



From Calling “Action” to Community Action: The Milwaukee Film Festival’s Conversation Series

A festival report

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Milwaukee, Wisconsin, is a small city of about 600,000 people located on Lake Michigan, ninety miles north of Chicago. Historically known for its breweries and manufacturing, and often referred to as part of the “rust belt,” Milwaukee has struggled for decades with declining industrial jobs and a decreasing middle class. As these problems occurred, Milwaukee became increasingly racially segregated and often tops lists of the most segregated metropolitan areas in the United States. According to a 2013 report, the Milwaukee-Waukesha-West Allis metropolitan area has an overall dissimilarity score of nearly sixty-eight, with a dissimilarity score of eighty for white-black populations.¹ Scores over sixty indicate very high segregation; Milwaukee easily, and continually, tops that. It is within this landscape that the Milwaukee Film Festival was born. In 2009, the nonprofit Milwaukee Film organization formed specifically to host a film festival for the city.² Initially its goal was simply to screen great films that may not otherwise be seen in the city’s theaters.³ However, social and political engagement became a part of the Milwaukee Film Festival experience through its pairing of free-to-the-public panels and social-issues films, and by 2011, the festival incorporated another free-to-the-public event: a Conversations series meant to

¹ See “The 25 Most Segregated Cities in America” <http://www.businessinsider.com/most->

² The Milwaukee International Film Festival (MIFF), which ran for five years prior to the Milwaukee Film Festival, also grew rapidly during its lifespan, and relied on many of the same local funders. A different organization—Milwaukee Film—formed to restructure the Milwaukee Film Festival and hired former MIFF programmer Jonathan Jackson to serve as Executive and Artistic Director. MIFF certainly laid the groundwork for film festival audience building in Milwaukee in the 2000s.

³ Milwaukee has two Landmark Theatres, the Oriental and the Downer, as well as the Union Theater at the University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee that each screen international and independent films. The Milwaukee Film Festival generally programs films that do not otherwise screen at these theaters or are seen as having merit warranting additional screenings to expand that film’s audience.

encourage audiences to think more deeply about the films and their content while connecting festival audiences with each other. As the former Education Director of Milwaukee Film,⁴ I sat down with Executive Director Jonathan Jackson to discuss the Conversations series, and Milwaukee Film was kind enough to supply data to assess the Festival's success as a community discussion forum.

Now entering its seventh year, the rapidly growing Milwaukee Film Festival showcased 240 short and feature films resulting in an attendance of 55,000 people in 2013. The following year, it screened 275 films with a total attendance of just over 64,000.⁵ Executive Director Jonathan Jackson characterizes the festival as a "best of" generalist festival, which selects films that did well at other major festivals and that he believes will appeal to Milwaukee audiences. The Milwaukee Film Festival also fits many parameters of what Mark Peranson defines as an "audience festival," since the Festival is not a premiere or business-driven festival and most films are solicited and discovered through other film festivals (27). Additionally, audience and sponsors' satisfaction is a primary concern, attendees tend to treat the festival "like vacation," and local critics are key "promotional tools" (28). While films are first and foremost selected based on their quality, they may be chosen strategically to appease a sponsor's request. Milwaukee Film also prominently features regional filmmakers in its Cream City Cinema program. The Festival's quick growth, due in large part to the financial support it receives from local foundations and individual funders, occurred primarily in its first years of operation. Between 2009 and 2010, the organization's total revenue leapt from \$667,463 to \$1,577,428 and again to \$1,945,500 in 2011.⁶ Ticket sales totaled \$160,422 in 2009, \$223,666 in 2010, and \$222,950 in 2011, indicating that although total revenue increased during the third festival year, ticket sale revenue declined. Ticket sales

⁴ As Education Director, I oversaw Milwaukee Film's adult and youth education initiatives. At the time, this included youth and adult filmmaking and screenwriting programs and additional filmmaker services and intern opportunities. It also involved programming the Milwaukee Children's Film Festival public and education screenings, guiding curriculum development for said screenings, and overseeing the festival's free-to-the-public educational Panels and Conversations series.

⁵ <http://mkefilm.org/mff-2014-announces-the-allan-h-bud-and-suzanne-l-selig-audience-award-winners/>

⁶ As reported on the organization's 990 forms, which are public record.

rebounded in 2012 to \$277,158, likely due to the festival's expansion from ten to fourteen days. Simultaneously, total revenue fell closer to 2010 levels. Although financial figures for 2013 are not yet available, Milwaukee Film announced a ten percent increase in attendance in 2013 over 2012. It is clear that both funders and residents want the nonprofit to succeed.

