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# **Not Only Projections in a Dark Room: Theorizing Activist Film Festivals in the Lives of Campaigns and Social Movements**

**By Lyell Davies**

Among the film festivals staged each year are some that seek to advance human rights, social or economic justice, environmental agendas, or promote intergroup understanding. These 'activist' film festivals are not staged to serve the needs of media industries, for only artistic or entertainment ends, or with the primary intent of turning a profit. Instead, they are hosted in an effort to increase public awareness about a particular issue, to build or strengthen the membership of a community, campaign or movement, or otherwise catalyze some form of political action. They are launched on the premise that the public exhibition of film has a role to play in these processes. Questions about the role that activist films or film festivals play in influencing political conditions are complex to answer: they are often ignored by those studying political cinema, with films circulated to elicit change examined only in relation to their form and content, or the intent of the filmmakers behind them, rather than their impact on actual audiences. For every film, there are "at least three stories that intertwine: the filmmaker's, the film's, and the audience's", [\[1\]](#) but the latter of these is the area that is often least examined within academic cinema study. Departing from this tendency, studies of activist film festivals often prominently address matters related to audiences, including an examination of the experiences accrued by festivalgoers, and the motivations behind attending a film festival in the first place. This important corpus of literature encompasses studies by academic researchers, some of them participant observers, as well as self-studies, best practice reports, personal reflections, and other materials generated by festival workers—the individuals who inaugurate, organize, supervise the operation of, or program films for activist film festivals.

Questions about how media messages stir people to action in the political arena are neither new nor only of importance to understanding the impact of cinema. In the literary, philosophical, anthropological, sociological, and historical fields theories abound regarding how media texts are received by those who are exposed to them, as well as how this affects their subsequent thinking or actions. Indeed, a comprehensive study of activist film screenings or festivals must be an interdisciplinary project and encompass such varied fields as the study of media audiences, psychology and group dynamics, and the formation and operation of social movements. Adding further complication, the scholarly

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findings regarding the impact of media messages on audiences are complex, require nuanced interpretation, and can be counterintuitive, thereby limiting their ability to counter the simplistic understandings of media effects often circulated and taken as fact in popular discourse. The latter have sometimes been accepted by advocates for politically engaged cinema as well, with some filmmakers or those behind activist film screenings or festivals assuming that an audience's exposure to a particular message "inevitably leads to action".<sup>[ii]</sup> By no means do I seek to argue that exposure to a particular media message cannot have a lasting effect on viewers, including spurring them to immediate actions in the political arena. There are some instances where this has happened.<sup>[iii]</sup> But it is simplistic to think that films will automatically have this kind of impact on viewers, or to assume that if viewers are motivated to act after viewing a media production they will have the avenues—the "political opportunities"—necessary to act in an effective way.<sup>[iv]</sup> In addition, it is simplistic to examine activist screenings or festivals only in regard to whether or not they lead those in attendance to engage in dramatic actions afterward. The best of the recent research on activist film festivals dispenses with such simplistic thinking, and instead presents a rounded understanding of audience experiences at events of this kind.<sup>[v]</sup> The claims made so far are provocative, but there are more themes in need of exploration.

Contributing to this body of research, in my study I seek to deepen our theoretical understanding of the audience at activist film screenings and festivals. I will argue, first, we should dispense with the idea that in this setting the only, or even the primary event is the screening of a film. Among those writing on activist film festivals there is an understanding that although cinema is a point of focus for events of this kind, it is only one of a festival's facets, and other goings-on are of key importance. I will theorize some of the key elements operative in this regard. Second, I will discuss activist screenings and film festivals as a site where 'a public' or 'counterpublic' is formed, noting the importance of this in the building of a base of support for a particular viewpoint, or for mobilizing a political campaign or movement. And third, I will argue that activist film screenings and festivals are an important element in the cultural life of campaign work and social movements, and a site where new individual and movement-based identities are generated and expressed as cultural growth and experimentation occurs.

My methodological approach to this subject is interdisciplinary, drawing most purposefully on sociology-based studies of the practice of everyday life and social movements. These fields of scholarship do not provide insight into every aspect of activist film screenings or festivals, but they provide useful frameworks with which to examine how occasions such as these, that bring people together in a shared location, are an important

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feature of political campaigns and social movements. Usefully, the study of social movements provides us with four terms that allow us to refine our questions about what activist screenings or festival might 'do' and who the audience in attendance might 'be'. First, those in attendance at occasions of this type could already be constituents, indicating individuals that are already active and invested in a particular campaign or social movement. Second, those present could be adherents, indicating individuals who are predisposed to the message of a film or the goal of the festival, but who have not yet taken any action on their beliefs. Third, audience members could be part of the bystander public, indicating individuals who have no opinion on the issues at hand. And fourth, they could be opponents, individuals who disagree with the message or stance of the film or festival.<sup>[vi]</sup> Using these terms we can consider the relationship between an activist film screening or festival and those present. Can activist film screenings or festivals convince bystander publics to become movement adherents? Stir adherents to become active campaign or movement constituents? Can they change the minds of opponents, convincing them of the error in their thinking or actions? Or is the role of the activist film screening or festival primarily to reaffirm the thinking of those who are already campaign or movement constituents, sustaining their beliefs, thereby propelling them towards further action in the future? In theory, any of these scenarios is possible.

