

STÉPHANIE SAADÉ IN CONVERSATION WITH ROY SAMAHA

S: You're currently showing two films at Kunsthaus Pasquart, as part of the film program *A Night in Beirut*, that I curated there in parallel with my show *Building a Home with Time*. The first film is *Landscape at Noon*; it's a proper cinematographic film, which lasts 66 minutes. Why did you feel like making a cinematographic film rather than an artist film like you usually do?

R: It's just another way of telling stories... I don't really see a difference between films whether they are fictional or documentary. It's about exploring another narrative structure so I chose this format mainly because it is based on some narrative literature and I thought it would be nice to represent it in a narrative fictional way.

S: The film starts with Nasri, a young filmmaker like yourself, filming a war scene. He is dissatisfied with it because he doesn't find it realistic enough: the fake blood doesn't look like real blood, etc. Is there a parallel between Nasri and you which made you choose a filmmaker as the protagonist?

R: ... Every story we tell is in essence a synthesized autobiography. Nasri is mainly dissatisfied with the fake aspect of cinema, you know that's what he is annoyed with, he has a certain image in his head about things he saw during the war and he thought that he could represent that on screen by reconstructing scenes that he had from his memory and archival material, but he feels that he is failing, he is constantly failing so he partly blames it on he is not sure why he is failing even though he did a lot of research, he watched a lot of archival footage and tried to be as authentic as possible, but there is something artificial in the way cinema represents reality and somehow he had this kind of existential crisis because that he is making all of this effort and still failing to represent an image that is stuck in his mind, so he decides to pause making the film and to go on further research. That's why he decides to go to Nicosia, because the situation there is formally still similar to what Beirut was during the 70s & 80s ... also thinking he might get new inspiration that will help him make this film so he embarks on this journey...

S: We learn that Nasri's father was kidnapped during the war and had lost his memory when he came back home. It feels as if, through the film that he's trying to make, and through the trip that he will make to Nicosia, Nasri is trying to access not only the lost memory of his country – a time past – but also his father's inaccessible memories. Nicosia is depicted in your movie as a version of wartime Beirut frozen in the past, and traveling as the possibility of time travel into the past. How did you think of making this parallel between Nicosia and Beirut?

R: We don't know that the father was kidnapped, he just disappeared and no one knows what happened, and so this lack of memory in the father's lived experience is basically the core of the film, because when we don't have information on a certain event or a period of time, this is when speculation and rumor, therefore fiction, starts Nasri's obsession with wanting to understand this mysterious event made him want to make this film that he is unable to make, because he is unable to access this dark period... so the parallel to Nicosia is basically... the parallel was there during the war, for some reason the civil war started there in 74 and few months later started in Beirut, so this parallel imposed itself ...they divided their capital and the country, we divided our capital and the country ... of course it was in relation to many regional and geopolitical events happening but basically the events here and there were unfolding in parallel, so if you listened to radio broadcasts from that period we would get news reports from Nicosia and Beirut...so the parallel was there anyway Also very important to me is the relationship between this latent memory and the notion of the buffer zone. I am thinking about amnesia not as an absence of memory, but as an alternative reprocessing of events, like the buffer zone in Cyprus, which is a portal to a past frozen by a United Nations decree. It creates a kind of spatiotemporal amnesia where space-time is wrapped, non-linear, indefinite and reversible. A political gesture, such as the creation of this zone, turns an area into a latent picture still to be processed with an uncertain outcome. This archiving of the past in stills and videos etc. is symptomatic of a society moving towards amnesia.

S: The film starts in a realistic way but once Nasri reaches Cyprus communication with his girlfriend is broken; she sends him messages on his phone but she doesn't get any reply. Nasri eventually decides to send her a postcard

from his hotel in Nicosia – we can't help noticing that this postcard is exactly the same that his father had in his pocket when he came back from his disappearance. Nasri forgets to write the address on the postcard, as if it was unnecessary, as if communication could happen in a direct way. My question to you is about objects in your films: this postcard, and a ring that we see at several times in the film, are kind of "transitional" objects, that are linking different geographical locations and different times magically. How would you define these objects?

R: The postcard is what he kept from his father after he passed away, so he took it with him and basically when he is on his first walk in the city he notices that at a shop in the street there is a rack that has postcards that had many copies of the same postcard that he had, so he had thought it was a unique special item but then he noticed that it actually isn't. He had thought that this might be a clue about what his father ...what happened to his father during this one week of absence, but he noticed that it's just another regular object that you can find anywhere, so he kind of got disappointed and then in a playful way of moving on, he decides to send her a letter, like a classical way of communicating ... but he is so absent minded that he forgets to put the address. He is not able to focus on things around him because he is drawn to this week when his father disappeared, and it's all in total darkness, it's taking his attention away, so he does things half-way. He doesn't finish his gestures well, he doesn't communicate well because he is divagating...

S: As Nasri is taking photos at the port, he is approached by an unknown man who asks him to photograph a dead man. What is the importance of the photography of the dead for you and in the film?

