

Broken Cameras, A Broken Territory

IMAN SYED, *University of Pennsylvania*

Abstract

Emad Burnat, a Palestinian farmer uses cameras and filming to depict his son Gibreel's upbringing. However, under the backdrop of Israeli occupation, his clips instead display peaceful dissent against the apartheid in his town of Bil'in, located in Ramallah in the West Bank. Paired with and anti-Zionist activism Israeli director – Guy Davidi– Burnat's home films accumulate in the Academy Award nominated film *5 Broken Cameras*. This paper argues that *5 Broken Cameras* is not only a microcosm for Palestinian nonviolent resistance but an attempt to humanize a vilified people to an international audience. The paper is a case study of the film, drawing from sources highlighting information about the occupation, interviews with Burnat and Davidi, and reception of the film from Middle East articles. The film is effective in its demonstration of the tenacity but also the hopefulness and determination required of a non-violent movement in light of the odds of succeeding slim. The Bil'in villagers' ability to work to not only promote their own cause but trust an Israeli – their perceived enemy – demonstrates the possibility of allyship for the Palestinian people and cause against Zionism. The film became a way to bridge the gaps and promote cultural understanding between the audience and Palestinians.

keywords: Film Studies, Palestine, Middle Eastern Film, Zionism, Israel

Two-year-old Palestinian Gibreel Burnat, overwhelmed by the looming barrier ahead of him, clutches an olive branch. He waddles over to the patrolling Israeli guard – a gun slung around his chest – in the Palestinian village of Bil'in (west of Ramallah); he proceeds to extend an olive branch, literally. The extraordinary moment is captured on film: behind the camera stands Gibreel's father, filming on his second in a series of his five broken cameras.¹

Burnat – a Palestinian farmer and olive picker by trade – bought his first camera to celebrate the birth of his fourth child, Gibreel. However, the camera's intention shifted from documenting Gibreel's upbringing to centering around Bil'in's and its villagers' role in Palestinian non-violent resistance against the Israeli occupation. Burnat films the arrests, the deaths, and the dangers of fighting peacefully for the right of land and peoplehood. Despite the lack of attention in Western media, Palestinian resistance has taken non-violent forms since even before the 1948 UN creation of the state of Israel. This is because Palestinians do not have an effective or "proper" army. These home videos – co-directed and edited by Israeli director Guy Davidi – were filmed over five broken cameras throughout six years. *5 Broken Cameras*, the deeply emotional film and a first-hand account stirs intense empathy for the Palestinian villagers fighting for their rights against those who oppress them. Bil'in became a focal point of international nonviolent resistance as the Palestinian villagers fought against a wall cutting through their farmlands, with the Israeli settlement – Modi'in-Ilit – planning to expand onto the disputed land. " ² Burnat captured the villagers – young and old – going to the street after every Jummah – Friday prayer, to peacefully protest; these demonstrations often ended in Israeli officers cracking down with arrests, tear gas, or

shootings. The film introduced American and European audiences to the concept of non-violent Palestinian resistance, a type of protest not portrayed by Western Media. Western–American and European media often characterizes Palestinian resistance as violent due to its coverage on acts perpetrated by groups like Hamas. ³Palestinian resistance, therefore, in the Western gaze often gets conflated with terrorism. Additionally, the documentary showed the brutality that Israeli Defense Force – or IDF – soldiers use towards the Palestinians, and the brute force and systematic laws involved in occupying and encroaching on Palestinian lands.⁴

5 Broken Cameras is an exemplar for non-violent Palestinian resistance. This paper argues that *5 Broken Cameras* is not only a microcosm for Palestinian nonviolent resistance but also an attempt to re-humanize a vilified people. The opening section of this paper will provide context for the film: the discussion of the development of the film, the conflict happening in Bil'in within the parameters of the larger Israeli occupation, and how it effectively showed the evolution of non-violent resistance in this town. Then, the paper will transition to discuss how the Palestinians were depicted in the film. These nonviolent protests in Bil'in will be set in the context of the larger Palestinian non-violent movement. The next section will focus on the reception of the film. Then, the paper will transition into an analysis of the worldwide reception of the movie, proving that goodwill can be created by depicting narratives and humanizing the villainized.

