

San Francisco International Film Festival 2004—Part 1

Outrage in the Middle East

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This is the first in a series of articles on the 2004 San Francisco International Film Festival, held April 15-29.

Checkpoint (Mahssomin), directed by Yoav Shamir

Route 181: Fragments of a Journey in Palestine-Israel, directed by Michel Khleifi and Eyal Sivan

Worldwide anger is growing in response to the escalation of murderous violence and repression by the Israeli government of Ariel Sharon against the Palestinian people. A section of the Israeli population is outraged—and ashamed—as well by the crimes committed in its name. One expression of this oppositional sentiment is the appearance of documentaries treating critically the history of the Zionist state and examining its present-day aggression. Two films screened at the festival—one made by an Israeli filmmaker and the other co-directed by Palestinian and Israeli documentarians—register strong and eloquent protests about the plight of the Palestinians.

“The roadblock has turned over the years into an icon—an icon of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza,” states Israeli documentarian Yoav Shamir in the production notes of *Checkpoint*.

Shamir’s work chronicles the brutality and repression suffered by Palestinians as they travel from one point to another in the territories occupied by Israel since 1967. With some 200 checkpoints pockmarking the West Bank and Gaza, Israel’s colonialist mentality is exposed in Shamir’s work.

A subtitled prologue explains that the documentary was compiled between 2001 and 2003, after the second Palestinian Intifada in 2000. The occupied population now numbers 3 million. Checkpoints in Jenin, Hebron, Ramallah and the Gaza Strip are among those featured in the film.

Being an Israeli afforded director Shamir the opportunity to video the checkpoints with a high degree of transparency, exposing Palestinians of all ages routinely being treated like criminals and worse. Checkpoint abuse involves making Palestinians wait innumerable hours to go to school, to go to work or to take sick relatives to hospital.

A truck driver returning home from a day’s labor is prevented from crossing the military barricade and is told by soldiers that he must sleep in his truck. Guards harshly interrogate a four-year-old child to determine if the youngster is sick while berating the father who has explained that the family, due to illness, must go to a clinic.

An ambulance on its way to Nablus is detained. “Everyone’s always sick,” mocks a checkpoint soldier. The vehicle is transporting a cardiac patient and another with leukemia. Nablus has the closest facility offering chemotherapy. A guard yells: “Am I your problem-solver? I’m just a soldier at a checkpoint.”

A group of border police look directly at the camera and brag: “Border policemen—the country’s great patriots! We break those who make

trouble—no one messes with border police!” In Ramallah, a guard arrogantly steps forward and declares that all those who reside in the city are animals. Young Palestinian girls in Jerusalem get harassed and sexually taunted: “Jews are the best!”

A Palestinian mother with distraught children in tow is barred from crossing a checkpoint. As she is forced to turn back, she angrily states the obvious: “As if our children were terrorists!”

As *Checkpoint* progresses, protests become more strident. An elderly man wearing a Palestinian kuffiyeh insists that he too is a soldier on duty. A crowd of detainees forced to wait in the rain for hours break through the barricades, ignoring the shots fired by the Israeli military. A man defies the guards to shoot him on camera.

Capturing on video business-as-usual at the military checkpoints scattered throughout the occupied territories reveals the indignities suffered by the Palestinians at the hands of a sadistic occupying force. *Checkpoint* makes clear that these “security” roadblocks are instruments of humiliation and subjugation, rather than barriers against terrorism.

Stephen Holden of the *New York Times* was offended by Shamir’s movie. Holden writes: “There’s no question that military roadblocks and inspections prevent suicide bombers and terrorists from wreaking worse havoc than has already been created.” Holden, writing for a newspaper that has justified every significant crime committed by the Zionist state, is quite blatant and provocative. He is instinctively hostile to a documentary by an Israeli filmmaker that strikingly shows the xenophobic and discriminatory nature of the Zionist project. Though the WWSWS does not support terrorist attacks on civilians and views such tactics as detrimental to the fight against Israeli occupation and oppression, it contends that there is no equivalence between the desperate acts of a brutalized youth and the use of a vast military apparatus with the most advanced weaponry to conduct reprisals against an entire population.

In a statement posted on the web site *Spirituality and Health*, Shamir admonishes: “*Checkpoint* is my own cry for help. It represents my part in the struggle against the injustices of occupation. *Checkpoint* was made for my people, my family and friends who represent a large side of Israeli society who choose to not know what is going on so near to us.

“Many of the people in Israel don’t really perceive the true meaning of being an occupying nation. How does it affect us and how does it affect the Palestinians? What does it mean for a Palestinian to live under occupation; how does it feel every time you want to go to work, school, or to a doctor or just visit friends, you have to go through these checkpoints? How does it feel to be a young soldier who has to stand in that impossible situation—to face civilians, to handle situations he was not trained for? To have so much power over other people’s lives? How does it affect that soldier? How does it affect our society?”

Shamir’s documentary reinforces, via *cinéma vérité*, the fact that a

society built on Jewish nationalism in the form of Zionism is a nightmare, not only for the Palestinians but also for the Israeli people. It is a terrible irony that those engaged in depredations against the Palestinians—in the name of defending a Jewish homeland—threaten to duplicate the barbarity of the Nazis. *Checkpoint* evokes this historical parallel.

