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Call Me by Your Name. Directed by Luca Guadagnino. Screenplay by James Ivory. Italy/USA/
Brazil/France. Sony Pictures Classics, 2017. 132 minutes.

Adapted from André Aciman's novel of the same title, *Call Me by Your Name* is set near Crema in Lombardy in 1983. It recounts the growing desire of seventeen-year old Elio (Timothée Chalamet), son of archeologist Samuel Perlman (Michael Stuhlbarg), for Oliver (Armie Hammer), a doctoral student spending the summer as an intern at the Perlmans' villa. Released in Britain in October 2018 and in the United States a month later, the film quickly became a success with mainstream audiences in the English-speaking world. Enthusiastically reviewed by critics across multiple media outlets, it has been described with adjectives ranging from "ravishing" to "rapturous." A few isolated voices objecting to the "age gap" between the two leading characters were soon drowned out by the film's loyal chorus of fans. As this review goes to press, the film has earned more than \$40,000,000 internationally.

Nominated for four Academy Awards, including a nod for Best Picture (the first Italian film to appear in this category since Roberto Benigni's *La vita è bella / Life is Beautiful* (1997), *Call Me by Your Name* won an Oscar for James Ivory's adapted screenplay. Although it opened in English-speaking markets in late 2017, the film was not distributed in Italy until January 2018, thus enabling its growing international acclaim to register with the Italian media before its national release. Guadagnino's best-known earlier features, *Io sono l'amore / I am Love* (2009) and *A Bigger Splash* (2015), both starring Tilda Swinton, had met with mixed responses from Italian critics and audiences while achieving a considerably more enthusiastic reception abroad. The release of *Call Me by Your Name* in Italy, by contrast, yielded mostly positive reviews and strong box office returns.

Guadagnino's latest film has some superficial similarities to *Io sono l'amore* and *A Bigger Splash*, leading reviewers to describe them collectively as a trilogy or, prompted by a comment made by the director in an interview, as a "trilogy of desire." The action in all three films is indeed triggered by the eruption of previously unacknowledged desire. *Call Me by Your Name* is in other respects, however, quite distinct from the earlier features. Although he is out as a gay man, until embarking on *Call Me by Your Name* Guadagnino had not made a film entirely focused on queer desire. Significantly, the eruption of desire in this film does not trigger the violently destructive consequences observed in the preceding ones, as a reciprocal attraction evolves here without apparent opposition from those on the periphery of the relationship. At the same time, despite the narrative centrality of a sexual relationship between two young men, *Call Me by Your Name* is not underpinned by any unequivocal affirmation of queer politics and practices. In its calculated attempt to appeal to a broad general audience--in other words, to a predominantly heterosexual audience--it forfeits its potentially transgressive edge.

Call Me by Your Name is without doubt a ravishing production, whose attractions are nonetheless located mostly on its surface. At the center of the action is the Perlmans' beautiful seventeenth-century villa in the Po Valley. Surrounded by orchards and gardens, it draws into its orbit several young visitors vacationing nearby who spend long afternoons lounging on the lawn, playing volleyball, or bathing in the pool. Sayombhu Mukdeeprom's camera carefully captures the nuances of the setting, highlighting the refinements and pleasures of the Perlmans' daily lives, the distinctive charms of the local landscape, and the beauty of young bodies cavorting in the sun or enjoying more intense pleasures in the intimacy of semi-darkness. The relationship between these young bodies and the idealized statuary of the Greco-Roman tradition is set up in the opening credit sequence, where the camera pans over several photographs of ancient bronze statues strewn on the surface of a desk. It is reinforced at subsequent moments in the film, perhaps most heavy-handedly when the two young protagonists accompany the professor to the shore of Lake Garda to view a magnificent bronze nude that has just been removed from the water where it had been hidden for centuries.

Music is crucial to *Call Me by Your Name*, whose narrative tentatively suggests that it is Oliver's fascination with Elio's prodigious musical talent and virtuoso piano playing that prompts his initial interest in this coltish teenager not yet fully at home in his body. The soundtrack thus reinforces the seductiveness of the film's visual appeal with a score by Ryuichi Sakamoto and an eclectic mix of additional elements, including work by Ravel and John Adams, Italian pop tunes from the 1980s, and the Psychedelic Furs' "Love My Way." Most notable are three songs written and performed by Sufjan Stevens, two of which were composed specifically for the film: "Mystery of Love," the recipient of an Oscar nomination for Best Song, and "Visions of Gideon," whose spare, heart-wrenching lyrics evoke the viewer's identification with Elio's silent longing.

To some extent, *Call Me By Your Name* is reminiscent of Bertolucci's *Io ballo da sola / Stealing Beauty* (1996), which similarly narrates the sexual awakening of a young foreigner spending the summer among a cluster of privileged, cosmopolitan acquaintances in the gorgeous Italian countryside. Yet the two films have some decisive tonal differences. In *Stealing Beauty*, despite the vitality and playfulness of the younger characters, the specter of death is perpetually present in the figure of a moribund Englishman apparently afflicted with AIDS (Jeremy Irons). No such real-world concerns overshadow the enchantment of Guadagnino's vision. Although set in 1983, when the reality of AIDS was already beginning to permeate public consciousness, the film resolutely ignores this historical detail and remains focused on the exquisite pain and pleasure of desire, yearning, and seduction.

