

Human Rights Film Network

Reflections on its History, Principles and Practices

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Summary

This article originates from the need to establish a basic level of "theory" of the human rights film - no such theory has as yet been elaborated. It starts with sketching the fast-growing phenomenon of human rights film festivals, and then deals, in many examples, with the history of how human rights and their violations have been portrayed in documentaries and feature films. As to a working definition of the human rights film, the author proposes a film that is "truthful". Two feature films and two documentaries, including Michael Moore's blockbuster documentary *Bowling for Columbine*, illustrate the conditions that could be set to distinguish a true human rights film from another kind of film. In conclusion, it is argued that the "ambiguity" that is essential in film making is both the major opportunity and challenge for the development of effective and convincing human rights films.

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Human rights film festivals

In July 2003, the Amnesty International Film Festival of Amsterdam produced a brochure on fourteen human rights film festivals. The brochure shows that such festivals are being staged in Buenos Aires, Prague, Paris, Nuremberg, Bologna, Amsterdam, Warsaw, Moscow, Seoul, Barcelona, Geneva, London, New York, Burlington and various other places in the United States.

The brochure's list is not exhaustive. Information on other human rights film festivals, among them a festival in Vancouver, was received later. Moreover, there have been quite a few occasional human rights film festivals, such as in Colombia, Turkey and Lugano (Switzerland). Also, film festivals of a "general" nature have included human rights programs, as in Rotterdam and Copenhagen. Some film organizations have awarded human rights prizes; the American Political Film Society has done so annually since 1998.

Worldwide, human rights films are the focus of festivals on a regular or incidental basis. Human rights film festivals originated from a variety of sources: international and domestic human rights organizations, other non-governmental organizations, universities, cultural foundations, governmental and intergovernmental institutions. The two major international human rights organizations, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, each host festivals in various places in the world.

The festivals vary considerably in their outlay. Some have a duration of only a few days, others are spread out over two weeks. Some festivals screen a dozen films, while the One World Festival in Prague screens 130 documentaries. Most are restricted to documentary films, but quite a few present feature films as well. Many festivals award a prize, for a particular film or to a particular director. All festivals include a program of debates, panels, discussion groups and sometimes workshops; the Geneva International Film Festival on Human Rights is based on a concept of "one film, one subject, one debate" at each of the eight nights of the festival.

There is no common formula as to the aims and aspirations of all these festivals. In their leaflets, festivals emphasize the importance of creating human rights awareness, contributing to the development of civil society, inspiring solidarity, showing the "other side" of news and commercial films - or just state that they want to offer the best of present day human rights films.

In general, there are two aims that appear to be relevant for all festivals. First, they intend to promote human rights films of good quality, by screening the film itself, by invitations to filmmakers and others involved and by means of public debate. Second, they are a platform for debates that include film professionals, human rights experts and activists, politicians, writers and journalists, and other opinion makers.

Often there are two other, sometimes implicit aspirations in these festivals. One aim is that of trying to contribute to a wider distribution of these films, in smaller or larger film theatres or through television networks and other forms of broadcast. Another is that of helping those who produce human rights films secure a sound and independent basis in the national and international environment, including the means for their survival and development.

History: documentary films

Though the concept of "human rights films" may be fairly recent, it can be argued that such films have been made during many decades of moving pictures history. Famous directors as well as local film makers have documented human rights abuses and have striven to give a voice to those who were not heard by the powers that be. Such films have superseded common notions of "left" and "right". They have, implicitly or explicitly, been based on human rights tenets, even before the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights established those rights in 1948.

The Battle of the Somme, filmed by Geoffrey Malins and J.B. McDowell in 1916, and the 1937 film Spanish Earth by Dutch filmmaker Joris Ivens (with narrators John Dos Passos and Ernest Hemingway, and historical figures such as La Pasionara playing themselves) could be labeled early examples of the "human rights documentary". The same label seems appropriate for some films by the French director Alain Resnais, such as Guernica (1950), on the 1937 bombing of a village during the Spanish Civil War, and Nuit et Brouillard (1955) which was the first major documentary on the Nazi concentration camps.

Over the years, it has become possible to include more and more filmed material within documentary films, and such films have tended to become longer. Peter Davis' 1974 documentary on the Vietnam War, Hearts and Minds, takes nearly two hours. A Grin without a Cat (Le Fond de l'air est rouge), a documentary collage by Chris Marker on wars in three continents in the 1960s and 1970s, turned out a three hour film when it was released in 1978. Shoah (1985) by Claude Lanzmann lasts nine hours. Civil War, a historical documentary produced as a television series by Ken Burns in 1990, which has slavery as its core issue, was released in 2002 on DVD totaling eleven hours. These long documentaries countervail the restrictions of many public and commercial television networks, which offer limited time slots and prefer short clips over in-depth reporting.

