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SAMOUNI ROAD

A FILM BY DE STEFANO SAVONA



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A FILM BY STEFANO SAVONA

2018 / France, Italy / Duration: 129' / couleur

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SYNOPSIS

In the rural outskirts of Gaza City a small community of farmers, the Samouni extended family, is about to celebrate a wedding. It's going to be the first celebration since the last war. Amal, Fuad, their brothers and their cousins have lost their parents, their houses and their olive trees. The neighborhood where they live is being rebuilt. As they replant trees and plow fields, they face their most difficult task: piecing together their own memory. Through these young survivors' recollections, Samouni Road conveys a deep, multifaceted portrait of a family before, during and after the tragic event that changed its life forever.





INTERVIEW WITH STEFANO SAVONA



In 2009, you made *Cast Lead*, a film composed of images you shot in Gaza during the attack by the Israeli army in the Palestinian enclave. What inspired you to make this new film nine years later?

The purpose of *Cast Lead* was to break through the embargo of images imposed by the Israelis regarding their military operation. It was designed less like a film and more like a kind of day-to-day cinematographic blog starting the moment I was able to enter Gaza, despite the fact that its borders were completely closed. I filmed everyday and showed what I'd shot each evening, putting the videos online immediately in an attempt to make a visual chronicle of everyday life during the attack. Though I had traveled extensively in Middle East, I didn't know much about Gaza, but I was incensed by the sanitized media coverage of the war seen from the outside, without any idea of what was really happening in the Strip, and the pornographic view shown from the inside, focusing solely on the dead bodies, the pain and the violence. I wanted to break away from this double rhetorical approach, which made it impossible to understand what was really happening for the people of Gaza. The film I compiled with these fragments subsequently, *Cast Lead*, bears traces of this intention.

It was during your stay that you met the Samouni family.

Yes. Following the retreat of the Israeli army on January 20th, 2009, I was able to reach the northern part of the Strip and Gaza City, where I met the Samouni, a community of farmers living close by who had been until then spared from the sixty years of conflict and occupation and who were facing, for the very first time, a tragedy without precedent. Twenty-nine members of this community, women and children for the most part, had been killed by an elite unit of the Israeli army. Their homes and fields had been completely destroyed. I immediately started to film them, but from the very beginning I knew I had to make another film about what happened to this family, a film that didn't have the same form as *Cast Lead*. A film that couldn't be reduced to an account of a massacre or a report on the poignant grieving of an entire family. I saw that it had to be approached from another angle, to distance the film from this kind of situation where one arrives just after an event has happened, when it has already taken place and the people only exist as victims, or in any case are completely subjugated by the horror that has struck them. They disappear as individuals: the personality, diversity of each person no longer exists. Everything they are, putting aside the event, everything they were before it and to some extent after it, has disappeared. I wanted to give back to the Samouni their existence, to stop burying them, both the dead and those left alive, under the unbearable weight of a fatal event.

Did you become aware of this distortion as soon as you came back to France?

Yes. The more Penelope (*Penelope Bortoluzzi, Stefano Savona's producer*) and I worked on the images I shot at the Samounis', the more we realized the limits of the position in which I found myself. We didn't want to simply make another film of denunciation; we know that their impact is limited and that they often run the risk of restituting the magnitude of a complex event in a perfunctory and reductive manner. As the translations arrived, we discovered testimonies of great quality, going far beyond complaints and denunciation and instead drawing the portrait of a specific community with a fascinating history. In the way the Samouni expressed themselves, I recognized the same way of telling something that comes from an oral tradition, just like the Sicilian farmers who I have been following for years for a documentary project called *Il Pane di San Giuseppe*. These Palestinian farmers express a relationship with the world that is basically very similar to that of the Sicilians, a relationship that is at once anchored in reality and filled with imagery.

How did these observations influence the work on the film?

I knew the images I shot in 2009 wouldn't be enough. A year later, in 2010, I got a message announcing the marriage of a young couple; this just seemed impossible, given the tragedy of January 2009 and in particular the death of both their fathers. That was the trigger for my return, even if entering Gaza had become even more problematic. I had to travel through tunnels to get there, but despite quite a few difficulties, I succeeded in reaching the Samouni's district and I stayed there several weeks.

How had the situation evolved in a year's time?

