

# *The Gatekeepers* from Israel and a film version of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*

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The *Gatekeepers*, directed by Dror Moreh; *On the Road*, directed by Walter Salles, screenplay by Jose Rivers, based on the novel by Jack Kerouac.

Director Dror Moreh's new documentary *The Gatekeepers* provides a glimpse into the crisis wracking Israeli society and the failing Zionist project.

The film's core is made up of interviews with former directors of the Shin Bet, the Israeli internal security agency (also known by the acronym Shabak), whose primary mandate since the Six Day War in 1967 has been repressing the Arab population in the West Bank and Gaza and within Israel itself.

The fact that six key leaders of the secretive organization speak rather gloomily on camera about how they view the current state of affairs in Israel is extraordinary and revelatory. With an unusual degree of candor, each describes how he pursued his task ruthlessly and each in his own way expresses anxiety about Israel's prospects.

The disastrous situation created by the nearly seventy-year persecution of the Palestinians deeply concerns the filmmaker. In the immediate aftermath of the 1967 conflict, one million Palestinians came under military rule. Admitting in an interview to being "pessimistic," about a solution to the Palestinian question, Moreh states the "problems that America is dealing with [in the "war on terror"] are the same problems that the film deals with: How much physical pressure can you [apply] while torturing people? How much can an occupation succeed? Is targeted assassination a good technique or not a good technique? Will it lead where we want it to lead?"

Moreh's documentary is all the more remarkable given his conservative political and ideological background. In 2000-01, he directed political campaign ads for Ariel Sharon, the ultra-right former general and defense minister who was challenging Israel's incumbent prime minister, Ehud Barak. Moreh also worked for Sharon in 2003, and again in 2006, before Sharon suffered a stroke.

In *The Gatekeepers*, Moreh pushes his subjects to elaborate on some of their more notorious exploits. Avraham Shalom, an old man with red suspenders and a cruel glint in his eyes, ran Shin Bet from 1980 to 1986. The filmmaker presses him about the beating and summary execution of two unarmed hijackers in the 1984 "Bus 300 Affair," a sordid affair that led to Shalom's resignation from Shin Bet and nearly brought down the government of Yitzhak Shamir. "You killed a terrorist whose hands were tied." How is that moral, asks the director. Shalom coldly replies: "With terrorists, there are no morals."

Avi Dichter, who headed the agency from 2000 to 2005, oversaw the 2002 assassination of Hamas leader Salah Shehadeh by ordering a one-ton bomb to be dropped on a crowded Gaza City neighborhood, resulting in the deaths of 14 other people, including eight children. Another notable assassination by Shin Bet, described in the film in the segment "Collateral Damage," was that of Hamas "engineer" Yahya Ayyash, killed in 1996 by a cell phone rigged with explosives. Dichter says in Moreh's movie that

"you can't make peace with military means."

Interspersed with the interviews is harrowing archival footage of half-naked, brutalized Palestinian prisoners, as well as mass protest demonstrations against the Israeli government. "You knock on doors in the middle of the night, these moments end up etched deep inside you. When you retire, you become a bit of a leftist," says Yaakov Peri, who was in charge from 1988 to 1994, during the first Palestinian Intifada, or insurrection.

"We all have our moments," says Yuval Diskin, director from 2005 to 2011. "Maybe you're shaving and you think, 'I make a decision and x number of people are killed.' The power to take lives in an instant, there's something unnatural about it."

The former Shin Bet leaders denounce the politicians who, for example, oversaw minimal punishment meted out to the Gush Emunim West Bank settlers' group, known as the Jewish Underground, for their 1984 plans to destroy the Dome of the Rock, a Muslim shrine, which would have had major international consequences.

A number of the interviewees agree with curbing Jewish settlements on the West Bank and generally favor a two-state solution to the Palestinian question, which may reflect, as Peri's comment suggests, a degree of political hindsight. Along these lines, the 1995 assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin—whose government signed the 1993 Oslo peace accords with the Palestine Liberation Organization—by a Zionist zealot is universally lamented in the movie.

Toward the film's end, several stark pronouncements are made: remarkably, Shalom asserts that Israel has become "a brutal occupation force, similar to the Germans in World War II"; Carmi Gillon, Shin Bet director from 1994 to 1996, concedes that "we are making the lives of millions unbearable"; and Ami Ayalon (1996 to 2000) claims that the "tragedy of Israel's public security debate is that we win every battle, but lose the war."

*The Gatekeepers* emerges out of the fissures created by the crisis of Israeli society, a state built on ethnicity and exclusivity, aided and abetted by the most powerful imperialist countries, particularly the United States. The filmmaker is pleading for the Israeli political establishment to change course, something rendered impossible by Zionism's entire history and trajectory. Whatever his political past and motives, however, Moreh has directed a valuable and insightful work.

## *On the Road*

"With the coming of Dean Moriarty began part of my life you could call my life on the road," Jack Kerouac wrote famously in his 1957 novel about postwar America, *On the Road*. Kerouac (1922-1969), a leading figure in the Beat movement, penned his book while traveling back and

forth across the US and Mexico. His chronicles involve a complex cast of real-life personalities, whose names were changed in the novel, in some cases to avoid libel suits. Disaffected with and alienated from official, conformist American society of the time, they were dubbed by the author a “lemon lot.”

