

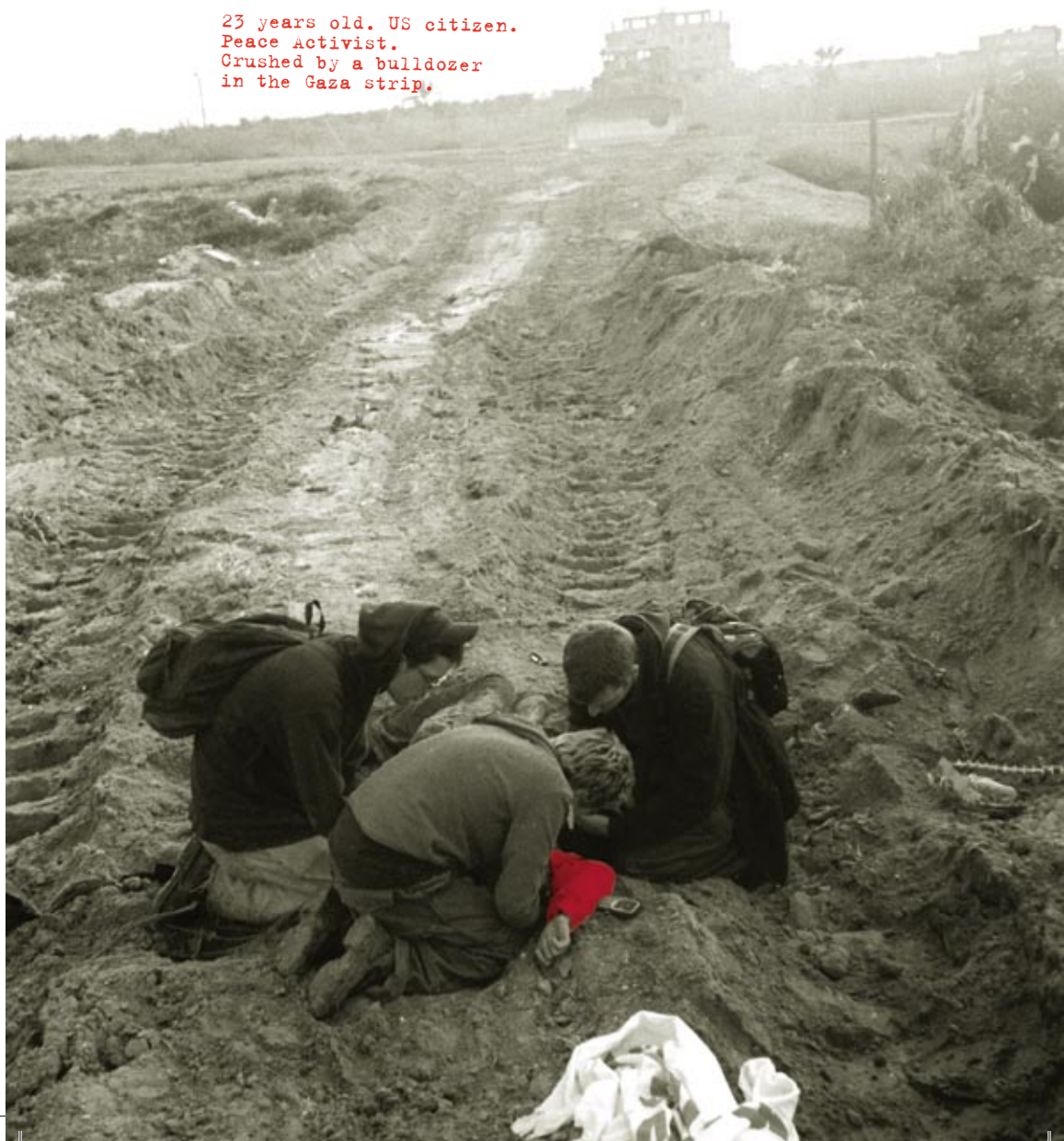
Ciné-Sud Promotion presents

Rebelle  
59<sup>e</sup> Internationale  
du Festival de  
Berlin  
Forum

# Rachel

A FILM BY SIMONE BITTON

23 years old. US citizen.  
Peace Activist.  
Crushed by a bulldozer  
in the Gaza strip.



23 years old. US citizen.  
Peace Activist.  
Crushed by a bulldozer  
in the Gaza strip.

