



# TAHRIR: LIBERATION SQUARE

A Film by Stefano Savona  
An Icarus Films Release

"Embraces the thrill and uncertainty of popular action [by plunging] you into the crowds and clamor. With the fate of Egypt still cloudy, [this] film has already become poignant."  
*The New York Times*

"Thrilling! [This] stirringly in-your-face documentary about the Arab Spring revolution is a priceless historical, human document. Surely one of the most impassioned political films ever made."  
*Film Journal International*

Press materials: <http://icarusfilms.com/pressroom.html> Username: icarus Password: press

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## SELECTED FILM FESTIVALS AND AWARDS

World Premiere, 2011 Locarno Film Festival

Official Selection, 2011 New York Film Festival

Official Selection, 2011 DocLisboa

Official Selection, 2011 Belfort International Film Festival, France

Official Selection, 2011 Dubai international Film Festival

Official Selection, 2011 Watch Docs Warsaw International Film Festival, Poland

Official Selection, 2011 DOC POINT Helsinki Documentary Film Festival, Finland

Winner, International Competition Tasca d'Almerita Award, 2011 SalinaDocFest, Italy

Winner, Grand Prize, 2011 Traces de vies Documentary Film Festival, France

Official Selection, 2012 Santa Barbara International Film Festival

Teaser: <http://www.youtube.com/icarusfilmsny>



## SYNOPSIS

"Soon after the first reports came about the occupation of Tahrir Square, filmmaker Stefano Savona headed for Cairo, where he stayed, amidst the ever-growing masses in the Square, for weeks. His film introduces us to young Egyptians such as Elsayed, Noha and Ahmed, spending all day and night talking, shouting, singing, finally expressing everything they were forbidden to say out loud until now.

"As the protests grow in intensity, the regime's repression becomes more violent, with the terrifying potential for massacre never far away. TAHRIR is a film written in the faces, hands, and voices of those who experienced this period in the Square. It is a day-to-day account of the Egyptian revolution, capturing the anger, fear, resolve and finally elation of those who made it happen."

—2011 New York Film Festival

## SELECTED PRESS QUOTES

"Records thrillingly the raw chaos of history, gives us the guts of revolt and will fascinate for years to come whatever besets the abused nation who is the film's main character." James Woodall, *The Arts Desk*

"The sense of urgency never flags; neither does the protestors' deeply affecting pride in being Egyptian and finally taking control of their destiny. As one woman says, 'We have our dignity back.'" Jay Weissberg, *Variety*

"Tahrir" embraces the thrill and uncertainty of popular action. In some ways resembling old-fashioned vérité, Stefano Savona's chronicle aims to plunge you into the crowds and clamor. Mr. Savona, formerly a student of archaeology and anthropology, focuses on the homemade rhythms of strangers brought close together, the words of their call-and-response and the felt duration of watching and waiting. With the fate of Egypt still cloudy, his film has already become poignant." —Nicolas Rapold, *The New York Times*

“Thrilling! [This] stirring in-your-face documentary about the Arab Spring revolution is a priceless historical, human document. Editor Penelope Bortoluzzi is especially to be commended for the massive, magnificent work she has done in piecing together the multitudinous tiles of this vibrant, vitally important mosaic. This is surely one of the most impassioned political films ever made.” – David Noh, *Film Journal International*

“Stirring! *Tahrir* is a must-see account of the Egyptian uprising. An extremely intimate cinema-verite documentary observing the protests that forced Mubarak to officially resign from his government position. The cameras never move from that one location, so much so that it becomes a character itself. ‘Tahrir’ succeeds in being a perfect of-the-moment time capsule, transporting the viewer right into the middle of the scuffle. It’s a level of interactivity that’s rarely achieved [...] Subjects like this are rarely given the respect and intelligence that ‘Tahrir’ has; generally directors are quick to make propaganda pieces full of cartoons and dry interview sessions. No, this is a much more worthwhile experience than that, a completely potent film covering a human triumph, bereft of belittlement. This is a highly engaging film, not for the passive viewer, and absolutely able enough to make even the most reluctant viewer a participant.”  
–Christopher Bell, *Indiewire*

“When violence erupts, Savano fearlessly heads to the source, rocks flying through the air, bleeding men being carried past him. The film has no narration and no textual information; instead, Savano places the viewer right in the middle of the action, as if we’re there with him in Tahrir Square.” –*This Week in New York*

