East European Film Bulletin

INTERVIEW

Anna Hints on *Smoke Sauna Sisterhood*

VOL. 143 (MARCH 2024) BY ANTONIS LAGARIAS

We met Estonian filmmaker Anna Hints during the 35th Trieste Film Festival (January 19-27), where her debut feature "Smoke Sauna Sisterhood" screened out-of-competition. The director records stories of women told within the space of one of the oldest Estonian traditions, the smoke sauna, which is inscribed on the UNESCO list of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. We spoke about the uniqueness of her filming process, the documentary's resonance with culturally diverse audiences, and how cinema can shed light on the experience of being born into a female body.

In the film we experience the smoke sauna through a group of women that you were also part of. We listen to fragile and intimate stories these women share inside the sauna. Typically, for others to open up to the camera, the filmmaker needs to earn their trust. How did you choose the participants? Did you already know them, and did the fact that you were also part of the group help in gaining their trust?

In fact, we see approximately twenty-five different women in the film, and I am also often participating in the experience of the sauna. The exact number is not very important, however, since the film does not follow the story of any particular woman. What was important for me was to find a way to transport the experience of the smoke sauna into a different space, into the dark room of a cinema, so that viewers would feel connected to these women, as if they were themselves inside the smoke sauna.

As for trust, it was there from the start because I am part of this community. The smoke sauna is a tradition inscribed on the UNESCO heritage list, part of a culture indigenous to South-Eastern Estonia where I come from. Concerning the women who appear in the film, I first started with friends and people I knew, the sisterhood I am part of, but I followed specific rules. First, I decided that I will not try to convince anyone to participate. I had individual meetings with

them to explain in a very transparent way the type of intimacy I was looking for. Then, I only chose those who wanted to continue, and, if I felt any hesitation, I did not try to change their minds. I felt that this was very important for this film, to avoid imposing my voice on these women, not to convince or seduce them or anything like that. They had to feel a need to participate.

Second, when someone agrees to be in a film, the production usually brings them legal documents to sign before the shooting. Here, this felt very wrong. I could not make them sign a paper and then ask them to be naked, body and soul, and share very personal experiences. I was very lucky that my producer shared my vision and supported me even if it meant taking a huge risk. As a filmmaker, it is important to work with people who support your vision. We agreed to show them the initial cut of the film in post-production and only then the women would choose whether or not to sign the papers. In this way, I tried to not take the right to their own voice away from them, but empower them right up to the end of the filming process. Otherwise, had they signed beforehand, I believe they would keep thinking about what they would say during the sauna, and it would be difficult for them to open up.

Third, the whole magic of the smoke sauna is that, once you enter, you really need to take your time. You cannot do it in a rush and the experience may last for many hours. First, physical dirt starts to rise to the surface because of the heat. Then comes the emotional dirt. So, another rule was that we would not decide in advance what the discussions inside the sauna would be about. We were open to whatever emerged.

A big personal challenge was to avoid depicting nudity as something sexual, since we were all naked together inside the sauna. Nude female bodies tend to be sexualized and objectified, so I had to make sure that there would be no sexual gaze in the film. I tested this with the cinematographer, seeking out a visual language so that we could film the bodies in a way that felt safe. After deciding on the filmic language we would use, I showed the women the scenes that we had shot. I wanted them to see how I would treat their bodies in the film so that they could feel safe.

Also, I spent seven years making this film, and it was interesting to see that some women were hesitant at the beginning but later changed their minds. They called me and said they wanted to participate. Estonia is a very small country, and when people heard I was shooting a film, they wrote to me, asking to participate. Again, the final cut includes twenty-five women, but the raw material had around forty.

There are very few shots showing the faces of the women inside the sauna, which helps maintain their anonymity. Was this an idea you

had had from the beginning, or did it emerge during the tests with the cinematographer?

It was an idea we had had from the beginning, since the first part of the film was to find a visual language. To capture the experience of the smoke sauna, we needed to be ready, technically, physically, and psychologically, before shooting. Not showing faces was an important visual element in transforming the smoke sauna into an experience for cinema. It varies depending on the light and where you are seated, but inside the sauna you cannot actually see clearly, so it made sense to not show everything. I also asked every woman whether they wanted their face to appear in the film. Some of them did not want to, but this also worked thematically. Not showing the participants' faces was thus an important element of the visual approach we established from the outset.

While we listen to individual stories, the women's voices also seem to blend together, becoming something like a collective voice. Because of their anonymity and the universality of the themes discussed, it seems possible for the audience to identify on a personal level with some of the stories shared inside the sauna. Going back to the origin of the idea, was it your intention to create a collective voice instead of telling distinct individual stories?

Yes, because it was related to my main task of transposing the experience of the smoke sauna into film. The sauna is a collective experience. You take off your clothes and enter this dark small space that resembles a cosmic womb, where one can share absolutely everything and everyone has the right to exist. It became a collective experience, on the topic of being born into a female body. Then, as you say, it is also a way for viewers to connect with the film and think about their own bodies and stories. At first, it was not easy to get funding for this specific approach. I received a lot of feedback saying that I should follow the story of a specific person, show more faces or have a different visual language that would make the film look more like films we have seen before. But when the film premiered at Sundance and I won the award for Best Director, the jury specifically congratulated me on these choices, on taking a risk and avoiding a more conventional approach.

What personally surprised me in the way you made the film, as I understand it now, is that everything that was said inside the sauna was unplanned and emerged in the moment. Despite the fact that the film was shot in a very specific place and society, within the context of an Estonian tradition, the women's testimonies can be related to any social and cultural context. Did you expect this to happen?