The scope of documentary films on human rights issues is nearly as wide as that of the issues themselves. Admittedly, some subjects receive much more attention than others - in many festivals there is, for example, a disproportionate number of documentaries on the Israeli-Palestine conflict and on race issues in the United States. But recent festivals also featured films on "honor killings" in Pakistan and Colombia, child soldiers in Rwanda and Sierra Leone, female genital mutilation in Kenya and Somalia, forced prostitution in India and Thailand, slavery in Mali and Brazil, war atrocities in Chechnya and Afghanistan, the "disappeared" in Bosnia and Chile, massacres in Liberia and Aceh, the history of state violence in Mexico and South Africa ... Documentaries have covered virtually all corners of the world. The documentaries largely reflect on and add to the reports of human rights organizations. Sometimes the documentaries themselves have prompted further research by human rights groups.

In practice, a limited number of types of documentary has evolved in the few decades in which the "human rights documentary" now exists. A rough typology of human rights documentaries could present them in four basic forms:

- The "explanatory" documentary: films that document a particular situation, country or theme, generally in a mixture of impressive images from the field, interviews, and commentary.
- The "denunciatory" documentary: the film that focuses on a particular abuse, or pattern of abuses, and is set to make the responsibility for that crime as clear as possible - it is the kind of documentary that is likely to include images that shock the viewer. A denunciatory film can last for hours, but can also be effective within the time frame of just a few minutes.
- The "search" documentary, in which the film maker is a detective taking the viewer on his or her investigations into, for example, the whereabouts of a "disappeared" person, or the background of a political killing, or the facts behind a political trial. Such a documentary does not have to end conclusively - crucial questions may remain unsolved.
- The "testimonial" documentary, which makes not much attempt to explanation, denunciation or a plot. Commentary is generally minimal or absent, interviews may be of a fragmentary character, personal details illustrate the overall problem.

History: feature films

As to feature films that deal with major human rights issues, a far from exhaustive list could contain hundreds of titles. Among the earliest feature films that show the human devastations wrought by political conflict are World War I films such as *J'accuse* directed by Abel Gance (1918) and *The Big Parade* by King Vidor (1925). Like many other historical events of great cruelty, that war has continued to inspire dozens of feature films, such as *Regeneration* issued in 1997.

Charlie Chaplin's humorous *The Great Dictator* (1940) portrayed the frightening new face of Hitler's Germany and Mussolini's Italy when most of the horrors still had to occur. Roberto Rossellini's *Germany: Year Zero* (1947) told the trauma of survivors in the first year after the end of the war. There were many, many more feature films to follow on the persecution of the Jews in World War II. *Kapo* (Gillo Pontecorve, 1959) was one of the first feature films that portrayed the dilemmas of resistance and collaboration within a Nazi concentration camp. *Judgment at Nuremberg* (1961), a film with superstars Spencer Tracy, July Garland and Marlene Dietrich under the direction of Stanley Kramer, was a highly successful picture on individual responsibility during the Nazi regime. Feature films on the Nazi crimes have been conspicuously successful in winning awards. *Holocaust* (1978), an American television series totaling six hours with a cast including a young Meryl Streep, won eight Emmies and actually introduced the term 'holocaust' to a worldwide audience. By 1979, it was estimated to have reached 220 million viewers in the US and Europe. It is difficult to overestimate the significance of this series: it sparked a debate on the fate of the Jews that has never since abated. Other public success films on the holocaust included *Sophie's Choice* (1982), again with Meryl Streep who won an Academy Award for her leading role; Stephen Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993), a 195 minutes film in black and white that stands at number 20 in the TimeOut list of 100 most favorite films; *Life is Beautiful* (*La vita e bella*, Roberto Benigni, 1997), which won two Academy Awards and was the first major comedy film on the life in a concentration camp; and the partly autobiographical *The Pianist* (2002) by Roman Polanski that won six of Paris' Cesar Awards.

The experiences of fascist and war-time Italy have resulted in films such as Rossellini's *Rome Open City* (1945), *Il Conformista* by Bernardo Bertolucci (1969) that is also on the *TimeOut* Top 100, and one of the great blockbusters of 1977, *Una giornata particolare* (*A Special Day*) with Sophia Loren and Marcello Mastroianni directed by Ettore Scola, which got two Oscar Nominations (though the *TimeOut* Film Guide states the film is "rubbish").

Films on Stalin's repression ranged from the international mega-production *Doctor Zhivago* (1965) to the beautiful Russian film *Burnt by the Sun* (1994). Central Europe under communist repression was the theme of local film makers who challenged censorship, as in *The Report on the Party and the Guests* (1966), featuring many Czech film makers, some of whom were banned at the time, and in two productions by Andrzej Wajda, *Man of Marble* (1976), a censored film on a champion of workers rights, and *Man of Iron* (1981) on the rise of the *Solidarnosc* independent trade union movement.

