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From Chernobyl to Fukushima – The Uranium Film Festival

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From Chernobyl to Fukushima

The Uranium Film Festival

Courtney Sheehan

The Uranium Film Festival (UFF), the world's only film festival focused on 'the whole nuclear fuel chain', is entering its third year in Rio de Janeiro. The organisers Marcia Gomes de Oliveira (Executive Director) and Norbert G. Suchanek (General Director) of the arts and education non-profit Yellow Archives began the festival with the mission of stimulating discussion about topics ranging from uranium mining, nuclear weapons, power plants, and nuclear waste. Rather than adopt a strict anti-nuclear stance the festival endeavors to present films about nuclear issues that audiences might not otherwise be able to access. This ambition to present audiences with information in addition to art (or embedded within art) reflects Leshu Torchin's conception of the activist film festival as a 'field of witnessing'.¹ By fostering the conditions for audiences to interact with films as more than merely passive viewers the Uranium Film Festival represents an attempt to elevate the role of the film festival to that of politically-infused public sphere.

The foundational motivation driving the establishment of the UFF could be described as a call to action. The organisers were first inspired to start this unusual film festival in 2006 while working with the Guarani indigenous people in the southern part of Rio de Janeiro. The construction of three nuclear power plants on their territory negatively affected the Guarani people and motivated Suchanek to reach out to the organisers of the Indigenous World Uranium Summit, a conference of native peoples concerned with uranium mining and nuclear waste on their lands. Suchanek facilitated communication between the Navajo and Guarani people, filmed the statement of a Guarani leader about his people's organised resistance against nuclear power plants in Rio de Janeiro, and attended the Summit on the Guarani's behalf in late 2006 on Navajo territory in Arizona (United States). It was there that Suchanek met many filmmakers and first had the idea for the festival. As he said,

I thought, there are many films about uranium mining, nuclear energy, nuclear waste, but they never reached Brazil. And the non-Portuguese speaking world has no idea what's going on in Brazil. So how do we change it? The international film festival aims to share information.²

The first edition of UFF took place just two months after the Fukushima nuclear meltdown in 2011. The program included some 40 films and a photo exhibition about Brazil's worst nuclear accident, which occurred in 1987 and resulted in the

deaths of four people. The Jury Award for Best Feature Documentary in this first edition went to Danish director Michael Madsen's *Into Eternity* (2010), which delves into the dark depths of Onkalo, a nuclear waste repository in Finland. Nuclear waste remains radioactive for 100,000 years; in the film's description Madsen focuses on how Onkalo 'transgresses both in construction and on a philosophical level all previous human endeavours'. Through interviews with scientists and administrators connected to the project the film reveals the staggering amount of uncertainty surrounding how to communicate to future generations (or species) that Onkalo is a dangerous place that should not be entered. Other first edition winners included *Uranium 238: The Pentagon's Dirty Pool* (Pablo Ortega, 2009) and *Caesium 137 – The Nightmare of Goiânia* (Roberto Pires, 1989), a film about the Brazilian nuclear disaster.

The second edition took place from 28 June-14 July 2012 at the Cinema of the Modern Art Museum in Rio de Janeiro. The diverse programming included Peter Greenaway's experimental short *Atomic Bombs on the Planet Earth* (2011), which compiles images and data of hundreds of the well over 2,000 atomic bombs dropped on earth between the years 1945 to 1989. The structure of the short composed of many frames arranged in a grid overwhelms with the amount of activity while simultaneously the arrangement of colors and sounds coheres in an almost beautiful choreography. The festival also screened *Abrigo Nuclear* (Nuclear Shelter), a low-budget Brazilian science-fiction film produced in 1979. Some films in the program delivered strong anti-nuclear messages such as a number of documentaries that exposed the harmful impact of nuclear sites on local populations – which are often indigenous peoples in countries like the U.S., Australia, and Brazil; other selections reflected a more abstract or narrative-based engagement with the nuclear theme.

The films in the UFF program cover the full spectrum of nuclear-related issues. Multiple films focused on uranium mining in various parts of the world including Australia, Portugal, Africa, and Jadugoda, India's primary uranium mining location. Other films dealt with the negative effects of nuclear power plants and waste sites on surrounding populations. The festival also featured a program of animation films which included *Sacred Ground* (Karen Aqua, 1997), a contemplative 2D animation that juxtaposes the ancient Native American rock art site Three Rivers with the Trinity Site, the site of the first atomic bomb detonation located a mere 35 miles away. Another excellent animated film *Leonid's Story* (Rainer Ludwigs, 2011) employs multiple forms of animation in order to tell the story of one family deeply affected by the Chernobyl disaster. UFF included a program of films about Chernobyl which showcased documentary as well as fiction films. Other film topics in the international program explored issues like protests against nuclear waste transport in Germany, the plight of the Guarani people in Brazil, the nuclear

fuel production cycle, the struggles of Native American peoples against uranium mining, Fukushima, and food and radiation.

