DIOGENES

Diogenes 216: 63–71
ISSN 0392-1921

An Interview with Nurith Aviv

Maria Letizia Cravetto

MLC: *What gave you the urge to make documentaries?*
NA: I made the first documentary, *Kafr Qara, Israel*, in 1989, while I was still a chief camera operator.

Do you operate the camera when you're filming?
Mostly, but not always. I carried on making images, working as chief camera operator for other people. Before that I studied at IDHEC, the Paris film school. I was in the camera department, where there were no women. I became the first woman chief operator in France shortly before the women's movement.

You compose a frame like a painter: there's a Nurith Aviv style.
Indeed, my references are painting and music.

Marc le Bot talked about 'formal obsession' to emphasize the fact that, with painters who stand out and innovate in painting, the space is divided up according to recurring modes.
I hope I can adapt to different directors and also create different styles.

Coming to your work, I'd like us to talk first about Makom, avoda (a place, a job).[1]
Makom, avoda, which means 'a place, a job', was made in a slightly accidental fashion and not on my own initiative. A woman producer suggested making a film on foreign workers in Israel; it was a recent phenomenon to see black people, Filipinos, or Thais rather than Palestinians. But I couldn't imagine making a film without mentioning the Palestinians. So I suggested a triangular form: foreign workers replacing Palestinians. I looked for those triangles. I did weeks and weeks of research on Africans who worked especially in services, or Romanians who worked in the building industry, but I found it very hard to get into agricultural areas. They didn't want me to go there. But in the end I managed to get into this agricultural village called Shekef. I found the triangle there: it was there. To start with I heard the sound coming from the Beth Awah muezzin, from the village opposite, then the music

Copyright © UNESCO 2007
SAGE: Los Angeles, London, New Delhi and Singapore, http://dio.sagepub.com
DOI: 10.1177/0392192107086531

floating out of the Thai workers' huts . . . and of course people were speaking Hebrew all around.

As regards the image, I also had the three things: the Israeli village, the village of the Palestinians who'd been banned from working there and the Thais who'd replaced them. When I arrived I found the scenery extraordinary and I said to myself: 'this is it.' Then I binned everything I'd turned up in various spots. Afterwards, when I said again to myself: 'this is it', I started to ask how things had happened. That was when I found out there'd been a tale of murder.

During the first Intifada there'd been a murder which has never been solved. I'm convinced the Palestinian workers weren't behind it: maybe other Palestinians, who didn't like the relationship between the Shekef *moshav* and the Palestinian village of Beth Awah, maybe it was a crime of passion. Anyhow it was never solved. But overnight the Palestinian workers were thrown out. For a year the Israelis looked for other solutions; in the end Shekef was the first village to get permission to bring in Thai workers.

At the time when I made the film all the agricultural work was being done by Thais. Now and then Palestinians worked there but that was increasingly sporadic. The Thais had replaced the Palestinians.

People think I made the documentary because of the murder. But the murder was an extra. What was important was the landscape and the three elements I was looking for, together in a single place.

Triangulation turns up in all your films.
I like the threesome connection.

The connection brings in symbolism, but from another viewpoint what seems to me fundamental in your work is that you can't dissociate image and sound; sound becomes an integral part of the image.
Indeed. The story appears to be the dominant element but for me the starting point is often the space of sound and image. Even for a difficult subject like *Vaters Land* it began with a 30-minute shot where sound is an integral part of the image.

In French Vaters Land *is called* Perte (*loss*).[2]
'*Vaters Land*' is a play on words. It's the country of your fathers but it also alludes to Sigmund Freud's text, which mentions *Vaterland*, meaning fatherland.

It's in the quotation you placed at the start of the film: 'Mourning is the reaction to the loss of a beloved person or an abstract entity taking their place such as fatherland, freedom, an ideal. . .'
I was surprised that Sigmund Freud should talk about fatherland. It was almost from there that the idea took shape. For quite a while I'd had the idea of doing a 30-minute piece in Berlin. Because Berlin had been my father's city and my paternal relations' for a long time. Because German was the Nazis' language that's no reason for me not to speak it. In my family people had spoken German for generations. And for me Berlin is the S-Bahn, the overhead railway crossing the city.