Also in the Top 100 of all-time classics is *Battle of Algiers* (1965), again by Gillo Pontecorvo, "the prototype for all mainstream political film of the 1970s"; some 15 minutes of torture sequences were cut from prints in US and Britain. Torture was also the theme of *State of Siege* (1973) by Costa Gavras, with Yves Montand in the leading role - the same couple that had made *z* (1969). Both films deal with terrorism by the opposition and particularly by the state, taking Uruguay and Greece as examples and following historical reality closely.

The Vietnam and Cambodia War and its atrocities sparked many films. Some of these are considered to belong to the greatest films of their generation, such as *Apocalypse Now* (1979); *The Deer Hunter* (1978) starring Robert De Niro and, once more, Meryl Streep - "one of the few great films of the decade", with gruesome torture scenes; *The Killing Fields* (1984), showing all the horrors of the Khmer Rouge regime; and *The Quiet American* (2002) in which Michael Caine is the protagonist of Graham Greene's story on how the United States became involved in the war in Vietnam.

Feature films have been of enormous importance in making a large public aware of human rights violations and political violence in "far-off" countries - the public of these films may be a hundred times more numerous than that of books or in-depth newspaper articles on the subject. The story of the onset of the 1965 massacre in Indonesia was told in *The Year of Living Dangerously* (1982). The violence in Central America was fictionalized in *Romero* (1989) with Raul Julia in the role of the archbishop of El Salvador who was killed at the altar in 1980; in *El Norte* (1983), on the trek of refugees from Guatemala to Los Angeles; and in Oliver Stone's politics-cum-adventure story *Salvador* (1986). Torture and disappearances in Latin America have been the theme of various major feature films since the 1980s. These include *Missing* (1982) with Jack Lemmon and Sissy Spacek on disappearances in Chile and the American support to the military regime; *La Historia oficial* (1985), a highly moving Argentine film on a child who was adopted after his mother had been "disappeared" and killed; *Death and the Maiden* (1994) by Roman Polanski, a claustrophobic account of a women meeting her former torturer; and *Garage Olimpo* (1999) by Argentine director Marco Bechis, a film that spares the viewer no details of the tortures in a secret detention center.

Prison conditions in Turkey were featured, in a not too subtle way, in *Midnight Express* (1978), while conditions in a women prison in Iran were the subject of the austere and convincing *Women's Prison* (*Zendan-e Zanan*, directed by Manijeh Hekmat, Iran 2002). The

apartheid system of South Africa was the background and subject matter for such films as *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1951, remade 1995), *a World Apart* (1988) and *a Dry White Season* (1989). The political violence and police torture in Northern Ireland (and England) has been documented in many films, including *The Crying Game* (Neil Jordan, 1992) and *In the Name of the Father* (Jim Sheridan, 1993). Some remarkable (and often humorous) domestic films were produced on the war in the former Yugoslavia, such as *How the War Started on My Island* (1996), the Oscar-winning *No Man's Land* (2001) and the Silver Leopard Award winner *Gori Vatra* (2003).

The oppression of women - through discrimination, and domestic and political violence - was conspicuously absent in feature films up to the late 1960s. The feminist analysis of decades of Hollywood film making has been devastating. For a serious treatment of this subject, one has to look for films that were produced recently and generally outside of the main commercial production centers, such as Peter Mullan's *Magdalene Sisters* (2002) on the suffocating treatment of single mothers by the Irish catholic church; the Silver Leopard winner Rumanian film *Maria* (2003) that deals with domestic violence; and the Pakistani *Khamosh Pani* (Silent Waters), winner of the 2003 Golden Leopard Award, that charts the complex fate of women in twenty years of political oppression. Portrayals of explicit homosexual themes have an even shorter history. The first American television series to address that theme was *That Certain Summer* (1972). By now, the Subjects Index of the TimeOut Film Guide lists hundreds of titles under "Gays" and "Lesbians", among which *The Celluloid Closet* (1995), with Tom Hanks and Susan Sarandon, on Hollywood's on-screen and off-screen treatment of homosexuality.

One human rights subject that has prompted many films in by far the largest film-producing country of the world, the United States, is that of capital punishment. *I Want to Live!* (1958), directed by Robert Wise, is a film on the life and death of Barbara Graham (played by Susan Hayward), a prostitute who may have been innocent of the capital crime she was convicted for. Tim Robbins directed *Dead Man Walking* in 1995, with Susan Sarandon in the role of the legendary Sister Prejean who has assisted many death row convicts. *The Green Mile* (1999) and *The Life of David Gale* (2003) are other recent films showing the vicissitudes of judicial proceedings leading to the death penalty.

