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‘Where is here?’: Place and rurality through the cinematic child

ABSTRACT

This article explores the ways in which Alice Rohrwacher’s Le maraviglie, *as exemplary of a growing tendency within contemporary cinema, negotiates ideas of place and belonging through the trope of the rural child. It contends that the cinematic child in the film articulates a dynamic and open – rather than static, localized and fixed – understanding of place. Against the Romantic tendency to associate childhood and nature as a way of grounding essentialist ideas of place, the film draws on children’s heightened openness to the others in order to embody what Doreen Massey calls a* global sense of place *(1991): a sense of place built upon the social relations created in the encounter with the other. By bringing together film analysis, childhood studies and theorizations of place, this article builds an interdisciplinary approach to look into this shifting use of the child figure. It first explores two different reactions to the threats of the global presented in the film – the family’s mode of living and the reality TV show contest – as reterritorializing attempts to ground a sense of place in the local. It then argues that, in the way in which the child protagonist bonds with a newcomer to the farm, she rejects both these notions and opens herself up to alternative understandings of place. In a gradual recovery of her childhood that culminates in the last scene of the film, she comes to embody a progressive sense of place that emphasizes the hybrid nature of global places.*

KEYWORDS

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Le meraviglie (*The Wonders*) (Rohrwacher 2014), Alice Rohrwacher's sophomore feature film, opens with a scene at night. The headlights of some cars, from hunters out for a beating, break the pervading darkness of the initial shot. As they slowly get closer to the camera, they reveal the presence of a house in the middle of nowhere. Shocked by the discovery, a hunter comments: '[t]here's a house in there'.[1] Audiences will soon learn that this remote, isolated place is where the protagonists of the story live. Yet, the hunter's appreciation already poses a question central to the film: why are the protagonists there? Why would this – in the words of the filmmaker – 'family without a place' want to live in isolation from everything and everyone else (Rohrwacher 2014: n.pag.)? This article seeks to interrogate the logic underlying these questions. It analyses *The Wonders* as a film that negotiates different understandings of place in a global world. In a moment in which places are argued to have become 'phantasmagoric' because of the forces of modernity (Giddens 1990: 19), the film offers different forms of dealing with that process as epitomized by its protagonist, Gelsomina, and her father. By bringing together film analysis, childhood studies and theorizations of place, this article shows how cinematic children, in their heightened openness to others, can be regarded as embodiments of what Doreen Massey calls a *global sense of place* (1991).

1. Unless otherwise indicated, translations of film dialogue are from the original DVD.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the twenty-first century, people – but also goods, data, information – are argued to move around more than ever before. Different theorizations of the sociopolitical system structuring our world in the last decades, either you call it modernity, postmodernity, liquid modernity or late capitalism, place mobility as an essential feature (see Harvey 1990; Giddens 1990; Jameson 1991; Bauman 2000). Movement lies at the core of what Manuel Castells describes as the 'network society', a social configuration shaped by the increasing flow and exchange of information, capital and cultural communication across the globe (2009). For David Harvey, mobilities are both a cause and a consequence of the process of 'time-space compression' that characterizes postmodernity. Here the pace of life accelerates at the same time as spatial distance is collapsed under new forms of transport and communication (1990). This state of permanent transition, of constant flux, is also at the centre of Zygmunt Bauman's concept of liquid modernity, the transformation of a previous 'heavy' modernity caused, among other factors, by the heightened movement of the global world (2000).

According to Peter Adey, mobility 'changes the way we understand society, culture, politics, and community' (2017: 7). For Anthony Elliot and John Urry, it 'affects the ways in which lives are lived, experienced and understood' (2010: x). A crucial part of this shift is how a heightened sense of mobility engenders anxieties about our feeling of place. As spatial distances shorten and the global collapses into the local, the identity of places is argued to be at risk, and the chance to establish solid, stable attachments to specific places disappears. Robert D. Sack traces this process when he argues that:

> To be an agent, one must be somewhere. This basic and integrative sense of place has come to be fragmented into complex, contradictory and disorienting parts. Space is becoming far more integrated and yet territorially fragmented. Places are specific or unique, yet in many senses they appear more generic and alike. Places seem to be 'out there', and yet they are humanly constructed. Things occur in and through space,

> and yet there is less necessity for them to occur in any one place. Our society stores information about places, and yet we have little sense of place. And the landscapes that result from modern processes appear to be pastiches, disorienting, inauthentic and juxtaposed.
>
> (1988: 642)

His words echo Michel de Certeau's distinction between space as 'an intersection of mobile elements' and place as 'an instantaneous configuration of positions [that] implies an indication of stability' (1984: 117). For Sack, place is meant to be static, but the fragmentation of space in our global world threatens the stability of place, and brings with it feelings of disorientation and insecurity. We have 'little sense of place' because, in an era of heightened mobility, we no longer can hold on to fixed places to be reassured of our belonging to the world. No theorist has more concisely encapsulated this crisis than Doreen Massey when she asked: 'if everything is moving where is "here"?' (2005: 138). How can we understand the category of place for it to be useful in the era of mobilities? How to develop a sense of place in an increasingly moving world?

