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Euforia. Directed by Valeria Golino. HT Film & Indigo Film, in collaboration with Rai Cinema, 2018. 115 minutes.

Euforia/Euphoria, Valeria Golino's second film, stars Riccardo Scamarcio as Matteo, a wealthy gay entrepreneur in Rome, who is forced to confront his relationship with his country-bumpkin brother Ettore (Valerio Mastandrea). The tensions between the brothers are caused partly by Ettore's antagonism to Matteo's extravagant lifestyle and sophisticated pals (who gather endlessly on Matteo's terrace, *La grande bellezza*-style), and Ettore's vague, though not hostile, incomprehension towards his brother's homosexuality. For his part, Matteo produces most of the film's considerable melodrama, not through his sexuality, but by virtue of his narratively inexplicable decision to keep from his brother the knowledge of Ettore's terminal cancer. He also organizes and pays for Ettore's treatment (letting him think he has merely a benign cyst), and puts him up in his lavish apartment.

The film was produced by HT Film and Indigo Film (also responsible for Sergio Castellitto's Cannes success *Fortunata/Lucky* in 2018), and co-stars auteur and quality film staples Jasmine Trinca and Isabella Ferrari alongside Scamarcio and Mastandrea. Despite the "crisis" of Italian cinema on the festival circuit¹, *Euphoria* premiered in the "Un certain regard" section at Cannes in 2018, and has circulated widely at international festivals. The film's critical reception outside Italy, however, has been decidedly mixed: negative critiques mainly focus on the film's portrayal of homosexuality, and the melodramatic and somewhat hackneyed illness narrative. To address the former critique first: Scamarcio's Matteo is a Prada-dressed narcissist, lacking empathy (he discusses how to make money by refurbishing a refugee camp), who, despite paying for his brother's treatment, repeatedly prioritizes his sex life over Ettore's welfare. In one notable comic scene, for example, he exiles Ettore to the freezing balcony of their hotel in Medjugorje where they have gone to seek a cure for the "cyst," in order to have sex with a random fellow pilgrim.

Despite the involvement of queer novelist Walter Siti on the writing team, this queer representation is not transgressive, and the focus of some reviews is that it reinforces stereotypes of gay men as superficial and sex-obsessed. *Variety* trenchantly commented that "it's quite an achievement to set back gay representation on Italian screens by about 30 years, but Valeria Golino's second feature as director manages to accomplish that dubious feat."² *The Hollywood Reporter*, meanwhile, wondered whether "LGBTQ audiences will buy into the main character of Matteo."³ Golino's response when pressed on this potentially problematic representation was to point to the film's nomination for the Queer Palm at Cannes, the involvement of Siti, and to declare her critics moralistic and herself "a free artist, not a prissy one."⁴ However, she seems to have misread the *Variety* piece, which criticized not the fact that Scamarcio's character is having gay sex, but that the character is one-dimensional and superficial, and that there is no transgressive charge in the narrative. This debate points up some key issues in queer representation on screen: Golino's rejection of a more normative narrative, one that would perhaps have seen Matteo desire to marry and procreate, sees sex itself as liberating and still potentially radical: "maybe I should have made him more loving and willing to create a family, that would have been more politically correct. But I

¹ Damiano Garofalo, "Italian Cinema in The Shadow of Film Festival Crisis," 2018. Accessed July 16, 2019. <https://www.italiancinema.it/italian-cinema-in-the-shadow-of-film-festival-crisis/>.

² Jay Weissberg, "Cannes Film Review: *Euphoria*," *Variety*, May 25, 2018. Accessed July 16, 2019. <https://variety.com/2018/film/reviews/euphoria-review-2-1202822607/>.

³ Deborah Young, "*Euphoria* ('Euforia'): Film Review," *The Hollywood Reporter*, May 16, 2018. Accessed July 16, 2019. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/euphoria-1112479>.

⁴ Quoted in Tommaso Cartia, "I'm a Free Artist, not a Prissy One.' Valeria Golino and Her *Euphoria* in New York," *La Voce di New York*, December 11, 2018.

find this the real obscenity, like if it is a shame to be sexually free.”⁵ Meanwhile, it is easy to read Matteo’s vanity and self-care, his spending, his purchase of face creams and his decision to get calf implants as elements of reductive gay stereotyping that link him to feminine habits. However, Scamarcio’s performance (for which he was nominated for a David di Donatello) in general manages to transcend these clichés, offering both lightness and depth to the character.