### **It's Not (Only) About Film**

Experiencing or witnessing injustice does not inevitably trigger action to end injustice. For this to happen a great deal of communication and conscious planning needs to occur, as existing grievances are transformed into a concerted effort to bring about change, a process that is most likely to be successful if it features collective action on the part of many people.<sup>[vii]</sup> Since the early days of filmmaking there have been those who argue that the cinema can mobilize people towards action in the political arena. In popular understandings, concepts such as 'injustice', 'racism', 'oppression', or 'colonization' are easily abstracted, stripping them of a connection to the lived experience of actual people. Film has the ability to counter this elision by providing a human face to these concepts, while depicting their operation or scope in the form of a comprehensible narrative. In the process, film offers a powerful way of fostering "hot cognition", meaning that the representation of a condition or situation carries charged emotional overtones and is likely to incite affect on the part of audiences.<sup>[viii]</sup> Activist enterprises and campaigns or social movements commonly circulate two kinds of information, 'technical information', such as statistical data and reports that describe the big picture of a situation or case, and 'personal information' which gives a human face to an issue through testimony or personal profiles. Both forms of information are important, and "without individual cases

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activists cannot mobilize people to seek changed politics”.[\[ix\]](#) Film—and I would argue, documentary film in particular—is a powerful means for giving injustice a human face, as well as being a convenient way of duplicating and physically transporting representations of injustice for exhibition before geographically dispersed audiences.

As with other features in the repertoire of political struggle such as strikes, boycotts, protests, petitions, public meetings, or staged media events, the making and circulation of film is a modular activity that can be employed by all manner of struggles or campaigns. As the plethora of activist screenings and film festivals targeting political issues shows, these events are also a modular activity staged to advance any number of agendas, from environmental initiatives to liberation struggles or campaigns for racial, gender, or economic justice. The production and exhibition of media in this way is a means to circulate the “shared cultural understanding[s]” that are needed for collective action, while also assisting in the coordination of “autonomous and dispersed populations into common and sustained action”.[\[x\]](#) The intent of activist film screenings or festivals means that what occurs in these settings is different for those in attendance to the experience to be had in commercial, entertainment-centered film exhibition settings. The activist film festival is concerned with presenting “information and testimony” rather “than art and entertainment”,[\[xi\]](#) and seeks to create a “testimonial encounter” where festivalgoers “take responsibility for what they have seen and become ready to respond”.[\[xii\]](#) In this way, activist film festivals seek to draw festivalgoers “into a set of relationships that bind them differently were their activities not ‘activist’”, pressing them to emerge as a “responsible historical subject” who is both knowledgeable of the issues at hand, and functions as an agent for change in the political arena.[\[xiii\]](#)

Creating conditions where this is likely to happen is complicated, and a challenge for those behind the effort. Exposure to media messages, including those that educate on political matters, does not necessarily foster action. As media theorists Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Robert K. Merton observed in the 1950s, “The interested and informed citizen can congratulate himself on his lofty state of interest and information, and neglect to see that he has abstained from decision and action... He comes to mistake knowing about problems of the day for doing something about them”[\[xiv\]](#). In addition, we have to take seriously that audiences do not automatically respond to media productions in the way their authors intended, since “the film and the spectator simultaneously engage in two quite distinctly located visual acts that meet on shared ground but never identically occupy it”.[\[xv\]](#) The audience is pressed to ‘read’ a media message as it was intended by its authors, since the “message has a privileged position in the communicative exchange”.[\[xvi\]](#) Nonetheless,

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“As audience members we often find what we want, or need, to find in films, sometimes at the expense of what the film really has to offer others. Different audiences will see different things”.[\[xvii\]](#) Writing on human rights film festivals, Sonia Tascón offers an illustration of how festivalgoers may respond to a film in a less than optimal way. She argues that audience members can adopt “the humanitarian gaze”, a state where the viewer sees those onscreen as victims to be pitied for the suffering they endure, or admired if they struggle to “be more like us”.[\[xviii\]](#) Both responses primarily flatter the viewer, allowing them to feel superior to those onscreen while affirming a sense of their own righteousness; all the while short circuiting the development of a more equitable relationship between those who ‘look’ and those who are ‘looked at’.

Theorizing how this can be averted, Tascón argues that we should revisit the concept of the ‘film act’, as developed by radical Third Cinema filmmakers and their allies during the 1960s and 1970s.[\[xix\]](#) Third Cinema filmmakers and theorists Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino argue that the exhibition of a film has “little meaning if it was not complemented by the participation of the comrades, if a debate was not opened on the themes suggested by the films”, thereby moving viewers who were previously “considered spectators” to emerge as “participants”.[\[xx\]](#) Pondering this process, filmmaker Tomás Gutiérrez Alea writes, “we ask ourselves to what degree a certain type of show can cause the viewers to acquire a new socio-political awareness”, and how this awareness can become action “when viewers leave the movie theater and encounter once again that other reality, their social and individual life, their day-to-day”.[\[xxi\]](#) For filmmakers of the Third Cinema movement, the conventional channels for film exhibition were thought inadequate to their political goals, leading to distribution through “decentralized parallel circuits” where films might, for instance, be exhibited unannounced, guerilla-style in communities, parishes, universities or cultural centers, using a portable film projector and generator.[\[xxii\]](#) During these screenings, the film might be stopped at crucial moments so that audience members could engage in dialogue about the issues raised by what they were seeing onscreen.[\[xxiii\]](#)

For all screenings or film festivals the setting and accompanying off-screen events or activities are important. Termed “extra-cinematic” or “para-cinematic” events, the off-screen elements of a typical film festival include receptions, red-carpet entrances, press conferences, award ceremonies, or after-screening parties.[\[xxiv\]](#) Some from this list are also present in the schedule of activist film festivals, but they are typically overshadowed in importance by workshops, in-depth discussion and deliberation sessions, the presence of experts on political affairs, film subjects who testify to particular conditions,[\[xxv\]](#) or other activities that are “intended to make the connection to the social world in ways that

