
Stories from the Margins: The Practicality and Ethics of Refugee Film Festivals

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Film festivals serve a variety of purposes; as Elsaesser puts it, film festivals are simultaneously marketplaces, showcases, competitions, and an international body that frequently has an implicit or explicit political stance.[\[1\]](#) The largest and most prestigious film festivals such as Cannes have relinquished their historical nationalist politics in favor of more diffuse goals of “raising awareness” for a variety of issues, including refugee issues.[\[2\]](#) However, topical film festivals have taken their ideological places. LGBT+ film festivals, women’s film festivals, and others have proliferated – albeit of varying size and quality – as well as nation- and region-specific festivals. A particularly interesting example is the development of refugee film festivals, which showcase films about or by refugees from all over the globe.

To begin, a clarification of terminology is necessary. “Refugee” typically refers to people who have claimed asylum in a country not their own. For the purposes of this paper it will also be used to refer to displaced persons who are in the process of claiming asylum or who are displaced within their own countries, as the lived experience of such people can be very similar to the experiences of refugees as a whole, despite differences of region, language, or cause.[\[3\]](#) Refugee matters are managed in the international sphere by the United Nations High Council on Refugees (UNHCR). A separate organization, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), handles the protracted issue of Palestinian refugees. Refugee film festivals partner with UNHCR, national organizations, or NGOs, as well as working independently from any other charity. No festival partners with UNRWA, although films sponsored by UNRWA have circulated in the traditional film festival circuit.[\[4\]](#)

Perhaps the best known, as well as one of the longest running refugee film festivals, is the UNHCR Refugee Film Festival, which began in 2006.[\[5\]](#) Spread across six cities in Japan, it aims to bring the stories of refugees to Japan and inspire attendees to take action. Most other refugee film festivals over the past decade have followed a similar model, aiming to communicate previously unheard stories with the hope of eventually moving audiences to do something about refugee crises – see examples such as Refugees Welcome Film Fest, FilmAid, Refugee Week Film Festival, and others.[\[6\]](#) Importantly, many of these festivals take place in regions that have little physical contact with any refugee population, and whose regional audiences might otherwise see refugee

problems as very distant from their own lives.

Refugee film festivals occupy a unique position in the broad network of film festivals. The implication of an identity-based event such as a women's film festival is both that female directors and producers will receive recognition denied them by a patriarchal world, and that women will be able to attend and see themselves represented accurately and honestly on screen. The same holds true for festivals that aim to amplify the cinematic voices of most marginalized groups. Many refugees, by contrast, are confined to specific places around the globe and may never actually attend the festivals intended to celebrate them, if the festival even includes films made by refugees.

Refugee film festivals tend to be open about this, claiming to raise awareness about the suffering of refugees across the globe, as well as serving a fundraising purpose. Few focus on a specific refugee crisis. Australia's Refugee Week Film Festival, for example, states on its website that its purpose is to "inform the public about refugees", without indicating a specific refugee population.^[7] Raising awareness is valuable, but unless it is linked to meaningful action, it simply becomes a self-congratulatory circle of half-hearted liberalism. This is not to say that all, or even most, of the refugee film festivals in the developed world fall into this trap. Indeed, Tascón offers a thoughtful exploration of how film can be a catalyst for changing a privileged spectatorship of suffering into an active experience of solidarity.^[8] Nonetheless, the sheer number of refugee film festivals is in sharp contrast with the number of initiatives attempting to bring films to refugees. Regardless of the effectiveness of refugee film festivals for raising awareness and funds, refugees themselves are being left out of the cultural conversation.

This paper is not an attempt to silence these existing festivals or claim that they should not exist; rather, it is a study of whose voices are not being heard. I am less concerned with criticizing the failings of these well-intentioned institutions, and more interested in exploring where film festivals have succeeded in reaching the people they are celebrating. Answering this question requires taking a broader look at what constitutes a "film festival". In order to understand film festivals as they occur in refugee camps, it is essential to move beyond a Eurocentric, or indeed a nation-centric, perspective. Films made by refugees are made from a transnational or "accented" perspective, and the content often aligns with the terminology of transnational or accented cinema more broadly.^[9] The theoretical underpinnings of studying transnational films may well apply to studying refugee film festivals as transnational events, with all the messiness and conflict that entails.

