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Film Festival Review. Venice Film Festival 2022. There Is No Alternative to Family

2023

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/19638>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version

Rezension / review

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Pezzoli-Olgiati, Daria: Film Festival Review. Venice Film Festival 2022. There Is No Alternative to Family. In: *Journal for Religion, Film and Media*. Paradise Lost: Presentation of Nostalgic Longing in Digital Games, Jg. 9 (2023), Nr. 1, S. 189–197. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/19638>.

Erstmalig hier erschienen / Initial publication here:

https://www.jrfm.eu/index.php/ojs_jrfm/article/view/366

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Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati

Film Festival Review

Venice Film Festival 2022

There Is No Alternative to Family

The family played a leading role at the 79th Venice International Film Festival – in the main competition, in the session *Orizzonti* and in films out of competition. In a wide corpus of films released in 2022, this fundamental element of society is cross-examined, with exploration of facets of familial interconnections on the edge of – and sometimes beyond – collapse. During lockdown, the family was often the only place one could dwell with less rules and regulations. The experience of this reality may explain why this topic has attracted such huge attention in contemporary movie production. In films from all over the world, the family is presented as a mandatory metaphor for human coexistence. There are, however, very different ideas of what a family is, should be or must be. From portraits of the family as a cohesive unit to the depiction of the familial cell as a place of annihilation, the works presented at the Venice Biennale cover many questions and debates. The films discussed here explore families in terms of blossoming gardens or cold, grey dehumanising prisons – the range of shades, perspectives, styles and topics dealing with family is broad and controversial.

The Family as a Laboratory for Existential Challenge

A crazy cosmos of familial aspirations is staged in *WHITE NOISE* (Noah Baumbach, US/UK 2022), a brilliant apocalyptic black comedy. Professor Jack Gladney (Adam Driver), an expert in National Socialism, floats his wife and four children through a difficult time caused by a mysterious cloud menacing the whole region. The cloud can be read as symbolic of an approaching (ecological?) disaster threatening everyday life, where love, death and all the challenges of a complex patchwork family are experienced. With its vivid and monumental style, *BARDO*, *FALSA CRÓNICA DE UNAS CUANTAS VERDADES* (*BARDO*,

FALSE CHRONICLE OF A HANDFUL OF TRUTHS, Alejandro Iñárritu, MX 2022) examines the self-reflection of a journalist in personal crisis. Across almost three hours, the film explores intimate dreams, achievements at work and the fears of a successful documentarist whose life is divided between Mexico and the United States. The story of Silverio Gama (Daniel Giménez Cacho) unfolds within his cheerful family, a common ground in which love and loss, birth and death, success and failure are addressed. The surreal style blurs the outlines of the individual, familial and national histories that are interwoven through this epic narration that labours to find an end. The family as a place fostering courage and social engagement is depicted in ARGENTINA, 1985 (Santiago Mitre, AR/US 2022), a cinematic reinterpretation of the courageous prosecutor Julio César Strassera and his team in their fight for justice for all the victims of the military junta. The protagonist, skilfully acted by Ricardo Darín, challenges the still very influential military and prepares a case against the junta, although this puts his life in danger. The destructive force of arbitrary political violence has scattered families who have never stopped fighting for justice, organising protest movements like the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. Strassera is highly motivated by the suffering of grandmothers, mothers and family members, and he is unconditionally supported by his wife, son and daughter, who share his commitment to justice and the risks of this endeavour. The film explores families as places of solidarity but also as where values of supremacy and toxic ideas about social hierarchies are transmitted.

In these works, family is a societal island of solidarity and endurance. A place of debate, controversy, and irony but also of unconditional affection, family is staged as a solid background against which protagonists can be themselves.

Collapsing Families

In L'IMMENSITÀ (Emanuele Criolese, IT/FR 2022), mother-of-two Clara Borghetti (played by Penélope Cruz) could enjoy a cosy bourgeois life if she adapted to the values of an Italian family in the 1970s, educating her children according to the dictates of the social class she belongs to – and not according to their individual personalities – assuming her role of a betrayed wife with composure and filling her life with the emptiness that her position and gender require. The film's style is characterised by bright colours and chromatic

