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Zen sul ghiaccio sottile / Zen in the Ice Rift. Directed by Margherita Ferri. Articulture, 2018. 90 minutes.

Birdsong tweets as the opening credits begin on a low angle view through mountain trees whose upper branches converge overhead in a calm blue sky. The trees are seen from the perspective of 16-year-old schoolgirl, Maia, nicknamed “Zen,” as she lies on her back and finishes a cigarette, exhales, then raises her middle finger, center-frame and towards the sky. It is a gesture of refusal of everything at once, and nothing in particular. The scene cuts from Zen to an aerial shot of massive glacial rifts creaking as they crack apart. In a poetic motif also hinted at in the film’s title, the glaciers impart a magnitude to this personal, intimate portrait of the pressures of conformity. The opening also illustrates the deft touch of debut director Margherita Ferri, who moves between small-town life, teenage aggression and a sublime force that suggests the existence of something beyond the stifling restrictions of the everyday.

This opening sets up the theme of disruption that lies at the heart of the film. Zen is the only girl to play in the youth ice hockey team in Fanano, a ski resort in the Emilian Apennines. The snowy mountains that surround the town are fitting indicators of the cold emotional environment and of isolation, but also, perhaps, of solitary resilience. Chosen for the national female squad for the next season, the sullen and isolated Maia is bullied by her peers for her androgynous appearance and her failure – or refusal – to fit in. But when one of the popular girls, Vanessa, gets Maia to let her secretly hide out in Maia’s mother’s mountain lodge, an unlikely relationship opens up between the two. Taking refuge in their illicit retreat, they reveal the different kinds of disappointments in the social and sexual expectations that the two feel. Just as their relationship seems like it will move towards another realm, those same pressures conspire to further ostracize Maia, and reintegrate Vanessa into “normality.”

The teen drama has established itself as one of the most popular genres in contemporary Italian cinema, dependent as it is on the importance of the youth market, and whose success has been proven in examples as varied as Federico Moccia’s romantic comedy *Scusa ma ti chiamo amore / Sorry, If I Love You* (2008), Gabriele Salvatores’ superhero franchise *Il ragazzo invisibile / The Invisible Boy* (2014), and Luca Guadagnino’s international production *Call Me By Your Name* (2017). But unlike its more generic counterparts, youth is not a time of frivolous hijinks in this film, nor a coming-of-age onto the horizons of adult possibility. It is instead marked by frustration. Maia lives at home with her mother, making *Zen sul ghiaccio* also a film whose focus is firmly on female relationships. But the dramatic focus remains on the difficulties Maia faces in navigating her peer group, with school rendered a place of enforced group belonging whose teenage members teeter between amoral irresponsibility and harsh enforcement of social rules.

The film was trailed in the press as being about the discovery of identity, but this effaces the deliberate uncertainty that lies at its heart. Zen does not undergo anything as neat as an awakening of her “true self” as either trans, lesbian, or any other precise designation, but simply lives her life without conforming to the standards her classmates want her to. The continual taunts towards Maia of “bitch,” “fucking lesbian” and “half-girl,” provide a dramatic illustration of what gender theorists like Judith Butler have argued about playground bullying, and its status as more than simple game-playing. Name-calling is an education into what any society deems are the proper ways to behave, policing the boundaries of how we should be and punishing the signs of deviation. The film presents non-conformity as part of a more complex reality than the straightforward revelation of some underlying “authentic” identity, for complexity is itself the point.

This is the debut fiction feature for Margherita Ferri, with a wonderful central performance by Eleonora Conti, and it was made thanks to the support of the 2017/18 Biennale College Cinema to promote young directors. One could see the germ for the film in her previous work, the 16-minute documentary *Odio il rosa! / I Hate Pink!* (2017), which follows an 8-year-old tomboy as she prepares for a breakdancing contest in a campsite on a beach in Rimini. But the ice rink in *Zen sul ghiaccio sottile*

does not allow Zen an escape from reality nor a release from social restrictions. Films as diverse as the British social realist drama *The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner* by Tony Richardson (1962) or Jennie Livingston's *Paris Is Burning* (1990), the documentary about voguing in New York's 1980s drag scene, seek to counter issues of social marginalization through acts of public performance through which the body's physicality can express itself. In *Zen sul ghiaccio sottile*, ice hockey instead typifies the strenuous difficulties that group interaction pose for its protagonist. It is only in isolation that Zen reaches the kind of state that her nickname might suggest, as in one final, balletic sequence that she performs on the rink on her own. It is sensory engagement, rather than personal self-realization or public performance, that suggests release. Ambient sounds play while Maia showers, redolent of a later montage of mountain waterfall when she befriends Vanessa. The development of this relationship occurs with minimal dialogue and is made up instead of looking, dancing, drawing and tattooing, a development that the girls' re-entry into society threatens to cut short. It thus has in common with the otherwise very different *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, by Céline Sciamma (2019), the role of sensuality as an alternative to the male gaze and an expression of the intensity of female desire as it may exist outside of social norms.

While the English title, "Zen in the Ice Rift," indicates Maia's in-between position, the subtly different Italian original indicates tension instead. "Zen on Thin Ice" suggests the danger of maintaining self-composure in an insecure environment. The melting glacial ice to which the film occasionally returns, torrents of water gushing below and between the rifts, evoke the sublime of nature. It also sets up a series of questions about what is happening to Maia – or is it actually Vanessa? – as the film goes on. Is it a motif of dissolution? The thawing of a frosty world? Is it a metaphor for cracking up? Or an image of the fluidity that exists in nature, a fluidity that we might apply, despite the efforts of the playground bullies, to gender and sexuality as well?

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