Central to this article is the fact that Milwaukee Film has integrated social action into its core values as a means of creating dialogue between segregated communities via festival film screenings and discussions. While revising the organization's Mission and Vision statements in 2012, language was included to foreground the festival as a catalyst for community engagement. The Vision Statement implores the Milwaukee Film organization to "create a film festival in Milwaukee that is [...] a true forum for our diverse community" and to "do our part to make better the city that has made *us* better." The Mission and Vision statements were revised, in part, to reflect the organization's educational and community outreach initiatives, which include the aptly named Conversations series as well as free public panels held throughout the festival. In other words, Milwaukee Film is trying to create "an 'actual' community" where "a variety of peoples congregate [during] the festival" (Iordanova: 37) despite the segregated nature of Milwaukeeans' everyday lives.

The Conversations Series Background

The Conversations program is comprised of just that—conversations—that immediately follow select screenings and are held in the theaters' lobby areas when appropriate space is available, or at nearby coffee shops, bars, restaurants, or bookstores. Moving Conversations away from the actual screening spaces is intended to allow participants to interact with each other more communally—for example around a table instead of in rows of chairs all facing one moderator—and break down the hierarchy that exists between a formal, spot-lit moderator and darkened spectators.⁷ When filmmakers or documentary subjects attend the festival, they often participate in the Conversations as

⁷ Logistically, it also allows for the seamless flow of continuous film screenings and ticket lines.

well, which humanizes the filmmakers and provides an intimate chance for both filmmakers and audiences to get to know one another. During the programming phase of the festival cycle, films tied to social issues or that seem particularly provocative in narrative content or structure are paired with Conversations. Films, however, are not programmed with Conversations in mind. “The screening of a great film is just the beginning of the experience,” Jackson explains. It is “an opportunity for citizens of the community to connect with the world, connect with a cinema of ideas, and connect with their community members.” Conversations are considered “drop-in” events; they are free to the public, announced prior to screenings as well as in the program book, and participants do not have to sign up in advance. Most Conversations are scheduled with matinee and early evening screenings, the assumption being that many people will not attend Conversations after a late evening screening.

In 2011, the first year Conversations were held, 371 attendees participated in post-screening conversations, averaging eight participants per discussion. In 2012 this number grew to 514 participants in seventy conversations, and increased again in 2013 to 554 participants in seventy-two discussions, averaging eight people per group. For 2014, the Milwaukee Film Festival scheduled one hundred conversations following eighty different films. The Conversation series is not directly income generating, though surveys have found that post-screening conversations keep audiences on the film festival “campus” longer; in 2012, fifty-five percent of post-Conversations survey participants said that had they not attended the conversation, they would have left the area (most frequently to go home). This dropped slightly in 2013 to forty-six percent, but it is still a notable percentage. At a base level, Conversations help people engage with the festival in a more meaningful way and help the festival distinguish itself from just another day at the multiplex.

Conversations generally involve ten people or fewer, though at times they include more than twenty, and participants introduce themselves before discussing the film. In early deliberations about how the series would be facilitated, everyone involved agreed that participants should be allowed to express opposing viewpoints and that the group

leader would not proffer an “official” or “right” reading of the film. He or she may provide context for the film’s subject matter, country of production, reception history, or the director’s oeuvre, but the leader does not give the official stamp of approval on any one response. This structure is meant to mimic something like a college classroom where discussion is lively, and it seems to work. During my tenure as the Education Director, many people expressed anecdotally that this was part of why they enjoyed the conversations and continued attending them: they longed for more opportunities to talk intellectually about film and craved interaction with people who know a lot about it—rather than, say, reading a blog post. It is perhaps significant that these comments generally came from middle-aged people, and that they attend Conversations more frequently. Conversations participants ages forty- to sixty-years-old outnumber the twenty- to forty-year-old participants two to one, and participants over sixty outnumber the younger group three to one. These generations (Generation X and older) grew up interacting face to face; they seem to miss it. Jackson speculates that the way in which we create our Internet communities to limit exposure to things we do not “like” contributes to the need for Conversations: “We’re programming ourselves to only see information that we’re likely to like. It’s ever more important to have experiences where you lose that control and are introduced to people, places, ideas, contexts that you wouldn’t seek out on your own.” Conversations attempt to do that. They aim to introduce a random quality to the discussants assembled and ideas put forth, and to encourage people to abandon some control over the perspectives to which they are exposed. Conversations also ideally penetrate the walls that insulate not only participants’ intellectual worlds, but also their perceptions of their community, of Milwaukee.

