

Human rights, film, and social change: Screening Rights Film Festival, Birmingham Centre for Film Studies

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The inaugural Birmingham Screening Rights film festival screened its programme of 7 films in July 2015 over three days under the auspices of human rights in a region that houses some of England's greatest ethnic diversity. The small number of films screened over such a short time might suggest that this did not constitute a festival in its own right. This was, in fact, the second attempt to re-energise a human rights film festival in Birmingham. The first such attempt was organised by the Birmingham International Film Society, which screened a programme of just 14 films over four weeks in September 2011. The second edition in September 2012 screened 22 films over the same period. This attempt was hosted by Birmingham University's B-Film Institute and headed by film scholar Michele Aaron, whose work on film ethics positioned her well to host and curate the festival.

The perceived importance for the region of such festivals is also the very reason they are precarious and fragile; they expose issues that are confronting and require action. For that reason, but also other ideological and contextual factors, human rights film festivals confront ever-diminishing funding opportunities. B-Film Institute's efforts to re-energise a social issues festival using human rights as the backbone needed to occur tenuously, humbly, and with a reduced number of screenings. I would still call this a festival mostly because it forms part of a much wider and global collective network of such festivals attempting to draw attention to social issues through one of the few visions available to activists after 1989. I will have more to say about this. This festival is one of over 40 such festivals, part of a global network that is loosely held together by the umbrella organisation Human Rights Film Network (Human Rights Film Network n.d.).

For the second-largest city in England, located in an industrialised region, the need to connect its increasingly diverse population is vitally important. With definite plans underway for a second edition of the festival to take place in 2016 the 2015 edition's relatively small programme reflected an attempt to resurrect a global vision that has been used in different contexts around the world to bring attention to issues that are of interest to their audiences. In this instance I would suggest that human rights have been used for something specifically Birmingham-related even while the vision is a global one. That something-specifically-Birmingham is its growing diversity, which the 2001 census showed had increased dramatically and included large numbers of people from Pakistan, India, Asia in general, and more recently the Middle East and Africa.[1] This level of diversity coupled with high rates of socio-economic marginalisation can be a recipe for social upheaval. Human rights come to be used here not to create a cosmopolitan citizenry; it is being used to highlight the fact of its already cosmopolitan-ness, to connect its diversity through this global vision.

The seven films that were included in the 2015 programme reflected Birmingham's diversity. *Open Bethlehem* (L. Sansour, 2013), about a woman's campaign to save the city, opened the festival on the first night. On the second day the programme included *But They Can't Break Stones* (E. Dirstaru, 2015), dealing with Nepal's civil war and the ongoing effects on women and women's health; *Waves* (A. Nour, 2014), focusing on Egypt and the Arab Springs; *The Look of Silence* (J. Oppenheimer, 2014), companion piece to *The Act of Killing* (J. Oppenheimer, 2012), exploring the perpetrators of the Indonesian genocide of 1965. On the last day of the festival the films screened were *No Fire Zone* (C. Macrae, 2013), about the final months of the Sri Lankan civil war, during which thousands of Tamils were killed; *Riots Reframed* (F. Alam, 2014), a documentary 'reframe' of England's 2011 riots through the eyes of the filmmaker, who was jailed for his supposed part in it; *Stories of Our Lives* (J. Chuchu, 2014), a set of five true stories of LGBTI individuals in Kenya.[2]

To review the Screening Rights Film Festival in Birmingham one needs to consider it in the context of activist and human rights film festivals (HRFFs). HRFFs appeared in 1988 as a subspecies of activist film festivals. As film festivals emerged in Europe in the 1930s and grew in number they underwent a series of specialisations and sub-specialisations.[3] HRFFs emerged from within the political contestations that had given rise to radical film festivals in the 1960s and 1970s, but they also appeared on the land-

