

Now What Do You Think?

Film Festivals as a Platform for Discussion

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The moderator of the Freedom Film Festival in Malaysia says: “Feel free to share your thoughts and questions during the Q&A after the screening. The whole point for this festival is to provide a platform for free discussion. You may agree, disagree or, have your own thoughts about it, but this is what the festival from its start is all about”.¹

Statements like this can be heard at many human rights film festivals across the world. Most Human Rights Film Festivals actually use film screenings as a basis for public discussions.

Film festivals serve as a platform for dialogue for experts, artists, policy makers, journalists, civil society organisations and the audience. Human rights films and debates are unique opportunities to enjoy freedom of expression. Especially in contexts where individuals and civil societies struggle, they can play a crucial role in providing a rare opportunity for people to express their feelings about the issues presented and ask questions. Missing facts and updates about the screened events, can be shared with the audience.

Films have the capacity to reach out to communities that do not have access to written information on human rights or that have not been able to broach difficult issues. Video and film are being effectively used across the world by human rights advocates in remote locations, from war torn villages in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Rwanda, to communities in Chiapas or Burma, enabling community discussions that otherwise might not take place. Grassroots organisations in the DRC have used video to open up discussions on the effects of rape as a tactic of war, enabling affected women to stop hiding their identities, seek justice and demand respect and compassion from their families and communities. Others have used film-sparked discussions to change discriminatory practices against women in the name of cultural traditions, to convince armed groups to release child soldiers, or to aid in the collective healing process after war and genocide.

The organiser of the AfricanBamba Human Rights Festival in Thiaroye, Senegal, puts it like this: “The festival is one of the few opportunities for us to communicate to those who govern us, to our people and to the world what are our dreams, our worries; how we would see a socially just and peaceful world. In Thiaroye, the festival

is viewed and lived by the people as a new way for the community to engage, be recognised, and express themselves on urgent social issues”.²

For the organisers of Ciné Droit Libre in Burkina Faso it is important that the screenings and discussions raise questions: “Lasting and durable development is only possible if citizens are well-informed and ask legitimate questions about their rights and their duties, demanding accountability of the authorities”.³

Clearly, debates are very important at human rights film festivals. So are Q&A sessions, during which the audience can pose their questions to an expert or filmmaker. But how can a successful debate programme or Q&A session be organised?

Objectives

When you finalise your film selection you can set the themes for the debates and Q&A's. Which themes deserve more attention? Some films deal with underexposed issues, while others raise questions and dilemmas. It is always useful to find links to current affairs and issues in your country or region.

Discussions may serve to:

- Inform and deepen the knowledge of the audience. Guest speakers can provide more information on the subject matter.
- Raise awareness and discussion. Guest speakers

can provide new insights and perspectives.

- Express ideas. Some films arouse emotions that people would like to share after the screening.
- Motivate. Films may encourage or inspire the public to take action, to change their behavior, sign a petition, vote, etc.

The format of the event and the choice of speakers (presenters or performers) can be adjusted to fit your objective. It can take the form of a debate, lecture, an interview, a master class, a quiz, or any other (self-invented) format that might fit. In some cases, cultural performances such as dance, theatre, music, spoken word performances or poetry readings can work as a way for the audience to reflect on the films' subject matter.

A good discussion programme starts by knowing your audience and adapting to the local context. Who is the film screening targeting? Do you expect mostly women to attend the screening? Or do you aim for university students? Do you organise an outdoor screening for primarily local fishermen? Is your setting a postwar environment and do you expect war victims to attend your event? Adapt the form and content of the discussion for different audiences to be effective. Invite guest speakers and moderators that connect with your audience.