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other... film festivals do not”.[\[xxvi\]](#) In this way, the screening or festival site becomes a location where the meaning of films, as well as how audience members are encouraged to respond to them, are framed and negotiated, illustrating that these events need “to be understood not only in terms of the films they show, but also the... forms of practice played out within the spaces of the auditorium, foyer and so on”.[\[xxvii\]](#) Tascón argues that through efforts such as these, human rights film festivals seek to promote “an active and interactive relationship between life-world, film, and spectator”.[\[xxviii\]](#) Terming this the “festival effect”, she argues that off screen workshops, discussion sessions, and deliberation have the “the potential to excavate meanings and dimensions of that relationship not available through the individual consumption of images... that makes activist film festivals a place where a particular type of spectator is facilitated, one that may be less detached and prone to the expectation of seeing tragic victims”.[\[xxix\]](#) Along similar lines, festival director Igor Blažević argues that what distinguishes a human rights film festival from non-activist festivals “is not the films we screen, but what we ‘do’ with the films and the interpretive contexts we build for their screenings”.[\[xxx\]](#)

A means to understand the processes that are unfolding in such setting is offered by sociologist Erving Goffman’s theorizing of “social occasions”.[\[xxxii\]](#) He argues that a social occasion comes into being when a number of people share a “structured social context”, such as “a social party, a workday in an office, a picnic, or a night at the opera”.[\[xxxiii\]](#) He contrasts social occasions with “gatherings”, which are an instance where two or more people directly interact with each other, arguing that social occasions are broader events than gatherings, and can encompass many small gatherings.[\[xxxiii\]](#) Most commonly, one or more of those behind the staging of the social occasion are “responsible for getting the affair under way, guiding the main activity, terminating the event, and sustaining order”.[\[xxxiv\]](#) In doing so, they author a social occasion’s “distinctive ethos, an emotional structure, that must be properly created, sustained, and laid to rest”.[\[xxxv\]](#) At activist screenings or film festivals, the responsibility of doing this is largely (but not exclusively)[\[xxxvi\]](#) in the hands of those who organized it, programmed the films to be exhibited, and decided on the type, character, and scheduling of any off screen aspects. With many activist film festivals affiliated with civil society or nongovernmental organizations, these parent organizations play a central role in determining the ideological thrust, priorities, planned or intended outcomes or a particular festival. They do this with the aim of best advancing a festival’s “core mission, the motivation behind their screenings and what they want to achieve”.[\[xxxvii\]](#) A consideration in the structuring of an activist film screening or festival is that some social occasions are considered to be recreational and thought to be an end in themselves as “the individual avowedly participates for the consummate

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pleasure of doing so”.[\[xxxviii\]](#) Other categories of social occasions are considered serious in character, and “seen as merely means to other ends”.[\[xxxix\]](#) Most of the time, attending the cinema is considered a recreational activity, even though popular cinema is ideologically loaded and contributes to the formation of political and cultural hegemonies. Those who seek to use the cinema as a means of pressing home a particular political agenda must ensure that those present in the audience understand that the occasion is serious, and a means to an end rather than an end in itself.

Illustrating how festivals can be framed, film festival organizers Matthea de Jong and Daan Bronkhorst argue that there are four possible approaches when staging a human rights film festival, approaches that mirror four common approaches to human rights advocacy more generally.[\[xl\]](#) These are, first, film festivals that seek to attract the widest possible audience in an effort to inject human rights principles into society at large. Second, those that seek to foster a deliberative environment that serves as a forum for rigorous debate about human rights issues, while catering to specialized audiences that may include policy makers. Third, those that are designed to foster protest actions and activism, and present human rights discourse as a model for broad social change. And fourth, those that adopt a dispassionate stance to offer a forum for the airing of divergent views on human rights and related matters. Most human rights film festivals contain some mixture of these approaches, with the strongest trajectories influencing the overall character of a festival—including the kind of promotional and outreach efforts undertaken, the locations used, presence or absence of activist workshops, and who is likely to be in attendance. These decisions have consequences regarding an event’s outcomes. If the goal of a festival is to convert opponents or attract bystanders to a particular cause, this will require different strategies than those employed to engage those who are already issue adherents or constituents. Similarly, a festival with an openly activist stance is unlikely to be attended by political opponents, since studies show that media audiences tend to select information that is “consistent with attitudes and beliefs and ignore or avoid information that is discrepant”.[\[xli\]](#) As de Jong and Bronkhorst argue, the first of these types of festivals will seek to reach the widest possible audience and “opt for open-air screenings at popular places”, while a deliberation-focused festival might “pick venues that work best for each group” of its target audience and activist-focused festivals gear “to using their festival as a platform for action, facilitating workshops on film making or non-violent activism, distributing petitions or providing suggestions on how to further promote the observance of human rights”.[\[xlii\]](#) On a practical level, the organization and timing of a screening or festival will determine what is likely to transpire at a festival. Timing a festival program in such a way that it leaves little time for post-screening discussions, the use of fixed-

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seating auditoriums that make interaction between those present difficult, or access considerations, such ticket prices or the choice of screening venues that prohibit or make unlikely attendance by some people within the community, can prevent an festival from fulfilling its mission as well as intended.

