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Creative and Emotional Labour: Programming Human Rights Film Festivals as Practice-led Ethnography

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Abstract: *Film festival curation and programming remain highly individualistic practices, that negotiate several discourses/tensions, including the responsibility of the curator to others (artists and audiences) and the creative independence of the curator. Much remains to be written about the creative process of curation, and how aesthetic judgements are articulated by those who practice it. While progress in this direction has been made in relation to some festivals (LGBT, African), human rights film festivals have only recently started to be part of academic scholarship, which tended to focus on the main functions and spectatorship roles that they encourage (Tascón; Tascón and Wils; Davies). This article focuses on the creative process of programming human rights film festivals using the case study of Document Human Rights Film Festival in Glasgow. Part of a practice-led collaborative research project between the Universities of Glasgow, St Andrews and the festival, this article is based on my reflections and experience as a co-opted member of the programming team for the 2016 and 2017 editions. Drawing on practice-led ethnography, I argue that this festival adopted a form of ethical programming, sharing authorship and responsibility towards the audience, the filmmakers and the profession, as well as a form of emotional labour.*

Human rights film festivals have proliferated over the last three decades, becoming a widespread global phenomenon, actively shaping the niche of human rights films and contributing to human rights culture (Nash). Scholarship in the field (Iordanova and Torchin; Tascón; Tascón and Wils; Davies), including texts produced by practitioners (Kulhánková et al.; Porybná), has begun to explore the diversity of these festivals, the creative and innovative approaches to human rights in cinema (both documentary and fiction), as well as audience engagement and the promotion of activism. However, more research is needed to understand the challenges, decisions and responsibilities of festival workers who, through their labour and creative approach, highlight certain perspectives over others (in terms of the issues, subjects and countries represented on screen). The need to explore these decisions and the shift toward critical festival studies (Winton and Turnin) is particularly relevant in the current media landscape, populated by "fake news", hate speech and distorted information.[1] A common feature of human rights film festivals is the attempt to counterbalance mainstream media through careful programming and to foster a more contemplative and active commitment in viewers. At the same time, these festivals aim to challenge spectators, provoke debate and raise questions about the most fundamental human rights. This often involves showing controversial, problematic films and dealing with representations of sensitive, divisive topics. As such, human rights film festivals are at the forefront of debates around the responsibilities of programmers to their creative profession, the filmmakers whose work they showcase, their subjects and their audiences. Nevertheless, the process of navigating these tensions and responsibilities remains underexplored in public discourse and scholarly work.

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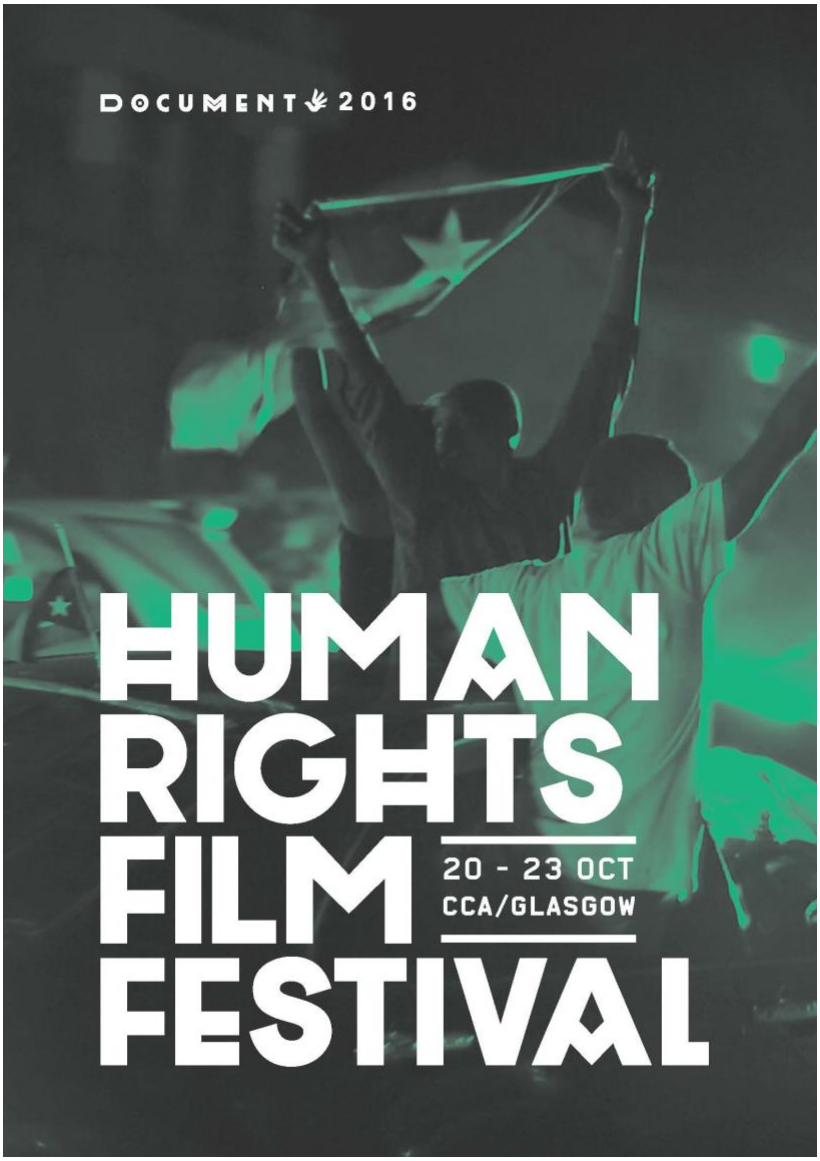


Figure 1: The cover of the Document 2016 Festival brochure.

