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Telling Stories of Resistance and Change: Organizers
of Film Festivals Contribute to Media Literacy

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Articles

TELLING STORIES OF RESISTANCE AND CHANGE: ORGANIZERS OF FILM FESTIVALS CONTRIBUTE TO MEDIA LITERACY

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Abstract

Various authors have recently written about the importance of collective learning. Cultural events, like documentary film festivals, provide important sites for collective learning. Organizers of such events are necessary catalysts that play different roles, from programming to fundraising and audience development to promotion and volunteer coordination. Through their curatorial role, programmers in particular contribute to the educational nature of these events by presenting alternative information and often ignored stories that foster critical thinking, media literacy, and critical self-reflection. Information is key in a democratic society, and when mass media occlude as much as they reveal, channels that present alternative perspectives play an important role in the development of criticality in citizens.

Résumé

Divers auteurs ont récemment porter attention à l'apprentissage collectif. Les événements culturels, comme les festivals de films documentaires, fournissent des sites importants pour l'apprentissage collectif. Les organisateurs de tels événements sont des catalyseurs nécessaires qui jouent des rôles différents, de la programmation à la collecte de fonds et le développement de l'auditoire à la promotion et la coordination des bénévoles. Par leur rôle dans la sélection du programme, les programmeurs en particulier contribuent à la nature éducative de ces événements en présentant une information alternative et des histoires souvent ignorées qui favorisent la pensée critique, l'éducation aux médias, et l'auto-réflexion critique. L'information est essentielle dans une société démocratique, et quand les médias de masse cachent autant qu'ils révèlent, les événements qui présentent des perspectives alternatives jouent un rôle important dans le développement de la pensée critique dans les citoyens.

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Background and Purpose of the Study

Adult educators often engage in practice and research toward social justice. Increasingly, social movements are recognized as significant sites of adult learning (Clover, 2006; English & Mayo, 2012; Gorman, 2007; Hall & Turray, 2006; Preskill & Brookfield, 2009). English and Mayo suggested a notion of citizenship "that embraces collectivity and movements rather than the idea of atomised individual citizens" (p. 19). Gorman also challenged the notion of the autonomous, at times competitive, learner and instead suggested that we need to pay attention to the collective nature of learning, especially when discussing social movements, resistance to status quo, or struggles for social justice and political equality. However, while collective events or actions may happen spontaneously, generally they require some degree of organization. Yet we live at a time in North America when "community is made difficult by social and technological developments that force us further and further apart into a chaotic assemblage of fractured individual existences" (Preskill & Brookfield, p. 199). Preskill and Brookfield also suggested that finding ways to bring people together, disseminate alternative information, and encourage collaboration and engagement is crucial to building solidarity.

Films are excellent catalysts of discussion. English and Mayo (2012) wrote, "Media and the arts are among the many exciting trends and strategies that are part of the toolkit of community development and education" (p. 136) and can be important tools "to increase meaningful engagement and participation in matters that affect all our lives" (p. 138). Film festivals are popular cultural events, from local community-based festivals to industry-sponsored festivals that can attract half a million people, as does the Toronto International Film Festival (Wong, 2011, p. 49). There are different types of film festivals; some showcase the corporate film industry while others focus on a theme, such as human rights, mental health, or gay and lesbian films; a specific genre, like experimental, science fiction, or documentary; or a specific geographical area. In this study I looked at community-based documentary film festivals aimed at providing alternative information with a view to citizen engagement and greater democracy. Belenky, Bond, and Weinstock (1997) suggested that collective events provide a public space for questioning and learning, while Clover (2006) added that innovative and creative pedagogies are needed to promote active engagement and imagination. As Young (2006) said, "Change seems to be a process that can be tapped but not muscled" (p. ix). In this paper I focus on organizers of documentary film festivals and their role in providing alternative information and perspectives and the impact such film festivals have had on organizers and attendees.

Research Methodology

This is a qualitative case study of two film festivals that showcase documentaries by independent filmmakers on a wide range of topics related to social justice and community development. These festivals take place in communities with fewer than 70,000 residents.

