

Interview with Nurit Kedar, Filmmaker

Sergi Doladé. Director of the International Association of Independent Producers of the Mediterranean (APIMED)

Nurit Kedar is a true artist. One of those creatures touched by the capacity to push the boundaries to the next level. That place where common people need to be carried to. She has an extensive career producing and directing documentary films that was honored and acknowledged when she received the Lifetime Achievement Award given by the Israeli Academy of Film and Television in 2014 and the highest recognition of the Israeli Ministry of Culture, The Art of Cinema Award, in 2016. Nurit is a true character with a critical eye, a determined woman who has endeavored to understand the soul of humankind all her life, no matter the conventions and profound disagreements between enemies. She is a true fighter with one weapon: her camera and her unstoppable will to reveal the truth.

Sergi Doladé: Originally, your family was Polish. Where exactly did they come from?

Nurit Kedar: My mother Ruth ran away from Warsaw weeks before the occupation. Her parents, sister, brother and the rest of the family were murdered while hiding underground. My father came from Poland to Israel in 1940. My mother was a nurse working in a hospital and my father was a driver working for a big truck company. No one in my family is connected with films or art. Before my mother died, she asked me to study. For her it was the most important thing: going to university. Years later, I graduated in Biology.

S. D.: What significant memories of your childhood can you share?

N. K.: The most painful and shocking event that occurred in my youth was the death of

my mother from cancer. I was young, and the memory of her death is with me to this day. I remember the screening of my first film *Lebanon Dream* at the Lincoln Center in New York. “Mom,” I said to her, “Mom, if you could be with me, look where I got. I made a living from nothing.”

S. D.: How did you deal with the fact that you were part of a minority group when you were younger?

N. K.: Suddenly I cut my long hair and decided to embrace shiny baldness, standing against the world, against anyone who thinks otherwise. I threw away the embroidered dresses with the long sleeves and closed necklines, and I wore a low-cut black dress and high heels. I think it is amazing to dye your hair in shocking blonde. I coat my nails in red and paint my eyes deep blue, sometimes green. Without this

green, life is not worth it. Getting to foreign places in no man's land, faraway, thinking of a once in a lifetime experience and starting from the beginning. My full frame is missing many pictures. I do not know where these pictures are, certainly not in my photo album. In my private album I found other pictures, not ones that will be shown in my frame. What do you do with all the films that go around in your head? What film am I in now? In a film that is just starting? In a film that is already over? In a film for which all the tickets are sold out? I forgot the film that failed. I want the film of a lifetime. My frames in my films can be so many: once it is the sky, or the sunset, the bloody war, a helicopter, begging eyes, but the tears are not always seen.

S. D.: During the Spanish Civil War, many Catalan Republicans escaped to France, where most of them were kept in concentration camps on the beach of Argelès-sur-mer, where thousands died. Others were later sent to prison camps during the Second World War and the Nazis killed them. A whole generation was destroyed and the survivors of the war did not talk about it. Does that sound familiar to you?

N. K.: It resembles our life here. The Holocaust survivors never spoke. They started a new life in Israel and tried to erase their past. Their children suffered and there are many documentaries showing the pain and the struggle they went through. Israel was established because of the millions of survivors who came here. They were the base of the new Israel. They raised their children to become the new Israeli. Elie Wiesel wrote years ago about his first-time experience teaching a group of university students about the Holocaust. As the very first class came to an end, the students just sat there. Unmovable. Grounded in their seats by the sheer weight of the truth and memory that they were only beginning to inherit. He

realized he had caused them pain. The Holocaust follows us from kindergarten. Teaching about the Holocaust is going to cause pain and will be painful for us: the memory keepers and the links in the chain. For it is impossible to stare in the face of such horror and not endure heartache. The educator's added challenge is that we must keep the ache buried within while we transmit experiences, try to break down time and foster empathy in all who will listen.

