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Current trends across three European human rights film festivals

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Three major human rights film festivals (HRFFs) take place on the European continent annually in March. In 2017 the line-up was as follows: One World was held in Prague, Czech Republic from 6-15 March; the International Film Festival and Forum on Human Rights (FIFDH) in Geneva, Switzerland unfolded between 10-19 March; and Movies that Matter (MtM) in The Hague, Netherlands was presented from March 24 to April 1.[1] The three events play nodal roles in the relatively young branch of HRFFs that emerged since 1985.[2] The concentration of leading events within such a short time frame is particularly inviting for a comparative review in which both distinctive markers and shared characteristics are addressed. This review will begin by profiling the events vis-à-vis each other and in relation to the film festival world at large. As Sonia Tascón (2016) argued in her review of the Screening Rights Film Festival in Birmingham in NECSUS one year ago, HRFFs ought to be considered in a larger context of activist festivals and their emergence can be understood, historically, in reference to changes in radical programming at festivals. My focus in the last part of this review moves to contemporary trends. I highlight certain features of the three 2017 editions to identify directions in the programming of human rights film today.

Shared characteristics

Dina Jordanova has argued that activist filmmaking and activist film festivals have at least two things in common:

[f]irstly, they are engaged in an effort to correct the record on a certain issue by highlighting lesser known aspects for the benefit of improved public understanding.

They are driven by intentionality, be it to increase public awareness, to expose, to warn, to prevent and sometimes change the course of events. Secondly, they embody the belief that film is powerful enough to have an impact.[3]

Such commitment to intentionality and impact commonly goes hand in hand with an orientation to stakeholders that can support the causes. In the specific case of human rights festivals these include various non-governmental organisations (NGOs), international judicial organs, and knowledge institutes in the field of (social) justice. The three festivals are all particularly well situated and networked for advocacy. This becomes visible in three main ways: organisational ties with NGOs; positioning in international centres for human rights; involvement in networking for human rights film.

One World is organised by People in Need, a Czech NGO dedicated to human rights, humanitarian aid, social justice, and social integration.[4] Movies that Matter is an independent organisation that originated from the Amnesty International Film Festival.[5] It retains close collaboration with Amnesty, which sponsors the Matter of Act competition, and continues sharing office space in Amsterdam.[6] The International Film Festival and Forum on Human Rights (FIFDH) does not have a history of official NGO affiliation[7] but is supported by leading organisations like the World Organization Against Torture (OCMT) that lends its name to the OCMT competition. All three festivals boost an impressive list of partners that cover general categories (media, technical support, academic, corporate, municipal, etc.) as well as explicitly human rights or humanitarian aid-oriented organisations. They have year-round staff and decent operating budgets.[8]

Two of the three March events take place in cities known for their relation to human rights. FIFDH takes place in Geneva, known as the international capital of human rights due to the high number of international organisations that are located in the city, including various United Nations headquarters. The festival's unique selling point is that it is strategically scheduled to coincide with the main session of the UN Human Rights Council to maximise these local advantages. Originally held in Amsterdam, headquarters of Amnesty Netherlands, the Movies that Matter festival was moved to The Hague in 2009, known as the 'international city of peace and justice',[9] to benefit from closer proximity to the 160 organisations working on international peace and justice in the city. Located in Prague, One World is more peripherally situated for political lobbying. It responds to this geographical disadvantage by bringing a selection of films from the festival each year to Brussels

to reach a broader international audience of politicians and government officials.

The festivals were among the 17 founding members of the Human Rights Film Network (HRFN) established on 18 April 2004 in Prague. One World continued to function as a meeting place for human rights and activist festival organisers from around the world since 2004. During an annual Festivals Meet Festivals gathering knowledge and information is exchanged between big and small, established and young, as well as Global North and Global South festivals. One World's facilitating role in connecting human rights festivals builds on the international network of the mother organisation People in Need that supports human rights activities and film (festival) events globally. Movies that Matter is an active network member as well; it carries the HRFN secretary and organises an annual network meeting during IDFA in November.

Distinct identities

Despite these shared characteristics the three festivals display quite distinct identities. One World presents itself as 'the largest human rights documentary film festival in the world'.^[10] The festival is indeed big in terms of size and scope. In 2017 some 50,000 visitors attended the festival in Prague and 121 documentaries were screened in 11 days. The programme is divided in no less than 15 thematic categories with a familiar separation between annual flagship competitions, survey sections,^[11] and thematic strands, of which some are recurring.^[12] The international competition features documentaries that stand out for their creative approach, while the Vaclav Havel Jury Award is bestowed on a documentary that makes an extraordinary contribution to the defence of human rights in the explicitly political Right to Know section.^[13] However, it is the diversity of themes addressed in the other sections that anchors the festival's identity as a large event. A broad understanding of human rights is translated into sections that deal with environmental issues (So-Called Civilization), investigate liveable cities (Faces of the City), or question normativity (Who is Normal Here?).^[14] The scope of its programming is what makes One World particularly well suited to function as a meeting place for human rights festival organisers as well as activist festivals more broadly from around the world. It is a role the festival actively embraces. The attraction of One World for professionals is tied to the East Doc