The S-Bahn was a great attraction for me. Before, to go from A to B, you went through East Germany. And as the S-Bahn belonged to East Germany the coaches hadn't changed. When I made the film I insisted on shooting it in those old coaches. Now there are new coaches but the sound of the old coaches was quite different. Unfortunately there are practically none left. I had to wait for some to be found. And nearly all of them had graffitti, there was only one clean one. That was where I set up my camera.

It's something I'd been wanting to do for a long while. The idea of that project is connected with my father's birthday: 12 November. Three days after 9 November, the anniversary of *Kristallnacht*. Arte had suggested I should do something on mourning. It began with that. I wanted to film on the 12th because of my father's birthday and I'd got everything ready, but the answer from Arte didn't arrive till 9 November, which coincided with *Kristallnacht*. It was a Friday and I couldn't arrange filming for Monday. So I reversed the figures and filmed on 21 November. There are a lot of things that happened like that, by chance.

Arte asked for a half-hour film about mourning. Sometimes chance does its job really well: between the Ost Kreuz and West Kreuz stations, which I'd chosen to film, the journey *by chance* takes exactly 30 minutes. And the number 30 for Jews refers to the 30 days of compulsory mourning.

I got the idea of crossing the city and maybe mourning the language, where from goodness knows. At the same time you feel something familiar: I thought my father and grandfather had perhaps travelled in the same coach. The coaches haven't changed. But you feel something completely foreign too: I was in a foreign city, people were speaking a language I feel close to, but at the same time I was in a place that's more than alien to me because . . . Well, with everything that's happened!

So not at the same moment but perhaps in the same coach: a very weird feeling of *unheimlich*, a strange familiarity (and not a disturbing strangeness as it is usually translated).

Later, a few years ago, I met one of my father's cousins who lived in London; he's dead now too. Not long after the film I told him I'd filmed in the S-Bahn. He said to me: 'You know, I used to live in the east; we were the poor cousins, your father lived in the west. When I went to his house you could hear the noise of the S-Bahn in the house. They didn't live far from the S-Bahn.' I didn't know that. I know it was that train my father took, and my grandfather and grandmother. . . Then I remembered my father telling me that when he was a child he used to travel around on the S-Bahn because with one ticket he could go out and come back.

Technically you've been able to use a fixed shot.

It's not fixed: it moves. You're forgetting that the camera is fixed for good. The train does the work by itself. I shot the outside through the window. It's a 30-minute piece and there's no cut! Once you've decided where to put the camera you can't do anything else. Nothing. You've fixed the camera. And everything you see, the beauty of the shot . . . it was chance that created it. I'd decided in advance where to put the camera, I'd decided on the size of the lens and all that, but afterwards it was chance that created the 'thing'. The people are put on top later by a very simple 'blue screen' system. They were in the studio.

I have to admit that when I saw Misafa Lesafa: from one language to the other *for the*

first time I left the cinema: the film was too challenging. In Vaters Land *what disturbed me most was your voice-over when at the end of the documentary you say: 'My mother died in Israel. She said her last word in German. She said* 'aussteigen', *get off.*
The only thing I didn't know in advance was that I was going to end with the maternal line! My starting point was related to the paternal line, in Berlin. At the beginning of the film it's Hannah Arendt talking – I used a bit of an archive documentary – then there's my four friends, people I've known for ages, most of them since the 1960s and 70s.

Hannah Arendt talks about the disappointment in her intellectual friends. I went to see my friends who are intellectuals: I definitely wasn't disappointed. They taught me about German Judaism. They opened a whole world for me. In Israel, where I was born, no one had taught me anything about that. My German friends helped me discover Walter Benjamin . . . With them I felt the loss. They gave me that feeling of loss: the German have lost their Jews, the Jewish part of their own culture.

You make us realize that loss: you put the viewer inside that loss.
The Germans' loss?

Yes.
But if you travel from the beginning to the end in that S-Bahn, which for me is the signifier of Berlin just as the Eiffel Tower is the signifier of Paris, you realize you're getting closer to a place that's a non-place.

A place that's a non-place?
Yes: the S-Bahn is moving. Usually when people make films about their fathers they go and see the houses where they lived. I never thought of going to look for my father's house. A long while ago a psychoanalyst friend from Berlin asked me whether I'd seen my father's house yet. I replied that I didn't even know where it was. It wasn't about going to see the house. In the moving S-Bahn which, with the feelings and the ghosts by my side, is a non-place, I'm with my father. Not just the ghost of my dead father, or the ghost of my father by my side . . . With my father as a child, with my grandfather.

