9. Unraveling Curatorial Dilemmas: Practice-Led and Auto-Ethnography in the Study of Human Rights Film Festivals

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Abstract: This chapter proposes a methodological approach that can reveal the often hidden to the outsider eye, difficult decision-making process and the factors that influence programming and the ethos of human rights film festivals.. Drawing on the main case study (Document Human Rights Film Festival in Scotland) this chapter discusses the use of practice-led ethnography and autoethnography to the study of programming film festivals and the findings they generated. These methods contributed to the understanding of the often difficult-to-articulate subjective decisions behind curation as well as the creative, emotional labour involved in this process. This chapter also reflects on the dual role of the researcher and/as practitioner, the challenges and opportunities of being both insider and outsider, fulfilling industry and academic agendas.

Keywords: ethnography, practice-led research, film festival research, festival programming, festival labour

On a Sunday afternoon in January 2020, a few months after completing my PhD thesis on the politics and practices of programming human rights film festivals (Colta 2020), I had one final important presentation to deliver: an overview of my findings and recommendations to the festival that has been my main case study: Document Human Rights Film Festival[1] (henceforth

1 Document Human Rights Film Festival website: https://www.documentfilmfestival.org/. Last Accessed October 3, 2024.

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called "Document"), the longest-running film festival in Scotland dedicated to human rights-oriented non-fiction cinema within a local and global context. Next to me at the round table sat the current coordinators alongside the founders, board members, and thesis supervisors, all of whom had contributed to the longitudinal study of Document. I shared with them the findings accumulated during two years of fieldwork, discussed the findings in relation to the broader international human rights film festival landscape, as well as the analysis of archival materials which covered historical data from Document's seventeen years of existence. In this chapter, I will explain and reflect on the methods used during my doctoral research, focusing on the mixed-method approach that included statistical analysis of programming and contextualizing it with practice-led ethnography, where the researcher takes an active role in the activity and organization that is the main field of study. I will discuss some of the findings that these methods generated, such as imbalances in the process of programming, in terms of access to films that represent a diversity of voices, in terms of criteria for the selection, and in terms of the challenges of working as a film curator or programmer. I will also discuss the role and responsibility of the researcher to address injustices and challenge misconceptions in the field, concluding with the outcomes of the knowledge exchange session referred to above, at the end of the PhD project.

Researching Human Rights Film Festivals: Context and Methods

Human rights film festivals have proliferated over the past 30 years, becoming specialized cultural intermediaries that actively shape and define "human rights cinema" (Grassilli 2012) and ways for engaging audiences in conversation and potential action. Despite the common thematic focus and the collaborative nature of their activity based on knowledge and resource-sharing rather than competition, human rights film festivals come in all shapes and sizes, organizational structures, and programming approaches. By 2020 when I completed the research for my thesis, I identified over 130 film festivals that define themselves as human rights oriented, and each of them is influenced by the specific local and temporal context in which they operate (Colta 2020). The scholarship so far has addressed the manifold manifestations of human rights film festivals and their history and activism (Iordanova and Torchin 2012), their development in relation to local contexts and the "humanitarian gaze" (Tascón 2015), and their power to transform audiences into political subjects (Tascón and Wils 2017). There

are also notable contributions that explore the process of programming from professionals who draw on their own practical experience to explain how human rights discourses and films circulate globally (see Blažević 2012; Kulhánková et al. 2015). However, the decision-making process and the factors and criteria that influence programming remain relatively under-explored. Also, more research is needed into grassroots, autonomous organizations guided by a do-it-yourself practice and ethos, operating at the fringes of mainstream culture (Lowndes 2016). Such organizations, their politics and practices, tend to be overlooked by film festival studies, as they do not hold the same prestige or commercial influence as their top-tier counterparts. Nevertheless, human rights film festivals in their manifold organizational forms and politics, actively contribute to discourses around human rights, activism, and cinema, problematizing the representation of human suffering at a distance.

My thesis and this chapter explore the perspective of a film festival located in Scotland, in the Global North, in a liberal democratic country, while showing an international program of films. The issues of representation of other nations and suffering on screen are at the core of this study and determine a critical, self-reflexive, and practice-led approach. This approach was facilitated by the Applied Research Collaborative Studentship (ARCS), designed as an institutional partnership between two universities—Glasgow and St. Andrews—and Document. This festival became my main case study, providing access to its resources and archives as well as an opportunity to actively participate in its activities.

