

Dina Iordanova, 'Carole Zabar's Other Israel Festival,'
In: *Film Festival Yearbook 6: Film Festivals and the Middle East*.
St Andrews: St Andrews Film Studies. 2014, 235-247.

Carole Zabar's Other Israel Film Festival

Dina Iordanova

First held in 2007, the Other Israel Film Festival (www.otherisrael.org) abides by a Mission Statement, according to which it

uses film to foster social awareness and cultural understanding. The Festival presents dramatic and documentary films, as well as engaging panels about history, culture and identity on the topic of minority populations in Israel with a focus on Arab / Palestinian citizens of Israel. Our goal is to provide a dynamic and inclusive forum for exploitation of, and dialogue about, diverse communities in Israel, and encourage cinematic expression and creativity dealing with these themes. (Other Israel)

In addition to Israel's Muslim and Christian Arab populations (close to 2 million people), the festival is concerned with the cinematic treatment of other Israeli minorities. There are Druze, Bedouins, as well as the significant population of foreign workers (nearly half a million) and other non-Jewish immigrants whose experiences constitute an important yet lesser-known part of the country's multicultural context.

Initiated and largely funded by Carole Zabar (of Zabar's, the famous Upper West Side food emporium; <http://www.zabars.com>), the Other Israel takes place over a week in mid-November and is headquartered at the Jewish Community Centre (JCC) in Manhattan. For a festival that is still in its first decade, it has generated an encouraging amount of media

attention, with articles in *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times* and the *Village Voice*, among other publications.¹

In June 2013, I travelled to New York for a meeting with the festival's team. Our encounter took place on the premises of the JCC and was attended by the festival's founder Carole Zabar,² as well as by two other team members – the festival's Director Ravit Turjeman³ (of Dragoman Films) and the festival's Executive Director Isaac Zablocki (the Director of the Israel Film Center at the JCC in Manhattan).⁴ Our conversation lasted over an hour and was recorded on my advanced Samsung Galaxy II phone. Due to my technical ineptitude, however, at the last moment I pressed the wrong button and lost the entire recording. I left thinking I could restore the conversation from memory if I only could work on the transcript sooner rather than later. But within days of my return from New York I suffered a family bereavement, so for me the summer months of 2013 were marked by mourning, a period during which I could not work meaningfully. At the time of this writing, in October 2013, I have no way to reliably reference a recording of the conversation and therefore I cannot present the results of this interview as a transcript. What I have reconstructed here is based on the extensive notes that I took during the meeting. To compensate for this deficiency, I explored much material from the web and printed sources, the festival's leaflets and site, and used research notes that I had assembled in preparation for the interview and in the aftermath. Thus, what I render here is a portrait of the Other Israel Film Festival that is partly based on the June 2013 encounter with the founder and the programming team, and partly on my own research.

Why did I think the Other Israel would be an interesting festival to present in the context of this volume? Perhaps because I know that there is a solid, yet often overlooked body of works that feature the difficult co-existence of diverse groups in Israel, i.e. in what is

ultimately a multi-ethnic state that finds it difficult to recognise its own diverse nature. Perhaps because, based on my own past experience working with similar material in the context of the Balkan conflict,⁵ I know how influential the type of films they present can be. Perhaps because, like the festival's founder, I believe that equating 'Israeli' with 'Jewish' is counter-productive as it obscures multiple other dimensions that are equally vital and deserving of respect and mindful awareness. Perhaps because I like Zabar's *chutzpah* in creating this festival: even if she is assisted by affluence, this is a woman alone taking on the rigid establishment of American mainstream public opinion in her own delightfully stubborn and idiosyncratic way. And perhaps because I share her views on the importance of understanding and respecting multiculturalism and the power of film.⁶ So, here is my report on what I learned about the Other Israel Film Festival.