This article explores the ways in which *The Wonders* (Rohrwacher 2014), as exemplary of a certain tendency within contemporary cinema, attempts to answer these questions. In particular, how the crisis of a sense of place is negotiated through child figures in the context of the rural. Notions of mobility, place and belonging in contemporary cinema have been – and still are – mostly approached through the prism of migration. Edited volumes such as Wendy Everett and Peter Wagstaff (eds) *Cultures of Exile: Images of Displacement* (2005), Daniela Berghahn and Claudia Sternberg (eds) *European Cinema in Motion: Migrant and Diasporic Film in Contemporary Europe* (2010) or Louis Bayman and Natália Pinazza (eds) *Journeys on Screen: Theory, Ethics, Aesthetics* (2019), among others, have engaged with filmic renderings of place and belonging in the context of exilic and diasporic narratives. Nilgün Bayraktar's monograph *Mobility and Migration in Film and Moving-Image Art* contributes to this line of scholarship by exploring the politics of mobility within Turkish German Cinema, Maghrebi French Cinema, and diasporic video art (2016). Although migrant narratives are key to the way in which contemporary notions of space and place are dealt with in recent films, this analysis takes a different route. It focuses on a tendency in contemporary cinema to approach ideas of place and belonging through the figure of the child and in the context of the rural. This is the case of films like *The Wonders*, *Vie Sauvage* (Kahn 2014), *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (Zeitlin 2012), *Leave No Trace* (Granik 2018), *Estiu 1993* (Simon 2017) or *Un dia perfecte per volar* (Recha 2015), where child characters that lead unconventional lives in rurality are placed at the centre of conflicts of identity and attachment to the global world.

To explore the crisis of a sense of place generated by mobility, an emphasis on childhood and rurality might seem like a counterintuitive choice. The natural world, for Henri Lefebvre, is thought of as the point of departure of any society, as 'the origin, and the original model, of the social process'; and childhood, for its part, is understood to be at the origin of life (1991: 30). At the very essence of society and life, respectively, both rurality and children are coded in popular discourse in terms of stability. For Peter Adey, 'ideas that hold the rural as stable or immobile can shape popular and political discussions about what the rural is' (2017: 67). Similarly, childhood is often defined as 'a time of stability and rootedness' that is sometimes opposed to the hectic, chaotic life of adults (Holdsworth 2014: 421). Frequently, this tendency to associate

children with rural lifestyles – which can be traced back to Romantic thought and to Rousseau's idea that innate, natural innocence is spoiled by civilization – has been deployed in cinema to ground essentialist ideas of place (see, for instance, Jones [2007] on the childhood rural idyll). As a reaction to the shifts of modern life, many films draw on the purity of rural children as a return to what is perceived as stable.

However, this article reads *The Wonders* as a different deploying of the rural child trope. It contends that the cinematic child here articulates a dynamic and open – rather than static, localized and fixed – understanding of place. Against the Romantic tendency to associate childhood and nature as a way of grounding essentialist ideas of place, the film draws on children's heightened openness to others in order to present place as an 'articulated moment in networks of social relations and understandings' (Massey 1991: 28). That is, it downplays the romanticized affinity of childhood with nature and the land. Instead, it foregrounds children's relationships to others – often social outcasts – as the constitutive element of what Doreen Massey calls a *progressive* or *global sense of place*: a sense of place that acknowledges the hybrid dimension of contemporary places 'without being threatened by it' (1991: 29). By combining film analysis and theoretical approaches to place coming from human geography, this article builds an interdisciplinary approach to look into this shifting use of the child figure. It first explores two different reactions to the threats of the global – the family's mode of living and the reality TV show contest – as reterritorializing attempts to ground a sense of place in the local. It then argues that, in the way in which the child protagonist bonds with a newcomer to the farm, she rejects both these notions and opens herself up to alternative understandings of place. In a gradual recovery of her childhood that culminates in the last scene of the film, she comes to embody a progressive sense of place that emphasizes the hybrid nature of global places.