Finally, historical human rights abuses continue to inspire present-day film makers. The twelve hour mini-series *Roots*, first aired in the US in 1977, scored higher ratings than any previous entertainment program in history. Stephen Spielberg directed *Amistad* (1997), the story of a slave revolt at a slave ship in 1832. Ken Loach, in his typically forceful though somewhat didactic manner, shaped *Land and Freedom* (1995) on the horrors of the Spanish Civil War. Atom Egoyan's *Ararat* (2002) deals with the 1915 genocide of the Armenian population of Ottoman Turkey.

Though the list of human rights feature films is long, it should be noted that it also shows a bias. Some subjects have apparently not been deemed interesting enough for an international (or rather, American) audience. As yet no major feature films were made on Uganda under Idi Amin in the 1970s, or the massacres in East Timor from 1975 onwards, or Iraq's mass killing of Kurdish citizens in the 1980s, or Rwanda at the time of the 1994 genocide, or many other human rights disasters. Other such crises may not have produced feature films because they are considered too politically sensitive: there is no popular video-outlet movie on the human rights abuses of the Israeli-Palestine conflict, for example.

What are human rights?

Human rights films are, evidently, about human rights. But what are these rights? Various answers to that question are possible. The simplest answer is to be found in international legal standards, such as those of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The human rights of that text include:

- Integrity rights, such as those to be protected from torture and arbitrary detention;
- Political and civil rights, such as those to participate in public life, in the government and in private organizations;
- Social, economic and cultural rights, including the rights to food, work, housing, participation in cultural and scientific life, and copyright.

As announced in the title of this declaration, these human rights are universal. They cannot be derogated from on basis of "tradition", "culture" or any other excuse. Governments, or the actual authorities in any area, are primarily responsible for the protection of such rights. Governments also have an obligation of "due diligence": they have to take measures in order to prevent and redress violence and injustice among private persons, such as violence targeted at women, children and minorities. Also, as phrased in the Universal Declaration, "every individual and every organ of society... shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms... "

But the Universal Declaration is not the last and definite word on human rights. The concept has also taken on the notion of a broader, less legalized, more emotional sense of human dignity. Human rights are also an ideological appeal to empathy, solidarity, and human decency. In this sense, human rights, from the perspective of many activists and thinkers, have taken over the role previously played by religions and traditions. Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and other religions each lay claim to particular concepts of human dignity and to their own moral precepts, but these varying belief systems do not satisfy a large part of the world's population that prefers a universal moral system. Human rights ideals, for some, fulfil such a desire. They, indeed, have a worldwide appeal that is strongly rooted in universal feelings about right and wrong. Human rights are the present-day term for "justice", including social justice.

The ideas, and feelings, about the scope of the human rights concept vary quite a lot. And this is reflected in the selections of films and speakers at human rights festivals. In a more strict approach, the choice is limited to those productions that deal directly with the kind of human rights abuses that are campaigned on by organizations such as Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch: political imprisonment, torture, execution, targeted threats to life made by governments and opposition groups, violence against women in prisons and situations of armed conflict, the dangers faced by political refugees. Other festivals have opted for a much broader area of interest. They have included films on environmental issues, all kinds of violence in the domestic sphere or among private individuals, the politics of peace and war, migration based on both political and non-political grounds, the effects of natural disasters, fair trial procedures in criminal cases, and much more.

In so far as a broader vision elucidates the backgrounds of "core" human rights issues and abuses, this may be a well-founded choice. In some cases however it seems to have been more a choice from expedience - or lack of understanding of the human rights field. A too broad selection will easily blur the distinction between a true "human rights film festival" and a film festival, period. This may jeopardize the very raison d'etre of a human rights film festival. Neither does such a broad array of subjects create much awareness of human rights - rather that of a huge world in which so many things are bad and unjust.

Human rights films

Human rights films, in the view of this author, are films that reflect the actual state of human rights violations, or the visions and aspirations as to the ways to redress those violations. Such films can have the form of a documentary, a feature film, a video production, a "new media" experiment, or something similar. Human rights films may be harshly realistic, or highly utopian. They may offer gruesome pictures, or show the effects of peaceful life. They may report, denounce or convey an emotional message. They may forcefully present the views of one group or individual only, or try to convey the opinions of as many of those involved as possible. They may be a highly accurate report of facts, or pure fiction.

There is one primary condition that one should set to distinguish a human rights film, either fictional or documentary, from something else. A human rights film should be truthful. Truthful is something more than "a true story" or a documentary that "follows the truth". In the words of German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, a communication intended to convey the truth must first of all correspond to the facts. Second, it should comply with a normative system within which both those who make a statement and those who receive it are able to make judgments. And third, the most interesting element and the most difficult to define, a true statement should be sincere, honest, i.e. "truthful". A physician's consulting room situation might serve as a simple example. When i visit my doctor, i want to know the facts. I want to hear them in a form i can understand; i want to hear them in a way which gives me confidence in their truth, and from a person of integrity.

