

Petitioning for Peace?

‘The Festival That Never Happened’¹ and The Case of Amos Gitai



The Venice Film Festival held last year from 27 August to 6 September exposed film artists to a novel form of persecution, which is followed by the latest 2025 *boycott Israel campaign* signed by no less than their colleagues in the film industry, thus allegedly gathering ‘thousands of signatures’ according to The Guardian.³ As The Guardian states in the title “actors and directors pledge not to work with Israeli film groups ‘implicated in genocide.’”⁴ The petition refers to “whitewashing or justifying genocide and apartheid, and/or partnering with the government committing them” and represents an answer to “the call of Palestinian film-makers, who have urged the international film industry to refuse silence, racism, and dehumanisation, as well as to ‘do everything humanly possible’ to end complicity in their oppression.”⁵ While the petition aims to be self-explanatory in the given circumstances it might prove to be counterproductive, arbitrarily aimed at independent artists and critical voices coming from Israel. It is also not clear how this would work in practice, who would be excluded and who would not, nor how the Palestinian filmmakers would access the platforms that would give them more visibility. Prior to the latest petition for peace by famous and prosperous industry

¹ Mina Radovic: “‘The Ones that Did Not Happen’: The Fascist Influence in the Venice International Film Festival 1932-1945” in *Reframing Film Festivals*, Venice: Ca’ Foscari University of Venice, 2020; also see Bosworth in Radovic.

² Eadweard Muybridge https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Muybridge_race_horse_animated.gif

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2025/sep/08/film-pledge-israeli-institutions-palestinians>

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2025/sep/08/film-pledge-israeli-institutions-palestinians>

⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2025/sep/08/film-pledge-israeli-institutions-palestinians>

‘stars’ the division and persecution of those who are not complicit in genocide started much earlier. That is to say, the festivals have long been highly politicised, putting cinema at risk of becoming a tool of power in the hand of a few curators and stakeholders.

Film festivals have been pushed to exclude important film artists and film historians from specific parts of the world. For example, in 2024 the targeted scapegoat was Amos Gitai,⁶ one of the most important film auteurs of our time and advocate for peace in the Middle East, whose films were too frequently perceived as controversial, as they disturbed those sides not interested in peace. However, in spite of the impressive artistic opus of Amos Gitai, the marketing machinery framed him as a person somehow complicit in the Palestinian catastrophe, which was nothing short of an attempted character assassination. Framing the scapegoats drew us thus closely to the type of persecution to which some film festivals such as the Venice Film Festival are no stranger. In light of this the situation is not promising for any genuine film artists, including the Palestinian auteurs.

Let us start with Venice as a cultural hub of exclusion and let us start from the beginning. The first Venice Biennale started as The International Art Exhibition of the City of Venice in 1895. The Venice Film Festival (Mostra Internazionale d’Arte Cinematografica della Biennale di Venezia), considered one of the ‘Big Five’ international film festivals, was founded in 1932 by Giuseppe Volpi – a member of the National Fascist Party and Benito Mussolini’s Minister of Finance, a count, businessmen, and later president of film juries⁷. Already in the 1920s the fascist influence in the Italian cultural sphere became dominant and the first film festival in 1932 had already been influenced by fascist ideology⁸ both through its founder and its combination of state elitism and promotion of mass culture that would escalate over the years. In 1936 Joseph Goebbels was present and in 1939 opened the Festival, while in 1941 Ante Pavelić attended the Venice Film Festival and in 1942 the Croatian Exhibition (of the Nazi-puppet state NDH Independent State of Croatia) which included the statue of *Poglavnik*⁹ was displayed. In 1938 the Jury was pressured to give the Award to Leni Riefenstahl for *Olympia*, the year when racial laws were already in place. From 1938 German films (alongside Italian)

⁶ <http://www.amosgitai.com/html/film.asp?lang=1>

⁷ “Volpi met Hitler on a state visit.” R.J.B. Bosworth: *Italian Venice: A History*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014.

