse.

5 Marie Benedicte Dembour, "What Are Human Rights? Four Schools of Thought", *Human Rights Quarterly* 32 (2010): 1-20.

6 María Carríon (Executive director FiSahara) in response to a questionnaire we developed in preparation for this article and that was distributed amongst members of the Human Rights Film Network.

7 Uli Stelzner (Director of Muestra de Cine Internacional Memoria Verdad Justicia) in response to the questionnaire.

8 Gennady Kofman (Director of DocuDays UA), report about the DocuDays UA Travelling Film Festival (Ukraine, 2013).

9 As of June 18, 2014, retrieved at the website of Global Voices Online, http://goo.gl/2E61HQ.

10 Isabelle Gattiker (General Director of the FIFDH) in response to the questionnaire.

11 Zuzana Raušová (Programmer One World International Human Rights Documentary Film Festival) in response to the questionnaire.

12 Kumjana Novakova (Creative director Pravo Ljudski), presentation at the Mobile Cinema Workshop organised by Movies that Matter (Amsterdam, November 2013).

13 Interview with Ayman Bardawil (Programmer Karama Human Rights Film Festival) by Mira Zeehandelaar (in Dutch) (Amsterdam: *Wordt Vervolgd*, April 2011).

14 Sridhar Rangayan (Director Flashpoint Human Rights Film Festival) in response to the questionnaire.