

REVIEW

Review of Paolo Sorrentino's *The Hand of God*

2021, The Apartment Pictures/Lucky Red/Netflix, 130 min

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The Hand of God (*È stata la mano di Dio*, 2021) opens with Paolo Sorrentino's camera floating over the coast, across the shore, alongside a car, and into the center of his native Naples. It is as if an angel were soaring to this location to offer a divine proclamation. Then, immediately, the audience is met with a mysterious man who knows the details of a random woman waiting at a bus stop. He knows that she is unable to bear children. He tells her that he can undo this, that she and her husband can start their family. The woman listens intently, follows him to a deteriorating building once beautiful, and is met by a diminutive Kafkaesque and Neapolitan *munaciello*, who blesses her and assures her she is not only able to have children but is now with child.

Returning home and bearing these good tidings, the woman's miraculous conception is instantly rejected by her husband. She is humiliated, physically abused, and only saved by the late arrival of family members. Having lost the child, she is incapable of speaking to her husband out of fear and he cannot speak to her out of hatred. So it is within the film's first ten minutes, in which Sorrentino establishes the balanced order of the divine and profane, beauty and disgust, love and sorrow. As Ezra Pound writes in "Ortus": "You are mingled with the elements unborn; / I have loved a stream and a shadow." Sorrentino shows that to truly love another, to fully understand miracles, there has to also be a space for, or at least recognition of, difference.

The larger focus of the film is on a young Fabietto Schisa (Filippo Scotti). Viewers see him undergo loss and success, lamentation and joy within a sweltering 1980s Naples. It is in many ways a summer similar to Luca Guadagnino's *Call Me By Your Name* (2017), but the biggest distinction between the two Italian filmmakers' works, is that for Sorrentino's film, despite the characters he encounters and lessons learned, there is a greater love for the stagnant moments of experience rather than traditional progressive plot points. The usual push of narrative is more absent from *The Hand of God* than in *Call Me By Your Name*; despite each film's focus on the coming-of-age of a young man, Sorrentino replaces the checkpoints of time with a deep sense of place. In Naples, Fabietto wanders, searches, and waits; he comes to know himself in the grey lull of time that often follows grief and which, less often, gives way to encountering the divine.

Fabietto is given the advice to look forward and to not focus on the past. Likewise, he is admonished not to dwell in the present but to only move toward another abstract distant something. In light of this advice, with Sorrentino's obsession on the miraculous pitted against its contrasting dull void, the question is raised: By losing sight of the past, the surrounding present, is a providential message able to be received? Or, to further illustrate: If it is not night, could a lighthouse's beam be seen? If there is no fog, is a guiding hand needed?

This navigational idea is asked throughout the film: in conversation with Neapolitan director Antonio Capuano, on a Vespa ride through city lights like stars, during a funeral where an elderly man only speaks of football, etc. In the absence of a conventional plot, the audience grasps to care about something – here, it is the young Fabietto. In these conversations and moments, he is forced to make sense of the insights placed before him. The audience sees Fabietto move, but also wait. He learns, but also regresses. He is, under the subjection of the omniscient and omnipresent camera, an apprentice learning to be okay in a world so convulsive.

Behind and in front of him as if a deep cloud floating through a street, throughout it all, the eponymous hand of God is present. It is in both the pleasant and harrowing, the ease and the pain; as in the KJV translation of 1 Timothy 3:16: “Great is the mystery of godliness.” In Sorrentino’s *The Hand of God*, he shows the range in which this divinity can be manifested, and how mysterious God truly is. It is for both Fabietto and the audience to recognize this holy existence, and then, if not to do something with it, to know that it has and will still be there.