

SPECIALE Landscapes of Creative Dissent, Protest and Freedom of Speech. **Witnessing, Testifying And Narrating Dissent In Human Rights Film Network Between 2011-2013**

As underlined by Leshu Torchin in the Opening of the book *Film Festivals and Activism*, when Igor Blazevic, the founder of One World Festival in Prague, defines the human rights film – outlined and programmed within the Human Rights Festival Network- as “information and testimony rather than art and entertainment”¹, he sets the premise for a conceptual shift that, despite its seeming self-evidence, sets the human right film’s screening dynamic as a whole, in terms of *relational* experience investing film creators, film programmers, film audiences and space and time of this exchange, in the realm of a dynamic producing, internally, *social agency* and, externally, impacting on the *public opinion discourse* as part of the project itself.

The experience of a human right film’s screening is therefore conceived and read in the framework of the testimonial encounter - in the terms expresses by McLagan² - as the evolving “interface between the testimony or programmed films and the audiences hailed as witnessing public, viewers who take responsibility for what they have seen or are ready to respond to”. And this, as noted by Torchin himself, needs further understanding for the implications inherent to the project. The word “testimony”, from its Christian meaning to its juridical background, passing through its therapeutic and performative meanings - as noted by Felman and Laub³ - has evolved through the centuries around the function displayed by an individual (or a group of individuals) who carry a certain narration of a situation - with the intention of it being truthful - for the sake of a beneficial transformation to the community⁴.

So, if we go back for a moment to the definition of “human rights film” by Igor Blazevic we will find three transformations which might be interesting briefly underline in this context. Firstly, the *taxonomic* aspect - the definition of a “human rights film” typology as characterised by *an ethical/political discourse in its own constitution*, which invests the film as vector of a message of potential change. The second one is its *reception* by *an audience community* created by the very experience of the screening of such films in the context of a shared responsibility. The third one, is *the shift from an aesthetic discourse* or a discourse based on *cinophilia, film theory, film history and film criticism*, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, on industry-oriented models, to focus instead on a *relational* definition of film festival, which defines a space that builds itself around the problematisation of a discourse on truth and on information as a process that conveys a different kind of knowledge to the one institutionalised by other contexts. The *transformative feature* mentioned by Torchin and carried by this conception of “human rights film”⁵ as acting in the field of the audience’s expectations within the framework of the testimonial encounter, is, in fact, the notion I would like to apply as heuristic tool to explore the social and political role played by the Human Right Film Festival Network in the years 2011/2013.

What I would like to discuss through some case studies, is the influence of the local (and global) civic agencies on the festival and especially on the decision of directors to choose a specific theme or guests, internally, and on the freedom of speech promotion, externally, as supported by local screenings and transnational circulation of a set of films/discourses on *activism and protest*, within a certain time frame, as a counterpoint to the official news-making agenda and as a call for action, in relationship to the new media dynamic itself. The way I would like to do is by analysing the node *testimonies/live screening event/online communication space* as a way to produce social agency that was experimentally outlined in new ways in some editions of Human Rights Film Festivals in the years mentioned above.

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Fig. 1

My hypothesis, is that the initial idea of international human rights networks as potentially able to constitute “channels for bringing alternative visions and information into the international debate” (Keck and Sikkink)⁶, which was framed at the end of the Sixties in the context of nationally rooted political and media networks exchanging contents on an international level, is in the process of re-structuring itself in the light of the current transnational dimension of new media communication. The ‘space of flows’ as “simultaneity of social practices without territorial contiguity” - theorised by Castells⁷ and well represented by the evolving hubs like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter - constitutes the material precondition from which most recent protests have reached their intensity, the place where they have been socialised and disseminated and where the documentary footage testifying some political events has been produced and showcased in the first place. This process, on the one hand, diminishes the need for the physical presence of live screening events- as underlined by Iordanova⁸ - but it could also be reinforcing the *mobilisation* potential of protest discourses carried by *filmmaking as a testimonial practice*, within events like the one organised by Human Rights Film Festival Network that are characterised by a strong *community-building factor*.