For whom is the festival? The festival is a mainstay for those New York-based Jews who want to keep an open mind on the conflict, and for those Arab-Israelis who are open to the idea of dialogue. According to *The New York Times*, Zabar's one goal [for] the festival was to make American Jews face difficult realities. 'I am doing this for those Jews who go to Israel and see only the fine and rosy parts of life there,' she said. 'I think they have to see this. It is the real Israel. That is the bottom line of why I started this festival.' (Bronner 2012)

Programming team. At this point, the festival is programmed by a team of four: Carole Zabar, Ravit Turjeman, Isaac Zablocki (all three based in Manhattan) and with the close involvement of the Israeli-Arab actor Mohammad Bakri,⁷ who is based in Israel and thus interacts with them from a distance. Zabar has frequently spoken publicly of her great friendship with Bakri, which has developed and persevered over the years. She reiterated to me that this is a friendship she particularly cherishes, but she feels her friendship with the other team members is remarkable as well. These relationships are not easy, as all team

members differ in their political persuasions. She explains that Bakri usually walks out on the festival at least once every year but always stays on in the end.⁸ All things considered, Zabar said, what is most important for the quality of the festival's programme is that members of the team have the freedom to challenge and disagree with one other.

Programming philosophy. For programmer Zablocki, the most important thing is the quality of the films, as it is on quality that the festival's reputation is built. For Zabar, there are other important dimensions: the conversations that take place around the film, the aura that is created, and even the very fact that the festival takes place. According to her, these things may be even more important than the films. The festival generates a kind of community, which sometimes draws in people who may not have attended just a picture show. 'But all these elements would not be as impactful', Ravit Turjeman interjects, 'if the films were not there.' They all concede that, for the festival, the films' content may sometimes be more important than their form.

The programming philosophy relies on showing different takes on life via films from a variety of countries. For an opening night gala the programmers would usually seek to have a film featuring life in a divided country; most often these are films feature the lives of Israeli Arabs. In 2013, the festival opened with the American *Dancing in Jaffa* (Hilla Medalia, U.S., 2013); in 2012, the French *Une bouteille à la mer* (*A Bottle in the Gaza Sea*, Thierry Binisti, France / Israel / Canada, 2011) was received with great interest.

The programme is put together through a selection of films seen at other festivals in Israel (most commonly at Docaviv in Tel Aviv in May (www.docaviv.co.il), at the Jerusalem FF (www.jff.org.il), at the Haifa FF (www.haifaff.co.il) or at other festivals in the U.S., such as the Hamptons International Film Festival (www.hamptonsfilmfest.org) or the Sundance Film

Festival (www.sundance.org/festival)). About 20-30% of the programme is selected from among the 100 or so films submitted directly to the open call (in 2012, three out of the 14 films at the festival were selected in this way). Some of the acclaimed films screened in recent times include *Dolphin Boy* (Dani Menkin and Yonatan Nir, Israel, 2011), or *Shom 'ray Ha 'Saf* (*The Gatekeepers*, Dror Moreh, Israel / France / Germany / Belgium, 2012).

Venues. Most of the festival screenings take place at the JCC in Manhattan (Upper West Side, 334 Amsterdam Avenue; www.jccmanhattan.org). All films also show at the Cinema Village in Greenwich Village (which bills itself as ‘specializing in provocative foreign and independent films’; www.cinemavillage.com). In recent years the festival has been running joint projects with the Taub Centre for Israeli studies at New York University (www.hebrewjudaic.as.nyu.edu/page/taub) and some of the screenings have also taken place at NYU facilities. A selection of films is streamed via the website, but access is available only to audiences based in the U.S. (for copyright reasons). The website also streams some of the discussions that take place around the festival.⁹

Beyond New York City? Is there a network that permits at least some of the films to be seen beyond NYC? What is, in this respect, the relationship of the Other Israel to the significant number of Jewish Film Festivals across North America and internationally? Isaac Zablocki runs a network of about 80 Jewish Film Festivals,¹⁰ based chiefly in the U.S., but in other countries, too. In his assessment, about half of the films shown at the Other Israel would play in the context of many of these other Jewish film festivals as well. Also, a variety of festivals and events – sometimes based in remote or unexpected places – get in touch to ask for some of the films: there has been interest from the Netherlands and Brazil, but also from Rome and even from Jaffa in Israel. In this way, Other Israel plays a distribution role of sorts, ensuring a wider spread for such material.