This article uncovers the process behind programming human rights films drawing on the experience I gained through practice-led research associated with Document Human Rights Film Festival in Glasgow (2003–). This is complemented by fieldwork observation of the Human Rights Film Network and other festivals (such as One World Human Rights Film Festival in Bucharest) in 2016 and 2017.[2] As a researcher and participant in the Document programming team, I selected films and participated in conversations around the development of selection criteria, curatorial strategies and discourses around documentary films and human rights themes. I argue that this research method contributes to the development of empathy, which enables the researcher to identify emotionally with the experience of another while imagining the situation from their perspective (Degarrod). Through this lens, I engage with the emotional and intrinsic process of making decisions and value judgements on films and their artistic, affective and realistic merits. I argue that this can be understood as a process of "self-responsibilisation", as programmers attempt to provide a balance between humanitarian and human rights discourses, visual aesthetics and tensions raised by the hero/perpetrator dichotomoy in the films they select (Nash 396). I contend that this process can be explored as ethical programming, based on self-reflexivity and a set of principles that "inform deliberations

and decisions about the right thing to do" (Sanders 531). These principles are filtered through the subjective experience of programmers in relation to the environment and through their personal interests. Finally, I reflect on the labour of programming human rights films and the emotional toll taken on by programmers required to watch images of suffering repeatedly.

The notion of emotional labour, introduced by Arlie Russel Hochschild in her research involving flight attendants, is defined as a form of managing feelings as part of the job: "the silent work of evoking and supressing feeling" (333). There are many studies exploring emotional labour in media work, particularly focusing on the precarity of the creative industries (Gill; Hesmondhalgh and Baker). Festival organisation and programming involve emotional labour in dealing with this precarity alongside lengthy exposure to images of suffering as part of the job. Human rights films are often described as unwatchable, particularly due to their focus on victims and the violation of fundamental rights (Porybná).[3] Festival programmers are expected to watch many such films, usually over a short period of time, and this requires an ongoing effort in managing the emotions evoked by viewing. Handling these feelings is not only required for the curation of content that has the potential to move audiences, but it also contributes to effective team work through the development of empathy towards other programmers as well the wider film community. Therefore, this article provides a situated, grounded perspective of festival curation, taking into consideration the emotional aspects of this work as well as the social, economic and cultural context in which it takes place. Firstly, I describe the context and research design of practice-led ethnography and collaborative work. Secondly, I explore in more detail the process of programming, from managing instinctive responses and emotions (first phase, managing film submissions) to strategic decision-making (second phase, deciding upon the shortlist and establishing themes). I argue that during the programming process, the members of the selection team became increasingly self-reflexive of their practice and developed a sense of responsibility towards the audience, the filmmakers, and the profession of production more generally. This can be viewed as a form of ethical programming, where these responsibilities become guiding principles for establishing the final selection of material.

Research Context: Applied Research Collaborative Framework

In 2015, I was appointed a doctoral researcher by the University of Glasgow under the Applied Research Collaborative Studentship (ARCS) scheme to work on a project investigating "Human Rights Film Festivals: Politics, Programming, Practices". This was the first year this framework was trialled by the Scottish Graduate School for Arts and Humanities (SGSAH), the cluster of Scottish higher education institutions (HEIs). All ARCS projects had to include at least two HEIs and a non-academic partner and were required to "demonstrate mutual benefit for all partners" (SGSAH). This framework is similar to the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council's (AHRC) Collaborative Doctoral Award (CDA) scheme, in that both are based on contractual arrangements. Insider access is key for film festival or event studies, which is often developed through personal connections and has to be negotiated and managed between researchers and organisations. From this perspective, the organisation has control over this access and can at any point pause or rescind it. The CDA and ARCS schemes are different, as they are based on contractual partnerships, which grant access from the beginning, and require constant collaboration, interaction and knowledge exchange.