The appeal exerted on audiences by *Call Me by Your Name*, however, is in part the seduction of an imagined Italy, a construct rooted in the era of the Grand Tour and perpetually refashioned over the intervening centuries by artists of non-Italian origins—painters, writers, photographers, and filmmakers. This Italy has been popularized, with variations, across a range of international movies that include, to give some relatively recent examples, Audrey Wells' *Under the Tuscan Sun* (2003), Richard Loncraine's *My House in Umbria* (2003) and Joanna Hogg's *Unrelated* (2007). To this group of films one could also assign *Room with a View* (J. Ivory, 1985), based on E. M. Forster's Edwardian-era novel and directed by James Ivory, who also happens to be the screenwriter of *Call Me By Your Name*. In all of them, "Italy" is the exquisite landscape, climate, and décor through which the privileged English-speaking characters move with an air of entitlement, embarking on adventures apparently unlikely to occur at home. Almost without exception, "Italians" feature in these scenarios as background figures who exist to facilitate the visitors' basic needs or to provide some comic relief.

One of the most puzzling aspects of Guadagnino's film is the uncertainty of the Perlman family's relationship to the territory in which the story unfolds. In Aciman's novel, the Perlman family is understood to be urban Italian Jews who customarily spend their summers at the family villa located somewhere close to the Ligurian coast. In the film, questions of identity, national belonging, and rootedness are less clear. In an early scene, Elio observes that the recently arrived Oliver is wearing a Star of David under his shirt. His recognition of their shared Jewishness seems to contribute to Elio's growing interest in the handsome visitor, though he soon takes pains to stress that his family does not place excessive emphasis on their identity as Jews. "We are also American, Italian, and French," he says. He later adds, somewhat facetiously, "My mother says we are Jews of discretion." The Perlman family are apparently the only Jews to reside in or visit the sleepy corner of the Po Valley where they have inherited the villa that is now their summer home. Where they live the rest of the year is a mystery. The accents of father and son strongly suggest the United States, but this is never clarified. Elio's mother Annella (Amira Casar) may have Italian roots, but she speaks English with a British accent. While Elio is multi-lingual, he speaks English and French most often, even with the middle-class teenagers spending the summer nearby, whose names suggest they are Italian. When he offers a comment in Italian, his speech is noticeably accented, as is true of Professor Perlman as well. In other

words, although this privileged, erudite family seems completely at ease in the Italian landscape, they have no discernable connection to Italian society.

On just one occasion an Italian couple is invited to the Perlmans' villa for dinner. A muddled discussion of current Italian politics ensues in Italian (encompassing references both to the *compromesso storico* and Bettino Craxi), with the Italian characters shouting and gesticulating hyperbolically like performers in a comic routine. The Italians who appear most often in *Call Me by Your Name*, however, are the Perlmans' servants, Mafalda and Anchise, who unobtrusively bring fresh fish from the river, provide cooked food for the table, and keep the elegant household in functioning order. These are earthy, straightforward individuals of few words, contrasting sharply with the expressive refinement and poise of the Perlman family. The servants effectively provide the film with some much-needed local color, their dialect-inflected speech offering the illusion of anthropological authenticity.

Another anthropological touch is injected into the film in the scene where Elio and Oliver stop at a farmhouse in the course of a long bike ride and ask an old woman they find shelling peas in the courtyard for a glass of water. The woman shuffles off and reappears almost immediately to deliver, without a word, the water they requested. In yet another scene, Oliver enters a small bar where several grizzled local men are engrossed in a game of cards. Signaling his desire to play, Oliver is immediately allowed to take a chair and cut in on the game. This fantasy of compliant or accommodating locals, proffering hospitality, service, and sustenance to the privileged outsiders residing in their territory, resonates with a strain of colonial nostalgia. The film's configuration of its principal characters' relationship to Italy thus unconsciously reprises some of the more problematical motifs of the international films I have previously mentioned, including the rendering of Italian locals either as servants or amusing clowns.

Call Me By Your Name exerts its sensual charm on the audience from the first scene, where the arrival of the almost impossibly tall and handsome "intruder" (as Elio describes Oliver) is observed from an upstairs window by Elio and his French girlfriend, Marzia (Esther Garrel). Oliver, however, is not an intruder in the style of the anonymous visitor in Pasolini's *Teorema / Theorem* (1965), and he will leave no irreparable disarray in his wake. Unlike *Teorema*, where desire triggers cataclysmic change, or even *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), where homophobic antagonists lurk violently in the wings, same-sex attraction in *Call Me by Your Name* seems to meet no external opposition or threat. Blond, blue-eyed, and broad-shouldered, Hammer's Oliver combines the magnetic charm of an old-fashioned Hollywood film star with the imposing proportions of a Greek statue. Moving through the world with a display of brash self-confidence, Oliver alienates Elio at first, but this emotional distance begins to crumble in the course of their frequent, if sometimes brittle exchanges. Chalamet artfully conveys Elio's physical restlessness and internal turmoil as he confronts his involuntary attraction to the visitor and inability to articulate it. Oliver, in the meantime, remains something of a cipher. Exerting a magnetic appeal on the young women he meets locally, he flirts with energetic abandon, and disappears into the night to pursue unknown, though presumably heterosexual encounters.