This messiness extends to defining film festivals. Whereas traditional film

festivals take place in designated venues, with pomp and circumstance, film festivals for refugees can be ramshackle constructions of inflatable screens and a single MC. Nonetheless, they are festivals in that they bring together multiple curated films for a public audience in a public sphere. Additionally, while many major film festivals title themselves by their location, refugee film festivals place the emphasis on the lack of location inherent in the refugee experience. An effective refugee film festival cannot have a permanent physical home because it aims to serve people who are living in a temporary status of displacement.

Furthermore, the external standards of what constitutes a “good” film festival cannot apply. Organization, glamor, and prestige are less essential than empowering the audience and fostering a cinematic dialogue, and to that end a successful film festival by and for refugees may be difficult to recognize from a traditional standpoint. Regional stars may have a place, as a symbol of the outside world standing in solidarity with the refugee population, but glamorous and exclusive events only serve to exclude the already-marginalized. What a well-intentioned outsider may consider to be a recognizable star - or, for that matter, a good film - may carry little meaning among audiences.

Along those lines, discussing a “circuit” of refugee film festivals is more or less meaningless. The most effective ways of reaching a transitory population are often themselves transitory, and the films may travel with the festival, such as in the case of Solar Cinema. Furthermore, as refugee camps may appear and disappear in a matter of months or years, pinning down any place as a “node” within a system of similar places that support festivals is a challenging task. Nonetheless, surrounded as such projects are by a crowd of supporters, activists, artists, and spectators, they are hardly isolated. The FiSahara festival has managed to stake its claim in the international human rights film festival circuit, but that special case is predicated on the semi-permanent nature of the camp. Because semi-permanent refugee camps are not desirable for either refugees or the country in which they reside, entry into the film festival circuit as it is traditionally conceptualized should not necessarily be desirable for refugee film festivals either.

In this paper, I will explore three examples, selected for the diversity both of their approaches and of their respective levels of funding and prestige. The first, Solar World Cinema, deals with refugees through an offshoot program serving people displaced by the 2015 earthquake in Nepal. Its mobile model is valuable for reaching transient and displaced populations. The next, Secret Cinema’s screening in the Calais camp, was a one-time event that aimed to raise awareness as well as alleviating suffering in a temporary and overcrowded camp. The final example is the most recognizable as a film festival; FiSahara, in the Sahrawi refugee

camp of Algeria, has established itself on the global human rights film festival circuit in part due to the protracted nature of the Sahrawi refugee crisis. Taken together, these examples span a variety of regions – Asia, Europe, Africa – and meet a wide variety of needs through innovative practical strategies. Nonetheless, they have ethical and theoretical themes in common.

The mission of Solar World Cinema is, according to their website, to “democratize the access to cinema”, bringing “unseen films to unusual places”.[\[10\]](#) Solar Cinema does not specifically target refugees, instead partnering with local organizations to reach all kinds of remote populations that may not have access to cinema. However, their model is perhaps the most effective for reaching transitory and remote refugee populations. Vans equipped with solar panels tour regions as varied as Kosovo, Croatia, and the southwestern United States, unfolding or inflating a screen after dark and projecting films in locations from beaches to village squares. These cinemas are self-contained, sustainable, and able to project 10 hours on a single charge. They can project DVD, Blue-Ray, and video files through the systems, making exhibition easy and accessible.

Solar World Cinema has an explicitly human rights and environmental justice focus, so their regularly curated program aims to communicate environmental issues without being patronizing or moralizing. With the legacy of informative travelling cinema, especially in developing regions, it is essential to be critical of programmed content, but the practical model itself is undeniably an effective one. The selected program travels with each van and changes on a yearly basis. On occasion, when Solar Cinema partners with a particular festival, they put out a specific call for films around themes appropriate to the festival. Furthermore, satellite cinemas utilizing a similar model have sprung up. EcoCinema, located in Uruguay and Mexico, began as a Solar Cinema program and has since begun operating independently. FilmAid also runs a similar program, but distinguishes it from its associated film festival.[\[11\]](#) However, the one that is of particular interest for a refugee context is located in Nepal.