S. D.: What was it that made you decide to make films?

N. K.: The decision to set out on my own and to make my own films was not an easy one. Being a CNN producer caused me to become addicted to the news. In Israel, there isn't a dull moment. News haunts news. I had no life outside CNN. After two years, I moved to the new Israeli commercial channel Ch. 2 Keshet. Broadcasting from day one, I produced documentary series and films. Beside the documentaries, I was the producer of the Channel 2 news magazine on Friday evening, which is still the primetime news hour. Through my work at CNN and the news on Channel 2, I was seeing and experiencing inhuman situations between the Israeli military and Palestinian civilians. Injustice affected me mentally and morally. Since you cannot make your own decisions and you are always subject to your superior's decision, I decided to go my own way by making my own films. I set out on my long risky journey making my first film *Lebanon Dream*.

S. D.: How would you describe your state of mind while filming?

N. K.: The topics that interested me the most are the conflicts in the war zone. This is how I found myself in Lebanon, which in the late 1990s was the hot-blooded place in hell. The Israeli army held outposts in Southern

Nurit Kedar Yehuda Bitton Present



Concrete | בטון

Produced by Yehuda Bitton | מייק יבודה ביטון | Script by Nurit Kedar | תסריט נורית קדר | Director Nurit Kedar | במאי נורית קדר
Camera Avner Shahaf | אבנר שאהף | Cinematographer Giora Bejach | גיורא בייח | Editor Noam Levy | נחום לבוי
Original score Ofir Leibovitz | אופיר לייבוביץ | Sound design Alex Claude | אלכס קלוד | Sound Amos Zikori | אמוס זיקורי

Concrete, by Nurit Kedar.

Lebanon and there was not a day that soldiers were not killed in clashes with Hezbollah. The difficult situation with hundreds of dead soldiers led to the decision to withdraw Israel from Lebanon after 20 years. In my film *Lebanon Dream* I looked at the Lebanese mud. Was I scared? Yes. The adrenaline flooded me. The sights hit me. Over the years, I have been in other war zones, the only woman director in war zones.

S. D.: In such situations, do you have a red line that you will not cross while filming?

N. K.: Absolutely! I have clear lines about my moral codes while filming and editing my films. My film *One Shot* focuses on snipers. The Israel Forces (IDF) employs snipers in combat units for targeted assassinations. While documenting assassinations, I decided that I would never reveal the identity of the assassins. This is my red line and it is clear and rigid. While filming *Lebanon Dream* unbearably difficult moments are immortalized, during which the wounded IDF soldiers and casualties are evacuated to the rescue helicopter. I chose not to use the sound of the shouts, not to expose the faces of the wounded. This is my code of ethics.

S. D.: How can documentary films change people's perspectives about the war in general?

N. K.: I think it is inevitable that people will come to find documentaries more compelling and important than fiction. Just as in literature, where the taste has moved from fiction to non-fiction, I think this is going to happen in film as well. In a way, you are on a serendipitous journey, a journey that is much more akin to the life experience. When you see somebody on the screen in a documentary, you are engaged with a person going through real life experiences. Therefore, as you watch the film, you are in fact in the shoes of another individual. Watching

a documentary can feel like a serendipitous journey on which the real lives of strangers unfold before the audience's eyes. There is identification in that special sense of discovery and feeling of close connection to the subject of the film. If documentary war films generate empathy in audiences, illuminating new perspectives and activating powerful emotions, then what happens next? Some leave saying: "I want to do something about the way I feel and what I just saw." Others can shout: "What have you done? Why? What is your evil purpose? Damn you!!!" Margaret Mead taught me that we should never doubt that a small group of thoughtful people can change the world.

S. D.: Let's talk about your latest documentary film *Lieberman*. What drove you to make a film that deciphers Avigdor Lieberman's story?

