PREVIEW

A FLY IN THE SOUP

Mocking, mischievous, ironic and pugnacious, Avi Mograbi uses documentary to tell Israelis some things they'd rather not hear

By Michael Chanan

Imagine a documentary about a progressive documentarist trying to make a film about an uncooperative right-wing politician. It's a recipe for a rather special subgenre; let's call it the serious documentary comedy. Locate it in South Africa in 1991 and you get a film by Nick Broomfield. Place it in Israel a few years later during an election campaign and you've got *How I Learned to Overcome My Fear and Love Arik Sharon* by Avi Mograbi (1997). Punctuated by the filmmaker's personal diary-style confessions to camera, in which he owns up to having ghastly dreams about the general-turned-politician, what unfolds is not just an amusing tale about the excitement and frustrations of the chase but an investigation into the way the charismatic politician enters the filmmaker's psyche as he tries to get close to him. The result is a black comedy of which the filmmaker has remarked, "I was forced to play the part of somebody who is not really me, and getting as close as possible to him made me play the part even harder."

So who is this Avi Mograbi? He was born in Tel Aviv in 1956 of immigrant parents: a mother who fled to Palestine from Germany in the 1930s and a father who was born in Beirut into an Arabic-speaking Jewish family. Politicised in his student days (art college, and philosophy at university), he is a man of the left who was sent to prison for refusing to serve in Lebanon in the 1980s. He started making films in 1989 and has developed, out of the simple video diary, a highly idiosyncratic style of self-reflexive personal essay, at once pugnacious and satirical about the corrosive reality he finds around him.

But when you watch his films, you can't always be sure what you're seeing. Turn to his next film, *Happy Birthday, Mr. Mograbi* (1999), or the one after that, *August: A Moment Before the Eruption* (2002), and you get the impression that he's a kind of imp, fond of pranks and scraps and prone to jokey disguises, putting a towel on his head to become Mrs Mograbi. *Variety* calls him a "gadfly documaker" and *Cineaste* quotes his own self-evaluation: "If some [filmmakers] see themselves as a fly on the wall, I see myself as a fly in the soup". In short, he is a performative documentarist, like Broomfield, Michael Moore or Nanni Moretti, who acts himself up on screen: a playful and self-deprecating video diarist with attitude – and split-screen personality disorder.

Part of this attitude is a rejection of Zionist orthodoxies and solidarity with the Palestinians; part is a deep distrust of the orthodox idea of objectivity. Reality isn't punctual. As Mograbi puts it, it is never there in itself and it's always already being interpreted for us all the time. Besides, there is no such thing as a transparent camera; no way, for example, you can introduce a camera at a checkpoint without the soldiers noticing. The camera has a certain power: "You can almost blackmail everyone into behaving better." Whatever the situation, people respond to the camera, whether explicitly or not. But the intervention of the camera also has a tendency to backfire on you.

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Double vision: *August: A Moment Before the Eruption* is like a cognitive map of social paranoia

Wherever he goes with his camera – doctor's waiting room, Tel Aviv beachfront, the Old City of Jerusalem – Mograbi finds a palpable atmosphere of paranoid aggression, which sometimes seems to be occasioned by the presence of the camera itself. In *August*, when he films a demonstration by Zionist settlers, he's beset by a stream of questions about who he's filming for. When he replies, "For myself; I'm independent", some of his interrogators take this to mean that either he's a freelance for an international news agency or a stringer for the police. He encounters the same suspicious questions from a bunch of casual labourers waiting on the roadside for jobs, working-class North African Jews on one side, Israeli Palestinians on the other, no love lost between them. In one extraordinary scene, the crowd don't just want to argue with the camera, they want to direct it as well. Filming the arrest of a couple of Palestine youths in the Old City of Jerusalem, Mograbi is surrounded by a bunch of hostile Israeli onlookers who complain that he didn't film the youths when they were throwing stones.

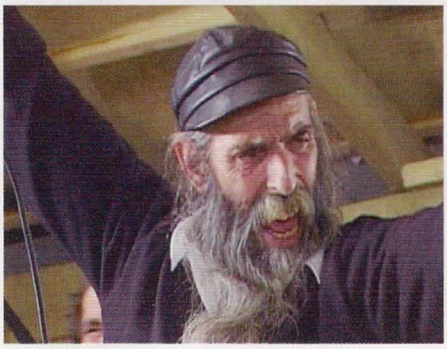
Mograbi plays the role of a documentarist trying to confront everyday reality in a highly ironic attempt to get inside the tortured Israeli psyche. The films are not conventional documentaries at all, but the staging of the problem of documentary truth-telling in the context of a national political disaster and a generalised state of denial about it. Mograbi himself calls them 'fictional documentary' and others call them things like 'pseudo-documentary', but this should not disguise the disturbing truths they tell. For all the barbed humour, there is a deep sense of apprehension in his portrayal of Israel. They are truths the Israeli audience doesn't much care to see, and they punish him by staying away. Indeed, Israeli filmmakers have long been caught in a bind, especially documentarists with a questioning attitude. Their natural audience shuns them and the domestic media marginalise them but abroad they win prizes precisely for asking awkward questions about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the character of Zionism.