Background

The Oslo Accords signed in 1993 and 1995 between the State of Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (or PLO) attempted to grant "right of the Palestinian people to self-determination."⁵ However, the success of these accords fell short as the Palestinian

lifestyle is defined by the constraints of the Israeli Occupation. These constraints involve current barriers, checkpoints, and establishment of settlements: “cutting off Palestinian areas with barriers and checkpoints, mostly in Gaza but also in enclaves throughout the West Bank, created conditions for testing a wide variety of techniques that monitored and restricted the movement of people, including systems of incarceration and interrogation.”⁶ Since the signing of these accords, seven additional Jewish-only⁷ settlements have been built either in places near Bil’in or on other Palestinian lands.⁸

Bil’in – a small, farming town in the Rammallah district of the Central West Bank – became site of on-going nonviolent resistance since 2005 because the barrier separating Modi’in Illit – an Israeli settlement – from the village cut through 50–60% of Bil’in’s land.⁹ The Palestinian rural economy relies on olive production, and thus the barrier between the settlement and village prevented Palestinian farmers from having access to their crops.¹⁰ Many of the Palestinian residents lost their jobs, as Israeli soldiers burned down olive groves to make way for the settlement to expand. In total, the Israeli soldiers destroyed about 1,000 olive trees.¹¹

In wake of the brute Israeli force, as depicted in the film, Iyad Burnat led Palestinian villagers, boys young and old, who would take to the street following every Jumma Prayer. Under Burnat’s leadership, the dissenters engaged in creative and often theatrical non-violent methods such as dressing up as civil rights leaders like MLK, Gandhi, and Nelson Mandela.¹² As of 2013, 40 Palestinians have been killed in these peaceful rebellions.¹³

At the frontlines holding filming these uprisings was Iyad Burnat’s brother, Emad Burnat. His home videos centered around his son Gibreel’s loss of childhood in lieu of

violence amongst peaceful dissent. Emad Burnat describes how he instinctively whips out the camera when clashes between Palestinians and Israelis erupt: “I feel like my camera protects me, but that’s an illusion. I take the camera [along] to protect myself”¹⁴ He documents the arrests and deaths of neighbors, the victories of the village, and everyday strife of Palestinians living with this looming border. These deeply emotional moments are thus used to remember the trauma caused by the Israelis and perhaps add to the Palestinian cinematic reserve.

The Narrative and Depiction of Palestinians

“Why did they shoot Fil. What did he do to them,”¹⁵ toddler Gibreel’s voice reverberates as he asks his father during the funeral of their beloved villager Fil. Fil – or “elephant man,” a nickname given to him by the children of the village – died after an Israeli tear gas canister hit him in the chest following peacefully protesting the barrier. Fil’s charisma and demeanor were childish; he was the symbol of hope in the village. Burnat is witnessing the death of a neighbor and audiences “are made witness not just to a death but to the moral nature of Burnat’s will to ‘keep shooting’ --not to fire back in defense (using a gun), but to document (with a camera) as a form of emotional and ethical response.”¹⁶ This ideal to stay determined – to “keep filming” – and expose instead of fighting back with violence, becomes an effective tool; a tool to explain the perseverance of Palestinians and to show how it serves as a microcosm for Palestinians resist. Other films such as *Private* embodies the notion of Israeli colonialism using different screens of Palestine in the past, and using the camera to expose apartheid and its detrimental effects.¹⁷

Arab documentary since the 1970s have meant to highlight liberation and freedom

against oppressive forces.¹⁸ To convey this message, these films lead with a character-led narrative to defy “orientalist views” on the MENA region, essentially humanizing the people.¹⁹ Films in Palestinian cannon present and future have contributed to the case of Palestinians as a colonized people living under a system of oppression. *The Dupes*, *Rana’s Wedding*, and *Eyes of a Thief* undercut stereotypical Palestinian representations to provide different perspectives of the Palestinian people to a transnational audience.²⁰

