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Sembra mio figlio / Just Like My Son. Directed by Costanza Quatriglio. Subject and screenplay by Costanza Quatriglio and Doriana Leoneff, with the collaboration of Mohammad Jan Azad. Italy/Belgium/Croatia. Ascent Films, Rai Cinema, Caviar, Antitalent, 2018. 103 min.

Sembra mio figlio marks documentarist Costanza Quatriglio's return to fiction for the first time since her feature-length film, *L'isola / The Island*, was presented at Cannes in 2003. The film is an international co-production, partly funded through Eurimages, the agency of the Council of Europe that supports European cinematic co-productions. *Sembra mio figlio* tells the story of Ismail, a Hazara refugee, who has left Afghanistan as a teenager to escape the Taliban persecution of his people. Ismail works as an interpreter and cultural mediator in Trieste, where he also takes care of his older brother, Hassan, whose body and mind bear the scars of Taliban violence. Just as the two brothers seem to have set the foundations for a solid future in Italy—a moment symbolized by their purchase of a tailor shop, where Hassan can practice his craft—Ismail makes contact with their mother for the first time since she pushed them to leave Afghanistan ten years earlier. The mother's tentative voice calls Hassan and Ismail back to their past. The film thus follows Ismail's geographical and mental journey in search of his lost mother, while raising questions regarding identity and belonging.

Sembra mio figlio is rooted in Quatriglio's 2006 documentary *Il mondo addosso (Wearing the World)*, in which the director followed four young migrants living in foster homes, after their arrival in Italy as unaccompanied minors. Among these migrants was Mohammad Jan Azad, a Hazara teen who had escaped Afghanistan as a child and had had no news about his mother since then. In 2010, after hearing that Azad had finally reached his mother on the phone, Quatriglio told the story of their reunion in *Breve film d'amore e libertà (Short Film of Love and Freedom)*, where Azad played himself.

Azad consulted on the story and screenplay for *Sembra mio figlio*, which Quatriglio wrote with award-winning screenwriter Doriana Leoneff (*La variabile umana / The Human Factor* [2013], *Giorni e nuvole / Days and Clouds* [2007], *La giusta distanza / The Right Distance* [2007]). Critics have called the movie "lyrical" and "poetic," built on silences and ellipses. Indeed, the narrative temporality of the film is dilated by an extraordinary musical score (curated and partly written by Luca D'Alberto), by the camera's lingering on the characters' faces and gazes, and by the meaningful silences that accompany their every gesture. Particularly in the first part of the film, Quatriglio and cinematographers Stefano Falivene and Sabrina Varani favor close-ups and extreme close-ups, often filtered by windows and other reflective surfaces. Indeed, for Quatriglio, reality is only accessible through the filter of the observer's subjectivity. The camera, therefore, works to evoke, rather than to illustrate, that which remains invisible under the composed expressivity of the actors.

This reserved emotional register in the acting is both a strength and a weakness of *Sembra mio figlio*. With the exception of the magnificent Tihana Lazovic, the Croatian actor who plays Ismail's co-worker, Nina, all the characters are interpreted by non-professional actors. For some critics the composed restraint of the actors prevents any emotional involvement on the part of the audience, even if for others, the characters' "distancing"¹ allows Quatriglio to avoid romanticizing the characters' story.²

The choice of non-professional actors of Hazara origin was, for Quatriglio, essential to respecting the historical dimension of the film. Such insistence on authenticity—well beyond a naturalistic approach to cinematic storytelling—reflects both the director's documentarist background

¹ Claudio Trionfera, "*Sembra mio figlio* – Un viaggio dolce verso la madre," *Panorama*, September 24, 2018, <https://www.panorama.it/lifestyle/cinema/sembra-mio-figlio-un-dolce-viaggio-verso-la-madre-la-recensione>.

² Mauro Donzelli, "*Sembra mio figlio*: recensione del delicato dramma diretto da Costanza Quatriglio," *Coming Soon*, September 19, 2018, <https://www.comingsoon.it/film/sembra-mio-figlio/55201/recensione/>.

and her understanding of individual stories as participating in the history of an entire people. She insisted on running a series of casting calls around Italy as well as in countries where Hazara refugees are more numerous, like Sweden, Canada, and Australia. In the end, Milan-based poet and journalist, Basir Ahang, was chosen to play Ismail, while Roman activist and cultural mediator, Dawood Yousefi, interprets Hassan. Both actors' experiences of displacement and persecutions inform their powerful performances in the film.