ARCS is distinguished from CDA by having an additional HEI involved (in my case, the University of St Andrews) and the notion of applied research embedded in the project. Not

only did I have access to the organisation's resources, but I could also participate in their activities. My placement in the organisation—Document Human Rights Film Festival in Glasgow—was also contractually bound and involved programming, as a co-opted member of the film selection panel, as well as the planning and delivery of an event called the Critical Forum. Thus, I had the opportunity to work alongside the team to produce the final festival programme and, at the same time, to work reflexively through some of my research questions during this process. The placement was meant to offer "first-hand insight into the organisation" as well as to "develop research that can inform the festival's work", as mentioned in the advert for this PhD project. In other words, the project was expected to deliver two outcomes: to contribute to the academic field with insightful, insider knowledge and to share relevant findings with the festival to contribute towards its organisational development. Soon into the project, it became clear that the main approach of conducting this research was to combine ethnographic knowledge with practice-led enquiry. In this sense, I adopt the definition of practice-led ethnography that goes one step further than ethnographic research as it "renders the familiar strange [...] turning a critical eye onto practices, dynamics, policies and meaning making within familiar cultures" (Goodley et al. 57). As such, it invites researchers to explore the cultures and activities that they might feel they already know well.

Film festivals are a frequent occurrence especially in urban settings, with over six thousand in operation globally (Loist, "Film Festival Circuit" 49). While some of them are only open to industry professionals (Cannes) or specific, niche audiences, the majority are accessible to the general public and provide a wide range of film screenings and activities. As such, film festivals as research settings can provide entry points into culturally significant, public-facing events, which are based on collaborative and creative work. They offer a unique and complex setting for film festival researchers, and an increasing number of festivals are opening their doors to academics and lending their practices to investigation and collaboration (Dickson; Lee; Mitchell).

The practice-led component of my research involved my active participation as a member of the festival team in the creative collective effort to curate a programme of documentary films engaging with human rights topics. There are a variety of terms that are used to try and label different forms of using practice within research, such as practice-as-research, practice-and-research and practice-based research (Skains). In this article, I follow Skains's definition of 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" (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. Practice-led ethnography takes into account cultural practices in a self-reflexive, intersubjective way, "wherein the situated and motivated position of the ethnographer him/herself is highlighted as an integral part of the production of knowledge" (Kwon 76). The collaborative aspect is also pivotal for this research, as "the informant and the ethnographer are producing some sort of common construct together" (Pinxten 31). Therefore, my own practice alongside that of the main informants (the other members of the selection panel and the board) produced knowledge (the festival operation) and the finalised construct (the programme).

My programming activity involved participating in two main stages: individual viewing of film submissions received through an open call and group discussions and decision-making with the rest of the team. This activity translated into watching approximatively fifty films per festival edition, writing notes that supported my decision to accept or reject each film and

articulating these opinions verbally during programming meetings. I kept a diary in which I recorded comments about the social and political context alongside my personal thoughts and feelings regarding the programming process. This presented a useful opportunity for me to reflect on the sometimes difficult-to-articulate reactions to the films I viewed and how I constructed my arguments in the programming notes. I encouraged the same reflexive process when I organised two group interviews with the festival programmers, one month before and one month after the fourteenth edition of Document in 2016. As we had shared the experience of programming and contributed collectively to the way the festival was designed, we knew of each other's preferences and modes of working, and I was able to draw on my own reflections to ask detailed questions. These group discussions revealed the principles and questions that guided programming in relation to human rights, cinema and ethics as well as the perceptions over the type of labour involved. In addition to knowledge, this approach contributed to the development of empathy, defined as the experiential understanding of another person's perspective, in which an individual resonates emotionally with the experience of another while at the same time viewing the situation from the point of the view of that other (Hollan and Throop qtd. in Degarrod 382). Through this lens, I was able to gradually understand the challenges of progamming personally as well as gain an insight into how others perceive the process. This approach further emphasised the conceptualisation of festival programming as a form of emotional labour, as many of the films viewed provoked our sensibilities, triggered a wide range of feelings and determined subjective, instinctive decision making.

Programming and Curating: The Role of the Argument

Following the political upheaval of late 1960s, film curation became recognised as one of the most important activities of film festivals as a creative practice that involves intuitive responses as well as knowledge of art film and history (de Valck). This key moment saw the rise of festival directors' role as as tastemakers, cultural gatekeepers and "custodians of cinema culture" through the films they selected (Bosma 1). Since then, the profession of film festival curation became more institutionalised and gained popularity as festivals proliferated worldwide.

Despite decades of development and professionalisation of this practice, there is still little standardisation, and the field remains extremely heterogeneous (Dovey). This is evident, firstly, in the terminology as "programming" and "curating" are often used interchangeably, despite holding different meanings and political underpinnings. Practitioners and scholars use both terms to describe the decision-making and creative activity behind film selection and presentation into thematic strands organised in schedules. Several scholars believe that the word "curate" describes most accurately the work of people involved in the shaping of film festival content. According to Dovey, the term demands a different kind of "care" in the representation of the people and their creations (30). Bosma prefers to use the term "film curator", borrowing the term from the art world, galleries and museums to describe a "more sophisticated level of cinematic knowledge than simply 'programming' specific screenings" (6). With this statement, Bosma suggests that curators perform a variety of tasks beyond scheduling, such as using prior knowledge of film history and canons, appraising audiences' interests and creatively producting a coherent programme of films and events in conversation with the film industry and with consideration of the wider social, political and economic contexts of production.