“‘Tahrir: Liberation Square’ is a breathtaking and politically engaged documentary. Anybody with more than a passing interest in the movements challenging the status quo over the past two years, from Wall Street to Tahrir Square, will find it spellbinding but for my regular readers in the New York region, in other words the kind of people who marched against the banksters, it is a must. The director seems to be everywhere at once and has managed to pull together some of the most hair-raising footage one can imagine. –Louis Proyect, *The Unrepentant Marxist*

“Not only significant to what happened but also to the medium of documentary, as it’s the kind of immediate and present filming that Direct Cinema lives on through while also filling a huge void in journalism today. This film boldly embeds us into the moment with chilling results.” –Christopher Campbell, *Documentary Channel DocBlog*

“This stirring documentary by Italian Stefano Savona enjoys a theatrical run following its premiere last fall at the New York Film Festival. The run-and-gun camerawork trades polish for vital immediacy, capturing the daily confessions, debates and exhilarated outbursts of anger and celebration by a core of protesters who every day brave violence and doubt to see their cause to the end. It’s an inspiring document of history in the making.” –Steve Dollar, *The Wall Street Journal*

## FILM CREDITS

*Tahrir: Liberation Square*

A film directed and photographed by Stefano Savona

Edited by Penelope Bortoluzzi

Sound Editing and Mixing by Jean Mallet

Produced by Penelope Bortoluzzi and Marco Alessi

A coproduction Picofilms and Dugong

With the participation of

Rai 3

Alter Ego - Cécile Lestrade

Périphérie - Centre de création cinématographique

2011 / France, Italy / 91 minutes / In Arabic with English Subtitles / Color

An Icarus Films Release  
[www.lcarusfilms.com](http://www.lcarusfilms.com)

## DIRECTOR BIOGRAPHY

**Stefano Savona** was born in Palermo, Italy, in 1969. He studied archeology and anthropology in Rome and participated in archeological excavations in the Sudan, Egypt, Turkey and Israel. He worked as a freelance photographer from 1995 until 1999, when he began directing and producing documentaries and video installations. *D-Day* (2005) was exhibited at the Centre Pompidou, Paris; *Notes from a Kurdish Rebel* (2006) was nominated for the David di Donatello prize; *Cast Lead* (2009) won the Special Jury Prize at the Locarno Film Festival; *Palazzo delle Aquile* won the Grand Prix at the Cinéma du Réel Film Festival. In 2009, Savona began collecting the hundreds testimonies of Il Pane di San Giuseppe, a visual history archive documenting 100 years of rural civilization in Sicily. In 2010, he and Penelope Bortoluzzi founded Picofilms, a Paris-based production house.

## DIRECTOR FILMOGRAPHY

- 2011 *Palazzo delle Aquile* (128 minutes)  
Documentary produced by Picofilms with the Associazione Corso Salani  
Winner, Grand Prix du Cinéma du Réel, France  
Winner, Human Rights Award BAFICI, Argentina  
Winner, Special Mention IndieLisboa, Portugal  
Official Selection, Acid Cannes
- 2010 *Spezzacatene* (82 minutes)  
A documentary produced by Lotus/Pulsemedia/Regione Sicilia  
Official Selection, Torino Film Festival, Italy  
Official Selection, Lussas Documentaiy Film Festival, France
- 2009 *Cast Lead* (80 minutes)  
A documentary produced by Pulsemedia, Italy with RAI  
Winner, Special Jury Prize, Filmmakers of the Present, Locarno Film Festival  
Winner, Mention Prix de l'Image, RIDM, Montréal, Canada  
Winner, Best Documentary, Annecy Cinéma Italien, Italy  
Official Selection, Munich Film Festival  
Official Selection, Lussas Documentaiy Film Festival, France  
Official Selection, Dubai Film Festival, UAE
- 2006 *Notes from a Kurdish Rebel* (80 minutes)  
A documentary produced by JBA Production/ Minimum Fax with ARTE  
France (Grand Format) and YLE Finland  
Winner, Grand Prix du Jury, S.C.A.M., Cinéma du Réel 2006, France  
Best Documentary Nominee David di Donatello  
Winner, Prix Casa Rossa, Best Italian Documentary  
Official Selection, Viennale Film Festival, Italy  
Winner, Genziana d'oro, Trento Film Festival, Italy  
Jury Special Mention, Mostra del Nuovo Cinema, Italy