Also a story that is complete fiction can be "truthful". We may demand that it is honest. It should not represent fiction as fact, or vice versa. It should not manipulate and misrepresent the views or words of those portrayed. It should not be so unbalanced as to invoke hatred and discrimination against groups and individuals, or serve political or commercial interests only.

For decades, there has been an intense debate on an important aspect of human rights communication, including film: should it have a certain "effect" on the audience? Should they prompt solidarity, educate on human dignity, make people engage in political and ethical debates? Should human rights films, in other words, serve as a tool for something more than just the presentation of a good story or a reality well told?

On the one hand, the answer could well be "yes". As Ken Loach observed at the 2003

Locarno Festival, where he was honored with a lifetime award for his movies: "When they ask me whether i take a stand, i can only answer that for me it is impossible to make a film without having taken a stand. Otherwise i would have no direction." If the film maker does not take any position on the picture he or she is producing, what can then be the "soul" of the film? What is its impact, apart from maybe ninety minutes of amusement or horror, or the somewhat macabre combination of both?

On the other hand, it may not be good advice to attribute a particular educational "message" to those who make films. In her essay *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2002), Susan Sontag notes that the effect of "shocking" pictures is very hard to predict and varies greatly with individual, societal and cultural characteristics. Films are mostly viewed by an anonymous audience, far out of the reach of the film makers. They may inspire a viewer to go home and write a letter for Amnesty International right away, but they may set another viewer on the road to have a drink and continue a nice evening. The world of the film is not that of the classroom. (It can be used in an educational setting, but that's another matter.)

The "effect" that we can expect of a good human rights film is that it broadens the consumer's understanding (both in the intellectual and emotional meaning of the word) of human rights issues. Understanding - no more. There are many ways to address human rights violations, and they vary greatly depending on whether an individual is a politician, a professional humanitarian worker, a teacher, a lawyer, a high-school student, a business consultant, a plumber, a housewife. It is up to human rights organizations to capitalize the awareness and understanding evoked by mass media, including film productions. But just as we do not read a newspaper in order to be "educated" towards a particular political goal, or a novel to impress on us the "good" way of living of loving, so we should not ask from a "human rights" film to instruct us on the right course of campaigning.

Evidently, films that serve a precise campaigning purpose are being made, by national and international human rights organizations and by others. In the definition of this paper, they cannot be labeled "human rights films". 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.

True human rights films, and other films: four examples

To illustrate the standards that can be set to distinguish a "good" human rights movie, let's compare two examples each of documentary and feature films.

The *Land of the Wandering Souls* (*La Terre des âmes errantes*, 2000) is a film by Cambodian documentary film maker Rithy Panh, dealing with the aftermath of the horrors of the Khmer Rouge regime and Cambodia's transition to a market economy. It was awarded or nominated at festivals in France, Switzerland, the US and elsewhere, and was laurelled with the Golden Matchstick of the Amnesty International Film Festival 2001 in Amsterdam. Rithy Panh's film is quite a simple story, pictured with simple technological means. In 1999, the first optical

fiber cable is laid through Cambodia to connect that country, but more specifically Thailand, to the "information superhighway". Panh films the villagers that live near the places where the cable is laid, among them local workers on that project. Some tell about the horrors of the Khmer Rouge regime, or show the lasting effects of that - they may have lost an arm or a leg. The documentary is also a presentation of sheer poverty, as when villagers try to catch minute fish from a pool so as to have something for dinner. At times, it is a funny film. One villager, when being explained how the threads of various colors in the cable serve various electronic ends, responds politely that he doesn't know much about technology, since he has never seen a computer - actually, he has never had electricity in his house. This film is never an explicit argument against the violent past or the uncertain future, nor against globalization or modernization, nor against the present government of Cambodia or the failures of the international community. But all such issues can be derived from the stories that the local population tells the camera.

Bowling for Columbine (2002), a documentary by American writer and film maker Michael Moore, was awarded a plethora of prizes, including an American Oscar and a French Caesar for Best Foreign Film. It was named "Best Documentary of All Time" by the International Documentary Association in a poll of 2,000 documentary makers around the world.

Michael Moore's film is an alternatively humorous and horrifying, and strongly didactic film about guns in the United States. Why do 11,000 people die in America each year at the hands of gun violence? Moore shows how a local bank offers a free rifle to anyone opening a new account. He assails Charles Heston, chairman of the National Rifle Association, with his questions (and with his somewhat threatening presence in the house of Heston, who at the time was showing the first signs of Alzheimer disease). He interviews the brother of Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh, who himself hides a Magnum pistol under his pillow. The film is a diatribe against many targets, including imperialism, racism and the lack of welfare provisions - all of US making. The film's starting point is the 1999 Columbine high school massacre: two students shot to death 12 of their peers and a teacher in Littleton, Colorado, which Moore feels is emblematic of the whole gun problem.