Platform, organised by the Institute for Documentary Film parallel to and in collaboration with the festival since 2012. Training, networking, pitching, and financing activities at East Doc Platform focus on creative documentary making in Central and Eastern Europe and link One World to the larger circuit of documentary film festivals. One World's festival identity thus might best be summarised as a second-tier business festival,[15] one that operates on the intersections between documentary and activist filmmaking.

Movies that Matter is what Mark Peranson has called an audience festival – an event where audiences are the major priority and sponsors 'need to be appeased, with "sponsor films", more commercial films with stars or audience friendly'.[16] The event in The Hague is stable at around 25,000 visits annually. While 'commercial' is a rather inappropriate term to describe the collaborations with NGOs and activist organisations in the specific case of human rights festivals, Peranson's high ranking of sponsor interest at audience events matches practice at HRFFs when 'partners' are considered a type of sponsor. Clearly the festival in The Hague is affected by its close proximity to IDFA in Amsterdam and IFFR in Rotterdam. These behemoths saturate the demand for business festivals in the Netherlands and leave no space but for audience fests. Interestingly though, Movies that Matter does play a role in facilitating business needs (again, not the right word in the human rights and activist context) but on a significantly smaller and more specialised scale; it is not involved in matters of film production but instead offers advice, support, and funds to activists and festival organisers to help them further their cause.[17] In particular, the existence of a fund is interesting as it extends a Dutch tradition of support for festival films and film festivals globally to relatively new branches in the festival world such as HRFFs.[18]

FIFDH promotes itself as 'the leading international event dedicated to film and human rights'.[19] The festival's showpiece is the Forum – a high-profile series of events targeting international human rights activists, politicians, filmmakers, specialists, and other members of civil society. The Forum is built around the concept 'one film, one subject, one debate'.[20] The formula aims at raising public awareness around selected topics in an environment and context from which political actions may aggregate. Sixteen sessions were presented in 2017 including: an investigation of Erdogan's move toward an increasingly authoritarian governance model (Turkey: Erdogan's Worrisome Transformation); documentation of human rights violations by the Bashar al-Assad regime (Syria, Damning Proofs); and the criticism levelled at the International Court (The International Criminal Court under

Fire).[21] The festival's distinctive identity revolves around international impact. Public visibility is boosted with celebrity involvement. Highlights from 2017 included Angelina Jolie visiting an art installation[22] and former Brazilian president Dilma Rousseff participating in the Forum session on fighting hunger in Brazil and India.[23]

There seems to be no strong competition between One World, FIFDH, and Movies that Matter, which may be explained by their distinct profiles, diverging strengths, and audience orientation. Occasionally the festivals will lose a film to one another while in other instances filmmakers or activists will benefit from the proximity of events and combine festival visits. However, the overlap in programming is not very substantial. In 2017 One World and FIFDH shared seven films (on totals of 121 and 44 respectively), One World and Movies that Matter ten (on a total of 80 for Movies that Matter), and FIFDH and Movies that Matter five. Only two films were screened at all three events: *Tickling Giants* by Sara Taksler (US, 2016) and *The Good Postman* by Tonislav Hristov (Finland/Bulgaria, 2016). National availability and demand affect programming choices more than competition between HRFFs across borders: for One World the Jihlava International Documentary Film Festival in October is important; FIFDH is positioned between Locarno and Vision du Réel; and Movies that Matter follows IDFA and IFFR, as previously mentioned.

Trends: Impact and audience outreach

All human rights and activist film festivals share a heightened orientation toward their audiences, as their main aim is to be part of a process of social change.[24] Providing a context to the films screened is particularly important at HRFFs, where background information and connections with activist programs or opportunities for individual action are essential tools for engaging audiences. Leshu Torchin emphasises this when she writes how the events 'become sites of capacity-building harnessed by the filmmakers/activists and facilitated by the festival programmers'.[25] Arguably nowhere in the festival world has the tradition of Q&As, explanatory talks, after-screening discussions, and panel debates been as solid as with activist and human rights festivals. Furthermore, over the years HRFFs have developed ways to extend and expand audiences by moving outside the main festival setting, for example by organising events in the region, educational screenings, and

online presence. For established organisations like One World, Movies that Matter, and FIFDH these activities have become integral parts of their operations.