Thierry Lenouvel presents

# Rachel

A FILM BY SIMONE BITTON

France/Belgium - 2008 - 100 mn - 35 mm - 1.85- Couleurs - Dolby SR



A Ciné-Sud Promotion, Arte France Cinéma, Novak Prod., RTBF  
coproduction

## World Sales

### UMedia

14 rue du 18 Aout 93100 Montreuil - France  
Tel: +33 1 4870 7318 Fax: +33 1 4972 0421  
Cell in Berlin: +33 6 2041 1137  
Email: [contact@umedia.fr](mailto:contact@umedia.fr)  
[www.umedia.fr](http://www.umedia.fr)

## International Press

**Magali Montet, Martin Marquet & Mia Farrell @ Berlinale 09'**

Email: [mlinkpress@gmail.com](mailto:mlinkpress@gmail.com) or [martin.marquet@mac.com](mailto:martin.marquet@mac.com)  
Tel: + 1 310 927 5789





## Synopsis

On March 16, 2003, in the almost uninterrupted tide of Middle Eastern current affairs and just before the war in Iraq, a small tragic event was reported by some press agencies, just a few lines in the newspaper, or a 45-second report on television: A young American peace activist was killed in the Gaza Strip, crushed by an Israeli bulldozer while she was trying to prevent the destruction of a Palestinian house.

A few weeks later, some media reports mentioned that the Israeli military police conducted an inquiry, concluding that Rachel Corrie's death was accidental. Despite many eyewitnesses' claims that she was intentionally murdered by the bulldozer driver, there was no independent inquiry, and the case was classified and forgotten.

Five years later, director Simone Bitton is somehow doing what a court should have done. *RACHEL* is a cinematic inquiry into the death of a young unknown girl, made with a rigour and scope normally reserved for first-rate historical characters. It gives word to all the people involved in Rachel's story, from Palestinian and international witnesses to Israeli military spokespersons and investigators, doctors, activists and soldiers linked to the affair. The film begins like a classical documentary, but very soon it develops and transcends its subject, transforming into a cinematographic meditation on youth, war, idealism and political commitment. Palestine is a reality, but also a metaphor: a tomb for a child of today.

In the beginning, there is this: She was called Rachel Corrie. She was 23. She was convinced that her American nationality would be enough to make her an effective human shield, that her simple presence would save lives, olive trees, wells and houses. Like many young people of her generation, she kept a travel log in the form of e-mails, which she sent to her family and friends in the United States.

During the eight weeks that she had left to live, Rachel Corrie was to discover that which, in her own words, no documentary film could have taught her.



## Interview

WITH SIMONE BITTON

### How would you tell the story of your movie?

It is a cinematographic inquiry into the death of a young girl who was crushed by a military vehicle in a diseased country. This young girl was American, the vehicle was an Israeli bulldozer, and the country is Palestine and Israel - a region whose misfortune and occasional beauty I have not ceased to document, film after film. Rachel was killed in 2003 in Rafah, at the southern end of the Gaza strip. At the time, the Israeli army was destroying hundreds of houses and buildings in order to create a no man's land and erect a wall at the border with Egypt. Rachel was part of an international group of pacifists who interposed themselves between the houses and the bulldozers. One of those bulldozers simply didn't stop, and the Israeli army declined all responsibility.

My inquiry is rigorous. Since the matter was never brought to trial, I play the role of an investigating judge: I interrogate witnesses, I scrutinize their testimonies, I examine the incriminating evidence, etc. I unravel a mountain of lies and let the truth emerge

of itself, without commentary. This type of rigor is essential, because it allows me to go further, to transcend the subject.

In a movie, the result of an investigation counts for less than the investigation itself. The point is to film and to observe places, people and objects; to gather words, gestures or silences. To arouse emotions from the coldest and hardest materials, like the images from a surveillance camera or the smooth metal of an autopsy table.

The Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish often said: "The way home is more important than home itself." It is a very good definition for any artistic endeavor. How one searches and what one comes upon in the process counts for much more than what one finds in the end. In this movie, I tried to inquire poetically.

### Some of the images you show are hardly bearable. Was it necessary to show Rachel's corpse?

Yes. It was necessary to show it, even before the opening credits and several times during the movie so that everything refers back to that image, to the broken body of





a young person who will never grow old. My work would not have had any meaning if I had averted my eyes from that image. But it was also important for me to share my difficulty in appropriating it and express the thought process that eventually allowed me to do so. The young man who took one of these photographs says that he felt guilty about it and that he is aware of the element of obscenity it contained. But he took it because evidence was needed. He also says that he regretted not having a video camera, that the presence of a camera might have prevented his friend's death. I showed excerpts of the movie recently in Belfast, where I was invited to talk about my work in a class with film students. One of the seminar participants, a woman of my generation, said that the images brought her back to her youth, when she was confronting the British army with her bare hands. She added that if she had been killed during these clashes, she would have wanted the image of her blood-drenched body to be shown around the world. Today, there are cameras almost everywhere. Protesters and militants in conflict zones know that

if they are killed, the image of their body will be given media attention around the world; not only are they not opposed to it, but it is part of their approach. So I believe, very sincerely, that Rachel would have allowed me to use her image; her family, at any rate, did not have any objection.