Elio's eventual confession of desire is skillfully staged in a long take that occurs almost midway through the film, as he paces around the statue of a war hero at the center of a small-town piazza and Oliver remains standing on one side. Although his muttered statement is far from explicit, Oliver acknowledges that he understands what Elio is communicating, and he balks, emphatically refusing to speak of such things. Yet Elio persists, and soon makes the first move. After some passionate kissing, Oliver again withdraws. The film renders this back-and-forth of desire, pursuit, and hesitation with compelling plausibility. In the heat of frustration, Elio seeks out Marzia and makes love to her for the first time. Their encounter is soon followed, however, by the scene of Elio's lovemaking with Oliver, which seals the erotic bond between the pair. Although the scene is shot with visual restraint—as the camera discreetly pans away from the lovers' tangled bodies to contemplate the trees outside the

window—the passionate urgency of the moment is made strikingly clear. Several additional scenes of sexual intimacy follow, including a teasing exchange between the lovers involving a sperm-soaked peach. The most intimate details of these encounters, however, are left to the viewers' imagination.

Guadagnino's refusal to visualize frontal male nudity and full-scale sexual intimacy has been criticized by a small number of reviewers, at least one of whom has argued that the director sanitizes queer sex in order to make the film palatable to mainstream heterosexual audiences.¹ The element in the film that is most frequently mentioned by reviewers, however, is not the degree to which the director allows the audience to observe gay lovemaking, but rather the revelation, after Oliver's departure, that Elio's father has known all along about the relationship, and to some extent enabled it to happen. Both comforting and congratulating Elio, who is obviously heartbroken to be finally separated from his lover, Perlman tells his son that he regrets not having had the courage to consummate a similar attachment in his own youth. Perhaps the father, as a scholar of classical antiquity, is implicitly drawing a parallel between Elio's affair with Oliver and the sexual relationships habitually forged in ancient Greek society between an adult male and a teenage protégé, a bond that ended when the older partner married. For the Greeks, homosexuality was a sanctioned phase of male social development, preceding heterosexual marriage and reproduction. In this way, Elio's queer attachment can be repositioned by the erudite professor within a classical heteronormative imaginary and his own closeted history simultaneously accounted for along similar lines. The father's striking declaration, delivered with a mixture of gravitas and wistful emotion, is considered by many commentators to be one of the most affecting moments in the film. Yet the scene is fraught with ambiguity, as it reframes Elio's bond with Oliver not as an adventure shaped by the force of Elio's own desire and agency, but rather as process observed and facilitated by his parents.

The ambivalent, even troubling connotations of this scene are reinforced in the film's epilogue, which unfolds in December at the family villa, where Elio and his parents have returned for the winter holiday. A festive meal is being prepared, and candles are lit on the menorah. In the midst of this activity, the telephone rings, and Elio and his parents pick up on separate lines. Oliver is calling to wish all of them a happy Hanukkah in what is apparently his first communication with the family since his departure from Italy. When he unexpectedly announces that he is about to get married, the parents respond with immediate enthusiasm. As it is by now clear that they were both fully aware and accepting of his relationship with Elio the previous summer, their unequivocal delight upon hearing news of the impending marriage is striking. The Perlman seem, in effect, to be endorsing Oliver's commitment to reproductive heteronormativity as a new but fully predictable and desirable phase in his life. Their shared joy also suggests that they may be projecting a similar trajectory onto their son.

When Elio manages to speak to Oliver alone on the telephone he learns that Oliver's relationship with the unnamed fiancée has been "on and off" for years. Very quickly, however, the two young men reprise their private signal of erotic intimacy, each calling the other by his own name. Their conversation, though wistful, is very brief. In the film's compelling final shot, a close-up lasting about two minutes, Elio gazes into the fireplace as the credits begin to appear on the left side of the frame. Illuminated by the flickering flames, tears gather in his eyes. Meanwhile, on the soundtrack, the lyrics of "Visions of Gideon" poignantly convey his unspoken devastation. In the background, family life proceeds as usual, as the out-of-focus figures of his mother and the housekeeper move about, setting the table for dinner. Elio's isolation is complete. There appears to be no remaining space in the ordered universe of this apparently open-minded and permissive family for enduring queer desire.

¹ D. A. Miller, "Elio's Education," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, last modified February 19, 2018, accessed May 12, 2018, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/elios-education/#>.

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