### **‘A Public’ or Hegemony Opposing ‘Counterpublic’**

All film screenings or festivals that bring together a group of viewers facilitate the formation of ‘a public’ (as opposed to ‘the public’ which is all people in a society),[\[xliii\]](#) defined by social theorist Michael Warner as “a concrete audience, a crowd witnessing itself in a visible space, as with a theatrical public. Such a public also has a sense of totality, bounded by the event or by the shared physical space”.[\[xliv\]](#) The character of the public that forms varies in intensity and in the connections between its members, and a public can be formed simply by people showing up and being aware of the others around them. The ability of a populace to assemble in this way is integral to the operation of the public sphere,[\[xlv\]](#) and if deprived of the ability to form publics we are not “capable of being addressed, and capable of action, we would be nothing but the peasants of capital”.[\[xlvi\]](#) For a vibrant public sphere to exist, people need credible information about occurrences in the world, and the “rights of political organization, speech and assembly; it needs deliberation”.[\[xlvii\]](#) Activist film screenings and festivals serve as such a site. When hosted in a high-profile site such as at a mainstream commercial cinema or multiplex, museum, park or stadium, a screening or festival gains prominence and status, elevating its standing in the public sphere. This confers status on the films featured within the festival’s program, and on the viewpoints or arguments presented, thereby powerfully signaling that “one has arrived... that one’s behaviour and opinions are significant enough to require public notice”.[\[xlviii\]](#) For an organization sponsoring an activist screening or film festival, this can also mean temporarily moving its base of operation from a modest work space of the kind that is commonly occupied by perennially underfunded activist organizations, to an accoutrement-rich environment in a high-traffic, city center location, further signaling the importance of that organization and its agenda within the broad public sphere. Indeed, in light of shrinkage in the U.S. public sphere as participation in membership organizations and other public affiliations declines,[\[xlix\]](#) and as many activists increasingly turn to clicktivism, the ongoing importance of activist screenings or film festivals as a site for the formation of a public must not be underestimated.

An activist screening or film festival that nurtures counter-hegemonic ideas or seeks to serve the needs of a subaltern constituency fits the definition of a ‘counterpublic’, indicating that it has a “conflictual relation to the dominant public” and occupies a “subordinate status” vis-à-vis

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mainstream ideas.<sup>[1]</sup> Illustrating this, Skadi Loist and Ger Zielinski argue that LGBTQ film festivals are an extension of social movement efforts for gender equality and positioned to offer “interventions into hegemonic representational regimes”.<sup>[li]</sup> So engaged, they serve as “a space where a group of individuals could meet and create a community... they [are] counter-public spheres”.<sup>[lii]</sup> The study of social movements proposes that for political advocacy or social movement work to develop, an “oppositional consciousness” must be developed.<sup>[liii]</sup> For this to happen, Sharon Groch contends, people usually need a physical space where they can assemble “to see themselves as a group [and] find a common interest with other members of the group”.<sup>[liv]</sup> Solanas and Getino argue that the exhibition of radical cinema can create a space of this kind, with every screening carving out “a liberated space, *a decolonized territory*” (author’s emphasis).<sup>[lv]</sup> According to Solanas and Getino, a person who decides to attend a guerilla film screening, “was no longer a spectator... he became an actor, a more important protagonist than those who appeared in the films. Such as person was seeking other committed people like himself, while he, in turn, became committed to them”.<sup>[lvi]</sup>

The formation of such a space requires that those in attendance be drawn into engagement with others around them. Goffman argues that some social occasions are structured to promote “mutual accessibility”, with those present adopting a posture of “informality and solidarity” as they recognize that they and the others around them belong to the same group, a recognition that is heightened “if this group be one that is disadvantaged”.<sup>[lvii]</sup> This is an enabling feature in the formation of what he terms an “open region”, which is a physically bounded place “where ‘any’ two persons, acquainted or not, have the right to initiate face engagement with each other for the purpose of extending salutations”.<sup>[lviii]</sup> Society at large hosts a variety of open regions, such as at parties and in bars or other settings “where participants have a right... to engage anyone present”.<sup>[lix]</sup> Noting the importance of mutual accessibility to the film act, Solanas and Getino report that one aspect of it is “disinhibiting” those present through the inclusion of ice-breaking musical performances, poetry readings, and the involvement of “a program director who chaired the debate and presented the film and the comrades who were speaking”.<sup>[lx]</sup> An example of this in operation in a contemporary context is provided by descriptions of the Canada-based Cinema Politica screening series: “everyone talks—from the cranks and curmudgeons to the naïve feel-gooders and recent converts, to the calm and idealist yet slightly cynical frontline veterans working the crowd”.<sup>[lxi]</sup>

These conditions enable ‘enclave deliberation’ where those present incubate new ideas or express perspectives that are shunned in other settings. They can also foster feelings of personal and group empowerment as those present see themselves and the group they belong

