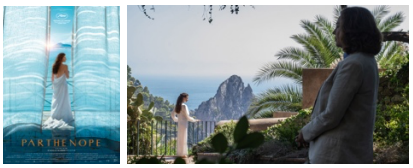
REVIEW

Review of Paolo Sorrentino's *Parthenope*

2024, The Apartment/Fremantle/Saint Laurent, 136 min



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Italy, five years after World War II, Parthenope is born. A nulliparous Italy, until Parthenope – Italy is reborn. Born of Naples's water, overlooking its mountains, her name meaning "maiden-voiced" in Greek, Parthenope is the mythical siren who drowned when her music failed to entice Odysseus, who nurtured Virgil in the *Georgics*, and whose body washed ashore, marking the first Greek settlement in Italy, eventually to become Naples. It is to Naples that she returns in Paolo Sorrentino's celebration of the city, the 2024 *Parthenope*. Parthenope: Naples personified. Parthenope: the most beautiful woman in Italy.

She wanders and is wandered upon. Men watch and lust after her; when she is in a room, embodying a space, there is nothing else; all eyes are on Parthenope (Celeste Dalla Porta), as if she were their God. "Are you aware of the disruption your beauty causes?" John Cheever (Gary Oldman) asks her. But this question is like asking a forest if it is aware of its lumbermen, its travelers, its litterers. Parthenope simply exists, as does everyone who desires her. But she does not ask for as much. She merely is, Parthenope. She recalls the lines of T. S. Eliot's "Preludes": "The worlds revolve like ancient women" (16). Parthenope is the world of Naples, and always has been, as with the wanton men who would seek to have her – they only exist in relation to her.

Oldman's Cheever continues, "Beauty is like war. It opens doors." Then, later in the film, when Parthenope is in a Catholic cathedral and tries to open a door to get new air, it does not open; the doors are fake. "It's Catholicism," the priest tells her, "Freedom doesn't enter through doors." "And where does it enter?" she asks. "It doesn't," he replies.

Such a contrast of beauty and religion is typical of the films of Sorrentino. He famously frames the assumed against the understood, and here it is as if Derrida were deconstructing the framework of religion, or the early Christian Gnostics emphasizing the instruction of Christ over the institution of Christ. Marx famously writes that "the criticism of religion is, therefore, in embryo, the criticism of that vale of tears of which religion is the halo." What is religion if not a collection of philosophical teachings that restructure an individual and, by extension, a community's beliefs and actions? Religion is the vehicle that gives its followers a halo but can also seclude such when the institution is mistaken for its teachings. Sorrentino wants his viewers to be faced with an unrequited beauty throughout his film, as Parthenope does not give herself to anyone but to those who need her; and also to those she needs: beauty finds itself in the hearts of its desperate seekers, whether they are conscious of their pursuit or not. It is not in the Catholic institution that freedom is found, but in its teachings, in its beauty.

Throughout the film, Parthenope is asked: "What are you thinking about?" or of those around her: "What is she thinking about?" Through her sublime beauty, others are drawn to her. With reverence, they become disciples and Parthenope is their prophet, their oracle, a dispenser of truth: "Parthenope, what will you tell me that I cannot think myself?" As though her physical body and what she represents were not contiguous, her acolytes reach out to her as if in prayer, "Parthenope…." Parthenope – she is not she, but the underlying we: the beauty that takes a life's effort to find within ourselves.

Sorrentino questions us before he answers. His message? Love is not found – but gained.

Parthenope, now much older (Stefania Sandrelli), is asked why she never married, to which she replies that no one had ever seriously asked. And how could the most beautiful woman that ever lived remain unmarried? Because she was never understood, never fully discovered. Her difference lay in her person; a person that was only engaged with as an object, or icon, or deity. And so, her beauty fails, because those that sought it had also failed. The same can be applied to religion. What is a religion if not wrestled with? It remains merely an institution, in embryo.

Like the eponymous Santiago from Hemingway's *Old Man and the Sea*, who serves as a template to the religious convert, purpose can only be had through the struggle. As he battles the great fish, his thoughts become a type of John Donne prayer of violence for transfiguration: "You are killing me, fish, the old man thought. But you have a right to. Never have I seen a greater, or more beautiful, or a calmer or more noble thing than you, brother. Come on and kill me. I do not care who kills who" (92). Santiago is being torn apart by his desperate need for the fish, and he cannot fail it, even if he dies alongside it, because he will be failing himself in achieving his purpose, and if he dies while fighting it, then he will have died while living. Without religious struggle, the disciple cannot be a disciple but will be a follower who knows not what they follow.

Parthenope is Italy after the war. She is beautiful, strong, sensitive, enigmatic and fleeting. Others seek her for her wisdom, seek her for her sensual beauty, seek her for the relief they believe she offers. Yet, she does not know how to find love for herself. Parthenope is lost, love-stranded, afraid of herself, remaining all the while hopeful, in knowing what she can give. Harnessing her wisdom into academic laurels, Parthenope cannot be held, cannot be possessed; she can only be learned. Parthenope is Naples; Parthenope is post-war Italy. Parthenope is beauty incarnate – and only those would learn from her may have her beauty, too.

Works Cited

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