scape in the 1980s to replace their radical fellow-festivals. As radical politics were being demolished along with the Berlin Wall and the Cold War human rights and identity politics took much of the space they vacated. Along with a whole realm of single-issue film festivals centered on identity politics HRFFs appeared on the film festival scene to fill some of the vacuum left by the exit of the radical film festivals. Thus, for example, the growth in queer film festivals can be explained from this set of ideological shifts.[4] In the field of activism human rights gained a greater dominance, and this had consequences. As Wendy Brown has rightly pointed out more critically-edged politics were pushed aside as human rights entered the lime-light.[5] In the fields of social activism this positioned human rights as one of the few acceptable models for seeking social change. By 2016 the number of HRFFs worldwide had climbed to 40, an increase of 25% since I began my research on activist film festivals in 2011. The presence of an umbrella body (Human Rights Film Network [HRFN][6]) attests to the growing importance of such festivals; most, but not all,[7] HRFFs worldwide are members.

Human rights are not neutral;[8] their modern form is largely grounded, culturally and ideologically, in liberal struggles of Western Europe while being used to claim a supposedly universal vision of human-ness. Epistemologically, human rights have been configured through a very particular type of knowledge-formation: legal-rationality, which is reductive and adversarial in its ontological manifestations. Their historical origins[9] possibly explain best why most HRFFs around the globe cluster in Western Europe and the post-colonial North, as human rights make more sense to those whose traditions shaped them. Yet when we closely examine what is happening on the ground the situation is more complex. This is because each HRFF uses the historically Western vision for their own needs. In this process and through the use of creative texts HRFFs are redefining human rights. I argue that HRFFs are transforming the epistemological underpinnings of modern human rights by means of two processes: *cultural elaboration* and *domestication*. Cultural elaboration refers to the effect that the addition of creative cultural products (such as films) is having on the primarily-legally-defined-and-understood foundation of human rights; domestication refers to the localisation of human rights stories, for example by selecting local productions or appealing to something that is distinctly local. I would suggest that for the 2015 Birmingham festival this local-ness is made manifest in its programming, which mirrors its ethnic makeup: close to half are from/about Asia; close to a third from/about the Middle East; one film

about disenfranchised English youth; and one from/about Africa. By domestication I do not mean that the stories are immediately about the groups in question, but that they will appeal to the local groups for some domestic reason.

Cultural elaboration and domestication are not only having an effect on the ways that human rights are conceived and applied but, I would suggest, also on their conceptualisation and production. This festival, by their use of creative texts, is entrenching a process that occurs whenever the term 'human rights' is used to describe the films screened – often films that in other contexts would not be called human rights. Both the films screened and human rights as a discourse undergo a process of re-definition. For example, as *The Look of Silence* is exhibited elsewhere, in other festivals and cinema complexes, for the audiences that first saw it in Birmingham it is likely to remain a human rights film. Likewise that audience's understanding of human rights has come to be filtered through that film and will no longer be appreciated as in the province of the legal world.

The increasing number of HRFFs across the globe since 1988 suggests that the coming together of films and human rights is injecting new possibilities for both fields – for human rights to be imagined outside of their strictly legal frames, unsettling their supposed universality, and for films with an activist hue to have another site for exhibition; political and independently-produced films, in an ideologically-reduced environment, would normally have fewer places of exhibition. This was apparent at the Birmingham festival. The screening of the film *No Fire Zone: The Killing Fields of Sri Lanka* (Callum Macrae, 2013) was banned in Sri Lanka, India, Malaysia, and Nepal. With a high percentage of people of Indian, Pakistani, and other Asian backgrounds in Birmingham (close to 25%) the film was a significant circulator of information for the Asian region. The festival provided one of the few exhibition sites for those people originating from the countries where it was banned. This does not suggest that open dissemination of the topic exposed by the film will not also engender conflicts from within the same communities covered by the film. This is always a very real threat with the screening of such controversial films. A good example of this was the screening of *The 10 Conditions of Love* (Jeff Daniels, 2009) at the Melbourne International Film Festival in 2009, which drew the ire of the Chinese government and who asked for it to be banned; the festival's website was hacked and abusive emails were received.[10] The screening of *No Fire Zone* did not receive such a reaction, although it was noted by the festival

and the film's official website as disseminating important information and 'credited with playing a key role in convincing the UN Human Rights Council in March 2014 to launch a major international war crimes investigation'.^[11]