Unlike larger Solar World Cinema circuits, Solar Cinema Nepal actively curates films that deal with local issues. It was founded in 2012 and took on a new role after the 2015 earthquake that displaced approximately 2.6 million people within Nepal.[\[12\]](#) Solar Cinema Nepal aims to show films made by Nepali filmmakers in Nepalese villages, often focusing on practical and emotional ways to recover from the trauma of environmental catastrophe and resulting displacement. In addition, it collaborates with villages to create new films with similar themes. This strategy is akin to the model of “from, by, for” proposed by the Nigeria Slum Film Festival.[\[13\]](#) The festival takes on a fundamentally local flavor,

communicating technical knowledge as well as emotional solidarity. These films can then be released online through digital platforms such as YouTube and Facebook, raising awareness in the global community.[\[14\]](#) This combination of local production and initial exhibition with global release in the digital sphere makes it an effective yet flexible model to apply to refugee crises in remote areas. However, in more established and accessible camps, such transportability and transience is no longer necessary.

In 2015, the well-known Secret Cinema group hosted a screening at the refugee camps in Calais as well as in partner cinemas around the world. The Calais refugee camp, or the Calais Jungle as it was informally known due to its poverty and hopelessness, was at its peak home to approximately 6,000 refugees from Iraq, Iran, and Syria, primarily young men.[\[15\]](#) Its poverty was a stark contrast to the surrounding affluence of the region, turning it into a cornerstone of refugee discourse in Europe. Secret Cinema's goal was to simultaneously improve the quality of life for the refugees in Calais, raise funds for the Refugee Council, and be a pro-refugee voice in the broader discourses of asylum and human rights. Along those lines, the screening was framed as a protest; the website opens with a quote from Bob Dylan and invites attendees and supporters to use the hashtag #secretprotest to discuss the event. The film shown to the refugees was different from the film shown to the more privileged supporters of Secret Cinema; the "secret" film was *Turtles Can Fly* [2005, dir. Bahman Ghobadi], a drama about refugee experience, while the camp screened *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jeyenge* [1995, dir. Aditya Chopra], a popular Bollywood romance.

Secret Cinema is a well-established cinematic institution known for its unique and experiential style, which allowed it to garner support easily. Like the political moments that continue to stem from the official film festival circuit, program founder Fabien Riggall used his existing platform to bring attention to refugee crises. The program provided a kit for anyone interested in showing *Turtles Can Fly* in conjunction with the Secret Cinema event, resulting in simultaneous screenings in 20 countries around the world.[\[16\]](#) It is unclear how much the event raised financially.

In the camps, the reaction to the film was positive. An estimated 1,000 of the 3,000-4,000 refugees living in the Calais Jungle camp at the time attended the screening, which was publicized through Arabic- and Pashto-language flyers, word of mouth, and the simple curiosity caused by the process of setting up the inflatable screen. As the screen inflated, organizers began to play music to draw attention, and a Nigerian MC living in London named Afrikan Boy introduced the screening.[\[17\]](#) The result was a convivial, festival-like atmosphere as Riggall introduced the

three-hour film.

In contrast to the “from, by, for” model proposed by the Slum festival in Nigeria, *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jeyenge* has no substantive ties to the camp at all and was specifically selected to be so.^[18] Hindi-language films with Arabic subtitles are popular across much of the Middle East, and *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jeyenge* is one of the most popular Bollywood films of all time. The film was therefore chosen to be universally enjoyable while simultaneously not directly from one of the numerous cultures represented in the Calais camp.

This choice illustrates a critical challenge with programming film festivals for refugee camps with populations from multiple cultures. Short of the model of Solar Cinema Nepal, where films are made by other refugees, it can be very challenging to create a high-quality program that will still be genuinely enjoyable for an audience that may have very different tastes. Furthermore, if a film from one group is picked, the others may feel excluded. An outside programmer must work with people within the refugee camp to understand the tastes of the camp and the politics of its residents, as Secret Cinema did. When the refugee population is united by a common language or culture, this process is expediated, but still necessary.

However, the success of the *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jeyenge* screening points to the universality of cinema as a cultural unifier, as well as their propensity to temporarily relieve suffering. Fabien Riggall describes Secret Cinema’s mission succinctly: “as a cultural organization, we should react to this.”^[19] There is no doubt that this reaction, while different from that of Solar Cinema Nepal, is valuable. Even though the film itself has no ties to the refugees, their opinions and tastes were considered when selecting the film, and the result was a success.

Less successful, however, was the lack of continuation. The Calais camp was razed a year after the Secret Cinema screening, but an estimated seven hundred refugees remain, now without even the marginal support provided by the camp. Furthermore, refugees continue to enter Europe; over a hundred thousand refugees and migrants entered Europe in the first half of 2017 alone. The problems that Secret Cinema aimed to address have not gone away, even as media attention has moved on. This is in part a result of the brand cultivated by Secret Cinema. Its episodic format lends itself well to screenings in different areas, but its brand also prioritizes the uniqueness of each screening experience. At some point, the choice was made to not continue the program, and nothing has come to fill its place.