Founded in 2003, Document began as a grassroots organization, exploring human rights issues through documentary alongside debates and discussion events. Over the years, it developed into a professional cultural organization but maintained a relatively small-scale team and program compared to other festivals, showcasing around twenty to thirty films over a long weekend in one main venue, with a team of two or three year-round core staff. Nevertheless, it is an important example to explore due to its close historical links to the Glasgow grassroots art scenes as well as for its international reputation, as the only UK member of the Human Rights Film Network, a network of human rights film festivals from all over the world.

The research design was developed as a longitudinal case study of Document, using a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods associated with "practice-led ethnography," auto-ethnography, and action research, which were deployed gradually as my fieldwork progressed over two years. I started from an outsider position, exploring the wider landscape of human rights film festivals, looking at how they have developed in close connection to

their local history and stakeholders. I then continued as an insider, studying the festival's archives, doing interviews with key people, and collecting data about funding, films, and audiences during the two editions covered during the fieldwork. My role gradually became more involved in the organization's activities, as I actively participated in the programming process as a member of the selection panel and I contributed to decisions regarding the festival's output. This approach was informed by "practice-led research" that "focuses on the nature of creative practice, leading to new knowledge of operational significance for that practice, in order to advance knowledge about or within practice" (Skains 2018, 85). Undertaking programming responsibilities, I focused on the task and range of activities as well as on the conditions in which programming takes place and how it operates. These different activities that I undertook as an active member in the organization were not included in the research project from the start. However, I quickly realized that such a close involvement was essential, as I had to go through these experiences to understand on a personal level the work and the challenges that the programmers can encounter. This access and positioning within the organization had to be constantly negotiated, guided by the dual role of the ARCS research project—to advance academic knowledge and to disseminate findings about film festival programming to be used as a resource for the festival to develop its practices and operations.

Counting Imbalances in Festival Programming—Quantitative Data

Festival scholars have called for more quantitative data to provide a balance between facts and narratives, between the particular and the general (Armatage 2009; de Valck 2007; Stringer 2003). Many of these scholars explored how festivals are extremely concerned with their image and the way they present themselves, choosing what information to display, publicly or privately, with researchers or journalists. Thus, access has often been indispensable to researchers seeking the facts that can paint the fuller picture behind the stories. Similar to other ethnographic studies of film festivals that aim to balance qualitative detail with quantifiable facts (Mitchell 2017; Dickson 2014), I also found that "hard data" revealed striking results that complemented the qualitative detail obtained during fieldwork.

As a member of the selection panel for both the 2016 and 2017 editions, I had access to the full list of submitted films received through the open submission process. To submit to Document was free and open to everyone,

regardless of country, year of production, or premiere status. Within a five-month window, the festival received over 220 submissions each year, which is typical of festivals of a similar theme and size as Document. In order to assess the accessibility and outreach of this process, I grouped the films by the main country of production to discover their geographical distribution, which revealed striking results. As you can see below (tables 9.1 and 9.2), both charts reveal how Western Europe dominated the submissions section for both editions. The fewest submissions came from the African continent (four films in 2016 and eight in 2017).

Table 9.1. Number of submitted films by continent/region 2016

Africa	Asia	Australia & NZ	Europe (E)	Europe (W)	Latin America	Middle East	North America
4	21	7	23	111	25	16	15

Table 9.2. Number of submitted films by continent/region 2017

Africa	Asia	Europe (E)	Europe (W)	Latin America	Middle East	North America
8	15	42	116	13	25	17

One of the possible reasons for this disparity is that Document is a European festival, and its profile and reputation were built in this context. This data also reinforces the idea that human rights discourse is a Western construct as well as the fact that film industries in Western Europe are more developed[2] and thus produce significantly more films. In turn, selecting films from these sources, had the potential of perpetuating the humanitarian gaze, a concept formulated by Sonia Tascón that evokes a relationship of unequal power between who is watching and who is being watched. In her 2015 book *Human Rights Film Festivals: Activism in Context*, Tascón suggests that films and consequently festivals, can establish a gaze depending on the geographical direction in which they turn when representing suffering—from a distanced, privileged position seeking impoverishment and pity in others. Tascón explains the tension of representing human rights violations and suffering at a distance, or the "humanitarian gaze" through a set of looking relations, whereby some organizations or films "look out"

2 Other regions such as North America also have very developed film industries, but in this particular case, the data was not as significant.

at others' troubles from a detached, distant position or "look in," framing and understanding their own.

