

71st Berlin International Film Festival—Part 3

Documentary films from Israel—*The First 54 Years: An Abbreviated Manual for Military Occupation*—and the US—*Dirty Feathers*

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This is the third in a series of articles on the 2021 Berlin international film festival, the Berlinale, which took place March 1–5. The first part was posted March 16 and the second March 20.

The First 54 Years—An Abbreviated Manual for Military Occupation

Israel has occupied the West Bank and Gaza Strip since 1967 in the longest occupation of foreign territory in modern history. For *The First 54 Years—An Abbreviated Manual for Military Occupation*, Israeli director Avi Mograbi edited dozens of interviews with Israeli soldiers who have participated in the repressive operations over the past half century or so.

The interviews with 38 soldiers are drawn from the archives of Breaking the Silence, an organisation—founded in 2004—made up of Israeli army veterans prepared to speak out against the occupation and expose its inner workings.

The interviews on the Breaking the Silence website are posted largely without commentary. They bear witness to the countless crimes of the Israeli regime, varying from psychological warfare and mass intimidation up to vicious forms of torture.

Having assembled the interviews, Mograbi realised it was necessary to provide some broader context and, in his “manual for military occupation,” he goes through the various stages of the Israeli occupation and the varying tactics adopted by the Israeli army to cement its presence, under successive coalition governments led by Labour and later Likud. The soldiers describe their orders, missions and actions, with Mograbi commenting, between interviews, on the “how” and “why,” i.e., the occupier’s motives for imposing a particular system of laws and rules on the inhabitants.

The film opens with the Six-Day War in June 1967, Israel’s victory and subsequent land grab of the West Bank and Gaza. Large numbers of Palestinians were working in foreign countries and sending money home when the occupation began. One of the first measures adopted by the Israeli government was to prevent those abroad from returning home.

This policy led to the break-up of families and the increasing disruption of Palestinian society. This policy of “shredding the social fabric” was enhanced by arbitrary searches of houses, often in the middle of the night, waking families with young children and forcing them into the street, combined with road blocks aimed at stopping and intimidating those attempting to return to their homes.

At the same time, Israel commenced building new settlements inside the

occupied areas for its (non-Arab) population. In the first decade after the start of the military occupation, 28 such settlements were established. The current total of settlements stands at more than 250.

When it became clear that all the talk of self-determination for Palestinians on the part of the Israeli government was hollow, and its grab of territory was being expanded, Palestinians responded with protests and riots in the West Bank, Gaza Strip and within Israel itself. One of those periods of sustained protest, the First Intifada, lasted from December 1987 until the autumn of 1991.

At this point Israeli tactics changed, as Mograbi’s film makes clear. We witness scenes where Israeli soldiers use clubs to beat Palestinians, including women and young children. One soldier reports that the order was given to his unit to break the arms and legs of protesters or anyone who stood in the way of Israeli troops. According to the accounts of leading figures in the Zionist regime, the order to break limbs came directly from Israeli Defence Minister Yitzhak Rabin. Another soldier reports that the torture of those taken into custody to obtain intelligence was now officially sanctioned.

The aftermath of the US-brokered peace talks in Oslo (1993)—the Camp David summit (2000)—revealed that Israel had no intention of pursuing peace or reversing its policy of illegal occupation. In September 2000, Israeli opposition leader (and future prime minister) Ariel Sharon, surrounded by a massive security force, visited the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Palestinians reacted to this deliberate provocation by the Israeli state with renewed protests and riots in what was to become the Second Intifada (September 2000 to February 2005).

The initial protests by Palestinian youth throwing stones were met by Israeli police using rubber bullets and tear gas. Quickly the confrontation escalated with Israel adopting a policy of urban combat involving well-armed infantry conducting house-to-house searches.

Tanks and armoured personnel carriers carried out repeated incursions into the West Bank and Gaza Strip, supported by F-16 fighter jets, drone aircraft and helicopter gunships, which carried out “targeted killings.” This Israeli policy, frequently involving large numbers of innocent casualties, became the model for imperialist aggression all over the world, notably the drone strikes carried out by the Obama administration in the Middle East and Afghanistan.

In Mograbi’s film we see Israeli bulldozers demolishing entire houses, first to create “buffer zones” and then build a 435-mile, eight-metre high wall cordoning off the West Bank—in turn, clearing the ground for future Israeli settlements. One soldier reports that in its response to the Second Intifada, the military high command announced there were “no rules of engagement,” everything was allowed. In the parlance of the Israeli

government, there were no innocent bystanders. or as Avi Dichter, a chair of the Israeli Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee, put it a decade later: “The IDF has enough bullets for everyone.”

The final section of Mograbi’s film deals with Israel’s Operation Cast Lead, a massive assault on the Gaza Strip in 2008, which, over the course of 22 days, cost the lives of around 1,400 Palestinians, most of them civilians.