contrasts that highlight all the more the greyness of the emotional environment the characters are trapped in. In another film with Penélope Cruz, *EN LOS MÁRGENES* (*ON THE FRINGE*, Juan Diego Botto, ES/UK 2022), families are confronted with the implosion of the mortgage loan system in Spain. The film interrelates different kinds of family dealing with the crisis: Azucena (Cruz), a mother of a boy, tries to defend her home alone, for her partner is very passive; an older widow commits suicide to avoid her son's having to shoulder her debts; and a passionate social worker fails to keep together his newly reassembled family. The political and financial organisation of society ruins all types of families represented in the film, with solidarity only possible among those existing beyond subsistence. In *THE WHALE* (Darren Aronofsky, US 2022) – awarded a prize by the Interfilm-Jury – familial collapse has already happened. The film accompanies the protagonist, Charlie (Brendan Fraser), during his last days. Beginning with Monday and ending on Friday, the time structure echoes the passion of Christ. Charlie collapses within his extremely obese body, having failed to cope with the death of his male partner or to find a way to relate to his daughter and his former wife. The film takes place entirely within Charlie's house, where his body has trapped him.

Although they differ in many ways, these movies address family as a fragile, disruptive, isolating system in which single members are alone in their desperate attempt to stay alive.

Reconstructing a Whole from Fragments

LES ENFANTS DES AUTRES (*OTHER PEOPLE'S CHILDREN*, Rebecca Zlotowski, FR 2022) deals with Rebecca (Virginie Efira), who falls in love with Ali (Roschdy Zem), and with his small daughter, Leila. Rebecca's affection for Leila is scrutinized by her mother, Alice. Leila has ambivalent feelings towards the three adults who love her. In the end, Ali gives his former family another chance, and Rebecca dedicates herself to her middle-school pupils. This unpretentious story is told with sensitive images of everyday life in a fictional Paris where religious and cultural differences do not matter. Still, the tensions in this complex, fragmented familial network cannot be resolved, with the characters unable to escape conflicts of loyalty. In *ARU OTOKO* (*A MAN*, Kei Ishikawa, JP 2022), Rie (Sakura Ando) has just divorced after the death from illness of one of her two children. In her village, she meets a stranger, Daisuke (Masataka Kubota), who soon settles down and finds a job as a

tree-feller. Rie and Daisuke marry, and he adopts her small boy. All three find happiness and affection within this new family. Suddenly, however, Daisuke dies in an accident, and Rie discovers that her husband was not the person he pretended to be. Addressing questions of identity and truth, this minimalist and delicate film contrasts social expectations and conventions with lived emotions and love. A further Japanese work, *RABU RAIFU* (*LOVE LIFE*, Kôji Fukada, JP/FR 2022), explores the microcosmos of a newly married couple. The protagonist, Taeko (Fumino Kimura), is challenged by the sudden death of her son and the reappearance of his biological father in a poor mental and physical condition. In this film, family is a labyrinth of relationships and loyalties, of happiness and traumatic events and of intergenerational challenges. A boardgame plays a central role in the story, and in terms of style, it becomes a metaphor for family life.

In these movies, families are staged as fragmented entities, networks of different destinies that briefly cross and are soon divided again. Children are essential members of these transitory communities. They drive the development of the adults, confront them with the fragility of life, the desire for certitude and the need for sincere feelings.

The Perfect Family as a Dystopian Community

DON'T WORRY DARLING (Olivia Wilde, US 2022) presents the American dream of the ideal family in the 1950s, with attractive and stylish housewives completely committed to making their busy husbands happy. They live in Victory, an experimental luxury city that turns out to be a dystopian place produced by technology and extreme mental control. Victory offers security and wellbeing in a segregated location without self-determination, as an alternative for a few exquisite people wishing to escape stress and competition in contemporary urban society. Contradictory ideas of partnership and family are also found in *SICCITÀ* (Paolo Virzì, IT 2022). This drama with elements of science fiction portrays Rome during a severe drought. The film scrutinises the chaos that arises in familial relationships under the pressure of the climate crisis: the same characters appear in different familial constellations, trying to cope with water shortages, epidemics and social and individual disintegration. The Holy Family cross the desert-like riverbed of the Tiber in a dystopian Rome. Some people pray, others offer rescue courses on social media, and some fight the crisis, while a few continue to

enjoy life as if nothing has happened. The film adopts an ironic gaze on societal microcosms led by a desire for excitement, success, and consumerism. The two films, with, on one hand, a dystopian family where gender roles and power structures are very simple and, on the other, clear and various familial constellations in the last days of the Eternal City, offer insights into the family as the emotional place that humans inhabit.

In these films, the family appears as an idealised community with such individual and collective expectations that it is fragile and unrealistic as well as unbearable.

