

Rebelling Against Mafia. The Cinema Way

Marina Melchionda (June 22, 2009)



Interview with Marco Amenta, director of “La Siciliana Ribelle” (“The Sicilian Girl”), a movie based on the real life of the daughter of a Mafia family, who at the age of seventeen, becomes one of the criminal organization’s fiercest opponents

Movies about the Mafia? We have seen so many of them... In America it has become a cinematographic genre, and characters such as Vito Corleone or Tony Montana have become real icons. Fascinated, we learned their code of honor, supported their lust for revenge, suffered for their pains of love and for their losses... Sometimes we almost forget they are criminals, murderers, we just feel close to them and (often) quote their expressions, copy their looks, imitate some of their behavior.



But what about those who are victims of the Mafia system? Those who have grown up in areas where organized crime is the real ruling power and have learned to deal with it in their daily life? For many decades or, let's say, centuries, almost nobody in Italy had the strength, or the will, to denounce the pathological situation of a large part of Southern Italy, where Camorra, Ndrangheta, Mafia and Sacra Corona govern the economical, political, and social life of the area. And many of those who did, paid.

Today something is changing. Movies like "Gomorrah", "Il Divo", show a new trend. They give testimony to a renewed refusal to live in a present and a future under the shadow of organized crime. People are committing themselves to a new denuncia, and cinema is becoming the mirror of their growing protest.

Director Marco Amenta presented his latest movie, "The Sicilian Girl", during this year's edition of "Open Roads" (June 4 - 11, 2009). The production received nominations for two prestigious awards : the "[Nastri d'Argento](#) [2]" and the "[David di Donatello](#) [3]". The film is inspired by a true story, the protagonist being Rita Atria, a member of a Mafia family in Sicily.

She rebels against organized crime when her brother and father are killed under orders from the boss of a rival family. She finds in judge Borsellino and legal prosecution the only way to revenge the deaths of her dear ones. Her diaries become the evidence police need to arrest dozens of Mafia bosses and criminals. They are also, however, her death sentence. A few months after her "denuncia", and a short period of life hidden in Rome, persecutions, menaces, intimidations, and murders induce Rita to end her life, committing suicide.

Director Amenta told this story already once before, in 1998. The 56 minute-long documentary, "Diario di una Siciliana Ribelle" (One Girl Against the Mafia), received awards at several Italian and foreign movie Festivals, among which the [Mostra del Cinema di Venezia](#) [4]; the "[Prix Italia](#) [5]"; the "[Prix Europa](#) [6]"; and was also presented at the [Docfest](#) [7] in New York.

We interviewed director Amenta and asked him about his movie, his life in Sicily, his commitment in the battle against organized crime, and his future projects.

You produced the documentary "Diario di una siciliana ribelle" more than 10 years ago. Your new movie, "The Sicilian Girl", is also based on the story of young Rita, a member and, at the same time, a victim of the Mafia system. Why does this story touch you so deeply?

The two productions are completely different. In 1998 I told the story portraying the real characters. I used images from photographic archives and I also used the authentic diary of this young girl. That was a documentary. I presented it throughout the world, also here in the United States. I wanted people to know this story. But something was still missing, and that was the psychological description of the character, her inner feelings. It was important to me to give full value to her path of emancipation. She is raised in a Mafia family and considers her brother and father as real heroes, to her eyes they are almost modern Robin Hoods. She lives in her own fairy tale, and feels like a princess.

When both are killed she finds revenge collaborating with an anti-mafia judge, with whom she understands that her beloved ones were nothing but murderers. That is when she begins a very hard inner journey, a psychological path that will allow her to look at the Mafia world from a new point of view, and to destroy the heroic image she used to have of her brother and father. She becomes the counterpart of another female character of the movie, her mother. The latter is a typical Sicilian Mafia woman, that abandons and disowns her own daughter to remain faithful to a belief she has adhered to for all her life. Rita rebels against two types of tyrannies: the Mafia; and a violent, sexist and patriarchal system. This second form of rebellion can make a universal story of her experience, one that we could find in any place or time.



I lived there during my childhood and adolescent years. Then I moved to France where I lived for several years, but I always maintained important ties with my homeland. My job as a photo-reporter allowed me to have direct contact with organized crime in Sicily, as I was asked to photograph murders, witnesses, those responsible for terrible massacres. I was also threatened.

As a Sicilian man, I know this world perfectly. It is unavoidable when you grow up there. I imagine this is the reason why it is so important for me to tell my audience about what still happens in my homeland. Yes, because Italy has never been emancipated from organized crime. And if it still wants to consider itself a “modern democracy”, just as other European countries, it has to get read of his huge curse.

In which way does the Mafia affect democracy in Italy?