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to as efficacious causal agents in moves towards greater justice in society, and during collective deliberation sessions hear their beliefs given “meaning, coherence, and significance”.[\[lxii\]](#) As this happens various trajectories are in operation. Studies suggest that in settings where those present believe themselves to be surrounded by like-minded others, they will attribute greater weight to the comments or experiences that are aired than they would in a setting where they see those around them as different from themselves.[\[lxiii\]](#) With regard to the exhibition of film, there is evidence that media messages can have a strong effect on viewers when they talk about the message they have been exposed to amongst themselves afterwards.[\[lxiv\]](#) This has been termed an “intermedia effect”, as exposure to a media message “leads to interpersonal communication among peers, which in turn influences behaviour change”.[\[lxv\]](#) The intermedia effect seems to have particular bearing with regard to the circulation of educational media, which can “cause people to engage in peer communication as they seek to make sense out of what is happening”.[\[lxvi\]](#) Here it is important to distinguish between, first, an audience discussion of the issues raised by a film, which is a common feature of many film festivals during question and answer sessions, workshops, or dialogue sessions, and second, those in attendance making a tangible decision to engage in some form of subsequent action. A discussion of the issues raised by a film can provide insight into the existence of an injustice, or clarification as to why a particular course of action is needed, but for action that will bring about change to begin those involved must migrate from a discussion stage to making a decision about a course of action they commit to taking—even if this course of action is something as open-ended as agreeing to meet again at a later date, or requires only low-level engagement, such as an act of clicktivism or the signing of a petition. Interestingly, studies of group dynamics suggest that individuals who make decisions as part of a collective process are more likely to stick to any decision that they do make.[\[lxvii\]](#) Even decisions that are made quite quickly in a group setting can affect the long term conduct of an individual, since the setting “seems to have a ‘freezing’ effect which is partly due to the individual’s tendency to ‘stick to his decision’ and partly to the ‘commitment to a group’”.[\[lxviii\]](#)

Dovetailing with these arguments, research on the conditions that lead people to join movements suggests, “Although it is individuals who decide whether or not to take up collective action, it is in their face-to-face groups, their social networks and their institutions that collective actions is most often activated and sustained”.[\[lxix\]](#) In a useful counterpoint to this argument, social movement theorist James Jasper argues that there are two ways that social movements commonly grow their numbers.[\[lxx\]](#) First, this occurs through the recruitment of ‘intimates’, these being individuals who are already members of social networks that overlap with

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movement participants, such as a personal connection to friends, families, or co-workers. And second, through the recruitment of ‘strangers’, indicating individuals who have no personal connection with those involved in a movement. A method by which strangers are drawn to political work is the circulation of “cultural messages transmitted by means of... anonymous media”, but it is intimate personal connections that are the most common method of recruitment to a movement.[\[lxxi\]](#) In the setting of the activist screening or film festival elements of both of these recruitment processes are in operation: the presentation of anonymous media on the screen is coupled with the bringing together of a public in such a way that an individuated experience of film spectatorship is supplemented by face-to-face deliberation and decision making. The aforementioned studies therefore seem to suggest that activist screenings or film festivals have the potential to be impactful sites for orientating those in attendance towards particular courses of action. However, there is no single, rigid formula regarding how viewers will respond to what they see or hear in the setting of an activist film screening or festival since all present do not experience the event in the same way. Instead, at social occasions “multiple social realities can occur in the same place”.[\[lxxii\]](#) Some of those present may commit or re-commit themselves to a role as a full-fledged campaign or movement constituent, others may be swept up in the moment and commit to taking actions they will never actually complete, while still others may “thin out” their involvement in the occasion, delivering only the minimum level of involvement that the decorum of the occasion at hand seems to demand.[\[lxxiii\]](#)

### **Cultural Changes ‘Below the Surface’**

A tenet of activist screenings or film festivals is that deliberation is fostered among those present, as issues are discussed and expanded upon or campaign tactics and strategies are developed and decided upon. Ongoing deliberation and decision-making of this type is integral to activist work. But the deliberation and decision-making that occurs in these settings is not only about tactics, strategies, or campaign goals. It is also deliberation on the part of those present as they decide on their own relation to these issues, and to activism itself. The emergence of an engaged ‘responsible historical subject’ necessitates that the festivalgoer embrace a political and moral standpoint regarding what they believe is right or wrong, acceptable or unacceptable, and to thereby decide to ‘take a position’. The cultural transformation that occurs as this happens is colloquially described as ‘consciousness raising’ or ‘empowerment’, terms that record a change in the thinking, beliefs, or confidence and feeling of self efficacy of those involved, rather than changes to political conditions per se. This transformation is noted when those behind activist screenings or film festivals argue that “Cinema is pre-eminently the

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medium that has the ability to further expand the moral imagination", [lxxiv] or that festival attendance provides "inspiration for active participation in advocacy and social justice". [lxxv] These remarks highlight an introspective reevaluation of the festivalgoer's relationship to self and activism. It is common to think of social movements in terms of "ideologies, tactics, issues, campaigns, strategies, organizations", [lxxvi] thereby paying insufficient attention to the cultural transformations that are occurring as individual and collective identities are revised and generated, and "changes in values, ideas, and ways of life" occur. [lxxvii] Along with political meetings, education sessions, rallies, or similar politics-elaborating occasions, activist film screenings and festivals are a site where these changes can occur. They are a site where social capital is generated, "by fostering new identities and extending social networks", as well as, potentially, through the forging of "lifelong identities and solidarities". [lxxviii] The cultural dimension of activist work often goes unrecorded since dramatic events such as public protests or campaign victories are the side of activist work that is most commonly presented through media channels or in historical accounts. The often unseen importance of cultural transformation indicates that when it comes to campaigns and social movements, like an "iceberg... much of the action [is] happening below the surface". [lxxix]