This has been a significant documentary, in more than one sense. It had a public success such as rarely befell a documentary film. It has stimulated much public discussion on the issue of gun control. Yet with all its merits, and the ostentatious praise it received in reviews, there is reasonable doubt whether Moore's film cannot be considered a "truthful" documentary. As one of the rare negative reviews noted: "The real tragedy of Columbine wasn't the guns but the alienation and ostracism felt by the killers - feelings that drove them to commit their heinous act in the first place. Moore knows this, and rock star Marilyn Manson states that in the movie, but the director prefers heat to light." Moore intersperses his pictures with comments and "facts", sometimes projected on the screen in texts and figures, which are biased at least. It is not true, as noted by more than one Canadian viewer of the film, that "Canadians do not lock their doors" because there is effective gun control in their country. It is quite blunt of Moore to state that "2 million people" in Vietnam and 3,000 in Chile were the fatal victims of US arms policies - as to Chile, the victims were sadly killed by their own government and the actual impact of American policies on that regime is still a matter of much debate, most of all in Chile itself. If one wants to link American military adventures abroad to the violent American gun culture, as Moore does on many occasions, one should at least note that the bombing of Kosovo, for example, was a NATO exercise - and was, for good or bad reasons, undertaken to end atrocities committed by the Yugoslav army. And so on.

Gori Vatra (2003) is a feature film about a small town in Bosnia that is awaiting a very special kind of American intervention: President Bill Clinton will visit the place, to see for himself what reconciliation is all about. The superficial picture of the village is that of warm, open and unassuming inhabitants, a market square, tradition. But this hides ethnic intolerance, crime, prostitution, the smuggling of illegal immigrants, war atrocities that have never been forgotten. The American president should bring the town a massive influx of foreign capital, so it is time to clean up the darker sides. The whole community tips over into madness as the hours tick by. The prostitutes become performers in a show celebrating religious diversity; the firemen rapidly form a band and the local flag is exhumed - as are some of the weapons buried after the war ended in 1995. There is a great amount of humor in this film. The tone is poignantly bitter-sweet. Nearly every turn of the story is both tragedy and comedy. There are real bombs that devastate the life of real people and there is an innocent explosion that spoils all the economic and political hopes of the town. In its 105 minutes, the film explores all the important themes of "truth and reconciliation" in a society that has to heal the scars of war and overcome the legacy of gross human rights abuses.

Black Hawk Down (2002), directed by Ridley Scott and based on a book by Mark Bowden, is another film about American involvement in an overseas war. It tells the story of America's botched 1993 mission in Somalia. Sent to capture two high-ranking enemy agents, two UH-60 Black Hawk helicopters were shot down in the middle of a town square. In an attempt to rescue the wounded, 18 Americans died and 72 were wounded by heavily armed Somali troopers hiding around every corner. The more the soldiers attempted to rescue their colleagues, the more they themselves needed rescuing. However, whenever the battle stops for even a moment in this film to focus on characters, just about every war movie cliché takes over. Patriotism is at an all-time high. There is abundant bloodshed. There is virtually nothing about the political background. There is hardly a clue as to why U.S. troops were sent to Somalia, what they hoped to accomplish, why the population of an entire city wanted to kill them, or even what the objective of this particular mission was in the first place. The overtones of racism are hard to miss. "American soldiers just blast away hordes of black Somalians", is how one film critic reviewed the film.

This comparative excursion may elucidate some of the main traps that confront "human rights films", or more specifically the film makers and the programmers of human rights film festivals. There is the trap of politics: even while human rights are often in the center of political debate and struggle, they are by nature something else than political statements - they rather define what should come before any political debate. There is also the trap of facility: it may be easy to portray just one side of a conflict, just one aspect of a complex problem - but human rights principles pervade the operations of all partners in that conflict and should be upheld on an equal basis. And there is the trap of expedience: those who make films, or make possible the making of a film, may gear to what they think the public would like to hear and see - but human rights abuses are more often than not what large parts of the public would prefer not to witness.

These examples of documentaries and feature films may also help in clarifying what a human rights film can do, or cannot do. The impact of a human rights film is strong and convincing if it shows what real people suffer in the real world, preferably in their own words, as in Rithy Panh's film. In contrast, Michael Moore made a film to vent personal anger - rightful anger on what guns are used for in his country - in which many facts have been made subservient to his "message". The risks of distortion are a serious issue for concern in any documentary, but,

one would say, particularly so in a "human rights" documentary. The human rights documentary precisely is an endeavor to tread beyond the distortions and falsifications offered by the powers that are responsible for human rights violations. The more claim to "facts", rather than explicit fictionalization or humorous interpretation, the greater the responsibility of film makers to be truthful.