Combining an appealing cast, alluring cinematography and a jazz soundtrack featuring the electrifying music of Charlie Parker and Slim Gaillard, Brazilian director Walter Salles (born 1956) has attempted to make a movie that retains the feel of the Kerouac literary classic. Salles has directed a number of interesting films, including *Central Station* (1998), *Motorcycle Diaries* [based on the diaries of Che Guevara] (2004) and *Linha de Passe* (2008).

The year is 1947. Sal Paradise (based on Kerouac, played by Sam Riley) and his gay poet friend Carlo Marx (Allen Ginsberg, played by Tom Sturridge) become emotionally gripped by the charismatic Dean Moriarty (Neal Cassady, played by Garrett Hedlund), a hustler and quasi-intellectual with an unquenchable thirst for breaking social taboos. (Kerouac: “Dean just raced in society, eager for bread and love.”) Dean’s young life has been split into thirds—pool halls, jail and the public library. A dog-eared copy of Proust is his constant companion.

From his mother’s apartment in Ozone Park, Queens (as opposed to his aunt’s in the novel), Sal sets off by thumb, bus and car across the country. Most times he is joined by Dean and the latter’s 16-year-old child bride Marylou (LuAnne Henderson, played by Kristen Stewart), whom he is in the process of dumping for the San Francisco-based sophisticate Camille (Carolyn Cassady, played by Kirsten Dunst).

In between coasts, there are a few stopovers. On a visit to New Orleans, they meet up with Old Bull Lee (William S. Burroughs, played by Viggo Mortensen). Says Sal about Old Bull: “Let’s just say now, he was a teacher, and it may be said that he had every right to teach because he spent all his time learning,” and pushing heroin into his veins.

Summing up his code of life, Sal proclaims that the “only people for me are the mad ones. The ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones that never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn like Roman candles across the night.”

It is perhaps director Salles’ difficulty in dramatizing the source of what Kerouac terms “maniacal extremes” that accounts for an overabundance of explicit sex in the film. Salles does explain in an interview that “I was struck by the way sex and drugs were described as a bridge to transcend the limited territory in which society tried to confine those young men and women.” Unfortunately, because a detailed picture of the social and cultural landscape is lacking, the constant presence of sex and drugs in the movie, essentially devoid of what is more thoughtful and insightful in Kerouac, becomes tedious.

Salles’ reasons for making the film are interesting. (No other film adaptation has been made of *On the Road*, although the lives of Kerouac, Cassady and the others have been the subject of numerous documentary and fiction films, including John Byrum’s not very successful *Heart Beat* (1980) with Nick Nolte and *Big Sur* (2013), directed by Michael Polish, with Josh Lucas as Cassady. In 1957, Kerouac wrote a letter to Marlon Brando, suggesting that Brando play Dean while he would play Sal.)

In a recent interview with the *Daily Planet*, Salles says: “I was 18 when I read *On the Road* for the first time, and we were living under military dictatorship in Brazil. There was censorship in all forms of cultural expression; cinema, theater, and music—and worse than that there was exile, there was torture. So when I read *On the Road* it hadn’t been published and translated in Brazil yet, since there was censorship in literature as well. We read it in English, as we were entering University.

“What was striking to us, was those characters in search in all forms of freedom were actually managing to really find a future and we were not. They were allowed to become what they wanted and we didn’t have that

opportunity. The whole idea of investigating the forbidden was exactly what was not offered to us. I remember the book traveled from hands to hands in class, and when it came back to me, it had writing from other students and I still keep this copy.”

Salles’ response to the book (his previous favorite had apparently been J.D. Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye*) is understandable and even moving. Taking the film beyond that generalized opposition to tyranny and desire for freedom in the direction of something concrete and telling proves more difficult and some of the difficulty may lie with the novel itself.

There is still something to *On the Road* after more than half a century, although it may become more and more of a social-historical document as time passes. There are pictures of life and youth in Kerouac’s novel, of some of the possibilities provided by the end of the Depression and the war. No reference is made to the anti-communist mania that was going on at the time of the book’s events, but, at least by implication, it aims to offer a criticism or a quasi-alternative to that, with its full-speed chronicle of cars, buses, trains, odd jobs, odd characters, drinking, sex, conversation, poetry, jazz, restlessness, moments of ecstasy and misery.

There is a certain feeling for the underdog; the depictions in the book—and movie—of the exploited immigrant population, eking out an existence picking cotton and loading heavy bags of grain onto rail cars, are some of the most memorable.

At any rate, along with Ginsberg’s *Howl*, Burroughs’ *Junkie*, Herbert Huncke’s *The Evening Sun Turned Crimson* and some other works, *On the Road* is part of the Beat contribution to America’s knowing and representing itself.

A few evocative quotes from Kerouac’s *On the Road*.

“It was three children of the earth trying to decide something in the night and having all the weight of past centuries ballooning in the dark before them.”

“LA is the loneliest and most brutal of American cities; New York gets god-awful cold in the winter but there’s a feeling of wacky comradeship somewhere in the streets. LA is a jungle.”

“I knew I had lived a whole life and many others in the poor atomistic husk of my flesh, and I had all the dreams.”

“...by now the children must be crying in the land where they let children cry.”



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