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La vita davanti a sé/ The Life Ahead. Directed by Edoardo Ponti. Palomar in collaboration with Artemis Rising Foundation, 2020. 98 minutes.

La vita davanti a sé/The Life Ahead (2020) is Edoardo Ponti's third feature-length film. Like several of Ponti's other works, notably *Cuori estranei/Between Strangers* (2002) and *Voce umana/The Human Voice* (2014), the film draws on traditions of internationally acclaimed middlebrow drama (a staple of exportable European cinema) through literary adaptation, its casting of a world-renowned European star, and a palimpsestic approach to historical representation. *The Life Ahead*, one of few Italian-language films directed by Ponti, is an adaptation of the French novel, *La vie devant soi/The Life Before Us* (Romain Gary, 1975). It is driven by its pairing of diva, Sophia Loren (mother and long-time professional collaborator of Ponti) with a relatively unknown young actor, Ibrahima Gueye, who makes his feature debut here, following his role in the Spanish short, *Muñeca Negra* (The Black Doll, Mateo Nicolau, 2019). Loren plays a retired sex worker and Holocaust survivor, Madame Rosa, who cares for other sex workers' children. Meanwhile, Gueye plays Rosa's antagonist-turned-adoptee, Momo (Mohamed). Momo, the leading migrant figure in the film, is an orphan of Senegalese descent who finds himself being unofficially adopted by well-meaning (and sometimes not so well-meaning) strangers hoping to keep him away from social services.

Adding a further level of precision and locating *The Life Ahead* in an Italian cinematic context, we might place the film in the tradition of progressive, "multicultural melodrama" exemplified by the works of Ferzan Özpetek. Indeed, it engages with Holocaust memory through the narrative of the encounter between an aging, traumatized figure, Madame Rosa (Loren), and an uncomprehending youth, Momo (Gueye), in a way that invites comparison with Özpetek's *La finestra di fronte/Facing Windows* (2003).¹ Yet it is the aspiration to represent an intersectional "melting pot" of characters of different genders, sexualities, creeds, and races that distinguishes *The Life Ahead* as a film that at once echoes and extends the commitment found in Özpetek's earlier works. Ponti's film presents a community of diverse, and variously marginalized characters, not dissimilar from the "chosen family" of LGBTQ* figures in *Le fate ignoranti/Ignorant Fairies* (Özpetek, 2001). However, this alternative family in *The Life Ahead* traverses boundaries of sexuality, gender, race and, unlike *Ignorant Fairies*, religion: alongside Madame Rosa and Momo appear Lola (Abril Zamora), a transgender sex worker, Hamil (Babak Karimi), a Muslim shop owner and scholar, and Iosif (Iosif Diego Pirvu), a Romanian (and possibly Jewish) orphan also under Madame Rosa's care. Narrated from Momo's perspective, the film shows such characters negotiate their relationships and their own identities as people marginalized by the state and mainstream society.

It would be easy to interpret *The Life Ahead* as a film that evinces a fantasy of liberal multicultural inclusion—one which has proven amenable not only to international film festivals, but online distributors such as Netflix. (Ponti's films have premiered at Venice, Toronto, and Capri, and this latest offering is distributed by Netflix.) Indeed, the film treads well-worn visual and narrative tropes, from the sudden discovery of Madame Rosa's past through an image of the identity number tattooed on her forearm, to the expression of Lola's experience as a transgender woman being filtered through the fear of rejection by her father (see also *Ignorant Fairies*), to the almost Dickensian narrative of Momo's redemption. Furthermore, the film's culmination in a happy ending—or at least one on the sweet side of bittersweet—may detract from moments of genuine complexity, limiting the film's potential to effectively represent the messiness of living in the midst of oppression.

Yet to read *The Life Ahead* only in this way is to ignore its negotiation of a middlebrow address and downplay moments in which it might complicate generic tropes, even opening up space for a more radical politics. In fact, the film's focus on the relationship between Madame Rosa and Momo

¹ Loren's Madame Rosa is to Massimo Girotti's Davide, for instance.

foregrounds a deep suspicion towards, and possible rejection of, the state, showing structures of support outside it. The very premise of the film is enabled by Rosa's characterization as a "Madame" who offers care for the children of other sex workers.² Simultaneously, Madame Rosa's status as a retired sex worker presents an intriguing reversal of stereotypical depictions of such figures in narrative art. As Danielle Hipkins and Katharine Mitchell have noted, the female sex worker is a staple of melodrama, from its operatic form, in *La Traviata*, to its cinematic forms in films such as *Un giorno speciale* (*A Special Day*, Comencini, 2013) and, now, *The Life Ahead*.³ Ponti's film at once evokes and complicates common cultural representations of the sex worker in Italian melodrama. On the one hand, Madame Rosa exemplifies the "sympathetic, suffering female prostitute 'with a heart of gold'" who, ultimately and tragically, dies. However, her character removes the core of this trope: the narrative of a young girl's loss of sexual innocence, indicative of the degradation of Italian society. Instead, she represents a woman who, having lost such innocence long ago, has *survived*, aging into womanhood to become a source of support for others where the state has remained stubbornly absent, even hostile.

The absence of the state is itself a common trope in Italian cinema, and through it we might locate *The Life Ahead* in another tradition of filmmaking, comprised of films such as *Ladri di biciclette*/*Bicycle Thieves* (De Sica, 1948), *Il ladro di bambini*/*The Stolen Children* (Amelio, 1992), *Certi bambini*/*A Children's Story* (Frazzi and Frazzi, 2004) and even *Gomorra*/*Gomorrah* (Garrone, 2008). However, through its parallel between the persecution of migrants today and Jews in the twentieth century, *The Life Ahead* moves from a depiction of the State as absent to one of the State as aberrant. We see this most clearly in the two scenes in which police appear, albeit briefly. In the first, state violence explodes onto the screen in the form of an immigration raid. Remaining strictly in the melodramatic mode, the film shows only chaotic glimpses of the immigration officers, and the people being forcibly removed from their homes; rather, we *hear* the scene through diegetic shouting and cries, and the emotive music (the *melo*) that plays over the top. These sounds combine with mid shots of Madame Rosa's and Momo's fearful expressions, indicating that the moments we have just glimpsed constitute a human tragedy, an atrocity of state violence. The film later uses the same technique as Momo and Madame Rosa hide from police in the basement of their apartment building. By this point, we have discovered that Loren's character frequents this room in a kind of symptomatic repetition of her seeking refuge during her internment at Auschwitz. As the camera cuts to Momo and Madame Rosa's concerned expressions, the thudding of police boots above creates an echo not only through the building, but through time: the specter of oppressive state power returns.

All in all, *The Life Ahead* is a genre film which seeks as broad an audience as possible for its narrative of progressive inclusion. What this means for the politics of the movie is open for debate. The interpretation I have presented above has sought to highlight moments of radical solidarity in the film—a solidarity that it is our responsibility, as viewers, to take up.

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² "Meglio io dei servizi sociali (better me than social services) she says.

³ Danielle Hipkins and Katharine Mitchell, "Le Traviate: Suffering Heroines and the Italian State Between the Nineteenth and Twenty-First Centuries," in *Prostitution and Sex Work in Global Cinema: New Takes on Fallen Women*, ed. Danielle Hipkins and Kate Taylor-Jones (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 195-218.