R: The port is in Kyrenia, in the occupied northern part of Cyprus. First a little clarification. Nasri lied to the person who approached him, Suleiman, he just wanted to get rid of him, you know he was just taking pictures and this guy approaches him for some reason, so he assumed the role of an ex-war photographer who is now into real estate just to get rid of him, he thought that maybe if he tells him this the guy will leave him alone, he wasn't really in the mood to engage with anybody. But ironically what he did actually got him more stuck in this situation, he was trying to move on with his free mindless wandering and he lied, and somehow this guy decides to invite him on a trip. So about photographing the dead, we return to the main idea behind the film Nasri was writing which is called "the Last Portrait", it is an old, established tradition, everybody used to do this but they don't do it anymore. It comes from this idea of fixating this last presence of the people we love before they completely leave us, before we put them in the ground and they just disintegrate...so it's an old tradition and it resonates with the idea of Nasri not being able to represent death properly in his film. This is why he quit or he postponed making the film... and he was looking for an experience that will give him the sense of authenticity you know, and he kind of got it... it's like careful what you wish for, so the film is mainly constructed on this ironic reading of history.

S: From that moment on, the film shifts from realistic to fantastical. Nasri is invited to photograph a dead man but instead the dead man rises and invites Nasri to follow him. Nasri enters into a different realm, obeying different rules, and finds himself amongst dead people (including his own girlfriend), who inhabit a mansion with a garden. What really happens here, and are you establishing an unexpected and uncanny connection with Lebanese history?

R: Also a little detail is that the second part of the film is partly adapted from two short stories, one that was written by Lord Byron two centuries ago called "Fragment of a Novel", it's an unfinished short story that was published without his consent, and the second adaptation is from "Photographic Memory", also a short story written by Jalal Toufic around two decades ago ... and I took them, combined them and expanded on them to turn them into one script...

S: Where are these scenes shot? We also can't help but notice that the actors in your film are all from the Lebanese art sphere,... Was it an intentional decision on your side to invite them to act in your film?

R: The intention was more a collaborative attitude, people that I know and thought it would be nice to place in another context..... about the locations, the film was shot between Turkey, Greece, Cyprus and Lebanon, mainly in these 4 locations, so the mansion is in Lebanon, parts of the woods are also in Lebanon and other parts are in Cyprus and elsewhere etc..., and in the film we don't really know which is where because of this similarity in vegetation and topography between these countries, and it enhances this idea of making a parallel between these places, not just based on the political situation there, but also on the geographical similarities between them.

S: There are some parallels between the two films you're showing, *Landscape at Noon* and *Sun Rave*, such as the recurrence of old and abandoned houses' interiors: furniture covered in bed sheets, objects covered in dust, broken objects, ...

R: Concerning the objects in the film, that is also something that I am always working on and reading about, this notion of what memory objects retain after we leave, this idea of the object itself being a container of memory, it retains the memory of the people that once used these objects, they also resonate the idea of this missing memory and the possibility to revisit it...

S: The second film, *Sun Rave* starts with a very surprising and frightening information given to us in the form of a text, and that establishes a correlation between major solar events and political events. Why were you interested in highlighting this connection, and what was the departure point of your research for this film?

R: I was mainly researching major solar storms that happened in the 20th century, I became interested in this subject when I found book in our library that belonged to my father. It talks about how solar storms can disturb electronic communication systems when they happen, I mean depending on their magnitude. so I was searching for the major ones that happened in history and one of the most recent happened in 1989, and during this period many weird events happened at the same time you know like in Eastern Europe, like the Soviet Union starting to get dismantled, the fall of the Berlin wall etc.. so these 2 events happened during the same period, so I pursued this idea further and this how the film got to be made.

S: Through this film you're establishing a connection between the cosmic and the political, implying that the political could be influenced by the cosmic. You describe the effects of solar storms on earth and on individuals as events that made them go crazy. Could this also be a new way of exploring Lebanese history, by transcending the local problematic that led to the war and suggesting that there was an influence from above?

R: Politics are mainly managed by people and people are very susceptible to many things, you know it's like depending on their mood they might make a decision and this decision can lead to a disaster, so this is something we all agree upon I mean depending on the mood of the politician something will happen, something good or something very bad. So I kind of pushed this idea to a very ironic stage where basically... it's also from the perceptive of an oblique reading of history, not just talking about the geopolitical dynamic or the common interest of countries and how people and politicians act according to their personal interests I wanted to add this layer of a "pataphysical" reading of history. That a very slight change in someone's mood might lead to a disaster or something else.

S: In *Sun Rave*, as in *Landscape at Noon*, objects are very present. There are still shots of chandeliers, old paintings, which constitute a kind of collective memory of houses in Lebanon; they could be coming from our grandparents or parents' houses, or from neighbors' houses as is the case in your film. I was drawn to them as I use similar objects in my work, and in my show *Building a Home with Time* at Kunsthau Pasquart. What is the importance of these objects in *Sun Rave*?