Organized crime, being Camorra, Mafia, or nDrangheta, controls parts of the national economy. It controls politics, institutions - civil society. Italy is not a “sane democracy”. The victims of this system are not only those who fight against the Mafia but also ordinary people. In the universities, in the hospitals, doctors and professors are hired only because they have important friendships, or maybe because they can do some kind of “favors”. We are all victims of this system, even if we do not want to admit it. We must not be afraid, we shall face this problem.

How do you portray the Mafia in your movies?

Just the way it is. I do not want my movies to be classified in the “Mafia gendre”, neither do I want to copy from other directors that have told about this issue using all kinds of stereotypes. They tell grotesque stories. I want to recount reality, so I take inspiration from it. This is what Saviano did too, with his “Gomorrah”: he worked with the Camorra for three months to write his book. As a photo reporter I was infiltrated too. I showed in my movie how the criminals look, how the nervousness of the anti-mafia judge caused his hands to tremble so much that he could not sign documents... This is what makes the difference in my movies, they are a sort of hybrid between a documentary and a movie production ...

Is this also the case of “The Sicilian Girl”?

Yes, I chose actors that could communicate directly with the public, and give an introspective image of what was happening.

First of all, most of them were Sicilian, except for the judge who was French and a few others. Many were not professional actors, and came from “risky” environments. As an example, the actor that plays Rita’s boyfriend, Vito, comes from a slum in Palermo, called “Zen”. Just like the character, he had to choose between a “legal” and a “criminal” life. He opted for the first choice, but today his childhood pals still try to convince him to follow the other path. You can see how he fits that role just perfectly.

I also allowed the actors to speak in dialect pretty often, and this gives great realism to the movie and the characters. The cast is made with actors that play in an instinctive and visceral way. “Rita” only performed in two movies before, and never studied recitation. But she has a wild side, and a naive one too. I liked her, and I felt I needed her for my movie...

Do you face any kind of obstructionism against the making of a movie of this kind in Italy?

Fortunately, there aren’t so many taboos anymore. Things are changing. But it is still difficult to produce politically or socially committed movies. Comedies of course are more remunerative, since they attract a greater audience. Today the trend, also and especially in TV, is to hide reality and its



problems. They want people to dream and forget about history and politics. Italy is imposing on itself a sort of self censure. Look at what is happening with the reality shows. What are they all about? A group of VIPs pretending to be farmers, survivors on desert islands... They portray the exact opposite of real life, they are absolute fiction. I would call Italian TV's present era as the era of "Berlusconiism", where people are offered a sort of never-ending and ethereal reproduction of reality. This is why I prefer cinema, which is the place where you can recount reality. But we have our difficulties too, because the tendency is to produce fictional stories. But Sorrentino made it with "Il Divo" and Garrone with "Gomorra". And thanks to all those who financed my project and believed in it, "The Sicilian Girl" came out too.

Are you working on new projects?

My company, Eurofilm, bought the rights of "The Banker to the Poor", the autobiographical book of [Muhammad Yumus](#) [8], before he became a Nobel prize. My sister Simonetta Amenta is the producer of this new movie, and I wrote the screenplay together with [Sergio Donati](#) [9], who already collaborated with us for "The Sicilian Girl". The screenplay, indeed, won a prize at this year's edition of the [Tribeca Film Festival](#) [10]. The movie will be shot in Bangladesh and in the United States, and will be released in English. It is the story of a man that invents a new kind of bank. He lends small sums of money to the poor, to widows, to ill women with children. He does not ask for any kind of guarantee, breaching this way one of the fundamental rules of the

modern financial and banking system. Everybody believes he is fool, crazy, nobody trusts him or believes in his idea. Thus he starts his "new business" alone.

He opens it up in a hovel in a village in Bangladesh. Contrary to all predictions, the beneficiaries of his business returned the loans as soon as they could and with no foreign or international assistance. He had been the first one to give them dignity, and they did not want to delude him. Very soon Mohammed opens new branches of his bank, multiplying them throughout the world. As a result he helped millions of poor, and in 2006 he received the Nobel prize for Peace.

This movie, just like "The Sicilian Girl", wants to show people that there is always an alternative way, we always have a choice. The prize at the Tribeca shows that Italians can recount universal stories too. Bertolucci recounted life in China in "L'Ultimo Imperatore", Sergio Leone narrated about America to the Americans... my movie is about an ethical bank in Bangladesh. It was important for me to present it in the city of Wall Street. The banking system was created to help people, now it has become an abstract and cold entity that stands far from the every-day problems of the people. Given the current economic crisis, my movie could suggest a change...

What is the ultimate goal of your movies?

I want to introduce my audience to a whole new world, make it live new emotional experiences. Of course I don't think that my movies can change the world, but at least I want to light sparks in my spectators. Some of them can become true fires. When and if I will realize I am not able to do it anymore, I will quit my job.

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