The commitment to audience engagement and outreach is therefore not new. Still, one can discern a trend amongst these three leading HRFFs in the conceptualisation of their relations to audiences and efforts to find new publics – a trend that might be summed up by the term ‘impact’. It is One World that foregrounds this term in the new label Impact introduced in 2016 for ‘films connected with various activities, petitions or campaigns which you can easily get involved in too; with your help they will become films that change the world’.[26] It is not difficult to see how existing ideals are repackaged here in neoliberal language that help with the festivals’ continued relevance. One may ask if implicit in such a linguistic shift is the suggestion that raising awareness or correcting the record itself is not enough; impact evokes a quantitative framework of effects that can be traced or measured rather than a humanities investment in understanding intellectually, morally and cross-culturally as prerequisite for any change. The latter approach to human rights films is captured in the Movies that Matter title and its motto: open your eyes. The belief in film’s power to make a difference remains uncontested at HRFFs but the tendency to present more tangible evidence of the marks that are left has gained weight. With a neoliberal interpretation of impact the push is toward increasing audience numbers, expanding, and incorporating more events that require audiences to actively engage.

There are multiple examples of innovation at the festivals that involve impact. Here are three examples for brevity to analyse the trend by providing divergent illustrations from the 2017 editions: the German interactive drama *The Verdict* (Lars Kraune, 2016) screened at Movies that Matter, One World’s interpretation of impact under the Impact label, and FIFDH’s installment of new special juries. *The Verdict* solves the problem of film viewers’ ontological passivity by providing two possible endings. The film places spectators in the jury seats, asking them to vote on the case of an air flight pilot shooting down a passenger flight to prevent a terrorist attack on a stadium. Rather than merely offering a stimulus for contemplation on the ethical dilemma’s and juridical approaches to these *The Verdict* requires spectators to act. This requirement to act heightens viewer engagement and moves them beyond the option of a noncommittal attitude. Audiences at Movies that Matter appreciated the format, as was evident from its high ranking (third place) in the audience poll.[27] At One World one could discover that

impact may be many different things. The label was waywardly applied to a broad range of activities and events. Some serious, like speed dating to get to know homeless people, as featured in *Theatre of Life* (Peter Svatek, Canada, 2016); some inspirational, like dance lessons with the elderly inspired by the Locarno-premiered *A Young Girl in her Nineties* (Valeria Bruni Tedeschi and Yann Coridian, France 2016); some ludic, like a workshop making art from recycled material to accompany Jiu-liang Wang's *Plastic China* (China, 2016); and some old-school, like signing a petition to protect indigenous Jawara people, in *We Are Humanity* (Alexandre Dereims, France/India 2016). At FIFDH yet another approach to impact is introduced with the new special jury awards. The festival presents a small series of three Swiss films to minors in a juvenile detention center, to adolescents in a psychiatric ward, and adults in a prison, allowing each of the groups to bestow an award. Expansion of audience outreach goes hand in hand with refuting the critique that HRFFs preach to the converted. In an inclusive gesture the festival argues that '[i]ndividuals who have been judged by society become judges themselves: they reverse the gaze, open a place of exchange, and regain confidence in their critical abilities.' [28]

While the three festivals unmistakably move and model themselves in relation to dominant thinking they are at the same time renewing their longer tradition of audience engagement and outreach. Commitment to intentionality and social impact is translated into a broad palette of new initiatives that *also*, not solely, lend themselves well for promotional purposes and accountability in grant applications and annual reports. The bravura with which a young generation of festival directors [29] appropriate neoliberal logic for their own ends is a hopeful sign of the sector's resilience.

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Notes

- [1] The London edition of the Human Rights Watch Film Festival also takes place in March (in 2017 from 6-17 March). The festival is programmed from New York and screens in multiple cities.
- [2] In 1985 the first Vermont International Film Festival took place. While emerging from the anti-nuclear movement and originally being identified as an environmental and human rights film festival, the festival's scope has expanded to include independent art house cinema. In 1988 the Human Rights Watch International Film Festival was founded in New York to mark the occasion of the NGO's tenth anniversary. For more on this particular festival and the historical development of Human Rights festivals see Tascón 2015.
- [3] Iordanova 2012, p. 13.
- [4] One World was founded in 1999 by Igor Blažević, a human rights campaigner of Bosnian origin, and People in Need.
- [5] The first edition of the Movies that Matter festival took place in 2006 as successor of the Amnesty International Film Festival that had been held since 1995.
- [6] The second flagship competition, Camera Justitia, is sponsored by the Vfonds, a Dutch national fund for peace, freedom, and veteran care.
- [7] It was created in 2002 by film director Leo Kaneman and co-founded by several others including Pierre Hazan and Isabelle Gattiker, the head of the festival since 2015.
- [8] The budget for 'education and awareness' at People in Need is around 2,5 million euro, including 608.000 euro for the One World Festival (*People in Need Financial Report*, 2015, p. 75); the FIFDH budget is 1,6 million CHF (1,5 million euro), (Communiqué de Presse, 23 February 2016, <http://www.fifdh.org/2016/media/presse/fr/communique20160223fr.pdf>); Movies that Matter has 1,7 million euro, of which 840.000 is for the festival (Financial report 2015, http://www.moviesthatmatter.nl/media/documenten/financieeljaarverslag2015_ongetekend.pdf).
- [9] The motto 'Peace and Justice' is officially carried on the city's coat of arms since 2012. See <http://www.thehaguepeacejustice.com/peace-and-justice.htm>
- [10] *One World Website*, <https://www.oneworld.cz/2017/about-festival> (accessed on 31 March 2017).
- [11] The two survey sections are Panorama, focusing on the most successful documentaries that screened at other festivals, and Journeys to Freedom, in which films are collected that report on activities and events in the countries in which People in Need has been active.
- [12] Like most major festivals today One World offers a special program for children and an interactive corner where visitors can sample VR shorts.