Laura Marks proposes a more discernible distinction between programming and curation, which I have adopted in my research and practice. For instance, she defines programming as an objective form of selection, less concerned with the individual personalities of the programmers and oriented towards reflecting the state of the field (Marks 36). Conversely, curation is driven by concepts and thus follows a subjective agenda, shaped by individual tastes and is not necessarily linked to a venue or to representing the field. Roya Rastegar also suggests a similar distinction between the two terms by exploring, from a practice-led perspective, the curatorial potential of festival programming (181). She argues that film programming involves a two-part process: firstly editing out thousands or hundreds of film submissions to compile a shortlist and secondly, the curatorial process, which is a more strategic and subjective stage in which negotiation and decision-making occurs. This latter part of the process, she suggests, "calls for programmers to be open to seeing and feeling something differently, and acknowledging the limits of one's own sensibilities and taste in order to make space for films that fall outside of individual registers of knowledge" (Rastegar 190). Both programming and curation can be understood as creative processes that involve subjectivity, emotional investment, strategic decision-making and innovative presentation of a different configuration, where films gain new meanings by association with certain themes (e.g. human rights) or in relation to other films.[4]

While "[c]uration is inherently a matter of personal taste and aesthetics", Haslam argues that "this can become a problem when one's own tastes are exalted to the level of the absolute. Often, along with this comes the attitude that because this set of aesthetic parameters is now considered absolute, it doesn't need to be articulated, defined, or made explicit to others" (57). Haslam argues that individual decision-making as well as groupthink in selection committees are difficult to challenge and hold to account. This idea is also expressed by Marks, when she argues that the "objectivity" (of the programmer) and "subjectivity" (of the curator) are terms that remain obscure. Each can be clarified, and made available for questioning, through the device of argument (Marks 36). Along the same lines, I approach festival programming and curation as a form of shared authorship and responsibility that produces a discussion around the chosen films presented in the limited time and space of the festival. This framework is also useful for analysing the labour of programming and curating and how these arguments are shaped by the make-up of the team. The remainder of this article will focus on the example of human rights film festivals considering the main challenges, dilemmas and arguments raised by programming and curation. More specifically, it will explore the main ethical concerns of festival programmers in relation to their own subjectivities and the position of artists (filmmakers) and the audience within the ecosystem of human rights film festivals.

Discourses of Evaluation in Film Festival Programming and Curation

Scholarship focusing on human rights film festivals has only briefly explored the process of programming, with notable contributions from professionals who have drawn on their practical experience, such as Igor Blaževič and his work for One World in Prague and Tyson Wils's exploration of the Human Rights Arts and Film Festival in Australia. These case studies highlight some of the criteria used for programming, such as the relevance of foundational acts like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the mission to inform and educate and to show empowering characters instead of passive victims of abuse (Blaževič; Nash). As these festivals have proliferated globally, particularly since the 1990s, they have expanded on the seemingly straightforward definition of human rights, offering a variety of perspectives and approaches. The main distinction from other film festivals lies "not in the

films we screen, but what we 'do' with the films and the interpretive contexts we build for their screenings" (Blaževič 112). This refers to the off-screen events and opportunities to raise awareness of human rights and promote social change. While scholarship has focused more predominantly on the strategies festivals use to engage concerned spectators, little research has been undertaken into the subjective decision-making process behind film selection from an organisational perspective. I was interested in the ways in which programmers balanced emotional, instinctive reactions with the intellectual processes of selecting and placing films in a human rights framework. I also investigated how complicated notions of truth, accuracy and representation are discussed throughout the programming and curation stages and whether content mattered more to the programmers than form or style.

Programming choices are rarely made explicit to the public or even internally; moreover, they are often difficult to articulate or decode. This is similar to the art world, where "artists find it difficult to verbalize the general principles on which they make their choices, or even to give any reason at all. They often resort to such non-communicative statements as 'it sounds better that way'; 'it looked good to me'; or 'it works'" (Becker 199). As a part of the programming team, I came across similar formulations surrounding film selection and I also found it difficult at times to ascertain what made me prefer one film to another. In the first stage of programming, I noticed that the selection was mostly based on emotional responses, which can be triggered by artistic sensibility (with comments including "beautifully shot" or "visually striking"), political stance (solidarity with people fighting against oppression), narrative structure (preference for films with little or no narrative following a poetic cinema aesthetic) or topical urgency (global current affairs perceived important at the time, such as genocide or the European refugee crisis). Rarely a film encapsulates all these criteria and each programmer values them differently, according to their own interests and experience. Therefore, an essential part of the curatorial process of festival work is to build a programming team "highly attuned to their own and each other's weaknesses, tastes, and proclivities when watching films" in order to balance out individual interests towards a collective vision (Rastegar 190).

