

## **FESTIVALS OF FILMS, DECOLONIAL SPACES, AND PUBLIC PEDAGOGY: SOME PRELIMINARY REFLECTIONS**

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**ABSTRACT** The present paper offers reflections on festivals of films as potential spaces for public pedagogy, decolonization, and emancipation. The aim is to examine some dilemmas inherent to spectatorship, which overlap with pedagogical dilemmas around the establishing of communities and the recognizing of students — the oppressed, the individual, the collective — as persons. Drawing on the works of Brazilian educationalist Paulo Freire, French philosopher Jacques Rancière, Carol Roy, Elizabeth Ellsworth, and others, I offer ways in which film and its deployment within festivals might open up generative spaces of imagination for students, educators, community members, and festival programmers. In order to do this, I argue that watching films and attending festivals should be considered along their collective and individual correlates; that the human dimension of festival participation differentiates it from isolated spectatorship; and that festival programmers can help to place viewers in positions of potential emancipation if they take care to organize films around dialogue, understanding that a key educational dimension of festivals is that they call us into

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relation with others. In attempting to “demythologize” film and festivals of films in this manner, I make a preliminary attempt to redeem or reconceptualize the festival as a decolonized space of politics, culture, and solidarity building.

**Keywords:** film festivals, public pedagogy, emancipation, decolonization, spectator

## **Introduction**

As the son of Indian immigrants to Canada, I work as a humanities educator in a Canadian suburban school district in which questions of identity, diversity, equity, decolonization, and Indigeneity are paramount. In my work, I witness how film can frame some of these questions for students and teachers, young and old alike, and from diverse backgrounds. In broader settings, I have organized film screenings as part of community outreach initiatives<sup>2</sup> alongside my teachers and peers. I have recounted documentary film festivals as a student journalist, watched animated films with children, and I have played editorial roles for film-studies periodicals. I have consumed and been consumed by films to the extent that films, in all their genres, are particularly powerful for me today, as I work to incorporate them into my teaching of adult students, many of whom are recent immigrants finding themselves in unfamiliar and precarious systems of schooling in which the question of emancipation is central. The power of films is

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<sup>2</sup> I am indebted to my teacher, Professor Greg Chan, from the Department of English at Kwantlen Polytechnic University, who also serves as Community Outreach Director of KDocs Documentary Film Festival, Metro Vancouver’s premier social justice film festival <<http://www.kdocsff.com>>. Professor Chan made possible my initial interactions with film studies and public pedagogy through film and festivals of films. About his work, refer to <<http://www.gregchan.com/>>.

clear to me; they speak to us in profound ways, in ways texts do not. Films presume only that we can perceive, not that we can write, read, or even necessarily hear. This power of films makes the organizing of viewing activities challenging, particularly considering the socio-cultural and political dynamics of schools and students. In this paper, I wish to take on some of these challenges and questions I confront in my work, so that film and its deployment might open up generative spaces of imagination for students, educators, community members and, not less, programmers.

My point of departure is that attending film festivals represents both a collective and individual act, each grounded in its own, yet intersecting dynamics. The phenomena of watching a film and participating in a film festival should be considered, simultaneously, along their collective and individual correlates. Though we participate in festivals with others, understanding the roles of affectivity in collective pedagogical experiences, that “emotions work to secure collectives”,<sup>3</sup> we ultimately watch, read, and interpret films within the intimacy of our being (Ahmed, 2004, p. 25). Notwithstanding, there is a human dimension of festival participation that differentiates it from mere, isolated, spectatorship of film. A core premise of the present paper is that film festival programmers need to consider these individual and collective dimensions of film viewing, and their intersections. How might programmers frame the collective viewing of films by individuals, and how might viewers be placed in positions of potential emancipation?

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<sup>3</sup> Sara Ahmed, in ‘Collective Feelings Or, The Impressions Left by Others’, argues that emotionality “as a responsiveness to and openness towards the worlds of others [...] involves an interweaving of the personal with the social”—that “what separates us from others also connects us to others” (2004, pp. 28-29).

What are some issues around a decolonising public pedagogy of film festivals that programmers should consider, whether in schools, community centres, or other public arenas? Clearly, organizing of film festivals cannot be reduced to scheduling films in some arbitrary way. There is far more to the craft of envisioning emancipatory film festivals as practices of public pedagogy, particularly when it comes to identifying practices that seek to decolonise the audiovisual stimuli that present themselves to our senses, in what are often fundamentally diverse and pluralistic societies.

I begin by considering some general dimensions of festivals, trying to put them in some relation to the concept of ‘film’. In a second instance, I lay out some initial pedagogical dilemmas around organizing festivals using the specific medium of film, some of which I have encountered in my own work. In the third and fourth sections, I consult primarily Brazilian educationalist Paulo Freire, to articulate a notion of education in relation to film festivals that is emancipatory and, dare I say, decolonising. In the fifth section, I examine viewership from the perspective of the spectator by drawing on the work of French philosopher Jacques Rancière. To conclude, in the final section, I return to my initial, anticipated ‘educational’ challenges and reflect on what it means for film festival programmers to consider. Throughout, in framing things in terms of relevant educational theory and their relations to film festivals, I draw on the works of Elizabeth Ellsworth (1997) and that of Carole Roy (2016), which focus on viewing film as a “scene of address” that is fundamentally positioned in relation to the practice of transformative learning.

## **Festival of film: Dimensions, definitions, problems**

The 2019 *Routledge handbook of festivals* begins with editor Judith Mair offering a slightly reluctant ‘definition’ of festivals:

[...] short term, recurring, publicly accessible events that usually celebrate and / or perform particular elements of culture that are important to the place in which they are held or the communities which hold them; that provide opportunities for recreation and entertainment; and that give rise to feelings of belonging and sharing. (2019, p. 5)

Because the term ‘festival’ escapes a narrow definition, Mair (2019) finds it appropriate instead to think about “dimensions” of festivals (p. 4). The primary dimensions or characteristics of festivals she speaks to include their short term and recurring nature, that they are publicly accessible, celebratory of culture, community-driven and place-based, often contain performative elements, and are recreational in spirit (p. 5).