Descriptions of the Cases

1. The World Community Film Festival (WCFF) in Courtenay, British Columbia, started in 1991 in an effort to link local and global development. It is a two-day festival with multiple concurrent venues. It includes a thriving bazaar where food is available and where local organizations offer information on a wide range of topics or products.

Some people attend only the bazaar. Some founding members and current organizers, attendees, and representatives of community organizations participating in the bazaar were included in this study. Since 2003, through the Travelling World Community Film Festival (TWCF), the WCF program is available to an average of 10 communities a year, from British Columbia to the Yukon, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Nova Scotia. The data analyzed for this article include interviews with organizers of the TWCF in Salt Spring Island and in Nanaimo, British Columbia.

2. The Travelling World Community Film Festival (TWCF) in Peterborough, Ontario, started in 2005 to foster local community building and celebrate international solidarity during International Development Week. It initially showed films from the Courtenay TWCF program, and in 2009 was renamed ReFrame Peterborough International Film Festival. It uniquely includes a vibrant program of visual art displays and local performers. Interviews with some founding members and current organizers, attendees, and sponsors of the festival were included in this study. In addition, two organizers of the former Canadian Images Film Festival that took place in Peterborough for five years in the late 1970s and early 1980s were interviewed, as they are also experts in the use of the arts in social change.

The data analyzed for this study includes archival documents from each festival; interviews with attendees, including individual exit interviews, in-depth semi-structured individual interviews, and group interviews; in-depth semi-structured interviews with organizers and authorities on the use of the arts for social change; in-depth semi-structured individual interviews with representatives from local organizations participating in the bazaar at the WCF Courtenay; and a group interview with representatives of local organizations sponsoring ReFrame in Peterborough. Comments are attributed to pseudonyms unless permission was given for the use of someone's name. As disclosure: I attended the WCF Courtenay for three years and was inspired to initiate and coordinate documentary film festivals in two communities where I subsequently moved: the TWCF Peterborough (2005–2007, which was renamed ReFrame Peterborough International Film Festival in 2009), and the Antigonish International Film Festival (AIFF, 2007–2013), also associated with TWCF but not part of this article. While I interviewed organizers, sponsors, and some attendees in Courtenay and Peterborough, research assistants did the exit interviews and some of the in-depth interviews with attendees.

Findings

In this study it became clear that these documentary film festivals are educational events that foster critical thinking and media literacy while contributing to a greater sense of community. These festivals are the result of effective teamwork by volunteers who generously share their skills and a significant amount of time on coordination, programming, fundraising and community outreach, graphic design of promotional material and publicity, and volunteer recruitment, training, and scheduling. While organizers share a desire to promote greater awareness of current issues and a commitment to their community, their diverse backgrounds, skills, and interests ensure completion of the various tasks required for a successful event and allow connections to different sectors of the local community. After a brief review of organizers' backgrounds, this article will focus on the curatorial role

some organizers play in selecting the films and creating a program, as this is directly related to the festivals' educational nature. In relation to the curatorial role I will look at how the programs they select foster criticality, media literacy, and critical self-reflection.

Who Are the Organizers?

Organizers come to the festival with diverse backgrounds, experiences, and interests. Some worked in education and some in the film and video industry, while others were activists involved in community development or social movements. Among the organizers interviewed, three were founding members of the WCFF Courtenay, the oldest of the festivals in this study and the inspiration for the other festivals. Frank Tester was a professor in the Department of Social Work at the University of British Columbia and Anne Cubitt had been involved with the beginning of Co-op Radio in Vancouver and worked with the highly respected Challenge for Change program of the National Film Board. On the other hand, Wayne Bradley, a member of the United Fishermen and Allied Workers Union at the time, came to the festival through his involvement with the labour movement. A current WCFF organizer and coordinator of TWCF, Jeanette Reinhardt came to the festival through her experience in film and video distribution in Vancouver (1978–1990), which included being part of starting Satellite Video Exchange (1973) and setting up Video Out (1980), the distribution arm. She was on the national executive of the Association of National Non-Profit Artists' Centres and a board member of the Independent Film and Video Association.