R: The same way I approached objects in *Landscape at Noon*, the idea that these are memory capsules, they retain whatever has been around them like the voices of people. Of course the first level is the bodily presence, people sit on them and touch them and exchange sweat etc... but they also retain the presence itself, in some ethereal way... when people leave these objects behind, that's basically why we get nostalgic when we look at these objects, they trigger something and I see that this triggering happens because the object itself is kind of communicating something to us, it communicates little bits and pieces from the people's lives who used to use these objects or be around them. And they also alter our perception of the present... like mainly in *Sun Rave* when I filmed the objects, there are constant offscreen sounds from the radio and the moving of chairs and furniture. so the objects that... how to say it... the mundane furniture and objects that are around us also shape this sonic space that we live in... the way sounds bounce on them or absorbed by them or filtered by them ...so they let something out and they retain something else at the same time.

S: In *Sun Rave*, text is put at the same level as image, it has the same importance. The text occupies half of the visual space of the film, and it's quite a striking text! You mentioned it partly comes from a book that you had from your father. What about the rest of the text, did you write it?

R: Yes the technical element come from the book, the rest is my diary. This is the book: Electronic Communication systems by George Kennedy. There is a chapter called Noise, I highlighted some paragraphs a long time ago when I sed to spend time reading the book just for fun without understanding much, because it's very complicated, and in this chapter about atmospheric noise they talk about the solar cycle.... It kind of stayed in my head and it kind of

shaped my poetic reading of reality ... and it also served as the technical basis of the text so I got these accurate scientific details and the rest is just my diary.

R: Yeah it is, I mean because there is information in the text that... there is something in the text that cannot be represented in the image, and I wanted to keep it in the text because there is something when you read a text that opens up something in your imagination, the image imposes something on your imagination.. when you see an image you are seeing something specific, so the imagination stops, but the intellectual process starts. With text, it's reversed. When you're reading something you're engaging your intellect, so your imagination starts expanding, and I wanted to do this kind of dialectic between the written and the visual... the written which is mainly a representation of our abstract thoughts, and the visual which is just pure representation of reality, and when they are put together they create this kind of ethereal image, this kind of image that we don't see in the film, but when the film is finished it stays with you... this is what stays with you.

S: Finally, what about the premonitory dimension in your films? It's something that I explore in my show, the way that works made before the October 17 2019 revolution in Lebanon, before the devaluation of the Lebanese pound, before the hyperinflation that followed, before the pandemic, before the August 4 Beirut blast, ... have been affected by these events in the way that we read them. But I also feel that artists, or their works, sensed that such events could occur, and this only becomes a layer of the work once these events have happened. In *Sun Rave*, we see a session of spiritism, is this way of obtaining answers, or is predicting the future something that you are interested in at all?

R: [laughs].... No spiritism is a very big part of my shaping you know, because we really had a neighbor who used to practice spiritism, I did not invent this story... and at night we used to hear the same voices that I reproduced in *Sun Rave*. This woman did exist and when she passed away people said that there were rumors that people could not cross the door, they were afraid to cross the door into her house ... they had to bring a priest who needed to do some rituals to clear out the house from her spirit, she had a very strong spirit...

S: laughs...

R: She also used to ... like if you go out on the street and you look up to her balcony, she used to do some very nice abstract drawings with dark red paint, I also mentioned this in the video. So this neighbor existed and the rumors around her used to be something we fantasized about, especially that she very active at night, after midnight and in the early hours of the morning... yeah so that's why it's part of the film, it's very important, it was really part of the diary I wrote about this little story. Now the other aspect you are talking about, the premonitory thing is kind of like the cyclic aspect of solar activity , like every eleven years it repeats itself and there are major storms during this cycle then it goes back to zero and then repeats and then there are other major storms.... so I drew a parallel between how history works and how the cosmos works... again we go back to this relationship between the political and the cosmic... so politics is, and this is the ironic reading of history that politics follow the cyclical aspect of cosmic events... so they affect us and we act accordingly ... and it's funny you asked this question because when I was making this film ... in it I talk mainly about the period around 1989, and the head of the state of Lebanon at that time came back when I actually made the film in 2018... so now it feels it was a premonition, but it was a funny coincidence, but it actually happened, there was a collapse then and there is a collapse now ...

S: You spoke about a diary that you keep, and that you use parts of when you want to make a film. Could you say more about it? Is diary-keeping a practice that was always part of your life and artistic process?

R: It's not a proper diary with very organized entries, it's like little aphorisms I write from time to time and they accumulate. At some point I eventually sit down, go through them, take parts of them and turn them into a work, for example *Landscape at Noon* is also based on anecdotes that actually happened and then they just blend in the film very smoothly ...I don't really differentiate, I make sure that everything blends in, you know the diary documentary aspect of the story and the fictional aspect make it like one whole big dream, the same way we dream, this how I wrote my films in the way dreams are constructed, so you have factual elements and then there is a parallel reality that comes from outside that blends in, and you get one narrative that moves on different plateaus, zigzagging between reality and imagination.