N. K.: The meteoric rise of Avigdor Lieberman was the first sign of a new era in the State of Israel and, with it, the fall of "the old elites", the rightwing trend and the emergence of "the second Israel" as the dominant political force. However, Lieberman himself, who immigrated at the age of twenty, without a penny in his pocket, remains a mystery. How did he make it? Is he corrupt or a victim? A racist or a pragmatist? Moreover, what lies behind his special relations with Benjamin Netanyahu, dating back to the eighties? Lieberman is not to be thought of as a contrived politician, a Russian immigrant, or one of those classic rags-to-riches stories. He is a creature of Israel. A reflection and manifestation of a very deep and angry strain of the Israeli collective unconsciousness. He is the organic expression of the dark side of Israeli culture. Like his patron Netanyahu, Lieberman was one of the politicians who grew up in the post-Channel 2 era, Israel's commercial TV station, where nothing looked as it did in the days of Channel 1 (Israel Broadcasting Authority) and

the member's notebooks. Lieberman does not have the natural talent for communication that Bibi has, he does not have broad popular support. He does not have a significant record of achievements and he does not have a clear agenda, except for statements against the Arab citizens of Israel. He has to build himself on very shaky foundations, and he does so with unbridled patience and determination. Lieberman also knows how to play a complex game with his public image, with a forceful pose alongside careful, even insipid, conduct in the offices he has reached. He manages at once to be a foreign plant and the symbol of the new, nationalistic and hedonistic Israelites.

S. D.: Making the film, what was the most unexpected aspect of Lieberman you uncovered?

N. K.: At the beginning of his career, Lieberman was marked as “another” but over the years he learned to turn the disadvantage into an advantage that propelled him up. Now the innovation is gone and, precisely because no one is questioning its legitimacy, it is faltering and sinking. In retrospect, this was also the mistake of all his critics and persecutors – they called him Russian – and they thought he was carrying the foreign virus that would kill the Israeli body, but they just did not understand where they lived. Lieberman was never Yvette who came from Russia, but Avigdor who was created here, in this country. He is one of ours, a native landscape of his homeland. That is exactly what I revealed, which was new for the audience. It is my personal point of view. It was the first time people got the full picture of Lieberman.

S. D.: Besides the political issues that the film tackles, I believe you are also portraying an in-depth picture of Israeli society. Why is this such a crucial issue for you?

N. K.: The 1990s were a key moment in Israeli history. Israel, which was a small, intimate, closed and mobilized society, was suddenly open to the world. Privatization was gaining momentum. The population was skyrocketing in size. The Russians, Arabs and ultra-Orthodox appeared on the political stage. The veteran elite were leaving the civil service, the military and public positions in favor of academia, the media and the business world. Israeli society was disintegrating into tribes fighting each other. A layer of new rich people was growing rapidly. Private planes landed at Ben Gurion Airport and yachts moored in Herzliya. Lieberman was exposed to big money, capital, Martin Schlaff and the Russian oligarchs. Vodka was replaced by quality wine. The suits were upgraded. My film deciphers the Lieberman story from a new perspective, one that has to do with the social changes that Israel underwent in the previous two decades. In order to understand Lieberman I had to point out the big change in Israel. Lieberman fitted this new era like a glove.

S. D.: In the past, you received death threats after your film *Concrete* was broadcast on Channel 4. Prelate Pere Casaldàliga, who has just passed away, always defended the idea that one had to have a cause that gives one's life sense. Would you agree?

N. K.: Being mentioned alongside Pere Casaldàliga, one of the best-known exponents of liberation theology, Bishop of the people, is a great honor, which I do not deserve. Let me explain why my film *Concrete* caused threats to my life. The Israeli public, especially the rightwing of the political map, are not ready to hear criticism of the soldiers. Certainly not for military operations. For them soldiers are the undisputed heroes and cannot be criticized. It is difficult for this audience to face the truth even if the soldiers tell it. That is why in their

eyes I am a traitor; I am cheating on them. *Concrete* is a “perpetrator” documentary, the protagonists of which were soldiers who took part in Operation Cast Lead in Gaza. *Concrete* shows a tragedy of every battle in every war. My strong belief in this documentary was and still is the soldiers’ ability to talk about the sights they saw and be able to face the truth even if it was not flattering.

S. D.: What are your upcoming plans? Any other films about Israel, or would you look for a completely different topic?

N. K.: My new film takes place in Lebanon back in 1982. It is called *Playground* and is based on an unknown true story. In June 1982, Israel invaded Lebanon. A company of Israeli paratroopers took part in the occupation of the southern coastal cities of Tira and Sidon. Soon, the situation got complicated as the Israel Defense Forces were up to their neck in the heart of densely populated urban settings: forcibly removing unarmed civilians from their homes, demolishing high-rise residential buildings, surrounded by women and children while fighting. The pressure was intense, especially psychologically. That is when the company got an order to guard a thousand Palestinians detained in a Sidon schoolyard.