The second stage of programming involved the decision-making process based on strategic thinking in relation to the wider cultural landscape, as well as on the subjective criteria and vision developed through team work. From Document 2016 onwards, this stage became more curated, as the programmers devised concepts and ideas that guided the selection from the shortlist, rather than taking a more objective stance towards representing the field.[5] During my placement, this was also the stage when the researcher and practitioner roles became more blurred and I had to constantly reflect on my positionality and subjectivity. This is a common occurrence in practice-led research, where research and practice are not easily separated: "Research informs practice, practice leads research, research inspires practice and practice inspires research" (Baker 35). For instance, after watching several films and shortlisting them based on instinctual, emotional responses, I took a step back to reflect on the specific elements that convinced me to accept or reject them. I realised that I preferred the films that had an innovative approach in terms of structure or storytelling, as well as those that raised ethical questions around the film's production, its relationship to its subjects, or the filmmaker's stance. The discussions we had as a team around the shortlisted films were an opportunity to reflect on these preferences and we soon discovered that this was a common interest. As such, the criteria of selecting films based on their challenging nature emerged at this stage. According to the programmers, they hoped that this approach would also stimulate conversation and critical thinking among audience members. This is a principle that many other human rights film festivals follow, which was revealed through several interviews I conducted with festival directors (Dirk van der Straaten (Movies that Matter), Andrea Kuhn (Nuremberg International

Human Rights Film Festival) and Alexandru Solomon (One World Romania)). They all suggested they select films that raise questions and spark debates amongst audience members, who are welcome to deconstruct the issues presented on screen and the mode of delivery. However, this approach further complicates the responsibility of festival programmers and the potential risks or controversies that can be raised by their choices. In other words, should programmers choose problematic films for the sake of sparking discussion? And, if yes, then what are the boundaries in relation to presenting traumatic, manipulative or fabricated content? Furthermore, to whom should accountability be attributed from an audience's perspective: filmmaker or programmer? Through our collective self-reflexive approach, we were able to integrate these questions into our practice of finalising the programme for Document. As a result, these criteria were communicated (verbally and through meeting minutes) to the new team of programmers in the following year (2018), providing a basis from which to start the process for another festival edition.

Ethical Programming and the Importance of an Argument

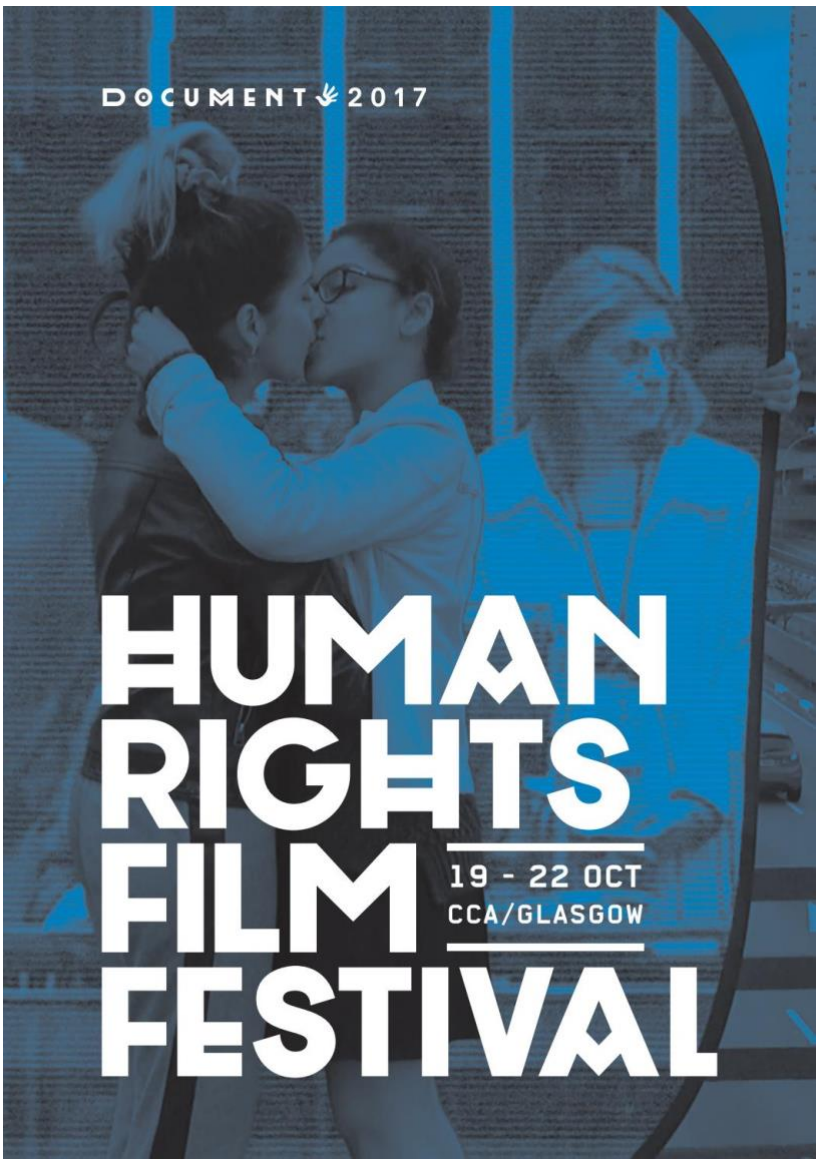


Figure 2: The cover of the Document 2017 Festival Brochure.