A more enduring model is found in the FiSahara festival. Located in a

semi-permanent refugee camp, it has a consistent location and reoccurs year after year. Also known as the Sahara International Film Festival, it takes place in the Sahrawi refugee camps in Algeria, which have been in existence for over forty years.[\[20\]](#) Formed as a result of the Western Sahara War, the exact numbers of refugees and the amount of aid they receive is deeply politicized, but estimates indicate nearly a hundred thousand refugees live in the region.[\[21\]](#) This situation is anything but desirable; many of the people living in these camps were born there and have neither integrated into Algerian society nor returned home. It is also not unique - nearly twelve million people worldwide live in protracted refugee situations, including 5.2 million refugees from Palestine alone. Such situations warrant a different approach in terms of festival organization and programming.

Unlike the mobility of Solar Cinema and the short-term scope of Secret Cinema, FiSahara has both a consistent location and a consistent place in the calendar year, earning it a spot on the human rights film festival circuit.[\[22\]](#) This more traditional methodology has been discussed at length elsewhere, and I will not delve into it here.[\[23\]](#) However, there are elements of the FiSahara program that are worth discussing in this context.

In response to the extreme poverty and the forgotten nature of the crisis, the FiSahara festival started in 2003 with the goal of empowering the Sahrawi people through film. In 2011 it made that goal explicit by starting a permanent, year-round associated film school. Young Sahrawi refugees are making what FiSahara claims are the first uniquely Sahrawi films, which are then shown within the community as well as at the official festival.[\[24\]](#) The result is that Sahrawi refugees have possibly the best access to their own films of any refugee population in the world.

The school is year-round and offers two-year-long programs for its 18-25 year old students. It provides them with film and television education from a technical and artistic point of view.[\[25\]](#)(1) It intends to preserve and share Sahrawi culture through film production, not just film exhibition and distribution. This is similar, albeit in a more formal context, to the work of Solar Cinema Nepal, which also encourages film production. However, unlike Solar Cinema Nepal, the FiSahara Film School offers stable, long-term classes in a single location with the possibility of further employment afterwards. This is at least partially due to the greater logistical opportunities afforded by FiSahara's global reach and established location and offers meaningful economic as well as cultural impact.

Of these three examples of strategies to bring cinema to refugee populations, several logistical issues emerge. The location and probable

permanence of the camps must be considered. A new and hopefully temporary camp like the Calais camp is more suited to one-time festivals or mobile festivals that can follow refugees if they need to move. Remote camps may require mobile solutions. In such a situation, showing films produced by the refugees can be logistically impossible, although week-long workshops could potentially produce valuable short films for exhibition in the camp and abroad, as demonstrated by Solar Cinema Nepal.

However, as Secret Cinema demonstrated, an outside programmer can still make conscious choices about the kind of cinema that will appeal in the specific situation, and engage in dialogue with members of the camp to help inform that decision. Such programming may be less innovative than the programming shown at a refugee film festival in an urban, privileged context, and it may be less relatable than content created by refugees, but it is still valuable to its audience. Choosing appropriate films requires a reorienting of taste – moving away from the privileging of art cinema within traditional film festival circuits.[\[26\]](#) A more cynical view would refer to this as catering to the lowest common denominator, but I believe a more positive reading is possible. It is enough for cinema to be a simply enjoyable experience. Furthermore, a wide variety of people, sometimes with nothing else in common, can enjoy the same film. In the context of refugee camps, which are often made up of people fleeing ethnic conflict, this simple joy can be undervalued but incredibly meaningful.

These kinds of positive experiences can be challenging to implement. A benefit of applying the Solar Cinema model to refugee film festivals is that it allows for the unpredictability of refugee situations. Refugee camps may vanish within a short period of time, or alternatively, may remain far longer than anticipated. A mobile cinema allows for continuous, flexible programming in a way that a one-off event like Secret Cinema does not. However, Secret Cinema has the advantage of a global following of dedicated fans; this external support is an essential piece of creating a sustainable program.