In one of the last scenes in *The First 54 Years*, Israeli soldiers in a bunker witness the impact of a missile fired into a civilian area of the Gaza Strip. As the missile detonates in a huge explosion with untold consequences and casualties, one of the soldiers remarks, “That was so beautiful.”

Israeli government spokespeople have denounced *Breaking the Silence*, claiming that the accusations of war crimes levelled by former and serving soldiers are unfounded and made by anonymous individuals. The Israeli Defence Forces (IDF), they claim, is a purely defensive force.

Mograbi’s film proves the opposite. The interviews with former soldiers who show themselves on camera demolish the claim of anonymity, and the film clips of Israeli soldiers viciously beating children, intimidating old women and looking on as bulldozers demolish Palestinian homes to make way for new settler residences underscore that the Israeli army has never been a “defensive” force.

The First 54 Years is a devastating indictment of the Israeli occupation, and although this is not its theme, a damning indictment of all those governments across the globe, including the imperialist powers and the various Arab regimes, that have given succour to the Israeli regime over the past decades.

Dirty Feathers

Dirty Feathers (directed by Carlos Alfonso Corral) is a black-and-white documentary following the lives of a number of homeless people in the US-Mexico border towns of El Paso, Texas and Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua.

Part of the film is shot in the Opportunity Centre (“The OC”), featuring short clips of residents at the homeless centre. Most of *Dirty Feathers*, however, concentrates on a handful of the homeless whose situation is so desperate they are excluded from the centre. We are introduced to Brandon and his wife Reagan. The latter is eight months pregnant and a crack cocaine addict. The couple have been banned from the homeless centre for unruly behaviour and are forced to live on the streets.

Brandon has a culinary arts degree and dreams of opening up a soul food restaurant in El Paso. Reagan is struggling with her addiction and fearful for the fate of her unborn child. A highlight of their day is the donation of a pair of shoes, which allows them to burn with glee the tattered pair of shoes of a fellow homeless person—16-year-old Ashley. To stay clean, Brandon takes a shower in the open from a railway water tank. The couple sleep in the open, leaving their bedclothes and belongings in the street during the day when they seek something to eat and satiate Reagan’s addiction.

A low point in their lives occurs when they return and find someone has ransacked their belongings. Anything of value has gone, left behind are bags of flour—useless for the pair, who have no means to cook. Brandon wears a t-shirt with the insignia “God Bless America.”

We are introduced to others living on the streets. Navy veteran Nathan describes his tours of duty and then the way in which he was left high and dry when he left the military. Ashley has a bruised face and traces of abuse. From her appearance, she could be 15 years older. She is highly religious, rejects all material things and is prepared to go hungry so that

her fellow homeless can eat.

Director Corral describes his motivations for making the film. Born in Mexico, he grew up in El Paso, where he spent most of his childhood. He describes himself as a Chicano. In the press notes for the film, Corral writes: “I have childhood memories of the police raiding our home, their goal was to destabilise our well-being, inculcate a culture of fear in us, and make us feel that we didn’t belong,” indicating that this is why “I relate with, and care for those living at the margins of US society.”

Corral is a talented filmmaker. He chose black-and-white for his film to highlight the extremes experienced by the homeless in their day-to-day lives. There are a number of lyrical scenes in *Dirty Feathers* underscored by his imaginative use of music.

At the same time there are discordant elements. Towards the end of the film, we return to the Opportunity Centre, where a voluntary worker is imparting “life advice” to the residents. “God is with you,” she asserts, “as you dwell in your favourite space.” The final shot of the film is a young man with angel wings strapped to his back who is evidently delusional. “There is madness to my method,” he proclaims, “The question is, is there method to my madness?” These scenes are unaccompanied by comment.

Capitalist society seeks to render the homeless invisible and force them under bridges and into camps on the fringes of cities or institutions hidden away from public view. Corral’s film makes their presence felt. He gives them a voice, allows them to tell their stories and provides them with a degree of dignity. At the same time, the director fails to provide any broader context for the source and growth of homelessness.

Corral’s film raises issues similar to those dealt with in a recent review of *Nomadland*. Homelessness is not a fact of nature or the inevitable consequence of individual mistakes. Rather it is a direct consequence of the unprecedented levels of polarisation between rich and poor in modern society.

According to official statistics (no doubt an underestimation) released by the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the US homeless population grew last year for the fourth year in a row. “On a single night in January 2020, there were more than 580,000 individuals who were homeless in the United States, a 2 percent increase from the year before.” In 2020 and for the first time since the government began counting, the number of single adults living outside—209,413—exceeded the number of individuals living in shelters—199,478. The figure of over half a million homeless includes more than 106,000 children. These statistics do not take into account the repercussions of the COVID-19 epidemic.

Federal funding for the homeless in 2020 was less than \$3 billion, that is, around one-twentieth of the wealth of one Texas billionaire, Alice Walton, the only daughter of Walmart founder Sam Walton and America’s richest woman, with an estimated net wealth of \$62.3 billion.

To be continued



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