When I returned in 2010, barely a year after the bulldozers of the Israeli army had razed everything, the Samouni had already succeeded in reestablishing some of their fields, in transforming an expanse of rubble and red earth into a planted and green landscape. Despite tremendous material problems, made worse by a very strict embargo, the Samouni had for the most part resisted the existential shock of the tragedy and its heavy ideological fallout. Filming day-to-day life in 2010, marked by the war but almost astonishingly "normal", made me want to recount the daily lives of these people in 2008, before the war that erupted in this peaceful area like something completely unexpected, even if this is Gaza. I wanted to free the Samouni from the roles assigned most of the time to Palestinians by the media, i.e., that they're either terrorists or martyrs. I wanted to make room for and reveal the variety of their lives, the lives of men, women and children.

In one way or another, you had to show situations that you hadn't filmed, those that occurred before the war and also the Israeli attack.

I thought about making a fiction film, but it was just impossible because I did not want to make the persons that I had filmed "disappear" behind actors. Nor did I want to make any reconstitutions, with the inhabitants playing their own roles, obliging them to interact with actors who had to be playing their dead loved ones. It was at this time that the idea of animation came up, a field that neither Penelope nor I knew very well, and with which we had little in common. We wondered about the feasibility of mixing documentary images and animation. This was before Rithy Panh's film, *The Missing Picture*, which proposes another response to a comparable problem, the absence of images from "before the tragedy". We hesitated until we discovered the animation work of Simone Massi.

Who is Simone Massi and how has his work provided an answer to what you were looking for?

Massi has made around ten shorts in 20 years' time, all based on the memory of his family and other inhabitants of his village in central Italy. It takes him an average of two years to make a 5-minute film. His style is very homogeneous and consists of single-sequence shots where the visual elements are constantly transforming, with the viewer circulating among different scales in a very poetic manner. For many years now he has used the scratch card technique, a procedure that begins with an entirely black surface. By means of a succession of lines drawn that remove the black, like the burin for an engraving, light appears. His drawings have a dreamlike quality but they are also visually very realistic, very precise, which makes it possible to connect them to real-life photography. Simone works entirely by hand, very slowly. I think that the tremendous quantity of time and manual gestures incorporated in each drawing also gives a documentary dimension to what he is creating.

How did you work with Simone Massi?

The animations reconstitute the memories of the protagonists. We did not invent anything, all the animation parts of the film are based on the stories and testimonies of the Samouni, including the dream sequences. I wanted to pursue the same approach in the animated sequences as in the rest of the film: they bring to life a district that really existed, along with the charismatic members of the family who died in the massacre. It was therefore absolutely essential for me that the film precisely reconstitutes, almost "archeologically", the houses, the mosque, the orchards – this paradise lost as told to me by the film's protagonists. It was also important that these real characters be recognizable and realistic in their animated



versions. Therefore, I decided beforehand to make use of 3D technology: with the 3D team, we rebuilt the Samouni district before the war and made models of all the film's protagonists (the living using the images I'd shot and the dead based on photos). By means of these virtual models, it was possible to direct the animated sequences: we created animated sequences in 3D that were then redrawn by Simone Massi and conventional 2D animation artists. Each artist took charge of one sequence and interpreted it with his/her individual sensitivity under the artistic direction of Simone Massi.

Do you think there can be as much truth in an animated image as in a documentary sequence?

Yes. I read a lot of non-fiction that is aligned with the writings of Truman Capote. I think that the cinema can also associate the scrupulous respect of the facts with recourse to the resources of the novel in terms of expression. An artifice such as animation makes it possible to recount past events in the present, like those that occurred in the Samouni district, whereas in a documentary it is impossible to film them in the present.

In addition to documentary images and animation you have used a third type of images.

We have recreated the views from the helicopters and Israeli drones by 3D digital images. But all that we see and hear come from cross-checked documentary sources: the testimonies of the Samouni family, members of the International Red Cross and the findings of an Israeli army's investigation commission.

You didn't think about the possibility of contextualizing the events?

We thought about it, and namely in relation to inserting chronological markers in the film, but finally we decided that this story belongs in a more universal context, to be "in the present" as closely as it can. Unfortunately, nothing has basically changed in Gaza in the past few years; there have been other attacks led by Israel since then, and all the problems still remain. That is why the film takes place "today in Gaza". The dates of the events are shown only in the final images. Penelope and I deliberately chose to not refer to them during the film – except the date of the bombing, which can be seen on the digital images.

Since the massacre of 29 members of the family, the status of the Samouni has necessarily changed.