Festival de Cine en la Calle in Guatemala notes this difference between rural and urban settings: “In rural areas, it is easier to propose meetings for discussion



Q&A after the screening of *Warisan* at Freedom Film Fest in Malaysia. Photo: Archive of Freedom Film Fest.

because people are used to critically participate in the public life of the community. In contrast, in urban neighbourhoods, family, group and ethnic fragmentation negatively influence the consideration of public space as something collective and, therefore, the critical and effective participation of people in public activities".⁴

In general, most film festivals are keen to avoid approaches that are too didactic and avoid superficiality. Human rights are multidisciplinary, comprised of legal, social, philosophical, political, economic, religious and cultural aspects. The director of the Nuremberg International Human Rights Film Festival Andrea Kuhn explains: "We consider ourselves a film festival that engages audiences in a critical debate about films, media and human rights. We feel that part of any human rights activity should be a conception of an audience as critical individuals that should be respected to make their own informed decisions. We want them to question their perception of the world and we hope that they think the films we present are good films that take them seriously and are not just feeding them with a message, but allow them to think for themselves".⁵

Taboo Issues

Special care is required when dealing with sensitive or controversial issues that touch upon deeply held views and embedded attitudes. Make sure you talk to your community about how to address taboo issues

in front of the public in order to encourage a safe, open, and respectful dialogue.

In 2012, the organisers of CinéDoc, the documentary festival in Tbilisi in Georgia, organised a mobile cinema project in the isolated border regions of the Southern Caucasus. The aim was to create more mutual understanding and cross-border dialogue between the people living on different sides of the borders in a region torn by conflict and war. To do so, the organisers consciously avoided screening films dealing with war, conflict or internally displaced persons. Instead, to garner trust and mutual understanding, they selected films dealing with everyday life. Organiser Artchil Khetagouri explains that "screening a film from the neighbouring country is already provocative enough. Because of the public pressure and fear of authorities it was sometimes extremely challenging to discuss certain topics. To initiate dialogue and peaceful debates it was vital to be neutral, and not get involved in political discussions".⁶

For some audiences who are themselves affected by serious human rights issues, debates around a film can have an empowering effect by showing how other communities deal with a similar situation, and can help contextualise their own reality. Don't worry about not being able to always answer all the questions and resolve complex issues presented in the films. Simply opening a debate on sensitive or unspoken topics can have a powerful effect on people's minds and help them to cope with their own traumas, especially

when dealing with issues like genocide, political repression, LGBT rights or domestic violence.

Smaller, intimate spaces where people feel more at ease are often more suitable for discussing sensitive issues. In these types of more intimate debates, it often helps to have the audience and guests sit in a circle, encouraging closeness and open dialogue.

You can find more about covering sensitive issues in the chapter: *Film Festivals with Guts: Security and Censorship*.

Format

Welcome: We recommend opening screenings with a word from the moderator, a staff member or a volunteer. They can welcome the audience to the festival, provide basic information about the film (the title, director) and announce if there will be a debate, Q&A session or other event with guest speakers after the screening. This will allow audience members to prepare their questions during the screening and ensure that they do not leave immediately after the film ends.

Introduction: When the film deals with a sensitive or difficult issue you can prepare your audience by providing some context in advance that will increase their understanding of the film. You can also provide a handout with more background information on the film's subject matter. One of your guest speakers may want to say a few words before the screening as well.

Inform your audience and guest speakers beforehand if the discussion is being recorded on video or streamed live. For some speakers or audience members it may be uncomfortable or even risky to be seen or express their opinions on camera.

Questions & Answers: A Q&A session provides a platform for the audience to ask questions and share opinions with guest speakers. A moderator guides the session. The duration of the Q&A can be anywhere between 10 and 45 minutes.

Panel Debate: If you want to address topics that you consider more compelling and important to discuss in more detail you can organise a panel debate with several guests. Each can share a different perspective, opinion or experience with the audience.

Panel debates usually need more time than a Q&A's (for instance, 45 minutes to an hour) and a skilled moderator. You could plan the debate with a brief script that lays out the format and the different questions to be addressed. As a way to structure the discussion, you can also work with different challenging statements for the panelists and the audience to respond to.

At the FIFDH in Geneva the panel discussions start with a discussion between the panelists; they introduce themselves and exchange ideas with the moderator for approximately 20 to 30 minutes. Then the panel opens up the discussion to questions from the audience. This is a way to make sure that the debate

is not immediately taken over by people representing particular ideologies, special groups, etc., and to ensure there is a real discussion.