Along similar lines we should not discount the importance of activist screening and film festivals and similar occasions in sustaining the involvement of those who are already campaign or social movement constituents. The involvement of an individual in political work is almost always provisional, and their recruitment is in a sense never wholly complete since it likely needs ongoing reaffirmation. One way that this occurs is through the routine circulation of all manner of electronic and other media, such as informal media exchanges in the form of the "telephone calls, E-mails, and fax communications, and the circulation of newsletters, pamphlets and bulletins" that bind movement participants together. [lxxx] While ephemeral media exchanges such as these take place on a day-to-day basis, more complex media texts such as feature length films also sustain and solidify shared values among campaign or movement constituents, with public screenings or festivals a site where this occurs. The problems that can come with 'preaching only to the choir' are obvious, but there is also the risk expressed by actor-activist Harry Belafonte that "if one stops preaching to the choir, they may stop singing". [lxxxii] Indeed, the analogy of a choir is interesting for the study of film, since there are parallels between the performance of songs linked to social movements and the exhibition of political cinema. Just as songs such as "We Shall Overcome" or "This Land Is Our Land" are indelibly linked, respectively, to the U.S. struggle for civil rights and protests against social inequality, films can become widely understood and circulated markers for particular understandings of political struggle, as

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they crystallize and bring to the screen representations of injustice or memorialize acts of dissent, protest, or rebellion. Thus, song and films have in common that they are cultural artifacts that can repeatedly bring people together in a shared space to remind them of the possibilities of struggle, keep alive histories and bodies of knowledge, and offer inspiration and solidarity across time or geography.

## **Conclusion**

There are many more questions to ask of activist screenings and film festivals and the audiences who attend them. Once a screening is over and the public or counterpublic that formed at the exhibition site disbands, how is an ongoing political engagement best sustained? When a public or counterpublic forms at a screening, are its members seeking a deep engagement with the matters at hand, or is it possible that one of the attractions of cinema viewership that it allows one to feel part of a public while also maintaining a sense of 'strangerhood' that keeps the engagement with those around you at a low level? There are also historical questions to ask. The Third Cinema movement's thinking regarding 'the film act' was rooted in the ideologies of the radical social movements of a particular historical moment. That moment is not longer with us, so how do ideas from that period translate into the particular conditions of our present? Indeed, in light of the historical context we presently occupy, concepts such as enclave deliberation must be critically examined. The formation of counterpublics and the deliberation they support can be hugely empowering for those involved, as strongly held beliefs or ideas are aired and reinforced. But as recent U.S. history shows enclaves can also become an echo chamber bereft of self-criticism or an awareness of other ideas, and lead to the uncritical consumption of fake 'realities' and propaganda messages generated by disreputable political actors.

For those involved in the day-to-day practice of organizing and hosting activist screenings or film festivals, the study of these events provides both practical advice and guidance on more philosophical matters that can be employed to ensure these occasions fulfill their intended purpose. For film scholars and filmmakers, research on activist screenings and film festivals offers important insight into how and where political cinemas can impact actual political conditions. But more than this is available in examining these occasions. Activist film screenings and festivals are a microcosm where features of our broader media, social, and political lives can be witnessed, experienced, and considered. Therefore, the study of activist screenings and film festivals provides insight into features of everyday life, from our rituals and social occasions, to how political consciousness-raising can be fostered, or how campaigns and movements for change are built and sustained.

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## Notes

[i] Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010), 94.

[ii] Leshu Torchin, "Networked for Advocacy: Film Festivals and Activism", in *Film Festival Yearbook 4: Film Festivals and Activism*, ed. by Dina Iordanova and Leshu Torchin (St. Andrews: St Andrews Film Studies, 2012, 1-12), 1.

[iii] See Lyell Davies, "Activism Off-Screen and the Documentary Film Screening", in *Activist Film Festivals: Towards a Political Subject*, ed. Sonia Tascón and Tyson Wils (Bristol, UK/Chicago, USA: Intellect, 2017, 39-57) 43; Steve James, "We Aren't Sorry for This Interruption...", in *Screening Truth to Power: A Reader on Documentary Activism*, ed. Svetla Turnin and Ezra Winton (Montreal: Cinema Politica, 2014, 57-60) 59; or Everett M. Rogers, "Intermedia Processes and Powerful Media Effects", in *Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research*, ed. Jennings Bryant and Dolf Zillmann (Mahwah, New Jersey & London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 2002, 199-214) 208.

[iv] Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements, Collective Action and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1994.

[v] See Dina Iordanova and Leshu Torchin (ed), *Film Festival Yearbook 4: Film Festivals and Activism* (St. Andrews: St Andrews Film Studies, 2012); Dina Iordanova (ed), *The Film Festival Reader* (St. Andrews: St Andrews Film Studies, 2013); Sonia M. Tascón, *Human Rights Film Festivals: Activism in Context* (New York: Palgrave MacMillen, 2015); Sonia M. Tascón and Tyson Wils (ed), *Activist Film Festivals: Towards a Political Subject* (Bristol, UK/Chicago, USA: Intellect, 2017).

[vi] John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald, "Social Movement Organizations (from 'Resource Mobilization and Social Movements: A Partial Theory'", in *The Social Movements Reader: Cases and Concepts*, ed. Jeff Goodwin and James M. Casper (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003, 169-186), 175.

[vii] Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements, Collective Action and Politics*.

[viii] William A. Gamson, *Talking Politics* (Cambridge & New York: University of Cambridge Press, 1992), 32.

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[ix] Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1998), 21.

[x] Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements, Collective Action and Politics*, 9.

[xi] Igor Blažević, "How to Start", in *Setting Up a Human Rights Film Festival: A Handbook for Festival Organizers Including Case Studies of Prominent Human Rights Events*, ed. Tereza Porybná (Prague: People in Need, 2009, 14-25), 15.

[xii] Leshu Torchin, "Networked for Advocacy: Film Festivals and Activism", 2-3.

[xiii] Sonia Tascón, "Watching Others' Troubles: Revisiting 'The Film Act' and Spectatorship in Activist Film Festivals", in *Activist Film Festivals: Towards a Political Subject*, ed. by Sonia Tascón and Tyson Wils (Bristol, UK/Chicago, USA: Intellect, 2017, 21-37), 23.