Five Broken Cameras takes this character-led approach which is important in demonstrating how it compares with other similar movements in Palestinian resistance and the conflict. When discussing social justice within Palestine, one thought in contemporary debate is concerning the significance of focusing on narratives as a way for the community’s collective memory. The Palestinian movement shifts from being portrayed as “terrorism” to a legitimate peaceful struggle against oppressive Israeli forces.²¹

In an interview, Emad Burnat discusses the unity within the Palestinians “I say in the film that I am a farmer, but for me every Palestinian is a farmer. The doctor is a farmer, the journalist a farmer, the lawyer a farmer. This is a symbol in Palestine. Everyone is a farmer.”²² By invoking a commonality, Burnat uses his own personal story and town to represent the larger Palestinian non-violent resistance and integrate them within the narrative of overarching Palestinian resistance.

Besides the daily resistance of being a Palestinian – circumventing checkpoints, those who build homes without permits, and villagers who live on their land without proper living conditions – more traditional forms of resistance have occurred. Before the 1948 creation of Israel– in 1936– Palestinians engaged in nonviolent dissent against British

and Zionist colonialism through civil disobedience, leading to a general strike.²³ In addition, Palestinians observe a yearly day of mourning called Land Day. Land Day is a day to remember the six Palestinians who died following peaceful demonstrations over the Israeli government’s “expropriate 60,000 dunams of Palestinian-owned land in the Galilee” on March 30, 1976.²⁴

Even in Bil’in, nonviolent resistance was met with a degree of success. The Israeli High Court declared the barrier should be changed; the Palestinians engaged in great, theatrical celebrations, dancing in traditional outfits in the streets and banging drums.²⁵ However, a year went by the ruling was never enforced: the village continued on their track of nonviolence, influenced by examples of their past.

In this film, Palestinians continue this tradition. Villagers like AdeeB – a tough and vocal protestor who gets shot in the leg – continues to return to the street Friday; Iyad Burnat gets arrested by Israeli planted Palestinian protestor; innocent children run away from Israeli soldiers who are employing tear gas and rubber bullets. The Israeli soldiers know they are being filmed, yet they continue to enforce their power, demonstrating to audiences the blatant apathy the IDF soldiers have towards Palestinians. Regardless, the Bil’in villagers continue to adhere to the sentiment of nonviolence, heeding to the history and tradition of their advocacy.

Implications

Two Sides, Two Directors

Anti-Zionist activist and Israeli, Guy Davidi, was amazed the tenacity of the villagers of Bil’in. One day in 2005, he was approached by this olive farmer named Burnat 2005; together, a relationship was built. Burnat was handing over his most personal and intimate moments to someone whose ancestral relatives have and are currently occupying

his land. Davidi was given the proposition to help edit and direct a film which went against the Zionist beliefs he had grown up with. Both knew the risks involved working with each other, however, were able to overlook these cultural differences for an end goal: create this documentary to retell the story of this town.²⁶

Davidi, starting in 2005, would frequently journey to Bil'in to witness the protest, as neighboring villages began looking to Bil'in as an example on how to dissent. Due to the fact that Burnat was the only one in the village with a camera and he could document afterhours, people were interested in getting to know him. Thus, when Burnat realized the substance of his story, he reached out Davidi due to his experience as a filmmaker and involvement in neighboring villages anti-Zionist protest. Burnat explains that it was not an active political decision to turn to an Israeli editor, but friendship itself.²⁷

It is a taboo in Israeli-Palestinian society for an Israeli and Palestinian to collaborate or even cooperate.²⁸ Given the location where this film takes place – right at the frontlines of Israeli occupation – *5 Broken Cameras* becomes an example for how two anti-Zionist sides can bridge their cultural differences and cultivate good will. There is a highly personal aspect of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: the years of resentment between each other, individuals seeing the difference between binaries of bad and good, Israeli and Palestinian, occupier and occupied. People were skeptical about their relationship. In an interview, Davidi explained how “when I first came to the village, people wouldn't be seen with me because they didn't want to be seen as a collaborator.”²⁹ In Burnat's case, he could overlook the status of being labelled a “collaborator.”