The future of human rights films, and their festivals

The language of cinema contains only nouns and no adjectives. It shows the people and things as they are. We may read, for example, about one victim with a number of adjective characteristics - such as that she is a young woman, is black, had her hand amputated, has eyes that express a mixture of fear and hope, etcetera. On film however, we just see this one woman, in her youth, blackness, handicap and expressiveness.

Human rights and film are a good combination. One image can speak more clearly than many words. One testimony on film can leave a deep impression. It reveals individuality in a single gesture, a glance, a sigh, a laugh.

Human rights are associated with misery. And indeed, there is enough of that in the films selected by human rights film festivals. The little boy in North-Korea who collects crumbs so as not to starve. The Bosnian woman in search of her young children, probably killed - her only clue a pair of red rubber children's boots. Japanese soldiers who tell, seemingly unaffected, about atrocities they committed in China. The young woman in Rwanda who raises a child born from rape. Such personal images belie the cynicism of the flood of everyday news. Yet human rights are more. They are the daily struggle for ideals which are not utopia, but a reality close at hand. We see a Nobel Prize laureate devoting a life's work to human rights. We see women supporting victims of abuse in the name of "honor". We see people taking care of one another while they are displaced by war.

Human rights film festivals have deployed a wide array of activities and initiatives. To the simple screening of films, they have added opportunities for two-sided communication - between film maker, producers, critics, activists and the public. They have done so by awarding prizes and grants for outstanding films and film makers; collaboration with other film and cultural festivals, events, manifestations and the like; extending invitations to filmmakers, producers, actors, human rights groups, victims of human rights abuses, officials and others involved in particular human rights films; organizing debates, forums and workshops; publicity in the mass media; the publication of brochures, pamphlets, magazine issues and books, promoting human rights films with a view to television, film theatre and internet screening; and international exchange programs with other (human rights) film festivals. Human rights film festivals strive to protect their independence in the selection and presentation of films, the invitations to film professionals and others, the means of publicity, the raising of funds and all other areas. They strive to uphold the principle of freedom of expression and information, whatever their affiliation and their sources of funding and assistance.

Of the four types of documentary film sketched above, the testimonial type of documentary is

in a sense the culmination of the tradition of human rights documentaries. So much has already been said and explained by so many people, that by now a straightforward personal expression seems to suffice. Yet this observation takes us to the heart of the problem of the human rights documentary: what is our purpose with it? Shouldn't we use the means of communication that are available for human rights activism to effect change rather than just observe? Don't we want to induce the audience, in this case the viewer, to write a letter, donate, join a demonstration? What does yet another testimony, which is always complex and tied up with the ambiguities of personal life, contribute?

The self-appointed responsibility assumed by the human rights filmmaker and activist is essentially different from that of the reporter or artist. The former has to deal with conflicting requirements that are difficult to combine. Explanation is indispensable, because those who will campaign for Colombia or Liberia should have some knowledge of the specific circumstances in those countries. The accusation has to be accurate, but should also have an emotional appeal. There should also be a story, as the testimony needs to hold the viewer's attention.

This presents a formidable, but not an impossible task. The dilemma is, in any case, clear enough. The visual language of film has increasingly become a language of suggestion, of images that evoke other images, and may be accompanied by a spoken comment which is suggestive and non-hermetic. In this way a language of ambiguity is realized. This is the language which an ever increasing audience has become accustomed to, the level of sophistication that is now expected by the average sophisticated audience. Yet it remains necessary for human rights activists to make clear statements, to define responsibilities, and to initiate concrete action. Documentary makers should take up that challenge. The human rights film, both as a documentary and as a feature film, 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.

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Appendix: Recent human rights documentaries

To illustrate the scope, the following are examples of documentaries shown, and either nominated for a prize or awarded that prize, at recent human rights film festivals:

- *Against My Will* (Ayfer Ergün, the Netherlands, 2002): The Dastak relief centre in Pakistan houses women who have fled from their own families. In many cases, they are victims of abuse, or they have been married off by their parents to a man they did not want. The women's lives are in danger, because in this Pakistani community divorce is a disgrace to the family.