Master Class: You can ask a filmmaker or other interesting guest speaker, such as a human rights activist, to give a master class. A master class is a learning session or discussion offered by an expert on a particular topic or discipline, in this case related to films and the issues they address. This format gives the opportunity to learn more about the work of the filmmaker or activist. Provide enough time for questions from the audience.

Talk Show: Some festivals organise daily talk shows with short discussions, interviews and possibly other elements like music, poetry, or stand-up comedy. The talk shows can centre on a specific theme or discuss the festival highlights.

Speakers

Inspiring speakers are essential for successful Q&As and panel discussions, although some festivals organise discussions in which primarily the audience participates and reflects on the film with their thoughts and questions.

The right choice of speakers always intersects with knowing who your audience is. If they are students or people with little experience with human rights films it is crucial that the speaker can effectively address and

connect with this type of group. If NGO representatives or politicians are in your audience be sure to have professional speakers with a greater expertise who are able to address complex questions. If victims of human rights violations might be among the audience members, be sure that the experts you invite are aware of this and capable of being especially sensitive and resourceful on the topic and know how to address this audience.

New audiences in remote areas may prefer someone from the community as a guest instead of someone from afar speaking in a different language. In the case of screenings and debates dealing with deeply-held opinions or traditions—some possibly discriminatory—local guests are especially important in order to diffuse arguments that “outsiders” are imposing their values on the community.

Filmmakers, experts and activists can be invited as guests. You can also think of NGO representatives, community leaders, politicians, journalists, and university representatives, who should be able to give context to the issue under discussion. Festivals regularly invite policy makers and influential figures to attend, serving as a powerful tool for influencing policy and facilitating networking, as well as acting as a catalyst for public debate.

People are usually more interested in personalised stories and practical examples than promotional talks from an organisation or political party.

If possible, bring in a local resource person who knows more about the on-the-ground realities of the topic and who can connect it up with real-life local issues. It helps to take a look at videos of other debates they have participated in to assess whether they are inspiring speakers.

Festival de Cine en La Calle (Street Cinema Festival) in Guatemala City organises outdoor screenings in urban and rural areas. The organisers underscore the importance of the local artists' participation. It is important to mention local artists' strong commitment to the project since the first edition; over the years, a great number of filmmakers have recognised the importance of bringing cinema to the people, and in particular the role that the Street Cinema festival is playing in bringing people closer to independent cinema. During the latest edition, directors were present even in the most remote villages of the Ixil area".⁷

If your festival has sufficient funding you can invite international guests—either filmmakers or film protagonists. Both are very attractive to the audience. Filmmakers can provide interesting details about how the film was made and about their personal relationship to the theme.

Seeing a film's protagonist is an especially profound experience for the audience. If you are not able to bring an international guest from the film you can also find someone with a similar life story locally. Usually his or her direct testimony is stronger than the analy-

sis of an expert. Both combined (protagonist/expert) can also result in a more in-depth discussion, with one providing a first-hand account and the other offering a larger context.

If resources are limited you can also opt for a Skype call with the filmmaker. In 2009, the Movies that Matter Festival in The Netherlands screened *In Prison My Whole Life* about (at that time) death row inmate Mumia Abu Jamal. His lawyer was present and arranged a telephone call with Abu Jamal from prison. In this way, the audience was able to remotely ask questions to the imprisoned writer and activist.

When you invite your guests share your ideas on the specific content of the debate or Q&A, its format and, if applicable, the other guest speakers. If they are unable to participate you may ask them for suggestions in order to use their network to find alternative guests. If possible, it is also advisable to provide the guest speakers with an online link or DVD copy of the film in advance so that they can better prepare for the discussion. Make sure you know what language(s) they speak ahead of time in order to organise translations if needed. You can ask your guests to spread the word about your event, for instance through social media or via the communications channels of the organisation they represent.

Be prepared for a last-minute guest cancellation. If possible, identify alternative guests and a moderator just in case, and be prepared with a Plan B.



Guests and audience during Q&As at Derecho a Ver in Colombia. Photo: Archive of Movies that Matter.