Beyond the concerns of program sustainability, these temporary refugee camps also draw significant resources from the surrounding community and can leave substantial traces upon the land. Any initiative within these camps should therefore try to be environmentally sustainable. Both Solar Cinema and Secret Cinema used inflatable screens that are easily constructed and removed. In areas where electricity can be minimal or non-existent, the Solar Cinema model becomes appealing. Powered simply by a van and a solar panel, these cinemas can provide festivals all over the world, going where the need is greatest without being a drag on already overstrained resources.

These resources are drained in part because many refugee situations take years to resolve. When refugee camps take on a semi-permanent status, it becomes easy to forget them. Part of bringing cinema to such situations is committing to a long-term, sustainable program such as FiSahara. These programs should be able to provide more for their audiences than just simple amusement; both FiSahara and Solar Cinema Nepal have associated film schools and provide a space for cinematic conversation within the community. FiSahara is able to have a more long-term program in part due to its consistent location, but the concept remains the same. Giving an authentic voice to protracted refugee situations helps keep them in the forefront of public consciousness and increases the likelihood that their situation will reach a resolution.

One technique for giving a voice to such situations is through film education. Film schools associated with festivals more broadly are not unheard of; festivals as prestigious as the Berlinale have associated production programs.[\[27\]](#) However, in a refugee context there can be both enthusiasm for the unique stories that can be told and a reasonable concern that organizers will stifle students' creativity through a desire to encourage more "authentic" film, promoting autobiographical narratives over more imaginative ones. Ultimately, refugees are so silenced otherwise that a concern of stifled creativity cannot be said to be the most severe one. Such schools must, nonetheless, make a conscious commitment to keep production education both rigorous and liberating.

A further aspect worth discussing is that of curation. It goes without saying that members of the camp should help curate the festival, but each example discussed here has a different purpose to their curation. Secret Cinema wanted to create a happy experience for refugees while simultaneously raising awareness of their situation, hence their choice to show a different film in the camp than at sister screenings. By contrast, Solar Cinema Nepal envisions film as an educational tool for and by struggling villages. Neither of these aspects are necessarily less legitimate than the other; they simply fill different needs.

As mentioned earlier, curation of this sort requires stepping back from preconceived notions of what makes a "good" film. Not all films chosen to bring pleasure to stressed, overwhelmed refugees are going to be cinematic masterpieces - a label already often informed by colonialist and imperialist impulses. Furthermore, many films made by inexperienced filmmakers, such as the films produced by Solar Cinema Nepal, will have technical errors. Nonetheless, if they communicate something meaningful to their audiences, even just a simple message of hope and solidarity, they have succeeded.

Beyond practical aspects of production, exhibition, and curation, there is

the larger issue of associated culture that comes with these kinds of festivals. Every festival cultivates some kind of brand around itself, from the glamour associated with the Cannes Film Festival to the counter-cultural image cultivated by festivals such as the Radical Film Network in Glasgow.[\[28\]](#) However, unlike such traditional festivals and like the refugees they serve, refugee festivals have no national allegiance. Instead, they moor themselves to either a distribution method (Secret Cinema, Solar Cinema) or to a region, rather than a country (FiSahara). Historically, more traditional film festivals have been a kind of national cultural export, inviting cosmopolitan international attendees to partake of a specific country's cultural riches. These refugee film festivals, by contrast, attempt to provide comfort and solidarity to displaced peoples whose national affiliations have been violently taken from them. These examples still export culture; all of the festivals mentioned here invite external participation. However, the export is no longer tied to a specific nation-state, instead entering into dialogue with the home state, the host state, and the refugee experience.[\[29\]](#)

Furthermore, of the three examples discussed here, only one - FiSahara - fits in with the broader image of what kind of culture a festival "should" export. Secret Cinema is more of a distribution company than a festival coordinator, although they have been included in this paper due to their screening for refugees, and Solar Cinema is too physically and temporally unmoored to seem like a traditional festival. However, these are the most practical ways to reach millions of potential audience members, and in other ways - a curated selection of films shown for a large audience in a specific location - they are very much like festivals.

Exploring these kinds of initiatives from a theoretical perspective, therefore, requires either expanding the current definition of festival or creating an entirely new category for them. Certainly, a new category is possible - FilmAid adopts just such a split model[\[30\]](#) - but that excludes festivals that have the same goal and criteria but a more formal approach, such as FiSahara. Furthermore, other initiatives with the same goals may come to appear more like a traditional festival, drawing the boundaries of such a category into question. Therefore, I believe it is more efficient and effective to expand the category of "film festival" by including these transnational organizations under that large and respected label.

