

Israeli filmmaker Ra'anana Alexandrowicz's *The Viewing Booth*: Changing hearts and minds?

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Written and directed by Ra'anana Alexandrowicz

Israeli-born filmmaker Ra'anana Alexandrowicz's 2019 documentary, *The Viewing Booth*, explores the notion that exposing pro-Israeli viewers to videos depicting the brutality of the military occupation of the West Bank alone can change hearts and minds.

Alexandrowicz is well known for *The Inner Tour* (2001), *James' Journey to Jerusalem* (2003) and *The Law in These Parts* (2011), all of them critical of Zionist policies. The WSWS spoke to the filmmaker at the 2003 Toronto International Film Festival. Four years ago, Alexandrowicz (born in 1969 in Jerusalem) left Israel to reside in Philadelphia, where he now carries out research at Temple University.

In 2017, the writer-director compiled 40 short videos, half of which came from human rights organizations such as B'Tselem and half from far-right sources. He put out a call at Temple, where the 71-minute film was shot, for volunteer-participants to watch the video clips in a "viewing booth," while Alexandrowicz would observe and film their reactions.

Seven students responded. Alexandrowicz focuses almost exclusively on Jewish-American Maia Levy, a strong supporter of Zionist policy.

In the film, the director explains that the videos were chosen "out of the hundreds that I have seen, there are thousands of others like them online. Each one captures a fragment of the reality we call 'The Occupation.' One fragment of this reality that the person holding the camera wants us to see. Such videos transform the viewer into a witness ... During an hour and a half, Maia watched 11 videos."

The camera fixes on Maia's face as she witnesses scenes of Israeli military brutality against Palestinian

civilians. One consists of a horrific night raid by masked Israeli soldiers, breaking into the apartment of a terrified Palestinian family. In another, an Israeli soldier assaults a young Palestinian boy.

Maia is filmed twice, six months apart. "They lie a lot," she says, referring to Arabs. She remarks that her parents, both Israelis, claim that footage from B'Tselem is manipulated propaganda.

"It's not so easy to change a belief system," concludes the student-viewer. "It's an identity thing. This is who I am." She claims that the images are not convincing enough to alter her outlook.

In the film's production notes, Alexandrowicz explains that while "it encompasses questions that were cultivated over a long period of time, *The Viewing Booth* finally happened, almost by chance, during a session that was meant to be a pilot shoot, testing a possible concept for the project."

He continues: "Years of thoughts suddenly and unexpectedly found a cinematic expression when Maia Levy, whom I had never met before, entered the improvised viewing booth that I had created ... Maia's dialogue with the images of Palestine and Israel, as well as her reflections on her own perception of these images, lead me to confront myself—as an image maker—in ways that I had not expected. The result is an intimate and tightly focused film that invites viewers to delve into quintessential universal questions on the perception of nonfiction images in our times."

Alexandrowicz is an artist of genuine sincerity and integrity. In his documentary *The Inner Tour*, a group of Palestinians take a three-day bus trip throughout Israel, where they or their families once lived. The film provides a powerful glimpse of the suffering of the

Palestinian population, driven out of their homes and dispersed into refugee camps and exile. *The Law in These Parts* is another penetrating documentary, dealing with the Israeli military legal system in the Occupied Territories on the West Bank and in the Gaza Strip over the last 45 years.

Alexandrowicz attempts to be conscious in his artistry. He obviously has thought about filmmaking and its relationship to social processes. “I don’t agree that images are powerless,” opines Alexandrowicz in an interview with Middleeasteye.net. “I mean, look at what happened with George Floyd. I do, however, admit there’s a great and rapid evolution in the making of non-fiction image-making and I can no longer follow the same paradigms that governed how I made documentaries before.”

Elaborating on that thought in another interview, with *Haaretz*, the filmmaker explained that in “the past, I was quite devoted to trying to influence society by means of documentary images ... when I tried to look at every documentary scrap that had been done on the history of the occupation, I discovered a lot of films and articles that had asked the right questions earlier and prompted the right criticism. It made me question what I was trying to do, and have doubts about the medium and what could be achieved with it, and led me to the conclusion that I needed to redirect the camera from the reality to the viewers—to see what was going on there, in their own eyes and minds.”

In other words, Alexandrowicz changed course, from treating the objective reality of the situation in the Middle East to concerning himself with problems of consciousness, particularly among those supportive of Israeli policy. His frustrations and concerns are legitimate, but, unfortunately, this change of direction has the immediate effect at least of rendering *The Viewing Booth* a somewhat minor work by comparison with previous efforts. While Alexandrowicz’s intentions are worthy, his new project runs up against ideological and social problems that images on their own cannot overcome.

“In retrospect,” the director continued in *Haaretz*, “I understand that I also wanted her to push the limits of the frame, but I wanted her to see it in the form of 50 years of raids on homes in the middle of the night, when 99 percent of the time, it has nothing to do with a bomb [excuse for the raid], but rather with [a desire for]

control, because that way, the population knows that you’re there. That is what I wanted her to see.”

The problem is that human beings are not blank slates. There are reasons, some of them deeply rooted, why they think the way they do. There are historical reasons, for example, such as the ongoing trauma produced by the Holocaust. Moreover, an important motivation for a certain affluent social layer is its investment in Israeli bourgeois society and the defense of the profitable status quo. Why should such people transform their thinking, because of a few ugly images, when they are essentially content with the way the world is?

In 2003, in an interview with the WSWS, Alexandrowicz commented: “If you ask me if I’m optimistic or pessimistic, then I would say, I have a deep optimism because I feel that I know something about the two societies, the two peoples, and I feel that they are very compatible. I feel this deep connection, and I know because of the way I live, the people that I know and the connections I have with Palestinians, I know that there is the possibility for a very good relationship between Israelis and Palestinians. So I would say that in this way, I’m very optimistic on the human level. When I analyze the way the political issues are developing, I am scared to death, I’m very afraid. This is the way I feel.”

These are sensitive, perceptive sentiments. But the essential decency of the two peoples can and will only truly find expression, in the final analysis, in an active political-revolutionary struggle, a struggle against the Zionist state, the Arab bourgeois nationalist regimes and US imperialist conspiracies, led by a united Arab and Israeli working class. It is that movement, above all, that will shake up and polarize consciousness, dramatically changing many minds in the process.



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