Above all, it is the final dimension I am most drawn to: the participatory and collective aspect of festivals that give rise to community, sharing, “belonging and identification” (Mair, 2019, p. 8). The capacity for festivals to “[reinforce] personal and social identity” (p. 26) recalls perhaps the key ‘educational’ or formative component of festivals: their capacity to put us into relation with others. The voluntary desire of individuals to attend recreational events that place them into some relation with others, in my mind, is in part what makes festivals open to some investigation through educational theory. How film figures into this image of the

festival is in some ways secondary to this educational dimension or characteristic of festivals. Whatever their title, festival programmers seem to be aware of the educative dimensions associated with their role. For them, film would only deepen these dimensions. Therefore, to put ‘festival’ and not ‘film’ in the foundational and leading role, is to refer not to a film festival, but to a festival *of* films. The relational, collective, educative dimensions of festivals can perhaps be made more apparent when ‘festival’ is perceived as the leading concept.

That festivals (of films or otherwise) “perform elements of culture” in a public manner ensures that they are educational sites in broad senses of both “culture” and “education” (Mair, 2019, p. 5). Following Antonio Gramsci, Stuart Hall, and more recently Henry Giroux, culture entails change, interpretation and contestation; culture plays roles in transforming identities, enacting power, and can initiate imaginings for “oppositional social change” (Giroux, 2004, p. 60). Moreover, culture may be understood as a force for establishing communal norms of habituation, that is culture can be educational, in moral and practical terms, particularly salient for the present study in the context of modes of viewership or the reading of filmic items as “expansive teaching [machines]” (Giroux, 2004, p. 67). We may say, in other words, that the culture of festivals of films are inherently concerned with public pedagogy. Considering Giroux’s rendering of public pedagogy and culture in “*Cultural Studies, Public Pedagogy, and the Responsibility of Intellectuals*”, we find that pedagogy “becomes a defining principle of a wide-ranging set of cultural apparatuses” (2004, p. 63) with political and existential implications. In my reading of festivals of films as educational and cultural

sites, I take Giroux's point that public pedagogy is a commitment to "deliberation and struggle" against the remaking of contexts and meanings "often within unequal relations of power" (2004, p. 65). Following Giroux, what I will try to show is a dialogic dimension of pedagogy: "pedagogy as a form of production and critique [offering] a discourse of [possibilities]" (Giroux, 2004, p. 73), ways of linking meaning to commitment for social transformation through dialogue.

At the same time, a festival of films entails, by definition, the filmic items themselves. Corrigan, White, and Mazaj (2011) assert that, taken at face value, a film represents an inherent contradiction. Different films have been employed by different people at different times for entirely different purposes. Even at a single point in time, films are read from divergent points of view. Film, therefore, as multifaceted and interdisciplinary, is at least a construction of various art forms as well as a configuration of "commercial, artistic and social interests" (p. vii). Film is like the image for Rancière: not a duplicate record of some other thing, but under our gaze a continually altered "complex set of relations between the visible and invisible, the visible and speech, the said and the unsaid" (2009, p. 93). To be clear, under the gazes of viewers, films as representations of reality come (or should come) into question. For Freire, the dialogic character of film as a communicative medium opens opportunities to understand films as problems "to be solved" by audiences (Freire, 2005, p. 123). Programmers, or anchors of the educative situation that films initiate, understanding that films are not innocent, provide viewers with thematic foci that facilitate dialogue, fill gaps between themes, or "illustrate the relations between the general program content

and the [views] of the world held by the people” (Freire, 2005, p. 120). As a result, being staged within a festival further complicates and potentially enriches the affective, dialogic, and educative role of film.

Like ‘festival’, at its outset the film comes under scrutiny. Leaving aside how to neatly define ‘film’, how film relates to reality, and how films operate on us is peculiar if we consider that they are configurations of various—and at times warring—interests. Films are at once products of the entertainment industry, a form of “show business”, for example; but also they are “used to propagate important national and societal messages” (Bhattacharya, 2013, p. 175); and so, films are potentially educational in that, for one, ‘education’ can be wrapped in ‘entertaining’ and ingratiating packages. The leisurely or entertaining dimension of films, in other words, may be seen to overlap or align with their inherent “elements for learning” (2013, p. 181) in some paradoxical sense. That films provide us entertainment is not on its own a basis upon which we can dismiss films or even television as unworthy of analysis using educational theory. As a result, the purposes and effects of films within a festival may not necessarily be taken for granted. This is due in part, as well, to the “direct or indirect educational dimensions” (Bhattacharya, 2013, p. 182) of film production and viewership. Considering film as a distinct “aesthetic form and social institution” (Corrigan et al., 2011, p. vii), then, we might wonder how to conceptualize film and position it between entertainment, ‘made-for-pleasure’, and something far more, potentially ‘offering a critical vision of reality’. Which types of film should an organizer include or work to exclude? The variety of filmic types may not in any obvious way help our conceptualization

of the filmic item, for so many films even of the same genre pose questions, paradoxes, and seem to instruct us in such contradictory ways.

One potentially useful approach to film, from the perspective of the festival programmer, is that reluctant disposition, alluded to above, which does not in advance over-determine the ultimate affective, moral, or aesthetic quality of a particular film and of film in general. This approach might maintain a slightly open-ended conceptualization of film as textual item within the context of festivals, at once potentially emancipatory and potentially harmful for adult education and education broadly speaking.

To begin with, part of the difficulty faced by educators in screening films is figuring out what sorts of effects the viewing of films might have on students, an impossibly complex but potentially worthwhile consideration. When it comes to viewership, Rancière is not in favor of any corporate monopoly on filmic expectations, or their intended effects. He writes that modern multiplexes have stripped some of the spirit of cinema, in that films are now carefully commercialized and formatted for audiences to produce intended consumeristic effects. “Film-festival material”, we are told, is too often “reserved for the exclusive enjoyment of a film-buff elite” (2009, p. 81). While we might tentatively concede these points, the general questions are open: can watching film, big-budget or otherwise, be a form of therapy? Does watching film improve the quality of one’s life? Should film be countered, its effects not easily accepted? Or ought students yield to the on-screen content they watch and try to extract from the film what is valuable? What can we say

about the agency of our viewers, our students, as “the spectator *must see* [...] what the director *makes her see*”? (Rancière, 2009, p. 14). An organizer cannot possibly anticipate a viewer’s potential reaction to a film. So, for the reasons given and in light of the questions posed, conversation around the effects of film within festivals does not always yield to straightforward answers.

