

Ethics and the Film Festival

Abé Mark Nornes (Film Studies)

I have now worked on film festivals for a quarter of a century, and there is one thing I came to slowly appreciate over time: film festivals plug one into every aspect of cinema culture. They provide unique — and wonderfully fleeting — footing from which to think about film criticism, auteurism, industry, production culture, distribution, reception, and the list goes on. I would add one more item to this list, and that is *ethics*.

This issue occasionally roars to the foreground at festivals, usually around “problem films.” For example, in the 1993 Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival *Black Harvest* caused an uproar when one of the sidebars, a gathering of First Nation filmmakers, took offense at what they felt was the film’s one-dimensional portrait of an indigenous people, an approach they argued rendered them as “barbarians” (as if the developed people’s of Europe were any less violent). Alternatively, there was the fascinating battle among various feminist positions — both generational and geographical — over Dennis O’Rourke’s *Good Woman of Bangkok* at the 1991 festival.

A very special process of “reading” goes on around such films. Spectators assemble in the theater. The film unwinds. And viewers extrapolate an ethical stance from the time and space of the film itself. For every documentary implies an ethical comportment, and this is built into every camera angle, every edit, every choice the filmmaker makes. Of course, this is true for fictions films as well. However, documentary directors are recording their interactions with living, breathing human beings. And this makes a world

of difference. Documentaries invite us ask how directors conduct themselves within the complexities of *our* shared world.

The reason such problem films rile up the theaters, restaurants and bars of film festivals is that spectators are brought into a profound and inextricable relationship with the ethical stance of the filmmakers. Many of the great documentaries in history are made by directors that brazenly skirt lines of propriety and transgression. They transport spectators to those lines, daring them to vicariously experience the ethical perils or challenges the filmmaker has enjoined in the real world. When viewers decide a filmmaker has actually crossed an ethical line, the effect is visceral because of the intimate circuit documentaries create between *taisho*, filmmaker and audience.

In the hubbub around problem films, the role of the film festival itself is often overlooked. In fact, a range of ethical perils hide behind the choice to show a film or not. In placing a film on its slate, the film festival takes a measure of responsibility for the ethical stance of the filmmaker — although programmers prefer to lurk in the background and stay out of the (sometimes fierce) debates they have enabled.

This is to say, festivals themselves are spaces with a profoundly ethical charge. And the best films and film festivals self-consciously utilize ethics as an indispensable tool in the tool box. This is one goal of this year’s Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival.