

# A conversation with organizers of the Toronto film festival protest

## The issues around the spotlight on Tel Aviv

David Walsh  
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The savage Israeli assault on the Gaza Strip in December 2008-January 2009 left more than 1,400 Palestinians dead and many more wounded, hundreds of them civilians, including considerable numbers of women and children. A UN commission headed by Judge Richard Goldstone recently found Israel, as well as Hamas, guilty of war crimes and crimes against humanity.

The event outraged wide layers of global public opinion. Israeli's propagandists, well practiced at this kind of operation, were obliged to work overtime in an attempt to obscure the reality and whitewash the crimes.

In addition to painting Israel as the innocent victim of persecution by the Palestinians and the Muslim world in general, the Israeli foreign ministry considers it a priority to present the country as a hotbed of artistic-intellectual life, a democratic oasis in the middle of an autocratic Middle East. There is a particular appeal by the Zionist propagandists to sections of the middle class in Europe and North America, who might be made—or remain—indifferent to the suffering of the Palestinian population, if they were convinced that Israel was especially advanced on issues of sexual identity, cultural freedom, and similar matters.

It is not so terribly difficult to blind certain people, who are half-inclined not to use their eyes in that manner anyway, to the larger questions of imperialism and colonialism, Great Power geopolitical intrigue, the struggle over Middle East energy, and the decades-long oppression of the Palestinians.

In the aftermath of the Gaza events, the Zionist regime already had in place its so-called “Brand Israel” campaign, officially launched in September 2008.

This Israeli foreign ministry effort was designed, in the words of a *Jerusalem Post* article in August of that year, to “implant positive emotional associations to Israel.” Israel's Toronto consul-general Amir Gissin, who ran the “pilot program,” observed to the *Post*, “Explaining why we are right is not enough.... Our goal is to make Israel relevant and attractive...and to refocus attention away from the [Israeli-Palestinian] conflict.” Gissin had previously served as the Israeli foreign ministry's director of the Public Affairs Department, where he coordinated public relations policy and activities in Israeli missions worldwide.

Toronto, according to the *Post*, “one of the most multicultural cities in the world,” made “a very attractive laboratory to experiment in.”

The Israelis and their apologists could hardly have been clearer. This “re-branding” operation was not precisely a stealth campaign. So, in the aftermath of the Gaza atrocities, when Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) officials announced a spotlight on Tel Aviv as the inaugural edition of a new “City to City” program, the cynically minded were

prompted to ask themselves whether or not there was a connection between the film festival segment and the Israeli propaganda campaign.

In reality, the Israelis were more than willing, at a certain point, to boast that there was. Gissin, noted the *Canadian Jewish News* in August 2008, explained 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 same publication in September 2009 carried an interview with Tel Aviv mayor Ron Huldai, where the point was driven home: “He [Huldai] said that while the City to City program was initiated by the festival, the Israeli ministry of foreign affairs was involved as part of its Brand Israel media and advertising campaign, which was launched last year.”

In response to the film festival's proposed spotlight on Tel Aviv, a number of Toronto filmmakers and video artists demanded an explanation early in the summer of 2009 from Cameron Bailey, the festival's co-director and programmer of the “City to City” series. Bailey failed to reply, until the artists, including John Greyson, Elle Flanders, Richard Fung, b. h. Yael, and Kathy Wazana, warned that there would be “repercussions” if the festival continued to ignore them.

At the meeting that was then organized, described in some detail in the interview below, Bailey explained to his critics that the Tel Aviv spotlight was a *fait accompli*. In eventual protest, Greyson withdrew his short film *Covered* from the festival. A statement, “Toronto Declaration—No Celebration of Occupation,” was signed by 1,500 figures in the artistic and intellectual world.

The open letter read, in part, “We do not protest the individual Israeli filmmakers included in City to City, nor do we in any way suggest that Israeli films should be unwelcome at TIFF. However, especially in the wake of this year's brutal assault on Gaza, we object to the use of such an important international festival in staging a propaganda campaign.”

The media and pro-Israel elements falsely termed the protest a boycott and an attempt to exclude Israeli filmmakers. Bailey and the film festival reacted with hostility to the protest, and attempted to proceed with “business as usual.” However, it is not possible to return to the previous situation. The issue of the festival's social orientation and its responsibilities to something other than the commercial film world and the career aspirations of its officialdom has been raised, and that will not go away.

In our view, as we have made clear, there is also a link between the self-involved, banal, and artistically trivial character of so many of the films regularly screened at the Toronto and other festivals, on the one hand, and the social indifference and complacency of great portions of the film world, including its so-called “artistic” and “independent” wing.

