

Stories of Palestine. Part One : "Five Broken Cameras" reviewed by Elayne Jude for Great North News Service

"It takes a lot of strength to make something positive out of anger" - Emad Burnat, film maker

Bil'in is a Palestinian village in the West Bank, west of the city of Ramallah and two miles east of the Green Line, the demarcation lines set out in the 1949 Armistice Agreements between Israel and its neighbours, which also marks the line between Israel and the territories captured in the Six-Day War. It's a small village whose people have historically lived off the land, olive growers. Bil'in became the site of weekly protests and international interest when the construction of the West Bank Barrier separated the village from much of its farmland. It's the time when farmer Emad Burnat acquired a video camera, initially to document the early life of his fourth son, Gibreel. Emad was one of the villagers who went out to protest, and he naturally took his camera with him. In partnership with the Israeli film-maker Guy Davidi, the footage became a simple but sophisticated full length documentary which won global acclaim and awards, nominated for an Academy Award and. The progress of the demonstrations and the expansion of the Israeli settlement, using a succession of cameras which were shot up, smashed, and somehow replaced, became inextricable from the infancy and childhood of Gibreel and his early loss of innocence, and his father's accelerated descent into age.

The protests at the barrier are non-violent. The presiding spirit is Phil (the Elephant), a man of huge spiritual resource, calm and inspiration, beloved by the children and an incorrigible optimist. The film's journey sees that optimism tested; maybe destroyed.

It's not without humour. The demonstrations are in some sense a kind of extreme street party. Nobody, in the beginning, gets seriously hurt. Emad notes astutely of one of his fellow protestors that he loves to make a scene; his rhetoric is theatrical, his provocations operatic; he is filmed hugging an olive tree. Emad's contemporaries, young men (and it's exclusively men, with the odd Western female protest-tourist showing solidarity on occasion, and Emad's wife cooking and saying, Enough of the filming) of spirit and energy, work out that the Israeli trailers dumped on their land constitute a land claim. They retaliate by bringing their own trailer; when it's removed, they bring another, and occupy it. It's an ingenious prank, as wonderful to see as little Gibreel presenting a young Israeli soldier with an olive branch (which the Israeli accepts).

But things darken. The olive trees are burnt. The Israeli settlement grows. The protests turn more violent. An 11 year old child is shot by a sniper in the neighbouring village of Ni'lin, another shortly after his funeral. The cameras are smashed repeatedly; Emad is arrested twice. He makes an effort to take his children playing in the snow; it is hard, he says, to find the strength to feel the ordinary joys.

He crashes his truck into the barrier (he is even-handed enough to say that the barrier probably saved his life), spends a year in hospital, while Gaza is engaged in a three week war, also known as the Gaza Massacre, or the Battle of al-Furqan. Estimates put Palestinian deaths at between 1100-1600.

Emad returns home to a muted welcome. He will never be able to do physical work again; treated in an Israeli hospital, he faces, as a non-Israeli citizen, massive medical bills, continuing treatment he cannot afford. The Palestinian Authority deem his injury to be 'non-resistance related'. No help from there. If you do not fit the resistance ideal, says Emad, you're on your own.

The sole obligation of the victim, says Emad, is healing. He continues to film in order to heal himself. The village is sick with anger. He knows that it takes strength to turn that into something positive. With the children growing up amid loss and violence, he does not know how they will be able to bear their anger.

The Elephant is hit by a tear gas cannister and killed at the protest, an event filmed by Emad. Like the shaving of his baby curls, his eyes huge and doubtful in the barber's mirror, it marks the end of Gibreel's childhood. He questions his father: Why did they shoot Phil ? What did he ever do to them ?

Will he carry the olive branch to the soldier again ?

The strength of the film is its absence of polemic. It is about this particular man, his effort to retain his non-violent ideals, family, community. On the rare occasion we see visiting politicians, Emad and his friends are sceptical:

"Lots of people use symbols for political profit, whether it's a symbol of Bil'in, or a symbol of a Palestinian state. Bil'in is attracting more politicians of all stripes...I'd rather be with the real rebels." The camera pans away from the men in suits and their mobile media circus, and back to the villagers.