

Filmmakers, writers protest Toronto festival spotlight on Tel Aviv

David Walsh
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Dozens of filmmakers, writers and intellectuals have signed an Open Letter to the Toronto International Film Festival, “No Celebration of Occupation” (September 2, 2009), criticizing the festival’s decision “to host a celebratory spotlight on Tel Aviv.” The Israeli city is the first to be the subject of the film festival’s new program, “City to City.” The open letter protests that the Toronto event, “whether intentionally or not, has become complicit in the Israeli propaganda machine.”

The growing list of signatories includes numerous Canadian filmmakers and video artists, along with such figures as actors Jane Fonda and Danny Glover, filmmakers Ken Loach, Paul Laverty and Sophie Fiennes, playwright Wallace Shawn, journalist and filmmaker John Pilger, author Alice Walker, musician David Byrne, writer and art critic John Berger, and left academics Howard Zinn, Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Zizek.

Also among the names on the letter are those of Palestinian filmmakers Hany Abu-Assad (*Paradise Now*) and Elia Suleiman (*Chronicle of Love and Pain*), as well as Israeli filmmaker Ra’anana Alexandrowicz (*James’ Journey to Jerusalem, The Inner Tour*).

The open letter points out that in 2008, “the Israeli government and Canadian partners Sidney Greenberg of Astral Media, David Asper of Canwest Global Communications and Joel Reitman of MIJO Corporation launched ‘Brand Israel,’ a million dollar media and advertising campaign aimed at changing Canadian perceptions of Israel.”

An August 28, 2008, article in the *Canadian Jewish News*, the protest letter explains, “quotes Israeli consul general Amir Gissin as saying that Toronto would be the test city for a promotion that could then be deployed around the world. According to Gissin, the culmination of the campaign would be a major Israeli presence at the 2009 Toronto International Film Festival.”

The open letter notes that film festival organizers praise Tel Aviv for its “diversity,” but that such a claim “is empty given the absence of Palestinian filmmakers in the program. Furthermore, what this description does not say is that Tel Aviv is built on destroyed Palestinian villages, and that the city of Jaffa, Palestine’s main cultural hub until 1948, was annexed to Tel Aviv after the mass exiling of the Palestinian population. This program ignores the suffering of thousands of former residents and descendants of the Tel Aviv/Jaffa area who currently live in refugee camps in the Occupied Territories or who have been dispersed to other countries, including Canada.”

Among those who drafted the open letter were Israeli filmmaker Udi Aloni, Canadian filmmakers Elle Flanders, Kathy Wazana and John Greyson, video artist Richard Fung and writer-activist Naomi Klein.

Independent film director Greyson fired the first shot in the protest when he wrote a letter August 27 to Toronto film festival officials Piers Handling, Cameron Bailey (the programmer for the “City to City” segment), and Noah Cowan, announcing that he was withdrawing his short film, *Covered*, from the festival.

Greyson, too, pointed to the *Canadian Jewish News* article, noting that

Gissin “thanked Astral, MIJO and Canwest for donating the million-dollar budget. (Astral is of course a long-time TIFF [Toronto International Film Festival] sponsor, and Canwest owners’ Asper Foundation donated \$500,000 to TIFF). ‘We’ve got a real product to sell to Canadians.... The lessons learned from Toronto will inform the worldwide launch of *Brand Israel* in the coming years, Gissin said.’”

Greyson noted that the past year had seen “the devastating Gaza massacre of eight months ago, resulting in over 1000 civilian deaths; the election of a prime minister accused of war crimes; the aggressive extension of illegal Israeli settlements on Palestinian lands; the accelerated destruction of Palestinian homes and orchards; the viral growth of the totalitarian security wall; and the further enshrining of the check-point system.”

The Toronto-based filmmaker commented that, “To my mind, this isn’t the right year to celebrate *Brand Israel*, or to demonstrate an ostrich-like indifference to the realities (cinematic and otherwise) of the region, or to pointedly ignore the international economic boycott campaign against Israel.”

Greyson apparently wrote his letter following face-to-face discussions, and arguments, with the festival organizers. He poses a series of questions to them: “You say it [the Tel Aviv program] was initiated in November 2008...but then why would Gissin seem to be claiming it as part of his campaign four months earlier? You’ve told me that TIFF isn’t officially a part of *Brand Israel*—okay—but why haven’t you clarified this publicly? Why are only Jewish Israeli filmmakers included? Why are there no voices from the refugee camps and Gaza (or Toronto for that matter), where Tel Aviv’s displaced Palestinians now live? Why only big budget Israeli state-funded features—why not a program of shorts/docs/indie works by underground Israeli and Palestinian artists? Why is TIFF accepting and/or encouraging the support of the Israeli government and consulate, a direct flaunting of the boycott, with filmmaker plane tickets, receptions, parties and evidently the mayor of Tel Aviv opening the spotlight? Why does this feel like a propaganda campaign?”

In a clarification published September 7, Greyson stressed that he was not calling for a boycott of the Toronto film festival, but had made a “personal statement of principle...in the hopes that my action would ‘shine a spotlight’ on this deeply troubling Tel Aviv Spotlight.” In his original letter he observed that his protest was not directed “against the films or filmmakers you’ve chosen. I’ve seen brilliant works of Israeli and Palestinian cinema at past TIFFs, and will again in coming years.”