The Red Button (Ewa Pieta & Mirosław Grubek, 2011), a compelling human interest documentary from Poland, depicts the tale of Stanislav Petrov, the humble Russian officer credited with averting atomic war in 1983. Charged with monitoring and responding to missile attacks from the U.S., Petrov was startled late one night when the missile screen alerted him of an attack indicated by multiple missiles heading toward the USSR. Rather than react rashly by pressing the 'red button' Petrov reasoned that the appearance of the missiles were a fluke in the system since their number were not great enough to do significant damage. His hunch was correct. Today Petrov lives as an unsung hero on the edge of Moscow with only a meager pension to thank him for his role in stopping nuclear catastrophe.

The global scale of nuclear issues inevitably informs the range of countries represented in the festival's programs and indicates that this particular field of witnessing is not restricted to the local Rio community. As a festival concerned with issues that have worldwide impacts the UFF organisers endeavor to reach global audiences. As Suchanek said,

[w]e want to create here in Rio a center of uranium and nuclear film worldwide. We want to attract everybody who is interested in the subject, to come here once a year to see the newest productions about nuclear energy, radioactivity, nuclear submarines, atomic bombs.

The UFF hopes to stimulate production of films addressing nuclear themes, specifically within Latin America where so few films have been made about local mines and the political agendas behind nuclear projects. This lacuna in Latin American production is reflected in the film program at UFF. As Gomes de Oliveira and Suchanek said,

[w]e want more films from South America. Most of the films are from the U.S., Australia, and Germany. We had nine German productions this year. There's very good cinema in Argentina but no productions about nuclear energy.

Argentina is developing a nuclear submarine and has collaborated with Brazil on nuclear energy projects. Within Rio de Janeiro UFF encourages students to attend screenings. Gomes de Oliveira is a teacher at a public technical university and calls on her students to get involved by volunteering at the festival. As Suchanek explains,

[w]e invite of course the whole community of Rio, but we invite especially students who are studying nuclear energy, students of nuclear medicine. The anti-nuclear movement too.

Coordinating a film festival with such a controversial theme has proved challenging for the organisers. As wide in scope as the program is, like many human rights and social justice-themed film festivals UFF has struggled for coverage from local and international media outlets. In order to qualify for government funding the festival must first survive for three editions. Suchanek explained that state companies are in charge of distributing funding for film festival organisation.

All cultural events are financed by the state oil company, Petrobras, and another state company, which is a mining company, and the third company, Electrobras, the head of electricity...So we might get the chance to get money from the nuclear energy company of Brazil or the uranium mining company of Brazil.

Not hopeful about their chances of procuring funding through the state companies the organisers are seeking private sponsorships elsewhere. For now UFF operates on a budget of only \$10,000 provided by a single sponsor, the German policy think tank and environmentalist organisation Heinrich Böll Foundation Brasil – a partnership developed by Suchanek, who is German.

Since its first edition UFF has included a traveling component. After the 2011 festival in Rio de Janeiro the organisers took a program of films on the road to other Brazilian cities including São Paulo, Salvador, Recife, Fortaleza, João Pessoa, and Natal. The next year the tour expanded internationally to reach Lisbon, Porto, Peniche, and Nisa in Portugal as well as Berlin. In an effort to continue developing this international dimension of the festival the UFF organisers embarked on a ten-city tour of India in January and February 2013. In collaboration with Indian filmmaker Shri Prakash UFF coordinated with film festivals, organisations, and universities to screen 40 films in New Delhi, Shillong, Ranchi, Manipal, Hyderabad, Pune, Bangalore, Chennai, Thrissur, and Mumbai. Prakash was able to get some of the basic costs associated with the events covered by 'local and international organizations', as Suchanek noted in an email interview.³ The festival events attracted over 5,000 attendees and had good press coverage in *The Times of India*, *The Hindu*, *The Eastern Chronicle*, and *The Deccan Herald* as well as local TV and radio stations.

The most recent edition of the festival took place from 16-26 May 2013 and featured a program of first appearances from several countries including Israel, Russia, Romania, Estonia, Spain, and Jordan. The majority of the program consisted

of films from the U.S., Germany, Australia, and Japan. Following this third edition of the festival the UFF organisers plan to take the program on tour again. The traveling program will begin with locations in Brazil, including Macapa in the Amazon, before making its way to München (Germany) in September and then North America later in the fall (with the help of filmmaker Eve-Andree Laramé). Potential host cities include New York, Toronto, Santa Fe, and Window Rock, Arizona (capital of the Navajo Nation). UFF now faces the challenge of continuing to secure funding for future editions. Even as its field of witnesses expands and connects like-minded activists across the world its future, as is the case with so many film festivals fueled by social justice initiatives, remains uncertain.

Notes

1. Torchin 2012, p. 3.
2. All quotations from an interview conducted with Suchanek and Gomes by the author in July 2012 in Rio de Janeiro, unless otherwise noted.
3. Email interview conducted with Suchanek on 2 May 2013.

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Indigenous film festival as eco-testimonial encounter

The 2011 Native Film + Video Festival

Salma Monani

In struggles for political and cultural recognition many Indigenous groups employ visual media to make their concerns heard. Amongst these various channels for media activism are Indigenous film festivals which, in the words of festival coordinator Amalia Córdova, work to convey 'a sense of solidarity with Indigenous struggles'.¹ Córdova's essay on Indigenous film festivals appears in the collection