## AN INTERVIEW WITH **STEFANO SAVONA**

*What moved you to go to Egypt to film the revolution?*

Over the past twenty years, I have gone to Cairo almost every year and, like everybody who know and visit Egypt, I never expected the events of late January, early February 2011. On January 29, after hours in front of the al-Jazeera website, glued to the fragmentary and low-resolution online chronicle of the Egyptian Revolution, I decided to go there and see from close up who was on Tahrir Square, who were the thousands of people challenging the regime's state of emergency laws. I wanted to understand what exactly they wanted, what their political orientation and their symbolic points of reference were, how they imagined their future. Tahrir Square offered a unique opportunity to film the full scope of Egyptian society, people from all backgrounds and social classes, together for the first time, united in the sole cause of bringing down dictatorship, barricaded on this huge square where police and the thugs of the regime could not enter.

*Your documentaries are often shot in "extreme" situations.*

I have known Egypt well for years, but it is equally important to say that I have been waiting for years to film a situation of this type. Ever since I did my film about the Kurdish guerrillas of the PKK I started to center my work on the political dimension of existence as a specific component of the human condition. The guerrilla fighters were young men and women whose lives were completely deprived of any private, intimate spaces. They constantly expressed themselves in the public sphere, in an existence dominated day and night by discussions, by words. After this experience in Kurdistan, I was looking to find and film situations in which individuals, even though they are not professional politicians, become profoundly involved in a collective action. The Egyptians Revolution was in this sense a unique opportunity: I could witness of the political reawakening of a generation of youth that has lived all their lives under a dictatorship and that has to learn to discuss, to listen, to confront each other in the space of an occupied public square where people even forgot to sleep in order to continue a political discussion of the future. The regime's violence, the attacks by the its thugs only increase the force of the protest: brutality attacks the word, but the word wins.

*Your film was shot entirely during the revolution. Do you think it is also relevant to understand the present and future of Egypt?*

It's easy to say that in Egypt, five months after those incredible days everything is still in limbo, that the situation is complex and risky, that we are still a long way from the realization of the goals of the protests and the arrival of democracy. The demonstrations continue, the young protagonists of my film are still taking to the streets to make the military understand that they haven't gone back to sleep. But what my film wants to get across is that at any rate an event like this leaves an indelible and unchangeable mark; only cinema has the means to capture this fleeting aspect, show the electrifying spectacle of a revolution and bear witness to its irreversibility, whatever

happens next. Only cinema and documentaries can capture those moments in which freedom appears in its pure state: a sense of completeness that nestles in conversations, in the relationships that are being forged with others by the strength of words. In this sense, nothing was ever more free than Tahrir Square where complete strangers organized long debates, where after 30 years anybody could express themselves and nothing and nobody could cut off this stream of words. Documentary film is the ideal medium to account for the arresting power of collective action. Literature and journalism can speak of the details, but there is something more fleeting and ephemeral that only cinema can fixate and collect. The people on Tahrir Square were not simply a crowd, they are individuals who together became aware of their collective strength. They are a group that acts with one voice. "One hand", as one of the many slogans of this revolution put it.



## SELECTED FILM REVIEWS

# The New York Times

NYTIMES.COM

By NICOLAS RAPOLD, June 10, 2012

MOVIE REVIEW: 'Tahrir: Liberation Square,' Chronicles 2011 Cairo Protests

Begun in January 2011 amid mass demonstrations in downtown Cairo, "Tahrir: Liberation Square" had its official premiere scarcely six months later at the Locarno Film Festival in Switzerland. That makes it a hot document as far as movies go, recording events with ramifications yet unknown to Egyptians or the rest of the world.

But far from imposing clarity on the historic gatherings, "Tahrir" embraces the thrill and uncertainty of popular action. In some ways resembling old-fashioned *vérité*, Stefano Savona's chronicle aims to plunge you into the crowds and clamor. Updates trickle in — is President Hosni Mubarak sending thugs? has he resigned? — just as someone on the ground might learn them, by hook or by crook, but usually by cellphone. This modern revolution was posted on Facebook, and we hear quotations from not only the Tunisian poet Abul-Qasim al-Shabi but also (in English) whichever gym teacher first said "No pain, no gain."