Sidebars and debates. One of the most important features of the festival is the series of talks and encounters organised and presented as part of the Speak Easy Café, an on-going festival project hosted at the Laurie M. Tisch Gallery in Manhattan (www.otherisrael.org/speakeasy), again at the JCC. An example of a recent panel topic is Other Voices of Conscience: Challenging the Status Quo in Israel Today. It was at Speak Easy that, in 2011, actor Mohammad Bakri engaged in dialogue with Ella Shohat, known for her most eloquent writing on matters of the multi-layered Orientalisation and the problematic representation of minorities in Israeli cinema (1989). Other events staged by the festival include informal brunch discussions and a New Generations Shabbat Dinner, intended to provide a platform for ‘intimate discussion on activism in Israel with festival guests’ (Other Israel). The chief concern for the organisers is to keep the conversation going and ensure that the ensuing dialogue reflects the difference of opinions without excluding anyone.

Otherness. The films selected by the festival form a programme that addresses a broad variety of aspects of ‘otherness’ and that show the multicultural complexity of Israel. Over the years, films on the programme have dealt with many diverse topics, ranging from African refugees to forbidden love. In 2012, critics praised the selection and suggested a subtle shift towards a more universal understanding of otherness, as suggested by Emmanuel Lévinas (Bronner 2012). Ravit Turjeman confirmed that their aim is indeed to push the conversation a bit further, focusing on peace and reconciliation, yet not to dwell solely on the difficult relationship between Palestinians and Israeli Jews. It would be unfair to the audiences to not bring up those additional dimensions; Lévinas’ ideas of otherness are important because they deal with a wider range of issues and not solely with conflict. ¹¹

TRC? I noticed that the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) is referenced as an inspiration for a difficult yet necessary dialogue, so I asked about it. The

response was that this issue had come up in regard to the showing of the film *One Day After Peace* (Erez Laufer and Miri Laufer, Israel, 2012); the team recognise the importance of such cathartic encounters as those known to have occurred in the context of the TRC-led process, yet admit that they do not believe such things are likely to happen in Israel. How can one talk about such matters? There are so many layers of trauma and resentment. ‘It is not likely that Israel will ever come to it’, Zabar says. Indeed, according to Isaac, such important dialogues may come about on a social level, but only after peace. ‘It will take a few generations’, adds Ravit.

Partners and supporters: Also founded and partially funded by Carole Zabar at the JCC in Manhattan, is the Israel Film Center (www.israelfilmcenter.org), a major sponsor of Other Israel. The New Israel Fund (www.nif.org), an international organisation ‘committed to equality and democracy for all Israelis’ is a partner. Another partner is the educational foundation Givat Haviva, whose stated mission is ‘furthering equality and understanding between Jews and Arabs and Israel’ (www.givathaviva.org).

The bulk of the Other Israel’s budget (approx. U.S.\$175,000 per annum, which also pays part of Zablocki’s salary at the Israel Film Center) comes from Zabar’s private funds. Other support comes mainly as in-kind matching funds. I ask why it is that they do not seem to be pro-active in seeking more sponsors. What would happen if, for some reason, Zabar could no longer back the festival? The response of the team is that they are not worried about continuity and they are optimistic about the event’s sustainability. For the time being it is not necessary to seek other sponsors; the funding is sufficient. Should Zabar’s support cease for some reason, I am assured, there are enough parties out there willing to pick up the bill and ensure that the festival continues. Isaac and Ravit are equally invested in and committed to the festival, and they are sure that the JCC will continue supporting Other Israel, as it is

already one of its established brands. Zabar adds that there are also other people in the community who have the means and the desire to step in if required: 'I am not alone.'

Oppositions and rejection. The objections are two-fold: 'The title of the festival proves tricky for everyone', Isaac remarks. First, there is criticism from various Jewish groups. This was most pronounced in the early days. During the first and second year of the festival, for example, there were phone calls expressing suspicion about an anti-Israeli agenda. Somebody even started an organisation – 'one man and a computer', as Isaac puts it – called *JCC Watch*, the purpose of which is the monitoring of the JCC for alleged anti-Israeli activity (www.jccwatch.org). There has been criticism about some of the discussions that take place at Speak Easy, which are recorded and posted on Other Israel's On Demand website (www.otherisraelondemand.com). When the festival sought assistance from the Israeli consulate, someone suggested: 'Why don't you go to the Other Israeli consulate?' Zabar's close friendship with and support for Mohammad Bakri, whose documentary *Jenin, Jenin* (Israel, 2003) had been banned by the Israeli Film Board, which had described it as a 'propagandistic lie' (Pogrebin 2008), has also raised eyebrows among the Jewish community.¹² But whilst there have been tensions, there have so far not been problems major enough to have prevented the festival from taking place.¹³ The festival is not yet mainstream, but is now much more established than when it began.

