

Justice and the Claims of Truth: Films, Festivals and the Case of Palestine

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Thank you for your invitation to address the Festival's Open Forum. This is my first visit to Kerala, and hence the first to Kerala's International Film Festival and to Tiruvananthapuram. I have only been here for a few days but it has been a memorable experience despite that, both because of your city and because of your Festival. Already a significant event in the global festival circuit, and certainly the foremost radical international film festival worldwide, Kerala's festival is, I think, destined to be recognized as one of the most important film festivals in the world.

If I have any useful function here, however, particularly as I am not a maker of films myself, it is not to lavish polite or vapid praise on your Festival, on your selections for the programme, or even on the accomplishments in the films that are being screened. It is rather to bring some critical reflection to bear from outside the process. This I am qualified to do as that is my profession.

Amongst the most memorable moments of the last few days is the experience of the opening credit sequence of Saeed Akhtar Mirza's homage to contemporary Mumbai in *Just One Chance*. I register this not because Saeed is sharing the platform here today. I do so because the use of the techniques of accelerated footage and of intentionally de-focussed shots in that depiction of the immensity of the movement of people through VT railway station have arguably never before been so expressively deployed.

Here in this opening footage, and in the film as a whole, we have an allegory for the experience of modernity and modernization – the permanent state of insecurity and anxiety, the loss of the stable anchors of family and values and stable identities, and the dawn of an age characterized by a permanent precariousness. This is, moreover, an

experience shared by rich and poor alike, by the bourgeois and the petty-bourgeois as much as by the proletariat and by those who are marginalized – even if the consequences of its impact are vastly different in each case.

Those observations bring me, however, directly to a critique that I think must be voiced, however respectfully. It is that there is something unsettling about the manner in which many of those films that I have seen so far (and particularly the Malayalam films) exhibit what might be described as a preference for political nostalgia over contemporary struggle – an ache and a longing for a past in which friends and enemies were more easily identified, a past in which one's Party or one's organization of affiliation had not yet been forced into compromises in virtue of having taken political office and formed a government. I cannot generalize to the films of the Festival as a whole, of course, and can only speak of those I have seen, but of those that I have seen in only three days no less than three of them have expressed this regret.

The problem with such nostalgia is that it loses sight of the permanence of struggle. It confuses struggle for liberation from oppression and exploitation with the *precise contours* that such struggles took in an idealized past. Consequently, it does not interpret the struggles of today as having important continuities with those of the past, and sometimes fails even to identify them as comparable struggles at all.

The typical complaint of the nostalgic reflex is that young people do not understand from whence they have come, and do not appreciate the sacrifices that have been born in the past in order to secure their present opportunities. It is that 'the youth' is fascinated with the trinkets of modernity (with the mobile phone, the iPod, and Playstation, with fashion and design, and the narcissisms of the body and its decoration) as part of a groundless and egocentric aspiration and ambition for personal distinction. In this sentimental nostalgia, individualism is represented as the victor over collective identity in the attitudes of the young, and of those who scamper after recognition in their accommodation with capitalist modernity. This is surely a misjudgment – and as much a filmic misjudgment as it is a political misjudgment.

There is, of course, an element of truth in this attitude, as in most caricatures. Without a sense of the past, any people will be rendered powerless to question its present circumstances effectively. That is why the advocates of a neo-liberal world are so keen to erase history and collective memory in favour of an ever-present, an aesthetising

'now', and this because dissolution of political memory frees the choice of policy options from any past constraints or commitments. The mantra of the contemporary ideologues of neo-liberalism is an echo of the centralizing anti-human logic of the supercomputer 'Alpha Soixante' in Godard's *Alphaville*, which is to be screened later this week: "The present is the form of all life." That is why, whether we are film-makers or critics or philosophers or historians, we have an obligation to defend history, and its contending explanations of the past, from these threats of erasure. Yet in so doing, we must exercise care not to confuse the writing of histories with the evocation of nostalgia, or to permit any indulgence in the latter.

The struggle against oppression and exploitation continues today in both developed and underdeveloped regions of the world, even if the site of those struggles has moved decisively from the countryside to the city, and even if the nature of the proletariat has changed dramatically from what once it was. It is still factory and transport and extractive workers, skilled and unskilled, but is composed today also of salaried and educated staff in offices, banks and call-centres, and in studios, schools and offices. Though bearing passports of different states and identities formed by different cultures, it is today conjoined as inter-dependent global labour as never before, and with all of the associated potential, by the process of accelerated globalisation.

The struggle continues even if some of its immediate objectives have altered or are new: from the overthrow of c.19th colonialism yesterday to resistance against imperialist war and occupation today; from emancipation from feudal political relations to today's struggle against unplanned economic expansion and consumerism driven by capital accumulation and the market. One preeminent focus that binds both of these contemporary struggles is resistance to the threats of capital accumulation to the sustainability of our planet as one on which our species can survive and flourish.

