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A Chiara. Directed by Jonas Carpignano. MK2 Films. 2021. 120 minutes.

“Staying home would make me feel at home,” Chiara (Swamy Rotolo) says to the caseworker who is bringing her to a foster family in Umbria, in the center of Italy, an Italy that is much farther from Calabria than the kilometers that separate them. Chiara is the main character of *A Chiara*, Jonas Carpignano’s most recent film (2021), which completes the trilogy begun with *Mediterranea* (2015) and *A Ciambra* (2017). In this trilogy, the setting ranges from Africa to Calabria, passing through the gypsy village ‘A Ciambra,’ near the little town of Gioia Tauro where *A Chiara* takes place for the most part. *A Chiara* explicitly represents the last moment of a path that is both autobiographical and generational. On the one hand, Carpignano has said that after shooting this film he was going to leave Calabria, where he spent the last ten years of his young life. On the other hand, the film ends with Chiara—who just turned eighteen—starting training for an athletic competition. We see her moving forward, then the frame blurs. We do not know where Chiara is heading, what we clearly know is that she has left behind her own family of origin and the environment in which she grew up until the age of sixteen.

Such a “staying home would make me feel at home” represents the core of the film. The only way to stay at home would be to stay exactly where one cannot stay, because Chiara cannot keep on living in the same ‘*ndrangheta* (the specific Calabrian mafia) family that makes her life a life impossible and unfair to live for a young woman. The same holds true for a lot of young Calabrian girls and boys who do not find the existential and job opportunities that they deserve in their homeland. It is in this irresolvable contradiction that the specific power of this film lies. The film succeeds in avoiding both the rhetorical narrative of an underdeveloped and archaic Italian South and the similarly rhetorical narrative of a South whose nature is wonderful and whose people are warm and passionate. Neither feature of the South can alone depict the actual lives of those who really live in the South. For this reason, Carpignano wants us to pay particular attention to the eyes of Chiara: he wants to make us feel what it means to “see things you don’t want to see,” as Giulia (Chiara’s elder sister) tells her when she discovers that their father is a drug dealer.

Throughout the film, there are insistent framings of eyes and glances. What is at stake in *A Chiara* (which in Italian is a form of dedication, but also a sort of farewell) exactly is a question of glances. What is seen? What is not seen? By whom? And moreover, what is unbearable to see? At the beginning of the film Chiara’s beautiful eyes do not see anything, because Chiara sees only what she expects to see—her family, her beloved father, and her friends. However, once she discovers the source of her family’s wealth, Chiara suddenly starts seeing new and unexpected things in the world and people that she was so accustomed to seeing, or things to which she had never previously paid attention to. In either case, she does not understand what she is noticing or observing, because it is too difficult to see the actual condition in which she lives.

This is the other side of *A Chiara*, the inability to see what Jacques Lacan defines the Real. Take the case of Chiara, who actively and joyfully participates in her life in Gioia Tauro, without noticing the poverty and decay of her own town. In one of the first shots of the film, we see Chiara chatting with her girlfriends on the semi-destroyed pier of the city, in the background the port’s cranes, are on the dirt ground and abandoned garbage. She simply does not see what, on the contrary, strikes the viewer as a sad scenario for a young woman. In a later moment, Chiara comes back to this place, and suddenly—through her astonished eyes—we realize that she has grasped the frightening reality of the town where, until that moment, she had quite unconsciously spent her youth. Such a vision is unbearable because no one can stand before the Real; at the same time, such a moment represents the first step of a transformative movement, which, in the end, will carry her away from her own family and native land. This tension towards an “outside” is the most decisive feature of *A Chiara*. It runs

through the whole film. Such an “outside” takes the form of a continuous alternation of light and dark, of interior and exterior, of below (the bunkers where criminals hide), and above ground.

The same Chiara is crossed by such a drive toward the outside. In the long shot of the film, during Giulia’s birthday, there is a moment when Chiara dances a slow dance closely embraced by Claudio, her father. It is an intense moment, which almost assumes tones of incest. This is the way a young woman of an *‘ndrangheta* family is expected to behave, showing a strong connection to the father while almost despising the mother, who represents the traditional wife whose main function it is to protect the family’s secrets. On the contrary, at the end of the film, we see Chiara in her new foster family in Umbria where there are only women, a mother, and her daughter. It is as if Carpignano wanted to show us that alternatives exist, that there are different models of womanhood available to Chiara and for all the Chiaras of the world

But what does “staying home would make me feel at home” really mean? First, that the person who says this is not staying at her own, original home. This can only be said by someone who no longer lives at home, so could desire to be at home once again. More generally, this sentence means that the possibility of staying at home has been forever lost because such a situation where someone (Chiara) could simply stay at home no longer exists. In fact, what does it mean to live in a global world if the possibility of living a life “staying at home” no longer exists? From this perspective, Chiara is nothing but one of the millions of young people that cannot live where they were born because such a place does not offer any possibility of a decent life. This is the typical condition of those who are born into the so-called Global South. At the same time, this is also the case of the very Jonas Carpignano—born in New York and raised between the USA and Rome—who shows that the condition of not staying at home is the “normal” condition of any young person in the global world today.

When Chiara first says, “staying home would make me feel at home,” she still believes that her own home would forever be Gioia Tauro, together with her silent family that never speaks about the mysterious father’s life. To see without seeing means speaking of everything except that which really matters. In the end, when Chiara imagines seeing her original family reflected in the bathroom mirror while she is dressing for her eighteenth birthday party (far away in Umbria), we can imagine that she realizes that “staying home means” staying outside the closed and silent home where she lived before being forced to move to another home in another region. A home with two new women. That is a life without her mother and father.

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