The film tacks between chanting throngs and earnest individuals voicing hopes and grievances, debating constitutional and religious outcomes, or simply reacting. Though a young man in a checkered scarf becomes an unofficial commentator and an older gentleman is given free rein to deliver a monologue about youth and change, "Tahrir" is a group portrait. Mr. Savona, formerly a student of archaeology and anthropology, focuses on the homemade rhythms of strangers brought close together, the words of their call-and-response and the felt duration of watching and waiting.

Idealism, pride and solidarity carry the day and the night, which flow into one another without explanatory titles or voice-over. The mood and presentation are a conscious choice, contrasting with the succinct HBO documentary "In Tahrir Square" (which sets grim stakes by opening with torture footage) or the analysis and exposé of the film "Tahrir 2011." The sociably close camerawork and vivid HD photography, which gains a kind of humid vibrance by night, foster the sense of being in the moment.

The square, which we barely leave, is plainly a stage, but it must be said that Mr. Savona's talents as a dramatist are variable. He shapes his material with a slack hand for a feature-length documentary and sets his sights narrowly for an event amply covered in other media. But he is just as plainly a romantic, even as his final shot recognizes the fragility of progress. With the fate of Egypt still cloudy, his film has already become poignant.

A version of this review appeared in print on June 11, 2012, on page C4 of the New York edition with the headline: Tahrir: Liberation Square.

# THE PLAYLIST

## Review: 'Tahrir' Is A Must-See Account Of The Egyptian Uprising

BY CHRISTOPHER BELL | JUNE 11, 2012 11:00 AM



The "Arab Spring" -- a term frequently used to describe the various countries in the Middle East rising against their much-maligned leaders -- rages on in full force. Though the wave of revolution is powerful, the media tends to be very selective in its coverage, focusing on one country before quickly moving onto another. You can't blame someone if they just assumed Egypt was just dandy now given the lack of coverage, as Libya's the new paramour.

But let's avoid pointing fingers -- in their defense, the media can only give prime coverage to so many things and at a certain point we must take responsibility for ourselves to actively be in-the-know. At the moment, former President **Hosni Mubarak** is on trial for ordering the murder of demonstrators during the initial protests in January 2011. The people have become restless with the crawling political change and are generally suspicious of the interim military government; elections are imminent but not soon enough. Despite their relative impatience (they were, after all, under a "state of emergency" since 1967), it's easy to forget that this entire movement is very young and began with their first major protests on January 25th.

Italian director **Stefano Savona** brings us back to those early days of the anti-government demonstrations with "**Tahrir**," an extremely intimate cinema-verite documentary observing the protests that forced Mubarak to officially resign from his government position. The title is appropriate given that the cameras never move from that one location, so much so that it becomes a character itself. Certain faces become familiar as the film goes on, but distinctive personalities are less focused on in favor of a unified, collective mindset.

The film opens with a powerful chant -- one of the many emotive, passionate mantras that swell the area. Savona fills his frame with protesters that are energetic, but he then turns to the less enthused; single shots displaying what appears, at first, to be people either bored or unsold. Yet as the visual lingers, we get to know these few people, and

interpretation of hopelessness gives way to a reserved, yet absolutely present determination. Elsewhere, young adults lament the lack of a leader at the front of the revolution and the possibility that, eventually, the Muslim Brotherhood will win an election and erect an Islamic state rather than a secular one. While the collective has no concrete plan, one of the them chimes in and states that everyone has joined together regardless of religion for one common issue. There is no one leader, but there is everyone.

Thanks to the lack of an up-front filmmaker personality and traditional interviews or hand-holding narration, "Tahrir" succeeds in being a perfect-of-the-moment time capsule, transporting the viewer right into the middle of the scuffle. In fact, Savona's camera is so involved in the demonstrations that it often feels like an individual that's *part* of them rather than just *watching* them. It's a level of interactivity that's rarely achieved with other movies like this, which goes a long way considering most of its audience knows exactly the kind of things that went down during this protest and what the ultimate ending to this activist march was.

Smartly, the director also plays with the mood and tone of the film, preventing things from ever becoming too one-note. Moments of violence (protesters dig up the street for rocks to hurl into the air) are also brothered with humorous instances such as a stand-up session involving a bumbling Mubarak impression. In a similar fashion, the camera occasionally strays from its up-close-and-personal attitude and covers more ground; one particular wide shot stunningly captures an entire crowd on their knees in mid-prayer. For a film genre that generally gets away with paying less attention to framing and pure visual beauty, this documentary's look can be surprisingly arresting at times.

