

YOUNG GERMANY

Your career, education and lifestyle guide

Cinema that speaks for human rights

Once the location of the infamous Nazi Party Rallies, Nuremberg today endeavors to be a city of human rights and peace. As part of its commitment, the city founded the Nuremberg International Human Rights Film Festival in 1999. As part of our feature on human rights, YG looks at the potential of cinema to confront past horrors as well as social and political ills, even in a climate of censorship and repression.

In Germany today, classes are increasingly made up of students from around the world. The Open Eyes School Film Project which accompanies the festival aims to enhance the impact of the films shown with a special program around each screening.

“It’s important for students in German schools to know more about the person sitting next to them,” explains Andrea Kuhn, festival director since 2007. “Often we screen a film to students about a particular issue or conflict that’s happening in the world and someone in the audience will have been affected.”

Last year the festival showed *Little Alien*, a film that tells the stories of unaccompanied school-age refugees to a group of students. The screening saw the audience erupt with emotion as some of its members recognized faces of those they met while perilously crossing the border into Europe. The film was followed by a panel discussion with underage refugees.

“This festival’s very well received here in Nuremberg, especially by teachers, and it attracts all kinds of people,” says Kuhn. “We take great pride in presenting really strong cinematic films, not tear-jerking reportages.”

The biennial festival held in October features films, documentaries and animations which have human rights as their main focus. 504 films from all corners of the globe were submitted for the 7th festival, of which 62 were selected. According to Kuhn, the films’ themes have changed over time to include more environmental themes among the political and social ones.

Human rights violations, past and present

Because of Nuremberg’s association with the war crimes trials in particular, the festival also shows films about the era of National Socialism in Germany. “If there are films with the right qualities about World War II atrocities, they will always be part of our festival, especially here in Nuremberg,” emphasizes Kuhn. “This is the starting point of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” she says, referring to the pivotal role the investigations played in its drafting.

In screening such films, the festival organizers work closely with experts from the Documentation Centre Nazi Party Rally Grounds, a museum which stands where Nazi rallies were once held, so that films are accompanied by panel discussions.

In 2009, the festival showed the controversial film *Pizza in Auschwitz* which tells the story of

Dani Chanoch, a Holocaust survivor who takes his adult children with him on a journey through his past, including on a night spent in his barrack in Auschwitz. “We held a discussion with Dani and our audience so they understood that this is not something of the past,” says Kuhn. “This is a generation of people whom I know and the history lives on in the following generations.”

According to advocacy organizations, human rights violations in Germany are not only something of the past. A controversial law known as the *Residenzpflicht* is unique in the EU and restricts the freedom of movement of refugees, criminalizing their travel beyond a registered administrative district. The policy amounts to institutional racism and controversial police controls and is a serious human rights violation, according to Christa Kaletsch of the Anne Frank Educational Centre in Frankfurt who teaches workshops on the connection between anti-Semitism and human rights violations.

“The general public often does not often associate issues of human rights with their own country or with Europe,” says Kuhn. “So for us, it’s very important to raise issues surrounding the lives of refugees here in Germany through film.”

Nuremberg, the Arab Spring and Iran

In addition to screening films with human rights themes, the festival is also founding member of the Human Rights Film Network, an association which includes 33 human rights film festivals around the world, meaning it acts in support of emerging festivals around the world.

Nuremberg has worked especially closely with the Karama Human Rights Film Festival in Amman, Jordan now in its third edition. Karama showed 45 human rights films from 27 countries at its 2011 festival. Two were linked with Germany and events in the Middle East. One, the *Green Wave* is a German-Iranian production by Cologne-based director Ali Samadi Ahad. “In 2009, Iran was an important cinema topic for us and we featured a lot of films from Iran,” explains Kuhn, who’s also chair of the Network. “We’ve been in touch with documentary filmmakers from Iran ever since.”

Iranian film is no stranger to Germany. After winning the coveted Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film, Asghar Farhadi’s family drama *A Separation* may be awing global audiences with its humane portrayal of a family’s difficulties, but the film actually premiered at the 2011 Berlin International Film Festival where it won top prize. Notably, this was the year that the jury had one absent member, award-winning Iranian director Jafar Panahi who had been sentenced to six years in jail and a 20-year filmmaking and travel ban.

The complex climate surrounding filmmaking in Iran is all too familiar to author Shiva Rahbaran who’s interviewed six of the country’s leading filmmakers for her book *The power of the image: Iranian Filmmakers living and working in Iran*. Among those she met with were Panahi. “I interviewed Panahi when he was still free and he was hopeful,” recalls Rahbaran, who herself left Iran for a life in Germany in 1984. The two talked about Panahi’s film *Offside*, winner of the 2006 Silver Bear, which looks at the issues of women and sports.

In her research, Rahbaran tries to understand the role cinema plays in post-revolutionary Iran. The task was especially challenging, however, due to the overtly politicized atmosphere in the country although the interviews themselves weren’t political. “Everything a writer says is turned over a hundred times,” she explains. “I met a thinker in Iran who said, ‘We suffer from

too much *meaning* in this country,' in that anything said could have 1,001 different meanings. Censorship is more a matter of taste. It's dependent on the persons in charge."

In addition to interviewing the county's storied filmmakers, she also spoke with the former head of the Farabi Film Foundation, Sayed Mohammed Beheshti. "Under his period a lot of good films were made," she says. "It was one of the most fruitful times in the post-revolutionary period."

Rahbaran began her interviews in 2006 in a climate of comparative openness and completed her last one with filmmaker Bahram Beyzaii just five days before the 2009 elections and Green Movement demonstrations began.

"Up until even a few years ago, controversial topics like prostitution, drug use, having temporary wives, the selling of children, homeless girls, football and sports for women – all of these issues, with difficulties of course, were still being made into films," explains Rahbaran. "Farhadi is a very capable filmmaker, but these subjects have been dealt with deeply and aesthetically by filmmakers for some time. Many controversial films have been made in Iran and forbidden only after almost everyone's seen them."

The topic of women's emancipation in particular is not new to Iranian cinema. The films of Darioush Mehrjouii deal heavily with women's issues showing how able, present and educated they are in society, and yet by law how their hands tied. And in 2006, renowned female director Rakhshan Bani-etemad made the provocative film *Mainline* in which she tells the story of a mother's battle with her daughter's drug addiction. After receiving an award at a film festival in Iran, the film was forbidden and went underground.

In the current situation of increased crackdown on the industry, however, filmmakers are making controversial films for underground or international distribution. There's even criticism, according to Rahbaran, that some filmmakers are only making films for the underground scene. "This is a very dark situation, but the future of film is bright. Filmmaking has become the Iranian art, replacing poetry which was considered the greatest of Iranian arts."

Angela Boskovitch