Others came to the festival through their interest in community development. Don Castleden was an adult educator keen to join the board of WCFF in Courtenay:

When I first saw the [film] festival, right away I wanted to be a part of... [working on the festival] because it was bang-on in terms of getting issues out and bringing that awareness and this kind of information to the people. Of course this is what I wanted to be doing... Well, in a very basic sense it is a consciousness-raising process... That's what we [the film selection committee] talk about... You're not aware of what else is going on and of course [in] the good films, they take you right in to people's lives and they come alive. (personal communication, February 4, 2008)

An organizer in Peterborough, Daphne Ingram, was also motivated by her interest in development, both local and international. She was a volunteer with Amnesty International, Friends of the Afghanistan, and Servas International, although she also worked with the food bank where she lived in rural Ontario. In addition, she saw the importance of the festival for local development as it contributes to re-energizing the often dying downtown of small towns:

Downtowns are so important, I think, and Peterborough's downtown could do with a little help... I know the downtown businesses... are trying to have an event each month. So they sort of adopted the festival as their event... for January. I think that is really important and I think that is really good that they have a different thing each month, bringing people downtown. (personal communication, January 29, 2008)

As Courtenay's WCFF evolved in the mid-1990s it led to the creation of the World Community Development Society (WCDS), which pioneered Fair Trade. Don Munroe, who moved to Courtenay from Calgary where he had lived for 25 years while working in the oil industry as an accountant, explained that he came to the film festival through his interest in Fair Trade and food production:

I was drawn by the Fair Trade aspect of the [WCDS] organization initially...I participated with a couple of groups that had international focuses...In my spare time I volunteered at an organic certifying body and got to know some of the farmers and growers...Having a sense that people who grow our food are doing it as a commitment to a sense of values as opposed to making [money], there isn't a lot of money to be made...People who live on farms get a job in town to support their habit of growing food. And I think that's way more than unfortunate. It is a detriment to our society that we feel we have to find places that can grow our food more cheaply. Food is already incredibly inexpensive, but we still have to beat down the value and the price of food to the minimum denominator where we have to import people that we can pay very little money to grow our food. We are not going to get very far without air, water, or food. So I have been interested in the issue of food and the quality of food. (personal communication, February 5, 2008)

As mentioned earlier, I attended the WCFF in Courtenay for a few years and was inspired to initiate the TWCF Peterborough. Krista English, who worked in public health for about 20 years, got involved with TWCF Peterborough from the beginning, and is currently ReFrame's coordinator, was motivated by her sense of community: "I want my community to be the best thing out there" (personal communication, January 30, 2008). Working with volunteers proved inspiring and rewarding for her as she witnessed people taking on challenges and succeeding, getting their "sparkle back," which a husband told his wife was the result of her involvement with the Peterborough festival.

The organizers' diverse experiences and interests highlighted here are typical of the diversity of team members involved with organizing the festivals under study, from work in education or public health, to involvement in social movements, to experience with media and films, to interest in development issues, labour issues, and organic farming. These varied interests are reflected in the selection of films and, consequently, the audiences. This is an important contribution; as English and Mayo (2012) wrote, "The greatest challenge for adult education is to educate for solidarity without destroying the individual character of movements" (p. 126). English and Mayo pointed to the concept of "movement of movements" characterized by "its heterogeneous constituency" by the Latin American Social Observatory and the Latin American Social Science Council (cited in English & Mayo, p. 126). Documentary film festivals are cultural events that allow specific interest groups – such as environmental, human rights, and international development groups – to keep their integrity, yet festivals create a rare opportunity to showcase a wide range of issues and contributions to a diverse audience. Film festivals are communal experiences, in part due to the nature of films. Shirley Goldberg, who taught film studies for more than 30 years and was an organizer of TWCF Nanaimo, spoke of the social aspect of film: "From the beginning, film was conceived as a public experience. You sit in the dark with

a lot of people and you see the same images and you are all reacting to it. And you sense those reactions," adding, "and something about the response, it's contagious" (personal communication, February 8, 2010). Creating an event where people can see their concerns and contributions, as well as the diversity of their community, reflected all at once within a program is an achievement.

