

Review

Carol Roy (2016) *Documentary Film Festivals: Transformative Learning, Community Building and Solidarity*, Sense Publications: Rotterdam, pp156. Paperback, £24.

Drawing on research into three Canadian Documentary Film Festivals, Carol Roy presents a compelling case for such festivals as conduits for social connectedness, solidarity, activism/action and hope. Ultimately, this book encourages us and inspires us to reflect on how our own educational practice can work in this way.

My involvement in the Scottish Mental Health Arts and Film Festival as a tool for advocacy and activism, as well as my interest in adult and popular education from work around Mad Studies, tweaked my personal interest in this book. However, it will also have broad appeal to those working in any form of community work, community development work or adult/popular education.

In the current neoliberal, marketised world we are driven further and further apart from each other. Roy suggests that film festivals are a powerful way to counter this. Cinema is a collective experience, where we all ‘draw breath together’; film festivals can bring people together, encourage collaboration and engagement and help us to ‘imagine a different world’. Roy references Freire right from the start and states that, in order to transform the world, we need a dream, a utopia, a vision (Freire, 2004). Cinema has the power to enable us to witness and also to imagine different worlds. We can see our own lives and stories reflected and validated on screen, but film also allows us to encounter worlds and stories entirely different from our own, fostering a sense of solidarity (local and global), empathy and enhanced commitment to social change.

Importantly and distinctively, documentary film festivals can provide a counter-hegemonic narrative to Hollywood blockbusters and an alternative voice to the

mainstream media. In so doing, they can contribute to a healthy democracy and encourage citizens to think critically, increasing our media literacy.

The author insists that documentary film festivals can play an important political role in times of crisis. One excellent example she gives is the Sarajevo Film Festival which grew out of defiance of the Bosnian War and a desire to rebuild a sense of community, connection and humanity following the ‘devastation of war’. She certainly encourages us to see the arts as a powerful organising tool and challenges those who see them as frivolous or peripheral. I particularly liked her reference to ‘art as a hammer (social protest)’ (Gablik, 1991).

Roy writes of the links between film festivals and transformative learning. What stood out for me was what she said about festivals stimulating a desire to know more (‘epistophilia’), how they can shed light on complex issues and also how they help citizens search for understanding that is collective rather than individualised. She argues that the arts allow us to see other points of view, they provoke debate, ‘generate outrage, challenge biases and show us things we might not want to see’ (Butterwick and Dawson, 2006).

Roy shows how film festivals can link with Mezirow’s notion of ‘transformative learning’ (2000), stating that they can be tools for transformation. What stood out for me was when she talked about how the stories in documentaries can connect to audience members on an individual, personal level and how these can then be broadened out, fostering the ability to look at the wider societal issues. We need to have that personal connection first, before people can take a step back and begin to think about the wider picture. I related to the idea that films can ‘open the window in people’s minds just a little’. As Roy states, they enable people to question firmly held beliefs, which is the first step in social change. This, for me, is at the heart of any form of community-based education.

Films can also give us insight by putting a ‘human face’ on complex issues that at first seem alien to us. They can encourage critical thinking, encouraging us, for example,

to think about what citizenship really means. Roy again mentions Freire in suggesting how films can ‘announce possibilities, offer ideas of what can be done, encourage love and compassion, ultimately offering individual and collective transformation’ (Freire 2004).

The last three chapters look at how film festivals foster community and solidarity, inspire engagement and action and how they can be ‘Weavers of Dreams’. Neoliberalism and the free market have eroded our sense of community and connectedness. Film festivals could have an important role in rebuilding this. Roy believes that ‘public non-consumerist space is crucial to a vibrant democracy’, also that festivals can bridge differences between people, link the local and the global and thus create the possibility of change.

Festivals can help build activist networks and coalitions. Roy talks about the importance of ‘bazaars’ at festivals, which are the market place of stalls where festival goers can meet up with charities and local activists involved directly in social change. This offers connections and the potential for ‘concrete’ steps and actions. Bazaars can lead to more engagement, a desire to ‘do something’. Festivals are also a source of pride in communities, helping to reinvigorate and ‘recharge the batteries’ of more seasoned activists.

In her conclusion, Carol Roy does offer a critique of film festivals, specifically questioning if they speak mainly to middle class Canadians, also conceding that just seeing a film is not in itself enough to create change. Real solutions require reflection, time and a commitment to work with others.

Nevertheless, she ends by arguing that film festivals encourage social and political awareness and that they can embody Freire’s ‘pedagogy of indignation’, ultimately offering steps to action and resources for hope in times of unprecedented political and environmental challenges. By bearing witness to the stories presented in documentary films we are encouraged to reflect on what matters to us as human beings, what is

important to us in life and how we can change things we believe to be unjust. In my opinion, in this book Carol Roy offers us a compelling and inspiring argument.

References

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