Like Burnat, Davidi was put in a cultural dilemma of his own. Growing up in a more conservative household, he faced societal and

community stresses. He remembers how Israelis and American Jews told his mother her son was a traitor as well as instructed from a young age to not speak with Arabs.³⁰ Given the complex relationship between the peoplehood's, these two men's unique background – an Israeli and Palestinian—are an unlikely pair, working together to resist Israeli occupation through an anti-Zionist agenda.

Davidi eventually did gain the trust of the Bil'in villagers. It was a significant moment as they handed over the most intimate moments that define the evolution of their town to an Israeli: the deaths of villagers young and old caused by Davidi's people, private conversations Burnat had with his wife, Gibreel's milestones, etc. This trust given to Davidi's from the village and Burnat were necessary for the film's success. Although Burnat filmed the majority of the movie, Davidi's assistance laid in curating the script for the voice-over of these compiled videos. Davidi's guidance allowed for Burnat to digest some of the abnormalities involved in the way he and his kids grew up and verbalize what it means to be occupied. Words thus become a way to bridge the gaps and promote cultural understanding between the audience and Palestinians. While the remarkable and unlikely pair aim to push one's notions of Palestine to the Western world, the film becomes an example of the importance of finding allyship in unexpected places.

Humanization and Reception

When learning about Palestinian resistance, European and American often turn to the Western Media, which more often than not disproportionately focuses on violent Palestinian resistance.³¹ For example, in 2000, when Palestinian were protesting the reoccupation of their land in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, some Palestinian militias responded with violence and the U.S. media

focused mostly on Israelis' suffering without providing adequate context on the Israel disproportionate attacks on Palestinians.³² Thus, Palestinian resistance in all its forms gets conflated with terrorism. Once seeing the depiction of Palestinian resistance through this avenue, the film was designed to humanize the villainized Palestinian people. In a joint statement, the directors Burnat and Davidi write the purpose of this documentary,

*"We hope people will put aside pre-judgments and approach the film with fresh eyes. We think it is easy to shut down when watching a film that deals with such pain and controversy and reduce the experience to a series of binaries: right and wrong, good and bad, Palestinian and Israeli. We urge viewers to set aside these oversimplifications to fully embrace the complexity, beauty, and emotion of the circumstance."*³³

The statement shows the nuances of the conflict; it's our duty as onlookers of the conflict to challenge preconceived notions and understand that this issue has caused deep hurt. The film was designed for the international audience— not the Palestinian. Palestinian reception initially revolves around the criticism that Burnat had made this film with an Israeli. However, this partnership, depoliticized the issue, as a Jewish person and a Palestinian partnered to hold Israel responsible on the global stage.³⁴ With its humble beginnings as a home video, *5 Broken Cameras* is simply about a man, his kids, and his town. In a pathos appeal – supported by his amateur cinematography skills– the audience sees that this is not a state-sponsored or propagandic film, rather a tale of determination and persistence to stay non-violent regardless of the fact that "death is all around."³⁵

In its form as a first-hand account, audiences connect with how Burnat uses his victimhood

status to spur change. The inclusion of details like Gibreel's first words being "cartridge" and "army" informs the audience of the deep systematic presence of the occupation has on everyday citizens. It deters from what the Western media broadcasts, and the personal nature of the film makes us deconstruct the idea of Palestinian forces as "terrorists." Burnat tries to adjust the narrative and trajectory of Palestinians by using his victim status to create new image of Palestinians as determined, lively, and hopeful despite the looming occupation.

He brings some of the systemic ways the Israelis encroach on the land and oppress their voices. For example, the Israeli government declares Bil'in a closed military zone so that visitors couldn't come and join the protest.³⁶ He shows the brute force that the IDF soldiers assert on Palestinians and Palestinian children regardless of knowing they are being filmed. At one point in the film, one of the protests involved holding the casket of an 11-year-old boy killed by IDF soldiers killed during the Friday demonstration prior.³⁷ The utter lack of humanity that the Israeli forces brought onto innocent children invokes great sympathy as the "Palestinian terrorists" the Israeli forces are targeting, are in fact innocent children and villagers. By exposing to an international audience to this cruelty, Burnat succeeded in his goal of demonstrating the daily tribulations of being a Palestinian.

