

Interview with Ester Sparatore



By Nick Holdsworth
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"Photograph-Women"

When Ester Sparatore first heard about the chaos of life in Tunisia after its revolution, she could not find images of the women and children left behind, desperate and fearful for their men, who had disappeared after leaving for Europe as economic migrants in search of a better life for their families.

A Sicilian native - whose home island is close to the island of Lampedusa, the closest European territory within the reach of those people fleeing Tunisia by boat - Ester first began to understand the tragedy of ordinary people in Tunisia after attending a book launch (Spazi in migrazione: cartoline di una rivoluzione); she and the book's author Federica Sossi have since become close friends.

The result has now become Ester's first documentary film as a solo director at 44: "Photograph-Women", the story of women whose husbands, sons or brothers left Tunisia for Europe and never came home. Lacking any information on the fate of their men - have they drowned? Have they been taken into slavery by the mafia? Are they working until they have enough money to return home? - the women demonstrate outside Tunisian government offices demanding the facts.

Ester expects the film – during which she spent an extensive period of time (three years) with her key protagonist, Om El Khir, whose husband Nabil left for Europe and never returned – to be completed by March 2018, in time for submission to Locarno, Venice or another high-profile international film festival.

Eurimages talked to her about her career and new film.

How did you get into filmmaking? What was the key to becoming a director?

Ester Sparatore: I studied to be a video artist at Palermo's Academy of Fine Arts; it was a way to get into film. My first important experience was with "Palazzo delle Aquile" [co-directed with Stefan Savona and Alessia Porto] and for me it was really important because Stefan was well known and taught me a lot; after that I made another film ["Mare Magnum"] with another film director: Letizia Gullo.

I really wanted to get into documentary film - and with Stefan I had this chance. When I did video arts my works were between arts and documentary; I was always attracted to documentary.

After that I decided it was time to do my solo movie. I didn't like to work with other people; it was not a good experience for me. The kind of film I like to do is very personal. These films are not like documentaries with interviews; you have to follow a reality - you have to create a



© Still from "Photograph-Women"

personal relationship with the characters and to work with another co-director was really hard. Because everyone has a different point of view, a different relationship with people. So now I am the creator!

Making "Photograph-Women" was a wonderful experience - I still have a really nice relationship with the main character of the movie. I think this film tells the story between me and Om El Khir.

I thought it was more interesting to tell what happened to the people left behind - those who lose a son or husband. These experiences completely change the experience of the families who are affected.

They are searching for the truth behind the disappearance of their loved ones. They think maybe they are in prison - but are sure their sons are not dead in the sea. They don't know anything; they want to know the truth.

I tell this story through the story of Om El Khir and her young children. It is a way to tell a big story through a small personal story of this wonderful woman; she is proud and strong.

I followed her for three years. At first she is shy and even weak, but through these years you see how she grows stronger. At the end of the movie she is really a warrior. It is wonderful to see the changes. Generally when I make a movie I prefer not to have a strong opinion; I prefer to be neutral.

Do you feel that you faced greater obstacles than male colleagues in becoming a director?

E.S.: Personally I did not have any particular problems because I am a woman; my problem is that I live in Sicily, which is not the centre of the movie world, in Italy or anywhere else! I had to work hard because I want to stay there, not go to Rome or Paris.

If I have had some problems it is because I looked younger than my real age. In Italy it is a problem to be young; if you are young you have problems in being considered seriously. Also the normal problems in making a documentary and this kind of documentary; this kind of film is an uncertain business for a producer. You know the starting point but do not know where you are going. You have to convince the producer that your idea is strong and good.

Describe the main challenges and opportunities you encounter when making a film.

E.S.: The main challenge is to be sure that the idea is strong. Secondly, to find someone who likes me and believes in my ideas, a good producer who fights with me to find money and everything to do the movie. For this movie I was really lucky - my French producer is a really hard worker. This is a big challenge, to work with someone who believes strongly in my ideas.

I went to a presentation of a book because a friend presented this book - about the aftermath of the Tunisian Revolution. I met the author, Federica Sossi, and talked with her. After many months this story was inside my head; when something stays with me a long time I think it could be a good idea.

I wrote to Federica Sossi - who is now a really good friend - and the first time I went with her to Tunisia and she introduced to me all these people.



© Shooting film "Photograph-Women"

How would you describe your directing style? Do you think this differs from the directorial styles and approaches of men? And if so, is that because you are a woman or simply personal differences?

E.S.: It does not depend whether I am a woman or not. I approach the characters and story delicately; I don't like to force the situation. I like to build an open relationship with the characters. They show me what they want and I follow the characters in their life; it is a relationship of trust between me and the characters. This kind of movie is a deeply personal movie. When you see this movie you can understand who the director is. I don't push situations; I don't like fiction.

It was hard to shoot, especially in the street - Om El Khir lived in a neighbourhood that did not like strangers. At first it was also a little dangerous. At first she lived in a poor, criminal neighbourhood. I was not alone; I had a Tunisian assistant with me. The ordinary people don't speak French. For this reason it was a little different from my first two films. I had a lot of people working with me; it was my first solo movie but during the shooting I was not alone.

What different values and approaches do women directors bring to cinema?

E.S.: When I see a movie directed by a man or a woman I don't see a difference. I think behind the movie there is a person, not a woman or a man. I don't consider the difference - women, men, homosexual. I think a film is the work of a person. There are men who are full of sensitivity and some women who are not. I think it is a stereotype to say that women are more sensitive.

Do you think that more women directors will have a positive impact on European cinema? And if so, why?

E.S.: I don't know how to answer to this question because as I said before I don't believe in gender differences specific in cinema. The movie is a work of a person whether it's a man or a woman.

As a woman director are you inclined to use more women in your cast/crew?

E.S.: Normally I do not like to work with women, because I have not had a good experience. It was strange now to work with women; my main producer is a woman and my editor is a woman - she is really wonderful. My past experience was not so good. With men I always have good relations; it is more fun.

It is more important to find the person; but normally I prefer men. When I was younger I was - as we say in Sicilian - *maschiaccio!* [a bad boy!]

Why do you think until now cinema has remained a creative area dominated by men?

E.S.: It is related to that fact that we live in a male society. To make a movie is a position of power. You have to direct a lot of people. This kind of work has traditionally been considered men's work. It is a position of power to make a movie - especially a fiction movie.

Should there be more initiatives to channel money and opportunities to women filmmakers? Is positive discrimination needed? Or could this cause a detrimental backlash?

E.S.: Normally I do not like positive discrimination - it is like a version of apartheid. But now I think it is important to push women; it could be good. But I don't really like it because I see it as a form of discrimination.

Since the Weinstein revelations and the rise of the "me too" campaign, there have been allegations of widespread sexual harassment in the film industry (and other creative fields). Have you ever encountered such harassment yourself?

E.S.: No. I was lucky. Maybe in a really light form - especially in Sicily, some glances.