

Palestinian filmmakers accuse Hollywood of “dehumanization”

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Last week, nearly 70 Palestinian filmmakers issued an open letter highly critical of the way the film industry has portrayed Palestinians. This is the first collective statement by such artists since the genocide in Gaza began on October 7. The list of signatories includes many significant figures, such as Hany Abu-Assad, Farah Nabulsi, director of the well-received *The Teacher*, and other notables such as Elia Suliman.

The letter begins by thanking the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences (NATAS) for refusing to bow to a Zionist provocation against journalist Bisan Owda. The journalist is nominated for an Emmy for her *It's Bisan From Gaza and I'm Still Alive*. The witch-hunters accuse her of belonging to an organization, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), proscribed by the United States as “terrorist,” in an effort to force NATAS to retract the nomination.

According to *Hyperallergic*, Sharp “clarified that *It's Bisan from Gaza and I'm Still Alive* underwent review by two successive panels of independent judges for its nomination, and that the Academy, according to Sharp, ‘found no grounds, to date, upon which to overturn the editorial judgment of the independent journalists who reviewed the material.’”

The filmmakers’ letter notes about Bisan’s entry:

This film is narrated by the award-winning and inspiring 25-year-old Palestinian journalist, Bisan Owda, who has risked her life to share with the world reports and stories about the resilience, resistance and survival of ordinary Palestinian families in the face of Israel’s ongoing, livestreamed genocide in the occupied Gaza Strip.

The letter draws the connection between the attempt to

cancel Bisan with the long record of the film industry of distortion and repression of Palestinians and their national struggle:

Trying to censor Bisan’s voice is only the latest repressive attempt to deny Palestinians the right to reclaim our narrative, share our history, and in this case bring attention to the atrocities our people are facing in the hopes that we can bring an end to them. We well understand the power of image and cinema, and for far too long we have been outraged at the inhumanity and racism shown by some in the Western entertainment industry towards our people, even during this most difficult of times.

The letter continues by asserting that:

after so many years of Israel’s apartheid and settler-colonial rule over the Palestinian people, the relentless, decades-old dehumanization of Palestinians on small and big screens in the U.S., in Hollywood in particular, was beginning to give way to a more ethical stance. The censorship attempt against the film, though, was a reality check of sorts. We must still contend with and fiercely challenge the anti-Palestinian and generally anti-Arab racist propaganda that remains all too prevalent in Western entertainment media.

The letter ends with a call for a boycott of institutions that suppress the truth about the oppression of the Palestinian people by Zionism and imperialism.

We call on our international colleagues in the film industry, visionaries for the kind of world we would like to live in, to speak out against this genocide and the erasure, racism and censorship that enable it; to do everything humanly possible to stop and end complicity with this unspeakable horror; and to stand against working with production companies that are deeply complicit in dehumanizing Palestinians, or whitewashing and justifying Israel's crimes against us.

In a similar vein last week, over 300 filmmakers issued an open letter to the Venice Film Festival protesting the screening of Dani Rosenberg's Hebrew-language film *Al Klavim Veanashim (Of Dogs and Men)*, set against the backdrop of the October 7 prison break by Palestinians, and Israeli filmmaker Amos Gitai's *Why War*. The letter claims that these films, "were created by Israeli production companies that are complicit in whitewashing Israel's oppression against Palestinians."

The letter continues:

Of Dogs and Men, shot in the midst of Israel's ongoing attacks on Gaza, whitewashes the genocide. Like *Of Dogs and Men*, *Why War* was created by complicit Israeli production companies that contribute to apartheid, occupation and now genocide through their silence or active participation in artwashing. Palestinian society, including the absolute majority of filmmakers, has called for refusing to screen such productions.

The statement ends by calling for a stop to the complicity of the film festival in crimes against the Palestinian people.

The Venice Film Festival has remained silent about Israel's atrocities against the Palestinian people. This silence outrages us deeply. As art and film workers around the world, we call for effective and ethical measures to hold apartheid Israel to account for its crimes and system of colonial oppression against Palestinians.

Both letters are welcome and significant because of the issues they raise for film, art and intellectual life in general. While it is not news that the film industry has been complicit in many ways in projecting Zionist and imperialist propaganda and has promulgated racist stereotypes, the letters point to a larger phenomenon in the arts that now feeds directly into a critical issue of our time: the preparation of world war by the imperialist powers and the falsification in all areas of history, journalism and culture that must be undertaken by the propaganda organs.

To pursue war with Russia and China and in the Middle East—as it is, and at breakneck speed—imperialism needs to falsify world history just as the ethnic cleansing of Palestine must be accompanied by the degradation of Palestinians in the media and the arts. The censorship of truth about the history of the Middle East, particularly after the direct intervention of the imperialist powers in the region during and after World War I, and the development of the Zionist movement itself serves as model for "the imperialist spirit" in culture.

The response of thousands of artists, writers and filmmakers since October 7 to the lying, dissembling, strategic omissions of and about Palestinian culture, art and history, as well as the exposure of the collaboration of many cultural institutions and businesses, directly or indirectly, in the genocide itself has been of great significance.

However, setting the historical record straight in the arts and elsewhere is itself a task of world-historical proportions that will require the collaboration of historians, artists and, most of all, the politically conscious working class itself. The last 45 years have seen a cultural decline internationally and its impact on historical understanding in the arts, not only through conscious manipulation and lying, but through breeding ignorance, has been enormous.



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