⁸ The redacted version on the official website of the Venice Film Festival does not provide sufficient information and thus researchers are encouraged to examine the archives. <https://www.labiennale.org/en/history-venice-film-festival>

⁹ https://www.europeana.eu/en/item/08602/AttualitaA41_132610; <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ante-Pavelic>

would predominate at the Festival. The Festival became *the state-project*, promoting civic religion¹⁰ with racial, political and cultural exclusionism particularly targeting Jews, Slavs and Roma as ‘inferior races.’ In 1940 the Festival premiered the infamously antisemitic propagandist film *Jud Süß*¹¹ (Veit Harlan) without a single protest. Likewise, in 1942 *Straža na Drini* (*Watch on the Drina*, Branko Marjanovic)¹² – a fascist propagandist documentary assembled from the *Ustasha*¹³ newsreel – received a bronze diploma from the Festival. According to Volpi, Venice achieved “absolute world primacy in showcasing the high arts”¹⁴ and, further, displaying “the nation’s primacy in high culture and the contrast between the splendidly novel ‘totalitarian and revolutionary concepts of Fascism’ and ‘the old world of demo-plutocratic hegemony’.”¹⁵

The years 1939, 1940, 1941 and 1942 are treated as the years when ‘The Festival did not happen’ and although it very much did happen, it is not officially considered part of the Festival’s history (the so-called ‘void’). The truth of the matter is that the Festival was complicit in nurturing and carrying out totalitarianism in its cruellest form. The Festival in Venice became explicitly involved with fascism from the beginning, where Mussolini declared cinema “the fascist art”, and later with the Holocaust, Venice became a cultural hub of totalitarianism. Yet, Venice’s so-called cultural significance was to be protected at all costs – even the Allies were prohibited from bombing Venice unless they had “the highest authorization.”¹⁶



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¹⁰ Bosworth: Ibid.

¹¹ <https://www.yadvashem.org/de/education/newsletter/15/german-speaking-films-in-filmcenter.html>

¹² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Wacht_an_der_Drina_Stra%C5%BEa_na_Drini_13.ogv

¹³ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Ustasa>; <https://www.yadvashem.org/righteous/stories/the-holocaust-in-croatia.html>

¹⁴ Volpi in Bosworth: Ibid.

¹⁵ Bosworth: Ibid

¹⁶ Bosworth: Ibid.

¹⁷ Benito Mussolini https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Duce_Benito_Mussolini.jpg

In the words of historian R.J.B. Bosworth: “Venice today may pay tribute to La Partigiana with her promise of continuing anti-Fascist victory through permanent struggle. But neither the city’s experience of WWII, nor its peace time condition by 1948 provide compelling evidence of a historical reality that might give body to this myth.”¹⁸ Furthermore, Bosworth continues to explain that Volpi championed the Axis Powers at the Festival who “even in war...unlike their opponents could devote time to the silver screen because they understood cinema to be ‘a school of the nation or race, an art form that was ‘propagandist’ in the positive sense of the word.”¹⁹

This is exactly where the problem lies today. It seems that the Film Festival still perceives cinema to be ‘a school’ and ‘a propagandist art’. The point is that cinema is not a school nor merely propaganda, but a form of art that exposes, questions and subverts ideologies. It is often a space liberated from oppressive narratives in which poetic endeavours of artists strive to engage with the reality of human existence in most turbulent historical times: those artists that through a creative act become activist citizens, unintentionally however factually, while their activist colleagues remain a dead letter on paper and in real life.

For the sake of clarity, Amos Gitai’s film *Why War* was screened at the Venice Film Festival after Gitai declared that the film did not receive Israeli state money whatsoever.²⁰ It is useful here to remember that Amos Gitai’s case is not the only one. Many decades earlier Srđan Dragojević’s film *Pretty Village, Pretty Flame* (1996) was banned when “the director of Viennale, the Austrian film event, refused to screen it, claiming the film was ‘Serb fascist propaganda’.”²¹ Venice unsurprisingly thought the same. This proved as falsity and prejudiced political stance, while the audience was deprived of one of cinema’s greatest films that critically explores the tragedy of the civil war, piercing to the roots of the nationalist-religious ideology promoted and manifested in the cultural sphere only in order to subvert it.²² A lesson could have been learnt in 1996 to prevent the 2020s decade.

¹⁸ Bosworth: Ibid.

¹⁹ Bosworth: Ibid.

²⁰ <https://variety.com/2024/film/news/amos-gitai-why-war-venice-boycott-israel-gaza-1236126166/>

²¹ Dina Iordanova: *Cinema of Flames*, London: British Film Institute, 2001; Milja Radovic: *Cinematic Representations of Nationalist-Religious Ideology in Serbian Films of the 1990s*, Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh, 2009.

