



# Five Broken Cameras

**Director:** Emad Burnat, Guy Davidi

**Country:** Israel/Palestine

**Date:** 2011

*A review by Philip French for **The Observer**:*

Back in the late 70s and early 80s, before he embarked on the grander works that made him famous such as his Decalogue series and his Tricolor trilogy, Krzysztof Kieslowski made a succession of films about politics and personal responsibility. One of the most notable is *Camera Buff* about Filip, a minor functionary in a provincial Polish town who buys an 8mm camera to photograph his baby daughter. Very soon his boss gets him to make a film celebrating their factory, and thereafter, for better or worse, film comes to dominate Filip's life. The obsession breaks up his marriage and, as he makes increasingly tendentious pictures that threaten the authoritarian regime, he comes to endanger his colleagues and himself.



This subtle fiction from cold war days has an astonishing resemblance to a non-fiction movie of today, *5 Broken Cameras*, one of the best, most involving documentaries of the past couple of years, shot entirely in and around a Palestinian village in the occupied West Bank. As in *Camera Buff*, film-making figures both as a metaphor for social responsiveness and responsibility and as a daily fact for the director-protagonist of *5 Broken Cameras*. He's Emad Burnat, the peasant and smallholder who spends his days and nights recording life about

him in his native Bil'in, the township where his family has lived for generations. Like Filip in *Camera Buff*, Emad bought his first camera when his fourth son, Gibreel, was born in 2005. He initially used it for home movies and then, at their invitation, to make similar pictures for his neighbours.

But fairly soon Emad developed a sense of empowerment and a duty to serve his community. His camera became a way of uniting his fellow citizens, publicising their struggle and becoming a witness for posterity when the Israeli authorities sent in troops to deprive them of land to create a defensive barrier of steel and wire that later became a high concrete wall. Inevitably, seeing this barrier going up in Israel we think of the wall surrounding the Warsaw ghetto, the one that appeared overnight in Berlin and the one separating Catholics and Protestants in Belfast. Emad was not, however, politicised in the orthodox way. He didn't become an agent of any political faction and, ironically, he paid for this when some years later he was injured in a driving accident while going about his business. It left him in debt to the Israeli hospital where his life was saved, but he received no compensation from the Palestinian authorities, which disclaimed any responsibility for his activities.

Emad made this film over five years, and the title refers to the five cameras that were variously smashed in action during that time. At the beginning of the movie they're proudly displayed as battered souvenirs of the struggle. Over the years they've recorded the history of his embattled village, both its private and public sides. Several figures dominate the story that Emad narrates and comments upon. Up front at the barricades are a pair of dedicated friends. One is the vocal, not to say rhetorical Adeb, risking bullets as he comes face to face with Israeli troops. The other is Bassem, a cheerful giant, much loved by the children and nicknamed "el-Phil" (the elephant). Like Emad himself, both are arrested, see members of

their families go to jail and pay the price of passive resistance. Adeen is seriously wounded in the leg, Bassem suffers even worse injuries after a direct hit by a gas grenade.

Behind this pair, but no less endangered, is Emad, recording some of the fiercest footage of assaults and atrocities on the West Bank that I've ever seen, as well as the arson wreaked on Palestinian olive groves by illegal Jewish settlers. He's constantly threatened with physical injury and the destruction of his camera by the arrogant young soldiers, but is always there, arguing for his rights, though there is little he can say when told he lives in "a closed military zone" where he can't even use a camera in his own home. Always hovering around is the little Gibreel, trying to make sense of what he sees. Some of the earliest words he learns are "wall", "war" and "cartridge". There, too, is Soraya, Emad's wife, a handsome woman who ages before our eyes as the years pass. When once again her husband is threatened with arrest, she pleads with him to back down and live a quieter life.



But there are gentler, more hopeful moments in the movie, well brought out by the professional way Emad's raw, direct footage is edited by Jewish-Israeli film-maker Guy Davidi, who became involved with the film after visiting Bil'in with other supporters of the West Bank resisters. There are splendid moments, separated over four years, in which the village celebrates a legal victory and its eventual implementation; a lovely scene where the locals are shown Emad's work-in-progress film to raise their morale; and a peculiarly moving shot of Gibreel handing a sprig from a bulldozed olive tree to an Israeli soldier, that's none the worse for being staged.

5 Broken Cameras is a polemical work and in no sense analytical. It presents with overwhelming power a case of injustice on a massive scale, and gives us a direct experience of what it's like to be on the receiving end of oppression and dispossession, administered by the unyielding, stony-faced representatives of those convinced of their own righteousness. But it isn't vindictive and has a sense of history and destiny. Much may be concealed, but what we are shown and experience is the resilient spirit of one village recorded by a single observe

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