CURRENT TRENDS ACROSS THREE EUROPEAN HUMAN RIGHTS FILM FESTIVALS

- [13] The third competition program is the Czech Competition. A Student Award and Audience Award are also given.
- [14] The other thematic sections in 2017 were Vote For Change!, Dreams of Europe, Family Happiness, and the Power of the Media.
- [15] Loist 2016, p. 57.
- [16] Peranson 2009, p. 28.
- [17] The activists that are featured in the films in the Matter of Act competition become part of a personal program that brings them in contact with NGOs, politicians, other relevant organisations, and with the media. Movies that Matter International Support offers grants to screen human rights films in developing countries and places with limited press freedom.
- [18] The Hubert Bals Fund (IFFR) was established in 1988. The IDFA Bertha Fund, formerly known as the Jan Vrijman Fund, began in 1998. Movies that Matter Support exists since 2007. 'From 2007-2016 the Movies that Matter Support Programme allocated grants to 196 projects from more than 100 applicants in 60 countries' http://www.moviesthatmatter.nl/english_index/international/support_programme (accessed on 7 April 2017).
- [19] FIFDH Website: <http://www.fifdh.org/site/en/the-festival/the-festival> (accessed on 31 March 2017).
- [20] Formula coined by Leo Kaneman. See for example <http://www.cineuropa.org/nw.aspx?t=newsdetail&l=en&did=198132> (accessed on 10 April 2017).
- [21] The sixteen topics of the International Forum at FIFDH 2017 are:
- A state of human rights in a changed world that has become unpredictable (*Nowhere to Hide*)
 - African descent: A universal Black Power? (*I Am Not Your Negro*)
 - Fighting hunger and poverty: The cases of Brazil and India (*An Insignificant Man*)
 - Geneva, Kuala Lumpur, Hollywood: A global financial scandal (*The Borneo Case*)
 - Greece: When austerity policies create humanitarian crises (*A Greek Winter*)
 - Israelis and Palestinians against the occupation (*Disturbing the Peace*)
 - Migration, a time of disobedience? (*The Good Postman*)
 - Once upon a time there was a right to privacy (*Facebookistan*)
 - Philippines: A license to kill (*Philippines: Tirs a vue sure les dealers*)
 - Syria, damning proofs (*Syria's Disappeared: The Case Against Assad*)
 - The fingers of shame on our phones and tablets (*Complicit*)
 - The International Criminal Court under fire (*The Uncondemned*)
 - Transgender and intersex: out of the box, without rights? (*The Pearl of Africa*)
 - Turkey: Erdogan's worrisome transformation (*Erdogan, the Making of a Sultan*)
 - Women's rights: An ongoing struggle (*Vessel*)
 - Yemen: Out of sight, a descent into chaos (*The Funeral Bombing*)
- [22] She visited the art installation *Exil* by Rithy Pahn, companion piece to the eponymous film that screened in the competition for creative documentaries.
- [23] Rousseff's contribution to the Forum was highlighted in the festival's press release of 18 March as an example of excellent impact on social media and the web: 'The intervention of Dilma Rousseff [sic] was followed live by 1351 people, and viewed more than 77,000

times', <http://www.fifdh.org/media/presse/eng/fifdh-palmares-ang2.pdf> (accessed on 7 April 2017).

[24] See also Tascón 2017.

[25] Torchin 2012, p. 8.

[26] One World programme booklet, 2017, p. 2.

[27] Personal communication with Dirk van der Straaten, 6 April 2017.

[28] *FIFDH website*: <http://www.fifdh.org/site/en/2017-edition/special-juries-prisons-detention-centres-and-psychiatric-wards> (accessed on 7 April 2017).

[29] Issabel Gattiker and Dirk van der Straaten have been heading FIFDH and Movies that Matter respectively since 2015 (see also note 6). One World director Hana Kulhánková will step down in 2017.