Furthermore, this act of inclusion lends these programs the precise kind of legitimacy that was discussed earlier. If the film community at large is willing to accept such initiatives as film festivals, they have passed a significant hurdle in the construction of their image, however unconventional. This theoretical extension therefore has very real practical benefits. Admittedly, such a labeling may be met with

resistance, but it is worth the effort both to support these festivals and to welcome other creative offshoots of the traditional festival label.

However, if initiatives bringing films to refugees are labeled festivals, ethical concerns about power and privilege arise. While Secret Cinema undoubtedly created an enjoyable experience for refugees in the Calais camp, they also promoted their own brand. On the other hand, they also reached audiences that might not have attended a traditional refugee film festival. This kind of “do-good” advertising provokes a complex response. Promoting a for-profit company through service work is undeniably better than using the money to run a traditional ad campaign, but it still benefits a corporation first and foremost, and creates a risk that the company will exploit those it claims to serve. Refugees have very little social and economic capital, which makes it near impossible for them to defend themselves against such exploitation. By contrast, industry professionals and the overlapping consumer sphere have relatively significant socioeconomic power. Similar to the power imbalance possible when making films about refugees, creating cultural spaces for refugees can result in a kind of exploitative imperialism.[\[31\]](#)

The organizers, funders, and visitors of such festivals must therefore be aware of what constitutes exploitation and who is participating in such behaviors. The first aspect is consent; refugees must want a festival to take place and the festival should be organized to consume as few resources as possible. Additionally, refugees must be incorporated into all levels of the decision-making process, especially programming and advertising. Part of this is due to the diversity of refugee populations; there can be no one-size-fits-all model, especially in camps like the Calais Jungle where the residents are from a variety of linguistic, national, and cultural backgrounds. The other part is to allow refugees to have agency over a part of their lives, a valuable source of dignity amongst the instability and loss of control that characterizes many refugee experiences.

A further ethical consideration is that of publicity. Many refugees are uncomfortable with being filmed or photographed, or simply have been preyed upon by too many hungry media outlets.[\[32\]](#) On the other hand, funding does not magically materialize, and some kind of outside promotion is necessary for continuing funding. Secret Cinema’s model of simultaneous screenings is a helpful tool here; an event, united by a mission if not by physical space, that both raises awareness and relieves suffering. It is hardly the only model; another would be screening the films made by the community to wider audiences, like Solar Cinema Nepal. Additionally, festivals like FiSahara that adopt more traditional non-profit advertising methods excel when they make special efforts to adopt practices of cultural sensitivity and informed consent.

The number of refugee film festivals in the “developed” world indicates a very real passion to do something to relieve the suffering of refugee populations through cinema. This passion is incredibly valuable, but in its current incarnation cultural resources are kept within a relatively privileged sphere, rarely interacting with the people who most need them. Where these cultural resources result in broadening understanding and enacting social change, they are well-applied, but some of this passion must also be directed towards those directly experiencing refugee trauma. This paper has illustrated some of the strategies in place to do so, from inflatable screens and solar-powered vans to established film festivals and film schools. These examples open up interesting theoretical directions as well, potentially changing and broadening conceptions of film festivals.

A cynic would question if films even matter to people fleeing horrific circumstances and often struggling to meet their day-to-day needs. It goes without saying that film festivals are not the first line of humanitarian relief in a crisis, but they can be a welcome respite from a difficult and heartbreaking life. Assuming that refugees will not appreciate cinema veers dangerously close to colonialist ideas of the uncivilized “other”. Refugees come from all kinds of backgrounds and social classes, and there is no universal experience of displacement. (2) Additionally, the same could be said about any marginalized group that has communicated their plight and eased their suffering through the power of stories, and the only possible response to such a cynical view is the observed one; films do matter. In the words of an unnamed attendee of the Secret Cinema event, “we are happy because we sing, we dance, and we saw a long film”.[\[33\]](#)

Beyond the simple love of story, refugee film festivals stand to benefit a variety of refugee populations in a host of ways. Refugees hoping to settle in their current country of residence may welcome a chance to learn more about their new country, and their peers who wish to return may still find such cultural exchange interesting and valuable. Groups like the Sahrawi who feel abandoned by the outside world may see film and the associated trappings as a sign that they are not forgotten. Refugees who feel voiceless can see their own struggles played out in a cinematic context; depending on the resources available, they can start to tell their own stories. Healing from the trauma of displacement takes more than meeting physical needs; it takes cultural and emotional support, and film can be a starting place for this process.