No, for me, this was an unknown part. Entering the sauna meant being ready to enter the unknown, accepting that you do not know what was going to happen. To reduce this pressure, I was always telling people that it would be alright even if nothing came up. But I did suspect that things would emerge because I was born into this culture and know how things work. We all contain so much. Some people shared their most personal stories for the very first time. This is because the sauna has a special ambiance, it is a safe space where you can feel heard and seen, without judgment. When I started making this film, I was thinking that the most important thing was to share the uncomfortable, to find people who would be ready and willing to share experiences that may be uncomfortable. But over the course of several years, I realized that, more than sharing it, it may actually take more courage to be able to hear the uncomfortable. Are we really prepared for that? This is why the smoke sauna is so special. In the film you simply hear intimate stories without commentary or explanation.

The film was already powerful, but seeing how much it traveled and resonated with different audiences, it really shows that there is something universal to the experience of being born with a female body. We filmed in such a small and specific place, yet the film was relevant to so many different places and cultures. This confirmed the feeling shared among those who agreed to take part in the film, including myself, that this space belongs not only to Vöro in South-Eastern Estonia but to humanity at large. Over twenty people came to me after the different screenings and told me they had seen the film several times. Some had attended six or more screenings. I wanted to know what brought them back to the cinema, to see the same film again and again. They responded that, at a certain point, it is no longer about the film, but more like entering a space that is missing from their daily lives. They wanted to be part of the experience we see in the film, to be part of that sisterhood.

We see a similar thing in the film. To talk about certain things, it seems necessary to enter a space that is significantly different from the spaces of social life. The sauna, in the middle of the woods, feels like a place secluded from the rest of the world. Also, in the editing, you used many silent shots with impressive visuals to depict this space and its surroundings. We see branches and tree leaves used in the sauna, the smoke that surrounds the bodies, etc. Did you decide from the outset that the space of the sauna would be depicted in this specific way?

Yes, I think the ideas about the space of the sauna came first, also because I did not know what stories would be told. Funding committees were also asking how the film would look like, and I was convinced that it would be a strong visual experience because being inside the smoke sauna feels almost like

being inside a Caravaggio painting. There is also a specific rhythm to the experience. You sometimes have to go outside to breathe before going back inside. There were intense moments, intense stories, alternating with short breaks that released the tension. That is what I wanted to visually convey in the film. As you said, it is an isolated space, and, as another journalist pointed out, it functions in an opposite way compared to social media where you can choose how to portray yourself, using layers and filters. Inside the sauna, however, you have to be naked and take off everything that is covering you, both your physical and emotional “clothes”. You find yourself in a relatively dark space, without electricity, lit by candles. We are all together, naked in the dark, and there is a kind of vulnerability and freedom that is hard to find elsewhere. It is something we need.

Also, I planned the film around a circular structure. I wanted to traverse different seasons and include shots of the surrounding nature and images of water in particular. For me, water carries a certain philosophy that my grandmother, who was a healer, passed on to me. She used to say that trauma is like frozen water inside us. It is important to remember that even if we find ourselves in a deep and dark winter, frozen water has the power to start flowing again. We just need warmth and safety to let it melt. We carry this power of transformation inside of us.

You mentioned before that, once people heard about the shoot, they wanted to be part of it. The women who participated knew that the camera would be recording and that their stories would be heard and amplified through cinema. Do you believe that the presence of the camera helped them open up and share their stories?

Yes, it was a very empowering experience for all of us. The women who participated knew how their bodies would be filmed and that they could remain silent if they chose to, so this created trust. Some of the women never spoke in the film but their presence was equally important. They hugged or touched the others, sung in the rituals and were part of the experience. This kind of empowerment came from the filming process we chose, because one could also make a film about the smoke sauna in a very different way. A camera can take power away from the people, by objectifying their bodies for instance. So, when making a film, I think it is very important to consider all the steps of the filmmaking process, not only the stories being told. In many ways, the process can actually become the result. The women trusted the visual language and ended up almost forgetting about the camera. This was helpful to me as well. Since everything was decided in advance, I could be fully present in the sauna with the others, without distractions.

A well-known feminist slogan from the ’60s says that the personal is political. In your film, we see the personal coming to the surface, in all its fragility. How would you describe the political angle of your film?

The personal is absolutely political. The film is ultimately about the experience of being born into a female body. It does not really matter if you end up defining yourself as non-binary later, because being born into a female body is never neutral. Our female bodies are politicized and institutionalized and reclaiming our bodies is a political act. For me, having a degree in photography, it was important to find a way to avoid a sexual gaze on the body. I believe it ended up working because many people, both women and men, came to me after the screening to say that the film showed them a new way of looking at the body and they understood that they had previously adopted a kind of male gaze. This gaze is internalized regardless of whether you are a man or a woman, and becoming aware of it can set you free. For instance, an older woman saw the film twice and then told me she realized that she has been at war with her own body throughout her life. Now, she decided to end that war and embrace her body for her remaining days. Inspired by the film, she hired a photographer to take nude pictures of herself and put them on the wall in her home. It was her way of reconciling, and I think that what she did was very personal, very beautiful, and also political.

One of the first stories in the sauna was the brave confession of a mother relating how her first glance at her baby girl was in fact motivated by judgement. She was checking how beautiful she was. This resonated with other mothers, showing how we have all internalized this gaze, this judgement, thinking that the purpose of the female body is to become an object of desire. Becoming aware of this gaze may allow us to escape it, recalibrate the way we see things and help us reclaim our own body. It also explains why people are inspired by the film. Nudity is central to how we represent ourselves, and these representations matter. There are people who earn a lot of money from the fact that women are unhappy with their bodies and want to change them. Different representations can help us be more at peace with ourselves. I really loved what the older woman asked me: are we at war or are we at peace with ourselves?

Thank you for the interview.