As a way of increasing the value of these discussions, Milwaukee Film coordinates volunteer conversation leaders prior to the festival, the majority of whom are considered “humanities experts;” eighty percent of conversation leaders either have or are working toward advanced degrees. Jackson sees this as key to turning the Milwaukee Film Festival into the “modern-day forum” he hopes it will become, and he explains that the festival typically secures specialists in areas related to the films, whether subject matter, genre, country, or director. His aim is that films will “act as a catalyst to spark something

intellectually, emotionally, spiritually inside the audience member” so they can ruminate on their own or talk with others about ideas in the film, and that eventually, these discussions will influence positive social change within Milwaukee. This goal aligns with many points outlined in Dina Iordanova’s “Mediating Diaspora: Film Festivals and ‘Imagined Communities.’” Although Iordanova focuses primarily on transnational “imagined communities” via Benedict Anderson, she bridges notions of the national and transnational with the local and explains that festivals, as live events,

practically suspend the ‘imagined’ element of the community by substituting it with a very real one that is, nonetheless, configured around the same axis of imagination that drives the ideas of nation and nationalism. [...] On the one hand, audiences and programmers involved with the festival are invited to experience themselves [...] as an extension of a community that [...] they, by virtue of their very attendance at the festival, now relate to through a mental image of affinity and through the act of their very real togetherness. Yet, a secondary act of imagination is implied as well, linked to the need to experience a certain degree of identification with imaginary, fictional characters whose stories are told in the films projected at the festival. In the ‘live’ space of the festival, organisers and audiences form a community, an actual one, that congregates face to face for the purpose of fostering an ‘imagined community’ that comes live in the act of watching a film and imagining distant human beings becoming part of one’s own experiences. Thus, the festival’s set-up extends an invitation to engage in what is essentially a political act of imagined belonging. (13)

These engagements with both literal and imaginative community-building processes are just what the Conversations series is meant to spark. The goal for Conversations, Jackson says, “is that they facilitate a conversation between the community members who are there. What’s exciting about this, and the idea of community discussions at a film festival, is that I think by its nature, you pull a different group of people than you might typically get” at a formal lecture event. Even those who attend the film together and are already like-minded. “If you [hold] a discussion, say, about income inequality,” Jackson notes, “you’re going to get a very specific audience. [...] Now if you show a film that may touch on the subject matter and then have a conversation afterwards, I think there’s the potential to get a different audience to that conversation.”

Jackson explains that Milwaukee Film's goal for this "different audience" is not only to include people who may not regularly seek out these kinds of discussions but also people from a variety of backgrounds who do not cross paths regularly: "Everybody participates in movies. There's a randomness to attending a conversation ... [and] that's when I think you find the unique audience, you break down any barriers." One means of reaching diverse audiences is Milwaukee Film's Community Partners program. While the Festival advertises in places like the city newspaper, billboards bus stops, and restaurants and coffee shops, the organization realizes that its traditional advertising reaches wealthier, white audiences. The Community Partners program was created to reach audiences that may not hear about the festival through traditional advertising methods. Community Partners are employed to use their own outreach models to engage audiences not already connected to the festival.⁸ For example, in 2014 Milwaukee Film showcased for the first time films by or about people of the African diaspora through its Black Lens program consisting of eight films. Community Partners for this program included the Wisconsin Black Historical Society, the Bronzeville Cultural and Entertainment District,⁹ the Milwaukee NAACP, and other nonprofits with strong ties to the Black community. Milwaukee Film also expanded from three to four theaters in 2014, and now holds screenings in four different zip codes. Although one theater is in a very wealthy part of town (Whitefish Bay, where the average median household income is over \$55,000 more than the Milwaukee County average), the festival's main theater, the Oriental, is in an area representing a median household income on par with the county. Its second "core" theater is just up the road from the Oriental in an area that averages about \$5,000 more than the median yearly household income, and the Times Theater, added in 2014, is located in area code 53208, which runs about \$15,000 less than the county average. Conversations were scheduled in each of these theaters for 2014 screenings, though current Education Director Cara

⁸ I do not have numbers for how well these Community Partners are working. Festival attendance numbers continue to climb, but it would be interesting to know if there are any trends indicating which films' audiences are more (or less) bolstered by outreach through Community Partners.

⁹ Bronzeville is an historically Black area of town currently undergoing numerous revitalization efforts.