S. D.: Your films have gained wide global interest although you put the focus on a regional reality. How do you deal with this when considering a new project?

N. K.: I became involved with my new project *Playground* the first minute I met the officer who told me what it is about. Again, I am inside a war zone. Although I shed light on a regional reality, it has its impact. I want my film to illuminate a particularly important angle in our eyes that is related to the dangers of war. The realization that once you enter

into this being called war, you are exposed to the danger of losing humanity. Of complete disengagement from the shackles of morality and the restraints that keep you within humanity, in your normal daily life. This statement is true of almost every war story, but stands out in this story in particular. For these are mature, mostly educated, people, those who went to war skeptical. Without the enthusiasm or boldness that characterizes young and innocent warriors, and speeds up the process of disintegration of moral values. These are experienced people. If you told them – or their associates – to kill people with blows one day, they would look at you as unbelievers. Here it is. A chilling film that brings up the conflicts, fears, costs and moral issues that arise in time of war. I am interested in portraying the moral issues that arise between soldiers in the face of what has taken place, which is fascinating. I will examine in depth the mental constructs that human beings tell themselves, or the defense mechanisms they use, to justify their actions or deal with their consequences in retrospect. This is about the human condition. Nothing to do with a specific region of the planet.

S. D.: Making documentaries can be taken as a way to psychoanalyse oneself. How was the experience of filming the award-winning-film *One Shot*?

N. K.: Working on my film *One Shot* was a challenging process. The dilemmas, the ambivalent attitude towards the snipers on screen, the desire to find something that would do justice to what I heard. It is the soul of a human being, a fragile soul. It took me hours while listening to their harsh memories to ask one question: “Did you murder?” The word *murder* terrified me. I got the answer: “Murdered? I do not know but yes. You may say murdered.” On the one hand, I wanted the confessions about the deliberate killing. On the other, the

descriptions of the snipers scared me. For the first time in my life, I realized what it is like for a young soldier to kill, to murder. I wanted to protect them, to understand the depth of the act. It took me almost three years to locate snipers. The soldiers who act as snipers are not ready to be interviewed. They are aware of their actions. The snipers in my film had the mental need to talk, to take the deliberate killing away from them. It is difficult not to think of an entire generation of Israeli men whose military service made them believe in inexhaustible power.

S. D.: This issue of *Quaderns de la Mediterrània* is dedicated to art and creativity as a bridge of dialogue. Do you think international viewers recognize themselves in your films?

N. K.: The audience of my films abroad is completely different from the audience in Israel. While in Israel my films irritate the audience and there are shouts from the auditorium against me, abroad the audience is stunned by my films. First, they do not believe in the soldiers' revelations, the state of war, the fears and difficult experiences that the soldiers go through. Later on they shake my hand, fully admiring my films. I think most of my films have revealed to viewers confessions they have never heard. I remember in New York there were screenings of my film *One Shot*. Many Marines attended the Lincoln Center. They were shocked at the revelations of the sniper soldiers. Some of them told me that in the Marines even those who are released from service do not speak. The screenings that were more charged were to a Jewish audience. They did not believe what they saw on screen. They did not like my films, to say the least. They did not like my point of view. In their opinion, I presented Israel in an ugly light. The awards I received are proof that I did the right thing. My cinematic films told the truth even if it

hurts, even if it is not flattering.

S. D.: The arts have played a major role at bringing cultures together. What is your own experience?

N. K.: I believe that there are four roles traditionally assigned to artists. They are to produce a record of their surroundings; to express emotions in a tangible or visible manner; to reveal truths that were either universal or hidden; and to help people view the world from a different or novel perspective. The art that surround us, whether it is a painting, music or even videos, can have huge impact on our mood and emotions... All kinds of art can affect our mood in a positive way, making us feel happier, calmer, or even inspired to do something. Everywhere you go art is evident. Art binds. Culture generates social capital and strengthens a community's character. Art brings people together physically – in galleries, museums, performance spaces – and culturally, through its capacity to tell a community's shared story, to inspire reflection, and form connections that transcend differences.