Further to the addition of stories of local interest (the process of domestication of human rights) and the cultural elaboration of human rights by the addition of creative texts, the Birmingham Screening Rights Festival also added something more to the discursive developments as human rights and films come together. This festival also used two descriptive terms that, by their addition, refer their politics to those beyond the liberalism of human rights. The festival used both 'social justice' to describe its aims and 'post screening discussions' (website) as part of their activities. By these additions the festival returns the politics that Wendy Brown mentioned were eschewed by human rights. Both of these terms refer us to a more radical set of politics, the latter to the radical film festivals of the 1960s and 1970s. 'Social justice' is a term associated with collectivist and radical politics that promote the redistribution of wealth,^[12] something that often necessitates state or collective action. Modern human rights have centred on liberalism, initially conceptualised as individual political and civil freedoms and claims, with a collective inclination through the addition of social, economic, and cultural rights arriving later.^[13] The use of social justice to describe this festival begins to suggest a bleeding of other discourses into traditional understandings of 'rights'.^[14] As to the mention of 'post screening discussions', this again suggests an alignment with activist cinema. I would be stretching a long bow to suggest that Third Cinema – part of the revolutionary, activist cinema of 1970s Latin America^[15] – was the instigator of the 'post screening discussion'. In the third cinema 1969 manifesto^[16] the necessity, indeed, centrality of providing space for audience discussion during and after the film's exhibition was ascribed a vital role in the making of films. In 2012 Dina Iordanova, in an edited anthology titled *Film Festivals and Activism*, also mentions that one of the distinguishing elements of activist film festivals is audience participation:

The topical debates are probably the single most important feature that makes a festival activist: it is in the context of these discussions that a more complete understanding of a film can crystallise and a call to action can take place. In fact...the discussion is as important as the film screening and undoubtedly constitutes an inherent part of the festival structure. In this respect, discussions at activist film festivals differ from the Q&A sessions at mainstream festivals: the goal is not to receive

insight and information about the film's making and message, but to go beyond the film and address the issues that the film is concerned with, as well as to influence the thinking of the audience. Thus, audience engagement is of prime importance. [17]

The spectatorial position that is posed by an activist film festival is one that engages with the films in order to 'go beyond the film', so that actions may flow from its viewing. Film viewing is seen as not neutral but focused on the issue raised by the film in order to help motivate its audience to assist in change outside the screening. This requirement in activist film festivals – one that has become a tradition for many HRFFs – is possibly one of the most time-intensive and financially onerous activities for organisers, as it usually involves networking and collaborating with community groups and activists in the areas covered by the films (not simply with the filmmakers). The Birmingham festival included a discussant at every screening, either with an expert in the topic area of the film being screened. This happened after the screening of *Waves* (Nour, 2014), a film about the Egyptian revolution of 2011, when Dr. Dima Saber (Birmingham University), lecturer in the area of social change in the Middle East, introduced the film; sometimes a full panel of discussants was included, as took place for the opening film *Open Bethlehem* (Sansour, 2013). The last film chronicles one woman's campaign to help save the famous city within the context of the Palestine-Israeli conflict, and the selection of panel members – director Leila Sansour, Deborah Burton from the Tipping Point Film Fund, and Salma Yaqoob, former leader and former vice-chairman of the Respect Party and a former Birmingham City Councillor – is more than a nodding regard for the radical politics I mentioned above. Both Tipping Point Film Fund and the Respect Party are part of the radical political landscape in the UK.