²² Milja Radovic: “Resisting the Ideology of Violence in 1990s Serbian Film” in Alistair A. Kee (ed.), *Studies in World Christianity*, Vol. 14, Issue 2, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008; Milja Radovic: *Cinematic Representations*, Ibid. As Variety claimed: “In sensibility this film embodies elements of Jean Paul Sartre’s existentialism and Samuel Beckett’s absurdist humanism...Wilder in its black humor than “Mash”, bolder in its vision of politics and the military than any movie Stanley Kubrick has made, *Pretty Village, Pretty Flame* is one of the most audacious antiwar statements ever committed to the big screen.”

In that sense Dragojević and Gitai have something in common: not only have they been accused of something they did not do nor agreed with but there was also an attempt to ban them from the major festivals, and last but not least they engaged with the issue of war in their own lands. Gitai's *Kippur* (2000) – which firmly established his filmmaking career trajectory – remains one of the most important anti-war films. However, unlike Dragojević, Amos Gitai's film *Why War* was shown and Gitai expressed the firm hope that the tragic war will end,²³ emphasising the role of the artists as bridge-builders for peace, who transcend political divisions and whose task is to heal the wounds brought by destructive politics. In that sense, Gitai acted against the political censorship of artists whose task and vocation is to question reality, truth, peace and war, and to criticise the establishment and the politics of power.



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An attempt to ban Amos Gitai from the Venice Film Festival last year will remain a stain in the already stained history of the Festival. Amos Gitai is one of the rare film artists who unceasingly advocated for peace in the Middle East for decades now, exploring the possibility of peaceful life from the grass root level²⁵, even when that brought him even greater problems (*West of the Jordan River*, 2017: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VwV65EhXqdg>). Like his namesake the Prophet Amos he prophetically warned both the world and Israel what would happen should the peace agreements not be achieved, and should the warmongers remain in charge. Gitai has been focused on minorities in Israel but also on the issues of the position of women within extreme religious communities, on Bedouins, and other groups that share the same space and land. His portrayal of the sameness of Jews and Arabs was rooted in reality,

<https://variety.com/1996/film/reviews/pretty-village-pretty-flame-1200446922/>

²³ <https://variety.com/2024/film/news/amos-gitai-why-war-venice-boycott-israel-gaza-1236126166/>

²⁴ Amos Gitai, personal archive.

²⁵ See Milja Radovic: "Constructing Space, Changing Reality of Israel through Film", *Journal of Religion, Film and Media*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 2019; Milja Radovic: *Film, Religion and Activist Citizens: An Ontology of Transformative Acts*, New York: Routledge, 2017/2019.

which politicians and extremists tried to hide, and his poetic style reflected that reality of suffering and profound love found among the excluded (*Ana Arabia*, 2013: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x7CxVF66hYA>). Gitai unceasingly pursued the idea of the natural right of Jews and Arabs to share the same space, while warning time and again against the increasing conflict in Israel and Palestine, particularly after the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin (*Rabin: The Last Day*, 2015: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZMoG9Sue_9s)



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Attempting to ban or censor artists, such as Gitai, or for that matter important literary figures, musicians or athletes will not bring peace to Palestine, Israel, Ukraine, Russia or any other place on the planet. If anything, it will divide the world even more, imprisoning the artists (and many others) within the framework of specific political narratives from which point blank they cannot constructively criticize anyone or anything anywhere nor act according to their good conscience. Did the Festival who did not ban Riefenstahl have the right to attempt something like this? Certainly not. Burning books or banning films is the attribute of totalitarian ideologies and, in that sense only, we must think twice: are these artists complicit in genocide or are they just a scapegoat for those who should actually take accountability for the wars? Do we want the world without authentic artists whose only sin is often only that they have been ethnically or racially related to specific areas? Do we want a world without Dostoevsky or Pushkin? Do we want a world that in the name of millions of suffering people and children conducts meaningless ‘witch-hunts’ or do we need a world in which the peace will be diplomatically and politically achieved and genocides eradicated, if possible – forever? If the world peace depends on independent filmmakers, or Amos Gitai, then we are lucky. However, I am afraid that it is not to be so.

²⁶ Checkpoint. Film still, *West of the Jordan River* (Amos Gitai, IL/FR 2017), 00:08:01. Courtesy of Amos Gitai.



²⁷ Jerusalem's Carousel. Film still, *West of the Jordan River* (Amos Gitai, IL/FR 2017), 01:24:47. Courtesy of Amos Gitai.