On an intimate level, Emila's gender shift also plays out in how she affects others, most profoundly Rita. Rita's encounter with Manitas radically changes the nature of her work and life. But she remains acutely aware of her status as a single, childless woman in a society that values marriage and motherhood. Love, as Rita experiences it, is never romantic, but found in this friendship forged by an unspeakable secret. Emilia tells Rita at one point, "You're my sister now." The filming continually emphasizes this intense bond through emotionally revealing close-ups and two-shots, as well as by their physical closeness and meaningful interchange of glances. In a roundabout and tragic way, one might even say that Emilia grants Rita her greatest wish.

Beyond what's on the screen, we can view *Emilia Pérez* as transformational for both Saldaña and Gomez. Here, these Hollywood stars embrace their Latina identities, speaking Spanish and playing non-American characters. For Saldaña, it's also her homecoming as a dancer. She began as a ballerina, with a major role in the film *Center Stage* (2000); after years, she displays that talent once more, along with a strong voice.

For Audiard, *Emilia Pérez* is a breakthrough, too, one that hits a number of hot-button issues—and that has generated controversy, being called everything from "a disaster" and "a vicious insult, not only to trans people but to the entire nation of Mexico" (*Miami New Times*) to "dazzling and instantly divisive" (*Variety*). What will come next?—**Karen Backstein**

Vermiglio

Produced by Francesca Andreoli, Leonardo Guerra Seràgnoli, and Maura Delpero; directed by Maura Delpero; screenplay by Maura Delpero; cinematography by Mikhail Krichman; edited by Luca Mattei; production design by Pirra and Vito Giuseppe Zito; costume design by Andrea Cavalletto; art direction by Marina Pozanco; music by Matteo Franceschini; starring Tommaso Ragno, Giuseppe De Domenico, Roberta Rovelli. Martina Scrinzi, Orietta Notari, Carlotta Gamba, Santiago Fondevila, Rachele Potrich, Anna Thaler, and Patrick Gardner. Color, 119 min., 2024, dialogue in Solandro dialect and Italian with English subtitles. A Janus Films + Sideshow release, www.janusfilms.com and https://sideshowfilms.com.

"You don't talk much in a war," is the explanation one character offers for a surprising revelation at the heart of Maura Delpero's *Vermiglio*, Italy's entry for the Academy Awards' Best International Feature Film. The film is named after the village in the Dolomites, the Alpine Mountain range of Northeastern Italy, where most of the action takes place during the last months of World War II. The director's father was born there, and her grandfather served as the local *maestro*—the schoolteacher and inspiration for Tommaso Ragno's character, Cesare. Ragno is one of the film's few nationally known Italian actors. The majority of *Vermiglio*'s extraordinary performances are delivered by locals, many appearing for the first time on screen, and usually speaking the local Vermèi version of the Solandro dialect, of which there remain only about two thousand speakers today. Mikhail Krichman's cinematography contrasts the openness and isolation of the mountain village in exterior shots with the almost claustrophobic interiors, confined to just a few rooms. Deft editing by Luca Mattei propels much of the narrative. Although the men talk little, and the women not much more, it is the children, several to a bed, whose nighttime conversations—naive, but revealing—fill in the rest of the story.

Originally called *The Mountain Bride, Vermiglio* is far from a conventional war movie. Its opening scene shows a bedroom, with the camera fixed and lingering on the sleeping children. It then cuts to a stall, where the eldest daughter Lucia (Martina Scrinzi) milks a cow, leaning against its side. This is a movie about family and rural Italy. The war provides only the context, and a dimly understood context at that. It is more reminiscent of Ermanno Olmi's *The Tree of Wooden Clogs* (1978), set in a turn-of-the-century Lombard village during peacetime, than, say, *The Night of the Shooting Stars* (1982). That film of Paolo and Vittorio Taviani takes place at roughly the same time as *Vermiglio*—1944–45—and also relies on local actors, but the similarities end there. It depicts a Tuscan countryside ravaged by Nazi German occupiers and Italian fascist militias, engulfed by fierce partisan combat among locals on a first-name basis with each other.

In *Vermiglio*, the only gunshot—a highly consequential one—is fired off screen. Yet the war motivates the story. A Sicilian soldier named Pietro (Giuseppe De Domenico) arrives in Vermiglio, carrying a native of the village and his fellow soldier, Attilio (played by Santiago Fondevila, who also co-produced the film for Cinedora). Attilio is traumatized and barely speaks. Pietro does not know the local language, but Attilio's mother Cesira (Orietta Notari), the schoolteacher's widowed sister, welcomes him and introduces him to a few of her nieces: Lucia, who quickly develops a romantic attachment to Pietro; Ada (Rachele Potrich), the devout, but sexually curious, and self-abusing next oldest; and Flavia (Anna Thaler), precocious and wise beyond her years, who receives private lessons from her father as the best prospect for further education in the city (the family is too poor to send more than one). It is Flavia, later in the film reading the local newspaper aloud to the assembled family, who reveals what happened to Pietro after the war, when he returned to Sicily for what was supposed to be a brief visit with his mother.