I recently spoke to a number of the organizers of the Toronto protest, Elle Flanders, b. h. Yael, and John Greyson, about the episode and its implications.

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David Walsh: How did you find out that the film festival was organizing its Tel Aviv spotlight?

Elle Flanders: I had just come back from Palestine. John Greyson e-mailed me while I was over there, saying “You’re not going to believe this.” He told me that he’d heard there was going to be a film festival spotlight on Tel Aviv. From what I understand, and this is even more shocking, Cameron Bailey went to Tel Aviv in April, which is to say not even four months post-Gaza, for several days.

John wrote to Cameron, saying, “What’s going on? Let’s talk.” He didn’t hear anything back. Then we started to say, OK, we’ve got to do something. Yael sent something as well, still no reply. Come August, we knew it was a full-blown affair. So we demanded an “emergency” meeting.

There were a number from our side present. From the festival, there was Cameron Bailey, who came in with his entire publicity team. We sat down, he was extremely deferential, polite, waters all around, but really cold. The first thing he did was hand us the festival program guide.

Cameron opened it up, and said, the program [the Tel Aviv spotlight] is in there. So we looked around, and sort of said, well, what are we doing here? If the program is done and you’re not going to consider taking it out, what’s the point? He said, so where are we going from here? We said, well, we think there will be repercussions. He said, along what lines? We said, we can’t really tell you that yet.

We looked at the program guide and figured out right away that this was a molded program. We said, what about the other side? He said, there is no other side, this is about Tel Aviv. We said, wait a second, what about all the villages in Palestine, what about the Palestinians who live in Jaffa, which is now part of Tel Aviv? He said, we have this film, *Ajami*, but “my friend” Scandar Copti [the co-director of *Ajami*], in the end, didn’t feel it was right to be in the program. We said, duh! There’s a reason for that, Cameron.

We tried to educate him about what was happening there, and we said, how could you do this in the face of what’s happening? And he said, I think it’s much more sophisticated than how you’re presenting it. And we said, we think we’re presenting it in a far more sophisticated way than you’re showing it. And that was it. I said, you’ve been duped. Either you don’t care any more, and you know better, or you’ve been duped.

All of us are still a bit shell-shocked. We’re still wondering how could he, how could he? We’re looking for answers.

I think we know certain things. The Israeli government has been extremely active in terms of their cultural presence at festivals all over the world, knowing that festivals are hugely and widely reported on...they’ve been up to this for years. In Berlin, Cannes. The guy from the Israeli Film Fund has come up to me many times.

Yes, to some degree, all countries do that. France does that. They recognize that culture is a large economic force. But Israel has a double agenda. I think they approached Cameron at Berlin last year and said, “Hey, guess what, Tel Aviv is having its 100th anniversary, let’s do something.” I mean, this is how these things happen, you go to parties, you drink, you talk. I think that’s what happened, and he thought, oh, that would be interesting.

b. h. Yael: From what I understand, both from the letters leading up to that meeting, and the meeting itself, there was a constant question about Brand Israel. There was never a denial.

EF: Well, actually there was a denial at that meeting. We brought it up

and he said, absolutely no way are they [the Israeli government] involved. And we said, we find that hard to believe. And he shrugged, threw his hands up.

DW: I suspect that for the film festival organizers, once the program was announced, there was no possible way they could have rescinded the decision. They would have been raked over the coals by the *Toronto Star*, the *Sun*, the *Globe and Mail*, for giving in to the Palestinian “terrorist” lobby.

EF: Yes, what were we? “Storm-troopers,” among other things. There was no way with the Bell Lightbox [the new Toronto festival headquarters] going up, sitting on Reitman family land, which they donated to the festival at a cost of \$22 million, as a gift...there was no way that there wasn’t a connection between this program and the amount of Jewish money in the festival, and the amount that still has to come in to the festival.

DW: What surprised you about this experience? What was new and unexpected about it?

bhY: Certainly the magnitude of it, I mean the kind of response on all sides has been significant. I was actually talking to someone today, and one of the comments she made was the degree to which this became no longer an identity politics issue, Jews against Arabs, or Jews who identify with Palestine, it raised it to a new political level, because so many people who were not Arabs or Jews came on board to support the initiative—or denounce it.

EF: People were ready. There was this backlash in the sense of “we’re not going to take it any more.” The fact that we had 8,000 signatures on *Jewish Voice for Peace* after three days of being up on their website. Gaza was a tipping point. What also surprised me was the pressure put on people into not signing our declaration. People, whose names I can’t mention, told us they were quite convinced that they wouldn’t get a job working in film ever again if they did that. That’s chilling.

DW: Do you think there will be repercussions?

bhY: I think those who knew there would be repercussions didn’t sign it.