How did you get around to your mother? Isn't there also – forgive me – in your mother's words a place that's a non-place?
What I said at the end came . . . I don't know how. It wasn't in the plan for the film at all, it just came.

Did your mother speak German?
It's not only that. My maternal grandmother died on a train bound for Theresienstadt and we don't know the place where she died. My mother and grandmother spoke German like all the Jews in Prague. In the film I say: 'My mother's mother was born in Prague. Her mother was too. They spoke German like so many Jews in Prague. My grandmother left Theresienstadt in a train going to Riga. The place where she died is unknown. My mother died in Israel. She said her last word in German. She said: "*aussteigen*", get off.'

So there are also those non-places: the train, the last words of my mother saying '*aussteigen*', get off. She was in pain, she wanted to get off from life. It really was *getting off* the train of life. The pain was so severe, it was at the very end. She did this – pulled her hair and said: '*aussteigen*'. It came back to me when I planned the film. In fact I always prepare things ahead. Things are thoroughly thought through ahead of time. And within that very controlled thing there will always be important points that are unplanned and that arise. Without firm control there's no rhythm. It's planned in detail, but there are things that pop up and it turns out that those things are clearly important.

Ionesco used to say 'escape'.
Of course things have popped out . . . People getting on and off, moments when the train stops . . . What makes the fixed shots isn't me, it's chance. I gave chance an opportunity. I organized everything so that within it chance could operate . . . Not on the big things, on the less important things, the details.

In fact you do it all the time. But in Misafa Lesafa: from one language to another *you have gone beyond your intention. You have quite correct, controlled arguments about mother tongue, but there's also a taboo that affects the mother tongue. I realized it uncomfortably because no one ever talks about taboo . . .*
If you think so. But I find that in France it's worse. The political project of imposing French as the sole language has been successful. In Israel as well, but I myself have heard all sorts of languages around me.

There's an extraordinary coincidence. You raise the problem of the meaning and the loss of the mother tongue for immigrants; you draw out of nine responses – from poets, singers, and writers you filmed – to what extent language in Israel, Hebrew, 'is consubstantial with the political project' and you show the connection between 'the private and the political'. You emphasize the contradictions. In doing so you reminded me of Une politique de la langue, the volume edited by Michel de Certeau, Dominique Julia and Jacques Revel (2002), in which they explain how at the time of the French Revolution it was decided to suppress dialects.
I completely agree except that now in Israel you hear Russian everywhere. Do you know that a million Russians arrived between 1970 and 1990 and that now everything is written in Russian? Nowadays you can speak any language you wish, you hear all sorts of languages. In my film *Evgenya Dodina* the actress insists on her daughter speaking Russian but her daughter won't and she translates from Hebrew. So what can I say? Certainly there was a very firm political project. But you mustn't forget they created a nation that didn't exist, they took a language that was a sacred language and managed to turn it into a spoken one. If there's a country where I've heard all languages spoken all the time it's Israel. Take the Hungarian woman poet Agi Mishol: in my film she speaks four languages, learnt from her neighbours. I love Hungarian: it was my nursery teacher's language and my uncle's as well. And when people arrived after the war they spoke what they could . . .

You can see a link with Anna Akhmatova who says in Requiem*: 'I have a lot to do today: / I have to kill memory to the bitter end, / My soul has to turn to stone / I have to learn to live over again.' Meier Wieseltier, whom you film, says: 'I had to murder the Russian language.'*

And Agi Mishol, the poet, says: 'When my father died I felt that Hebrew could no longer bear me, I collapsed into Hungarian, I wailed in Hungarian.' Killing memory, turning feelings to stone, doesn't that mean giving up the 'maternal'?
It's that and its opposite. You had to have a language. It was in the process of evolving into a spoken language, and in fact it's still being created and all the time the language is being invented. There's a terrific slang. It's a very lively language, in which you can mix slang with the language of the sacred texts. Salman Masalha, a Palestinian Arab poet, says in the film that Hebrew was forced on him but that now it belongs to him and he writes as he wants to.