Free or not, we can at least presume that the concept of viewership itself, like the other associated concepts, yields on its surface a number of crucial questions. How might we instruct viewers to watch film, or should we? Should students not be taught how to watch film before watching, or might there be something peculiar to viewership that students or spectators already know? Does the truly free spectator simply close her eyes or drift into sleep to avoid the film being played before her? Does she question and criticize the production to demystify and reject it? Within the context of film festivals, and those organized in a non-arbitrary fashion, viewership comes under some justifiable inspection. As I try to show, viewers who are empowered as subjects are pushed to engage in “critical consciousness” and who, in intervening in the world, not passively watching, may change it for the better (Freire, 2005, p. 73). Such a perception should never assume that being a spectator is a “passive condition that we should transform into activity” (Rancière, 2009 p. 17). The insight here is that festival programmers should recognize that the being of a spectator involves its own activities and intelligences peculiar to itself (2009 p. 17). As such, spectating appears always-already interrupted and never at ease, for spectating involves linking “what we see to what we have seen and said, done and dreamed” (2009 p. 17). Spectating is a given capacity to

perceive, to liken our lives to those of others (2009 p. 17). Rancière's spectator, as we will see later, is not passive, thanks to the equalizing nature and intervening power of spectating. Ellsworth similarly notes that the 'viewing experience' is inherently "relational" in that the manner in which a film addresses us, its particular "mode of address", ranges and is negotiated (Ellsworth, 1997, p. 25). What one makes of films, Ellsworth writes, is a "projection of [...] relations" between the self and between "others, knowledge, and power" (1997, p. 25). In this way, even before they are publicly available, films presuppose, or "think", much about who the intended spectators are (1997, p. 25).

To summarize this introductory section, let us condense the various points of departure and dilemmas in relation to the pedagogical potential of film and film festivals. In the concluding section, we return to some of these points and offer questions in response to some of them:

1. There are both collective and individual dimensions of film festivals that programmers should attend to.
2. Programmers need to consider how to nurture the collective quality of watching film as well as the location of the individual persons attending festivals as spectators. In that sense, festivals of films – as distinct from mere "film festivals" – are premised on the configuration of the individual, participatory and collective aspects of viewing that gives rise to community, sharing, and "belonging and identification" (Mair, 2019, p. 8), yet also their contestation.

3. As a media that engages our audio and visual senses, film, in and of itself, represents some inherent contradictions. It is a product of many interests, implicit and explicit, that can be used to further different goals and political agendas. As a result, film complicates and potentially enriches the already-educational dimension of festivals.
4. How educators should teach or instruct viewers to watch or read film is an open question because spectating is a complex activity. Spectators already deploy their own ‘methods’ of spectatorship. In that sense, a film represents a “scene of address” that remains “mysterious” in terms of its effective (and affective) influence on viewers.

### **Festivals of films, education, emancipation**

Is it possible that festivals of films can challenge the mainstream flow of information to highlight and interrogate the struggles of everyday persons, and encourage others “to dare to act” with the oppressed *against* domination (Roy, p. 10)? To address this question, I consult Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2005), Roy’s *Documentary Film Festivals Transformative Learning, Community Building & Solidarity* (2016), and Ellsworth’s *Teaching Positions* (1997). My aim is to claim that educators, as programmers of festivals of films, can find inroads to establishing communities for dialogue and for a decolonising emancipation, if they deploy films “to fuel imagination” in the direction of noticing ourselves and others *in relation* to the greater world and our struggles in it (Roy, 2016, p. 9). It is this continued reliance on our acknowledgement of relations that underpins Freire’s

community-orientation with respect to education as (or for) emancipation. This is 'education' that attends to a more pressing call to love one another and love the world, precisely by decolonising the practices that underpin its audiovisual politics of representation.

Freire's approach to pedagogy begins in love and moves through the establishment of relationships of dialogue into community and humanization. In this paper, I am not analyzing each facet of his approach to education, as this has been undertaken fully by scholars (Mayo, 2012). Rather, I discuss Freire in relation to my re-envisioning of the festival of films. Freire's approach is upheld and fortified by a trust, firstly, in the oppressed to reflect and to act *for* themselves and, secondly, in the work "leadership and people" do "*with*" the oppressed (not "*for*" them) (Freire, 2005, p. 69, 67). Following this approach to education, festivals might be organized in ways to cultivate their surroundings to best capture film in this emancipatory and educational sense. This is a question of cultivating and nurturing discussion and the possibilities for community that might themselves grow around screenings, not establishing authoritative and all-encompassing readings of the film that close or curtail discussion.

For Freire, emancipation, in the educational sense, sees teachers-as-students and students-as-teachers, teaching *each other* and striving for betterment through dialogue and a collective responsiveness to each other and to the world (2005, p. 80). The emancipated educational situation begins in some sense of community in motion, in striving and in reconciliation of the common teacher-student dilemma, where a teacher only exists in relation to an ignorant

student. An emancipated classroom, a festival of films in our case, is therefore a space where one “strives for the *emergence* of consciousness and *critical intervention* in reality” (2005, p. 81). This is where we can stand on eye-level with our peers, oriented toward thought and action in our facing of the obstacles that the world presents us. In this scenario, dialogue is our vehicle to overcome domination.

Freire locates the radical nature of the activity inherent to education in “praxis”, where education is “constantly remade” (2005, p. 86). A praxical approach to education in the context of a festival of films accepts neither a straightforward and one-dimensional present “nor a predetermined future” (2005, p. 86). Instead, in praxis, we find a fixation on the “dynamic present”, not only on what is but what continues to be and become, what is representative of the unfolding and “transformational character of reality” (2005, p. 86). Freire’s is an emphatically hopeful vision for education and humanity, one that is oriented toward the building of a new world and toward the upward mobility of its most powerless inhabitants to be recognized as persons and community members.