In other words, these screenings could have been acting, as it happens in the context of the discourse on “choreography of assemblies” displayed by most recent forms of online protests in Gerbaudo’s terms⁹, more or less intentionally, a form of *soft leadership*. By concentrating attention on the process of filmmaking - and/or film showing - these festivals have been promoting the idea of film as political tool in itself, which has certainly encouraged a new politicisation of films. On the other hand, though, these festivals have also been acting as a bridge to the industry community, interested in understanding the phenomenon of social change and in having access to that footage and those actors that would have been stayed out of reach if a “protest-friendly” space wouldn’t have been provided for this encounter. In the context of a profound change of footage collection and production dynamic, the understanding of the ‘human right film’ discourse in its diversity, becomes extremely relevant to try and identify a first hypothesis on the strategic element represented by live screenings in the context of a wider digital circulation of discourses, and its access to bigger networks.

SPECIALE My analysis, far from being exhaustive, is instead aimed at selecting topical phenomena that are relevant to this discussion. The timeframe chosen is just a 'working tool' for the sake of this analysis and it covers a period that goes from the film programming stage to the media debate springing out of those showcasing events. The cycle of protests chosen is selected through the common feature of digital media as a mean of dissent narration and the cases I would like to mention the 2011 editions of One World Prague, the 2012 edition of One World Romania and the 2013 edition of Cine Derechos Humanos de Buenos Aires.

The March 2011 ONE WORLD Prague edition called '*Your energy is needed elsewhere*' – less than one month after the 18-days Egypt revolution- sees the foundation of a new event called "NEW MEDIA FOR SOCIAL CHANGE" and the organisation of a strand called *One World Many Ways, new directions in Human Rights Documentaries* which sees the participation of international guests - a key blogger in the analysis of the dynamics among documentary, internet and TV, a filmmaker from Egypt bringing footage directly from the heart of the unrest in Cairo - as a focus on the response by filmmakers and journalists to topical events - but also two commissioning editors from big broadcast groups, a filmmaker organising a filmmaking workshop on low-budget filmmaking for non-professional filmmakers and a focus on the Wikileaks case which had shaken the world of information just few months before, on the 1st of September 2011.

"Our goal" - states the 2011 One World film catalogue¹⁰

is to draw attention to the significance of new media, which has fundamentally changed the way in which people obtain, share and use information. Today access to technology opens the way to more effective reporting of human rights breaches and is, for example, playing a greater role in checking up national and local politicians or improving awareness of socially excluded groups.

Moreover, the event page in the catalogue lists several campaigns using social media in innovative ways, among which some citizen journalism platforms like *Kloop* (Kyrgyzstan) kloop.kg aimed at young citizen journalists and *Crowd voice* (Bahrain), an open crowd sourcing platform for collating, monitoring and evaluating information provided directly by citizens around the world. The festival also hosts the 2010 documentary *The Green Wave* by Ali Samadi Ahadi which narrates the murderous repression acted by Iranian government on protesters during 2009 presidential elections through the testimonies of Blog posts that were written by a number of anonymous Iranians who experienced the aftermath of the election chaos in Teheran.

Two months before the screening in Prague, in January 2011, the same film had been premiering at Sundance Film Festival, where the director had been stating "The day will come when they (the governments) will have to listen to the will of the people". Following this thread based around a discourse on digital civil resistance and citizen witnessing, which develops progressively in the course of 2011 through some topical events, like the one month-long Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia that brings to the destitution of President Ben Ali (18 December 2010 - 14 January 2011) to the Tahrir Square 18-days Egyptian unrest that brings to the destitution of President Mubarak (25 January 2011- 11 February 2011), the One World Prague film programming strategy of the March 2011 edition focuses on "access to technology", "education to low-budget filmmaking" and "sharing of information through digital media" as part of its innovation policy and of the widening mission of a Human Rights Film Festival of present times.

