

**Everyday
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Alice Rohrwacher's 'Corpo Celeste'**
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'Only sometimes do I feel I belong to the human species.'

–Anna Maria Ortese

One of the most remarkable yet discreet debuts of the last decade, *Corpo Celeste* (2011) announced a major talent in Alice Rohrwacher, whose signature blend of earthy realism and cosmic mystery arrived seemingly fully formed. Shot on Super 16mm with handheld immediacy by the great Hélène Louvart, Rohrwacher's film chronicles the physical and spiritual awakening of Marta (Yle Vianello), a soon-to-be 13-year-old girl who has recently relocated with her overworked mother and rather odious older sister from Switzerland to Reggio Calabria on Italy's southern coast. Marta's physical dislocation is paralleled by an inner one: her body morphing, her ideas forming, she is an outsider to herself as she wades through life's dirty puddles towards discovery. Inquisitive and headstrong yet shy and often silent, Marta struggles to fit in to this cloistered Catholic community as she begins to prepare for her Confirmation. Developing a deep suspicion of and disillusionment with the hypocrisy (and quasi-absurdity) of organized religion and the adult world in general, this rebellious soul seeks out grace in the mysteries of the everyday.

Based on its narrative description, one could be forgiven for thinking this a standard coming-of-age film, but *Corpo Celeste* is anything of the sort. While it charts the transformation of an adolescent coming into her own, fumbling as much as forging ahead, the film is perpetually on the move in its simultaneous construction and discovery of a new world, as well its probing of various facets of human existence. Rohrwacher, who grew up in a secular home in rural Italy, has said that the impetus behind the film was to explore how religion is taught in her country – specifically, how one learns about God. With her background in live theatre and documentary – notably, she worked on Pier Paolo Giarolo's Felliniesque portrait of travelling circus performers, *Un piccolo spettacolo* (*A Little Show*, 2005) – Rohrwacher did not come to her debut feature with a tremendous amount of on-set film experience. Yet her approach, practically as much as spiritually, is reminiscent of Roberto Rossellini's, whose neorealist classics embody a humanist ethos and a belief in cinema as an adventure. Rossellini readily reminded those critics hell-bent on anchoring neorealism solely in the social causes of the day that imagination is a big part of reality, one which fosters experimentation and vitality in cinema, and resistance and poetry in life.

So how does this manifest in *Corpo Celeste*? Bookended by two very different kinds of miracles – one immaterial, rooted in literal darkness and a sense of the archaic via a nocturnal procession, the other tactile and occurring in daylight, when a spontaneous offering of new life is placed in Marta's hands – Rohrwacher's film tracks multiple journeys rather than putting her young lead through literal or metaphorical Stations of the Cross (à la Bresson's *Mouchette*, 1967). While Marta's internal and physical struggles through the tumultuous time of puberty are compounded by the strain of her family's economic hardships, the pressure to make new friends, and the

community's isolation, the film explores the magical thinking of adolescence in subtle ways, not least of which is Marta's curious gaze and eccentric stubbornness. Even as it generally sticks close to Marta, *Corpo Celeste* allows for a multiplicity of perspectives and expresses empathy for those who surround her, even when their behaviour borders on the pathetic. Her mother Rita (Anita Caprioli) is a melancholic beauty, a true *mater dolorosa* doing her best as a single mom, working overtime in a local bakery and being patient with her two feuding daughters; she gives Marta plenty of love and depends on the comfort of its reciprocity. Santa (played by Pasqualina Scuncia, who reappears in Rohrwacher's third and latest feature, *Happy as Lazzaro*, 2018) is Marta's larger-than-life, overly enthusiastic catechism teacher. She tries to make her mostly uninterested young charges look at Jesus through the lens of cool sunglasses and quirky dance moves, leading them through outlandish and kitschy exercises in preparation for their upcoming Confirmation – her anguished efforts an attempt to please not only Jesus, but also the parish priest, Don Mario (Salvatore Cantalupo), with whom she has an unhealthy infatuation. Possessed of a patchy dye job, ulterior motives, and dissipating faith, Don Mario uses his influence to sway the municipal elections, appropriates a large wooden crucifix from an abandoned church to replace the local church's trippy neon one in order to impress the Archbishop, and openly angles for promotion to a more important parish.

Add to this cacophonous mix a mean older sister, Rosa (Maria Luisa De Crescenzo), and a nosy extended family, and one can easily side with Marta, who is looking to find and define herself at this crucial juncture not so much with words, but with wide-eyed observation and brave, non-conformist acts. Her quasi-mystical silence is a force to be reckoned with, and in some ways her defiant gestures – chopping off her hair, standing up for herself, refusing to be a sheep in a flock, and, most of all, steadfastly confronting the dishonesty she witnesses – become a catalyst for shoring up the fallibilities of others. A typical pre-teen in some respects, she is fascinated and frustrated by her body as she examines herself in the mirror (an obsession with boobs – her own and those of others – recurs throughout the film), yet she also holds up a mirror to those around her, reflecting back the complexities of their behaviour and their carefully concealed vulnerabilities. Rather than offering a character study of a single protagonist, Rohrwacher uses Marta as a prism to reflect and refract group dynamics (families, communities, or institutions like schools or churches). The underlying tenderness of her approach suggests that not only Marta, but also the other inhabitants of Reggio Calabria can be touched by the duality between the corporeal and the spiritual embodied in the film's title.