During my placement in the festival's programming process, I discovered concerns about ethical programming extended to film festivals more generally. Festival programmers are under pressure from several sides, determined by social, political and cultural changes. Audiences, the film industry or the media can make demands and hold festivals accountable for controversial film choices or the perceived reluctance to align with movements and changes that are taking place in other sectors. For instance, several A-list film festivals responded to the criticism regarding the systemic lack of diversity on screen or behind the camera of people of different races, genders or sexual orientations (Mumford). The #MeToo movement determined a proactive approach of many festivals to include more films made by women in their programmes (Watercutter).

In relation to documentary films, several festivals also faced criticism for failing to represent minorities or propagating misinformation. For instance, The Montreal International Documentary Festival (RIDM) faced a backlash after screening the controversial experimental documentary *Of the North* (Dominic Gagnon, 2015). The film has drawn significant criticism and was deemed racist by the Inuit community for promoting negative stereotypes (Walsh). The film sparked controversy among the filmmaking community in Canada and led other festivals such as the Quebec film festival Rendez-vous du cinéma québécois (RVCQ), which had initially selected the film, to withdraw it to avoid criticism ("*Of the North*"). While this decision was applauded, it raised important questions about the role and responsibility of a film festival, reflected in the words of the producer of Inuit radio show Stephen Agluvak Puskas: "I think a bigger discussion that's not being talked about is the ethics behind these film festivals that show these films […]. I really want film festivals to be held accountable for what they show" (ibid.). Puskas's comments acknowledged the importance of festivals by having a direct impact over representation of topical issues as well as the expectation of responsibility that follows it.

The issue of ethics and responsibility of documentary festivals was also raised in a 2016 *New York Times* article, focusing on the increased pressure and threat of censorship on programmers (Ryzik). In the article, several programmers from Toronto International Film Festival to Doc NYC and True/False Film Fest reflected on situations where they grappled with selecting problematic documentaries with hidden agendas, questionable ethics and issues with accuracy. The article draws on several examples, including the documentary *Vaxxed: From Cover-Up to Catastrophe* (Andrew Wakefield, 2016), which re-asserts the long-discredited link between autism and vaccines. While some of the festival representatives, such as Robert De Niro, defended the film's selection, focusing on its potential to create debate and unpick both sides of the argument, the increasing pressure from the medical community and others, contributed to the decision to pull it out of Tribeca Film Festival. Nevertheless, most programmers interviewed in the article emphasised that documentary is a subjective medium, representing the director's vision of "truth" (Ryzik). As such, festivals can show problematic documentaries as long as they provide a space for the audience to interpret and be critical, while self-censorship could become a slippery slope into limiting the freedom of expression.

These issues and pressures led many festivals to include these questions and principles in their programming activity, in addition to the artistic merit. Therefore, one approach for exploring the challenges of festival programming and curation is through analysing festivals' ethical position. The relationship between ethics and programming or curation has been discussed briefly by Laura Marks and Mark Haslam, and in relation to documentary film studies (Sanders; Aufderheide et al.). As such, I apply some of these ideas to the practice of human rights film festival programming and curation.

By ethical programming or curation, I understand the concern to reflect on the practice itself and "the principles that inform deliberations and decisions about the right thing to do" as a programmer or curator (Sanders 531). In relation to documentary filmmaking, Willemien Sanders draws on Jay Ruby to argue that the ethical position can be formulated through a set of responsibilities: to the participants, to the project or profession, and to the audience (544). The position of the filmmaker or, in this case, of the festival programmer or curator in relation to this web of relationships and responsibilities could be an important indicator of their ethics. In a similar vein, Marks identifies the responsibilities of the festival programmer or curator in relation to the filmmakers and their audience. Regarding programming, Marks suggests that the programmer has two main responsibilities toward the filmmakers: to select films by fair criteria and to make their work accessible to an audience (41). The programmers' responsibilities to audiences is to reward their trust that they will see the "best" work in a given field and to give them pleasure through familiarity and innovation. Conversely, the curators are responsible for synthesizing the meanings that emerge from the dialogue between their work and the world, as well as to gain and maintain the trust of the audience. In both cases, the need for a clear argument to justify the subjective stance or the authority derived from representing the field is necessary.