Curatorial Role

Among the tasks involved in organizing a film festival, the curatorial role of programmers is central to the educational nature of these events. Festival organizers recognized the importance of films as pedagogical tools. Organizers of the Salt Spring Film Festival in British Columbia, which used to be associated with the TWCCFF but is now independent, suggested that, for many people, learning from films is easier than reading books and that the visual affects a different part of our brain. Featuring documentaries also adds to their educational mission. Goldberg suggested that the documentary genre has experienced a resurgence of interest as "people have become more and more interested in what's real. The same thing happened in publishing; non-fiction became more and more important in the bookstores" (personal communication, February 8, 2010). As an example, she pointed to the 2009 Vancouver International Film Festival, which included documentaries for about one-third of its major films, saying that "the audiences are just as large for them as for anything else" and adding that the documentary genre is particularly well suited to an educational objective as it "is straightforward, it's got a message, whereas the message is often a little more subtly conveyed in the feature [fiction] films" (personal communication, February 8, 2010).

Ferne Cristall, an organizer with ReFrame in Peterborough from the beginning, is a respected media literacy educator with considerable experience. She commented on the social and pedagogical nature of films, saying that they allow community members "to meet people in situations and places they could never go to," which "captures people in a process" they can learn from; she suggested that the documentary form is "way more dramatic than a fiction often can be" and concluded with a comment on why the former films are effective: "Oftentimes in the kind of films we're showing the people are so-called ordinary people who you can relate to easily and be impressed by, and it combines what you see, what you hear, with a collective experience of watching together." She expanded on the educational nature of the festival by drawing in creativity: "I think that culture is a great organizing tool and should be part of all organizing because creativity brings good ideas in all sorts of ways...I mean, it makes people's minds loosen up and be more divergent" (personal communication, January 22, 2008).

An attendee's comment supported Cristall's view: "Films I've seen are more like creative films, and creative expression, and they just got me to think more creatively and think out of the box and to be all, like, innovative and to do different things," and she identified concrete benefits:

It helps me with my schooling, like when I'm doing opinion paragraphs or anything that has to do with creative expression...Or if I'm doing art for my art classes, I just kind of think, and go, yeah...It kind of gets people thinking about different stuff, not just like their life all the time, there's so much more. (C. S., personal communication, January 31, 2011)

In their curatorial role, programmers of these festivals seek thought-provoking films that not only offer new information but also foster criticality and media literacy and encourage critical self-reflection.

Fostering criticality. The educational mission of the film festival in Courtenay was clear from the beginning. Cubitt, a founding member of WCFF, recalled that it was to be “broadly educational...exposing people to ideas outside of their own world view” (personal communication, February 6, 2009). She also acknowledged the objective of connecting local and global development and indicated that there was an activist orientation, as an underlying belief was that change was possible, and since there were “lots of things that need to be worked on in any community...[and since] we live pretty privileged lives, let’s look at the issues that are out there in the world, let’s look at our own [local] issues” (personal communication, February 6, 2009). A comment by a representative of a sponsoring organization of the festival in Peterborough gave credence to Cubitt’s statement. This man, who worked for a ministry of the provincial government at the time, said that his co-workers appreciated hearing about the festival, as it was

an opportunity to go to films that were about things they didn’t know about, so a real opportunity to educate themselves about topics, not simply to go to something that was directly related to them, but sort of wondering about an issue...So it was seen as a very powerful education opportunity by anyone that I talked to. (T. H., personal communication, January 26, 2009)

Su Ditta, an organizer of the tremendously successful Canadian Images Film Festival in Peterborough in the late 1970s and early 1980s, suggested that the current film festival is “actually linked to a larger educational agenda” and “is part of a really well-thought-out program of education and consciousness raising and political activism” (personal communication, January 29, 2008). This view is supported by a woman who attended ReFrame in 2011, saw the film *Third World Canada* (Cazabon, 2010), and suggested that the festival resulted in

raising awareness around critical issues that perhaps haven’t seen the light of day or perhaps haven’t been given the importance that they need to be given. So to give the example of poverty and just the dire circumstances in the northwestern communities, you know, the remote Aboriginal communities and just positioning it as *Third World Canada*, it’s like, wait a minute, *Third World Canada*, what’s that about? Like just raising people’s knowledge that [while] we pat ourselves on the back in terms of our quality of life, we’re not there, we’ve got these huge injustices. To me, that’s the big thing. For me, learning about the mining, which isn’t something that I would have known anything about at all, so shining a light on issues like that is a huge benefit. (J. P., personal communication, January 31, 2011)