For me, in fact, the most unbearable moments are the ones when Rachel is alive: when she dances with a Palestinian scarf, or when she writes sentences like: "Coming here is one of the best things I've ever done." I watch those images with a lump in my throat and a wrenching in my gut.

**How long did you work on the investigation and on the movie itself? Was it difficult to locate the witnesses and get access to Israeli military officials?**

It took approximately three years of research, with travel back and forth between the USA, the UK and Israel. Nothing was easy, but I'm relentless. The press office of the Israeli army was extremely reticent. These army people are quite helpful and efficient when you're interested in something they want to talk about, but when you bring up a topic they dislike, they're very good at making things difficult for you at every step. I harassed them so much that finally, in order to get rid of me, they granted me a 30-minute interview with Maj. Avital Leibovitch, who is the Israeli army's chief propaganda officer for the foreign press. Not too bad... and she even brought some ad hoc documents, with computer renderings she showed on screen.

Rachel's friends were quite suspicious too, in the beginning, because at the time of the tragedy, a few malicious or incom-

petent journalists had misquoted or misrepresented them. In addition, they found politically suspect the fact of focusing on the death of an American woman rather than on one of the countless anonymous Palestinian victims. This gave rise to long conversations that ended up establishing relationships based on trust. Rachel's parents, on the other hand, cooperated with me as soon as we met, but they took a very long time to accept to see me! As for the Palestinian witnesses in Rafah, the problem was not to locate them but to find a way to meet with them; for more than two years, the Israeli army had been turning back all Israeli citizens at the Erez crossing, even those carrying a foreign passport and a press card, even those residing and working abroad, which is my case. Since I could not consider giving up this part of the shoot, the film was in danger of not being made at all. At that point, my faithful director of photography Jacques Bouquin, and my sound engineer Cosmas Antoniadis, saved the day. They decided to go to Gaza without me, in the company of Alexis Monchovet, who knows Rafah very well. Not without difficulty, I managed to obtain the necessary safe-conducts and I directed the segments over the phone. From Tel-Aviv, I spoke to witnesses, guided the camera from afar, asked Jacques to take shots of this or that ruin, this or that place. This experience was doubtless the strangest and saddest I ever went through on a film shoot.

**Why don't you talk about it in the movie?**

I don't like to discuss problems encountered during the shooting of the movie on screen. They are real but remain trivial; it

is a little obscene to dwell on them. The constraints placed on a filmmaker's movement are quite annoying, but they are nothing compared to the sequestering of an entire population. And also, in the end, the film exists and it is full as an egg. So there is no need to overdo it.

**In addition to photographs, you draw on a number of surprising documents, like the implicated soldiers' depositions or the video shot by a military surveillance camera. How did you obtain these?**

The army gave me the military video, which had been carefully sanitized, after many negotiations whose details I will spare you. It does not show the moment of Rachel's death. As such, it probably wasn't worth much, but the impact of the sequence comes from the fact that one of the witnesses recognizes himself on the footage because he happened to be wearing a white t-shirt and this creates a little white dot floating about in the frame. As for the depositions, let's say that I got access to them because it is a small country where I know a lot of people... I had them



read aloud by some friends, like my fellow filmmaker Avi Mograbi, whose voice passes very well for that of an officer!

Generally, the material available to documentary filmmakers today is much richer than in the past. Just a few years ago, we had to content ourselves with television archives and press agency photographs, which meant we had to treat subjects that had already received media attention. Nowadays, the smallest events leave traces in a profusion of sources. Rachel's story is recorded in dozens of amateur videos and photographs, in the emails she sent to multiple correspondents, and in the hard drives of surveillance cameras. It was a lot of work to gather all these sources, but at the time of editing it was thrilling to have so many documents at my disposal.