When I shared this finding with the festival team, it sparked a conversation on how to make the festival more accessible and to encourage submissions from under-represented filmmakers. The data showed that the festival wasn't reaching out to those groups despite the *no-fee-and-no-premiere* policy. As such, guided by the findings and by the coordinators' renewed curatorial aims, the festival transitioned to a targeted submissions approach, sharing the call with organizations, filmmakers, and networks working with filmmakers and producers outside Europe and North America, to encourage more direct engagement with groups that might not have engaged otherwise. It also meant sourcing films directly from distributors or filmmakers to fill in the gaps in representation and plurality of voices. While the editions that followed are beyond the scope of this research, and have not been studied in-depth in relation to this new approach, rethinking the submissions process generated more awareness and self-reflection over representation and the active role of festivals in reaching out to marginalized filmmakers and their stories.

Unraveling Curatorial Dilemmas—Practice-Led Ethnography

The process of curating or programming a film festival differs from one festival to the other. The decisions are mainly subjective, driven by the curators' instinct and are rarely articulated to the public or even internally to the team. A practice-led ethnographic approach and an active involvement in the curatorial process can illuminate some of the reasons behind these decisions by exploring them on the ground, as they unfold.

For this, I immersed myself in the field as an observer and active participant in the selection panel. I watched over 110 films during fieldwork for which I did additional research, wrote programming notes, participated in programming meetings, organized interviews[3] and kept a research diary reflecting on this work and how that made me feel.

Using these methods for collecting data, I was attempting to understand the criteria and ethos that guide curation, and which often remain unspoken. Some of these methods were more effective than others. The interviews, for instance, only revealed a part of the story. When asked about criteria, some

3 In addition to two group interviews with the coordinators who led the two editions of the festival during fieldwork, I also interviewed the festival's founders, one of the former coordinators, and other collaborators who worked closely with the festival over several years.

of the programmers said: "the idea is that it's open and that there aren't any criteria." Some of their programming notes were ambiguous as well, with wording such as: "interesting, moving story; not good enough," "fine; can't see it at Document." Some programming notes were detailed, focusing on the form, content, or reaction to the films. Programming meetings were also rich in debates about formal quality over content or urgency of subject matter over ethics. The process of watching films on my own, writing notes about them, and discussing them in a group setting expanded my understanding of the criteria. Eventually I started noticing patterns in interpreting and reviewing films. This led me to identify ten main criteria that illuminate the programmers' values and responsibilities towards the filmmakers, the audience, and the profession itself. These represent the main dilemmas encountered in the programming process and they are further nuanced and established through communication and collaboration among each other and with other contributors who can influence this process (such as board members, funders, external experts, or advisors etc.). Most of these criteria can be applied to other festivals, as they address more general notions of aesthetics, ethics, representation, and pragmatic reasons. However, some of these curatorial questions (for example, questions 5–7) are specifically relevant to human rights or political/identity-based festivals.

Key curatorial questions
1. Is the film "well-made"?
2. Does the film add variety to the program through form and/or structure?
3. Does the film address Document's thematic interests?
4. Is the film ethically made?
5. Does the filmmaker have a personal connection to or lived experience of the subject matter?
6. Does the film offer a "looking in" perspective?[4]
7. Does the film offer positive/hopeful stories?
8. Is the film relevant in the current political climate?
9. Can this film secure funding?[5]
10. Would the film go well with a specific venue/context in terms of themes, occasions, or collaborations?

4 "Looking in" was mentioned above in relation to Tascon's conceptualization of the "humanitarian gaze." In this context, it refers to the programmers actively seeking films that address domestic issues, in order to encourage an active, critical spectator who can relate more directly to the local context.

5 This pragmatic criterion referred to the potential opportunities to apply for funding with a certain film or strand.

For example, when addressing a film's formal quality, there was a consensus that a distinctive vision, filmmaking skills, attention to detail in terms of sound design and editing were very important. However, equally important and praised were the amateur camerawork or rough-style aesthetic if they were in line with the subject matter or the conditions of filming.

Similarly, a lot of attention was given to the ethics of filmmaking, as the programmers often analyzed the relationship with the subject, the claims made in the film as well as the context of production. For example, one of the points of debate revolved around the level of intrusion of the filmmaker or the use of techniques from fiction storytelling (re-enactments, animation, using professional actors, or staging scenes). For instance, Document 2017 selected *Left on Purpose* (2015), a documentary about Mayer Vishner, an anti-war activist of the 1960s. The film focuses on the man during his old age, as he battles addiction, depression, and considers suicide. As the film progresses, the filmmaker becomes more involved in the story and in trying to stop Vishner from taking his own life. The tension that looms over the entire film (and is indeed expressed throughout) is the fear that the camera becomes an enabler, capable of pushing the protagonist closer to suicide, or being complicit to a tragedy in the making. The ethical debate and the filmmaker's role in the protagonist's life are central not only to the film, but to the programmers as well. This invited reflection on the potential impact on audiences, which raised further ethical issues about presenting the subject as a vulnerable figure, influenced by the presence of the camera and the attention provided by subsequent visibility. Evaluating this film and others like it for Document prompted an exercise in self-reflexion by the programmers and a conclusion was reached that there would be a need for providing additional space where these ethics can be discussed, questioned, and analyzed with the audience. Through conversation and by reflecting on our choices, it became apparent that such techniques are justifiable in documentaries, when they are done with honesty and with an ethical approach towards the subject and the context.

