

Death. Rebirth. And lots of goats

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FILM

The most amazing thing about the Italian film *Le quattro volte*, among many, is that it might not strictly qualify for the Best Foreign Language Film Oscar. There is no language: no dialogue, no human utterance, save one mumbled "Grazie", a cry of "Via!" ("away!"), a bit of ecclesiastical chanting, and the vague collective jabber of crowd scenes. No music either. The soundtrack is goat bells, cock crows, dog barks, human coughing (a dying Calabrian farmer, our only "hero") and the ancillary noises of life in a remote mountain town, from festivals to funerals.

You know what I'm going to say. It's a masterpiece. "Oh you critics," you cry. "You like anything that is ridiculously minimal and set God knows where." You add: "Or you pretend to." Dear reader, you'd have to pretend *not* to like this film. It is overpoweringly lovable. It is now touring the globe charming the pantaloons off every audience in arthouses and beyond.

Granted, there is no story, just the changing seasons. *Le quattro volte* means "the four times" (or "turns"). Granted, there are weird juxtapositions of image and motif as chapters elliptically succeed each other: an Easter Passion play, a flock of goats escaping their pen and invading houses (I loved the nanny goat marooned on a too-narrow kitchen table), a landscape-wide shroud of snow, the raising of a festive tree, charcoal burners building and dismantling a log-made kiln.

Every death yields to birth, every birth points towards death. Yes, we're talking about regeneration. The very camera and its vision seem to have been told by director Michelangelo Frammartino to let themselves be serially reborn. Surely the funny, fantastic sequence in which a collie

dog first disruptively yaps at the stations-of-the-cross parade – "Via!" shouts a Roman centurion – and later causes town-square havoc by removing a van's stone chock so it crashes backwards through a goat-yard fence (all this in one continuous overhead shot), surely this could not have been *planned*? And later the tender, harrowing sequence of a lost kid in the snow?

If it was planned it is even more of a miracle: the real beatified by the artful. Imagine how ghastly this film would have been as straight ethno-documentary. "For decades the little Calabrian town of Suchandsuch has been blah blah blah..."

Instead it is dream realism. The old man (Giuseppe Fuda, grizzled-luminous of face, his bent body a question mark seeking its concluding dot) didn't really die; the kid didn't really perish; it is done for that fictional truth that provokes, expands and ennobles us. When the kid tears our hearts with its lost, euphonious bleating we even remember, or may do, the original Greek-derived meaning of the word "tragedy". Goat song.

Life, Above All, a sensitively crafted story of Aids sufferers in a South African township, hits a hard week. *Le quattro volte* makes it seem pedestrian. The stations of the cross, for characters brought in from Allan Stratton's novel *Chanda's Secrets*, are walked through with dignity and brave grace. Emotional climaxes are risen to. Everyone lets himself or herself – the protagonist is a girl (Khomotso Manyaka) with an Aids-dying mother and a child-prostitute friend treated as community pariah – be nailed to a destined cross. And director Oliver Schmitz, who made the moving apartheid drama *Mapantsula* (1988), never lets a false note into his passion play.

And yet. If only the film flew once or twice instead of walking. The signposts all point to Calvary;

everyone has to go there; and there are no planes or taxis. The tour guide tells us when to smile and when to weep. But unfortunately we've been ruined by *Le quattro volte*, which never tells us to do anything. In another week – we'll say it again – there would be nothing but praise for a movie well acted (especially by Mariyake), well directed, and honourably focused on a subject we care about and should continue to.

The advantage of love as a theme is that everyone experiences it and nobody understands it. We humans don't understand it even after 3m years. No wonder artists go on about it, even in Canada. Witness Xavier Dolan's *Heartbeats* (rotten title for the original, topic-defining *Les Amours imaginaires*): a film that is annoying, silly, adolescent, truthful, colourful, inventive and annoying. Spot the repeated adjective.

This is Dolan's second feature. His first, *J'ai tué ma mère*, was made at age 18 and wowed the Cannes Directors' Fortnight. It had a flashy precocity. He hasn't grown up. If you don't love this kind of self-adoring bisexual *cinéma d'amour*, in which a boy and girl (Dolan himself and Monia Chokri) become rivals for a dishy Nordic blond (Niels Schneider), you will most surely hate it. Dolan sprinkles real people into the mix, who talk into the camera about their passions, longings, infatuations, gay or straight. Think of *Reds* and take away Soviet communism.

Dolan has a gift but he hasn't fully unwrapped it. All we still see, mostly, is the glossy paper and coloured ribbons. Even so, this film-maker has a lively, even witty mind, and there are still four years to go before he reaches the age at which Welles made *Citizen Kane*.

The Hangover Part II is what the label says: another day in which you



sit there with blurred vision and a headache wondering how you came to be in the same room as several dozen other people debauched by Hollywood. The first film was a hit. The second film, in style and content, is more – or less – of the same. Bradley Cooper and his stag-night friends go for broke in Thailand. Where else? There must be terrible air traffic snarl-ups over Asia involving planes from Hollywood looking for comedy or karma. “Come in *Sex and the City 2*, you’re cleared for landing. *Hangover Part II*, please circle, you’re just behind *Eat, Love, Pray*. *Painted Veil*, you’re too close to *Karate Kid 9*.

Le quattro volte ★★★★★

Michelangelo Frammartino

Life, Above All ★★★★★

Oliver Schmitz

Heartbeats ★★★★★

Xavier Dolan

The Hangover Part II ★★★★★

Todd Phillips