Responsibility Towards the Filmmakers

The responsibility towards the filmmakers begins with the process of programming, which, in the case of Document, began with the submissions phase. It relied on the unspoken rule that all films received through the open call would be viewed and each would have an equal chance of being selected. The criteria of selection however remained vague, with only a few conditions including the fact the film had to be a documentary and had to address human rights. Otherwise, there were no restrictions regarding length, year, country of production, premiere status or style. Access to the festival was further increased by not having submission fees. Document programmers believed that this approach allowed them to receive a variety of films, perspectives and voices representative of the field and the state of contemporary documentary filmmaking. Despite this open policy, the majority of the films submitted for Document 2016 and 2017 came from Western Europe. While some of these films did cover stories on other parts of the world, they were mostly produced from within the Western film industry. This aspect has been discussed more broadly by Sonia Tascón who argues that Western festivals can perpetuate a "humanitarian gaze" showing films that reinforce stereotypes and power inequalities between victim and saviour. In our programming discussions for Document, we often reflected on this issue and felt the responsibility to acknowledge it and provide a balance of voices and representations in the final film selection. However, we also discovered challenges in achieving this objective. As Loist suggests, one of the main questions for programmers is whether the films they want are available ("Complicated Queerness" 161). Availability depends on a variety of factors, including "the specific festival and its position within the circuit and festival calendar" (161). To address this disparity, festival programmers can source films to try to counterbalance the lack of diversity or of stories that focus on local issues rather than distant suffering. At the same time, this involves additional work (research, viewing and negotiation) as well as financial resources, as films that have already travelled the circuit and gained acclaim or awards often require a (higher) screening fee. Document and other small-budget festivals rely heavily on films that do not require such fees. Consequently, this results in a limited pool of options.

Responsibility towards Audiences

Another responsibility emerged in the discussions about methods to assess the filmmakers' ethical approach and vision. The Human Rights Film Network (HRFN), which consists of forty festivals from around the world, expresses the responsibility of its members to present films that are "truthful". In their Charter, they suggest the following definition:

> We believe that human rights films, whatever their format, contents or character, should be "truthful". That is, they should inform the viewers on human rights issues and aspirations, and should not intentionally misrepresent the facts or the views or words of those portrayed. They should not be so biased as to invoke hatred and discrimination against groups and individuals, or serve political or commercial interests only. They should be explorative of the issue rather than propagandistic, and not reproduce stereotypes.

While HRFN acknowledges the diversity of filmmaking genres and approaches, it insists on the commitment to truthful and accurate depictions of people and situations rooted in reality. Bronkhorst, in his essay which preceded the formulation of the HRFN Charter, suggests that both fiction and documentary films "can explore the border area of the struggle between reason and emotion. It is precisely in this area that lies the vitality of human rights activism". Truth, from this perspective, refers to both the depiction of reality as well as the honesty with which it is delivered. Bronkhorst recognises that this idea of truthfulness is further complicated by making and showing films for social change (l). This often implies a one-sided message, a clear division between right and wrong and a more didactic approach on how change can be achieved. This filmmaking perspective further entrenches the controversial boundary between a truthful film and a propagandistic one and the effect they can have on the audience. For this reason, Bronkhorst excludes from human rights cinema those films made for campaigning purposes, by national or international NGOs or individuals. In his view, "They are pieces of (good or bad) propaganda, public relations or education tools, in a similar vein as PR is used by political parties, corporations or other interest groups" (1).

During our programming meetings, we often discussed the human rights angle of each film viewed, trying to assess the intention of the filmmaker, their artistic statements (Ruby) as well as their attitude and relationship with the subjects. As such, we did not investigate the films' truthfulness, in the sense that we did not fact-check the claims made in each work. Instead, we focused on the relationship of the filmmaker to the subjects, topic and context, investigating it according to how the film was produced. Through this lens, the final selection consisted of films which could be considered problematic through the evident fabrication of facts through re-enactment (*Out on the Streets* (Jasmina Metwaly and Philip Rizk, 2015); *La Commune (Paris 1871)* (Peter Watkins, 2000)) and through the representation of perpetrators or controversial subjects *(We Were Rebels* (Florian Schewe and Katharina von Schroeder, 2014); *The Other Side* (Roberto Minervini, 2015)). However, we considered that the filmmakers' approach was an essential part of the narrative and the topic, and the festival space provided further opportunities to critically engage with the merits of these choices.

Another responsibility toward the audience was expressed in relation to the depiction of suffering on screen. Human rights films are perceived as "sad and sentimental stories" (Nash) and exposure to them as well as with other media can lead to compassion fatigue, pity and feelings of hopelessness (Chouliaraki, *Ironic Spectator* and *Spectatorship of Suffering*; Boltanski). Programmers act as a filter for such films and therefore share a responsibility to

challenge this perception and avoid emotional exhaustion. Emotional labour was key in this process, as each member of the selection panel had to suppress the feelings brought up by watching suffering on screen and find mechanisms of coping, in order to continue viewing and maintain levels of clear, critical thinking.



Figure 3: Danny Mitchell's *Reykjavik Rising*. Conscious Collective, 2014. Screenshot.