[xiv] Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Robert K. Merton, "Mass Communication, Popular Taste, and Organized Action", in *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America*, ed. Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White (Glencoe: The Press and Falcon's Wing Press, 1957, 457-473), 464.

[xv] Vivian Sobchack, "Phenomenology and the Film Experience", in *Viewing Positions*, ed. Linda Williams (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1994, 36-58), 53.

[xvi] Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding", in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Simon During (New York & London: Routledge, 1993, 90-103), 91.

[xvii] Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 97.

[xviii] Sonia Tascón, *Human Rights Film Festivals: Activism in Context* (New York: Palgrave MacMillen, 2015), 7.

[xix] Sonia Tascón, "Watching Others' Troubles: Revisiting 'The Film Act' and Spectatorship in Activist Film Festivals".

[xx] Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, "Towards a Third Cinema", in *Movies And Methods: Volume 1*, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1976, 44-64), 61.

[xxi] Alea, Tomás Gutiérrez. "The Viewer's Dialectic". In *New Latin American Cinema: Volume 1, Theory Practices, and Transcontinental*

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*Articulations*, edited by Michael T. Martin. Detroit: Wayne State University, 1997, 108-133. (1997:110). Alea

[xxii] Octavio Getino, "Some Notes on the Concept of a "Third Cinema"", in *Argentine Cinema*, ed. Tim Barnard (Toronto: Nightwood Editions, 1986, 99-108), 103.

[xxiii] These ideas did not begin with Third Cinema in the 1960s and antecedents for some of these practices can be found, for instance, in the activities of workers' film groups in the 1920s and 1930s (see William Alexander, *Film on the Left: American Documentary Film From 1931-1942* [Princeton New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981]; Ralph Bond, "Formation of Film Societies", in *British Cinema: Traditions of Independence*, ed. Don MacPherson [London: British Film Institute, 1980, 115-117]; Bert Hogenkamp, "Worker's Newsreels in the 1920s and 1930s", *Our History* [Pamphlet 68. London: The History Group of the Communist Party, 1977, 1-36]; Joris Ivens, *The Film Camera and I*. [New York: International Publishers, 1969]. But Third Cinema practitioners cogently theorized these approaches, influencing radical filmmakers internationally (see Bill Nichols, *Newsreel: Documentary Filmmaking on the American Left* [Arno Press: New York, 1980]).

[xxiv] Vanessa R. Schwartz, *It's So French! Hollywood, Paris, and the Making of Cosmopolitan French Film Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 72.

[xxv] Off screen elements may extend well beyond the timeframe and primary location of an activist film festival, as the festival tours to secondary locations such as schools and other non-theatrical locations, and where it catalyses "invisible and constantly growing interactions and synergies between all actors and agencies... throughout the year" (Mariagiulia Grassilli, "Human Rights Film Festivals: Global/Local Networks for Advocacy", in *Film Festival Yearbook 4: Film Festivals and Activism*, ed. Dina Iordanova & Leshu Torchin [St. Andrews: St Andrews Film Studies, 2012, 31-47], 40). This may also happen through the use of video-on-demand services or other platforms that form an interlinked web for content distribution, thereby providing an unprecedented level of exposure to media messages and inaugurating "a new era for activism" (Dina Iordanova, "Film Festivals and Dissent: Can Film Change the World?" in *Film Festival Yearbook 4: Film Festivals and Activism*, ed. Dina Iordanova & Leshu Torchin [St. Andrews: St Andrews Film Studies, 2012, 13-30], 22).

[xxvi] Sonia Tascón, "Watching Others' Troubles: Revisiting 'The Film Act' and Spectatorship in Activist Film Festivals", 33.

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[xxvii] Lesley-Ann Dickson, “‘Ah! Other Bodies!’: Embodied spaces, pleasures and practices at Glasgow Film Festival”, *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies* (12.1, 2015, 703-724), 705.

[xxviii] Sonia Tascón, “Watching Others’ Troubles: Revisiting ‘The Film Act’ and Spectatorship in Activist Film Festivals”, 31.

[xxix] Ibid 33.

[xxx] Igor Blažević, “Film Festivals as Human Rights Awareness Building Tool: Experiences of the Prague One World Festival”, in *Film Festival Yearbook 4: Film Festivals and Activism*, ed. Dina Iordanova and Leshu Torchin (St. Andrews: St Andrews Film Studies, 2012, 109-120), 112.

[xxxi] Erving Goffman, *Behavior in Public Places: Notes on the Social Organization of Gatherings* (New York: The Free Press, 1963).

[xxxii] Ibid 18.

[xxxiii] Ibid 18.

[xxxiv] Ibid 18.

[xxxv] Ibid 19.

[xxxvi] Those who launch an activist screening or film festival do not have exclusive governance of the social occasion that subsequently unfolds since invited guest speakers or workshop organizers as well as individual audience members play a role in directing the thrust of what happens at a festival, particularly if the event has been designed to foster open-ended, participation-rich engagement by those present. But those behind a screening or festival are the primary structuring force behind most events of this type.

[xxxvii] Igor Blažević, “Film Festivals as Human Rights Awareness Building Tool: Experiences of the Prague One World Festival”, 111.

[xxxviii] Erving Goffman, *Behavior in Public Places: Notes on the Social Organization of Gatherings*, 19.

[xxxix] Ibid 19.