Ogburn says no targeted efforts were made to increase the diversity of Conversations participants or leaders this year:

Though we are always trying to broaden our base of leaders (and that broadening includes work toward messaging to diverse audiences), selections [of Conversations leaders] are often very tied to availability. We do try to target by a self-reported (or presumed if we know the person better) interest in subject matter—which often leads to diversity connections—but it's not geared toward diversity per se so much as toward quality of Convo [sic]. We're using community partners as appropriate across the series—again, more concerned with interest in and expertise on subject matter than diversity as such.

However, she notes that if they do not see the diversity of Conversations participants “tracking up with the rest of the fest,” they will assess how to generate awareness of Conversations for expanded audiences, “but that's not something we see yet.” Presumably after the 2014 festival ends, these numbers will become part of their yearly assessment.

Beyond increased attendance at the festival and diversity of audiences in general, Jackson's larger goal is that Conversations “help form connections in the community” and that the Festival become a driving force in addressing, if not overcoming, some of Milwaukee's problems—segregation and a struggling public school system, among others. He sees opening up the world for Milwaukee via international film as a way to reimagine Milwaukee in the way that Jordanova suggests. In other words, Jackson hopes Milwaukee audiences engage in the secondary act of imagining the community via identification with fictional or real screen characters or storylines they see throughout Festival screenings. This could be described as an outside-in approach that leads to inside-out problem solving. “Creating a two-week immersion in the world,” Jackson adds, “connects audiences with ideas, places and people from throughout the United States and the world. I think that creates a special vibrancy—connecting Milwaukee with the outside.” As a smaller city, Milwaukee often feels disconnected from larger cities in culture and industry—an island in the middle of the country. As an example, Jackson mentions Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker's rejection of federal funding for high-speed rail, which was meant to connect Milwaukee with Madison, Wisconsin, and eventually

with Minneapolis, Minnesota. The rejection of funds creates a literal disconnection of Milwaukee from other states, potentially increasing its isolation. “It just makes it all the more important that we have this opportunity to connect our community with the world that is going on outside of us.” Even having the ticket line for the Meryl Streep vehicle *August: Osage County* (John Wells, 2013) right next to the one for *12 O’Clock Boys* (Lotfy Nathan, 2013)—a documentary about an urban dirt bike gang in Baltimore, Maryland—created a cross-pollination of people not normally seen in Milwaukee. Just as many festivals “operate on the premise that film can make a difference to their immediate metropolitan environment” (Iordanova 37), Jackson hopes that people can see films about, say, public schools in New York City and relate them to Milwaukee’s public schools, or watch a film like *The Interrupters* (Steve James, 2011) and apply lessons about gun violence in Chicago to their own community. Seeing the world helps spectators see themselves in relation to their national or international community. It exposes people to other perspectives, cultures, ideas, problems, and solutions, each of which can inform how citizens relate to their neighbors, neighborhoods, and cities.

The Numbers

Beginning in 2012, Conversations participants filled out evaluations with statistical data, including their home zip code and age. Perhaps not surprisingly, in both 2012 and 2013, the geographical areas most strongly represented, with one exception, were those closest to the festival theaters.¹⁰ These zip codes are all primarily white, and people living there tend to be wealthier and have obtained higher levels of education than the average Milwaukee citizen, according to 2013 Census data. Zip code 53211, the top participating zip code for Conversations, had forty-six and thirty-eight participants in 2012 and 2013, respectively, while the second most represented zip code, 53202, grew from twenty-six to thirty-six in those two years. None of these areas had fewer than

¹⁰ The top five zip codes represented, from highest to lowest participation, were 53211, 53202, 53207, 53217, and 53212. The 53207 zip code is about five miles away from the Milwaukee Film Festival theaters, but its inclusion here is not a surprise. This zip code includes an area of southern Milwaukee known as Bayview, which has become something of an artist’s community in the past decade.

thirteen participants in either year. The Conversations series clearly appeals to these groups of people and, at minimum, illustrates that they are interested in thinking about film, or issues raised through films, beyond the screen.

Participation numbers from Milwaukee zip codes that are predominantly non-white were considerably lower. Two principally Hispanic zip codes—53215 and 53204—both had six Conversations participants in one year, and one or three in the other. One of these areas—53204, otherwise known as Walker’s Point—is rapidly gentrifying, so it will be interesting to see if those numbers change in the next few years. Walker’s Point residents’ participation decreased from six to three over these two years, while the 53215 zip code increased. Based on Conversations averaging seven and eight participants in 2011 and 2012 respectively, one can speculate that the sixteen people from primarily Hispanic zip codes were dispersed among at least three conversations (one in 2012 and two in 2013), that they likely did not all attend the same conversation in 2012, and that in 2013, they engaged in conversation with at least seven people who did not live in their zip codes. Although these results seem minor, they at least suggest that the Milwaukee Film Festival is providing opportunities for new configurations of intellectual exchange between people living in a racially and economically segregated city. Unfortunately, applying this same formula to the top five participatory zip codes is less useful. Residents of these zip codes attended at least nineteen Conversations in 2012 and eighteen in 2013, and while it is possible some of those groups were more diverse, it also is possible that these residents only encountered each other. This suggests that while some population crossover may occur through certain Conversations, those situations may be fewer in number than Conversations where people do encounter like-minded people, or racially and economically similar citizens, thus challenging the idea that a fuller “imagined community” of Milwaukee is inherently achieved through *all* Conversations.