At the same time, this also made the team more sensitive to films that presented an optimistic or humorous perspective; these were perceived as surprising and were viewed with enthusiasm. Another way to challenge this perception of human rights films was through selecting stories that represented "heroic victims" or victims who become "heroes by taking control of their lives and vigorously pursuing and defending their rights" (Nash 398). During my fieldwork participation, many of the films programmed focused on empowered figures, including *Next Stop Utopia* (Apostolos Karakasis, 2015), about workers in Greece occupying their factory and attempting to operate it themselves; *The Hard Stop* (George Amponsah, 2015), following the story of two men fighting for justice and against police brutality in London; *Reykjavik Rising* (Danny Mitchell, 2014), tracing the "Pots and Pans Revolution" in Iceland; *An Abominable Crime* (Micah Fink, 2013), the story of several activists fighting for LGBT rights in Jamaica.

Responsibility towards the Profession

Finally, programmers have the "responsibility to make his or her argument as accurate and convincingly as possible" (Nichols 17), emphasising their vision and authority in shaping the festival. Artistic independence and the freedom to choose and express their ideas and arguments are essential values for the profession. It is also one of the HRFN's aims, as they try to support each festival that faces censorship or limitations of their curatorial independence, especially in places where human rights are seen as problematic or oppositional to the government (Kulhánková et al.). As such, programmers' responsibilities to their profession can

clash with the relationships and responsibility toward financiers, the government or other stakeholders.

Another aspect that is rarely discussed in relation to programming is the responsibility towards oneself as an artist, an employee, or an advocate. This includes acknowledging the context of production and the precarious environment in which programming usually takes place (long hours, volunteer-based or low funding, short-term contracts or managing several jobs at the same time, etc.). Within this precarious context, programmers face other challenges in organising the festival, such as managing funding, collaborations with stakeholders (partnerships, filmmakers, distributors, guests), the pressure to innovate and expand, while maintaining a coherent festival identity, in line with the institutional legacy. During all festival meetings that I attended as well as during the festival itself these uncertainties, concerns or pressures were not visible. Therefore the programmers were effectively performing emotional labour, internalising difficulties, maintaining a friendly face and reassuring tone. Additionally, watching images of suffering created further anxiety associated with feelings of powerlessness and frustration at unjust situations and gross human rights violations without any possibility to alleviate suffering. Having an awareness of our privileged position by comparison can increase this sense of unfairness. In this context, emotional labour included reflecting on and overcoming such feelings by becoming more aware of our position and of the limited yet important role of raising awareness through the festival.

Conclusion

Film festival programming is inherently an instinctual and subjective practice, highly unstandardised and continuously changing. The difference in terminology and history of programming versus curation highlights debates over the creativity, labour and impact of these activities. This article has argued that programming (understood here as a survey of the field at a given time, thus more objective) and curation (as the subjective conceptualisation of the curator) (Marks) can be understood as creative practice in navigating the realms of ideas, framings and representations of people and stories on screen. This article also argued that some festivals, especially those focusing on documentary or human rights films, negotiate creativity with the responsibility to raise awareness of human rights and promote social change. Drawing on research studying documentary filmmaking, this article proposes considering the concept of "ethical programming" as the self-reflexive and self-responsibilisation process that some festival programmers and curators apply to their practice. This framework foregrounds the questions, debates and principles that guide the emergence of selection criteria and the strategic thinking behind festivals. Through the example of Document Human Rights Film Festival in Glasgow, this article explored the way in which the programmers articulated these questions into forms of responsibility towards the filmmakers, the audience and the profession. As such, festival programmers have to find a balance in representing voices on screen and challenging the humanitarian gaze (Tascón), as well as to be sensitive towards their audience, to avoid manipulation and propaganda. The responsibility towards their profession invites reflection over the conditions of working for festivals, which can be equally gratifying and precarious. These questions around the work and meaning of festival programming were explored through practice-led ethnography, a method which enhances the knowledge of the familiar, developing empathy and solidarity with others. Being involved in the festival team and an active participant in the decision-making process I was able to draw on my own experience and study it through collaborative festival work. Through this lens, I provide an insight into the discourses of

evaluation in programming human rights film festivals, an area of scholarship which is in need of further interrogation.

Notes

[1] Winton and Turnin argue for the critical study of film festivals in relation to political activism and festival space, as well as engaging with the concepts of affective architecture, the politics of presence and Rancière's notion of dissensus to problematise activism in the context of film festivals.

[2] The Human Rights Film Network (HRFN) was founded in 2004 by seventeen human rights film festivals and, in 2018, it consists of forty festival members from around the world. The HRFN organises an annual meeting during the International Documentary Festival in Amsterdam (IDFA) which I attended in 2017.

[3] The problematic nature of watching depictions of suffering on screen is explored in the edited volume *Unwatchable* (Baer et al.).

[4] For instance, FiSahara, which is recognised as a human rights film festival and a member of the HRFN, often shows films that are not explicitly about human rights. They gain meaning and impact by being shown in a specific place amongst people who gather to live in the refugee camp for Sahrawi people (Dovey).

[5] For instance, Document focused on both historical films and new releases, and grouped the films together under thematic strands that focused on conceptual approaches of neocolonialism, labour, censorship or cinematic discoveries (e.g. Mexican documentary, Marlon Riggs retrospective), rather than showcasing a range of documentaries presented under several human rights issues.

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