

When We Enter a Garden Called the Middle East, It's Not Yet Full of Flowers ...

An Interview with Avi Mograbi (Filmmaker)

— How do you feel about people like Ali (Al-Azhari) are fluent in Hebrew while the Israeli Jews, unlike yourself, usually don't learn Arabic?

A.M.: Well... It's shame on us! My Arabic is still very poor, that's lack of practice. Most Palestinian people do speak good Hebrew in Israel, not necessary in the occupied territories. And my story is even sadder because my father is from an Arabic speaking family. We are conditioned like that. Arabic is supposedly an official language of the State of Israel, but it's a language neglected, even concealed by the State from the people.

— True. Most of the official documents and signs are only in Hebrew, even at the Embassy here it's only in Hebrew and English.

A.M.: Road signs are in three languages, including Arabic, they want to make sure the Arabs won't miss the exit!

— The film starts talking about your family's Jewish exile experience, and shifts to Ali's, the Palestinian experience of loss and exile. But yours is not a typical Jewish exile experience: usually it's about immigration from Europe due to holocaust that we often hear about, but that's not the case here.

A.M.: I wouldn't say my family's experience was an exile experience. It was a premeditated self-determined immigration because of a sheer capitalistic reason; to make money. Until 1948 or maybe 47, they lived in the open Middle-East. The experience of the Jews in the Orient, in the Arab countries was good experience There were no Pogroms like in Europe before the foundation of the State of Israel.

— One of the intriguing moments in your movie is when Ali is bringing the telephone directory of Palestine, Lebanon and Syria from the 30's, and when you two find your grand parents' address, he is moved more than you, to confirm the mixture of cultures.

A.M.: Ali's ideology has always been living together and sharing, not excluding one another. He is also very good in self-humor, like toward the end at the last visit to Saffuryya when the cassette runs out, he starts to act and making fun of the most sacred issue of the Palestinian people; the return. There is not one moment that he can forget or let go the idea of his loss, but luckily he also has a sense of humor which allows himself to see the fundamental events of the Israel life in different ways.

— By the way the tape running out at that precise moment, did it really happen or you set it up?

A.M.: No no, everything you see in the film except for the letters is totally spontaneous.

— Everything being spontaneous means, the structure of the film you didn't prepare before hand?

A.M.: The original idea of the film was to recreate the moments

of the life of one of my father's cousins, his name was Marcel. He grew up in Beirut. When the state of Israel was founded, he was living in Beirut, and stayed in Beirut. Sometime in 1950's he disappeared from Beirut and appeared in Tel-Aviv, joined the army for a few months, he suffered in the army enormously, he didn't like that so disappeared from the army and returned to Beirut. Yes, it's something unthinkable. It was clear that if I wanted to do this story, part of the film must be in Arabic, So, I asked Ali not to translate a script but write the script with me.

— So what you started to film was originally some sort of a making-of.

A.M.: Yes, I decided to shoot the pre-production meetings. At the first meeting Ali pulled out that yellow pages, the telephone directory, which was a wonderful surprise. So... one thing led to another, I told him my family story as he had to be informed of the background, and when I arrived at last to tell the story of the cousin, we realized it was not interesting, the film was already finished, we were happy about what we've done!

— So you're not going to make the film about Marcel?

A.M.: No, because his story was lost but the idea remained. And also, he became the inspiration for the male character in the letters. Many people are disappointed to know that those letters are not real!

— I am right now!

A.M.: I couldn't write that myself in such good French, but my friends who worked with me came up with a lot of nuances and details, like the song *Once I Entered a Garden* which she [the woman writing/reading the letters] calls their song, a song that I didn't know, and it became the title of the film. The images that go with the letters are shot in Super 8 and look archaic, but actually they were shot in Beirut today, so it's actually contemporary, and it gives a sense of dual meanings. I didn't shoot my self because I couldn't go there, but someone in Beirut shot it for me and he did a wonderful job. You know we used 90% of the footage he took, which in documentary is unprecedented, or even in fiction. So the footage was great, the letters developed beautifully.

— In the past you also brought fiction elements in your documentaries, but more or less as humorous, as comedy. But this time the letters are the most emotional part of the film.

A.M.: Okay? Great! Anyway, this film is very different from what I did before, in its tone, it doesn't start with an antagonistic set of circumstances or issues, it is a film of empathy.

Interview conducted by Fujiwara Toshi (Filmmaker)
via Skype on September 22, 2013

■ Screenings

Once I Entered a Garden 【IC】 10/12 13:45- [A6] | 10/13 15:30- [CL]