

Dossier

Bridging Worlds and Languages

edited and introduced by Maria Letizia Cravetto

Night after night the crowd queued to see *Misafa Lesafa: from one language to the other*, the latest documentary by Nurith Aviv.

A Franco-Israeli film-maker, Nurith Aviv was the first woman chief camera-operator in France. Having created the images for a hundred or so films (fictional and documentary) directed by Agnès Varda, Amos Gitai, René Allio and Jacques Doillon among others, she has made eight documentaries of her own.

In *Misafa Lesafa: from one language to the other* she shows, through 'a cluster of circumstances and figures' (Barthes, 1984: 339), how emigration to Israel has included the giving up of her mother tongue. Successive waves of immigration have forced different groups of people to learn how to express themselves in a new language, Hebrew, and to live in a strange universe. Nurith Aviv understands the pain, the distress, the *disjunction* that runs deep in the characters' private lives, picking up and justifying with her cinematic style moments of extreme seriousness. Viewers find themselves confronted by situations between 'two worlds' and between 'two languages'.

The characters are forced to extricate themselves from one 'culture/language' which has lost its specificity and *raison d'être*. The loosening and reappropriation of the values of the world that has disappeared comprise a weakening of ancestral and family traditions and a socio-economic positioning in different surroundings. That occurs at the moment when feelings of uncertainty and instability give rise to a different functioning of speech, and artistic forms that demand long-term effort in order to get established.

That people came to see *Misafa Lesafa* several times, as well as the numbers patiently queueing for performances, was seen as significant by the group that made up the seminar 'Streben, pour une anthropologie du sous-sol', which met over a period of three years at the Maison des Sciences de l'Homme in Paris.¹

Copyright © UNESCO 2007

SAGE: Los Angeles, London, New Delhi and Singapore, <http://dio.sagepub.com>

DOI: 10.1177/0392192107086530

The 'anthropologie du sous-sol' (underground anthropology) group analyses, on the one hand, the fermentations and decompositions that metabolize the memory of deep-seated traumas haunting the border between the conscious and unconscious. On the other hand, this anthropology attempts to show how subjects and their bodies, with their generational and historical inheritance, are involved in the 'production' and 'representation' of cultural and social events. These events lead us to reflect on the transitions from one world and language to the other, and on the hybridization of mentalities and *métissages* (cross-fertilization: see Cravetto, 2006).²

At the origin of every *métissage* we do indeed find an unexpected reality that causes a fracture in which confidence, memories and hopes are swallowed up. Subjects are confronted with a knowledge that destroys the basis of the symbolic order, denatures the use of language and reveals the instability of systems of taboos. In this regard Anne-Lise Stern (2004) talks about a 'deported knowledge' and says that, when people were deported and lived in camps, experience lost its transmissible character.

Reflecting on this process leads us to wonder about the crisis of representation and to understand as yet unexplained motivations, a number of them via a plurality of modes of new communication, some of which reveal the force of a drive to improvise. Indeed the requirement to find a new way of expressing oneself allows us to imagine that acquaintance with disaster, being uprooted, trauma and exile are transformed into a precarious yet possible life, if subjects can acquire the confidence to say 'in another syntax' (Altounian, 2005: 122) what has reduced their being and speech to the disarray of an existential uncertainty. The Streben group members were convinced that, on the one hand, by analysing Nurith Aviv's work as well as the 'unspoken' in *Misafa Lesafa*, and by reflecting, on the other hand, on the crowd's enthusiasm, we would get closer to the generational experiences that give rise to hybridization of mentalities.

Since we are unable to identify the '*métissages*' that are in the process of occurring within ordinary lives, we need to track down the clues where we find a new mode of being, seeing and acting; where the real occupies the place of the symbolic. Knowing how to speak and act in an alien world, moving 'from one language to the other', are now requirements in our daily life. Traumatic gulfs have turned into rootlessness, while the fear of death has become a logic of destruction and unavoidable abandonment.

To demonstrate the violence and complexity of these changes we have chosen in this thematic section to focus on three different experiences of violence, hybridization and exile.

The first is *emigration to Israel*, discussed in the interview with Nurith Aviv that follows. Here the 'image-word-body' relationship is an underlying motif and a pointer rich in multiple meanings. The fact that sound is an integral part of the image shows that creativity, production of the object, comes out of a process similar to the spider's 'weaving its web with its secretions' (Cremonini and Le Bot, 1979: 16).

Next Paule Pérez, who edits the journal *Temps Marranes* with Claude Corman (www.temps-marranes.info), wanted to get across, in the case of 'masked exiles' heavy with symbolic consequences, how obscene it is to advocate a *hierarchy of exiles*. By writing *Quelques exils masqués, quelques masques d'exil*, she wanted to explore a

hidden aspect of western civilization: the processes that deform and denature transmission and those that damage the relationship between the subject and citizenship. By situating herself in a sociological, anthropological and psychoanalytical perspective, she bears witness in the first person to uprooted subjects. Even when their lives or identity are not in danger, the experience of exile forces them to invent a space–time relationship that can receive their mourning for the lost world. These affects cause an unprecedented connection between action and language which alters references to tradition and gives rise to a twofold risk through disciplining the view of the past and projection towards a future devoid of purchase.

Finally, Michel Sinapi devotes her paper to showing how the '*destruction*' is *constantly changing*, by analysing the motivations behind the crisis which shook French working-class suburbs in November 2005 and by asking questions about the ongoing changes underway in those suburbs, where today different languages and cultures intermingle.

In the transformation taking place, it is not a question of loss of mother tongue or 'political orchestration' of the loss of the maternal, but of the legacy of a traumatic disjunction. This forces subjects to search for new ways of representation that can connect their multiple identities to the effectiveness of their private and public speech.

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

Notes

1. See *Diogenes* no. 199.
2. In the Streben group, Paule Pérez stresses the possibility of the group reflecting on all forms of encounter, clash or interpenetration which on various levels produce new cultural and/or political exchanges. See Paule Pérez, 'Schibboleth, être l'autre chez l'autre, une affaire marrane', in *Temps Marranes* [<http://www.temps-marranes.info>].

References

- Altounian, J. (2005) *L'Intraduisible. Deuil, mémoire, transmission*. Paris: Dunod.
- Barthes, R. (1984) 'Longtemps je me suis couché de bonne heure', in *Le Bruissement de la langue. Essais critiques IV*. Paris: Seuil.
- Cravetto, M.L. (2006) 'Symposium: Migrated Knowledge and Metissages', *Social Science Information*, 45(3): 323–40.
- Cremonini, L. and Le Bot, M. (1979) *Les Parenthèses du regard*. Paris: Fayard.
- Stern, A.-L. (2004) *Le Savoir déporté: Camps, histoire, psychanalyse*. Paris: Seuil.