- Baghdad On/Off (Saad Salman, France/Iraq, 2002): Iraqi filmmaker Saad Salman has been living in Paris for more than twenty-five years after having fled from the regime because of his political opinions. He decides to return to Iraq to pay a visit to his mother in Baghdad. With the help of a guide - a wise and extremely phlegmatic man - he is able to cross the border, but then the trouble really starts.
- Behind Closed Eyes (Duco Tellegen, the Netherlands, 2000): When war children close their eyes, frightful images can reappear in their minds. How do they manage to survive? In this series of four short documentaries from Liberia, Kosovo, Cambodia and Rwanda, Dutch filmmaker Duco Tellegen shows how children tell about their experiences, how they play and work, how they build a new future.
- Children of the Secret State (Carla Garapedian & Joe Layburn, UK, 2000): With the help of undercover cameraman "Anh Chol", reporter Joe Layburn documents the horrifying world within North Korea's secret state. The government claims to feed its population through a central distribution system, but the thousands of street children or gochebi (wandering swallows) are testimony that the system is failing.
- The Day i Will Never Forget (Kim Longinotto, UK, 2001): Somali women living in Kenya and other members of the community debate circumcision. The story is told mainly by those who defend the practice as one that has Allah's blessing.
- The Day My God Died (Andrew Levine, USA, 2003): The "day my god died" is what these young girls call the day they are snatched from their villages to be sold as sex slaves. Hidden in the brothels of Bombay, Andrew Levine uses his camera to denounce these practices.
- Homophobia (Lionel Bernard, France, 2000): Within minutes after the first shots of this documentary, the viewer has been confronted with a wide array of nicknames and curses which testify to the homophobia in countries all over the world. While overly racist acts are almost universally condemned at least in words, many societies still do not even have anti-discrimination laws for homosexuals.
- Living Afterwards - Words of Women (Laurent Bécue Renard, France, 2001): Sedina, Jasmina and Senada are three young women who lost their husbands in the Bosnian war. This documentary film is an impression of the four seasons these women spent in a halfway house in Tuzla, where they were offered a combination of psychotherapy and body therapy to live through (and "after") their experiences.
- The Making of a Revolution (Katarina Rejger & Eric van den Broek, the Netherlands, 2001): In September 2000, when Slobodan Milosevic forced elections for the presidency, the student movement Otpor! (Resistance) took the lead in the making of a non-violent people's revolution.
- Ni olvido ni perdon (Richard Dindo, Mexico/Switzerland, 2003) Between July and October 1969, Mexico, students occupied the universities, and thousand of people gathered in streets and squares and demonstrated peacefully. This was just before the start of the Olympics. On October 2nd, a huge demonstration was surrounded by the police and more than 300 people were killed.
- Pinochet's Children (Paula Rodríguez, Germany, 2002): Alejandro Goic was sixteen, Enrique Paris twelve and Carolina Tohá eight years old when General Pinochet seized power in Chile on September 11, 1973. During the coup Alejandro and Carolina lost their fathers, and all three lost their innocence and their youth. And eventually all went on to become powerful student leaders in the tumultuous eighties.
- Prisoners of the Caucasus (Yury Khashchavatski, Poland/Belarus/Germany, 2002): Tolstoy's novel is a departure point for a look at modern Chechnya. Russia's literary tradition was the primary locus of Russian debate on the Caucasus until the media revolution of the post-Soviet 1990s.

- Red Rubber Boots (Jasmila Zbanic, Bosnia, 2000): Jasna P. is searching for her two children, Amar (4 years old) and Ajla (9 months old), who were killed by the Serbian army during the war in Bosnia and buried in a mass grave.
- Return to Kandahar (Nelofar Pazira, Canada/Afghanistan, 2003): Actress, journalist and Afghan refugee in Canada, Nelofar Pazira, goes back in Afghanistan after the latest war and the end of the Taliban regime. But what has really changed in Afghanistan? Are the Afghan women free now to show their faces? Is the regime over?
- S21 - The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine (Rithy Pahn, France, 2002): a film on survivors who meet their former torturers and ask the questions that death has not taken away from them.
- The Settlers (Ruth Walk, Israel, 2002): On the daily insanity of fundamentalism that doesn't shun murder to prove its right. In an intimate portrait The Settlers shows the daily life of two families that have been living for fourteen years in Tel Rumeida, a Jewish settlement in the Palestinian territory.
- Shenglet (Laurent Negre, Switzerland, 2002): Schenglet is "the new electronic bracelet-visa developed by post-Schengen Europe to manage migratory movements". A 7 minutes fictionalised "advertisement" of the European Community.
- Three Days and Never Again (Alexander Gutman, Russia, 1998): On the island of Ognenny, northeast of St. Petersburg, lies a prison for criminals sentenced to death. Alexandr Biryukov is one of them: he shot a commanding officer in the army after suffering sexual abuse. For many years he was not allowed visitors, but in 1997 his mother got permission on the basis of amended prison regulations.

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- Battle of the Somme, The (Geoffrey Malins, J.B. McDowell, Great Britain, 1916)
- Big Parade, The (King Vidor, US, 1925)
- Black Hawk Down (Ridley Scott, US, 2002)
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- Civil War (Ken Burns, US, 1990)
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- Crying Game, The (Neil Jordan, Great Britain, 1992)
- Dead Man Walking (Tim Robins, US, 1995)
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