

THE VIEWING BOOTH

A FILM BY RA'ANAN ALEXANDROWICZ

71 minutes | Israel, USA | 2020

World Premiere - 2020 Berlin International Film Festival (Forum)
2020 True/False Festival
2020 CPH:DOX Festival
2020 First Look Film Festival, Museum of the Moving Image

Trailer: <https://vimeo.com/389295018>

Images: <https://bit.ly/36fCcOO>

PRESS CONTACT:

Susan Norget Film Promotion

Susan@norget.com

w. 212.431.0090

c. 917.833.3056

Would seeing *how* we see change the way we think?

Short Synopsis

The Viewing Booth explores a space ostensibly off-limits to cinema — the internal experience of a viewer. Unique in its form and structure, the film turns its camera away from the world and towards Maia's eyes — allowing us to follow her experience as she negotiates images that challenge her worldview.

Long Synopsis

The Viewing Booth recounts a unique encounter between a filmmaker and a viewer — exploring the way meaning is attributed to non-fiction images in today's day and age. In a lab-like location, Maia Levy, a young Jewish American woman, watches videos portraying life in the occupied West Bank, while verbalizing her thoughts and feelings in real time. Maia is an enthusiastic supporter of Israel, and the images in the videos, depicting Palestinian life under Israeli military rule, contradict some of her deep-seated beliefs. Empathy, anger, embarrassment, innate biases, and healthy curiosity — all play out before our eyes as we watch her watch the images created by the Occupation. As Maia navigates and negotiates the images, which threaten her worldview, she also reflects on the way she sees them. Her candid and immediate reactions form a one-of-a-kind cinematic testimony to the psychology of the viewer in the digital era.

Director's Statement

During the time of the Spanish Civil War, Virginia Woolf received a letter from a prominent lawyer in London who asked her, perhaps provocatively: "How, in your opinion, are we to prevent war?" In her answer Woolf suggested they first address his use of the word "we" with a little thought experiment. What would happen, she asks him, if they both observe the images of war that are published every week? "Let us see," she writes, whether when we look at the same photographs, we will feel the same things."

I consider my first encounter with this correspondence, around five years ago, as the moment in which the film *The Viewing Booth* was conceived. Woolf's simple and prophetic words were written in a time when the photography of human suffering was a nascent and seemingly unshakable medium of truth. Reading them 80 years later, in a time when truth itself is a contested term in public life, I asked myself: Are people who are looking at the images I make, seeing what I am seeing?

Woolf's words permitted me, or rather commanded me, to question the way nonfiction images function, especially in regard to their role in advocating human rights and social justice. For a few years I searched for the cinematic way to do this. If documentaries are an exploration of reality, I thought, then there must be a way to explore the reality that is the documentary. The

more I searched for the filmic path to do this, the more I felt that in order to understand images I should stop looking at images, but rather turn the camera towards the viewers. The result is *The Viewing Booth*.

While it encompasses questions that were cultivated over a long period of time, *The Viewing Booth* finally happened, almost by chance, during a session that was meant to be a pilot shoot, testing a possible concept for the project. Years of thoughts suddenly and unexpectedly found a cinematic expression when Maia Levy, whom I had never met before, entered the improvised viewing booth that I had created at Temple University in Philadelphia. Maia's dialogue with the images of Palestine and Israel, as well as her reflections on her own perception of these images, lead me to confront myself — as an image maker — in ways that I had not expected. The result is an intimate and tightly focused film that invites viewers to delve into quintessential universal questions on the perception of nonfiction images in our times.

The introspective nature of *The Viewing Booth* determined its unconventional form and structure — one that often evokes the idea of a mirror, or a hall of mirrors. As the work on the film progressed, I realized that it is not only Maia and myself, who are facing our own reflections through this film. If it achieves its objective, *The Viewing Booth* will become a mirror for its viewers, as well as for the nonfiction tradition — a tradition which I consider myself a part of.

Director

Ra'anán Alexandrowicz is a director, screenwriter and editor. He is known for the documentary *The Law in These Parts* (2011), which received the Grand Jury Award at the Sundance Film Festival, a Peabody award, and numerous other prizes. His earlier documentaries, *The Inner Tour* (2001) and *Martin* (1999), were shown in the Berlin Film Festival's Forum section and MoMA's New Directors / New Films series. Alexandrowicz's single fiction feature, *James' Journey to Jerusalem* (2003), premiered in Cannes Directors' Fortnight and at the Toronto International Film Festival and received several international awards. Alexandrowicz's films have been released theatrically in the United States and Europe, and broadcast by PBS, ARTE, the BBC, as well as other television channels. Ra'anán served several times as an editing advisor for the Sundance Documentary Fund and his film *The Viewing Booth* is supported by the Sundance Art of Nonfiction initiative.

Producer

Liran Atzmor has produced numerous award-winning documentary films. Some of his main titles as a producer include *King BB* (2018), *Presenting Princess Shaw* (2015) and *The Law in These Parts* (2011), Atzmor has produced programs for all major Israeli broadcasters, as well as broadcasters and distributors in North America and Europe, including the BBC, ZDF-Arte, the History Channel, and many more. He also served as senior commissioning editor for Israel's documentary channel ("Channel 8").

Cinematographer

Zachary Reese is a Pennsylvania-based media artist who utilizes both analog film and digital video to create projects that combine observational documentation and subjective exploration. His past non-fiction short films include *Divided Highway* (2016), *The Last Place I Saw It* (2016), and *November* (2013). His recent work centers around 360° filmmaking and cinematic virtual reality.

Editor

Neta Dvorkis holds degrees both as a filmmaker and psychologist. She is based in Tel Aviv and has edited several films and television programs. Among her works are the fiction film *Princess* (2014) and the documentary *The Law in these Parts* (2011), which both played the Sundance Film Festival and several other international festivals. She was the supervising director of *Footsteps in Jerusalem* (2014), which was featured in the MoMA, the Barbican and several other film museums worldwide.

Credits

Director

Ra'anan Alexandrowicz

Producers

Liran Atzmor

Ra'anan Alexandrowicz

Cinematographer

Zachary Reese

Editors

Neta Dvorkis

Ra'anan Alexandrowicz

With Videos By

Na'if Da'ana

Rajaa Abu Shkheide

Manal Al-Jaabari

Ra'ed Abu Rmeile

Sound Design

Rotem Dror

Graphic Design

Yose Bercovich

Executive Producers

Annie Roney

Susan Norget

Kirsten Johnson

World Sales

ro*co films

Produced with the support of
Hot8, Israel
The Sundance Documentary Program Fund
The Sundance Art of Nonfiction Fund