The film pursues several intertwining themes beyond the romance between Lucia and Pietro in what could be considered a "choral" cast. The character of Ada is particularly compelling. Her budding sexuality is revealed as she hides behind a wardrobe, secretly touching herself. Later she seeks out her father's collection of pornographic photos, after vowing never to do it again. Before falling asleep in the sisters' communal bed, she asks Flavia to stroke her arms and legs with a feather. For sullying herself with such transgressions, Ada contemplates bizarre forms of penance that she writes down in a notebook. The self-punishments involve literally defiling herself in the barn with the animals.

The director evidently had these scenes in mind while recruiting the first-time actor, Rachele Potrich. As the producer Francesca Andreoli explained, in casting locals for the film, Delpero visited the regional agrarian institute. She asked the students to describe the happiest time of their lives to that point. Among the expected stories of family vacations and teenage romances, Potrich's response stood out: "The happiest moment

In *Vermiglio*, escaped soldier Pietro (Giuseppe De Domenico) meets Lucia (Martina Scrinzi) as precocious younger sister Flavia (Anna Thaler) looks on.

In *Vermiglio,* with interior shots confined to a few rooms, scenes of the large Graziadei family are most often enacted in claustrophobic atmospheres.

of my life was when one of my chickens ran to me because she recognized me." Delpero had found someone thoroughly at home in the rural setting of her father's youth and able to convey in her face and in her gestures the tension between tradition and modernity at the heart of *Vermiglio*.

Based on her previous films—the documentary *Nadea and Sveta* (2012) and her first feature, *Maternal* (2019), set in an Argentine home (*hogar*) for unwed mothers (*Hogar* is the film's title in Spanish)—Delpero became known for her depictions of women. Interviewers have asked her about the absence of men in those films, and their presence in *Vermiglio*. Delpero explained that there were no men playing major roles in the themes her earlier films addressed. Yet she acknowledged that she "felt a propensity to talk about women, for both personal and ideological reasons. On the one hand," she explained, "I felt it was interesting to put them at the center of the story, favoring their point of view, reversing a trend in classical cinema; on the other, it was a focus that felt natural to me: I felt I knew how to talk about women in depth." As for motherhood, "it's a topic that I didn't decide to address. It was an internal need that I listened to, an issue that touched my head, belly and heart. Addressing it cinematically was an act that imposed itself." It wasn't that she intended to avoid male characters. "On the contrary," in *Vermiglio*, "I really loved talking about Cesare, Pietro, Attilio, Dino, or the children. Where there is humanity with its contradictions, there is my intellectual and human, and therefore cinematic, curiosity."

Among the contradictions Delpero was curious to explore in *Vermiglio* many are centered on gender roles. Survival of the communities in rural Italy during wartime depended on women; men were at the front, in the mountains with the partisans, or in German prisons. Yet society did not accord women the status commensurate with their importance. Ada's friend Virginia (Carlotta Gamba) acts out masculine roles, smokes, plays the tomboy, and dangerously rides a bicycle on ice. Ada tells Flavia she wants to be a priest, "so that people will listen to me." Delpero does not deal in stereotypes. Cesare, the schoolmaster, is a somewhat domineering figure, yet he finds solace in poetry and music and in teaching his pupils to appreciate them. Although he has many sons among his children, he defies convention by choosing his daughter Flavia as the one most worthy of further education. With Ada, by contrast, he reinforces tradition, assigning her the role of remaining in the village to assist her mother with the children (a role that she, in turn, defies—abandoning the village for the city, yet caring for children after all, in an orphanage).

Among the male characters, six-year-old brother Pietrìn, played by another first-time actor, Enrico Panizza, stands out. He takes a shine to Pietro, the escaped Sicilian soldier, but his older sibling Dino (Patrick Gardner) is hostile. Dino has a fraught relationship with his schoolteacher-father, who criticizes him for neglecting his studies. Dino seems to resent that Pietro has been welcomed into the *maestro*'s family and joins them for Christmas dinner. The older men of the village, assembled in the local tavern, are also suspicious of Pietro. "Only cowards run from a war," exclaims one. "Just drink and shut up," responds another. The bartender explains that Attilio and Pietro escaped from a German work brigade, not from the front. "I'd run too if they caught me. I wouldn't stay and work for them."

