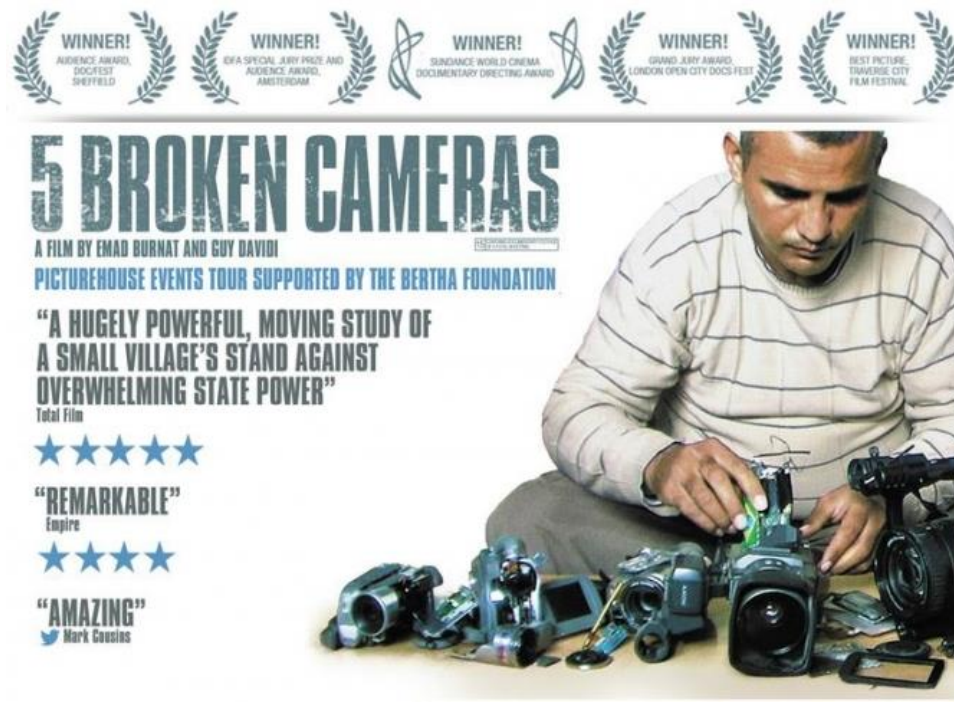


Five Broken Cameras
Roz Rothstein and Yael Lerman



Five Broken Cameras (2011), a documentary currently up for a 2013 Oscar and co-directed by the film's narrator and videographer, Palestinian Emad Burnat, and Israeli filmmaker Guy Davidi, attempts to erase the complexity of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The film unfolds as a Palestinian fairy tale, narrated in a soothing, storytelling voice:

Once upon a time, a poor Palestinian farmer lived in a West Bank village called Bil'in. He had four sons, a doting wife, and many friends. A few of the men worked, while the women spent their days cooking, cleaning, raising children and otherwise being invisible. The men smoked, danced, watched soccer games and occasionally picked olives. Life seemed perfect. One day, big bad Israelis erected a "barrier" through Bil'in, seemingly for the sole purpose of irritating the villagers. For the next five years, chronicled through the life of the farmer's youngest son, the farmer and his friends nonviolently protested this fence. Some got hurt and some even died because of Israeli soldiers' unprovoked and excessive use of force. Then, because of the villagers of Bil'in, the fence came down. Moral of the fairy tale: Israelis are bad; Palestinians are good; the farmer's son is very cute and has tragically suffered his loss of innocence because of Israel. An intelligent viewer walks away feeling highly manipulated without knowing why.

The film portrays reality through a broken lens. Its manipulative narration and visual editing craft a seemingly simple story of Palestinian nonviolent resistance to Israel's security fence, but its covert intent is to denigrate Israel. The film is part of an aggressive industry whose sole aim is to delegitimize and blame only Israel with predictable key techniques, all of which the film utilizes.