[xl] Matthea de Jong and Daan Bronkhorst, “Human Rights Film Festivals: Different Approaches to Change the World”, in *Activist Film Festivals: Towards a Political Subject*, ed. Sonia Tascón and Tyson Wils (Bristol, UK/Chicago, USA: Intellect, 2017, 105-120), 114-117.

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[xli] Mary Beth Oliver, "Individual Differences in Media Effects", in *Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research*, ed. Jennings Bryant and Dolf Zillmann (Mahwah, New Jersey & London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 2002, 507-524), 513.

[xlii] Matthea de Jong and Daan Bronkhorst, "Human Rights Film Festivals: Different Approaches to Change the World", 117.

[xliii] Cindy Hing-Yuk Wong, *Film Festivals: Culture, People, and Power on the Global*

*Screen* (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers's University Press, 2011).

[xliv] Michael Warner, "Publics and Counterpublics (abbreviated version)", *Quarterly Journal of Speech* (National Communication Association, 88.4, 2002, 413-425), 413.

[xlv] Habermas, Jürgen. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1998).

[xlvi] Michael Warner, "Publics and Counterpublics (abbreviated version)", 415.

[xlvii] Todd Gitlin, "Public sphere or public sphericules?" in *Media, Ritual and Identity*, ed. Tamar Liebes and James Curran (London & New York: Routledge, 1998, 168-174), 168.

[xlviii] Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Robert K. Merton, "Mass Communication, Popular Taste, and Organized Action", 461.

[xlix] Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York, London, Toronto, Sydney: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

[l] Michael Warner, "Publics and Counterpublics (abbreviated version)", 423-424.

[li] Skadi Loist and Ger Zielinski, "On the Development of Queer Film Festivals and Their Media Activism", in *Film Festival Yearbook 4: Film Festivals and Activism*, ed. Dina Iordanova and Leshu Torchin (St. Andrews: St Andrews Film Studies, 2012, 13-30), 50.

[lii] Ibid 50.

[liiii] Jane Mansbridge, "The Making of Oppositional Consciousness", in

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*Oppositional Consciousness: The Subjective Roots of Social Protest*, ed. Jane Mansbridge and Aldon Morris (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2001, 1-19).

[liv] Sharon Groch, "Free Spaces: Creating Oppositional Consciousness in the Disability Rights Movement", in *Oppositional Consciousness: The Subjective Roots of Social Protest*, ed. Jane Mansbridge and Aldon Morris (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2001, 65-98), 65.

[lv] Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, "Towards a Third Cinema", 61.

[lvi] Ibid 61.

[lvii] Erving Goffman, *Behavior in Public Places: Notes on the Social Organization of Gatherings*, 131.

[lviii] Ibid 132.

[lix] Ibid 135.

[lx] Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, "Towards a Third Cinema", 62.

[lxi] Liz Miller and Thomas Waugh, "The Process of Place: Grassroots Documentary Screenings", in *Screening Truth to Power: A Reader on Documentary Activism*, ed. Svetla Turnin and Ezra Winton (Montreal: Cinema Politica, 2014, 35-44), 42.

[lxii] Viktor Gecas, "Value Identities, Self-Motives, and Social Movements", in *Self, Identity, and Social Movements*, ed. Sheldon Stryker, Timothy J. Owens and Robert W. White (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000, 93-109), 101.

[lxiii] Cass Sunstein, *Republic.com* (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001), 70.

[lxiv] Everett M. Rogers, "Intermedia Processes and Powerful Media Effects", in *Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research*, ed. Jennings Bryant and Dolf Zillmann (Mahwah, New Jersey & London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 2002, 199-214).

[lxv] Ibid 209-210.

[lxvi] Ibid 212.

[lxvii] Kurt Lewin, "Frontiers in Group Dynamics: Concept, Method and Reality in Social Science; Social Equilibria and Social Change", *Human*

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*Relations* (1.5, 1947, 5-41), 35.

[\[lxviii\]](#) Ibid 37-38.

[\[lxix\]](#) Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements, Collective Action and Politics*, 21.

[\[lxx\]](#) James M. Jasper, "Recruiting Intimates, Recruiting Strangers: Building the Contemporary Animal Rights Movement", in *Waves of Protest: Social Movements Since the Sixties*, ed. Jo Freeman and Victoria Johnson (Lanham, Boulder, New York, Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. 1999, 65-84).

[\[lxxi\]](#) Ibid 65.

[\[lxxii\]](#) Erving Goffman, *Behavior in Public Places: Notes on the Social Organization of Gatherings*, 20

[\[lxxiii\]](#) Ibid 139.

[\[lxxiv\]](#) Matthea de Jong and Daan Bronkhorst, "Human Rights Film Festivals: Different Approaches to Change the World", 109.

[\[lxxv\]](#) Mariagiulia Grassilli, "Human Rights Film Festivals: Global/Local Networks for Advocacy", in *Film Festival Yearbook 4: Film Festivals and Activism*, ed. Dina Iordanova and Leshu Torchin (St. Andrews: St Andrews Film Studies, 2012, 31-47), 43.

[\[lxxvi\]](#) Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison, *Music and Social Movements: Mobilizing Traditions in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 11.

[\[lxxvii\]](#) Ibid, 7.

[\[lxxviii\]](#) Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, 153.

[\[lxxix\]](#) Elisabeth S. Clemens and Martin D. Hughes, "Recovering Past Protest: Historical Research on Social Movements", in *Methods of Social Movement Research*, ed. Bert Klandermans and Suzanne Staggenbord (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 2002, 201-230), 212.

[\[lxxx\]](#) Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics*, 18.

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[Lxxxii] Leshu Torchin, "Networked for Advocacy: Film Festivals and Activism", 6.

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