**The driver of the bulldozer and his commandant briefly appear in the movie, in an Israeli television archive. You didn't interview them yourself. Was this deliberate?**

No. I did not manage to meet with them. The army fiercely protects their identity. The driver let me know, through a third person, that he refused to talk to me, and I only film people who accept to be filmed. That archive was produced by a private network for an investigative news show. It was one week after Rachel's death, at a time when Israeli journalists could still enter Gaza and were welcomed in military bases.

**Do you think the driver killed Rachel intentionally?**

Yes and no. Not in the sense that he coldly decided to crush her or that he received the order to do so. But indifference to

human life was a very likely factor. If he truly didn't see her, it is probably because he didn't want to. At any rate, the excuse that she was hidden behind a mound of dirt doesn't hold up: all the photos prove the opposite, and the testimonies are very clear on that account.

A young tank artillery soldier who was posted in Rafah at the time of Rachel's death describes in the movie, in detail and quite candidly, the extent to which this kind of indifference was the norm. He and his comrades spent their time shooting at inhabited buildings, they gave a hand to the bulldozers destroying homes whose inhabitants didn't always have enough time to leave.

I don't mean to point the finger at these soldiers in particular; it is obviously the Israeli army and the occupation system that are to blame outright. The intentional crime my movie addresses is not Rachel Corrie's death. It is the willful destruction of entire neighborhoods, carried out with the knowledge that people who stay in their homes or attempt to defend them will be killed in the process. One clearly sees where this leads us: six years later, in the same spot, the same army kills hundreds of innocent victims in supposedly targeted bombings. Today the end result has been reached: all Palestinian civilians, as well as anyone seeking to give them assistance, are potential collateral victims; their lives are strictly speaking not worth anything anymore. Talking about war crimes or bringing up the Geneva Convention makes you look naïve, archaic.



**There are many young people in the movie, like Rachel's friends, the witnesses of her death, and that young Israeli anarchist, towards the end, who talks about his struggle against occupation. Do you recognize yourself in them?**

Yes, without a doubt. I am fifty-three years old; Rachel could have been my daughter. At her age, I was already protesting against the Israeli occupation, but my generation failed and today, the situation is even more atrocious. I also feel much sympathy with those who transgress borders, who do not automatically espouse the prejudices of their tribe and who refuse that someone exert oppression in their name.

Beyond the unraveling of a tragic episode – which in itself harks back to a much larger tragedy – I made this movie for all the young people who inherit this twisted world we leave them and who decide to resist. They are more numerous than we generally think. Rather than growing old and senile, I wanted to go towards them. I discovered that they are braver and more clear-headed than we were, probably because they don't have a choice. Yonatan,

the young anarchist, told me with a smile that one could struggle without hope, that resistance is life, that truth is in rebellion. He doesn't realize the boundless hope his words, his beauty and his commitment give rise to!

I come from the Middle East where these things are perhaps more obvious than elsewhere, but this is true for the entire world. To quote Mahmoud Darwish again, I would say that Palestine always becomes a metaphor for the world when one takes a closer look. Once again, I see bombs being dropped on TV and I tell myself that Gaza is not only the grave of Rachel Corrie and of the hundreds of civilians who are regularly assassinated there: it is a universal grave, where humanism as a whole is in the process of foundering.

I am a pacifist who has known many wars, and I am aware that I have made this movie to protect myself from despair. Rachel and her friends have been my human shields.

**Interview realized by Ciné-Sud Promotion  
January 2009**

## Biography

Simone Bitton was born in Morocco in 1955. She now lives in Paris. She has directed more than 15 documentary films, all of them attest to her deep personal and professional commitment to better representing the complex histories and cultures of the Middle East and North Africa.

Her latest film, *WALL*, was presented in prestigious international festivals where it has won numerous grand prizes and was widely distributed theatrically.