In any case that linguistic plurality, which we take in from the film because of the subtitles, is a counterpoint to an extraordinary beauty, for instance the first image where there's this blue sky . . .
There's one palm-tree, then two palm-trees, one straight and the other leaning over a bit. At that moment I say: 'What is my mother tongue? I don't know what to answer. Is it the language we speak at home, the language of my first words, or the other one, the language of the street, school, the language I learnt to read and write?' And the shot goes on and ends in the sky.

The quality of the blue dominates the white of the clouds. And you link the quality of the blue to the sound of the image. It's extraordinary! What will your next film be?
Langue sacrée, Langue parlée (sacred language, spoken language). Once again it's the story of a tension. The sacred language was sacred in that it wasn't spoken, but it was very much alive, it wasn't dead in the least. It was in everyday prayer, in schoolwork, in the correspondence between rabbis, in questions and responses on many things to do with daily life. It was written in Hebrew, so it definitely wasn't dead. The idea that only a spoken language is a living language is a 19th-century one. The sacred language was a completely living language except that it wasn't spoken. And it was called the sacred language.

But I think we've skipped rather fast over *Misafa Lesafa: from one language to the other*. What I'd like to say is that in the first section of the film we see people who've decided to put to one side their mother tongue, in which they hadn't learnt to read or write. That section features people who aren't fluent in their mother tongue. They were children and moved from one language to another. The second section starts with Palestinians who are bilingual by definition, and it moves from two Palestinians – Salman Masalha, a poet, and Amal Murkus, a singer and actress – to Evgenya Dodina, the Russian actress who, as I've said, insists on keeping her language whereas her daughter speaks Russian but translating from Hebrew like all the children of immigrants who were born in Israel. And after that Daniel Epstein, the philosopher rabbi, says he passes from one world to the other, from one language to the other, he is tossed to and fro. 'I run from one to the other. Like a heart beating, tossing and tossed.' He is in neither one nor the other.

At the beginning of the film, Meir Weiselter the poet says: 'I was eight when we landed in Haifa. I already knew a bit of Hebrew . . . I threw myself completely into Hebrew. It wasn't a decision. It was later on that I decided to be a writer . . . From the moment I tried to get into Hebrew and write, from the moment I had that idea, I had to strangle the Russian language.' So the film starts with a boy who decides to be a writer and knows he wants to become a writer. If you want to write there's only one language to write in, there aren't several languages. The decision to 'strangle the Russian language' is the decision of someone who knows they want to be a writer.

Agi Mishol, the poet, burst into tears in Hungarian.
Yes, but the day her father died! It's a lament, and the lament is preverbal. She collapsed in the language of the father who died. She said to him: 'daddy, daddy' in Hungarian: she spoke to him in his language. She said: 'I felt Hebrew could no longer bear me.' It didn't bear her up in something that had existed before speech. And she says her poetry comes out of that area, between two worlds. She talks of the place between. The Iraqi woman poet Aviva Pedaya also talks about that area: 'Language is, as it were, two-sided, Hebrew facing Arabic. I navigate between the two of them. I talk about my "Hebrewness" and my "Arabness" like two essences connected by a blind bridge, a forgotten zone, an abandoned area.'

You too come from an in-between . . .
Yes, an in-between between German and Hebrew: but at the moment we're speaking French, I've lived here longer than I lived in Israel . . .. Both those poets talk about poetry as an area that is in-between. I don't know whether they're talking about between-two-languages or maybe about maternal and paternal, maybe even the maternal that is preverbal and the paternal that is linguistic. I don't know.

In Misafa Lesafa: from one language to the other *Meir Weiselter's words are truly touching: 'I had to strangle the Russian language.' And Anna Akhmatova says: 'I have a lot to do today: / I have to kill memory to the bitter end, / My soul has to turn to stone / I have to learn to live anew.'*
I know. At a certain moment in your life you think you're doing that. The person who talks about it well is Daniel Epstein, rabbi and philosopher: 'At the time I thought I'd left French and philosophy behind me. But it came back, more and more determinedly, in my teaching because I was keen to pass on what's important to me in French culture, the philosophy I discovered in Israel, with Levinas.' He says as well: 'I wouldn't say I live first in one language, then in the other. I run from one to the other like a beating heart, tossing and tossed.' With Aharon Appelfeld the ambivalence is still stronger. He says: 'With German I always had an ambivalent relationship. It was my mother tongue but it was also the murderers' language.' But I've seen him speak German to Imre Kertesz, the Noble prizewinner, because it was their only common language. It comes back, comes out again.