Whether as students, or as viewers, Freire’s message is that human beings *can* initiate an overcoming of domination, but that this is an iterative and collective process, one that employs dialogue and sees love as a guide for making impressions of others and of the world. Love as an abstraction is immediately deflated for Freire, as he writes in his preface that he anticipates some readers’ dismissal of ‘love’, even hope and humility, as foolish concepts or emotions. But love, not of oneself but of another, also represents an existential and concrete risk for Freire,

because the oppressor is “solidary with the oppressed” only when the oppressed are no longer abstractions but “persons” (Freire, 2005, p. 50). This movement from abstraction to personhood is one grounded in the existential quality, the “praxis”, of love (2005, p. 50). “Love”, as well, is Freire’s foundation for dialogue; it is a courageous “*commitment*” of subjects to each other as they struggle against domination (2005, p. 89). There is another sense in which we can consider the concept of “love” as a collective value, and paradox, one that both compliments and challenges Freire’s universalism. Specifically, under some feminist readings of the role of affectivity in pedagogical experiences, love is both a force for globality, attachment, the establishing of “the skin of the collective” or global personhood, as well as a force for establishing distance, a method for reading the “proximity of others” who are more or less like me (Ahmed, 2004, pp. 30, 39). In other words, it appears we may only be a collective if others “stay put” as locals, as we seem most moved to love those like us (2004, p. 38). Sara Ahmed, in this instance, tries to demonstrate, like Freire, that the emotion of “love” has some capacity for mobility, for a coming together and not only a passing through, for recognition of the other as part of a collective “we”, that is, “like me”, “with me”, “able to be loved by me”, and therefore not “against me” (2004, p. 36). On the other hand, and at the same time, through her analysis of Nussbaum’s “Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism”, Ahmed cautions against the notion of perceiving all as “world [citizens]” and that notion’s appeal to universal reason, which presupposes “the neutrality of reason as the foundation of the global community” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 36). Here, Ahmed substitutes universal love for Nussbaum’s universal reason, arguing that others “become members of the community only insofar as they take form in a way that

I recognize as ‘like me’” (2004, p. 36), that is, we can find a fetishistic dimension of identity-based love, wherein love is crucial to the “delineation of the bodies of individual subjects” (2004, 25). Both universal appeals, love and reason, it seems, are involved in concealment. To be clear, one insight that Ahmed provides here on affectivity in general is that our dominant feelings of “love” or “compassion” for the other can be “cut off from histories of production”, consumption, and exchange (Ahmed, 2004, p. 36). In this way, our feelings for the other can work to conceal realities. Freire’s human love, then, cannot be detached from the human bodies, both individual and collective, of the world as Nussbaum’s appeals to human reason are or appear to be for Ahmed (2004, p. 36). With respect to ‘love’, this is my interpretation of Ahmed’s anticipated criticisms as they might relate to Freire’s universalism.

At this stage, some immediate implications for festival of films programmers are rather straightforward: a constant remaking or reimagining of film is made possible by opportunities for dialogue, both before and after the screening of a particular film, allowing viewers to ‘remake’ or rethink their interpretation of what they have ‘seen’ through dialogue. Building on Freire’s conceptualization of praxis, programmers should therefore be sensitive to the unending filmic experience. That is, programmers should acknowledge that what may take place at one particular festival is only part of a single beginning, perhaps for a single viewer, that might spark something within that viewer long after the credits have rolled. Simultaneously, we locate apparent paradoxes in the concept of love that begin to show

limitations around true, global viewership and, by extension, citizenship.

It is not difficult to imagine these qualities of collectivity and striving, those that Freire is after, within the context of a festival of films, where persons of various stripes come together to embody the connection between art and community through intervening dialogue that flanks the film screenings (Roy, 2016, p. 78). To the extent that the dialogic, communitarian, and humanistic spirit of festivals can be preserved, we can imagine a less oppressive and less exploitative film festival that may rise to meet Freire's standards. Here, in terms of decolonising potential, I point not to film itself but to the affirmative and dignified events taking shape before, after, and between the screenings, which elicit commentary from audience members. This is where filmgoers take on, not the spectacle of film, but the relationalities and their concomitant dialogic articulations. In that sense, a festival of films does not simply (or just) screen films for audiences, they might rather employ film as an educational instrument, by surrounding film by opportunities to establish relationships of dialogue or community. This idea is well captured in Leslie Roman's (2015) engagement with Stuart Hall's thought. Hall refuses to consider "publics" as given. Rather, for him, the major challenge facing educators is how 'to move' people from being an audience to 'making' and fostering an active public, "to suture together alliances with specific marginalized groups as part of his extraordinary commitment to education as public thinking and teaching publicly" (Roman, 2015, p. 200). For example, consider panel-discussions and town-hall meetings where film is a necessary component for the sparking of discussion. This, in part, is why film may be

understood as only a small part of what a festival of films represents: perhaps film is instrumental to the higher goods of collaboration, love, dialogue, community, and freedom that can be sought after in festivals. Festivals of films are thus places where the singular gaze of spectator, as non-spectator, faces necessary intervention by dialogue with others. The aim is to shape an environment of a “supportive and non-threatening atmosphere” of celebration or wonderment inspired by film (Roy, 2016, p. 9).

Drawing on insights from Freire, Hall, Roy, and Ahmed, festivals of films can be understood as the active building of “grassroots coalitions”, “of collaborative local networks between organizers” of different backgrounds, offering attendees opportunities for public engagement with others on pertinent issues. In this context, film becomes the informal guide to both conversation and leisure (Roy, 2016, p. 78-79). As Roy writes, film festivals have historically provided “effective means of communication and outreach” even where literacy rates are low (2016, p. 2). This is due, at least in part, to the collective qualities of festivals, as social movements and open gathering places: they are community-reliant; non-threatening; engaging; discourse-heavy; intervening and, above all, they have the potential to be liberating in Freire’s sense of education (2016, p. 2).

The notion of neighborhood cinema forums—essentially festivals of films by other names— as communicative, political, and educational sites where individuals can form relationships “with new people” have been the subject of ethnographic case-studies around the world (Castro-Varela, 2018, p. 405). Simply put, social discussions around the present issues have always existed. The Occupy Cinema