S. D.: As the artistic director of the Jerusalem Anthropological Film Festival, what is your experience regarding the similarities between cultures?

N. K.: It is fascinating. I opened my self to the world! I get to watch films that show you the diversity of societies, globalization, culture, and people everywhere. While ethnographic or anthropological, film festivals are part of the cultural calendars of major cities worldwide. The distinction of the Jerusalem Anthropological Film Festival comes from its unique combination of academic and public spheres: the festival is integral to the Hebrew University's study program, while holding public events to draw both film enthusiasts and "armchair anthropologists". The Jerusa-

lem Cinematheque, together with the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at the Hebrew University, are working to promote documentary films with ethnographic orientation. These films use cinematic techniques in order to demonstrate the complexity and difficulties of the lives of individuals and communities around the world, the relationship between the human and non-human, and the social, political and financial aspects of these relationships.

S. D.: How have art and creative minds inspired you in your own work?

N. K.: Always be open to new sources of inspiration. Right now, you might be filling your time by watching movie after movie, which is great, don't get me wrong. However, if you open your eyes or turn your head just a little, you might come across something you have never seen/experienced/heard/felt before, and it could end up being the creative catalyst you have been looking for. That is what happened to me. The dark backgrounds from Francis Bacon, the quotations from Brecht's *Mother Courage*, to the internationally renowned Ohad Naharin, the House Choreographer of the Batsheva Dance Company and creator of the Gaga movement language. Legendary choreographer Pina Bausch has greatly influenced my films. The pain, the loneliness, the suffering and the politics that became known in her choreographies she created. The soundtrack of her dance pieces inspired my film's music score featuring Thom Hanreich, Hazmat Modine, Jun Miyake and the unforgettable *O Let Me Weep, For Ever Weep* by the English Chamber Orchestra.

S. D.: Do you think free creativity is at stake?

N. K.: Sir Isaac Newton came up with his theory of gravity and Shakespeare wrote

King Lear during times of plague... What we know from history and psychology is that creativity and innovation arise in times of crisis. When our lives and our world undergo drastic changes, our minds change, too, often opening up to a new level of our own creative potential. Why do so many artists produce their best work during or following times of serious illness, trauma or loss? Moreover, why is it that major artistic movements tend to emerge in the aftermath of war, conflict and periods of social upheaval? Van Gogh created *Starry Night*, along with some of his other most celebrated paintings, in the asylum in Saint-Remy while battling crippling anxiety, depression and possible bipolar disorder. Virginia Woolf wrote *To the Lighthouse* as a way to cope with the loss of her mother. There's also Edvard Munch's *The Scream*, Picasso's *Guernica*, John Lennon's *Strawberry Fields Forever*, Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking* and Amy Winehouse's *Back to Black*, to name a few personal inspirations.

S. D.: The philosopher Byung-Chul Han describes our time as a burnout society. How far do you feel committed to Western society, or do you have a critical position towards it?

N. K.: Han is right, but can you act differently? He is not acting differently from other competitors in his era. It is a great privilege to sit in the academic ivory tower and criticize the people who want to excel or achieve a personal goal. In his opinion, everyone should have remained lumberjacks and water pumps... It is impossible to enjoy the pleasures of life without paying the price that life charges. The race for achievement is long and exhausting but, when you succeed, you enjoy the achievements. There are many who fall by the wayside, their downfall was not caused by Western society, their downfall happened because of low achievement ability.

This is the nature of competition. Some win and some lose. Every documentary filmmaker is accomplished. To be prominent in the field of documentary cinema you should have the ability to tell a story and use a fruitful and creative imagination. Does it sound simple? It's definitely not. I can assure you!

S. D.: Could you share any personal dream that you are still pursuing?

N. K.: My only dream is my closest family, the most precious treasure in my life. They are the diamond in the crown of my life.