Subjects like this are rarely given the respect and intelligence that "Tahrir" has; generally directors are quick to make propaganda pieces full of cartoons and dry interview sessions. No, this is a much more worthwhile experience than that, a completely potent film covering a human triumph, bereft of belittlement. This is a highly engaging film, not for the passive viewer, and absolutely able enough to make even the most reluctant viewer a participant. [A-]

*"Tahrir" opens in limited release today.*

A Revolution Without a Leader: 'Tahrir: Liberation Square'

By Cynthia Fuchs, PopMatters Film and TV Editor

[11 June 2012]

Speaker: The Middle East is like an artichoke. If you take off the leaves, what's left? What's the heart?

Crowd: Egypt!

Near the end of *Tahrir: Liberation Square*, the frame pauses on a single image, a suitcase. The person packing it is careful to fold the contents, including, as you see in this simple-seeming shot, a pair of jeans and a banner, a white bedsheet inscribed with words in Arabic. As the camera hovers, the packer smooths the fabrics.

The image aptly marks the end of the 18-day revolt in Tahrir Square in 2011, a protest sparked by frustrations with the Mubarak regime and facilitated by Facebook and cell phones, a movement of nonviolent civil disobedience that drew the attention of international media. Even as the closing of the suitcase signals the end of this moment, the subsequent, wider shots—in which protestors use the camera to insist, “We will not be fooled,” by the military or any other opportunistic forces—indicate that the revolution is not nearly done.

It begins with the gathering of hundreds of protestors in Cairo. Stefano Savona's film—screening this week at Maysles Cinema, part of the outstanding Documentary in Bloom Series—opens on 30 January, the sixth day of the revolution, a title tells you. *Tahrir: Liberation Square* goes on to track its course with a mix of on-the-ground vérité footage (some from cell phones, most from handheld cameras that carry you into crowds), fleeting interviews with protestors (“They’re corrupt, the whole country is corrupt, it’s a systematic corruption”), and discussions among three young Egyptians named Elsayed, Noha, and Ahmed.

Their debates—earnestly waged as they sit on the ground during relatively quiet periods—reflect the idealism and confusion around them. They seek organization and focus, but appreciate the potency of the mass too, people coming together for their own reasons and also, an increasingly single idea, to oust Hosni Mubarak. As speakers atop tanks and crude stages rouse the crowds with calls to commitment and action (“We’re not leaving from here!”), identification (“We’re the legitimate power in the country!”) or explanation (“We’re an example to follow because we don’t use any weapons!”), the camera captures the people’s pulsing energies, offering a very different view of the Square than western media were able to show at the time. Where televisions around the world showed pictures of the crowds, the fires, the government’s efforts to police from afar, this film brings you closer.

That's not to say the film constructs a sense of intimacy with protestors: you don't know names, you don't know histories, you can watch in horror as injured participants are carried past the camera, faces bloodied and limbs hanging from makeshift gurneys. Rather, the film is keenest in its depictions of how the people in Tahrir understood, then and now, how to use the camera, to make their voices heard and their faces seen. "What they're saying about us outside this Square isn't acceptable," notes one participant, wholly aware of the media's effects. "Here we're on a different planet. It's like the difference between Earth and Mars. Except that Tahrir Square is much closer."

Repeated direct addresses to the camera ensure that the chaotic imagery has a context, indeed, a series of contexts. On one level, the chronology of events is well known. First, the numbers of protestors increase, participants inspired by TV images and internet each day. Then Mubarak (now in critical condition in his prison hospital room) appears via a gigantic, Big Brotherish screen over the Square, decrying the "outsiders" who mean to exploit the "young" and insisting he must stay on to preserve "order." Individuals respond instantly to his frankly ludicrous proposition: "We won't go until he goes," they assert.

Their resolve leads to their use of materials at hand to show their outrage, as the chop at sidewalks to gather together chunks of cement to throw at the officers who mean to put them down. One remarkable long take shows a woman gather up a shirt full of chunks, then make her way through the crowd to the "front line," the camera jogging along behind her as she passes bloodied protestors headed back the other way.

Then again, their resolve is tested when uniformed police begin using live rounds to disperse the crowds. At least some protestors take up the challenge with brutal determination, again using the camera to make their points loudly and clearly ("Hosni Mubarak, you're a dead man!"). Others lead the camera to policemen who've been captured, framed from a slightly high angle, wincing in the light, maintaining their innocence. Throughout the long nights, protestors make noise, drawing the attention of international news crews, banging on fences and chanting, the rhythms of their calls and responses creating a pattern and sense of structure amid the mess.