Moderators

The role of the moderator is to encourage audience members to ask questions, help them digest the film and direct the debate by keeping time -- allowing as much participation as possible while also navigating sensitive or tense debates. Depending on the format or complexity of the issue the moderator does not necessarily need to be an expert on the topic or a professional moderator. It is more important that he or she knows how to encourage and maintain a dialogue. The moderator's charisma plays a big role but be aware that one with a particularly strong personality may dominate the discussion, relegating invited guests to a secondary position. You can help your moderator with talking points so she or he can more easily address substantive human rights issues during the discussion.

Some festivals have had good experiences with using professional TV and radio journalists. They are well trained for moderation and at the same time help to promote the festival's activities in the local media.

The best way to prepare the moderator for the discussion is to make sure he or she sees the film in advance, understands the issues raised and how they may relate to local reality, knows the guests' background and has at least two starting questions prepared as ice-breakers in case no one in the audience wants to ask the first question (people are sometimes too shy to ask or need a bit of time to formulate their questions).

The ideal moderator knows the local protocol formulas, respects cultural diversity and local traditions, does not feel a need to dominate the debate, is able to leave the floor to the audience and always acts respectfully. At the same time, he or she is able to intervene gracefully but firmly in case of offensive remarks from the audience. If there is a clash of opinions it is important that the moderator remains neutral, eases the situation and lets people express a wide range of opinions.

At One World Prague the moderator meets the speaker(s) at least 15 minutes before the screening to introduce him or herself and consult with the speaker about the prepared questions, the structure of the debate, how to introduce the guest, etc. The moderator should conclude the discussion by thanking guests and audience members for their contributions.

Examples

In 2011 a mobile cinema project in Peru screened films about the Peruvian mining industry, *The Devil Operation* and *Tambogrande, Mangos, Murder Mining*. The organiser reported: "Despite the different geographic and cultural contexts, the audiences all reacted emotionally to the films, perhaps because they touch upon issues affecting all Peruvians, and stories that are usually suppressed or ignored by the mainstream media. During screenings and discussion periods we saw faces stained with tears, heard shouts of anger, calls for justice and even plans for action.

In areas directly affected by mining activity, audience members called for the formation of ‘video defenders.’ In urban areas, like Chiclayo and Lima, audience members involved in advocacy campaigns to support Peru’s mining communities called on the public to sign petitions and get involved. Several communications students in Chiclayo said they would travel to the countryside to document struggles of farming and indigenous communities as part of their studies”.⁸

In 2014, the Freedom Film Festival in Malaysia organised a forum called “South East Asian Video Activism”. Two short films were screened and different guests were invited. A Burmese filmmaker spoke about how he addressed the topic of freedom of expression in the current political situation of Burma. A Chinese guest showed how Chinese artists use the camera to record officials, sometimes as a response to the surveillance to which they are subjected. A program manager from WITNESS pointed out how video activists can deal with security issues. An intense discussion evolved about the responsibility of filmmakers towards their protagonists and how to prepare them for the effects that participating in a film project might have on their lives.

To adapt your debates to the local context, it is advisable to invite local experts. In 2013, Film Aid organised a film festival in the Kenyan refugee camps Kakuma and Dadaab. The public discussions after the film screenings were about the rights of refugees and the portrayal of refugees in the media. Another

expert panel discussed how the Kenyan media has tried to deal with issues around tribalism and xenophobia, and the role of art in addressing social issues. The panels were comprised of a mix of experts from the camp (filmmakers, social activists) and experts from international organisations (UNHCR, Amnesty International).

In Cameroon, during the Bamenda Human Rights Film and Arts Festival 2013, various panel discussions were held on topics related to violence against women, human trafficking, discrimination of girls and domestic violence—topics that were featured in many of the festival films. According to the organisers, there is not only a culture of shame on these topics, but also a huge knowledge gap. Most youth and women in the Bamenda municipality are ignorant of the law; they do not know that any laws exist to punish human rights abuses. In addition, many people are hesitant about whether a police officer or judge would imprison another man for raping a woman. Local experts were asked to comment on the films and on these matters in panel discussions, which developed into consultative, almost therapeutic sessions. For example, in one of the debates a woman in her late 30s confessed to have hidden the fact that her seven year-old daughter was raped. She said she did not want any member of the public to know for fear that her child would be stigmatised by friends and classmates. One of the panellists, the executive director of the Bamenda-based Centre for Human Rights and Peace Advocacy, remarked that women should not

protect someone who has raped their children. The same woman then revealed that she was afraid that her husband would push both of them out of the family home. Understandably, many of the festival debates were very passionate and emotional; some members of the audience requested immediate action on some of the issues raised. At the end of the discussions, several people specifically confirmed their engagement to take action, on a (local) political level.