The structure of *Sembra mio figlio* mirrors this passage from the personal to the historical. The first part privileges the psychological dimension and the camera stays close to the characters. The second part, when Ismail arrives in Pakistan in search of his mother, is marked by a stylistic change that allows the audience to visually connect Ismail's personal experience of isolation and displacement with the Hazaras' history of suffering and exile. In the sequences taking place in Pakistan, therefore, there's a prevalence of wide shots, which place Ismail in a broader geo-political context; the nocturnal and interior scenes that predominate in the first part are replaced by daylight and exterior shots; the use of subjective shots further reinforces the correlation between Ismail's search and the surrounding landscape.

The Pakistani scenes were actually filmed in Iran (*Sembra mio figlio* is the first Italian film shot in Iran since Valerio Zurlini's 1976 *Il deserto dei Tartari* / *The Desert of the Tartars*), where a large Hazara diaspora has resided for decades. The casting of different generation of Hazara extras allowed Quatrighio to explore "the ancestral dimension of [Ismail's] search"³ for his mother. Indeed, Ismail recognizes his mother in all the women he meets on his journey—mothers, girls, elders. His search for his mother acquires thus a poetic and symbolic dimension, connected to his own and his people's sense of belonging and diasporic identity, which develops beyond the specificity of the biological relationship between Ismail and his actual mother, as the final, most powerful scene of the entire film makes manifest.

This symbolic dimension, which Quatrighio defined as "oneiric,"⁴ sometimes risks lending the film a sense of abstractness, which subtracts from the dramatic energy of the story. For example, Ismail and Hassan's life in Italy lacks specificity: Trieste is evoked, rather than explored, even though Ismail often travels through it on his motorcycle. The two brothers, moreover, seem utterly isolated within the four walls of their apartment. The only meaningful human relationship is that between Ismail and his co-worker, Nina, who is also a refugee, from the former Yugoslavia. The development of Ismail and Nina's friendship is perhaps the most persuasive part of the film, thanks in part to Lazovic's excellent performance, which gives emotional substance to the birth of romance. On the contrary, and despite its documentary basis, the long series of phone calls that follows the first contact between Ismail and his mother functions like a didactic device that clashes with the poetic visual style of the narration. Problematic are also the numerous continuity errors: it is daylight when Ismail walks off a train to take a phone call from Pakistan, followed by Nina, but their wait for the following train takes place at night. And in Pakistan, when a village elder and his grandson walk Ismail to talk to the militia, the counter-shot shows the two locals in long shot, even though before the cut they were shown standing right next to Ismail in a medium shot.

Despite these weaknesses, *Sembra mio figlio* is exceptional in the landscape of Italian films about migration and exile, both in its production and in the construction of its characters, whose migratory

³ Costanza Quatrighio, "*Sembra mio figlio* – Costanza Quatrighio: 'Il mio è un film sugli esseri umani,'" Interview by Valentina D'Amico, *Movie Player*, August 9, 2018, https://movieplayer.it/articoli/sembra-mio-figlio-intervista-costanza-quatrighio-locarno-2018_19388/.

⁴ Carlo Cerofolini "La politica dello sguardo: Conversazione con Costanza Quatrighio, regista di *Sembra mio figlio*," *Taxi Drivers*, September 20, 2018, <https://www.taxidrivers.it/107662/conversazione/la-politica-dello-sguardo-conversazione-con-costanza-quatrighio-regista-di-sembra-mio-figlio.html>.

autonomy is always respected: Ismail and his brother are never represented as objects of Italian benevolence, but rather as agents of their own search for identity and belonging. Quatriglio's insistence on casting Hazara people, her use of Hazaragi—the Dari dialect Hazaras speak—as the main language, while Italian is always spoken with a foreign inflection, manifest her attempt to build an “accented cinema,” as Hamid Naficy puts it: a cinema that transgresses generic, linguistic, and political boundaries and sees creativity as a social practice for change.

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