One year later, while several other Human Rights Film Festivals especially in Europe (Belgrade, Sarajevo, Skopje, Budapest among others) open the way to a discourse on the impact of new media and

SPECIALE technology hosting some films that are starting to come out about protests around the world, in February 2012 the institutional festival Berlinale organises a specific *Focus on Arab Spring*¹¹, based around the representation of protest and the function of “citizen journalism”¹² in the context of the Arab revolts.

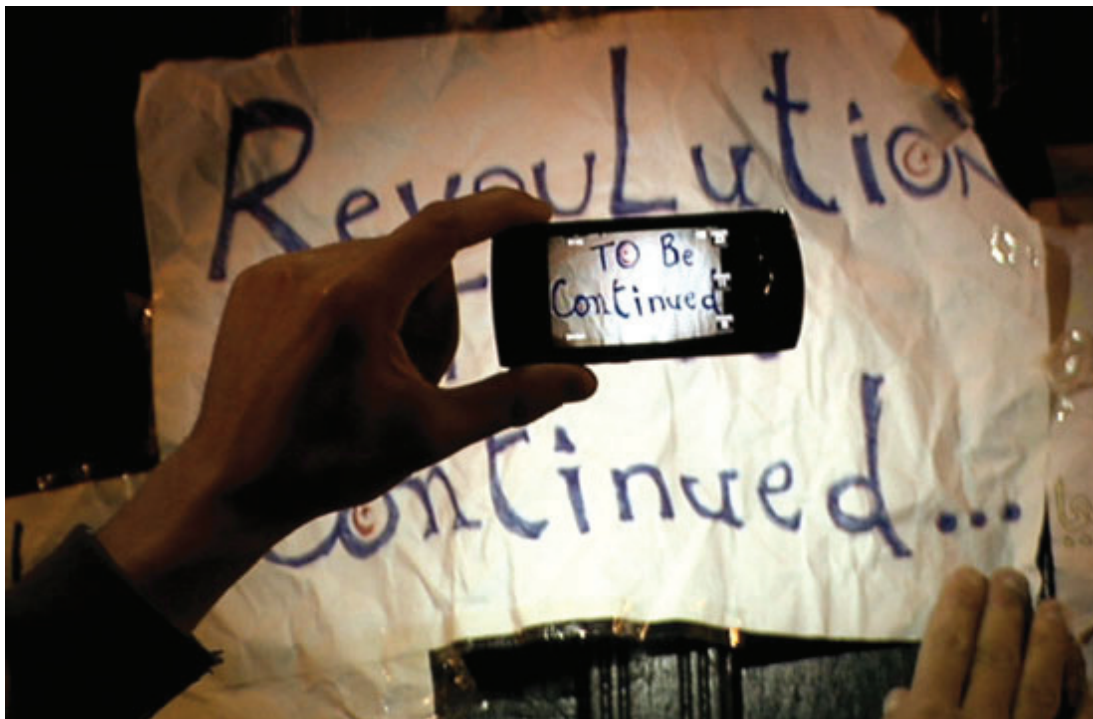


Fig. 2

In the mean time a wave of protests employing social media and messaging systems as communication tool had been crossing Europe, the Arab World, Canada and the United States during the whole year 2011 - the student protest wave in the UK against the rise in university tuition fees in December 2010 with the invention of the first Phone App “to keep protesters safe on protest” and the systematisation of flash-mobs as a disruption system by UK Uncut, the occupation of Tahrir Square on the 25th of January 2011, Change Square in Sana’a from February 2011, the occupation of Puerta del Sol in Madrid on May 20, 2011 - coordinated mostly via Facebook and Twitter - the streets riots of London in July 2011, coordinated through Blackberry messaging system, which caused Cameron’s strong censoring measures ‘against social media in time of civil unrest’, the Greek anti-austerity protests in May-July 2011, the occupation of Zuccotti Park in New York in September 2011, the Quebec student protest movement in February 2012 etc..

