

Three short films—including *The Present*, about the brutality of Israeli checkpoints

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The Present

Two short films and an hour-long documentary currently screening at international film festivals or available online recently came to our attention.

The most striking is *The Present* by British-Palestinian filmmaker Farah Nabulsi, concerning the Israeli oppression of the Palestinians, and focused on the brutal checkpoint system.

The film, co-written by Nabulsi and poet Hind Shoufani, was shot over six days at or around the infamous Checkpoint 300 in Bethlehem, Palestine. At that entry point thousands of Palestinian workers queue up as early as 3 a.m. to cross into Israel for work.

Yusef (played by the world-renowned Palestinian actor Saleh Bakri—*The Band's Visit*, *The Time That Remains*, *Wajib*) takes his young daughter Yasmine (Mariam Kanj) to buy a gift for his wife Noor (Mariam Basha) on their wedding anniversary. The simple excursion, which also involves buying groceries, requires going only a short distance. But nothing is simple when confronted with the enormous hurdle of crossing through a checkpoint manned by Israeli soldiers who would rather abuse and demean Yusef than allow him to pass.

At the entry, Yusef is forced to remove the contents of his pockets and some of his clothing. He is then put in a cage with other men waiting for admittance. During the long wait, the traumatized Yasmine urinates in her pants.

The return trip home is made even more difficult because father and daughter are pushing a trolley with a new refrigerator—the anniversary present—that won't fit through the gates of the checkpoint. More dehumanization: along with their groceries is a bag with Yasmine's soiled pants. "You're all disgusting," sneers one of the Israeli soldiers.

Rifles are instantly pointed at Yusef when he loses his temper. Chafing at the injustice of not being allowed to circumvent the checkpoint gates with his refrigerator, he nearly becomes another Palestinian casualty of war.

Beautifully shot by seasoned French cinematographer Benoit Chamaillard, the 25-minute movie dramatizes its points eloquently, forcefully and efficiently. In a world in which millions of refugees face insurmountable borders, Nabulsi, in

an interview with eninarothe.com, speaks about a people whose freedom of movement is continually trampled upon.

In Palestine, she explains, there are more than "130 Israeli military checkpoints, another 100 or so 'flying' checkpoints—that can appear anytime, anywhere—separate roads, curfews, the separation wall, a convoluted permit and ID system and of course the inhumane blockade of Gaza."

These control mechanisms, Nabulsi says, "are all an assault on this basic human right, that in turn destroys so many other rights—like the right to get to work and earn a living and put food on the table for your children, like being able to visit friends and family, tend to your lands, get to a hospital or clinic, school, study at university—or in the case of my film, something as simple as being able to go and buy someone you love a gift!"

The director also speaks about the psychological ramifications and the "impact on the human spirit, and the harm it can cause an individual, families, children, and whole communities, caught in such an exhausting, stressful and deliberately humiliating infrastructure."

In 2014, Nabulsi made her first trip to Palestine as an adult, where she saw up close the infamous wall "ploughing through villages, the refugee camps, the separate road system, the checkpoints, the settlements," she explains in an interview with the *National News*.

"I have met with mothers whose 13-year-old boys were in military prison," she notes in another interview, "I listened to their stories of how they were taken, what their experiences inside prison were. I have met families whose homes were demolished, and had tea with them on the rubble."

Her filmography indicates her commitment: she wrote *Oceans of Injustice* in 2016 and *Today They Took My Son* in 2017 about a mother coping with her young son being taken away by the Israeli military.

Award-winning film director and journalist John Pilger commented about the latter that this "extraordinary film is a landmark work. It touched me deeply and made me angry all over again about the horror of Israel and its treatment of the Palestinian people. It points a finger straight at the rest of us, whose governments support Israel, and demand that we speak up now, and never stop until Palestinians are free."

In 2018, Nabulsi wrote and directed *Nightmare of Gaza*.

“The arts play a crucial role in changing the world and I believe film precedes them all. It gives voice to the silenced, thereby helping build the empathy and understanding needed to effect change.” Farah Nabulsi

Lost Kings

American director Brian Lawes' short film *Lost Kings* treats child hunger. The movie tells the short story of Zuri (Dash Melrose) who, seeking food for a younger brother, sets out with a backpack and a rusty bike. His first stop is a convenience store where his attempt to steal a packaged meal gets interrupted by the store manager.

Zuri sees his opportunity when pedaling through a wealthy neighborhood. The residents of one of the homes are leaving. Breaking in, he fills his pack with food. Awed by the luxurious surroundings, he decides to explore further, only to be trapped upstairs when the family returns.

The tense, harrowing situation is resolved by a kindly teenage girl as the police arrive to investigate the family's report of an intruder. The film is well-intentioned, but somewhat socially nebulous and lacking concreteness.

“The world seems to be growing more and more polarized in so many ways,” asserts Lawes in an interview with *filmandtvnow*, “and in a time of crisis like we're all finding ourselves in, I think connection, empathy, and always striving to see each other's humanity first is going to be essential in finding our way through this period in history.”

COVID-19 is exacerbating the hunger crisis in America. A new report by Feeding America finds that the number of food insecure children could escalate to 18 million, the highest total ever reported by the US Department of Agriculture in the 25 years it has been measuring the condition. This horrendous figure compares to 17.2 million in 2009 at the height of the Great Recession.

The Curve

The Curve by Canadian filmmaker Adam Benzine is a documentary focusing on the first three months of the COVID-19 pandemic, from the first US case in January to the Easter weekend that Donald Trump randomly chose as his target for bringing the country out of lockdown.

In under an hour, the movie features a gallery of journalists

and international experts who describe in some detail the failures of the Trump administration. Among those interviewed in Benzine's work are Dr. Ali Khan, former director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Office of Public Health Preparedness and Response; Dr. Emily Landon, chief infectious-disease epidemiologist at University of Chicago Medicine; Sonia Shah, investigative journalist and author of *Pandemic*; Ilan Goldenberg, former U.S. State Department Adviser; Dr. Gavin Macgregor-Skinner, director of the Global Biorisk Advisory Council (GBAC); and Ed Yong, the *Atlantic*'s science writer.

There is no shortage of Trump video clips showing him in all his ignorant, reactionary glory.

This encourages one reviewer to comment about Benzine's documentary, “It all comes down to Trump, of course.” Except that it doesn't. In fact, while Trump is one of the most brazen and thuggish in relation to the COVID-19 crisis, every major government in Europe and around the world has adopted the same essentially homicidal policies. The impact of the coronavirus speaks, above all, to the incompatibility of decent health conditions and life itself with the continued existence of capitalism.

The Curve seems largely to have been made as a pro-Biden electoral tract, available for free on YouTube until the end of election day November 3.

The movie pushes the Democratic Party line that the coronavirus crisis has a significant racial element, featuring Black Lives Matters supporters, for example, as the only component of the multi-racial, multi-ethnic global demonstrations against police violence.

Benzine, based in Toronto, reveals his complacency when he claims that he could have made a film about the Canadian government's response to the pandemic, but that there was little to criticize: “There's no drama there. Canadians are largely a passive and obedient population in a good way. If the government says that scientists tell us to do something, we do it. We don't view it as an infringement on our civil liberties to not die.”

In fact, Canada has more than 250,000 cases, adding 2,000 new ones a day. There are more than 10,000 dead. The policies of the Justin Trudeau government have centered on forcing workers back to the job and students back to school, with disastrous consequences.



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