Burnat's efforts did not go unnoticed. The film was met with critical reception and received international acclaim. The film won the World Cinema Directing Award at the Sundance Film Festival, and a number of prizes in festivals across Europe: Stockholm, Prague, Netherlands, and Oslo.³⁸ In Stockholm, it won the International Stefan Jarl Award at Tempo, Sweden's largest documentary festival.³⁹ *5 Broken Cameras* was also nominated for an Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature. With a twinge

of irony, when the news broke that the film had been nominated, the Israeli media was quick to call it an Israeli Film, despite Davidi saying the film stands for no one besides his own work as a director.⁴⁰ Israeli media criticized a film similar in nature with its pro-Palestine undertones “The Gatekeepers.” The criticism surrounded the filmmaker’s decision to turn down Israeli consular reception during film festivals abroad, highlighting his film was not supposed to represent the state of Israel as the reason.⁴¹ The grand international reception received from this documentary lends credibility to the fact that the piece is a work of advocacy journalism. The director’s overall goal of the movie was achieved: to expose and bring attention to this dire issue. Once a group finally rips off villainized label, they can start working towards gaining more worldwide and international attention

Conclusion

5 Broken Cameras is a microcosm for Palestinian resistance and the humanization of the Palestinian people. They demonstrate the tenacity but also the hopefulness and determination required of a non-violent movement in light of the odds of succeeding slim. The Bil’in villagers’ ability to work to not only promote their own cause but trust an Israeli – their perceived enemy – demonstrates the possibility of allyship between Palestine and anti-Zionism activists against oppression. Some limitations of this study focus on the scarcity of scholarly literature surrounding Palestinian film due to its critical nature. This paper pulled from cultural sources like magazine and news articles to cement the gaps. Nevertheless, the work that Burnat and Davidi put out clearly humanized the villainized through its simple tale of a son, a village called Bil’in, and five broken cameras.

¹ Emad Burnat. *5 Broken Cameras*. DVD. Directed by Guy Davidi and Emad Burnat. Israel, Palestine: Kino Lorber 2012.

² Pov, "Film Description: 5 Broken Cameras: POV: PBS," POV (PBS, January 24, 2013), <http://archive.pov.org/5brokencameras/film-description/>

<https://www.afsc.org/resource/5-broken-cameras-discussion-guide-and-resources>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Emad Burnat. *5 Broken Cameras*. DVD. Directed by Guy Davidi and Emad Burnat. Israel, Palestine: Kino Lorber 2012.

⁵ United Nations, “Right of the Palestinian People to Self-Determination - Third Ctee Debate - Summary Record (Excerpts) - Question of Palestine,” United Nations, 2001, <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/auto-insert-178833/>.

⁶ Kaplan, Amy, *Our American Israel: the Story of an Entangled Alliance* (Cambridge, Massachusetts :: Harvard University Press, 2018), 239-274

⁷ Author chose to write “Jewish-Only” as words chosen by the sourced materials

⁸ Dale Sprusansky, "Activist Discusses Nonviolent Protest in Bil'in, West Bank." *The Washington Report on Middle East Affairs* 32, no. 3 (04, 2013): 65, accessed December 12, 2019

<https://proxy.library.upenn.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.proxy.library.upenn.edu/docview/1434714560?accountid=14707>.

⁹ Maia Carter Hallward, "Creative Responses to Separation: Israeli and Palestinian Joint Activism in Bil'in." *Journal of Peace Research* 46, no. 4 (07, 2009): 541-558, accessed December 11, 2019

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¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Dale Sprusansky, "Activist Discusses Nonviolent Protest in Bil'in, West Bank." *The Washington Report on Middle East Affairs* 32, no. 3 (04, 2013): 65.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ David LaRocca, "Shooting for the Truth: Amateur Documentary Filmmaking, Affective Optics, and the Ethical Impulse." *Post Script*, (2017), 36, no.2-3, accessed December 12, 2019 https://link-gale.com.proxy.library.upenn.edu/apps/doc/A532995700/AONE?u=upenn_main&sid=AONE&xid=36ccd896.

¹⁵ Emad Burnat. *5 Broken Cameras*. DVD. Directed by Guy Davidi and Emad Burnat. Israel, Palestine: Kino Lorber 2012.

