

Down in the hole

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I am not scared, directed by Gabriele Salvatores, screenplay by Francesca Marciano and Niccolò Ammaniti, based on the novel by Ammaniti

I am not scared is a flat and uninspired Italian film that has found some success in the international market. It is an adaptation of a successful recent Italian novel set in the Southern Italian countryside.

The film opens by following the games played by the children of a small community. One of them, Michele, accidentally finds a mysterious hole in the ground near a farm. A strange creature seems to lurk there, and after some tentative contact Michele realizes that it is a captive child. Michele feeds him, gives him water and begins to spend more and more time with him. Soon Michele learns that the child, Filippo, has been kidnapped. Worse, all the adults in his small world are involved in the abduction, from the local rowdy, whom Michele hates, to his own mother and father.

In the first scene of the film a caption informs us that the events take place in “Southern Italy, 1978.” But in truth it could just as well have been decades before or after. The film is, all in all, not just socially and historically abstract, but altogether vacuous in its dealing with people and events.

There are elements of potential interest in this story. The kidnapped child is a member of a wealthy family from the more prosperous and industrial North of the country. Interestingly, so is the apparent mastermind of the kidnapping who is visiting the village to check on the situation. Michele’s family and the rest of the village, instead, are Southern and poor.

The disparity between the industrial and prosperous North and the backward and rural South is one of the terrible and continuing failures of the Italian state since its inception. Historically, much of Italy’s intellectual and cultural life (Verga, Gramsci, Silone to name a few), has derived its energy from this maddening and stubborn disparity. Salvatores himself experienced it personally, since he moved from Naples to Milan as an adolescent. But the movie does not seek to draw from this problem as a dramatic or artistic resource or to engage with it in any meaningful way. “Southern Italy” is merely a beautiful countryside populated by not so beautiful people.

The play of social conditions and motivations that is naturally at the heart of any kidnapping story could also have been interesting. Michele’s village is obviously and wretchedly poor. One of his friends is relatively privileged because his uncle, who migrated to the US, occasionally sends him small toys. Unsurprisingly, Michele expresses a vague feeling of wanting to leave the village, a feeling that is later validated by his mother.

But these elements are also casually tossed around, without any particular logic or significance. Why does Michele want to leave? In the absence of any working out of these social issues, one is forced to speculate that he wants to do it because he is bored, or as a result of some sort of incurable angst peculiar to the youth. When Michele asks his father why they put the boy in the hole, the father fumbles for an answer but can only muster a stern look that, because of the social vagueness of the film, transmits nothing of significance about his motivations. It is, perhaps, one of the inexplicable things adults do.

Indeed if there is any kind of social concreteness to the film, if there a question that Salvatores here seems interested in pursuing with some energy, it is the conflict between the innocence of youth and an adult world that is dangerous and incomprehensible.

While Michele is playing in the fields, a squadron of unnaturally red wheat-threshers menacingly appears at the horizon. Michele stops playing, disturbed by the sight. After police helicopters begin to patrol the area, all the adults suddenly vanish. They are assembled somewhere in order to decide what to do with the kidnapped boy. This leaves the astonished kids alone in the empty village square, alarmed at first, but then happily enjoying a sense of liberation.

We are also supposed to be moved by Michele’s rich inner life. He is shown concocting various stories in order to make sense of the events and strengthen his resolve. This of course compares favorably with the stale and impoverished lives of the adults. The mother drudges away in the kitchen. The ringleader is an ogre who cusses at everyone in sight. The local shopkeeper seems barely alive when Michele tries to converse with her.

The last scene of the movie repeats this theme. Under

tragic circumstances Michele and Filippo manage to make a connection, reaching for one another across the intruding body of Michele's father standing between them.

Of course none of this works either. There is nothing convincing or illuminating about the innocence of these children or the barbarity of these adults. It is, rather, perhaps the most obvious of the many easy choices made by the director. Who will dare doubt the innocence of youth or quibble with cute kids? Salvatores clumsily plays around in the simple moral universe of a Spielberg, only without that kind of budget. "We are the same," the two children agree after realizing that they are both 10 years old—a conclusion that is patronizing and absurd even simply on the plane of the dramatic unfolding of the story.

The weakness of *I am not scared* is notable not just on its own terms, but also because it marks an obvious turn for the worse in Salvatores' work. The director is very well known in Italy and received an Oscar in 1991 for his *Mediterraneo*. Though *Mediterraneo* was not a great film, it had some undeniable strengths. Indeed much of Salvatores' earlier work represented something culturally important in the Italian context. The titles of these films are sufficient to reveal what their significance was. Films like *Marrakech Express* and *Puerto Escondido* signaled a conscious, almost programmatic opposition to provincialism and national self-satisfaction.

In Salvatores' films, the Italians, instead of slumbering in the unreal and unwholesome consumer world of the post-World War II middle class, are constantly found in a longing diasporic mood—uneasy, unsettled, looking for and finding themselves elsewhere. Those Italians were stubbornly dreaming and being drawn to other lands, particularly the very different world of the Mediterranean basin, which up until now in Salvatores' work seemed to serve as a conscious cultural and civilizational antidote to the processes of "Americanization."

Out of this template Salvatores (born 1950) may not always have produced satisfying films. And in fact this very template tended to produce its own peculiar and recurring forms of evasion. But he could scarcely have been accused of taking the path of least resistance. This is particularly true because Salvatores was busy populating the Italian imaginary with Africans, Turks and Mexicans in the decade when the issue of foreign immigration happened to powerfully emerge as a political issue.

In *I am not scared*, instead, with the exception of an odd reference by one of the characters to his Brazilian wife, these Italians are firmly rooted in place. Not to their "national soil," which would have been bad enough, but rather to a neatly packaged, glaringly artificial version of it.

Above, the skies of Basilicata are entirely too blue, and the

sun too bright. Below, the recurring and ostentatious shots of impossibly golden wheat stalks tossed around by the wind, or by the careless limbs of the zest-filled children make patently false promises about a countryside turgid with life and ebullient human relations. In fact everything, from the landscape to the people inhabiting it, is alien and unreal. No one could possibly recognize this as home.

Particularly in thinking back to Salvatores' earlier efforts, one cannot help but notice a definite strain of opportunism at work here. The American viewer will stumble upon many strangely familiar moments. When Michele still does not know who or what lives in the hole, one scene in particular will induce cringe-worthy flashbacks of Peter Jackson's hissing Golem (*Lord of the Rings*). While the movie is still toying with the possibility of turning into a far darker tale, the viewer is threatened with a mass of flesh-eating pigs reminiscent of *Hannibal*. It is not clear whether Salvatores is consciously winking at those in the know, or offering visual crutches for the spectator accustomed to the standard Hollywood fare.

It is quite possible, in any case, that all of this may be the unfortunate product of a decisive reorientation by Salvatores. Instead of the "cosmic" South and the Mediterranean, he seems to be looking far to the West, to certain lucrative niche markets for moderately and accessibly "artistic" European movies.

In the end, there is very little of value here. One should mention the performance of Giuseppe Cristiano, the young actor who plays Michele. But the glimpses of genuine feeling flashing on Cristiano's spirited and interesting face only expose more clearly the emptiness around it.

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