In March 2012, in Bucharest, One World Romania hosts two strands - out of its 10 strands- devoted to protest and activism. The first one, called *Online revolutions* hosts the films *Fragments of a Revolution*, *Tahrir*, *the Good*, *the Bad and the Politician*, *Rouge Parole*, on Egypt, Tunisia, Iran and the second one, aimed at problematizing activism which is called *Activism is stupid?*

In the presentation of the first strand, the catalogue¹³ states: “If the Romanian 1989 revolution was the first one to be televised, the Green movement blossomed on the internet and was fuelled through the

SPECIALE virtual networks. The change of tools took only 20 years, but the blood that they shed when they took the streets was not virtual at all”. And the second strand the catalogue states:

In Romanian, even the word activism has a funny resonance, and this cannot be blamed only on our recent communist past. We are not living in a society that values this kind of attitude. But in recent months, people took the streets in Romania in a sudden change of spirit. The films gathered under this banner offer different approaches to civic involvement. These people have doubts as well.



Fig. 3

The films listed below are from Estonia, UK, United States, Peru and show different kind of activism and different level of involvement in political action, but they are all united by a question on 'what is activism', which clearly the festival program sponsors and supports. This edition of the Human Rights Film festival testifies a real change in intensity compared to the previous one. In this edition of the festival the choice of films is made with a clear “educational” and “testimonial” stance taken by the festival itself, which proposes itself as a space where a protesting/mobilised community can find shelter and a hub for discussion. The intent of the festival is that of providing tools that can be useful for interpreting the protests that are crossing the streets of Bucharest in that same moment, plugging into the net where online communication around dissent is on-going. The impact the screenings are aimed at having on the local reality is directed at the re-framing of historical and current circumstances – with a touch of irony as well – in order to “sharpen views and cut through established perceptions” with “razor-like” films. The festival represents itself as a space nurturing alternative views and, rather than just analysing, participates in first person to the protest debate.

SPECIALE The case of the August 2013 Cine Derechos Humanos de Buenos Aires¹⁴ is totally different, but it represents a quite interesting and creative counterpoint in the discourse around social change. To respond to this situation of instability crossing Argentina again in 2012, after a decade of relative stability, the 15th edition of Buenos Aires Cine Derechos Humanos sends out a call aimed at gathering films to do with the relationship between art and social transformation. In its statement Florencia Santucho, while mentioning the financial difficulties the festival is undergoing, declares:

the universality of the cinematic message becomes a tool of social change when we break down the intangible barriers that separate the passive spectators from the reality behind the screen and we give Art the power to connect worlds. We are undergoing a profound change in the communicational paradigms, and this year's program reflects through its productions and identities as self-representative society that takes over the audiovisual language.

When one goes through the titles chosen by the festival, it's interesting to find such a relevant number of "animation", "re-enactment"- based films or "hybridisation" of documentary and fiction as a way of addressing political change. The most striking example is *The Act of Killing*, the film by Joshua Oppenheimer, which tells the story of a group of perpetrators who, challenged by the filmmaker about their role in the Indonesian genocide, decide to dramatise their role, initially to play the parts in a film - they play the victims and they play themselves - to then embark on a completely unsettling and shocking journey into the surreal representation of the genocide imaginary and the slow and sudden realisation of their role in historical events. But it is also a case like *L'Intervallo* by Leonardo di Costanzo, a fiction film starring non-professional actors, or the case of *Los hijos de las nubes, la ultima colonia* starring actor Javier Bardem and analysing the North African situation in the eye of the Western powers' policies through his eyes, or even *Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry* about the story of the Chinese artist who made himself a symbol of the Chinese government censorship.