The examples selected for this essay demonstrate a wide variety of techniques, goals, and levels of prestige. FiSahara resembles a traditional film festival in many ways, while Solar Cinema has neither a fixed location nor a fixed date. Secret Cinema prioritizes a cinematic event,

while FiSahara and Solar Cinema Nepal have both moved into production as well as exhibition. Screens can be assembled solely for the purpose of showing a film, take the form of semi-permanent installations, or be entirely mobile and self-sustaining. Programming varies from the entertaining to the educational, and can be produced by members of the camp or by a completely different national cinema. This diversity calls into question ideas of curation, quality, and what constitutes a “film festival”. However, each festival carries the same underlying message; that films matter, and that bringing films to everyone is a worthwhile task that will benefit the global community. Despite all other differences, lovers of film can agree on that.

Notes

- *Original text: “Con la idea de formar y dar opciones de empleo a los jóvenes saharauis; esta escuela servirá para preservar y difundir el patrimonio cultural saharauí, el castellano como segunda lengua y la participación en festivales de cine en los campamentos y en el extranjero.”*
- Special thanks, here and throughout the piece, to Colorado College Refugee Alliance and Lutheran Family Services for providing training to interested parties on refugee resettlement and appropriate conduct.

[1] Thomas Elsaesser, “Film Festival Networks,” *European Cinema: Face to Face with Hollywood*, University of Amsterdam Press, Amsterdam, 2005, 88.

[2] For an example, see Cannes’ all day event in 2016 which highlighted refugee voices in film. Sydney Levine, “Refugee Voices in Film: An All Day Event at 2016 Cannes Film Festival,” IndieWire, 5 May 2016, <http://www.indiewire.com/2016/05/refugee-voices-in-film-an-all-day-event-at-2016-cannes-film-festival-287898/>.

[3] “What Is a Refugee? Definition and Meaning | USA for UNHCR,” USA for UNHCR, <https://www.unrefugees.org/refugee-facts/what-is-a-refugee/>.

[4] An example is *The Road to Silverstone*. “UNRWA Film Receives Prize in International Festival,” UNRWA, June 13, 2013, <https://www.unrwa.org/newsroom/press-releases/unrwa-film-receives-prize-international-festival>.

[5] “About the UNHCR Refugee Film Festival,” UNHCR Refugee Film Festival, 2017, <http://unhcr.refugeefilm.org/2017/en/about/overview/>.

[6] “Refugees Welcome Film Fest,” FilmFreeway, 2017, <https://filmfreeway.com/RefugeesWelcomeFilmFest>; “Community Outreach,” FilmAid, <https://www.filmaid.org/community-outreach/>; “Refugee Film Festival,” Refugee Week, <https://www.refugeeweek.org.au/refugee-film-festival/>.

[7] “Refugee Week Film Festival,” <https://www.refugeeweek.org.au/about/overview/>

[8] Sonia M. Tascón, *Human rights film festivals: activism in context*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

[9] Hamid Naficy, *An accented cinema: exilic and diasporic filmmaking*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001.

[10] “Our Mission,” Solar World Cinema, <http://www.solarcinema.org/over/>.

[11] FilmAid, <https://www.filmaid.org/community-outreach/>.

[12] Marita Swain, “IDMC » Nepal: One Year after the Earthquakes, an End to Displacement Is Still Years Away,” IDMC » Bosnia and Herzegovina: Internal Displacement in Brief, April 25, 2016, <http://www.internal-displacement.org/library/expert-opinion/2016/nepal-one-year-after-the-earthquake-an-end-to-displacement-is-still-years-away/>.

[13] Lindiwe Dovey, Joshua McNamara, and Federico Olivieri, “‘From, by, for’— Nairobi’s slum film festival, film festival studies, and the practices of development,” *JUMP CUT: A Review of Contemporary Media*. 2013, <http://ejumpcut.org/archive/jc55.2013/DoveySFFNairobi/index.html>.

[14] “Solar Cinema Nepal,” YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCnwW9N_uBcp1MOIOmPRqkuQ.

[15] Amelia Gentleman, “The Horror of the Calais Refugee Camp: ‘We Feel like We Are Dying Slowly’,” *The Guardian*, November 03, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/03/refugees-horror-calais-jungle-refugee-camp-feel-like-dying-slowly>.

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Notes on Contributor

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