Forum of Barcelona, for instance, part of anti-austerity social movements in Spain, was taken up by Aurelio Castro-Varela in “*Going researcher’ in the Occupy Poble Sec Cinema Forum: listening to the screenings and tracing a fluid assemblage of learning and care*” (2018). When local area assemblies, namely, in Poble Sec, close to Barcelona’s “historic centre”, took to protest, various committees were established to organize and spread information (Castro-Varela, 2018, p. 396). Monthly film forums, one such organization, each followed by public debates, put the images and sounds of films into pressing local contexts: some films led viewers to “consider how political struggles had been [dampened] during the Spanish transition to democracy and subsequently ignored in later official accounts”, for example (Castro-Varela, 2018, p. 396). In this case, film was instrumental to educational and political ends. Opening spaces for film as pedagogical apparatus—in the spirit of Ellsworth— helps to “[reshape] different venues [...] for the [purposes] of thinking, speaking, and being together differently” (Castro-Varela, 2018, p. 397). These venues can take on a “logic of care”, in that they enable discussion in ordinary yet substantive ways through, among other things, the offerings of “drinks and snacks prepared by part of the organizing group and other members of the Poble Sec assembly” (Castro-Varela, 2018, p. 405). The wide-reaching appeal of these forums of films was apparent in the heterogenous social makeup of the audience members: immigrants, “precariously employed young people, unemployed adults, activists” and “old-age pensioners” begin to describe some of these persons. Further examples in the relevant literature are illustrative of different artistic fora as political and educational sites. Take, for instance, the notion of community developers employing educational

techniques, as is explored in English and Mayo's *Learning with Adults* (2012). Specifically, readers are told of Federico Garcia Lorca and his participatory theatre, involving his University troupe, *La Barraca*, who would "tour various remote and impoverished Spanish towns and villages, and also Afro-American quarters in New York", "eliciting ideas and knowledge from groups", in attempts to bring "theatre back to the people" (English & Mayo, 2012, p. 136). Both these and further examples invoke the primacy of the human person in such educational, political, communicative, and artistic situations.

Central to Freire's human-centered education stands the self-aware human subject, or person, who inscribes herself in history through her "quest for human completion" enabled by dialogic relationships, personal and common reflection and action that might be cultivated by good leadership (Freire, 2005, p. 47). In that sense, festivals of films "call us into relationships" with others. They are not reduceable to the passivity of regimented and mechanical education or instruction as they are commonly located within institutions of mass and state schooling, testing, or vocational training (Roy, 2016). It is worthy to note, on this very point, that 'new' film festivals are distinct from 'old' places of training or schooling, or passive watching, akin to Rancière's old theater, which for Plato, too, is where "ignoramus are invited to see people suffer", and where "true community" never lives (Rancière, 2009, p. 3). It is where, for Freire, the world remains veiled, one might say colonised, and where we remain prisoners of an "old, paternalistic teacher-student relationship" (Freire, 2005, p. 13).

All that said, we do not need to lose sense of our places in history. Viewers can appreciate film as historic artefact, too, representative of a particular time and place. Educators can turn to festivals of films as sites of transformation towards new possibilities around learning, knowledge, and action. Notwithstanding, programmers can also provide viewers a historical sense of how a film has been produced as a response to particular social circumstances. This is where dialogue mediates the “encounter among men and women who name the world”, who in doing so take part in this “act of creation” and re-creation that facilitates or enables their emancipation and establishment of relations (Freire, 2005, p. 89). Freire prefaces his radical call to transform the world with a prior, necessary, and more personal commitment to one another; to love one another, and to employ dialogue as mediation, for humanity. Freire’s liberty (or education), then, is entangled with the fostering of communities and dialogue; in fact, it assumes that education is “the practice of freedom [...] as opposed to [...] the practice of domination” (Freire, 2005, p. 81). Therefore, a fully-realized Freirian festival of films cannot be designed and organized in human isolation, alienation, fatalism, or historical inevitability. If festivals of films can be educative in Freire’s sense of things, they must be collectively emancipatory in their appeal to shared and universal desires for community, where opportunities for freedom are deployed in and through our relations with others and our engagement with the larger world. In that sense, festivals of films are parts of the larger world and reality “in process, in transformation” and, hence, not “static” entities (Freire, 2005, p. 83).

Freire maintains that the human desire (or, more accurately, struggle) for freedom is oppressed when not appreciated alongside its basic preconditions: love for humanity and the world, community, and dialogue. These are 'educational' issues for Freire to the extent that education is the human project of radical betterment and the practice of struggling for emancipation. "Pedagogy", to be clearer, is "a social relationship": it is deeply personal; it "gets right in your brain, your body, your heart, in your sense of self, or the world" (Ellsworth, 1997, p. 6). This is part of the experience of public pedagogy in the festival, which is robust and inspiring. The educative focus of such a festival may not follow any blueprint, produce tangible goods, or even be understood, measured, or forecasted in worldly terms. We can begin to see how Freire's notion of education for freedom naturally finds itself in film festivals, as the educative component of films is not always clear, both to opponents of films and those of festivals, as well as to their supporters.

What is clear, by now, is that in an arbitrarily designed and organized 'film festival', the struggle of the 'oppressed' individual or neoliberal agent, the ideal *spectator* as consumer-client, to break free and turn to witness their oppression, to keep alive the prospect of emancipation, is kept illusory as a 'non-issue' for the continued prevalence of hegemonic propaganda and civic and political hopelessness and helplessness. In contradistinction, dialogue, or pedagogy as human or social relation, might enable films screened at festivals *to do* educational work. Educators can then point, not to film, but to its context of approach, to its screening or to the "mode of address" of festivals of films as instrumental to educational ends (Ellsworth, 1997, p. 8). As

a result, the prospects for human emancipation might reveal themselves as an end to be fought for and not something to be granted or gifted (within the moment-to-moment experience of watching, of being entranced or dominated by some substantive spectacle). Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* presents an aversion to domination that he asserts is needed for the oppressed to consider "arts as alternative information channels" (Roy, 2016, p. 9), arts as vehicles to alternative and enduring modes of being.

### **Demythologizing festivals of films**

Programmers of festivals of films need to recognize the human person, the other, the oppressed, the student, the viewer, the individual, the collective, and so on, in all their movements, complexities, strivings, and perceptions at the very centre of the entire endeavor. One opportunity that festivals of films provide programmers is the chance to attempt to reinvigorate the commitments of attendees to engage authentically in the radical work of being and becoming human. This is an opportunity to demythologize the festival and the film and, therefore, indirectly, and potentially, the human person. As persons "increase the scope of their perception", as they direct their energies to "previously inconspicuous phenomena" associated with the drama they are observing, they gradually "develop their [powers]" to appreciate critically their place in the world, "*with which and in which they find themselves*", and their visions for it (Freire, 2005, p.83). Opening up spaces for reading films and other texts, let us presume, is central to the issues at hand: an emancipatory festival of films could be one where these abilities to see humans and reality as "unfinished" are developed in a manner that can better focus our critical energies (Freire, 2005, p. 84). For Freire, this