Another woman who was required to attend the WCFF festival for a college course saw four films (*100% Cotton* [Altemeier & Hornung, 2003]; *The Blue Planet* [Choquette & Duval, 2006]; *The Cats of Mirikitani* [Hattendorf, 2006]; *Damage Done: The Drug War Odyssey*

[Littlefield, 2006]). Her comment during a group interview with college students was revealing and a good test for the film festival:

I didn't have any expectations of the film festival. I wasn't sure what it was going to be, what sort of movies I was going to see. I thought it was going to be quite depressing. I wasn't very happy that I had to pay for an event that I had to go on my personal time. I take all of that back now after going to the films that I did. I am so glad that they made me go. Like, after some of the movies that I saw I actually went home and was telling people about them. I left with hope... more aware. Now I know that when I make purchases, I want to look harder, I don't want to have blinders on, [I want to] make wiser choices. (M. C., personal communication, February 7, 2008)

Organizers themselves felt that they continue their learning through their participation in the festival: "It is building our own wider awareness all the time," said Castleden, an organizer with WCFF (personal communication, February 4, 2008).

Promoting media literacy. In *Alternative and Activist Media*, media critic Waltz (2005) reported Chomsky's well-known concept that mass media "manufacture consent" rather than inform and truly debate (p. 17). Waltz further suggested that alternative media often attempt to bring people together to defy what Habermas called the "atomization of the public sphere," which is, at least in part, the result of mass media (cited in Waltz, p. 17). By acting as curators, the programmers of these festivals allowed stories often ignored by mass media to be told, at times in contradiction to mainstream media reports. Watching films in a community setting where people can talk with others about what they saw helps viewers gain greater media literacy. Tester, who in fact made the original proposal for the WCFF, explained the importance of the film festival showcasing alternative views:

I think it's really important because the mainstream media, with rare exceptions, does not say the things that are said in these films. It doesn't. Not entirely. I mean if you go to *Doc Zone* on CBC or *The Fifth Estate*, and even with the *Vancouver Sun*, there's at least one columnist who takes a critical look at things. But the media is so mainstream. Bland. It doesn't have a critical edge. By and large panders very much to the status quo. And even when it doesn't, is consummately liberal. You know – mushy. It's sort of hard to disagree with or agree with anything that's said. We just don't have media with a really critical cutting edge in this country. (personal communication, February 7, 2010)

Goldberg agreed with Tester that such a festival is important "because the mainstream media is simply not telling us these stories about the Canadian mining companies in Third World countries, about what's happening in Burma...so one can go and have a little crash course about what's in our world" (personal communication, February 8, 2010). Tester and Goldberg echoed media critic Solomon, who stated that "the major networks embody a consummate multiplicity of sameness" (cited in Waltz, 2005, p. 7). Eva Manly, a filmmaker and an organizer of TWCCFF Nanaimo, also commented on the importance of film festivals in terms of providing alternative information:

It gives people access to a lot of films they will not see on television. You know it really gives access to alternative visions of the world and I think that's really critically important...I don't know how many people learn about what Canadian mining companies are doing in Third World countries from a television set. Because the mainstream media does not want to jeopardize any of their funding or alienate their government, which is complicit with the kind of stuff that corporations are doing in the Third World. (personal communication, February 9, 2010)

John Wadland, a founding member of the very successful former Canadian Images Film Festival in Peterborough and regular attendee of ReFrame in Peterborough, suggested, as Manly did in the previous comment, that engagement is an objective of this type of film festival:

You are not just showing films. You're very selective about the films you are showing, you're trying to get people together, trying to get a discussion going, and you're trying to get a result that will produce some action in the future. But mostly you're part of a storytelling tradition. You're trying to get people aware of that storytelling tradition. (personal communication, January 23, 2008)