When morning comes, the protestors come together again. They mean to maintain the stanch camaraderie among old and young, Christians and Muslims, men and women. They debate the uses of the constitution (should it be thrown out? does it give them a place to start again?), resist the possibility of a military coup (they've seen this before, or know the consequences from history). "Ours is a revolution without a leader," says one protestor proudly. As you appreciate this focus, you also see how *Tahrir: Liberation Square* quite brilliantly pieces together a series of moments and experiences to create a sense of purpose and intention, its seemingly disparate images of pain and anger, deliberation and decision coming together in a dynamic portrait of resistance.

(Icarus Films; Maysles Cinema: 11 Jun 2012; 2011)

<http://www.popmatters.com/pm/review/159692-tahrir-liberation-square-opens-at-maysles-cinema/>



## DOCUMENTARY IN BLOOM: TAHRIR

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Stefano Savano puts viewers right in the middle of the recent Egyptian rebellion in TAHRIR

### **TAHRIR: LIBERATION SQUARE (Stefano Savano, 2011)**

Maysles Institute

343 Malcolm X Blvd. between 127th & 128th Sts.

June 11-17, suggested donation \$10, 7:30

212-582-6050

[www.mayslesinstitute.org](http://www.mayslesinstitute.org)

As soon as Stefano Savano heard about the people's rebellion going on in Egypt's Tahrir Square in January, the Italian filmmaker grabbed his camera and headed over to Cairo, where he had been many times before over the previous twenty years, and just started filming what he saw. As hundreds of thousands of Egyptians flooded the area, singing, protesting, and demanding that President Hosni Mubarak step down, Savano followed around various individuals and groups, including Elsayed, Noha, and Ahmed, getting them to share their thoughts on revolution and change, capturing intimate moments of their fight for freedom. When violence erupts, Savano fearlessly heads to the source, rocks flying through the air, bleeding men being carried past him. The film has no narration and no textual information; instead, Savano places the viewer right in the middle of the action, as if we're there with him in Tahrir Square. "I'm not a journalist, and I don't pretend to be one," Savano pointed out in a Skype press conference following a New York Film Festival preview screening of the film last year. Over the course of two weeks last summer, Savano and Penelope Botroluzzi edited down thirty-five hours of visuals and twenty-five hours of sound into this ninety-minute inside look at democracy in action, although it does get repetitive in the second half. Once again Savano, whose previous films include 2002's *A Border of Mirrors*, 2006's *Notes from a Kurdish Rebel*, and last year's *Spezzacatene*, focuses more on the human element than the political, adding a coda during the credits that places much of what went on before into intriguing perspective. *Tahrir: Liberation Square* will be screening June 11-17 as part of the Maysles Institute's Documentary in Bloom series curated by Livia Bloom.



# Louis Proyect: The Unrepentant Marxist



June 10, 2012

## Tahrir: Liberation Square

Filed under: [Egypt, Film](#) — louisproyect @ 9:07 pm



"Tahrir: Liberation Square" is a breathtaking and politically engaged documentary that opens tomorrow at [The Maysles Theater in Harlem for a one week run](#). Anybody with more than a passing interest in the movements challenging the status quo over the past two years, from Wall Street to Tahrir Square, will find it spellbinding but for my regular readers in the New York region, in other words the kind of people who marched against the banksters, it is a *must*.

The film is directed by Stefano Savona, who was an archaeologist by profession but who began making documentaries in 1999, including "Notes from a Kurdish Rebel" about the PKK in Turkey. The press notes allow Savona to explain what drew him to Tahrir Square:

Over the past twenty years, I have gone to Cairo almost every year and like everybody who knows and visits Egypt, I never expected the events of late January, early February 2011. On January 29, after hours in front of the al-Jazeera website, glued to the fragmentary and low-resolution online chronicle of the Egyptian Revolution, I decided to go there and see from close up who was on Tahrir Square, who were the thousands of people challenging the regime's state of emergency laws. I wanted to understand

what exactly they wanted, what their political orientation and their symbolic points of reference were, how they imagined their future. Tahrir Square offered a unique opportunity to film the full scope of Egyptian society, people from all backgrounds and social classes, together for the first time, united in the sole cause of bringing down dictatorship, barricaded on this huge square where police and the thugs of the regime could not enter.

