

5 Broken Cameras: “Forgotten wounds can’t be healed”

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Directed by Emad Burnat and Guy Davidi. Now available on Netflix.

“Healing is a challenge in life. It’s a victim’s sole obligation. By healing, you resist oppression. But when I’m hurt over and over again, I forget the wounds that rule my life. Forgotten wounds can’t be healed. So I film to heal. I know they may knock at my door at any moment. But I’ll just keep filming. It helps me confront life. And survive”—Emad Burnat

It is not often that this reviewer can recommend a contemporary film. Many of today’s films have little feeling for the world and do not leave a strong impression on the viewer. Fortunately, “non-fiction” or documentary films—not all of course—have, in recent years, been able to provide glimpses into humanity and tell the truth about the current state of affairs, even if only in a limited fashion. In that context, watching *5 Broken Cameras*, an Israeli-Palestinian-French co-production from directors Emad Burnat and Guy Davidi, is an extraordinary and moving experience.

The film’s title is a reference to five cameras filmmaker Emad Burnat used to document the struggle of a small village named Bil’in (population 1,800) in the West Bank to survive in the face of illegal Israeli settlements and non-stop repression at the hands of the Israeli army and police. Burnat documents the over six-year-long struggle of his native town to resist the Zionist occupation and move the “security fence,” which cuts off 60 percent of their own farmland from use, away from their village.

Burnat narrates the film and is a witness to his friends’ and family’s never-ending humiliation and degradation at the hands of Zionist settlers and the military. Olive trees are burnt, scores of people injured by tear gas and live ammunition, and close friends are killed. One would be hard pressed to think of another

film where the protagonist/director is a real human being and the actions being shown on screen are reality and not invention.

When one hears of another Palestinian killed or detained by the IDF in the headlines, this film drives home the point that these are flesh-and-blood human beings and not merely statistics. Alongside this all-pervasive death and destruction are life, humor and humanity. Indeed, the first camera that Burnat films with is bought shortly after the birth of his fourth son, Gibreel, in 2005. Later on in the film, Gibreel’s first words will be “army” and “wall.”

Each camera, before being shot at and replaced, tells a continuing story of a village under siege juxtaposed with very intimate scenes of Burnat’s own family and his village friends and neighbors. The film is subjective and objective at one and the same time. The power of film, particularly documentary film, as a medium to tell the truth is on display here. The villagers have no other recourse than to show the world what is happening.

The fact that this was an Israeli-produced film is also highly significant. There is an important and growing constituency within Israel that opposes what their government does to the Palestinian people. The people of Bil’in are joined by Israeli activists and other supporters from around the world in their struggle.

The images and sequences captured firsthand by Burnat range from horrifying to inspiring. The film begins in the context of Israel’s deliberate construction of a West Bank security fence and wall in 2005. Once the villagers discover that the wall will tear through half of their farmland they begin grassroots and nonviolent protests.

The Zionist settlers respond by burning their olive trees. Nonviolent protests are met in kind by rubber bullets and tear gas, followed soon by real bullets.

Many demonstrators are killed or detained by the Israeli police. One of Burnat's friends is seen taken prisoner by Israeli soldiers, blindfolded and then shot in the leg point-blank by his captors. Scenes like this are shown on YouTube and galvanize international support for the beleaguered community.

Bil'in becomes a symbol of resistance within the West Bank. Numerous politicians and figures associated with the Palestinian National Authority are seen making appearances in the town, but Burnat prefers to focus on "the real people." At a crucial moment, Burnat is severely injured when he tries to run over the barrier in a vehicle. He is taken to an Israeli hospital, which saves his life, as an inferior hospital in the West Bank would not have been up to date with the necessary equipment and staff. Since he is not an Israeli citizen, he is left with a huge hospital bill. Moreover, since Burnat's actions are not seen as "resistance related" by the Palestinian Authority, he and his family are left to fend for themselves.

Many of the scenes recall the treatment of the Jews at the hands of the Nazis during World War II. The Israeli Army comes into the town in the middle of the night and effectively kidnaps young men and boys for throwing rocks earlier at soldiers. They even come for Burnat and his camera and throw him in jail. The night raids prompt the children of Bil'in to stage their own demonstration, a children's crusade as it were, and the youth are seen chanting, "we want sleep" before the army checkpoint. There is something truly enraging when one sees one of the mostly heavily armed forces in the world against essentially defenseless farmers and workers.

The demonstrations become a weekly occurrence and a source of solidarity and hope for the town's inhabitants. Their only outlet in having a civilized life is to resist, even when nonviolence seems more and more futile. How can one lead a decent life, fall in love, raise a family, etc., etc., under such circumstances?

This is the stuff real drama is made of. While other films shy away from these issues and focus on so-called "everyday life," Burnat's film shows us what everyday life really means for the Palestinian masses.

Ultimately, the Israeli Supreme Court ordered in 2007 that the fence be halted, but the overall question: "Where do the Palestinians go from here?" remains unanswered. More could have been said about the

bourgeois Palestinian National Authority and its incapacity to liberate the Palestinian masses—or, for that matter, the social disaster that is the state of Israel.

What is missing from *5 Broken Cameras* is the historical context of the images we see. Of course the filmmaker cannot be expected to provide a social and political history of the Middle East in 90 minutes. Burnat has made a valuable and humane contribution to our understanding of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

On a final note, Burnat's film was awarded a 2012 Sundance Film Festival award and was also nominated earlier this year for Best Documentary at the 2013 Academy Awards, prompting immigration officials to inexplicably detain him before his appearance at the Oscars ceremony. Upon seeing *5 Broken Cameras*, it becomes more clear why the authorities viewed him as a threat.



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