Wadland added:

This is why film is so important, because it is a visual medium and people live visually now. Everything around them, their television sets and their computers and everything else, that's the world that they're in. So when you can make a strong statement as these films did, yes, there are people coming out of them weeping but that's not all that's happening. It's them converting, I mean it is a job to convert and galvanize that into action. (personal communication, January 23, 2008)

In interviews, attendees' comments indicated that programmers were successful in simulating critical thinking and media literacy. A number of attendees asked why these films are not shown on television, conveying their awareness of the limited representation available through mass media. In a discussion after the film *¡Salud!: Cuba and the Quest for Health* (Field, 2006), people expressed surprise at the contribution Cuba has made by sending doctors to help poor countries and/or after natural disasters despite being a very small country. As one person wrote on a feedback form, the comments during the discussion revealed that the film challenged some assumptions about Cuba as a small communist and agrarian society, as it is rarely portrayed as an innovative and generous society in Canadian media reports. Perhaps equally important at a time when medical services are under serious threat of cuts and privatization across Canada, viewers made comparisons with their local medical system and the inadequate provision of timely services and suggested they would like a community-based health care system similar to Cuba's. Through their curatorial role, programmers challenged the notion that our medical system is the best or that privatization is the only answer. Similar reactions were heard after many films, such as *The World According to Monsanto* (Robin, 2008), from which viewers learned what that corporation does to seeds and were heard talking about "buying organic"; or *Tapped* (Soechtig, 2009),

which exposed the bottled water industry and its destructive ecological impact and caused some viewers to state that they would not buy water in plastic bottles anymore or ask where to get the film in order to show it to elementary-school kids. "The beauty of those films to me is that they force people and they succeed in making people question what seems to be absolute truth" (J. Wadland, personal communication, January 23, 2008).

While some of the films dealt with subjects that have relevance on a personal level, like health, viewers also identified learning about the political issues in other countries, issues that may have less of an immediate impact on their personal lives. Even festival organizers learn from the films they show. An organizer in Nanaimo reported not being as concerned initially about the Palestinian situation until she saw films on the subject:

I've become very interested in films that have come out of the Middle East, films by Palestinian film directors and Israeli. I have actually done quite a bit of writing about that...I have watched all those films and I have a very strong sense of what is happening there. I wouldn't have been as concerned about it. I've become much more aware of the intractability of the problem and the way that it's being dealt with now. Certainly film has made me understand how difficult and how important the issue, and how profoundly sad the situation of the Palestinians is. And unjust. (S. Goldberg, personal communication, February 8, 2010)

The film *Budrus* (Bacha, 2009) is about the use of non-violence by residents of the Palestinian village of Budrus against the building of Israel's wall inside their village. A woman who attended the film at ReFrame said she had no idea of what was happening and she was very surprised by it, but knowing about it now she "wanted to be more involved with that kind of issue," and when she got home she "looked it up, learned more about it" (C. S., personal communication, January 31, 2011). Another attendee reported learning about the political struggle in Burma at Reframe the previous year:

Last year there was this really good film on the Buddhist monks in Burma [*Burma VJ: Reporting from a Closed Country* (Østergaard, 2008)]...It was very disturbing but it was a really good reminder of why things are disturbing. They are disturbing for a purpose and to be reminded of that too. But it was also a bit of a frustration of "why can't they give more details on the news?" People can learn so much more by watching an hour-long film than they can an hour's worth of two-minute segments... The sensationalism of what's actually going on, but it's not actually teaching you anything. And I find that really frustrating so I tend not to watch the news. (J. M., personal communication, January 31, 2011)

In these cases, film viewers gained information about significant issues taking place in other countries. While one looked for further information, the other expressed skepticism about the accuracy of news reports on television. Both conveyed their appreciation for the broader knowledge of the world that came from viewing these documentaries at the festival. Providing such information about other people living in similar and/or different situations is important if we are to nurture the type of citizenship Schugurensky (2006) suggested we need today:

