

Human Rights Film Festivals: Activism in Context

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February 2015

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Abstract

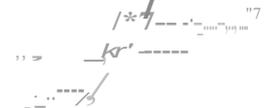
This thesis explores human rights film festivals (HRFFs), how they developed in particular locations, through particular conceptions of human rights and how they continue to adapt with changing expectations from audiences and human rights bodies. In this thesis the tensions produced by human rights' search for universality and the locatedness of the festivals are explored in detail through two case studies one located in Buenos Aires, South America; the other in New York, North America, which was the first human rights film festival worldwide.

The recent rise in interest in film festival scholarship has considered to some degree the activist film festival but has not yet taken into account those formulated around human rights. Activist film festivals are configured quite differently to those centred on cinephilia, although there are intersections with them as well. The former, with their focus on social change enter the film festival landscape specifically formulated to enhance social or political change through the educative elements of the visual image. Although there is a significant scholarship on visual activism, or the use of images for humanitarian purposes, much of which is critical because of the distancing and mediating effect for these purposes, very few consider the specific effects of human rights discourse as visual images are used for activism.

In this thesis I begin from the premise that film festivals are specific spaces for visual activism and that, further, the use of human rights as the organising discourse injects demands not present in other political modes of spectatorship. One of those is the universalising impulse of human rights, which I suggest here produces more of an internationalist perspective. As human rights became one of the few remaining viable political visions after the 1980s, these film festivals have grown in number globally, attested to by the existence of an umbrella organisation Human Rights Film Network, to which most, if not all, HRFFs, belong. As a project that takes a discursive approach, I view the coming together of films in a film festival, with human rights, as a merger that is at times an uneasy one because of the different demands made by films being located in a film festival for human rights activism, but also rich with possibilities for engaging active spectators and social change. In this thesis I present research findings across two HRFFs, one from Buenos Aires, and the other in New York. Their distinct histories, organisational affiliations, cultural and political contexts have produced a diverse and compelling set of relationships between cinema and human rights.

Declaration

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other institution and to the best of my knowledge the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis. This is a thesis by publication and the full manuscript has been published as a monograph by Palgrave Macmillan (2014).


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