Before 2009, the Samouni benefited from a special status; they had lived in Gaza for generations. They were not refugees, which most of Gaza's inhabitants are. They felt they were less threatened, they had no direct experience in their past with expulsions and persecutions. And again, they are farmers in an area that is almost entirely urbanized. Since 2009 they have, in some respects, become like other Gaza residents, they have somehow become refugees on their own land, constantly reminded of the martyrdom they've been subjected to; they are now beneficiaries of humanitarian aid that tends to detach them from their rural way of life, and namely from their ties to the land. The Samouni resist this phenomenon as best they can. For the majority of Palestinians, in consequence of their refugee status ongoing now for several generations, the attachment to the "land of Palestine" is an abstraction, a general claim, but for the Samouni it is a very concrete reality, one that is experienced physically, and this allows them to maintain a certain independence of thought and action.

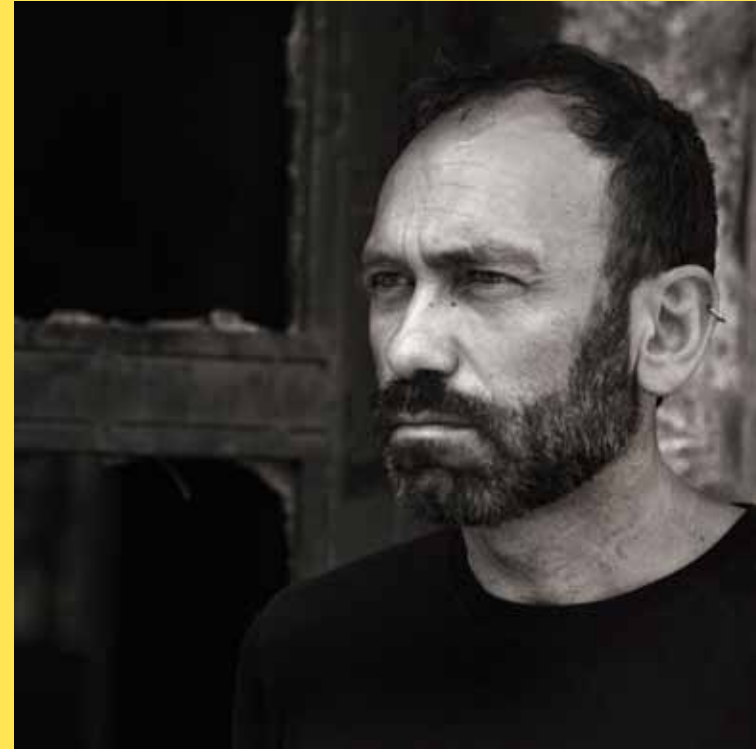
Interview by Jean-Michel Frodon

STEFANO SAVONA

BIOGRAPHY

Stefano Savona was born in Palermo in 1969. After studying archaeology and anthropology in Rome and Cambridge and working as an independent photographer in 1997 he started producing and directing documentaries and video installations. His first feature length documentary, *Notes from a Kurdish Rebel*, produced in 2006 by Arte France, gained the International Jury Prize at the Cinéma du Réel in Paris. His intimate chronicle of the 2008 war in Gaza, *Cast Lead*, obtained the Special Jury Prize at the Locarno Film Festival 2009.

In the same year he launched a campaign for the gathering of the filmed testimonies to be included into *Il Pane di San Giuseppe*, a visual archive for the preservation and the transmission of the oral history of rural civilization in Sicily counting to date around 200 hours of edited contributions. In 2010 he founded with Penelope Bortoluzzi Picofilms, a company with which he has been producing all his subsequent films. Among these *Palazzo delle Aquile*, awarded with the Grand Prix du Cinéma du Réel in 2011 and included in the Acid selection at Cannes Film Festival 2011, and *Tahrir Liberation Square* that, after its premieres in Locarno and at New York Film Festival was theatrically released in France and won the David di Donatello and the Silver Ribbon for best documentary in Italy.



FILMOGRAPHY

- | | |
|------|---|
| 2011 | Tahrir, Liberation Square
Palazzo delle Aquile |
| 2010 | Spezzacatene |
| 2009 | Cast Lead |
| 2006 | Notes from a Kurdish Rebel |

FICHE TECHNIQUE

Directed by	Stefano Savona
Image, Sound	Stefano Savona
Animation Art Director	Simone Massi
Screenplay	Stefano Savona Léa Mysius Penelope Bortoluzzi
Editing	Luc Forveille
Sound editing	Jean Mallet Margot Testemale
Sound mixing	Jean Mallet
Music	Giulia Tagliavia
Produced by	Penelope Bortoluzzi Marco Alessi Cécile Lestrade
Produced by	Picofilms (France) Alter Ego Production (France) Dugong Films (Italie)
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Onlus