Between the statements of the people in your film and you there's a sort of mirror play: a mirror play with your poetic style. A montage similar to that of the poet who constructs his rhythm.
I'd never thought the film would arouse such emotion. People came two, three, four times. There was a Chinese woman who wanted to speak: she started to cry. She couldn't do it. Why should that be? There was a Yugoslav woman, same thing! It was incredible how people came back . . .

The mother's language, longing for past worlds, come back – you say – 'by breaking into very emotional situations'. People watching the film don't understand. They're grabbed by an emotion that escapes them; they experience the break-in. The frames border the faces, whereas the words, intonations and sounds of Hebrew make them feel the 'orchestration' of the loss of the maternal. That loss sends viewers back to their 'lost object', mother, absence and pain. You send us back to that 'lost object' which 'gives consistency to pain' (Montrelay 1977: 22).
Yes, and at the same time there's a joy too. The joy of acquiring a language, a new language.

People are affected because your film touches them very deeply.
I agree. There's even a Romanian friend who told me: 'Your film has changed my life.' I don't know what happened to her. I know she came back, though she comes from far away, very far away.

The first time you don't see everything, you're caught up in the emotion. The second time you get to see and make connections, maybe because the film is constructed like a poem. It's very succinct. And people who don't speak Hebrew gain something. They don't understand the language so they don't focus on what's being said. They let themselves be bathed by the sound of the characters, the music of their voices. Perhaps language comes like that, from one body to another. . . . Paradoxically it's better for those who don't understand Hebrew. They have an extra dimension.

Thank you, Nurith Aviv.

Maria Letizia Cravetto
Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, Paris
Translated from the French by Jean Burrell

Nurith Aviv's Filmography as Director

1989	*Kafr Qara, Israël* (doc. 66 mins, France/Germany)
1992	*La tribu européenne* (doc. 75 mins, France)
1997	*Makom, avoda* (doc. 81 mins, France/Israel/Germany)
2000	*Circoncision* (doc. 52 mins, France)
2001	*Allenby, passage* (doc. 5 mins, Israel)
2002	*Vaters land* (Loss) (doc. 30 mins, Germany/France)
2004	*Misafa Lesafa: d'une langue à l'autre* (doc. 55 mins, France/Israel/Germany/Belgium) *L'alphabet de Bruly Bouabré* (doc. 17 mins, France/Germany)

Notes

1. In 1981 25 Israeli families founded the *moshav Shekef*, an agricultural village cooperative next to a large Palestinian village Beth Awah (7000 inhabitants). From either side of the 'green line' – the pre-June 1967 frontier – the *moshav* and the village faced each other. In the beginning the people living in the *moshav* worked the land themselves, but very quickly they called on young men from the neighbouring village. In 1988 at the start of the Intifada one of the *moshav*'s members was assassinated. Despite investigations the killers have not been identified to this day. But overnight the young Palestinian workers were dismissed from the *moshav*. Subsequently, as in the rest of the country, it was decided to replace the hitherto exclusively Palestinian agricultural labour force with workers brought in from a distance, in particular from Thailand. The film tells the story of a triangular relationship in a place (*makom*), around a job (*avoda*).
2. The documentary opens with a quotation from Sigmund Freud: 'Mourning is generally the reaction to the loss of a beloved person or an abstract entity taking their place such as fatherland, freedom, an ideal, etc.' In it Nurith Aviv tells of her paternal relations: her father, grandfather, great-grandfather, who were all born in Berlin. She was born in Tel-Aviv. For her Berlin is a foreign city. In the film Hannah Arendt talks about the attitude of German intellectuals in 1933: 'Our problem wasn't our enemies' attitude but our friends'.' She speaks of being 'suddenly dropped', of 'empty space around us'. She concludes that 'among intellectuals being dropped like that was the rule'. Nurith Aviv's non-Jewish friends from Berlin, who were born after the war, talk about encounters that helped them discover the Jewish component of their culture.

References

Akhmatova, A. (1976) *Requiem and Poem without a Hero*; translated by D. M. Thomas. Athens: Ohio University Press.

de Certeau, M., Julia, D. and Revel, J. (2002) *Une politique de la langue. La Révolution française et les patois: l'enquête de Grégoire*. Paris: Gallimard.

Montrelay, M. (1977) *L'Ombre et le Nom*. Paris: Minuit.