

From the Italian Film Journal SENTIERI SALVAGGI, 11/30/07

Review of THE REPLACEMENT CHILD by Margherita Palazzo

(English Translation)

Justin Lerner was born in Pennsylvania, and after both a Catholic, Jewish and Quaker upbringing he has, as a 27 year-old, come to the conclusion that he does not believe in God. He does, however, remain interested in religion and fanaticism and clearly refuses to tackle the subject in an 'easy' way, simply to benefit the screenplay. His thesis film at UCLA, a 25 minute short, shot in Wayland, Massachusetts, depicts a world of desolation; trucks abandoned in fields, ploughs, old gas stations with weary attendants in tattered t-shirts, bleak living rooms that are the theaters of family tragedies played out year in year out.

It is a backdrop that has nurtured an impressive body of literature – from Sherwood Anderson to Richard Yates, for example, who knew how to capture the stagnant heat and fractured beauty of the American countryside, in all its rigid hypocrisy. Todd Turnbull is the hero who returns home, but cannot enact the change he so desires, a late teenager, who is guilty of violently beating his step-father in a moment of rage. Turnbull is the director's flawed but romantic hero, in the mould of the old western gunslingers. The style of the film also complements this idea. Tight shots scrutinize every flinch in the characters' expressions as if engaged in a duel, the men play cards, the air of repression looms ever present. That Todd's journey through a land where religious folly reigns will end in violence in order to save a dying friend, seems all but inevitable.

Todd's return begins with the main protagonist seemingly changed, and inspired by God. He happily sings the Gospel. It all quickly turns to tragedy though. The hero is not a part of the community, but struggles against the status quo. Turnbull is at war but he is impotent: his greatest challenge is to not lash out against his withdrawn mother, the choir who rejects him, his now pregnant ex-girlfriend, and his fellow employees at the local fast food store (where Todd has been replaced by the boss' down syndrome son who berates him whenever possible). His greatest challenge is to not react when witnessing the plight of his friend, Michael. The latter lies dying in a bed bathed by afternoon light, coughing up blood and surrounded by a group of family members (as in Spoon River), praying for a miracle and resisting medical help.

The most enduring image in the film comes towards the end: Todd comes down the stairs, holding his dying, delicate featured friend, wearing white pajamas – a veritable testament to adolescent resistance. Half gunslinger, half orphan, the cost of his violence will once again be that it is not understood or properly contextualized. He decides to save his friend's life, and immediately after lies down on the grass, and sings a hymn. The singing drowns out all other sound...