

Can film inspire personal change?

Summary of brief study with Take One Action Film Festivals

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Method. To understand if film can inspire personal change we held workshops after three film events at the Filmhouse, Edinburgh. Events were film screenings followed by panel discussions and part of the Take One Action festival in August and September 2011: 'Just Do It' (Emily James, 2011); 'There Once Was An Island' (Briar March, 2010); and 'The Lightbulb Conspiracy' (Cosima Dannoritzer, 2010). Workshops were promoted by email to attendees of previous Take One Action events as a chance to, for free, a climate-change themed film and have a discussion over dinner. 12 people attended in total covering a range of ages and previous engagement in environmental action. Participants were led through the questions including:

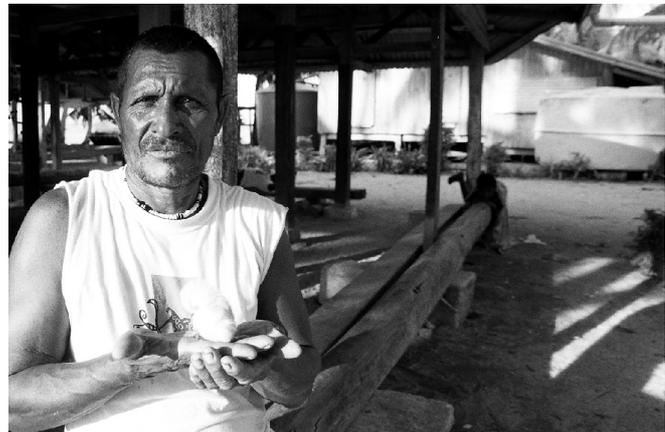
- What were your personal reactions to the film?
- What characters/parts of the film did you empathise with/feel distanced from?
- What emotions did you feel afterwards?
- Did you want to do anything/change anything in your own life afterwards?
- Did the film inform you about any ways you could make these changes?

Responses in the workshop were noted and considered alongside responses given on audience feedback forms at other environmental film screenings including 'You've Been Trumped' (Anthony Baxter, 2011).

Findings. We found that empathy was an important factor in audiences feeling 'connected' to the people and communities in films: they felt connected to films with a strong focus on the lives of individual people and communities. They were even more likely to empathise if these people were motivated, pro-active (rather than dependent), charming, and seen to be acting selflessly (rather than out of self-interest).

Films which nurtured feelings of empathy and those with high-emotions left a deeper mark. But as important as empathy was in audiences making connections with the issues in the films, it was not enough in of itself to motivate action.

Audiences of films that focused on explaining or detailing world problems, such as 'There Once Was an Island' or 'Enjoy Your Meal', were more inclined to want to learn more about the problem or issues depicted.



Positive and motivated characters like Teloo in 'There Once Was an Island' were well received. Image courtesy of On The Level Productions.

In contrast, audiences who had seen films primarily focused on activism and 'solutions' to world problems, such as 'Just Do it' and 'The Lightbulb Conspiracy', tended to leave the cinema thinking about how they could take action or make changes in their lives. Some films left audiences connected to the issue, but didn't resource or 'inspire' them to take action: audiences of such films tended to leave feeling disempowered and shocked.

Aspects of films such as these united audiences in their responses. Others divided them and highlighted differences in taste and background.

In discussions after 'Just Do It', which features a group of predominantly young people taking environmental direct action, viewers said they felt most connected to characters who were similar to them. Several said they felt distanced by their different lifestyles, and older audience members felt distanced from the young people depicted.

Some attendees felt more engaged by films with more information and context, whilst others found this uninteresting and were more engaged by action. For example, 'The Lightbulb Conspiracy' was criticised for both having too much and not enough context and historical background.

Many of the films we showed used confrontation as a key device to engage audiences. For example: 'You've Been Trumped' charts confrontation between, on the one side, residents and the film's director, and on the other, people who work for Donald Trump; 'Just Do It' depicts stand-offs between police and activists at the UN Climate Change talks in 2009. Some audiences insisted confrontation was compelling and a necessary component of these films in order to get the attention of the press and audiences. Others found scenes of confrontation off-putting: they made them feel "uncomfortable" and "distanced" from the characters. In the case of 'Just Do It', this later group wanted to see more of the accessible "constructive" actions in the film, such as the 'Transition Heathrow' project. These reactions suggest there may be a balance, or possibly even a trade-off, between elements of films which make them captivating and entertaining, and those which encourage and resource people to take action themselves.



Confrontation between police and activists in 'Just Do It'. Image courtesy of Emily James.

Some Green Shoots films fitted the project's aims very well with audiences leaving the event focused on climate change and personal carbon cutting. However, this was not universally the case. Audience members on occasion expressed a view that post-film discussions were too narrowly focused around environmental behaviour change and that they wanted to speak more directly to the issues in the film. In one example audience members at the same film (You've Been trumped) commented "It's great to see a documentary that doesn't provide a final answer" and "Would have liked to have gone away with an idea of how to make a difference". Judging the balance between being "resourcing, but also respectful" remains a challenge for film-makers and Take One Action as an organisation.

There may be deeper ways in which film can influence people. Work by the Natural Change project (www.naturalchange.org.uk) stresses the importance of place in sparking

personal responses to environmental challenges. Can some of the ways in which we're influenced by place be transposed through a cinema screen? Or are cinemas simply too passive a space for people to psychologically interact with the issues in the same way that they could do if they were there in person?

Clearly one film cannot meet everyone's needs and tastes. But understanding the diversity of ways that people understand and respond to films should help those who are publicising, sharing, and creating film to add value to their work.



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