During the summer of 2002, filmmakers Michel Khleifi (Palestinian) and Eyal Sivan (Israeli) traveled the border contours mapped out by the 1947 United Nations' Resolution 181, partitioning Palestine into two states—one Jewish and one Arab. The resolution gave 56 percent of the territory to the Jewish minority, while 43 percent was left for the Arab majority, with a small central area reserved for international supervision. This theoretical border led to the first Arab-Israel conflict—a war in 1948, culminating in Israeli independence, with the Jewish state taking more land than was originally allocated by the UN.

More than 50 years later, Khleifi and Sivan journeyed along “Route 181,” tracing a border that never came into existence.

In the *Route 181* production notes, the directors state: “Despite the tribal allegiances imposed on us, which we reject, and armed with our common experience, we decided to return to our country. By doing so, we wanted to unveil the geographic and mental reality in which the men and women of Palestine-Israel are living today.... Our aim was to break with the usual approach in which people, places or events are filmed only because they coincide with the filmmaker's ideological disposition, where nothing is really illuminated other than already familiar political discourses or clichés on what is called the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.... We wished to construct a film which resists the idea that the only thing Israelis and Palestinians can do together is fight wars until they are both driven to oblivion.”

From south to north, the 270-minute documentary registers the comments and feelings of those who live on the fictitious frontier. Some of the Israelis are racist monsters. An older Israeli woman rasps: “My café used to belong to an Arab. We should get rid of them and send them packing!” Graffiti along the roadside read: “Transfer means peace—all Palestinians to Jordan.” Someone questions whether an Arab life is a real life at all. We hear Nazi-like comments, that the Arabs are not human.

An Arab worker, on the other hand, philosophizes: “This is not between Arab and Jew, but between occupier and occupied.” A visit is made to a barbed-wire factory, whose product is used for borders and prisons. Because of the length of the wire's blades, governments exclude it for humanitarian reasons.

The film focuses on individuals or families who experienced the events of 1948. “Each demolished home is a memory lost forever!” Elderly Zionists gloatingly recall the military tactics that resulted in the pre-1967 transfer of Arab lands to Jewish ownership. Someone suggests that if the Jews had done to the Arabs what the Americans did to the native Indians, Israel would today be minus its major problem. Another boasts that South Africa is the model for Israel—a white minority dominating a black majority. “The Shoah has totally shaped the way I think—I don't feel the slightest guilt towards the Arabs,” remarks a particularly distasteful elderly man, as though the Holocaust could justify the oppression and potentially the destruction of another people. A guide in one Israeli community, which like many was built on the ruins of a Palestinian village, questions whether the filmmakers even have the “right” to film, considering their attitudes. In Lod, where more than 50,000 Arabs were forcibly expelled to Jordan in 1948, a city council meeting debates the fact that Israeli Arabs are considered neither Arab nor Israeli.

A politically cynical Arabic youth quips: “Arab countries could help but don't.” In Abou Dis, an area of 70 percent unemployment for Palestinians, the military has recently dynamited homes belonging to suicide bombers. The anguished mother of a young suicide bomber says: “Our son did not die for money. Sharon has been killing us since 1948. Suicide bombers are poor people with no tanks or planes.” One villager

explains that “the demolition of homes is a form of collective punishment—the rape of an entire people. Every Israeli soldier is a boss unto himself.”

An Israeli commander reads Kafka's “Before the Law” while enforcing the sequestration of Palestinians in their homes. The filmmakers remind the soldier of Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, which describes monstrous deeds performed by “ordinary” people. Another soldier is asked by the filmmakers about the Judgment of Solomon: “Who's the real mother? Splitting means killing! How about sympathy for the expelled?”

The film's climax takes place in Shefer, where an older Jewish woman from Tunisia, married to a Moroccan, expresses regret about her emigration to Israel. After explaining that her youngest son was killed during Israel's war against Lebanon, she argues: “Israel has beauty but no *joie de vivre*. Even if you have everything, you have nothing. No one enjoys life. It's no life at all. It's a waste here.” Gesticulating enthusiastically, she adds: “Of course we [Arab and Jews] can all live together!”

In an unprecedented move, the French Ministry of Culture cancelled one of the screenings of *Route 181* at Le Festival de Cinéma, the country's biggest documentary film festival, held in March. A statement issued jointly by the ministry, the Centre Pompidou and the Bibliothèque publique d'information (Bpi) claimed that the film has already “provoked intense emotion, particularly among those who are alarmed by the rise of anti-Semitic and anti-Jewish statements and acts in France, and who consider that the film's underlying hostility to the existence of Israel may be of a nature to encourage these acts.”

Deriding the act of censorship as “scandalous,” directors Sivan and Khleifi stated that “this defamatory accusation is the result of a campaign of pressure and intimidation on the Centre Pompidou and on the Bpi. We are as concerned about anti-Jewish and racist acts in France as our anonymous detractors. But in the face of these phenomena, no one has a monopoly or right of exclusivity over concern or the love of justice and peace, as our films have shown over the past two decades.... Quite apart from the fact that your act will only reinforce the odious fantasies of some, it also takes us a step nearer to the re-establishment of censorship and is a clear encouragement to extremists. To yield to pressure and to sectarian demands as you have done will hardly pacify emotions and lead to a real debate of the issues posed by the film.”

Sivan and Khleifi have since received wide support from a number of prominent figures, including filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard and philosopher Etienne Balibar. Their film is a remarkable one.



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