Next, there is the boycott, by Palestinians, and by Arab nations and international individuals, of all things Israeli. 'Efforts by the festival organizers to reach out to Arab groups have met with rejection over the past few years [...] nonetheless reaching across such barriers remains perhaps the central theme of the films being shown' (Bronner 2012).¹⁴ Zablocki confirms that it has been difficult to partner up with Arab organisations. For many, the boycott comes first and they take a 'guilty until proven innocent' stance. The mere fact that the festival titles

itself Other *Israel* would be enough to cause some to disassociate themselves from it as a reflex. And even though Zabar's efforts have earned the festival, and herself, the moniker of 'outliers' (Bronner 2012), Palestinian and Arab organisations have traditionally snubbed the event. Arab and Palestinian filmmakers who have taken part have had to make difficult choices: there have been directors who committed to take part but eventually did not come. Nevertheless, and perhaps most importantly, the team is committed to continuing to invite Arab and Palestinian directors, and there are, for the most part, at least *some* who do take part.

Food and film. To me it seemed logical to ask Zabar if she sees a direct link between film and food. After all, some of the most important discussions take place during brunch meetings hosted and catered at her home.¹⁵ She has often expressed the view that the only road to peace is by nurturing contacts between people, and on one occasion she used the metaphor of 'a famous Zabar's lobster salad which only has crayfish in it' (but no real lobster) to describe the uneasy situation of Arab Israelis (Zabar 2011). To her, food is one of the major tools for enabling communication; the breaking of bread and a shared meal can see all manner of borders transcended. She has even written a piece that speaks of 'crossing the cultural divide between Arabs and Jews through food and film' that was published by the *Washington Post*, symbolically, on the 10th anniversary of 9/11 (Zabar 2011). Cultural cross-over and the sharing of worlds is not a fantasy; it has already been achieved to some extent in important ways that are often overlooked, but that can teach us vital lessons. Thus, what some today may regard as traditional Jewish fare, in fact sports Arab roots, viz., the hummus boom of the 1970s, or rise of the falafel.¹⁶ In the context of the current explosion of interest in food, Zabar believes that a new BBC project, Yotam Ottolenghi's *Jerusalem on a Plate*

(2013), provides a vivid illustration of how such elusive multicultural conviviality can be effectively brought to the table.

Is this festival activist? ‘Absolutely,’ affirms Zabar. ‘I wanted to have an activist stealth films festival, to present a picture of ordinary Arab- Israelis, to show they are not as scary as many think: they are not only terrorists; I wanted to show their human face.’ As she has said elsewhere: ‘It is not about taking sides – this festival is about people’ (Other Israel). The activism was there from the beginning, and so what is particularly important is the shared experience of viewing films alongside others in the audience, observing how they interact and react – this is as important to Zabar as her own reaction to the films. She also believes the website plays an important role. Zablocki stresses that films screened here are never left to stand alone, the aim is to engage audiences in conversation. ‘For us it is not just about bringing in the directors or experts but to have the conversations in the context of the Speak Easy Café.’

Ravit Turjeman observes that a major change in the history of the festival came with the introduction of its Film Fund in 2009 ([www. otherisrael.org/film-fund](http://www.otherisrael.org/film-fund)). A number of its funded films have already been shown at the festival, including *Zahara*, by Mohammad Bakri (Palestine / Israel, 2009).¹⁷ Filmmakers who visit the festival have the opportunity to participate in important discussions. And, significantly, these exchanges take place in New York, far from where the on-going conflict; people feel more at ease, open up and talk. ‘We have relations with these filmmakers, we have conversations here that they cannot have there’, Zabar says.