process holds that “authentic [forms] of thought and action” are found within one another and are maintained as such to “demythologize” the world and the human beings who, finding themselves reinvigorated within it, might achieve “their ontological and historical vocation of becoming more fully human” (Freire, 2005, p. 84). This is another sense in which festivals of films might be reclaimed by Freire’s theory: could festivals play an educational role in helping students develop their skills in demythologizing the very institution of the film, as media, and thus opening up new spaces for re-reading the world? That is, can films, configured as part of a ‘festival’, be redeemed of their potential commercialized ends; to be approached critically in relation to humanity’s predicaments; to be decolonised as a space of politics and solidarity building? An approach to a festival of films that demythologizes the very institution it promotes does not allow film to stand on its own (as Hollywood productions, might). Rather, it opens spaces for viewers to make their own meanings and judgements over the backdrop of the historical contexts around the film and its ‘making’, ‘creation’, or ‘production’. Similarly, programmers can update viewers on the status of the film at present, on its reception in the larger communities, by providing many avenues for discussion and opening the film to a wider array of readings, commentaries, and to the plurality of wide-ranging criticism.

The individual challenging of human perception, ‘love’, in both Freire’s and Ahmed’s senses, as a result, becomes inherent to the activity of viewership. I introduce these points as a marker of departure to potential paradox because it will help us transition to the topic of Rancière’s spectator which, I argue, is not far away from Freire’s

conception of the student. Freire (2005) tells us that those “subjected to domination must fight for their emancipation” (p. 86), and that the “naming of the world [...] is not possible if it is not infused with love” (p. 89). To understand this point, we need to realize that, through their formal and “hidden curricula” (Luckett & Shay, 2017, pp. 10-12), classrooms are spaces of domination which must be subverted. Their fundamental educational presuppositions must be questioned so that love and community can flourish, and so that students can be located and empowered as human persons. To that end, some model of film presentation, wherein revolutionary or emancipatory aspirations are muffled, “justified on grounds of expediency”, can be inherently non-dialogic, without love and, therefore, may not overcome “authoritarianism and [...] alienating intellectualism” that dehumanizes students (Freire, 2005, p. 86). We might consider, then, how a well-intentioned film festival might not play out as a festival of films, rather dissolving into a hegemonic environment, wherein viewers are spoon-fed propaganda and forced into submission.

Festivals of films, as Freire might have perhaps imagined how to organize them, would have relied on community and dialogue to flank the screenings. Engaged students and spectators are not seen to sit idle. They are rather understood to come into relation with others through their questions, wonder, and dialogue. Spectators and students are neither persuaded to some grand vision by programmers nor passively filled as receptacles, they are instead located in a space, the Festival, where they are offered opportunities to think, act, move, be moved, and be. The dialogic and communal component of festivals make them what they are

and separate them from arenas that propagate passive modes of viewership. Festivals of films are neither only action-oriented, “action for action’s sake”, nor just illusory “verbalism” (Freire, 2005, p. 88). Rather, they reflect spaces of “existential necessity” for community building and solidarity, for the hope of human freedom to remain living (2005, p. 88).

Freire’s universal concept of humanization, the primary task of *consctentização*, or the raising of critical consciousness, is necessary for humanity to act *and* reflect upon reality to transform it. As has been made clear, Freire’s blanketing approach has been read by some as offering an ahistorical narrative, lacking the context and concreteness for such purposes as real revolution or decolonization (Tuck and Yang, 2012, p. 20). Part of the reason for this might be found in Freire’s conceptualization of history in relation to the human person (Freire, 2005, p. 32). History as relational activity requires humankind, and of course, there can be no humankind without humanization. Therefore, until the oppressed have been humanized by themselves and by their oppressors, they cannot fully participate in the human activities of history, advocacy, activism, and transformation. Put another way, there is no reflection that has not been unified with action, just as there are no movements of persons without prior movements in their minds, that is, stirrings in their hearts and souls. I, like Freire, make no attempt to detach these hearts, minds, or souls from persons. Instead, we might see action embedded within reflection, just as we might see action inherent to film viewership, or minds within (that is, essential to) persons.

## **Rancière's spectator and the problematic of solitary spectatorship**

In “*The Emancipated Spectator*”, Jacques Rancière takes aim at the “paradox of the spectator” (2009, p. 2). He seeks to *restore* spectatorship (and theatre) to what he considers representing their essential virtue. The paradox, he writes, is easily formulated: there can be no theatre without spectator (Rancière, 2009, p. 2). This places a great burden on the spectator to uphold the theatre. To soften this, we can say that both entities rely on each other: the theatre is at the same time created by the spectator and needed for theatre. Theatres are places where drama (or action) is moved “to its conclusion by bodies in motion” (2009, p. 3), but this action must be watched and interpreted by viewers who themselves are engaged in movement. In the same way that film can be employed, we know that these theatrical actions carry power (political, social, and so on) in animating and enlivening those “living bodies” (2009, p. 3) yet to be so moved. For the purpose of this paper, I draw on Rancière’s approach to theatre in order to address the festival of films as a theatre of a different kind. The student, or spectator, of the festival is essential to the festival itself; the student upholds the festive or celebratory dimension of a festival. There can be no conception of a “festival” without a foundational conception of the student, or human person, to *animate* it. Festival of films programmers need to recognize that reciprocal dependency as a primary task underpinning their work.

For Rancière, the drama of theatre can call a spectator in many directions—to activism, apathy, and other actions and thoughts. This is theatre “striving for its own abolition”, continually calling to something beyond itself, taking part in

the ordinary work of communication (2009, p. 8). We might extrapolate from this that films, too, attempt to call the spectator to something beyond themselves. Notwithstanding, Rancière's treatment of theatre in particular shows that there are elements that a film on its own cannot address. The "spectacle" for Rancière includes many forms, which perform before an audience, such as performance art, dance, mime, and drama (2009, p. 2). Moreover, the communicative quality of Rancière's theatre places it perhaps more easily within the 'educational' realm of Freire's pedagogy than film. Theatre simply cannot be viewed in the same manner as film, as theatre presupposes at least two individuals be physically present, while film presupposes only one. Yet, to reflect on the drama they witness (in the shape of film or theatre) is for the spectator to imagine new potential for these two media, and for a radical new spectator, who at festivals is never alone. Might this new theatre take the shape of an 'educational' festival of film, an exemplary community form, where the theatre of real dialogue replaces the drama of Rancière's theatre? It is plausible, in Rancière's reading, particularly given that "intellectual emancipation" takes shape in the same "self-vanishing mediation" that we notice both in theatre and in the "logic of the pedagogical relationship" (2009, p. 8), as well. It is worthy to note that Rancière gives special privilege to theatre as "community site", and not to film, because theatre is more than the sum of the action on stage, while film could be reduced to all that is on screen. "Theatre is in and of itself communitarian", he writes, unlike film, which amounts to "spectators in front of projected shadows" (2009, p. 16). This is something programmers should keep in mind: the wanting nature of films themselves, on their own, when compared to theatre. As communicative and educative