Corpo Celeste is named for a collection of essays by reclusive Italian author and autodidact Anna Maria Ortese, who wrote about the possibility of wonderment on earth, a sort of melancholic dreaminess in which one searches for a space that transcends reality. While much has been written about the film's poster image, which shows Marta wearing a blindfold, with her head tilted upward, evocative of her desire to see clearly while grappling in the dark, it is more interesting to consider how Rohrwacher's belief in the creation of an image is itself a way of seeing that approaches truth. In interviews, the filmmaker has spoken about the importance of the 'cinema of the real' and how

an image can mine the invisible gap that exists between human feelings. Her choice to shoot on film for all three of her features stems from the medium's aliveness: its grainy dance and unique palette, its precariousness and volatility, and, perhaps, its element of risk and surprise, going back to Rossellini's idea of adventure and abandon.

The film's title also suggests that fantasy is not synonymous with artificiality. With three acclaimed features to her name, Rohrwacher has become known for an ingenious blend of realism and fantasy. She has attributed this style to growing up in a countryside perpetually poised between fiction and reality, a place where legends and superstitions from the past continue to inform and participate in modern life. The 'old world' moniker still sticks – not only in regard to wine and other commodities, but to customs and rituals which can be alienating in their obstinacy even as they provide a nostalgic form of comfort and meaning for new generations.

In this, Rohrwacher shares an affinity with other bright lights in contemporary Italian cinema, especially Pietro Marcello and Alessandro Comodin, who work at the intersection of documentary and fiction, harbouring a deep respect for and love of rural Italy and those who live modestly from the land. These directors are unabashed romantics and humanists, struck by a passion for shooting on film. In all of their works to date, they have drawn inspiration in varying degrees from a 'lost and beautiful' Italy, to borrow the title of Marcello's 2015 film *Bella e perduta*. Coastal Calabria is postcard-pretty, bathed in strong sun and vibrant colours, with wild vegetation and a crystalline sea. Reggio Calabria, however, nestled between the coast and the mountains, is quite gritty and somewhat impoverished; while *Corpo Celeste* does not seek to transform or veil this reality, it coaxes a certain strange beauty from the muted greys and blues of its stratified, rocky landscapes and detritus-strewn riverbeds (a feat that is greatly aided by Louvart's impressive camerawork). A symmetrical Steadicam shot of Marta stridently walking alone against a whipping wind while garbage flies around her recalls the long final sequence in the most iconic of all coming-of-age films, François Truffaut's *Les quatre cents coups* (1959), in which Jean-Pierre L aud's Antoine Doinel (also twelve) runs toward the sea; while Marta's path is far less bucolic than Antoine's, it too leads her towards water. She eventually wades through a large, filthy puddle in a dark tunnel in order to reach the alternate world of the riverside. Built by the imagination of the young boys playing there, it is concocted out of castaway objects and rubbish, both recycled and reinvented in the tradition of *arte povera*.

Truffaut acknowledged a debt to Rossellini's neorealist masterpiece *Germany Year Zero* (1948), in which a twelve-year-old boy provides gravity in an adult world of destruction, disorder, and rocky rubble. A non-professional, he was reportedly found in a circus family. Rohrwacher saw many girls for the role of Marta and found the disarming non-professional Vianello living in an alternative community in the Apennines. In addition to her strong presence and spirit, Rohrwacher was drawn to the young girl's accent, or rather the lack thereof. In Italy, dialects and accents are strong markers of regional identity; with her seemingly unaccented Italian, Vianello emphasizes Marta's sense of foreignness as she adjusts to her new surroundings. The film's sound design plays a significant role in heightening a sense of strangeness

that emanates from both Marta herself and the barely contained chaos that surrounds her. The semi-seductive, semi-off-putting synth music that Santa plays in her gonzo God classes spills over beyond its diegetic use in ingenious and mischievous ways. Combined with chanting and a perpetually howling wind, it creates a soundscape at once understated and odd, greatly contributing to film's subtle sense of bewilderment and its ambiguous contemporary time frame.

Corpo Celeste is filled with off-kilter moments that suggest that life going off the rails for nearly everyone, including Jesus. After being strapped to the top of Don Mario's van, he is catapulted over a guardrail into the sea below when Marta calls bullshit on the priest's use of the gospel to justify his thievery. The crucified Jesus's automotive journey through the winding hills can't help but recall the amazing opening of Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* (1960), in which a statue of Christ is dangled from a helicopter above the roofs of Rome. If Rohrwacher's image is neither as sardonic nor as grandiose as Fellini's, she shares with the Maestro an attunement to the marvellous in the everyday, seeking it out with startling compositions and contradictory tones that tap into an unpredictable life force. Rich in atmospheric texture and visionary intent, *Corpo Celeste* shows us that, no matter how bleak, the world is alive with possibilities and small-scale epiphanies. The celestial can also be found on earth.