Pluralistic citizenship acknowledges that democratic politics must allow for particularities and differences but at the same time must encourage common actions for collective benefit. This “unity in diversity” approach nurtures cross-cultural dialogue and mutual respect...while it fosters joint struggles based on solidarity principles. (p. 77)

One striking aspect of these festivals is their effort to balance films that expose problems and films that tell stories of personal or community transformation, of successful struggles or creative projects. In Courtenay, programmers responded to early feedback that too many films about problems left people feeling overwhelmed. Yet Cristall, an organizer of ReFrame who brings considerable experience as a media literacy educator, suggested that

I like to be inspired, for sure, but sometimes we just have to be left with other feelings, and that’s okay...Not everything has hope. You don’t want to be naïve, you know...But I know that in terms of audiences, if we want to keep showing films, that is something that is important. (personal communication, January 22, 2008)

A lot of care goes into making the program; as Janet Fairbanks, a programmer for WCFF in Courtenay, explained, “We want opening night and closing night to not be something that is going to have people walking out depressed...it is good to know that people can survive horrible things” (personal communication, February 3, 2008). It is important not only to show films that address problems, but to offer examples of how individuals or communities met challenges with creativity and courage. These documentary festivals are excellent embodiments of Freire’s (2004) pedagogy of indignation, which includes denouncing injustices and announcing possibilities. Their selections presented new and significant perspectives that challenged assumptions and fostered critical thinking while offering inspiring stories of people having overcome adversity.

Tester stated that another important aspect of documentary film festivals is the support they provide for independent documentary filmmakers who express critical views:

They make films because they want to reach as many people as possible...That’s why film festivals of this sort with this kind of content are utterly unique and...play a very important...role in countering the lies, the deception, the falsehoods that are associated with a world run by transnational corporations that have one thing in mind, and that is growth, selling more products, and making a profit any way they can... The film festival plays...a major role in keeping a significant number of people sharp and thinking critically. (personal communication, February 7, 2010)

People who attend get the message. As one attendee put it, a benefit of the global community

is the fact that their voices can be heard. If you didn’t have a festival, you wouldn’t have an audience...Like that Burma one, I had no idea the depth of what was going on, so it gave me a better reference point... The voices are there and people want to be heard, and if you don’t have festivals, then you don’t have the venue, then you don’t have an audience, because it’s easier to look away from it than to look at it. (J. M., personal communication, January 31, 2011)

Paul Manly, a filmmaker who has also organized TWCCFF Nanaimo, spoke of the benefits of film festivals for filmmakers:

Film festivals are a great place to have films because they bring a diverse community together. And, you know, people are there to see films and there are a huge variety of things to see, so the ability to draw in an audience that you might not otherwise be able to [get]...When people come out to see a one-off screening, you get a different kind of audience than you get at a festival where people are going through a program... and maybe just checking out your film because it happens to be there at that time rather than searching it out or going there specifically because it's that film. So you might get some audience members [who may not otherwise go if it was presented on its own]. (personal communication, February 8, 2010)

While a film festival is not political organizing, through their curatorial role, programmers of these film festivals provide an opportunity for rarely heard voices to be heard and information that promotes discussion and fosters critical thinking and media literacy to be shared – important factors in a democratic society.

Encouraging critical self-reflection. Programmers also provide stories that, at times, allow people to reflect not only on what may be missing from the mass media but on their own personal beliefs and behaviour. After attending *Waste Land* (Walker, 2010), a film focused on waste disposal featured at the 2011 ReFrame, a woman said the film opened her eyes and encouraged her to reconsider how she used things; she spoke of films giving her “a new appreciation for nature and to just be more environmentally friendly and conscious, and think about my actions before I do them because they impact other things and not just me” (C. S., personal communication, January 31, 2011). The same attendee saw the film *Budrus* (Bacha, 2009), and said, “It probably inspired me in a way that I'd want to kind of help out and do more stuff because I learned that even though I'm a student at school and I have all this stuff going on, I could do so much more” (C. S., personal communication, January 31, 2011). A woman going through a life transition identified films as a source of reflection in her search for greater self-knowledge and in imagining future possibilities for herself.