Fig. 4

SPECIALE All these films are highly interested in expressing through highly cinematic tools an imaginary/fictionalised embodied access to a political content, to the exact opposite side of the spectrum of the discourse promoting *direct* access to filmmaking practices through online technologies and low-budget equipment and of *first-person testimonies*. Here the discourse of dissent is, instead, channelled through a form of testimonial encounter that involves not only the film-testimony and the witnessing audience, but also a way of taking distance and elaborating through the mediation of art cultural discourse. The organisation of the programme around these films somehow takes position against the immediacy of the protest discourse based on the urgency of participation - with the intent of bringing the elaboration and gestation of subjectivity discourse through the mediation of artistic languages back into a framework including a differentiated conception of testimonial encounter in the project of Human Rights Film Festivals.

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Notes

1. Ivan Blažević, "How to start" in Tereza Porybná (edited by), *Setting Up a Human Right Film Festival*, Prague, People in Need, 2009, pp.14-25, cited in Leshu Torchin, "Networked for Advocacy: Film Festivals and Activism" in Dina Iordanova, Leshu Torchin (edited by), *Film Festivals and Activism*, St. Andrews, St. Andrews Film Studies, 2012, p.1.
2. Meg McLagan, "Principles, Publicity, and Politics: Notes on Human Rights Media", *American Anthropologist*, 105, 1, 2003, pp. 605-12 cited in Leshu Torchin, *Ivi*, p.3.
3. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*, New York and London, Routledge, 1992.
4. For an interesting discussion on the difference between *witnessing* and *testimony* and its relationship with the node history and memory - especially as a reference to the process of "telling" about historical traumas like the Shoah – see Dori Laub, "Truth and Testimony: The Process and the Struggle" in Cathy Caruth (edited by) *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Baltimore Johns Hopkins University, 1995.
5. For a critical point of view on the discussion on the relation between political documentary and social action, refer to Jane Gaines and Michael Renov (edited by), *Collecting Visible Evidence*, Minneapolis, London, University of Minnesota Press, 1999. Also refer to the discussion developed by Berenike Jung in here work-in-progress PhD thesis at University of Warwick on torture, trauma and memory in Chilean films.
6. Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, "Transnational advocacy networks in international and regional politics" in *Unesco 1999*, Oxford and Maiden, Blackwell Publishers, 1999. See also Id., *Activists beyond Borders, Advocacy Networks in International Politics*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1998.
7. Manuel Castells, "Grassrouting the Space of Flows" in Ackbar Abbas and John Nguyet Erni (edited by), *Internatinalising Cultural Studies: An Anthology*, Oxford, Balckwells, pp. 627-36, cited in D. Iordanova, "Film Festival and Dissent: Can Film Change the World?" in Dina Iordanova, Leshu Torchin (edited by), *cit.* See also, Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society, The Power of identity, End of Millennium in The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*, Malden, Blackwell Publishers, 1996.
8. Dina Iordanova, "Film Festival and Dissent: Can Film Change the World?" in Dina Iordanova, Leshu Torchin (edited by), *op. cit.*
9. Paolo Gerbaudo, *Tweets and the Streets: Social Media and Contemporary Activism*, London, Pluto Press, 2011.

- SPECIALE** 10. Available at http://www.oneworld.cz/2011/userfiles/file/Jeden_svet_2011_velky_katalog.pdf, p. 170 (Last access November 2014).
11. For the programme see: http://www.berlinale.de/en/archiv/jahresarchive/2012/08_pressemitteilungen_2012/08_pressemitteilungen_2012detail_13207.html (Last access November 2014).
12. For a discussion on the concept of 'citizen journalism' see Stuart Allan, *Citizen Witnessing: Revisioning Journalism in Times of Crisis*, London, Polity, 2012.
13. See <http://oneworld.ro/2012/ro/sectiuni/22/sectia-revolutii-online/> (Last access November 2014).
14. http://www.imd.org.ar/festival/assets/downloads/catalogo_festival_15_2013.pdf, p.12 (Last access November 2014).