The Birmingham festival has certainly played an important role in the shifting of the human rights discourse away from being a primarily legally-defined one and away from its largely liberal political framework. However, being a festival hosted by an academic film institute also presented a certain inclination that did not often completely balance between community groups and art/film groups; indeed, in many cases filmmakers or film scholars were the only guest discussants. This often led the discussion towards the filmmaking process itself, uncovering aspects of the difficulties of doing so in complex situations. Some of the ethical issues for the filmmaker would also emerge, as well as the social issue/problem they had engaged with in their filmmaking. While offering a means to widen activist audienc-

es' knowledge of the apparatus itself, validating filmmakers who take on such projects and also adding to the unsettling of the legally-dominated discourse of human rights, this comes at a price. The non-inclusion of community groups or of the communities represented by the topics on the screen creates a gap in the audience's knowledge about the social issue/problem. Although the conversations at the screenings at which I was present did encompass the content of the film itself the presence of only a filmmaking discussant absents crucial information required for the social change dimension to be energised fully. For example, at the film *No Fire Zone*, after which only the director was present for a guided discussion, the conversation that followed did certainly include the people and political context of the events on the screen more than the filmmaking process itself – and yet these conversations were being represented by the mediator of that story, one that deeply affected a specific community (the Tamils of Sri Lanka).

The overemphasis on one or the other as films and human rights come together in HRFFs does not produce an equal sharing of information, something that is needed in order to create a viable new discourse. One of the most obvious gaps I come across during the course of my research is the lack of knowledge each field has of the other – human rights practitioners know little of the artistic and philosophical questions undertaken by film studies and practitioners; at the same time there is often an equal paucity in the level of information held by film scholars and practitioners placing their work within the banner of human rights. The latter lack can actually be and is an important means by which the discourse of human rights is being re-imagined, for without such re-inventions it will die. I do believe that this re-invention also needs to embrace some film *making*, as the emphasis on 'the subjective' has led to a de-emphasis of the very principles of the term used by the festival to describe its films: social justice. The complete focus on the cleverness of filmmaking (or the *cinophilia* that accompanies or is central to other film festivals)[18] diverts our attention from the world from whence this creativity comes, where it must also return to contribute towards change, so that all may benefit from its resources.

As Nicole Brenez has said, filmmaking needs to occur in order to encourage 'responsible historical subjects'. [19] The Screening Rights Film Festival performed this task admirably, if perhaps needing to consider the greater inclusion of community members. The level of attention given to each film and its discussion – knowing how time consuming this attention

is – contributed to the banishment of what Lilie Chouliaraki has said characterises much modern media activism in the West as ‘detached knowingness’.[20] All of this has played a significant role in contributing and further developing an emerging discourse, one that is merging the creative impulses of filmmaking and its communities, also the activist and humanitarian impulses of human rights and its communities.

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Notes

- [1] Birmingham City Council 'Population and Census': <http://www.birmingham.gov.uk/cs/Satellite?c=Page&childpagename=Planning-and-Regeneration%2FPageLayout&cid=1223096353923&pagename=BCC%2FCommon%2FWrapper%2FWrapper> (accessed on 31 January 2016).
- [2] Screening Rights Film Festival: <http://screeningrights.org/film-festival/> (accessed on 20 January 2016).
- [3] De Valck 2007.
- [4] Loist 2013.
- [5] Brown 2004.
- [6] <http://www.humanrightsfilmnetwork.org>
- [7] A notable absence (a recent withdrawal from its membership) is the Human Rights Watch International Film Festival, the genesis of all HRFFs. In personal communications with the organisers I was led to understand that this was due to the lack of control over the types of films being screened under the auspices of human rights in film festivals.
- [8] Tascón 2015.
- [9] It must be noted that there are many scholars who have suggested that human rights as a philosophical frame have resonances in many different cultural settings. Here and elsewhere (Tascón & Ife 2008; Tascón 2015) I have suggested that the very particular form they have taken in modern times, as well as their institutionalisation in the United Nations, makes obvious their cultural and ideological origins.
- [10] Brown 2009.
- [11] <http://nofirezone.org/about> (accessed on 31 January 2016).
- [12] Rawls 1971/1999.
- [13] Ife 2001, 2010.
- [14] It is important to note that 'social justice' has been used in recent times in association with human rights at an institutional level. For example the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action (1993) mentions social justice in its principles for human rights education (Section II, D, No. 80).
- [15] Falicov 2007; Brenez 2012.
- [16] Solanas & Getino 1969.
- [17] Iordanova 2012, pp. 15-16.
- [18] De Valck 2007; Czach 2010.
- [19] Brenez 2012.
- [20] Chouliaraki 2012, p. 2.