In an email interview with the WSWS, Canadian filmmaker and signatory of the September 2 open letter, Noam Gonick, commented:

“As a Jew I’ve lost faith in the Zionist project long ago, and I can’t help think that programming Tel Aviv in the inaugural City-to-City spotlight less than a year after the massacres in Gaza was a provocative political act on the part of the Festival.

“The scope of the reaction from filmmakers and artists worldwide

reminds me of campaigns against the South African regime before apartheid was dismantled ('I Ain't Gonna Play Sun City'), and that gives me hope that the plight of Palestinians is becoming more public, seeping into the cultural landscape.

"I know TIFF director Cameron Bailey, and he is a politically sensitive person with a history of human rights programming. He was the driving force behind the Planet Africa cinema program at TIFF, and this maelstrom must weigh heavily on his conscience. His program has thrust TIFF into the centre of a heated international debate about cinema and politics, taking the festival beyond the quotidian realm of US celebrities and distribution deals, and in that sense I would say he's done something quite positive.

"The cynic in me is reminded that TIFF is in the final stages of funding its new permanent home, and that the Toronto Jewish community has been at the forefront of donating to the construction (from the land which it is built on being donated by filmmaker Ivan Reitman, to the Asper Canwest Global media empire).

Whether inadvertent or planned, standing 'strong' behind the decision to present Tel Aviv in the spotlight will play well to those donors, who are hawkish on Israel and will no doubt be called on again to close the financing gap on the new building."

In a reply to Greyson and the protest, posted on the Toronto film festival Web site August 28, programmer and festival co-director Bailey manifested precisely the "ostrich-like" attitude that the filmmaker had criticized.

Bailey defended the spotlight, asserting that he had been attracted "to Tel Aviv as our inaugural city because the films being made there explore and critique the city from many different perspectives. Furthermore, the City to City series was conceived and curated entirely independently. There was no pressure from any outside source. Contrary to rumours or mistaken media reports, this focus is a product only of TIFF's programming decisions. We value that independence and would never compromise it."

Bailey noted blandly that "We recognize that Tel Aviv is not a simple choice and that the city remains contested ground," while ignoring both the provocative nature of the choice in the aftermath of the Gaza massacre, which outraged world public opinion, and the issue of the broader Israeli propaganda offensive, with which the spotlighting of Tel Aviv has inevitably become associated.

The protest against the "City to City" series is legitimate and principled. Greyson and the others are not calling for the exclusion of Israeli films and filmmakers, but denouncing a reactionary and cynical publicity campaign staged by the Zionist establishment and its supporters in Canada and elsewhere. Especially significant is the falsification of the history of Tel Aviv and Israel as a whole.

Whatever the intentions of festival officials, the spotlight on Tel Aviv dovetails with, and was clearly influenced by, a drive on the part of the Israeli regime and the Canadian establishment to whitewash Israel's crimes and imperialist character.

Canwest and Astral are mega-corporations with the power to persuade through donations and sponsorship dollars. Immediate financial consideration aside, however, the TIFF showcasing of Tel Aviv takes place within a definite political climate. The Conservative government of Stephen Harper in Ottawa has adopted a vociferously pro-Israel policy—for example, cutting off financial support for the Hamas government in the Gaza Strip and banning British MP George Galloway from entering the country.

This staunchly pro-Israel line has been seconded by Michael Ignatieff and the Liberal Party. Canwest and its *National Post* have long been mounting a vigorous campaign to condemn virtually any and all criticism of the Zionist state as anti-Semitic.

Moreover, it should not be forgotten that TIFF opened the 2008 festival with the wretched pro-war and pro-Canadian Armed Forces film, *Passchendaele*.

Bailey asserted that the "City to City" series "was conceived and curated entirely independently." But what does "independence" mean in such a case? That no one stood over his shoulder and directed his actions is probably true. However, obliviousness to the plight of the Palestinian people and social reality in general renders the nominally "independent" film festival programmer susceptible to powerful forces who have a less than innocent agenda.

What the selection of Tel Aviv points to, in regard to the film world, is the degree of insularity, social indifference and, to be blunt, political ignorance that dominates such circles. "Radical" politics in this milieu means, for the most part, identity politics: gay and racial or ethnic minority issues. Tel Aviv must have seemed attractive, with its "incredibly diverse mix of cultures" (Bailey in an interview) and significant gay scene. For political amnesiacs such as the Toronto film festival organizers, those appealing features far outweighed the massacre of Palestinians on the Gaza Strip and other atrocities.

And this is bound up with the general character of contemporary global filmmaking. Bailey asserted in his response to the protest that the "City to City" series and the festival's programming in general constituted "our contribution to expanding our audiences' experience of this art form and the worlds it represents." Unfortunately, the contribution that filmmaking at present makes to understanding *objective reality* is relatively weak and pale, underscored by the festival's willingness to go along with the Tel Aviv spotlight and the tameness and self-involvement of the overwhelming majority of films screened at the festival.

A final note in regard to the protest itself: it is worth pointing out that the Israeli state is not some extraordinary exception to the norms of imperialist morality. The Canadian bourgeoisie, for example, is an active co-sponsor of the Obama administration's escalating war against the Afghan people. Isolated protests against one or another imperialist regime—especially one that is somewhat more vulnerable to international criticism—should not take the place of a comprehensive exposure of, and opposition to, the crimes of imperialism as a global system.



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