media that might call viewers in many contradictory directions, film should be attended to as if it contains some potential for power. Indeed, the limitations of filmic items can open up space for the festival of films, which recognizes the human and communal dimensions of participation in festivals and of the public pedagogy of festivals, these are dimensions that mere spectatorship, whether it be of film, television, or the like, never accomplishes without some intervening act. Festival, in this sense, is the intervention that film calls for; festivals might theatrically mediate what would otherwise be plain spectatorship. It is at least curious then, that Rancière does not mention festivals explicitly in his analysis of the spectator, collapsing spectatorship to an individual dimension.

Some critics of Rancière's spectator maintain that spectators are doubly compromised: they are "separated from both the capacity to know and the power to act" (Rancière, 2009, p. 2). In other words, it is sometimes said that viewing cannot amount to knowing: drama, for instance, produces some appearances that conceal reality, and so through seeing we can never truly *know* anything thanks to a dramatic performance (2009, p. 2). Critics of spectatorship hold that the viewer is ignorant with respect to the production or machinery of the appearance. Secondly, viewership is opposed to acting, as the former is passive, unlike the latter. Immediately, here, we recall Freire's praxis: what the oppressed and the passive spectator have in common is that their struggles concern thought *and* (in)action—how is one to act in the face of a film that persuades them to a new vision of life? How might film empower or otherwise inspire human emotion *and* action? From these questions about the spectator and theatre,

Rancière asserts that we are led to some conclusions: firstly, that the old theatre, theatre as we know it, as “absolutely bad thing” should be abolished and replaced with what it prohibits: “the action of knowing and action guided by knowledge” (2009, p. 3). The theatre of old, as various performances that present illusions and transmit the “illness of ignorance”, never allows for a true and empowered community to flourish (2009, p. 3). This is because, for Rancière, true community appeals not to “theatrical mediation” but to the “energy” generated by actions and intelligences inherent to watching itself, that is, watching as a living act (and the spectacle as substantive) (p. 3). The theatre of old does not uphold such a living spectator. One reason in support of the existence of festivals of films, as educative sites, is that they are devoted to the creation and cultivation of such human energies and potentials—we are not merely talking about the filling of vessels with water; or with “stultifying” pedagogy, the “logic of straight, uniform transmission”; or the presentation of film without intervening commentary (2009, p. 14). In committing ourselves, we assume, as Rancière does, in Freire’s spirit, that “words and images, stories and performances”, when genuinely attended to, “can change something of the world” for human social relations (2009, p. 23). Film on its own might fail, or it may succeed from the point of view of producer, in which case it might fantastically or perversely influence generations of watchers. However, film in the context of a festival, or alongside the intervening force of dialogue, can play a more prominent and potentially emancipatory, educative role. Film, in festivals of films, can make it clear that watching is imbued with life.

In considering these things, we might, at the very least, locate a student as an active subject (not a simple spectator) in universal terms. Film, as we have described it, can be not only viewed, but discussed and contemplated at different levels of complexity, in a particular community and non-commercial arena, where programmers have moved to empower and enable oppressed or suppressed images, voices, and visions, opening up spaces for them to come to the forth, to appear on the screen, to be screened. The empowering of oppressed spectators might produce what Rancière has termed the ‘emancipated spectator’, or the non-spectator, which points to an equality among spectators to dissent from what they perceive. To be clear, Rancière is interested more so in “equality of the intelligences” (2009, p. 1) as a way of thinking about emancipation, an idea he develops in, among others, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1987), as opposed in some ways to Freire’s universal concept of empowerment through humanization (May, 2009, p. 3). The two concepts do, however, supplement one another and can therefore be linked: both are concerned with the mobility of oppressed classes of persons, those at the bottom of social hierarchies; and both take their concepts to be necessary presuppositions for human action, like dissent from social order, which is not granted and must be taken, directed at social change. Todd May (2009), in “*Democracy is Where We Make it: The Relevance of Jacques Rancière*”, shows that Rancière’s “equality of the intelligences” (p. 7) is a presupposition necessary for all humans, not a political dream or destination. Rancière’s equality of the intelligences is understood to be a social and communal reality, apparent in peoples’ abilities to create “meaningful lives with one another”, to talk with, reason with, and understand one another (May, 2009, p. 7). This

breaking with our assumptions about the abilities of our students and viewers can help us in seeing the “structure and justification of a social hierarchy”; once dissenting from these assumptions, we create spaces, or festivals, for a more liberated understanding of the spectator or non-spectator (May, 2009, p. 8).

For Rancière, spectators as non-spectators or anti-spectators, have been conceptualized in many ways. Different conceptualizations are different transformations of the old spectator. One of these conceptualizations maintains that spectators, “enthralled by appearances”, should be awakened to their “stupefaction” in a critical fashion (2009, p. 4). In so being awakened, spectators will seek the meaning of the spectacle before them. In seeking meaning, they are compelled to switch from “passive spectator” to “scientific investigator”, disinterested observer or “experimenter” (2009, p. 4). An alternative to this first formulation, Rancière writes, holds that spectators offered an “exemplary dilemma”, or paradox, may be persuaded to a new vision of life which requires that they reconsider their fundamental presuppositions for seeing and living in the world as they currently do (2009, p. 4). Both conceptualizations are extensions of a single idea; namely, that there is some distance between a spectator and the illusory drama onstage that can be surmounted by reasoned reflection, inference, or logical deduction. Supposed embodiments of inequality are the forces at work that keep alive these distances.

