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Piers Handling, Cameron Bailey, Noah Cowan
Toronto International Film Festival
2 Carlton St., 13th floor
Toronto Canada M5B 1J3

Dear Piers, Cameron, Noah:

I've come to a very difficult decision -- I'm withdrawing my film *Covered* from TIFF, in protest against your inaugural City-to-City Spotlight on Tel Aviv.

In the *Canadian Jewish News*, Israeli Consul General Amir Gissin described how this Spotlight is the culmination of his year-long *Brand Israel* campaign, which includes bus/radio/TV ads, the ROM's notorious Dead Sea Scrolls exhibit, and "a major Israeli presence at next year's Toronto International Film Festival, with numerous Israeli, Hollywood and Canadian entertainment luminaries on hand." Gissen said Toronto was chosen as a test-city for *Brand Israel* by Israel's Foreign Ministry, and thanked Astral, MIJO and Canwest for donating the million-dollar budget. (Astral is of course a long-time TIFF sponsor, and Canwest owners' Asper Foundation donated \$500,000 to TIFF). "We've got a real product to sell to Canadians... The lessons learned from Toronto will inform the worldwide launch of *Brand Israel* in the coming years, Gissin said."

This past year has also seen: the devastating Gaza massacre of eight months ago, resulting in over 1000 civilian deaths; the election of a Prime Minister accused of war crimes; the aggressive extension of illegal Israeli settlements on Palestinian lands; the accelerated destruction of Palestinian homes and orchards; the viral growth of the totalitarian security wall, and the further enshrining of the check-point system. Such state policies have led diverse figures such as John Berger, Jimmy Carter, and Bishop Desmond Tutu to characterize this 'brand' as apartheid. Your TIFF program book may describe Tel Aviv as a "vibrant young city... of beaches, cafes and cultural ferment... that celebrates its diversity," but it's also been called "a kind of alter-Gaza, the smiling face of Israeli apartheid" (Naomi Klein) and "the only city in the west without Arab residents" (Tel Aviv filmmaker Udi Aloni).

To my mind, this isn't the right year to celebrate *Brand Israel*, or to demonstrate an ostrich-like indifference to the realities (cinematic and otherwise) of the region, or to pointedly ignore the international economic boycott campaign against Israel. Launched by Palestinian NGO's in 2005, and since joined by thousands inside and outside Israel, the campaign is seen as the last hope for forcing Israel to comply with international law. By ignoring this boycott, TIFF has emphatically taken sides -- and in the process, forced every filmmaker and audience member who opposes the occupation to cross a type of picket line.

Let's be clear: my protest isn't against the films or filmmakers you've chosen. I've seen brilliant works of Israeli and Palestinian cinema at past TIFFs, and will again in coming years. My protest is against the Spotlight itself, and the smug business-as-usual aura it promotes of a "vibrant metropolis [and] dynamic young city... commemorating its centennial", seemingly untroubled by other anniversaries, such as the 42nd anniversary of the occupation. Isn't such an uncritical celebration of Tel Aviv right now akin to celebrating Montgomery buses in 1963, California grapes in 1969, Chilean wines in 1973, Nestles infant formula in 1984, or South African fruit in 1991?

You're probably groaning right now -- "inflammatory rhetoric!" -- but I mention these boycott campaigns because they were specific and strategic to their historic moments, and certainly complex. Like these others, the Israel boycott has been the subject of much debate, with many of us struggling with difficult questions of censorship, constructive engagement and free speech. In our meeting, for instance, you said you supported economic boycotts like South Africa's, but not cultural boycotts. Three points: South Africa was also a cultural boycott (asking singers not to play Sun City); culture is one of Canada's (and Israel's) largest economic sectors (this spotlight is funded by a Canadian Ministry of Industry tourism grant, after all); and the Israel rebrand campaign explicitly targets culture as a priority sector.

Many will still say a boycott prevents much needed dialogue between possible allies. That's why, like Chile, like Nestles, the strategic and specific nature of each case needs to be considered. For instance, I'm helping organize a screening in September for the Toronto Palestinian Film Festival, co-sponsored by Queers Against Israeli Apartheid and the Inside Out Festival. It's a doc that profiles Ezra Nawi, the queer Israeli activist jailed for blocking army bulldozers from destroying Palestinian homes. Technically, the film probably qualifies as meeting the technical criteria of boycott -- not because it was directed by an Israeli filmmaker, but because it received Israeli state funding. Yet all concerned have decided that this film should be seen by Toronto audiences, especially Jews and Palestinians -- a strategic, specific choice, and one that has triggered many productive discussions.

I'm sorry I can't feel the same way about your Tel Aviv spotlight. Despite this past month of emails and meetings, many questions remain for me about its origins, its funding, its programming, its sponsors. You say it was initiated in November 2008... but then why would Gissen seem to be claiming it as part of his campaign four months earlier? You've told me that TIFF isn't officially a part of *Brand Israel* -- okay -- but why haven't you clarified this publicly? Why are only Jewish Israeli filmmakers included? Why are there no voices from the refugee camps and Gaza (or Toronto for that matter), where Tel Aviv's displaced Palestinians now live? Why only big budget Israeli state-funded features -- why not a program of shorts/docs/indie works by underground Israeli and Palestinian artists? Why is TIFF accepting and/or encouraging the support of the Israeli government and consulate, a direct flaunting of the boycott, with filmmaker plane tickets, receptions, parties and evidently the Mayor of Tel Aviv opening the spotlight? Why does this feel like a propaganda campaign?

This decision was very tough. For thirty years, TIFF has been my film school and my community, an annual immersion in the best of world cinema. You've helped rewrite the canon through your pioneering support of new voices and difficult ideas, of avant-garde visions and global stories. You've opened many doors and many minds, and made me think critically and politically about cinema, about how film can speak out and make a difference. In particular, you've been extraordinarily supportive of my own work, often presenting the hometown premieres of my films to your legendary audiences. You are three of the smartest, sharpest, skillful and most thoughtful festival heads anywhere -- this isn't hyperbole, with all of you I speak from two decades worth of friendship and deep respect -- which makes this all the more inexplicable and troubling.

What eventually determined my decision to pull out was the subject of *Covered* itself. It's a doc about the 2008 Sarajevo Queer Festival, which was cancelled due to brutal anti-gay violence. The film focuses on the bravery of the organizers and their supporters, and equally, on the ostriches, on those who remained silent, who refused to speak out: most notoriously, the Sarajevo International Film Festival and the Canadian Ambassador in Sarajevo. To stand in judgment of these ostriches before a TIFF audience, but then say nothing about this Tel Aviv spotlight -- finally, I realized that that was a brand I couldn't stomach.

Peace,

John Greyson

For the duration of TIFF, I've posted *Covered* at: www.vimeo.com/greyzone