[When I see a film] I think, where does someone else's life take them, and where do I want my life to take me? You know, because you're seeing their path and their passion being played out, and then you can take stock of your own and where do you want to go with that...It's like, okay, there's all these paths laid out in front of me. Which one do I want to venture down?...I think, “Oh, I never thought of that possibility.” Or, “Isn't that interesting how they chose that path?” Or, “Look at that decision they made and where it took them.”...It's enlightenment, perhaps, or just tapping into a resource...Where are the possibilities? When they're endless, it can be overwhelming, so when you see other people, it helps you to compartmentalize to a certain extent. (J. M., personal communication, January 31, 2011)

For this attendee, the film *Jean-Michel Basquiat: The Radiant Child* (Davis, 2010) promoted food for thought, as “it reminded me to be a little more compassionate, to remember not to pay attention to a preconceived notion of someone, to look through to the real person because the real person is generally not as they present” (J. M., personal communication, January 31, 2011). She added,

That film in particular reminded me of who really is at the core of my own being and who is really at the core of each person that I know. I desire to find that out about people and I desire to find that out about myself, so I’m looking for it in other people equally as I’m looking for it in myself. (J. M., personal communication, January 31, 2011)

This woman was not the only one engaged in critical self-reflection. A former educational consultant for the United Nations watched *Schooling the World: The White Man’s Last Burden* (Black, 2010), a film about the impact of the modern schooling system in Ladakh, an Indian state where those who attend school dream of going away to urban centres, never to return – and if they return, they lack the knowledge and skills necessary for survival in their agrarian community. The film raises questions about the definition of wealth, about schooling and its resulting exodus from rural communities to distant urban locations, about the destruction of traditional and sustainable agriculture, and about the lack of recognition given to traditional knowledge. The former consultant reacted strongly to the film and ultimately asked herself, “Why did I stay in that field when I really don’t believe in it?” (M. V., personal communication, February 8, 2011). It is noteworthy that a film could break through the perspective of a highly educated individual who had encountered diverse cultures and cause her to reassess her former role and question her engagement in a system she did not believe in.

Finally, for some, the experience of a film festival becomes understood over many years. An organizer in Peterborough and member of a sponsoring organization made a comment that spoke to the importance the film festival plays in her life as an annual ritual and as a grounding force as she gathers with who she perceives as “other activists”:

I just realized myself this year that it has become a spiritual home, this event...Because I am not religious but there is a spiritual connection by being with people that are all engaged in different issues, so when I hear what you are doing with Council of Canadians, I am not a member but I’m spiritually connected to you in what you do. So I recognize you immediately as kind of a spiritual brother in what I see as spiritual work, fundamentally changing the world. So I realize this year, just about a week before the film festival happened, I was thinking about this and it just hit me: “Oh, this is becoming my church.” (D. H., personal communication, January 26, 2009)

The power of documentaries to promote critical self-reflection and reconsideration of previous beliefs and roles while providing hope through examples of successful struggles should not be underestimated.

Conclusion

Documentary film festivals are cultural events that tell stories of resistance and change, offer networks for independent filmmakers to provide alternative information, and foster critical thinking, media literacy, and critical self-reflection. These are important factors in a democratic society, as citizens must be informed about public affairs as well as reflect critically on their own beliefs and behaviour. Organizers of these festivals provide a concrete example of engaging differences with respect and in a stimulating setting, including examples of successful struggles or community development. English and Mayo (2012) state:

We do not limit ourselves to "ideology critique" but seek to ferret out the concealed positive potential that connects with people's preoccupations and quotidian experience...The task of critical adult education is to analyze issues systematically and collectively with learners in order to develop a coherent vision for reconstruction. (p. 1)

These film festivals contribute to community building as they allow engagement with differences in a respectful and non-threatening atmosphere, which is crucial in a pluralistic democratic society, but this will be the subject of a future article. Organizers of documentary film festivals do not carry out visioning exercises with festival attendees, yet indirectly they provide the material for reflection and a public space that help to create preferred visions of the future. As Clover (2006) put it, "Innovative and creative pedagogies are required if we are to assist adults to address social and cultural problems and become more active and imaginative citizens" (p. 4). Organizers of documentary film festivals are on the front line of such collective imagination.

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