I saw *Z32* (2008), in which an Israeli soldier confesses to killing two Palestinian policemen in action, in São Paulo, at a special screening during a film festival that was held in the magnificent auditorium of a Jewish community centre; it was very well attended and followed by a long and serious debate about the brutalising effects of Israel's occupation of Palestine. Mograbi is a good Brechtian, full of self-reflexive devices and self-interruption. He's at home with digital media but his suspicion of the conventions of mainstream documentary makes him distrustful of swish effects. He doesn't want the viewer to be taken in, so he wants the artifice to show – or, as *Variety* puts it: "Digital elements have a home movie feel that works with the personal message." *Variety* does not point out that in Mograbi's world, the personal is political because the political is personal.

This certainly goes for the soldier in *Z32*, who doesn't want his face to be seen, so Mograbi uses a constantly changing 3D digital mask with an uncanny effect on the stability of the viewer's vision: you see and don't see at the same time. On top of that, he pulls off the trick of delivering his commentary in the form of songs, in an entertaining pastiche of Brecht and Weill, and calls the film a "musical-documentary-tragedy".

Manic montage: ***Happy Birthday, Mr. Mograbi***

Naturally, he distrusts simple linear narratives. In *Happy Birthday, Mr. Mograbi* (1999), he plays a filmmaker commissioned to make a celebratory film about Israel's 50th anniversary. At the same time, he is asked by a Palestinian television station to shoot footage for a film they're making on the *Nakba*, or Disaster, as the Palestinians call the founding of Israel in 1948, when they were driven from their homes. Halfway through the film, Mograbi discovers that this year Israel's Independence Day, which follows the Hebrew calendar, falls on his own birthday according to the international calendar – a fact that seriously discombobulates him. But intertwined with the stories of the two films he's supposed to be making is a third, in which Mograbi recounts his attempt to sell a half-finished house on a disputed plot of land he bought ten years earlier. The black humour of this third story provides a tone that pervades the entire film. The result of this manic montage of disparate elements is a caustic view of the nationalism of the Israeli jubilee that was clearly shared by the audience at the documentary film festival in Tel Aviv where I first saw it. Granted, this was an audience of the intelligentsia, but I shall never forget how every time Netanyahu appeared on screen, they creased up in laughter. (Who knows if they're laughing now?)



Zionist myths: ***Avenge But One of My Two Eyes***

August is another three-stranded narrative, with Mograbi this time playing three characters: himself, his wife and his producer. Avi wants to make a film about the month of August, when it's too hot for comfort and which he sees as a metaphor for everything hateful in the State of Israel. His wife gets caught between him and his producer, who is trying to get him to make a film about Baruch Goldstein, the West Bank settler who massacred 29 Palestinians in Hebron in 1994. The film we're seeing moves back and forth between Avi's home, a series of gauche auditions for an actress to the play the role of Goldstein's wife, and the sorties with his camera on to the streets that I mentioned earlier. The resulting film is like a cognitive map of social paranoia.

Then there's *Avenge But One of My Two Eyes* (2005), which again combines disparate elements to deconstruct the heroic myths of ancient Israel so dear to Zionist ideology. The film takes its title from the biblical story of Samson and his suicidal revenge upon the Philistines, which provides the lyrics for a racist rock song sung by Jewish supremacists. Against the background of Palestinian suicide attacks, it makes Samson look like the first suicide bomber in history.

The Mograbi we meet in his latest film, *Once I Entered a Garden*, is mellower, dropping the pugnacity but keeping the irony as he engages his friend and Arabic language teacher Ali Al-Azhari in a dialogue about family history, displacement and cultural identity. Neither is typical of the official history told by either side. Avi laments the cultural loss suffered by his family when, buffeted by history, they abandoned their Arabic culture to migrate to the Zionist homeland. For his part, Ali is one of those driven from his home in 1948, but he has a prestigious job, is comfortably off by Palestinian standards – and his daughter's mother is Jewish. A smart eight-year-old, Yasmin contributes a peroration on racism at her Tel Aviv school, and we're left to ponder the intractable present and the unknown future. S

Avi Mograbi is a special guest at Open City Docs Fest (17-22 June). See opencitydocsfest.com for details