
Activist Film Festivals: Towards a Political Subject

Edited by Sonia Tascón and Tyson Wils

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Sonia Tascón and Tyson Wils's edited collection *Activist Film Festivals: Towards a Political Subject* is not the first book devoted to the intersection of activism and film festivals (Dina Iordanova and Leshu Torchin's 2012 *Film Festival Yearbook 4: Film Festivals and Activism* can make that claim), but it does seek to expand more thoroughly, as Tascón explains, our understanding of how spectators are "enveloped" differently at film festivals that have an activist orientation. *Activist Film Festivals* thus turns its attention to the role of the spectator and their visual activism to engage with issues raised in such seminal texts as Luc Boltanski's *Distant Suffering* and Susan Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others*. Whereas those essays posited a particularly problematic spectatorial position in which an inequitable dynamic was evident when a powerful saviour figure viewed the suffering of a disempowered "other," Tascón and Wils aim "to facilitate discussions that may consider other possibilities." As a structuring principle, the editors asked the contributors to consider how "the gaze of a spectator who chooses to view images of others' troubles may be configured differently through the context of consumption." Of course, for Tascón and Wils's volume, the film festival gets taken up as the privileged site of this image consumption.

The first two essays by Tascón and Davies both explore the possibilities that are opened up by post-screening discussions. Tascón draws upon Third Cinema practices that understand the need for the spectator to be involved not only in the film, but in the world beyond the film as well. Third Cinema advocated discussion and debate, facilitated by the film, as a means to organized social action. The film, as it were, was simply an intermediary step and not an end in itself. But how the politics of Third Cinema, which were largely motivated by anti-colonial liberation movements in Latin American and Africa, can be transposed to a contemporary context is undeveloped. By her own admission, Tascón writes: "What will ultimately motivate an affluent, powerful spectator of films watching others' troubles on a screen is far more complex than this paper could cover." How to activate the activism of contemporary film festivals is taken up by Lyell Davies in his essay "Off-Screen Activism and the Documentary Film Screening." In keeping with Tascón, Davies argues for the importance of what happens beyond the film screening. He

contends that the role of “off-screen” events, such as workshops, organizing sessions, and roundtable discussions are as important as what happens onscreen and that these events work to disseminate political knowledge as a first step in empowering spectators towards action. While occasionally turning to specific films or festivals to illustrate their arguments, Tascón and Davies’ essays helpfully map some of the pertinent mechanisms for how activism might be ignited at a festival.

Conversely, essays by Ezra Winton and Svetla Turnin as well as Stuart Richards point to the lost opportunities of sparking political action at leading documentary film festivals and queer festivals, respectively. Winton and Turnin turn their attention to two of the largest documentary film festivals in the world: The International Documentary Festival Amsterdam (IDFA) and Sheffield Doc/Fest to examine some problematic conventions and tendencies at these mainstream festivals. For example, when relevant organizations are not invited to contribute their expertise to post-film discussions or only attend one screening—an opportunity is missed to communicate their message to a larger constituency. Despite this, Winton and Turnin remain hopeful that “festivals, including the mainstream commercial variety, find the spirit and fortitude needed to diversify the festival space and experience, and to open the space for radical action.” Stuart Richards likewise critiques the lost opportunities for a more activist agenda at queer film festivals that have been commodified and corporatized as evident in the programming of homonormative cinema. Richards offers three ways of combatting this trend: 1) politicization, 2) challenging domesticity, and 3) challenging hierarchies of identity. Also concluding on a more hopeful note, Richards believes films that challenge “homonormativity have the power to alter potentially complacent film festival audiences.”

If Tascón, in her chapter, took a cue from Third Cinema for insights into engaging audiences, Davinia Thornley turns to Fourth Cinema and the guidance it offers non-Indigenous audience members viewing Indigenous film and media. Grounding her discussion in her attendance at Toronto’s ImagineNATIVE Film + Media Arts Festival, Thornley proposes a form of audience engagement (also elaborated upon in her 2014 book *Cinema, Cross-Cultural Collaboration, and Criticism*) that asks non-Indigenous viewers to “understand such a worldview from that perspective, and—ultimately—to recognize the extent to which understanding can only ever be an ongoing web of dialogue and exploration.” That is, collaborative criticism requires the non-Indigenous spectator to become comfortable with the unfamiliar and engage with Indigenous worldviews and knowledge they may not recognize. Spectators must accept the limits of their understanding, or as Thornley puts it, “not knowing.” However, she cautions, “Not knowing is never an excuse for ignorance or simplistic dismissal. Instead it requires courage and a constant reaching-out from

the critic.” Thornley’s essay reiterates yet again a key theme of the volume—that an active and involved spectator is essential for any collaborative critical process to work.

One of *Activist Film Festivals* greatest strengths is its attention to viewing contexts outside of Europe and North America. Shweta Kishore’s essay “Reframing the Margin” discusses a fascinating series of regional film festivals in India known as the Cinema of Resistance (COR). Organized for the culturally distinct Bhojpuri-speaking region, the festivals attempt to combat the dominance of commercial Hindi cinema and promote support for local production through what Kishore, by way of Gramsci, calls a “war of position.” COR, she argues, “through forming alliances with regional actors in a bid to distribute the methods of cultural production, circulation and representation towards the construction of participatory public cultures.” Alexandra Crosby follows up with some similar concerns in her essay on activist film festivals in Indonesia. “It’s Not Just About the Films” reaffirms the book’s central argument that what happens off-screen with the audience is of vital importance. Crosby argues that in post-new order Indonesia organizing a film festival is itself an activist act. Providing a brief overview of several film festivals in Indonesia and the surrounding area, Crosby details “networked, hybrid forms of activism, that make change as they reconfigure production and distribution.”

Additional essays address activism at human rights film festivals and disability festivals as well as the possibilities and limitations of activism at ITV (Independent Television Service) and how to build audience engagement and solidarity for Palestine at the Bristol Palestine Film Festival. Given that an “activist orientation” can be understood in innumerable ways, it is fitting that the contributors to *Activist Film Festivals* take up their interpretation of activism in such diverse and engaging ways.