Summing up is probably best left to Zablocki, who thinks of the Other Israel Film Festival as ‘by far one of the most progressive and creative festivals’:

There may be many other interesting film festivals out there; some have more money, some have better access. Yet our creativity, ingenuity, and vision, the quality of our programming, the dialogues, our understanding and thinking outside the box, make us proud. We are tempted to think that more people go to film festivals than to synagogues, and the added value that is created is enormous.

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Notes

1 Yet when I asked my New York-based cinéophile friends about the festival, most said they were hearing about it for the first time from me. Another friend commented by email: 'I cannot make up my mind whether I think the festival is doing a great job in sustaining a multi-ethnic awareness among especially U.S.- based Jews (who seem to be the primary target group) or trying to present a more favourable image of Israel than the one many of us are left with due to the Arab-Israeli conflict, like "We certainly have nothing against the Arabs – some of our best friends are Arabs"' (14 January 2014).

2 Carole Zabar, described as ‘both a great lover of Israel and a harsh critic, especially about its treatment of Palestinians’ (Bronner, 2012), was born in Detroit, Michigan, and attended Hebrew University of Jerusalem in the 1960s, graduating in Philosophy and English. She has been active in many Israeli non- profit organisations related to civil rights for over three decades. She worked as a professional photographer, and later completed a Law degree and worked for the City Law Department of New York in the Family Court Division. In 2006, she established the Other Israel Film Festival. Mrs. Zabar is also the co-founder of the Israel Film Center at the JCC in Manhattan. As part of her support for Israeli cultural, social and political causes, Mrs. Zabar serves as board member of the JCC, the New Israel Fund and the American Friends of Meretz. Most recently, she served as Executive Producer of Mohamed Bakri’s documentary film *Zahara* (Palestine / Israel, 2009).

3 Ravit Turjeman was born in Israel and is now based in the U.S. She founded and runs Dragoman Films (<http://www.dragomanfilms.com>), a NYC-based boutique distribution company, specialising in the marketing of independent Israeli cinema in North America. Ms. Turjeman also serves as director and programmer of other film festivals in the Tri-State area, including the New York Sephardic Jewish Film Festival (<http://sephardicfilmfest.org>).

4 Isaac Zablocki was born in New York, grew up in Israel and served as an Educational producer at the leading film unit of the Israeli Defense Forces. He studied film at Columbia University and worked for Miramax. Since 2004, Mr. Zablocki has been the Director of Film Programs at the JCC in Manhattan, from where he programmes several different film festivals, including Reelabilities: NY Disabilities Film Festival (<http://www.reelabilities.org>) which also travels nation- wide across the U.S. to a number of large cities. He is the leading programmer of Israeli films in the U.S. and has developed the largest online database of

Israeli films as well as the Israel Film Center Stream, the leading site for streaming Israeli films. He also writes for *The Huffington Post*.

5 See in particular my (2001) *Cinema of Flames: Balkan Film, Culture and the Media* (London: BFI); the writings in 'Balkan Cinema', the special supplement to *Cineaste* (New York) in June 2007. On-line. Available HTTP: <http://www.cineaste.com/>; and (2008) 'Intercultural Cinema and Balkan Hushed Histories' in *New Review of Film and Television*, 6, 1, 5-16

6 In a Letter from the Founder document posted on the festival's website, Carole Zabar develops her vision of the importance of multiculturalism and the role of film in fostering understanding. It reads:

The Other Israel Film Festival was founded to be a vehicle for cultural change and social insights into the nature of Israel as a democracy and the complex condition of the lives of its minorities that are living in the Jewish State. Israel's largest minority within its midst is the 1.7 million Arabs. In its 60 years of existence Israel has fostered another group of people who have put down roots in Israel and have born their Hebrew speaking children in its boundaries - Israel's 300,000 foreign workers. It is not about the conflict - it is not about taking sides - this festival is about people.

Film can be a powerful tool, it can show new sides, change perceptions, and evoke emotions. Through the use of film, we are provided with a human dimension that extends beyond the daily news bulletins. Film can explore the deeper meaning of everyday living. Through these films, the festival aims to present the lives, dreams and strengths of the Arab minority and to show their participation in Israeli life.

Foreign workers present a unique condition in Israeli society and we aim to familiarize our audience with the faces of ‘foreign workers’.

