The Festival: Presences: Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and the United States

As this festival articulates the watching of films to be guided by its parent organization, and HRW has defined its role as monitoring human rights, there is an implicit expectation of seeing violations rather than the celebration of the achievement of human rights. Watching others not doing well with human rights is the expected vista, or, at the very least, watching their struggles to make human rights happen. This is not what necessarily takes place at the festival, however. The three regions or nations on which I have chosen to focus were the most obvious presence at the festival, due either to the number of films they screened or the ongoing attention to that region, or both. I discuss each region separately as different themes emerge for each.

Films about human rights in the United States have a consistent numerical presence in the years under discussion here, most of the time between 30 percent and 40 percent of the films screened, except for 2005 and 2006 when only 1 out of 18 films, and 3 of 24 films respectively, concerned the United States. Most of these films centered on prison conditions or the justice system, but quite a few were concerned with activism/activists. The other two regions received different types of attention, as films about the Middle East were concerned with Israel-Palestine in the early years, portraying a sympathetic perspective toward Palestine. The focus on Eastern Europe sees film selections that are suggestive of HRW’s historical and ideological position from its origins as Helsinki Watch. I will begin with this latter region as the preceding Context chapter dealt with some of that history.

Eastern Europe

The focus on Eastern Europe can be readily explained through the work of the parent organization, first called Helsinki Watch, and later Human
Rights Watch. As I discussed in the previous chapter, this established a standpoint of “watchfulness” over this region that continues until today. The films included in the festival as representing this region have been on three themes: i) the conflicts as a result of the break-up of the former Yugoslavia—Kosovo, Bosnia-Serbia-Croatia—and of the former USSR, specifically Chechnya; ii) social conditions in Russia and Eastern Europe in general; and iii) “freedom” activism. Those films that deal with Russia do so fairly uniformly to critique either its policies or specifically Vladimir Putin and also to celebrate some of the prodemocracy activism. Most of the films show the political and social volatility of the region. These films more or less mirror Helsinki Watch as described by Jeri Laber in the previous chapter, which supported anticommunist activists and openly criticized the USSR’s repressive policies.

The conflicts that resulted as the USSR and Yugoslavia were breaking up have received the greatest attention, with at least 11 films on this subject screening in the 13-year period in question, in particular films about the Bosnian war and its aftermath. This includes films such as

- *That the Women Live* (Becue-Renard 2001) at the 2001 festival, a documentary about Bosnian women talking of their trauma during therapy;
- *Good Husband, Dear Son* (Honigmann 2002) at the 2002 festival, about widows from this war;
- *A Conversation with Haris* (Sofian 2002) at the same festival, a short animated film about a young Bosnian boy’s experience of seeing his grandmother killed by Serbs;
- *VIVISECT* (M. Gajicki 2003), a short documentary film screened at the 2003 festival that shows audience reactions to a photo exhibition in Serbia on the war;
- *Snow* (Begić 2008), a drama shown at the 2009 festival about a village without men in Bosnia; and
- *Honeymoons* (Paskaljevic 2009), shown at the 2010 festival, a drama about two couples from this region who migrate to Western Europe.

The most recognizable film, because it was released in mainstream cinemas prior to appearing on HRWIFF, was *The Whistleblower* (TW) (Kondracki 2011), which deals with Bosnia and the after effects of conflict, and which was screened at the 2011 festival, as a Benefit and Reception film screening. This feature fictional film focuses on a Nebraska woman police officer who enlists as a peacekeeper in postwar Bosnia, and her uncovering of corruption in the UN that has been aided by interests in the United States. Although many other films about this region show a tendency toward instruction, or a clear line of argumentation, such as