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Il bambino nascosto / The Hidden Child. Directed by Roberto Andò. Bibi Film Tv, RAI Cinema, 2021.
110 minutes.

Chosen as the closing film for the 78th Venice Film Festival in 2021, Roberto Andò's *Il bambino nascosto / The Hidden Child* is based on an eponymous 2020 novel by the director himself, who adapted it for the screen with the help of Franco Marcoaldi. The story centers on Gabriele (a touching Silvio Orlando), a sixty-something renowned piano teacher at Naples' conservatory and a rather aloof character, living alone in a spacious apartment in the lower-class neighborhood of Materdei. Gabriele's orderly routine is suddenly turned upside down when Ciro (Giuseppe Pirozzi, in an engaging turn), a preteen kid living upstairs, seeks shelter at his place. The youngster and a friend made the mistake of mugging the mother of a camorra boss, sending the old lady into a coma, and, thus, getting sentenced to death by the hoodlums in retaliation. Gabriele and Ciro are faced with the ambiguity and indifference of all institutions, including family: the local police commissioner has ties to the mob; Gabriele's brother is an important judge who offers no help at all; and, however distraught, Ciro's father, a minor *camorrista* himself, is ready to hand over his son. Exploring the unexpected bond the two main characters end up forming, the film constructs an engrossing narrative of reciprocal discovery, adding subtlety and originality to what could have been just the umpteenth reiteration of a worn-out trope.

More interested in the psychological repercussions of the slums' violent mindset than an actual analysis of criminal mechanisms, Andò effectively relies on the viewers' previous knowledge of this kind of environment from such titles as *Gomorra / Gomorrah*—both the film (Matteo Garrone, 2008) and the tv series (2014-2021)—or *La paranza dei bambini / Piranhas* (Claudio Giovannesi, 2019, another Roberto Saviano adaptation). The director is hence free to move in a different direction, sketching a study of the characters' personalities through their relationship to the spaces they inhabit. *Il bambino nascosto* could indeed be described as primarily a spatial fantasy, a musing on the permeable boundaries between interiority and externality, and on the topographic articulations of fear, trust, and affection.

The building in which the characters live is typical of Naples' architecture and its decrepit grandeur. The structure works as a metaphor for both the unforgiving organization of society (see the beautifully intricate camera movement bringing us from the first floor to the rooftop terrace, where a mob murder has taken place) and the palimpsest of the psyche. For example, the cave underneath the building, about which Gabriele learns from Ciro, offers an alternative point of access to and escape from the premises, but also functions as a fascinating correlate to the depths of the unconscious.

Suffused with harmony (Andò beautifully weaves the notes of Schumann, Beethoven, Ligeti, and others into the film fabric, using them as both diegetic and extra-diegetic scores), Gabriele's dwelling is an island of calm, protecting him against the chaos of the outside world. The maestro (as everybody in the neighborhood calls him) has retired within its walls, refusing a more public life as a concert pianist. His decision to live in the slums is at once a rejection of the more petit-bourgeois lifestyle he seemed destined to by his class origins and a form of self-exile. Gabriele, however, has not foregone emotions completely: he still accesses them through music and poetry. The first lines he speaks in the film are a quote from Konstantinos Kavafis' poem *Ithaca*, introducing the idea of a journey rich in "adventures and experiences." As if these verses had prepared him, the professor immediately and impulsively decides to help Ciro, when he appears, even if the kid offers little-to-no information on the reasons for his escape.

The whole film works as an extended game of hide-and-seek, with the two main characters pitted against one another at first (Gabriele is initially unaware of Ciro's presence) and later playing as partners. Whenever someone rings the doorbell, Ciro conceals himself in an enclosed loft above

Gabriele's living room. This dark space of safety, a closet of sorts, also proves to be a crucial vantage point, from which the boy can peek out and learn more about his host. The act of peeking out while unseen is indeed the foremost mode of looking in the film, as several other scenes underscore. Andò thus constructs a symbolism of the closet, whose full implications become clear when Gabriele is outed to Ciro by the unexpected visit of his sometime lover Biagio (Francesco Di Leva). After the latter leaves, unnerved by Gabriele's obvious discomfort, Ciro rushes out of his hiding place yelling homophobic slurs at his keeper.

Later, once reconciled, Gabriele serves Ciro the plate of pasta he had originally prepared for Biagio: a substitution portending potentially disturbing entailments. The threat of pederasty, however, is soon dispelled. Two previous scenes—one depicting Ciro trying on the new clothes Gabriele has bought him, the other showing the youth taking a bath—emphasize and problematize the older man's gaze on the younger character and his naïve performance of masculinity. Surprisingly, on the very night after the outing scene, while the maestro is asleep, Ciro secretly slips into his bed. As he wakes up in the morning, Gabriele is indeed shocked to find him by his side and gazes at the sleeping boy from top to bottom. The pan down Ciro's body stops at crotch level, but the suggestion of sexual interest is displaced by the revelation that the boy has wet the bed. Gabriele's tearful reaction supplants the possibility of desire with the reality of parental empathy.

As made evident by this brief and soberly melodramatic scene, Ciro is still a child, forced to grow up too fast by the brutal context of his upbringing. As the two main characters gradually overcome the barriers separating them, most importantly the class divide, Gabriele's curiosity towards Ciro's otherness can turn into identification and fatherly love, and the two are able to create a shared space of care. The film thus places itself alongside other relatively recent titles investigating the complex intertwining of sexual desire and parental instincts in relationships between men of different ages: the 2015 Venezuelan Golden Lion winner *Desde allá / From Afar* (Lorenzo Vigas); the French *Eastern Boys* (Robin Campillo, 2013); as well as an earlier Italian film, Antonio Capuano's *Pianese Nunzio, 14 anni a maggio / Sacred Silence* (1996). While these films describe much more explicitly erotic connections, Andò's decision to tackle the theme in a subdued fashion, cloaking it within the folds of a more traditional trajectory of mutual discovery, feels right for this story and proves quite haunting, as the diegetic game of hide-and-seek comes to involve the viewer himself and his sensibility to nuance.

Though the depiction of Ciro and Gabriele's more playful interactions is not always convincing, the film overall draws a compelling map of the characters' all-male affective constellations (Gabriele's cold brother, his wise and loving father, and his former pupil turned henchman, Diego; Ciro's father and his friend Rosario), implicating both of them in a complex network of doublings, repetitions, and replacements. The film's ending, however, which departs drastically from the book's bleaker one, chooses to free the two from all of their ties. Andò's film shows Gabriele and Ciro's ability to transcend the constraints of the law, taking refuge in France. This solution brings to mind such different films as Mario Soldati's *Fuga in Francia / Escape to France* (1948), another tale on the necessity to substitute an evil—in that case fascist—father with a righteous one, and James Ivory's *Maurice* (1987) from E.M. Forster's 1914 novel, where a couple of gay lovers flee Edwardian England for a brighter future in Canada. Andò concludes his reflection on the stratification of different forms of attraction and love by underlying the characters' necessity to cross the national border in order to build an alternative family. A finale whose political subtext, however understated, should not go unnoticed.

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