In observing an educational scenario, we can similarly see the distance between student and her liberation, between her present ignorance and potential knowledge, which is a space occupied and controlled by the teacher

(Rancière, 2009, p. 12). There is some separation between student and reality that is maintained by the teacher, for one's "inability" is so commonly the first thing assumed about students and taught to them (2009, p. 9). The student or spectator must then overcome and surpass her teacher, in order to realize her true desires in decolonizing the ways in which she reads the world as experienced. This movement from perceived ignorance to wisdom is similar to Freire's conception of our approaching the oppressed, which should be infused with dignity and respect as opposed to ignorance. Dignifying both the student and the spectator might allow programmers to commit to non-arbitrary or non-ambiguous behavior (Freire, 2005, p. 60). Therefore, it may very well be that good theatre, like good education, is "one that uses its separated reality in order to abolish [itself]" (Rancière, 2009, p. 7). There is a call resonating through these works: both Freire and Rancière call to subvert our dominating reliance on our inherited, or in other words, colonized, ways of approaching a spectacle in order to transform, renew, or re-envision our purposes for organizing.

Like Freire, Rancière cautions against thoughtless action, mere action for action's sake, for the sake of "immediacy and routine" or transformation of the spectacle or spectator (Rancière, 2009, p. 12). In doing so, he aligns himself with Freire, who always packages action alongside reflection. In my estimation, Rancière goes one step further when he reconceptualizes viewing, seeing it primarily as an action involving the making of associations; interpretation; observation; comparison; even invention (Rancière, 2009, p. 13). Here, we inch closer to the "emancipation of the spectator" (2009, p. 17). Spectators, he writes, are *already* embedded in action, are already persons of action in the

world, in their own stories, and therefore should not be transformed into actors or scholars or anything else (2009, p. 17). What Rancière calls the “hyper-theatre”, one that seeks to “transform representation into presence and passivity into activity”, could be made from an “emancipated community”, like a festival of films, looking to bring the experience of spectator closer to the reading of a book or the sharing of a story (2009, p. 22).

What I have tried to allude to is a new, emancipatory space for art to be staged, where self-affirming educational scenarios can take shape. This is a place where spectators are “active participants” who learn from and struggle with the appearance that manifests itself before them; no longer “passive voyeurs” seduced by them (2009, p. 3). This is, ultimately, a theatre “without spectators” as we normally appreciate them (Rancière, 2009, p. 4). We are again moved to recall Freire’s classroom, where teachers can become students and where students can become teachers. This is where the entire classroom dynamic as it has been commonly construed for the masses is subverted. This is where students as teachers are no longer just students but persons. Students having a hand in their education is akin to spectators participating in or being responsive to their viewership. In these senses of the terms, we can imagine a student and spectator that have contrived themselves in ways to struggle for their emancipation or education. For our purposes in re-imagining the festival of films, there are some insights in light of this section that we can return to in the conclusion.

## **Towards decolonized festivals of films**

In imagining the potential for a festival for films to bring forth new visions of education, we can look to Freire's vision of education for freedom, as well as to Rancière's rendering of an emancipated spectator, his universal vision of human intelligences. In both cases, the greatest burdens are placed on both the programmers and spectators (or students): the former must recognize the irreducibly human and relational at the centre of the educative endeavor; and the latter must struggle to see, think, re-think, interpret, reclaim, decolonize, speak, and act *for* others. Film, therefore, should be conceptualized within the sphere of education, particularly to the extent that we can involve ourselves in building a new social reality *with* the oppressed *through* communication that is drummed up by film. Festivals of films, as I see them, offer us some backdrop upon which we might attempt to transform the wider conversations around art and solidarity into decolonial action. The visions and theories that I have described and tried to build on, can help us in a preliminary way in thinking in clearer terms about the potential of festivals of films, rather than simply "film festivals", to be emancipatory sites for public pedagogy. We can find the grounds for a celebratory education in festivals of films, if we acknowledge the unseen drama inherent to new types of viewership, and the responsibilities (and possibilities) that engaged spectators (or 'non-spectators') might assume, or uncover, as decolonizing moments of engagement. This educative potential, then, holds within it a power against domination, the self-affirming power that individuals employ to imagine, to question, to act, and to dream in the face of oppression. It is that power which could possibly drive a student (or spectator) to become more "wholly themselves", to *discover* themselves, as mobilized

persons through engagement with art (Freire, 2005, p. 48). It is my hope that programmers can do their work while keeping in mind their commitments to mobilize persons, to transform popular discourse around film, and not to simply arrange screenings and be done with it.

The question to ask is not ‘should film festivals and other outreach initiatives that make use of film be included in critical pedagogies?’ or, even whether film festivals could be educational. Rather, the core questions that emerge are: how can programmers nurture the collective quality of festivals of films and broaden their appeal while maintaining, if not expanding, their utopian and decolonial spirit? How can programmers conceive of empowered and liberated spectators, along both individual and collective dimensions of decolonising? These are important questions particularly as we seek to interrupt the hegemonic frameworks of power that dominate the “political aesthetics of the sensible” and the “system of a priori forms determining what presents itself to sense experience” (Rancière, 2004, p. 13).

Film is already established and appreciated as a social practice, in a culture which has been saturated with audiovisual and semiotic systems. Hence, might we, as teachers, programmers, and students, locate the student-viewer in her striving between freedom and resistance? Attending to the questions and dilemmas raised in this paper would inform further study of festivals of films as decolonial educational and emancipatory spaces that can affirm “men and women as beings in the process of becoming” (Freire, 2005, p. 84.).

The orientation of the literature explored above has not to do with a “private revolution” of the spectator, but with the restoration of humanity, by moving audiences from mere spectators to collective and solidary publics, by the oppressed for themselves *and* for their oppressors (Freire, 2005, p. 48). Within that context, festivals of films, as spaces of public pedagogy, can lay the groundwork for social transformation as modes of action, not only liberation of the viewer in isolation as a one-off, cerebral exercise. The enrollment of students and spectators into their dignified search for self-affirmation, making it possible for them to enter the “historical process”, must be grounded in love of others and of the world (Freire, 2005, p. 36). Therefore, there is no purely solipsistic love, and no simple reduction of the vast human person into “mind”. Following this, my first tasks as educator and programmer of festivals of films is to relate to my students as persons, to empower them with skills to enter into new dialogues with the world, and hopefully to inspire in them, through film, the recognition of their own powers to transform their realities. My condensation of Freire, Rancière, and others regarding the prospects of a decolonial festival of films makes this reconceptualizing project a practical and pressing educational undertaking.

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