Navigating Relationships between Parents and Children

Several films navigate the complexity of the relationships of parents and children in various constellations, considering biological and social forms of parenthood. In the feature film *VERA* (Tizza Covi / Rainer Frimmel, AT 2022) the main character, Vera Gemma, plays herself: as the daughter of a movie star, she reflects on her relationship with her famous father and the consequences of his glamorous life for her. By chance she gets involved with a family living on the margins of contemporary society. She becomes a kind of godmother to a boy who has lost his mother, is neglected by his father and is looked after by a busy grandmother. This new maternal role provides the protagonist, who is sick of exclusive parties and occasional lovers, with a fulfilling role and an existential orientation. The kindness and gratitude of the destitute family proves to be a fatal trap. A further film is also named for its protagonist. In *MONICA* (Andrea Pallaoro, IT/US 2022), having had no contact with her family for a long time, a transgender woman comes back to care for her unwell and confused mother, who is dying. The film addresses gender identity within the close ties of a conservative family and the pain of being ignored and excluded. The most recent work by Paul Schrader, *MASTER GARDENER* (US 2022), depicts an intricate network of relationships in a wider family encompassing three generations as well as employees responsible for the historical garden of the estate where they all live. Gardening serves as powerful symbol of both the fragility of human relationships and the effects of love in a world dominated by precarious and extreme positions like fascism, drug addiction, and neglect. It is an optimistic, positive movie, very much in contrast to *THE SON* (Florian Zeller, UK/FR 2022), which addresses mental health issues in adolescence. Nicolas (Zen McGrath) moves to the

home of his father, who, after divorcing his mother, lives with his new partner and their new-born child. Blaming his former wife for being too soft with this challenging teenager, Peter (Hugh Jackmann), the father, is confident that his resolute attitude will help this impenetrable son become successful at school and popular with his peers, allowing him to discover true happiness. Nobody in this articulate family system realises how severe Nicolas' condition is. The film explores expectations in intergenerational relationships and the dilemmas of parents facing the decline of their child. *SAINT OMER* (Alice Diop, FR 2022) stages a different drama: a mother who kills her daughter. In this film, we follow Rama (Kayije Kagame), a successful writer, in the courtroom in Saint Omer, a village in Northern France. Rama, happily married and pregnant, wishes to understand an inscrutable young woman who has drowned her child at sea. The trial, presented from Rama's perspective, confronts both court and cinema audiences with an intricate hypothesis, incomprehensible motives, and the impossibility of identifying with the unfathomable accused mother. The thin line between trauma, marginalisation, madness and sorcery is explored in this quiet and formally very strong drama.

These films, albeit very diverse in style and plot, portray the relationship between adults and children as a realm of the uncontrollable. Educational ideals may be well conceived, expectations reshaped and affection sincere, but coming of age remains a challenge that can end in fulfilment or tragedy.

Violent Families and the “Tree of Poison”

Some films depict family as a cradle of violence, possibly as a result of an inhospitable environment. *ATHENA* (Romain Gavras, FR 2022), which provides an impressive depiction of the banlieue in Marseille, explores violence on many levels: in a North African family, within a neighbourhood marked by poverty and social segregation, within the French state and in global terrorism. The film examines the glorification of violence as the only way of achieving social and political recognition, staging the performance and the consequences of destruction in a straightforward, distressing style. *AUTO-BIOGRAPHY* (Makbul Mubarak, ID/FR/DE/PL/SG/PH/QA 2022) tells the story of Rakib (Kevin Ardilova), a boy who lives alone and takes care of a mansion belonging to a general in a rural Indonesian region. One day, the general comes back home to run for political office. He treats Rakib, whose family

has served the general's family for generations, like a son, teaching the teenager how to become a man of power. Rakib undergoes a ravaging initiation into corruption, humiliation, cruelty and brutal violence, which allows him to follow in the general's footsteps. In this film, becoming an adult means choosing between being killed or killing. An insight into extreme forms of familial violence is provided by *TI MANGIO IL CUORE* (Pippo Mezzapesa, IT 2022), a gangster film shot in black and white. In a rural village in southern Italy, the son of a mafia boss falls in love with the wife of his father's enemy. This love initiates a spiral of violence that kills almost all male members of the rival families. The hatred fuelling this bloody feud emanates from a matriarch, defined as the "tree of poison". The film is particularly disturbing because it presents atrocity in line with all the genre's stereotypes with a neat and unabashed photography. The documentary *THE MATCHMAKER* (Benedetta Argentieri, IT 2022) and the feature film *A NOÍVA* (*THE BRIDE*, Sérgio Tréfaut, PT 2022) address the same unresolved question: why did young women abandon their comfortable lives in Europe for the Islamic State in Syria, marrying fighters and soon becoming single mothers? Notwithstanding the different cinematic styles, both works unfold a contrast between the families these young widows have created and the middleclass families they come from. Neither the interviews with Tooba Gondal, an active recruiter of female jihadists on the Internet, in *THE MATCHMAKER*, nor the fictional depiction of a pregnant teenager and jihadist's widow in a prison camp in Iraq in *A NOÍVA* provides access to the girls' desire to start a family and raise children in the midst of violence and unceasing destruction.