Another curatorial dilemma focused on the spectatorship of suffering—many of the films we watched presented violence, gross human rights abuses, and graphic images of suffering. This prompted many conversations around the importance of showing these images to raise awareness and provoke a reaction versus desensitizing audiences and perpetuating compassion fatigue.[6] The programmers felt they had a responsibility to be a filtering

6 This concept has been discussed by several scholars, including Susan D. Moeller (1999) and Lillie Chouliaraki (2006) to argue that exposure to human suffering in the media can

wall between the filmmakers and the audience, limiting the number of films that depict trauma and suffering. The programming notes revealed countless instances of films that were "distressing," "sad," or "unwatchable" for showing images of violence, torture, badly injured people, or dead bodies. On the one hand, such films depict the realities that many people are facing and can create a sense of urgency and mobilization. On the other hand, they can perpetuate feelings of pity towards powerless victims, indifference, or choosing not to see at all (Juhasz 2016). Document programmers, driven by their responsibility towards audiences, wanted to challenge this perception by offering alternatives: "heroic victims," empowered protagonists that have agency to fight back (Nash 2018) and elements of humor or hope, which can be powerful tools to create empathy rather than apathy for the viewer and convey new beliefs and perceptions about human rights films.

These are some examples of curatorial questions or dilemmas that programmers of film festivals, in particular those dealing with documentary or human rights cinema, that emerged from observation and active participation. These are not fixed or clear-cut criteria, but they inform the final selection and decisions in terms of how films are then presented to the audience or paired with other off-screen events. Even if the criteria change over time and are shaped by each team of programmers, it is important to verbalize and make the curatorial criteria visible, highlighting the potential biases, gaps, and responsibilities inherent to this work. Not only would this transparency create more self-awareness among the team itself, but it would also encourage a more open relationship with filmmakers and other stakeholders.

Auto-Ethnography and Action Research: Programming as Emotional and Precarious Labor

The insider position in the field offered me an insight into the conditions of programming and the type of work involved. While programming is a collective, creative effort, it often carries a tremendous emotional toll, for festival workers more generally, but especially for human rights-oriented ones, due to the thematic focus, which will be discussed in more detail below. Throughout most of the programming process, the programmers did not know if the funding they applied for would be awarded, if they

lead to emotional and physical exhaustion, no longer able to feel compassion for others, thus disconnecting the viewer from the people represented on screen.

would be paid for their work, and if they would be able to cover screening fees for any of the films selected. The festival staff mentioned feelings of anxiety thinking about their own and the festival's sustainability, while the public-facing narratives had to present an optimistic image of growth, constant renewal, and excitement.

Furthermore, the constant exposure to images of suffering had a significant impact, something which I discovered first-hand. As I mentioned earlier, I kept a research diary during fieldwork, guided by auto-ethnography which "seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience" (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2010). This is an extract from this diary where I describe the conditions of watching a documentary as part of the selection panel:

> The film follows the protagonist, a teenager from Afghanistan living in an asylum seekers' center for minors in Denmark. He is about to turn 18 and be kicked out of the center or deported to his home country. While watching the film, I was very aware of what had just happened a few days ago in Germany when a 17-year old Afghan teenager and refugee had launched an axe attack on a train. This comes after several other terrorist incidents in France, Germany and other parts of Western Europe. It feels like whenever I turn on the TV, I hear about a new atrocity happening and this has definitely affected my film viewing, especially those that focus on asylum seekers or refugees living in Europe. I am trying to find different stories to those told in the media beyond this constant state of threat and fear but it is difficult to overcome this over-burdening feeling. (Fieldwork journal extract, July 21, 2016)