First, the film provides absolutely no context. Why is there a security fence? Emad alludes to a “barrier” being erected to “secure and separate the settlers.” Wrong. Israel temporarily built a security fence in response to the Second Intifada (2000-2005). The fence literally prevents Palestinian terrorists from walking from their villages, like Bil'in, into Israeli cities, like nearby Modi'in, and blowing themselves up. While it must be frustrating for a Palestinian farmer to walk through a gate to get to his field (as seen in the movie), it is surely more inconvenient for an Israeli girl to lose her parents and three siblings to a suicide bomber (as happened during the Jerusalem Sbarro restaurant suicide bombing on August 9, 2001). It seems that the fence is so troublesome that it has erased all of Emad's memory as to why it is there in the first place.

Second, the film ignores Palestinian terrorism against Israel. It is as if terrorism simply does not exist. An hour into the film, Emad mentions that “Israel is beginning its massive attack on Gaza” and shows images of infuriated villagers. He does not say why Israel is in Gaza. In fact, Israel began its operation to stop the over 7,000 rockets that had been fired from Gaza into southern Israel and to stop weapons smuggling into Gaza by internationally recognized terrorists. On March 1, 2008, alone, 56 rockets struck Israel from Gaza. Several landed on Ahskelon's Barzilai Hospital, which at the time was treating, in addition to Israeli citizens, premature Palestinian babies in its neonatal unit. Not surprisingly, Emad forgot to mention this.

Third, the film paints Palestinians as the sole victims and Israel as the sole aggressor. There are no discussions of morality, only Emad's views of good and evil. To show this, all Palestinian demonstrations in the film are peaceful (boys marching and banging with toy instruments, men singing songs and waving flags), and all Israeli soldiers are heavily armored, trigger-happy men with guns. For another picture that shows the manipulative use of “nonviolent demonstrations,” see www.youtube.com/watch?v=gDohNq9BORo. Or, read the Feb. 2010 Haaretz article that discusses the 110 Israeli security personnel who had been injured in Bil'in protests, including one soldier who lost an eye. Or watch a scene in the film in which Emad's son asks, “Daddy, why don't you kill the soldiers with a knife?” Emad responds, “Because they'd shoot me.” No, Daddy, that is the wrong answer. Son, the answer is because it is morally wrong to kill. Sadly, the distortion of values and lack of clear morality pervades the film.

Fourth, the film downplays the harsh realities of life under Palestinian Authority (PA) rule. That definitely would not paint a pretty picture for this fairy tale, so it had to be left out. When Emad is injured in a tractor accident, he states without any elaboration that he probably would have died had he been treated in a Palestinian hospital instead of an Israeli hospital. He is right. But this should not be the case. There is no excuse for poor Palestinian health care. The Palestinians are one of the largest recipients of international assistance per capita in the world. Donors gave roughly \$30 billion in international aid to Palestinians between 1993 and 2012. Where has that money gone? According to U.S. Congressional testimony in 2012, current PA President Mahmoud Abbas has deposited almost \$13 million in U.S. taxpayer dollars into a secret bank account, just as Yassir Arafat did when he was president of the PLO. According to former U.S. national security advisor Elliot Abrams, Arab leaders are reluctant to give aid to the PA because PA “officials will just steal it.” Or it will be used to fund terrorism. It truly is appalling that Emad can neither rely on a Palestinian hospital to save his life nor on his elected Palestinian Authority government to cover his health costs.

This film is not about the fence. It is actually part of an ongoing effort to deny Israel's right to defend its citizens with non-violent security measures like the fence. The film also underscores the difficulty Israel has in finding a true partner for peace. If Israel cannot find peace seekers among those who profess to be the ordinary people of Palestine, like Emad, then who will meet Israel at a negotiating table already forsaken by Palestinian terrorists ruling Gaza and the self-proclaimed “moderates” ruling the West Bank?

The reality is that Israelis and Palestinians are caught up in a tragic conflict. Both sides, Palestinians and Israelis, suffer as a consequence. The more tragic reality is that fairy tales like Five Broken Cameras do nothing to advance mutual understanding, recognition, or peaceful coexistence.

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