

Complacent and emotionally remote

The Son's Room, directed by Nanni Moretti

By Richard Phillips
10 May 2002

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Nanni Moretti's *The Son's Room*, a Palme d'Or prize winner at last year's Cannes Film Festival and currently screening in the US and Australia, represents a change in subject matter for the Italian writer/director/actor. In contrast to previous satirical observations of Italian contemporary life, Moretti has attempted a serious drama about how a close-knit middle class family deals with the accidental death of their only son.

Favourably compared by some critics to US director Woody Allen, Moretti began making short movies at school before moving on to full-length features in the early 1970s. The best known are *I'm Self Sufficient* (1976), *Ecce Bombo* (1978), *The Mass Is Ended* (1985), *Red Lob* (1990), *The Thing* (1990), *Dear Diary* (1994) and *April* (1998). Some of these lampoon the Italian Communist Party (PCI), the church and other social institutions and raise concerns about the rise of Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's extreme rightwing alliance. Moretti's approach to these important issues, however, has been consistently superficial and flippant.

In *Red Lob*, for example, he presents the debate inside the Stalinist PCI, when it decided to rename itself the Left Democrats, as a 24-hour water-polo match between competing political factions. The main character, a young PCI leader played by Moretti, has a car accident before the game and cannot remember who he is. In *April*, which is set against the backdrop of the 1994 Italian elections, Moretti plays a nervous film director and expectant father planning to make a 1950s-style musical about a Trotskyist pastry cook. The rambling film ruminates about the passivity of Left Democrat leader Massimo D'Alema in the face of Berlusconi's demagoguery, among other things, before

the director eventually starts the planned musical. The film concludes with Moretti and his crew swaying in time to the music as they shoot one of the choreographed dance scenes. It may be hilariously funny to the complacent middle class elements in and around the Italian "left", but it is of no assistance to anyone trying to understand what is happening in Italy.

Pre-publicity and critical reviews of *The Son's Room* suggested that Moretti may have risen above this sort of self-indulgent cynicism and produced a genuinely serious and moving work. Unfortunately, despite the change of subject matter, the film is disappointing.

The film's central character is Giovanni Sermont (Moretti), a successful psychiatrist in a small coastal town somewhere on Italy's east coast. Giovanni, who is happily married to Paola (Laura Morante), has two teenage children—Irene (Jasmine Trinca), a keen basketball player, and son Andrea (Giuseppe Sanfelice). Giovanni is satisfied with his work and the family leads a comfortable and contented life. While Andrea has minor problems at school and Irene's boyfriend smokes dope on occasions, these concerns are quietly resolved within the family.

Tragedy strikes, however, when Andrea is drowned in a diving accident and the grief-stricken family begins to fall apart. Giovanni begins reliving the moments before his son's death, deluding himself that somehow he could have prevented the accident. He begins to break down during counseling sessions and has to suspend his psychiatric practice. Unable to come to grips with Andrea's loss, Paola becomes impatient with Giovanni and his personal problems while Irene becomes involved in a physical altercation on the basketball court and is suspended for several weeks.

Suddenly a letter arrives at the Sermont home from Arianna, Andrea's secret summer girlfriend who is

unaware that the teenage boy has died. Paola decides to phone the girl and although Arianna does not want to meet the grieving family, she arrives unannounced at the apartment a few days later and offers her condolences and some photos of Andrea. The Sermonts warm to Arianna and when she explains that she is hitchhiking to France with her new boyfriend the family decides to help out by taking them a few kilometres out of town to a freeway truck stop. Giovanni, however, decides to drive the young couple a little further. Arianna has brought the Sermonts together and Giovanni wants to prolong their time with her and continues driving overnight to the French border. The film ends with the family dropping Arianna and her friend on a bus to Paris. As the bus pulls away it appears that the brief encounter with Arianna is a turning point for Giovanni, Paola and Irene, who have begun to find a way to come to terms with Andrea's death.

While Moretti has attempted to capture the trauma of Andrea's death and the family's difficult grieving process, *The Son's Room* is a remote and emotionally thin work. Obviously it is not easy to convincingly dramatise the impact of a child's death on a family without falling into melodrama or glib discourses about family life. The most important starting point in such a project, however, must be a clear appreciation of the connection between those suffering the trauma and the world in which they live and the ability to place oneself in their shoes.

But Moretti avoids all personal and social contradictions and creates an all-too-perfect family. In fact, the Sermont family are simply too good to be true. Father and son jog together regularly and the family, which always breakfasts together, even sings along in their drives through the country. There are no heated arguments, no sign of a television or other distractions, or the sort of tensions or difficulties confronting 21st century families with teenage children.

Although the anguish that grips Giovanni, Paola and Irene after Andrea's death is convincing enough at times, the family seems walled off from any external contact and Giovanni's path from a laid-back successful psychiatrist to a man losing his grip and breaking down in front of his patients is an obvious and predictable dramatic device.

Without denigrating the serious issues in *The Son's*

Room, the real tragedy of this film is that it is regarded as groundbreaking by most critics who have either forgotten or now regard as passé the genuinely great cinema from Italy in the 1940s and 50s. In 1942 Vittorio de Sica directed *The Children Are Watching Us*, which charts the tragic impact of a marriage breakdown on a small boy. This extraordinary example of early Italian neo-realist cinema, produced under the difficult conditions of fascist rule, has a novelistic depth and emotional power sadly missing from most contemporary films.

The failure of Moretti's latest movie lies not in a lack of technical skills or in the performances of his actors but in his inability to look beyond his own complacent and self-satisfied world. Instead of a deeply moving film, Moretti has created a kind of cinematic version of a social democratic "Third Way" speech in which well-heeled politicians feign concern about the plight of ordinary working people but have absolutely no idea how they really live and no interest in finding out.

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