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[Interview with Israeli Filmmaker and Scholar Avner Faingulernt](#)

[Ryan Wells](#) | April 30, 2012 | [0 Comments](#)



Avner Faingulernt

Cinespect recently spoke with renowned Israeli filmmaker and scholar Avner Faingulernt who is overseeing a [program of new Israeli cinema from Gaza and Sderot at Maysles Cinema from May 1-3](#). Our Conversation is as follows.

Tell us who Avner Faingulernt is.

At the moment, I'm a visiting professor at Columbia where I'm teaching Israeli docs. I'm also a filmmaker who found himself moving back to where he was born—by the border of Gaza. I also extensively traveled the world, saw a lot of different places, but really felt inspired to come back to my hometown, Bror Hail. It's really a wonderful place. My family came here from Brazil originally. There's actually quite a lot of other Brazilian Jews in the area.

Around eleven years ago, I worked on initiating the cinema studies department at [Sapir College](#). Right now, we have around 450 students enrolled. We have our own international film festival [Cinema South Film Festival]. We also are opening programs for master's students. It's wonderful to see that we're becoming quite a force in the international filmmaking community. We're doing really unique things.

On a personal and artistic level, I started making films later in my career when I was thirty-eight. I really have no formal method to it. I usually have no immediate ideas. I just get with my colleagues, grab my camera, and we just go and see where we end up. We see the work we do as a kind of new wave of Israeli cinema.

And so you're in New York for a while and you programmed this three-day series at Maysles Cinema. What it's on exactly?

Well, the films at Maysles are usually in documentary format and have a very psychological approach to their subjects. I also have a strong background in psychology, especially psychoanalysis, so it felt like the obvious choice to partner with.

The films I chose represent some really nice highlights from Gaza and Sderot. I'm really trying to show a different side to life along the border. Films like "My Family's Pizza" and "Sisai" also showcase the ethnic diversity that happens in this region, where films like "Chicken and the Egg" explore government policies in Israel from a feminist, emigrant point-of-view.

The last night we're showing my film "War Matador," which deals with the 2009 Gaza War, where people came from all over the world and Israel to watch the war as tourists, technically speaking. So we watched the people themselves. I see bull fighting as a metaphor for it. It's something that's endless, this chasing.

We'll also have a Q&A with Albert Maysles, Sami Shalom Cherit, and myself at the end of the last night.

Talk about the selection process.

I know all the filmmakers personally. I wanted to focus on something different each night. Living in Harlem reminded me a lot of living in southern Israel. It has a very nice feeling of community; there are parts that are poor, of course. Regardless, it's very genuine, these people.

No one really thinks people live in Gaza. They just see it as a war zone. It also gives another version of Israel of people. So I wanted to bring some very approachable films with universal themes to the Maysles Theater that will strike a chord with New Yorkers just as much as people living in Gaza.

What's been the reaction in Israel to your work and that of other faculty members at Sapir?

It really varies. Some people see our work as an incredible contribution to Israeli cinema. It's been very nicely received in other regions of the world, like Europe.

Our work has also been controversial because we're suggesting an alternative that is not accepted by a lot of people, especially the Israeli government. They believe we should be much more nationalistic and like everybody else. We're not. We claim that Israeli policy is completely wrong and we need to change it. The Palestinians are our neighbors and we need to deal with that.

I think we've also really succeed as a working faculty at Sapir. It's been an attractive place to study cinema. We have students from, say, Paris and Berlin whose parents are mad because they go to this war zone to study film.

A lot of other film schools in Israel really don't care about the kind of work we focus in on. It's not on their agenda. It's not their mission. Most film schools are about making audiences laugh and cry. Our mission is to be involved and be committed to the cause. In my role as a filmmaker, I live at the border. I feel very committed—I have to.



Avner Faingulernt's "War Matador" (2011)

Is Gaza being represented properly by mainstream Israeli filmmakers?

It's not. It's too painful. They don't want to deal with it. The fiction film "Paradise Now" is a very, very brave film. Other Israeli films haven't been that brave to me. Most fictionalized versions don't do a good enough job. Some documentaries reflect the reality well, especially the Occupation side of the discussion. Most want to think they live in Tel Aviv, which is like living in London or New York.

What about on the Palestinian side?

There's not many doing it; but foreigners living there can. The Palestinians, generally speaking, need to be very loyal to the regime. The last film I saw about Gaza by a Palestinian was called "Shooting the Elephant." Most are based in the West Bank. There are some great filmmakers like Nizar Hassan, Michel Khleifi, and Elie Suleiman that make some very important films. These guys are very political and aware. It's their mission to show what's happening there.

I think our film school and festival is really the only place where you're getting accounts on both sides of the issue. Usually it's boycotted on both sides and people don't talk to each other. It's very sad. We should be figuring out how we can live together, not blaming each other and playing the victim.

For Americans what should they take away from your work and this Maysles program?

They should make an effort to see good films; and see life in a place where they didn't think there was any. The media is always about the monstrosity of life there. We know about Israeli soldiers, the suicide bombers and so forth. We don't know the people who live there. Cinema can express the real realities that don't get captured in the mainstream media. In one way these southern Israeli films are very particular, as each film talks about one person's plight. But they are driven by universal themes: it's about life.

Tags: [Albert Maysles](#), [Avner Faingulernt](#), [Bror Hail](#), [Chicken and the Egg](#), [Cinema South Film Festival](#), [Columbia University](#), [Elie Suleiman](#), [featured](#), [full-image](#), [Gaza](#), [Harlem](#), [Israel](#), [Maysles Cinema](#), [Michel Khleifi](#), [My Family's Pizza](#), [Nizar Hassan](#), [Palestinian](#), [Paradise Now](#), [Sami Shalom Cherit](#), [Sapir College](#), [Sderot](#), [Sisai](#), [Tel Aviv](#), [War Matador](#)