

## Reality

In 2009, director Matteo Garrone swept the Italian national film awards with his unsparing look at the Neapolitan criminal underclass in “Gomorrah.” For his subsequent film, “Reality,” Garrone has returned to Naples but using an entirely different tone. How that tone changes throughout the film is what marks Garrone as a thoroughly talented, if also troubling, filmmaker.

“Reality” here means “reality television,” in this case the manufactured reality of random people thrown together and subject to a voyeuristic camera in a “constructed” space for months at a time. The show featured here is “Big Brother” (“Grande Fratello” in Italian) which originated in the Netherlands and has spread to dozens of other countries, including the US and Italy. It is this program, featuring unknowns who become well known, that fishmonger Luciano aches to participate in.

Luciano (Aniello Arena) is a hardworking guy, selling fish, running a shady sales gimmick on the side, raising a family with Maria (Loredana Simioli) and living with an extended one in a broken-down palazzo. He is also a bit of a show-off, occasionally performing silly bits at a garish wedding resort outside town. It’s at that latter gig where he meets Enzo (Raffaele Ferrante), another regular guy who became a national celebrity through his appearance on “Big Brother.” Encouraged by friends and family, Luciano applies for a spot on the show, and, surprisingly, passes a local audition to qualify for the final selection phase at a Rome cinema studio.

Thoroughly energized, Luciano begins to fantasize about making the show, and his expectations for the call from the capital begin to take over his life. His local support group continues to supply hope, but they clearly see his chances are fading as the weeks go by. He doesn’t; his desire to become somebody cannot be slaked. He succumbs to a paranoia that the show’s producers are watching him always, judging whether he is fit for the show. He sells his business, feeds greedy beggars to prove he’s worthy, and ignores his family, all in expectation of his dreamed-for debut.

When he doesn’t ultimately get the call and the show airs, his yearning drives him to Rome to invade its premises, with strange and disquieting results.

The arc of “Reality” (which won the 2012 Grand Jury Prize at the Cannes Film Festival), is an intriguing one. It opens as a lush fantasy, showing, in supersaturated colors, the wedding factory that opens the film. It then switches to another kind of “reality” when Luciano and his whole family come home. In an exquisite sequence, Garrone pans through the windows of the family’s apartment building as each soul readies himself for the evening in a homely and touching panorama. Later, another Neapolitan atmosphere is introduced in the lively, humane piazza where Luciano’s fish shop is located, where he works with his faithful assistant, Michele (Nando Paone).

This limning of Italian life will bring back memories for buffs of Italian cinema of yore, made over the years by noted directors from De Sica to Tornatore: the carefree comic Latin with a ripe accent and taste for the fast buck. Luciano is a character that would be comfortable fitting into a Fellini vignette or performing some Benigni shtick. It is familiar territory and is readily appealing.

But Luciano's fixation turns from comic to crazed. Garrone takes his time with the conversion. It doesn't take a sharp turn but rather spins out in a wide arc as the protagonist's quirks become less and less funny. In Garrone's own words, he thinks of Luciano "as a modern-day Pinocchio, one of childlike innocence and naïveté. I followed him with my camera as if he were living a fantastic adventure."

Whereas the film's opening brought the wondrous helicopter shot of the bright Naples landscape zooming down, down to a fairytale carriage, that take is reversed at the ending as we zoom away from one lit room in the grand "Big Brother" set up, up into the eerie nighttime blackness of Rome. The finale, with Luciano desperate to live his dream, is not horrific—nor cathartic—but it is disconcerting and raises, as surely Garrone wanted to raise, questions about where our international celebrity worship may be taking us. You might wonder, too.

(A stunning sidebar to this film: it is the first movie role for Aniello Arena, who is, in fact, serving a life sentence in an Italian prison. The director discovered him working in a prison theater group and took him on, a real challenge for the production.)  
*("Reality" runs 116 minutes, is rated "R").*

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