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È stata la mano di Dio / The Hand of God. Directed by Paolo Sorrentino. The Apartment, 2021. 130 minutes.

Described as his most personal film yet, Paolo Sorrentino's *È stata la mano di Dio / The Hand of God* is also perhaps his most accessible. Non-Italian viewers will readily follow the story, and many will identify with it, despite the numerous highly specific Neapolitan references. The question is: which viewer will identify with what, specifically?

Sorrentino, an internationally renowned contemporary Italian filmmaker, has often been compared stylistically to Fellini, in particular for the Oscar-winning *La grande bellezza / The Great Beauty* (2013). In *The Hand of God*, Sorrentino has made his most Fellinian film yet, as much for its markedly autobiographical story as for its visual style. Fabetto Schisa (newcomer Filippo Scotti) is Sorrentino's teenage avatar, coming of age in 1980s Naples, in the cinematic equivalent of a *Bildungs-* or *Künstlerroman*: the story of the formation of an artist. The typically linear progress of the *Bildungs-*narrative is disrupted, however, by a central tragic scene, around which the film is divided, each half with a distinctive affective tone. The first half is idyllic, the second, melancholic, but ultimately forward-looking, as Fabetto embarks on a new life. As with so much of the director's work, however, the overall tone is ironically elegiac, as Sorrentino refracts his own (masculine) artistic formation through the double lens of memory and cinema history—but not without cost to the women in the story, or rather one woman in particular: Fabetto's beautiful middle-aged aunt, Zia Patrizia (Luisa Ranieri), who, for him, is the epitome of the sexually desirable woman. On the one hand, Sorrentino appears to have exorcized the retrograde soft-porn tropes that marred *The New Pope* TV series (where he failed to heed the self-reflexively critical perspective of *Loro*). Conversely, *The Hand of God* shows that the director still struggles to transcend specific clichés in the onscreen representation of women's bodies and their inevitable subordination to the male protagonist's story arc.

For the first time in many projects, Sorrentino works without his long-time collaborator, Luca Bigazzi, who is largely responsible for the now recognizable Sorrentinian style of swooping camera and complex editing patterns. That said, in the film's first third, a number of scenes occur that have already achieved a certain fame for their memorable visuals and comic tone expressive of Fabetto's love for his parents. An extended summertime family lunch sequence, for instance, showcases Sorrentino's penchant for groups of actors exchanging witty repartee, even as their non-standard faces and bodies are lovingly displayed by cinematographer Dario D'Antonio's updated Fellinian gaze. Toni Servillo, Sorrentino's favored lead actor, is especially effective in the role of Saverio Schisa, Fabetto's father. From these establishing scenes it is clear that the protagonist's parents return Fabetto's love, in a house (a facsimile of the Sorrentino family apartment in Naples) characterized as much by his mother's practical jokes (Teresa Saponangelo), as his father's history of philandering. Another now-iconic scene, a long take of Fabetto driving happily with his parents on his Vespa, sums up their relationship (significantly, this scene is revisited as Fabetto's memory in the second half of the film, in a unique instance of an intra-diegetic flashback). Otherwise, despite his loving family, Fabetto leads an aimless, lonely life, with no appropriate outlet for his teenage desires.

The traumatic event at the center of *The Hand of God* is, in a sense, the whole point of the story. The film's title is a direct reference to the 1986 Mexico World Cup quarter-final, in which Argentine soccer star Diego Maradona touched the ball with his hand while scoring a goal ("a little with the head of Maradona and a little with the hand of God," as he put it). Proverbially, the "hand of God" also connotes the action of fate, an act of God, indifferent to human will or desire. When Sorrentino was sixteen, he lost his parents to carbon monoxide poisoning in their mountain chalet. He had stayed behind in Naples because he wanted to watch SSC Napoli, for whom Maradona played from 1984 to

1991. As Sorrentino has often recounted, Maradona—who, when he first arrived in Naples was embraced as the city’s, and southern Italy’s, savior—literally saved his life. This is the key event replicated in the film. But there are two other factors vying for Fabietto’s salvation: one is cinema, which wins out in the end; the other is women, or woman, and sexual desire. After all, as a twenty-first-century cinematic *Künstlerroman*, *The Hand of God* is a coming-of-age story, and, true to the genre, the protagonist’s sexual awakening is crucial to his formation as a potential artist.