EF: If they took Jane Fonda to task, imagine what they could do to others. The viciousness of the campaign against her was scary. Producers like Robert Lantos were responding. He runs film in this city. [Canadian filmmaker] Atom Egoyan’s response was dreadful. It should be pointed out that he got to share the \$1,000,000 Dan David prize out of Tel Aviv University in 2008.

DW: 2009 began with bombs raining down on Gaza, and the stock market crashing, and banks nearly crashing, and jobs being lost by the millions. Gaza is the brutal face of imperialism today, it’s not simply about the Israelis and Palestinians.

EF: Absolutely, but you know...it’s escalating, for various reasons.

bhY: I would agree with you in terms of the larger context, but also the response of the Zionist, Israeli-protectionist community has escalated. There is a much more concerted effort to dissuade the public from any sympathy for the Palestinians or Gaza. It’s a war of obfuscation.

DW: What is Canada doing in Afghanistan? What is the US doing in Iraq and Afghanistan? It’s not one bit different. Canada’s “mission” in Afghanistan is just as filthy and reactionary.

bhY: I would agree, but there are differences. The degree of popular support in Israel for the Gaza war and other actions, and the degree to which there has been an effort to eradicate “Arabness” in Israel.

DW: You were born in Israel?

bhY: Yes.

DW: How did you become critical, or oppositional?

bhY: I think it was a slow developmental process. Part of it started with asking questions about the politics of Israel, around *Mizrahi* and *Ashkenazi* identity, and seeing what emerged from the colonial past, both in terms of the Arab world, and the subsequent population of Israel.

Once the Second Intifada began [in September 2000], it became a matter of dealing with the politics much more directly. At that point, I went there, I did some videotaping, witnessing. When I went to Hebron, that was eye-opening. Seeing how Israeli settlers were living right on top of Palestinians, taking second and third floors, and bombarding Palestinians with garbage and intimidating them in all kinds of ways, emptying the marketplace with aggression.

I went back to Iraq with my mother, where she was born, in 2003, after the Americans invaded, because she had had such a longing. For her, it was so mixed, she was so delighted to be back, because she had such memories of growing up in Iraq, but there was also the devastation. For her, what was interesting was that when she grew up in the 1940s, Iraq was occupied by the British, so there was this kind of doubling up, these different occupations. We'd be on the street, and there would be demonstrations, and she would remember the demonstrations in the 1940s.

DW: What's your overall assessment of the protest?

John Greyson: I think it was a success in terms of getting people to talk about this. People really talked. We decided against a boycott. We were able continually, despite all the willful misrepresentations in the media, to remind people that this was not about the filmmakers, but about the Tel Aviv spotlight. It's a good record to stand on. We did see it through.

DW: It takes a certain backbone to do what you did, you deserve credit for that.

JG: The real credit has to go to the Egyptian producer [Sherif Mandour, of the feature film, *Heliopolis*], who pulled his film at much greater cost. Mine is a short, I don't distribute it myself, but it's my film. There are no producers, investors, distributors breathing down my neck.

DW: This is the first sign of protest I've seen at the festival in 16 years.

JG: Last year, there was an attempt to raise questions about the presence of a tank on opening night, for [the Canadian World War I film] *Passchendaele*. It was shocking, nobody blinked. I was so outraged, I hadn't even heard of it last year. So when I heard about it this year, I was writing it into one of the op-eds I did in the *National Post*. Our group ended up advising me to take it out because I would come across as "anti-military." I did take it out, because we had this collective process. But it struck me as one of those cultural things we should be pushing. On Remembrance Day I will not wear a poppy.

DW: That was, and remains, our criticism. Yes, what Israel does is horrible, but it's not an exception. What goes on in Afghanistan every day, in Iraq every day, may be less spectacular than what went on in Gaza during the assault, but it's the same process, the same colonialism. The people who told you to take out the reference to *Passchendaele* should be ashamed of themselves, in my opinion, because it's tied to the same issues. The entire world imperialist system needs to be exposed, and opposed.

Will there be repercussions from the protest?

JG: At the micro-level, there has been fall-out. None of it is surprising. We all went in with our eyes open. One positive repercussion is that many festivals will think twice or three times before they go down this road. The festivals are being courted like crazy. We all know the offers are flying fast and thick, like a snowstorm of carrots. Israeli money.

The gauntlet has been thrown down to the 20-somethings. This new generation has grown up with the wars we've been fighting since 2001, and that must have an impact. There is a great deal of work to do.

The author also recommends:

Filmmakers, writers protest Toronto festival spotlight on Tel Aviv [10 September 2009]

Protest against Toronto film festival collusion with Israeli regime continues [16 September 2009]



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