Overall, the link between family and violence in these films is depicted as inescapable destiny, even if it arises from a personal choice. The familial setting is soaked with abusive attitudes and coercion to be part of the worst that human beings are capable of. The cinematic approach traps the viewer in an abyss of violence with no hope of escape.

Family as a Metaphor

In the Iranian drama *SHAB, DAKHELI, DIVAR* (*BEYOND THE WALL*, Vahid Jalilvand, IR 2022), a former police officer is a prisoner, his complete isolation in the barren walls of the bunker-like place emphasised by his blindness. The film overlaps the prison with a private flat in an intricate building, where a stranded mother suddenly appears. She begs the blind prisoner to help her

find her lost child. All the characters are at the mercy of the power that keeps them in captivity. The film depicts a fabricated family poised between desire for freedom, oppression and trauma. This wonderfully made work is self-reflective, with a camera the only object in the prison. The film can be read as a metaphorical rendering of the role of film and the arts in contemporary Iran. It provides audiences with an impressive and moving insight into how it feels to live under a dictatorial, totalitarian regime.

Family as an Inescapable Human Condition

In a cross-reading of the films discussed in this review, family appears as an inescapable dimension of the human condition, as an overwhelming constraint and an inevitable destiny. Most of the movies were shot indoors, in rooms to which the audience must find its way via narrow corridors, doors, walls and staircases. Families are presented as crucial social units: the family mostly encompasses mother, father and children according to a heterosexual model. The cinematic families of 2022 are sometimes presented as realistic communities, sometimes as an image of living together. Overall, they are largely claustrophobic scenes of conflict, destruction and violence, and only in a few cases are they places of self-reflection and liberation. This cross-reading of selected films from the Biennale suggests that there is no alternative to family: for better or for worse, the intricate familial microcosmos is where filmic life unfolds in 2022.

Filmography

A NOÍVA (THE BRIDE, Sérgio Tréfaut, PT 2022).

ARGENTINA, 1985 (Santiago Mitre, AR/US 2022).

ARU OTOKO (A MAN, Kei Ishikawa, JP 2022).

ATHENA (Romain Gavras, FR 2022).

AUTOBIOGRAPHY (Makbul Mubarak, ID/FR/DE/PL/SG/PH/QA 2022).

BARDO, FALSA CRÓNICA DE UNAS CUANTAS VERDADES (BARDO, FALSE CHRONICLE OF A HANDFUL OF TRUTHS, Alejandro Iñárritu, MX 2022).

DON'T WORRY DARLING (Olivia Wilde, US 2022).

EN LOS MÁRGENES (ON THE FRINGE, Juan Diego Botto, ES/UK 2022).

LES ENFANTS DES AUTRES (OTHER PEOPLE'S CHILDREN, Rebecca Zlotowski, FR 2022).

L'IMMENSITÀ (Emanuele Criolese, IT/FR 2022).

MASTER GARDENER (Paul Schrader, US 2022).

MONICA (Andrea Pallaoro, IT/US 2022).

RABU RAIFU (LOVE LIFE, Kôji Fukada, JP/FR 2022).
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SHAB, DAKHELI, DIVAR (BEYOND THE WALL, Vahid Jalilvand, IR 2022).
SICCITÀ (Paolo Virzì, IT 2022).
TI MANGIO IL CUORE (Pippo Mezzapesa, IT 2022).
THE MATCHMAKER (Benedetta Argentieri, IT 2022).
THE SON (Florian Zeller, UK/FR 2022).
THE WHALE (Darren Aronofsky, US 2022).
VERA (Tizza Covi and Rainer Frimmel, AT 2022).
WHITE NOISE (Noah Baumbach, US/UK 2022).