I do not search in vain to see these struggles represented at the IFFK this year. They are there. They can be found in Akhta Mirza's film, already mentioned. They are in the work of Ncayiyana and of Aduka, and signally in the works of Peck and of Loach (some of which are yet to be screened but which I have seen before). But it is not a characteristic that is usual, however, much less universal, in the contemporary films in this year's packages at the Festival.

Last night's screening of Elias Sulieman's *The Time that Remains* constituted one of the key examples, nevertheless. Here is a mournful and even melancholy history of the dispossession of the Palestinian people told through the optic of six or seven key moments in the development and decline of a family (a semi-autobiographical account of Sulieman's own family, drawn from his father's diaries). Mourning and melancholy but no nostalgia; history and analysis but by implication rather than by instruction.

All of this is provided in *The Time that Remains* through visual imagery, and via another riveting soundtrack almost equal in effectiveness to the soundtrack of his *Divine Intervention*. In the end, it is a representation of the paralysis of the Palestinian resistance that is without any hint of resignation in the face of that depleted condition, or any hint of despair at the monstrousness of the oppression, and equally without any crippling idealization of the past. It is a representation of the history of the conflict, and the impact of that history on the self-identity of every Palestinian. This is a conflict that is marked a cyclical pattern of defeats for their national aspirations, rendering them seemingly voiceless and invisible, as if their existence in the second half of the c.20th was a momentary passing gesture, a cryptic wave at the world as they pass into oblivion. It is a representation that draws part of its strength from its capacity to name and to portray the frailties and delusions and the comicality of both sides.

The Festival is to be congratulated and commended for selecting this outstanding film. Yet the very showing of it at the Festival this year constitutes both an opportunity and an interesting challenge to the Festival's organizers for next year – the 15th IFFK. It is precisely that challenge and opportunity that I would like to suggest as a topic for discussion this evening. I do not know whether the organizers are aware of this challenge that they have thrown down to themselves. We will see.

In what remains of Palestine - in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, and in the open prison for 1.5 million people that is the Gaza Strip, the project underway is to make life so unbearable for the remaining Palestinians that they will abandon the land, and thus facilitate its annexation to Israel. In Gaza, the people are deprived of water and medicines and electrical power by the Israeli blockade, while they attempt to rebuild the schools and hospitals and sewerage plants targeted for destruction by Israel in its recent bombardment and invasion.

That is why the settlements are constructed in the West Bank in contravention of international law. It is a declaration of intent. That is why the Palestinians are systematically deprived of water for the cultivation of their land; it is why their olive groves are destroyed; it is why the Wall disaggregates the land so as to render movement for the Palestinians almost impossible; and it is why the education of children and students is insistently disrupted by the checkpoints by the raids and by the arrests and deportations. It is why only Israeli citizens are allowed to use the highways, and why rubble barriers are piled up on other roads by Israeli bulldozers. If we grind them down persistently, the Israeli strategists say, they will walk away eventually.

Within the pre-1967 borders of Israel, the Arab population is discriminated against in respect of jobs, housing, education, health, and political representation and rights. Palestinians are denied the right to travel between Gaza and the West Bank, even if married, or the right to settle in the other territory. So, married couples from different parts of the land are kept permanently apart. For the Palestinians who exist as refugees outside the area, there is no right to return to their homes, and in this, of course, the Israeli state is again in violation of international law. It is for all these reasons that the current Archbishop of Cape Town, and veteran opponent of Apartheid in South Africa, Desmond Tutu, has described the situation of the Palestinians as far worse than that endured by Africans under Apartheid.

Even this is not the worst of the plight of the Palestinians. Beyond these oppressions is the greatest threat and indignity of all – the attempt to eradicate the culture and the history of the people in its entirety, to erase the Palestinians as if they had never existed. This is not an attempt physically to eliminate them as the Nazis attempted to do with the Jewish communities of Europe during the German occupation in the Second World War. It is rather an attempt at the extirpation of the record of the people, to rewrite the history of the land, to concoct a tendentious archaeology of its settlements and anthropology of its inhabitants, to deny and disdain the national distinctiveness of its poetry, its literature and its song. It is to invent a record of the area that will ‘disappear’ a whole people, consigning them to an invented historical role as a minor tribe of the Hashemite kingdom of Jordan. Thus to deliver on the threat and the promise of an earlier Prime Minister of Israel, Golda Meir, in 1969 when she declared, “The Palestinians people do not exist”.

In these circumstances, the question that is posed is obvious. How can anyone conduct business as normal with Israel? How is it possible to continue working with those who are complicit in the occupation, and in this open discrimination and oppression, and in the barbaric blockade and starvation of Gaza? How are continued cultural and commercial links possible without making oneself equally complicit? How are we to respond to the united appeal to us for help from all factions, parties and trade unions in Palestine (a call that uniquely unites all of them whatever their other differences)? The appeal is that contacts with all Israeli institutions should be severed, and that Israel should be treated as a pariah state in like manner to the treatment of South Africa during the years of Apartheid?