This extract echoed the countless comments of my colleagues who expressed feeling "sad," "distressed," "overwhelmed" by images of suffering while encountering such suffering on a daily basis in mainstream media. These findings made me approach programming as a form of emotional labor, where the programmers suppress their feelings of anxiety, anger, or distress to convey the narrative of success for its stakeholders. Having these feelings towards some of the films did not influence the programming process beyond the responsibility to balance difficult representations of suffering with some positive, hopeful stories. However, it did push the programmers to become more resilient throughout the film-viewing process. One of the programmers evoked the act of suppressing feelings: "You have to engage less with emotions than as an audience member" in order to be able to "allow yourself to react to films" (Daily 2016, pers. comm.). In other words,

programmers have to be able to compartmentalize and manage feelings, to anticipate and understand emotional impact and potential avenues for mobilization, without being overwhelmed by it. All of these findings generated several discussion events on precarity in the film festival sector among local organizations.[7]

Challenges, Ethics, and Knowledge Exchange

In order to take a critical approach and analyze the process and outcome of the programming process, I needed some distance from the event and the festival. I encountered similar problems as Dovey (2015), who also draws on her own professional experience in founding, directing, and curating to inform her research interests in African film festivals. She felt it was "difficult to achieve the necessary critical distance when evaluating one's own work, making it all too easy to adopt an inappropriately self-congratulatory tone" (2015, 23). As a member of the submissions panel and a contributor to the festival output, this challenge intensified as I needed to repeat the narrative of success in reports submitted to funders and in highlighting the benefit for the wider audience. However, this made me reflect on the questions related to the role of festivals more broadly, such as: What makes a successful festival? How do we understand value and measure it? What were the aims of the event and were they achieved? I applied these questions to the study of programming and to develop a critical evaluation of the live event as it is understood by my own and the coordinators' subjective practice. Similar to Winton and Turnin (2017) and Dovey (2015), I also argue that it is important to recognise our own role in the culture we are studying, how "we (as researchers) may also bring about change, and be changed" (Dovey 2015, 22).

Even if some of these findings were not related to my initial research questions, I felt they had to be in my thesis and on the agenda of festival research. I wanted to raise more awareness of this matter and make it public through open debates. This may be a case of what anthropologists call "over-rapport" (Given 2008; Roberts 1994), empathizing too much with the research subjects at the

7 "Labour of Love—Festivals Speak Out on Working Conditions" was an event organized as part of the Radical Film Network Scotland festival in 2018 that celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of 1968. The event brought together trades union activists with festival workers in a conversation that explored the need to champion the working conditions of festival workers, whilst cognisant of the precarious nature of the organizations themselves. In 2019, as part of the seventeenth edition of Document Film Festival, a second event on this subject was organized to address these issues and identify action points for change.

expense of critical thinking. My drive for intervention in the field, proposing an action that could lead to change, is also problematic. Even though I was an insider in some of the festival's activities, I was still an outsider in other affairs and I had a slightly more privileged position, as a PhD student associated with the university. I was not directly hit by the precarious working conditions, but I was inviting others to speak out about them and expecting them to openly share these personal experiences. As researchers, our academic output can be used to raise awareness and work with the people that are part of our research to make an intervention in the field and bring about positive change. We might also have a different vision of what needs to be changed and what methods are necessary to achieve it. Whether that refers to creating more sustainable and fairer working environments, or to putting pressure on funding bodies to support organizations to develop in the long-term, they will emerge from the people going through these experiences on a daily basis. However, this is a challenging element of research that requires further consideration about what should we, as researchers, do with our findings—maintain a detached position or raise awareness and try to facilitate change?

Conclusion

The study of film festivals requires a multi-method approach, exploring both the quantifiable facts as well as the qualitative details. Ethnographic studies of film festivals have become more frequent, broadening our understanding of the lived experience of a festival from the perspectives of audiences or of its workers. Drawing on a practice-led approach and auto-ethnography provides a nuanced understanding of creative practices such as programming, as well as the conditions in which meaning is produced. Keeping track of personal reactions to the work can generate more knowledge about this practice, which, in turn, can potentially have a long-lasting, practical legacy. At the same time, these methods can make visible the unspoken, unrecognized labor that goes into festivals, as well as providing potential avenues for change towards becoming a more sustainable, fair, and inclusive practice.

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Alexandra-Maria Colta completed her PhD at the University of Glasgow in partnership with the University of St Andrews and Document Human Rights Film Festival, a collaborative framework exploring politics and programming practices at human rights film festivals. She is also involved in film curation and distribution, working with the Scottish Documentary Institute as Distribution and Talent Manager, and as Board Member at Document Human Rights Film Festival. She also teaches film and television studies, curation, and festivals. Before starting the PhD project, Alexandra studied media and cultural studies at the Centre for British Studies at Humboldt University.