¹⁶ David LaRocca, "Shooting for the Truth: Amateur Documentary Filmmaking, Affective Optics, and the Ethical Impulse." *Post Script*, (2017).

¹⁷ Martijn van Gils & Malaka Mohammed Shwaikh (2016) FIGHTING WITHOUT WEAPONS: PALESTINIAN DOCUMENTARY FILMS AND ACTS OF RESISTANCE, *Asian Affairs*, 47:3, 443-464, DOI: 10.1080/03068374.2016.1225903

¹⁸ Wessels, Josepha Ivanka. "Cosmopolitanism, Activism and Arab Documentary Film." *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 13;2020;, no. 2 (2020): 210-231.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ben Labidi, Imed. "Representation and Emancipation: Cinema of the Oppressed." *International Journal of*

Cultural Studies 24, no. 2 (March 2021): 250–65.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877920959338>.

²¹ Maia Carter Hallward, "Creative Responses to Separation: Israeli and Palestinian Joint Activism in Bil'in." *Journal of Peace Research* 46, no. 4 (07, 2009): 541-558.

²² "Interview With Emad Burnat, '5 Broken Cameras,'" Film at Lincoln Center, June 1, 2012,
<https://www.filmlinc.org/daily/interview-with-emad-burnat-5-broken-cameras/>

²³ Dana, Karam. 2018. "Confronting Injustice Beyond Borders: Palestinian Identity and Nonviolent Resistance." *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 6(4): 529-552.

²⁴ AFSC. "5 Broken Cameras Discussion Guide and Resources." American Friends Service Committee. AFSC, 2013.
<https://www.afsc.org/resource/5-broken-cameras-discussion-guide-and-resources>.

²⁵ Ethan Bronner, "In Village, Palestinians See Model for Their Cause," *The New York Times* (The New York Times, August 28, 2009),
<https://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/28/world/middleeast/28bilin.html?ref=middleeast>

²⁶ Lisa Goldman February et al., "5 Broken Cameras' Director: There Is No Room for Guilt - Only Taking Responsibility," *972 Magazine*, February 24, 2013,
<https://www.972mag.com/director-of-5-broken-cameras-there-is-no-room-for-guilt-only-taking-responsibility/66642/>)

²⁷ Salomon and Rogberg, Emad Burnat, and Guy Davidi. "5 Broken Cameras An Interview with Emad Burnat and Guy Davidi." *Cinéaste* 37, no. 3 (2012): 24-27.
www.jstor.org/stable/41691153.

²⁸ Goldman, "5 Broken Cameras' Director: There Is No Room for Guilt - Only Taking Responsibility," 2013.

²⁹ Salomon and Rogberg, Burnat, and Davidi. "5 Broken Cameras An Interview with Emad Burnat and Guy Davidi" 2012

³⁰ Goldman, "5 Broken Cameras' Director: There Is No Room for Guilt - Only Taking Responsibility," 2013.

³¹ Kaplan, Amy, *Our American Israel : the Story of an Entangled Alliance*(Cambridge, Massachusetts :: Harvard University Press, 2018), 239-274.

³² Ibid.

³³ Salomon Rogberg, Emad Burnat, and Guy Davidi. "5 Broken Cameras An Interview with Emad Burnat and Guy Davidi." *Cinéaste* 37, no. 3 (2012): 24-27.

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³⁵ Emad Burnat. *5 Broken Cameras*. DVD. Directed by Guy Davidi and Emad Burnat. Israel, Palestine: Kino Lorber 2012.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Salomon Rogberg, Emad Burnat, and Guy Davidi. "5 Broken Cameras An Interview with Emad Burnat and Guy Davidi." *Cinéaste* 37, no. 3 (2012): 24-27.

³⁹ Ibid

⁴⁰ Lisa Goldman February et al., "5 Broken Cameras' Director: There Is No Room for Guilt - Only Taking Responsibility," 972 Magazine, February 24, 2013.

⁴¹ Michal Shmulovich et al., "No Consular Reception for ISRAEL'S OSCAR Filmmakers," *The Times of Israel*, February 25, 2013,

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/israeli-filmmakers-reportedly-snubbed-by-consulate-in-la/>.