This is the question that now confronts the organizers of the Kerala Festival for next year, just as it confronts the organizers of festivals, conferences, entertainments and business contracts in the rest of India, and across the world. Of course, there will be those who will say that the people and governments of Kerala have a long history of supporting the Palestinians in their struggle, so this is therefore not an issue for Kerala or for the Festival. But that would be to miss the point entirely. This is a *new* call from the Palestinians for a new international movement in solidarity with them. It is not simply a matter of being generally supportive of their struggle. This is a *specific* and pressing question. It is a question of whether the Festival will continue its proud tradition in offering a global lead by *declaring* its support for the boycott call from the Palestinians. It is a question of whether Kerala will follow the example set by Ken Loach (whose latest release, *Looking for Eric*, is being shown here at the IFFK this year) who threatened to withdraw his film from the Edinburgh International Film Festival this past year unless the Israel Embassy grant that partly subsidized the Festival was returned. It is a question, therefore, of whether the Kerala Festival will declare itself in favour of a boycott, and then implement it, whether or not there are any Israeli submissions.

There will also be those who will bemoan the fact that a boycott would deny them the opportunity to see good Israeli films, or to witness the work of impressive Israeli artists. Such people may also argue that art and politics should be kept in separate domains, and that the right to freedom of artistic expression should not be infringed by political considerations.

They have a point. There are impressive Israeli films. There are Israeli directors, crews and casts that have made important contributions to film. Any boycott should not be

directed at individual Israeli artists just because of their citizenship. It is rather a question of whether such an artist has distanced her or himself from the policies of their Government, and whether their films have been produced using Israeli studios and facilities, and Israeli finance. In other words, it is a question of whether the film's production has been dependant on relations and associations with companies and individuals that are complicit in both the occupation and the oppression.

That is why those of us in universities across the world who argue for an academic boycott of Israel do not argue for an ostracisation of individuals but for a boycott of Israeli universities and colleges. We want to increase our contacts with individual Israeli colleagues in order to press them to speak out against their own Government. We do not want to diminish those contacts. The mechanism to achieve that critical contact is a boycott of their educational institutions, all of which are complicit in the occupation, and none of which have condemned the oppression. The initiative is working. Already there is a small but growing minority of Israelis, in universities and elsewhere, who are declaring themselves (at no small cost to their own careers and reputations in that society) to be in favour of the international boycott as the only thing that might make Israel listen to international criticism.

Those Israelis who are wiling to dissociate themselves, and to sever links with institutions that are complicit, should be encouraged rather than condemned. An Israeli citizen can no more be held responsible for the policies of her government than can any citizen of the US or the UK be held responsible for the illegal and imperialist policies pursued by George Bush or Tony Blair in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Israeli *productions* are another matter entirely. Each and every collaboration with an Israeli (or Israeli-backed) production, and every screening of that product, contributes to the normalization of the Israeli occupation, and to the normalization of the conditions imposed on the Palestinian Arab population within Israel. So it is not a question of an abstract debate about the relationship between art and politics. It is a practical (i.e. a moral and political) question of whether one wishes to choose to support or to oppose the normalization of occupation, dispossession and oppression. Every film or performance or contract that puts these matters aside in the interests of normal cultural exchange or business relations constitutes a tacit condoning of those policies, and an assent to their continuance. The liberal attempt to distinguish sharply between art and

politics thus itself constitutes a political act and a partial position – one whose consequence is support for oppression and colonization.

So, this is a central issue, I think, not just for the International Film Festival of Kerala but for *all* film festivals across India, and across the globe. It is a matter for all academic colleagues and for political representatives. It is a matter for every corporation and every executive considering entering into a contract with an Israeli supplier or purchaser. Together with the occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan, this is the central moral and political issue of the first decades of the c.21st. It is an issue comparable to the issue of how to relate to the Apartheid state of South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s, and it is one from which we cannot and should not turn away.

That is why I am confident that the organizers of the 15th IFFK for next year will give due consideration to the united Palestinian call for a boycott of Israel and of Israeli products, and why I hope that it will decide to announce the Festival's support for the boycott.

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Postscript:

Yesterday, we met the Honourable Minister for Education and Cultural Affairs for the Government of Kerala, Mr. M. A. Baby, for discussions. He asked us to read the following statement to the Festival.

A statement in solidarity with the people of Palestine from Shri. M. A. Baby, the Honourable Minister for Education and Cultural Affairs, Government of Kerala.

I would like to take this opportunity to express support to the Palestinian people in their struggle for justice, peace and the right of self-determination. The Palestinian struggle is part of a long and continuing fight against oppression, segregation and dispossession. The plight of the Palestinian refugees is one of the most explosive aspects of their existence on the planet.

Here in Kerala, and more widely in India, the relentless fight against injustice, exploitation and underdevelopment is on. We cannot separate the struggle at home from struggles for similar causes elsewhere and turn away the appeals for help from more helpless people.

It's high time the strands of a trans-continental movement for the liberation of Palestine are strengthened. Hopefully one day, not too far from today, we would win the Palestinian cause akin to the victory in the fight against apartheid in South Africa.

Red Salutes

**M.A. Baby.
15/12/2009**