Rather than focusing on alterity or marginalization, *Euforia* fits into a recent tradition of queer male representation that works to insert queerness into the family drama, despite Matteo’s rejection of heteronormativity. Derek Duncan has cited the example of Fernan Özpetek’s *Mine vaganti/Loose Cannons* (2010) as typical of mainstream films with a queer plotline, “often criticized for their relatively unchallenging narrative and aesthetic structures which, superficially at least, do little of the work that queer as a contestational category aspires to carry out.”⁶ The gentle humor of *Euforia* fits into that mainstream strand, as do its secondary characters: the sympathetic but overbearing mother, the sad ex-wife (Ferrari), the refreshing new love interest (Trinca). Scamarcio, Golino’s former long-term romantic partner, also starred in *Mine vaganti*, and he is part of a tradition of straight male stars playing gay roles: these include Alessandro Preziosi in *Mine vaganti*, Stefano Accorsi in *Le fate ignoranti/The Ignorant Fairies*, Özpetek (2001), Luca Argentero in *Diverso da chi?*, Umberto Carteni (2009), and *Gomorra: la serie* star Salvatore Esposito in *Puoi baciare lo sposo/My Big Gay Italian Wedding*, Alessandro Genovesi (2018). This has been considered part of a male star’s quest for prestige via diversification, and continues with the recent comments of current top male star Alessandro Borghi that “ho sempre detto che vincerò l’Oscar con il mio primo ruolo da trans” (I have always said that I will win an Oscar for my first trans* role)⁷. Meanwhile, Borghi’s character Aureliano’s queer-baiting relationship with his friend Spadino in *Suburra: la serie* is a fan favorite, while Spadino’s actual gay relationship is minimized.

Going beyond the question of positive or negative representations of homosexuality, it is productive, I think, to read the film in the light of its other criticism: that of excessive melodrama (Weissberg calls it “a ridiculous melodrama”⁸; Romney (2018) notes that “the result comes across as a glossily chic melodrama”). The film in many ways typifies how contemporary cinema works to reintegrate the “crisis male” into the Italian family; the fraternal, homosocial bond has long been privileged in quality Italian cinema, and the relationship between Matteo and Ettore is at the core of Golino’s film, with lovers and mother fairly marginal. Ettore is presented as a kind of “fallen man” – cast out from his family due to his affair with a younger woman, and narratively punished by illness. Mastandrea, interestingly, played a similar role in Ivano De Matteo’s *Gli equilibristi/Balancing Act* (2012), as a husband and father cast out from his family and rendered homeless because of a sexual indiscretion.

In *Euforia*’s male melodrama, the recuperation of the fallen man into the brotherly relationship is the point of the narrative, with both Ettore and Matteo needing to be redeemed (Matteo for his venality rather than his sexual habits). Questions of sexuality (and of illness, barely

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Derek Duncan, “The Geopolitics of Spectatorship and Screen Identification: What’s Queer About Italian Cinema?” *The Italianist* 33, no. 2 (2013): 258.

⁷ Quoted in Piera Scalise, “Il video di Alessandro Borghi a Le Iene commosso per Stefano Cucchi tra politica e omosessuali: ‘Vincerò l’Oscar con il mio primo ruolo da trans.’” January 28, 2019. Accessed July 16, 2019. <https://www.optimagazine.com/2019/01/28/il-video-di-alessandro-borghi-a-le-iene-commosso-per-stefano-cucchi-tra-politica-e-omosessuali-vincero-loscar-con-il-mio-primo-ruolo-da-trans/1353442>.

⁸ Weissberg, “Cannes Film Review: *Euforia*.”

⁹ Jonathan Romney, “*Euforia*: Cannes Review,” *Screen Daily*, May 16, 2018. Accessed July 16, 2019. <https://www.screendaily.com/reviews/euforia-cannes-review/5129414.article>.

explored) are resolved in the film's ending, and rendered decidedly secondary to the uncertain brotherly affection that relegates all other questions to the background. The brothers reconcile under a Roman sky while admiring a flock of starlings, in a gorgeously filmed if somewhat clichéd Sorrentino-esque scene. The brothers embrace, and there is silence, bar the diegetic sound of the starlings. Once again in Italian cinema, fraternal melodrama provides the deepest emotional charge.

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