Although Savona's film is nominally *cinéma vérité*, it is not the typical fly-on-the-wall affair done by Frederick Wiseman imitators. Instead, it is a skillfully edited condensation of some of the most compelling scenes that most of us know only through second-hand reports or Youtube clips uploaded from a cell phone, etc. The director seems to be everywhere at once and has managed to pull together some of the most hair-raising footage one can imagine.

Very early in the film, we see about a hundred men and women circled around a man who has been lifted on another man's shoulders and who is leading them in chants:

*Mubarak, we hate you  
You belong in a sarcophagus with the pharaohs  
The people want the regime to fall  
What's the difference between us and them?  
We are the people who work. We are the people who are hungry.  
They dress like princes while we sleep 10 to a room.*

Savona is there when the furious fight between protestors and Mubarak's goons take place. We see a woman wearing traditional religious garbs, including a headdress, carrying paving stones to the front lines to be used against the thugs. When one of them is captured by the freedom fighters, we see him confessing how he got there. He was in prison the day before he was recruited to break up the protests, receiving 5000 pounds for his services.

Throughout the film we see small groups of Egyptians in the square having intense political discussions about the country's future. What role will the Muslim Brotherhood play? How will the army function if it takes Mubarak's place? Nearly everybody agrees that neither the army nor the Islamists can be trusted, but as it turns out that is the choice Egyptians are now given, between a Muslim Brotherhood candidate and Mubarak's last prime minister, the choice of the military.

The film ends on a triumphant note but one can easily imagine a follow-up to the documentary in which Stefano Savona returns to interview some of the key subjects. Is this what they risked life and limb for? To put up with the Muslim Brotherhood's religious repression? Or even worse, to endure Mubarakism without Mubarak?

While there are obvious reasons for concern about Egypt's future, I for one remain optimistic based on the evidence of the people vividly captured in "Tahrir: Liberation Square". Over and over again, they express their willingness to die for their freedom and for social justice.



When watching this stirring film, I could not help but think of another work by a politically committed film-maker of which a sizable excerpt can now be seen online, namely Peter Watkin's "La Commune" that [I reviewed](#) back in 2006. At that time, I wrote:

Perhaps its greatest achievement is the way it makes this 135 year old struggle relevant to more recent ones, which was clearly the intention of its director Peter Watkins. As I sat watching it at the edge of my seat, practically breaking out in a cold sweat, I could not stop thinking about my visits to Nicaragua in the late 1980s when the country was like somebody hanging on to the edge of a cliff by their fingers. "La Commune" demonstrates that this is both the blessing and the curse of all revolutions. They are simultaneously great strides forward toward freedom and huge risks almost tantamount to Russian roulette.

I can only add that now it is Tahrir Square that I think of when I reflect back on Watkins's dramatization of the first workers state in history.

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I like the weeks where I can find a common theme among the new theatrical releases for documentary (some not opening today). But it's weeks like this, when the films are so remarkably different from one another, that I really feel good about the medium. We've got a pressing environmental issue film, a record of history, a nostalgia-fueled comeback story of an artist long past his prime and a retrospective-fueled portrait of an artist at a climactic point in her life. [...]

### **Tahrir: Liberation Square**

From the first second, before any credits, we're thrown into Tahrir Square and virtually experience two weeks of the Egyptian Revolution as it was centered in this location in early 2011. Director Stefano Savona (Palazzo delle Aquile) went to Cairo within days of the start of the demonstrations and, with a very small camera and sound recorder, captured the daily events through the protests and the civil violence up to Mubarek's resignation. And what he delivers is not only significant to what happened but also to the medium of documentary, as it's the kind of immediate and present filming that Direct Cinema lives on through while also filling a huge void in journalism today.

If you need context, this isn't the place to find it. It's not so much *about* the revolution as it is *of* the revolution, a document for history rather than history itself. Mostly

observational with occasional exposition provided by onscreen conversations, this film boldly embeds us into the moment with chilling results and it's a necessary supplement to whatever you already know or don't know about what went on in the eponymous square.

Winner of the 2011 International Competition Tasca d'Almerita Award at SalinaDocFest  
—Winner of the Grand Prize at the 2011 Traces de vies Documentary Film Festival.  
Recommended if you like: In Tahrir Square; The Battle of Chile; [Burma VJ](#)

Opens Monday at the Maysles Cinema in NYC. For upcoming screenings in other cities, check the film's [playdates page](#).

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