## Filmography (Excerpts)

- 2004** *Wall*. 94 minutes. About the separation fence in Israel Palestine. Coproduced by Cine-Sud Promotion and Arna Productions.  
Director's Fortnight, Cannes 2004/Marseille International Documentary Film Festival (Grand Prize)/Sundance Film Festival 2005 (Jury's special Prize, World documentary competition)/Jerusalem International Film Festival (Spirit of Freedom Award for best Documentary)/Pesaro 2004 Mostra for New Cinema (Grand Prize)/Montreal New Cinema 2005 (Grand Prize NBF for best Documentary). Distributed Theatrically in about 25 countries (Europe, North and South America, Asia, North Africa).
- 2001** *Ben Barka: the Moroccan Equation*. 84-minute portrait of Third World Moroccan opposition leader Mehdi Ben Barka, assassinated in Paris in 1965. Produced by Article Z, Paris/Arte, Paris/RTBF, Brussels.
- 1998** *The Bombing*. 58-minute documentary following a suicide bombing in Jerusalem and the common mourning of Israeli victim's families and Palestinian suicide bombers' families. Produced by Cinétévé, Paris/France 2, Paris/RTBF, Brussels/Noga Communications, Tel Aviv.
- 1997** *Mahmoud Darwich: As the Land is the Language*. 58-minute portrait of legendary Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwich. Produced by: Point du Jour, Paris/France 3.
- 1993** *Palestine: Story of a Land*. 110-minute two-part documentary history of Palestine using archival footage. Produced by: Point Du Jour, Paris/France 3, Paris/INA, Paris.
- Daney/Sanbar: North-South Conversation*. 47-minute documentary meeting between French film critic Serge Daney and Palestinian historian Elias Sanbar.
- 1990** *Great Voices of Arabic Music*. 180-minute three-part documentary series of 55 minutes each: portraits of Um Kulthum, Muhammad Abdel Wahab, and Farid al-Atrache.

## Ciné-Sud Promotion

Ciné-Sud Promotion started as a company designed to promote art house films (Rachid Bouchareb, Wang Chao, Guillermo Del Toro, Raymond Depardon, Djibril Diop Mambety, Julio Medem, Jafar Panahi, Manuel Poirier, Arturo Ripstein, Paulo Rocha, Carlos Saura, Paolo & Vittorio Taviani, Jean-Philippe Toussaint..., amongst others), and which has developed a production arm since 2000 in the same way.

In the mean time, Ciné-Sud has been a creator and animator of the Script Development Fund/International Film Festival of Amiens (since 1996) and co-production of *BABYLON*, a European film development program for minority film-makers.

**Some films produced:** *TIRANA, YEAR ZERO* by Fatmir Koci (France/Albania/Belgium, 2001), Competition/Venice, Golden Alexander/Thessaloniki; *RACHIDA* by Yamina Bachir Chouikh (France/Algeria, 2002), Official Selection/Cannes; *FUSE!* (Gori Vatra) by Pjer Zalica (Bosnia/Austria/Turkey/France, 2003), Silver Leopard/Locarno; *WALL* by Simone Bitton (France/Israel, 2004), Directors Fortnight/Cannes, Special Jury Prize/Sundance, Grand Prix/Marseille, Pesaro, Montreal, Jerusalem; *MOOLAADE* by Sembene Ousmane (Sénégal/France, 2004), Grand Prix Un Certain Regard/Cannes, Best Foreign Film/American Critics Awards; *BORDER POST* by Rajko Grlic (Croatia/Bosnia/Serbia.../UK/Austria/France), Competition/San Sebastian; *FALAFEL* by Michel Kammoun (Lebanon/France, 2006), Bayard d'Or/Namur, Silver Muhr/Dubai, Bronze Palm/Valencia; *IT'S HARD TO BE NICE* by Srdjan Vuletic (Bosnia/France, 2007), Tiger Award/Rotterdam 2008; *POMEGRANATES AND MYRRH* by Najwa Najjar (Palestine/Germany/France, 2008), Competition/Sundance and Rotterdam 2009; *RACHEL* by Simone Bitton (France/Belgium, 2008), Forum/Berlin 2009, Competition/Cinema du Réel 2009.

**Post-production:** *EVERY DAY IS A HOLIDAY* by Dima El Horr (France/Lebanon/Germany), with Hiam Abbass (Red Satin, Syrian bride, Munich, Free zone...) and Manal Khader (Divine Intervention); *TARATA* by Fabrizio Aguilar (Peru/France).

**In development:** *STOPLIGHT SOCIETY* by Ruben Mendoza (Colombia/France/Spain); *LA GRANDE PÂTURE*, by Omar Bekhaled (France) Special adviser: Karim Dridi; *AU BOUT DES DOIGTS* de Karine Douplitzki (France).

## Technical list

**Director:** Simone Bitton

**Country:** France, Belgium, 2008

**Duration:** 100 minutes

**Production:** Thierry Lenouvel/Ciné-Sud Promotion, France

**Co-Producers:** Arte France Cinéma; Novak Prod (Belgium), RTBF

**Screenplay:** Simone Bitton

**Camera:** Jacques Bouquin

**Sound:** Cosmas Antoniadis

**Editors:** Catherine Poitevin & Jean-Michel Perez

**Langages:** English, Hebrew, Arabic

**Format:** 35 mm (filmed in Dvcam)

**World Sales:** UMedia

umedia   
urban media international