Conversations participants from three primarily African-American zip codes—53205, 53206, and 53216—numbered slightly higher. Eleven residents of the 53216 zip code participated in Conversations both years—higher than numerous other zip codes. Of

these three areas, this zip code also reports the highest number of Bachelor's degrees per capita, perhaps signifying a correlation between education and interest in the Conversations series. According to Census data, each of these areas struggles economically and statistically lags behind state averages in educational degrees obtained, as do the two predominantly Hispanic zip codes.¹¹ However, six participants from the other two areas joined Conversations each year. These numbers suggest that citizens from predominantly African-American neighborhoods attended at least three Conversations over the two-year period and engaged in discussion with at least six people from other zip codes based on average attendance. At minimum, then, thirteen people from Hispanic or African-American communities discussed films with Caucasian people from other areas of town that they likely do not interact with regularly. Certainly these numbers alone are not enough to hasten widespread change, but for a fairly new program, this participation and crossover reflects an inroad to bringing segregated communities together in an act of reflection and has the potential to grow into a more substantial social catalyst as Community Partners and diversity initiatives are further employed. To draw additional conclusions from this data, it would be useful to know if certain films (for example, social issues documentaries or films about specific regions, class issues, or races) drew participants from specific zip codes, and which films drew the widest range of Conversations participants, geographically or economically.¹² Perhaps this is an endeavor the Milwaukee Film Festival can undertake in the future.

If Conversations are meant to be catalysts for local interaction, information exchange, and social change, it would seem that local films might be an ideal starting point. Conversations for films in the local Cream City Cinema program, however, appear to be falling away. In 2012, five Conversations were advertised after screenings. This number fell to four in 2013 and zero in 2014. The 2014 average for all other programming categories with a similar number of films is six Conversations. It would be interesting to

¹¹ For comparison, the percentage of citizens with Bachelor's degrees living in the top five participating zip codes ranges from twenty-five to sixty-three percent. The two Hispanic areas range from five to eleven percent, and the three African-American areas range from eight to seventeen percent.

¹² I did not have access to the original surveys, so I do not have this information.

know why this choice was made for 2014, as it likely comes down to some combination of low attendance numbers in previous years, film content, and screening times. Nevertheless, it indicates that the Milwaukee Film Festival is looking outside of Milwaukee—or for narratives outside of Milwaukee—to spur local dialogue, contest deep-seated discriminatory perspectives or social structures, and help move toward redefining local identity and restructuring Milwaukee as a community.

Jackson hopes the Festival can do more to capture the outcomes of Conversations, and he acknowledges that it will be a longer process to engage additional community members and document longer-term results, but he is committed to doing so: “There are many layers to it. One of them is just this idea of creating a community celebration of cinema that all audiences in Milwaukee participate in.” He adds: “we tend to [...] go to events, places, areas in the city that we know,” and hopefully the Milwaukee Film Festival will become “a destination point in the city” where everyone can celebrate. Increasing the variety of neighborhoods in which the festival screens films supports this venture. Incorporating conversations into the entertainment helps “slowly work on those ideas.” Jackson admits that the organization must make a special effort to draw diverse audiences to the festival. “If we don’t partner with the right community groups and community leaders, and get them talking about” and promoting the festival, if not specific films, he says, it is difficult to get word out to people who do not live close to theaters or regularly seek out independent films: “It’s not like *Field of Dreams*.” However, Jackson underscores Milwaukee Film’s dedication to making that effort because of the organization’s commitment to extending the film experience beyond the screen as a means of doing their part to “make better” the city that has made them a success. He believes Milwaukee Film has enough strong relationships with people and community groups that they will continue working together to increase diverse participation with the festival, and he hopes that concrete results eventually will be seen in the form of improved quality of life for all Milwaukee citizens, thus bringing together the “imagined community” of festival goers more enduringly as citizens who cross paths, share experiences, and dream big.

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