Here and elsewhere, the movie gestures to the war, without providing any context. That hardly matters—more detail would risk cluttering up the interweaving story lines: the budding romance of Pietro and Lucia; the deaths of infants to illness and malnutrition; the *maestro*'s progress in instructing both children and adults in reading and writing, poetry, music, and learning the basics of the national language; Ada's reaction to Virginia's experiments in gender nonconformity ("I like the way you look at me," says Virginia, as she removes her sweater to smoke a cigarette in order to avoid leaving a scent that her mother can detect). References to the war are literally fleeting—as when one of the nighttime reconnaissance planes collectively known as "Pippo" flies over the village. The *maestro* illustrates the word "epistolary" for his students by giving the example of soldiers at the front writing home to their mothers. When one of the younger pupils reports that his mother has heard nothing from her soldier-son for months, Cesare is caught short: "Now that you're big," he exaggerates, "you need to take care of your mother."

Cesare conducts a Saturday class for adults, where he asks them to write poems in standard Italian. One elderly man recites his poem and the *maestro* asks Pietro—whom he has invited to join the class—for his reaction. The poem speaks of soldiers, young and strong, who die in war. It reminds Pietro of a fellow soldier and friend. Ciro was young and strong, Pietro says, but was killed on "decimation day" (*decimazione*) and fell right at Pietro's feet. Cesare asks about the state of mind of a soldier under such circumstances. "It's like you're alive," Pietro responds, "but not really."

Lucia and Pietro barely communicate in words because he speaks Sicilian, doesn't know the local dialect or even basic Italian, so *Vermiglio* depicts their budding romance in images.

Like Pippo, the reference to *decimazione* is one that some, but not all, Italian viewers will understand. The province of Trentino/Alto Adige (Süd Tyrol in German) had been part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire before World War I. Italy incorporated the region after the war and carried out a policy of Italianization of the German-speaking population. When Benito Mussolini's Italy became an ally of Adolf Hitler's Germany, the policy contributed to a fraught relationship between *il Duce* and *der Fuehrer*. In June 1943, Mussolini's fascist cronies connived with King Victor Emmanuel III to remove him from power, as popular opinion increasingly criticized Italy's involvement in the war. The new leaders signed an armistice with the Allies in September and sought to withdraw from the war. The Germans responded by pouring in troops to occupy the country. Trentino was absorbed into *Operationszone Alpenvorland,* Operational Zone of the Alpine Foothills, and the Germans brutally repressed any opposition. One of their favorite techniques of reprisal was *decimazione*—derived from the number ten—literally murdering at random every tenth person.

Despite the dark context, *Vermiglio* is more of a family story than a war story. Delpero has explained that it was inspired by a dream she had shortly after her father died. He appeared to her as a young child of six years old, wearing a happy, toothless grin she remembered from a family photo. Pietrìn represents her father as a boy. Although Delpero acknowledges an admiration for Olmi, who also recreated rural life by recruiting locals who spoke in dialect (Bergamasco, in his case), she convincingly credits a wider range of artistic inspirations, from painting and novels to music. Jessica Kiang, writing in *Variety*, aptly described the face of Martina Scrinzi, who plays Lucia, as "apparently stolen from a Vermeer painting." But, in fact, Jan Vermeer's influence is everywhere in this film—in the composition of the scenes, in the use of natural light, in the tactile sense of the wooden tables and doors, the bed linen and crocheted hats and shawls. The director has mentioned Natalia Ginzburg's 1969 novel *Family Lexicon* as a model. Different in many ways from Delpero's movie—the novel deals with a Jewish Italian family in urban Turin—it shares an autobiographical origin, a strong patriarchal father figure, and a world depicted through the sensibility of children at their various stages of development.

Antonio Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons* violin concerti structure the narrative, which extends over a single year. Matteo Franceschini's original score is spare and diegetic. We hear organ music—his own, played by the composer himself—in one scene, and, in the next it appears to be coming from a church. A Chopin nocturne plays in the background of an outdoor scene and on the *maestro*'s phonograph in the next. Music and other sounds anticipate scene transitions and continue beyond them, some scenes changing abruptly as sound cuts to silence. The soundtrack is alive with local sounds, singing, and music performed at a dance and a wedding by folk musicians and a regional chorus directed by Alberto Delpero. *The Four Seasons* itself becomes the basis for one of the *maestro*'s lessons, even though his wife (Roberta Rovelli) has complained about the high cost of his records, when she can barely feed the children. The director sympathizes with both parents, as she explained in an interview, but who "wouldn't want their children to attend a lesson like Cesare's on Vivaldi?"