Practicalities

It is advisable to have one person within your team who coordinates the Q&A's and debates and is in touch with the guests, moderators and translators.

When scheduling the festival programme, don't forget to factor in time-slots for debates (as well as the time needed for translation of a debate, if required). If the allotted time for a debate is not sufficient you can invite the audience to continue in a space close to the screening hall, such as a classroom, lobby or café.

Debate participants should be comfortable. Make sure that your moderators and guests are sitting on comfortable chairs or standing in an adequate spot in front of the audience, and provide them with drinks (if the event is long make sure they are able to sit down). Treat them as you do other festival guests; give them a programme brochure so that they can get a sense of the entire event and attend other sessions if they wish.

Technical problems can easily ruin a debate so check all your technical needs ahead of time and again on the day of the event. Check if there are enough microphones, if necessary, and whether they are working. Are there enough seats? Is the lighting right? Will additional microphones be needed for the audience?

Some guests or professional moderators may request a fee for taking part in the discussion. If you are not able to pay a fee, a token gift basket with books or DVDs may serve as appreciation for the time and effort put in by the moderator or guest(s).

Wider Outreach

Discussions and Q&As often work as a litmus test because you can see how the audience responds to the film and its message. As organiser it is good to attend as many discussions as possible to get a sense of people's reactions. This will help you design your next program.

Don't forget to take photographs of the event that can be shared on your website and social media networks. It may also be a good idea to have one of your team members note down some salient points that came up during the discussion or Q&A. This can be shared as part of the report for your funders and partners, as well as on your website and social media networks. There is a wide audience beyond those who can physically attend the festival, and they are also interested in your festival and its topics and

films. For example, in Papua New Guinea debates have been recorded by national radio and broadcasted live across the country. The partnership with the national and local media has had a positive impact in bringing human rights education and debate to remote areas of the country, as radio is the major source of information for the majority of the population in Papua New Guinea.

Main tips

- Invest in a good moderation/facilitation.
- Make sure the guest speakers and the moderator connect with your audience.
- Adapt your debates to the local context and be

ready to avert/diffuse tensions.

- Inform your audience ahead of the debate and be ready with ice-breaker questions.
- Address technical needs such as microphones and translations.
- Prepare content ahead with guests and moderator.
- Always have a Plan B in case of last-minute guest cancellations.

Filmography

The Devil Operation (dir. Stephanie Boyd, 2010).

In Prison My Whole Life (dir. Marc Evans, 2007).

Tambogrande, Mangos, Murder Mining (dir. Ernesto Cabellos, 2007).

¹ Jerald Joseph (board member of Pusat KOMAS, organiser of Freedom Film Festival in Malaysia), September 2014, Petaling Jaya, Malaysia.

² Abdoulaye Gaye (Director AfricanBamba Human Rights Film Festival), festival plan for the AfricanBamba Human Rights Film Festival, Senegal, 2014.

³ Abdoulaye Diallo (Director Ciné Droit Libre), festival plan for Ciné Droit Libre, Burkina Faso, 2014.

⁴ Simone Dalmaso (member Colectivo Cine en la Calle), report for Cine en la Calle, Guatemala 2013.

⁵ Andrea Kuhn (Director Nuremberg International Human Rights Film Festival) in response to a questionnaire that was distributed to members of the Human Rights Film Network.

⁶ Artchil Khetagouri (Director CinéDoc), presentation at the Mobile Cinema Workshop organised by Movies that Matter, November 2013, Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

⁷ Simone Dalmaso (member Colectivo Cine en la Calle), report for Cine en la Calle, Guatemala 2013.

⁸ Stephanie Boyd (Asociación Quisca and director *The Devil's Operation*), report for Media that Matters Film Series, Peru, 2011.