I care deeply about Israel and its future. Growing up in a democratic Jewish state has without any doubt shaped the cultural and national identity of all of its inhabitants and citizens - who know no other home. These films and artistic expressions are paving the way to co-existence and a new, more inclusive culture in the Middle East.

Sincerely, Carole Zabar Founder (<http://www.otherisrael.org/about-us>).

7 Arab-Israeli theatre and film personality Mohammad Bakri was born in 1953 in North Israel. He is best known for one-man theatrical performances, and he is the director of critically outspoken documentary films such as *Jenin, Jenin* (Israel 2003), a film which won the Best Film award at the Carthage Film Festival, JCC and was subjected to an extensive anti-censorship battle in Israel, and *Zahara* (Palestine/Israel, 2009). A transnational actor, Bakri is also known for his roles in important critical films such as *Hanna K.* (Israel / France, 1983, Constantin Costa-Gavras), *Me'Ahorei Hasoragim (Beyond the Walls*, Israel, 1984, Uri Barabash), *Esther* (1986, Austria / Israel / UK, Amos Gitai, where he co-starred with Juliano Mer-Khamis), *Haifa* (Palestine/Germany/Netherlands, 1996, Rashid Mashrawi), *Desperado Square* (Israel, 2001, Benny Toraty), *Private* (Italy, 2004, Saverio Costanzo) and *La Masseria Delle Allodole* by Paolo and Vittorio Taviani (*The Lark Farm*, Italy / France / Spain / Bulgaria / Germany, 2007).

8 Bakri clearly prefers to keep a low profile with regard to his involvement. He is not listed as a member of the programming team on the website, nor as a member of the advisory board, which includes the following personnel: Daniel Chalfen - Filmmaker, DJC Films; Victoria S. Cook – Entertainment Attorney; Gil Kulick – Environmental and Middle East

Peace Activist; Richard Lorber – President, Koch Lorber Films; Richard Pena – Director, Film Society of Lincoln Center. Professor, Columbia University Film Department; Ravit Turjeman – Festival Director (Dragoman Films); Isaac Zablocki – Festival Executive Director (The JCC Manhattan); Carole Zabar – Festival Founder.

9 Some further recordings of discussions can be found on YouTube, for example Brunch with Festival Guests (2009), available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ykcCCwPD7cc>

10 In Zablocki's estimation, the number of Jewish film festivals stands at about 150 across North America.

11 For Emmanuel Lévinas (1906-1995), the face-to-face encounter with another human being is a privileged phenomenon, an epiphany, where the other person's proximity and distance are both strongly felt (as discussed in his *Totality and Infinity* (1961)).

12 In a recent example where Jewishness and Israel are considered to be the same thing, in August 2013, Isaac Zablocki came under sustained attack from *The Jewish Press* for allegedly expressing 'anti-Israeli views' in his writing for *The Huffington Post*, an offense particularly exacerbated by the fact that he was a paid employee of a Jewish organisation.

13 There has been no uproar comparable to the one faced by the San Francisco Jewish Film Festival (<http://www.sfjff.org>), which screened a film about Rachel Corrie, resulting in a public scandal in 2009. Rachel Corrie (1979-2003) was an American pro-Palestinian peace activist who was crushed to death by an Israel Defense Forces (IDF) armoured bulldozer in Rafah, in the Gaza Strip, under contested circumstances at the height of the second Palestinian Intifada.

14 [Editor's note: Nick Denes makes similar remarks in his chapter on the London Palestine Film Festival (<http://www.palestinefilmfoundation.org>) written for this volume.]

15 This part of our discussion reminded me that it may be a good idea to reference here Laura Marks' piece on festival programming: Marks (2004).

16 In a CityWide interview featured on YouTube, Carole's husband Saul Zabar also discusses his own efforts to change the staff ratio at his store from being primarily Jewish at its onset to the more multicultural balance it enjoys today (Saul Zabar 2012).

17 According to our style guide, we reference all films by the nationality listed on the IMDb. In the case of *Zahara*, however, which is listed with only Palestine as a producing country, I received an indirect communication from Bakri who confirmed that the film ought to be listed as Palestine / Israel – a guidance that I have adopted for this piece.