Winner of the Silver Lion Grand Jury Prize at the Venice Film Festival, among other awards, *Vermiglio* has been described as "conventional" by one critic and "so soporific it borders on anesthetizing" by another. Indeed, the film relies on a few familiar techniques. Krichman's visual style—recognizable from his work with Andrei Zvyagintsev on such films as *The Return* (2003) and *Leviathan* (2014)—relies on a mostly static camera, often set at eye-level (although sometimes, at the level of Flavia, hiding under a bed). The camera hardly moves, with no tracking to speak of, few zooms or pans, and no dissolves. Both indoors and out, characters arrive at and exit a fixed image; sometimes we see only their legs, arms, hands, or shoulders.

The techniques employed by the director, cinematographer, editor, and sound editor (Hervé Guyader) may be conventional, but they are used to powerful effect. There are gaps in the narrative, and they are filled mainly through these techniques. To convey that a baby has died, for example, the film shows us a table with his photo on it, then it cuts to a scene of the bereaved parents in bed, followed by another cut to a statuette of an angel with a candle burning in a candlestick, then to the children's bedroom for the explanation in the form of a question from Flavia, "Dino, is he really a little angel, flying up to heaven?" As Alberto Piroddi put it, "Delpero trusts her audience enough to let them ponder these gaps…It is a demanding way of telling a story, requiring patience, but the reward is enormous."

Isabelle Huppert described *Vermiglio* at Venice as "poetry in images." Some critics have complained that the movie is too slow. It's slow the way a poem is slow or a painting is slow. Do you skim a poem as if it were an Instagram post? Do you run through the Louvre, taking a glimpse at the *Mona Lisa* through the crowds of tourists, and making sure to score a Rembrandt or a Caravaggio on the way out? In fact, the movie's pacing varies: a long scene of a room will be followed by three quick, almost staccato cut-away scenes of other locations. The device serves to drive the narrative, but at the expense of the pleasure of lingering over each richly composed image. For that you should watch *Vermiglio* again. Each time, one appreciates all the more the artistry and the authenticity of this formidable young director and her remarkable team of professionals and amateurs whose collaboration is nothing less than lyrical.—**Matthew Evangelista**

Witches

Produced by Manon Aridsson, Chiara Ventura, and Jeremy Warmsley; written, directed, and edited by Elizabeth Sankey; cinematography by Chloë Thomson; production design by May Davies; original music by Jeremy Warmsley. Color, 90 min., 2024. A MUBI release, www.mubi.com.

British writer-director-editor Elizabeth Sankey's documentaries are about the ways in which modern audiovisual media, and particularly the commercial cinema, tend to warp the female mind, particularly her own. *Witches,* her latest, combines a personal essay approach with illustrative film clips and interviews, building on a formula she developed in *Romantic Comedy* (2019), but here to a far greater, dare I say even a spell-binding, effect. In *Witches*, the stakes of cultural criticism are vivid, both bone-cuttingly personal and explicitly political, as Sankey uses the history of film representations of witches, and related female madness and motherhood, to process her own experience of a postpartum mental health crisis that landed her in a psychiatric ward. Along the way, *Witches* contributes to the historiography of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century witch trials in Europe and North America. More pressingly, the film issues a call to action to the present-day medical profession, which grossly underdiagnoses and undertreats Perinatal Mood and Anxiety Disorders (PMADs). This, despite the prevalence and severity of such disorders, ranging from severe depression and anxiety to psychosis. In the U.S. and the U.K., approximately one in six pregnant or postpartum women experience a PMAD, with suicide as a leading cause of maternal death. Both statistics are climbing, which is unsurprising given the twenty-first century "age of anxiety" in which we live and bear children.

Witches begins with Sankey-the-disembodied-narrator in voice-over—familiar for those who have seen her *Romantic Comedy* (available on several U.S. streaming platforms) or the made-for-British-television *Boobs* (2022). In those films she reflects on how she (a white, millennial, middle-class, British woman) has been shaped by popular media representations with their imperative perky breasts and heterosexual coupling, respectively—reflections emerging from a sort of reception-study-of-one. For instance, *Romantic Comedy* begins with Sankey reflecting on her internalization of Rom-Coms' (patriarchal) "rules" for "find[ing] a man and keep[ing] him happy." Toward generalizing this ideological effect beyond herself, Sankey then weaves in the voices of interviewees who join her in analyzing the Rom-Com genre's "misogynistic tropes." Well-chosen and well-edited clips of Rom-Coms readily prove Sankey's case, while also proving her continued affection for the genre. Even though *Romantic Comedy* hardly