The scene in which Fabietto loses his virginity with the Baronessa (Betty Pedrazzi) is lifted straight from Sorrentino’s 2010 novel, *Hanno tutti ragione / Everybody’s Right*, which is not autobiographical (the story is rather inspired by the main character in the director’s 2001 feature, *L’uomo in più / One Man Up*, played by Servillo). The inclusion of this episode in the recent film suggests its significance to the director’s fictional reimagining of his own early life; it becomes all the more problematic from the perspective of the life story as a contemporary “Bildungs-film.” In this fictional autobiography, Fabietto’s Zia Patrizia is presented on screen in the unreconstructed or regressive manner for which Sorrentino is frequently criticized. That *The Hand of God*’s general point of view on Patrizia is aligned with Fabietto’s late-adolescent gaze does not vindicate the film’s gender politics. Nor does the fact that Sorrentino also gives her something that only Fabietto shares: an interior life. The film’s opening sequence, for example, is a kind of magical-realist dramatization of Patrizia’s anxiety over her childlessness, in which she meets San Gennaro, the patron saint and protector of Naples, here a wealthy ‘*nacchenella*’ (as they say in Naples) in a vintage chauffeur-driven car, and the *munaciello* (little monk), the peculiarly Neapolitan mythical figure who brings good fortune to those he favors. In this strange scene, in a decrepit but beautifully lit palazzo, Patrizia bends to kiss the little monk’s head while San Gennaro bestows his blessing by “copping a feel” (as they say in England). The “Hand of God” indeed. By the film’s end, Zia Patrizia is in an asylum—broken by domestic abuse (at the hands of her husband) and the miscarriage it engendered. It is to Patrizia in her final scene that Fabietto first confesses his ambition to become a filmmaker, and that in order to do so and realize his new forged dream, he must leave Naples (his childhood home) for Rome.

Whereas in *The Great Beauty* Sorrentino made what is now recognized as one of the great Roman films, *The Hand of God* does something comparable for Naples, which is shown at its most beautiful. As it happens, Sorrentino himself grew up in Naples and became a filmmaker there, only leaving for Rome at the age of thirty-seven. A cinematic thread runs through *The Hand of God*, linking the two parts thematically. At one point, Fabietto’s brother Marchino (Marlon Joubert) attends a local audition for a Fellini film, in what constitutes one of Sorrentino’s most overt references to his auteurist forebear. In another early scene, Fabietto visits a film shoot on location in Naples’ famous Galleria Umberto Primo. The man behind the film-within-the-film is real-life Neapolitan director Antonio Capuano (played by Ciro Capano), who plays a key role in Fabietto’s journey of self-discovery, just as he did for Sorrentino, who co-wrote Capuano’s *Polvere di Napoli (The Dust of Naples, 1998)* before going on to direct his own screenplays.

In *The Hand of God*’s final scene, however, Sorrentino returns to his other cinematic model as the film returns to the tone of its magical realist opening: in a direct visual echo of Fellini’s *I Vitelloni* (1953), the hero finally manages to leave his hometown for a new life in a more cosmopolitan city. On the train to Rome, Fabietto sees on the station platform the *munaciello*—the same little monk that blessed his aunt with fertility in the opening scene—the Neapolitan trickster figure, a bearer of good luck. But Fabietto’s wish to become a filmmaker—and therefore, in a sense, the director’s—comes at the cost of the woman who understood him best. While the film’s organization around these magical realist moments is structurally effective, this viewer can’t help feeling that Sorrentino, for all his audio-visual mastery, remains stuck on the train, always heading toward a more progressive future, but never quite arriving.

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