2. *IL PAESE DELLE MERAVIGLIE*: ATTEMPTS AT RETERRITORIALIZATION

The Wonders tells the story of a family of beekeepers living in stark isolation in the Italian countryside. The family is made up of Wolfgang (Sam Louwyck), the German father, and Angelica (played by Alba Rohrwacher, the filmmaker's sister), the Italian mother. They have chosen to lead a sustainable life in close contact with nature with their four daughters: Gelsomina (Alexandra Lungu), Marinella (Agnese Graziani), Caterina (Eva Morrow), and Luna (Maris Stella Morrow). They have a vegetable garden, sheep and bees. Gelsomina, the eldest daughter and the one onto which Wolfgang projects all his ideals, starts questioning the family's mode of life when her small world is shaken up by two simultaneous events: the shooting of a TV reality show in the area, *Il Paese delle meraviglie* (*The Wonders*), and the arrival of Martin (Luis Huilca Logroño), a silent German boy sent by a social reintegration programme to live with the family and work on the farm. Wolfgang is reluctant to participate in the TV contest and sees the newcomer as little more than some extra help around the farm. However, Gelsomina sees the contest as an opportunity to improve the family's living conditions, and slowly bonds with the German boy. Under the risk of eviction due to an unstable financial situation, the family takes part in the programme. As they refuse to be treated as stereotypes of the rural – Wolfgang uses his time on-screen to warn that 'the end of the world is near' – they do not win the contest, and they see themselves forced to leave the farm.

Although the central plot of the film is clear, Rohrwacher's choice of an elliptical form of narration imbues it with an intended ambiguity over certain aspects. The setting in spatial and temporal terms is vague. The farm is located in a region which was once Etruscan territory. According to the film press book, this is 'a border region between Umbria, Lazio, and Tuscany in the countryside, where the regional identities are all shattered', but this is never made explicit in the film (Rohrwacher 2014: n.pag.; see Puliti [2019] for a closer examination of the film's spatial setting). Temporal setting is equally undetermined: the technological devices displayed in the film and the pop song that Gelsomina and Marinella sing – Ambra's *T'appartengo*, from 1997 – hint at the late 1990s, but from costume and sets we might also understand it as closer to the film's release date. Gelsomina's age also remains a mystery. Alexandra Lungu, the actor, was 11 years old when she was chosen by Rohrwacher to play the leading role. Yet, the specific age of the character is not made explicit, neither in the movie nor in any of the paratextual materials that accompanied its release in different countries.[2] She is, as Silvia Angeli argues, a liminal character at the border between childhood and adolescence (2020). This way, the lack of an actual age works to emphasize her state of transition.

A sense of uncertainty also extends to the family's background story. Most conversations are in Italian, with Wolfgang switching to German when he is angry or when he addresses Martin, and to French with Angelica when they do not want the children to understand. From the diversity of languages used in the movie, a history of transnational migration is hinted at, although it is never explained nor even referred to. The only clue is given by Adrian (André Hennicke), an old friend who briefly visits the farm and who seems to have a shared past on political activism with Wolfgang and Angelica: '[y]ou've really changed', he argues, 'nothing about our struggle, you're all here cleaning, producing. When we lived together, it was different'. It is easy to assume, then, that Wolfgang and Angelica once lived in some type of anarchist commune, and they moved around different European countries. Probably, their nomadic way of life was an attempt at resisting the structures and strictures of neo-liberal society described by Deleuze and Guattari (1988). The birth of their daughters urged them to readjust their mode of living and settle down on the farm. Without giving up their political and environmental values, they now struggle to provide their daughters with a stable place in which to grow up – away from the 'evils' of civilization and in close contact with nature. Thus, they have shifted from movement to stasis, from the emancipatory potential of nomadism to the belief in 'dwelling' in the rural as a viable form of life (Heidegger 2001).

In his attempt to reconcile his political commitment with his life on the farm, Wolfgang is presented as a contradictory character. Worried about the increasing destruction of the planet by global capital, he attempts to lead a sustainable life that prioritizes respect for the environment over the accumulation of wealth. 'What will they do when money's no good anymore?', he asks, when he discusses the pressures over agricultural life with a neighbour. Indeed, he shows a great clarity of vision in understanding certain dynamics of globalization, such as the contested nature of the global countryside (Woods 2007). He is aware of the conflicts between the neo-liberal exploitation of the rural and traditional agricultural activities, and criticizes how rural gentrification pushes farming practices away from the countryside, so these places can become tourist attractions. Yet, his attitude towards place, also marked by this globalizing context, is more problematic. Implicitly, he perceives

2. The different press books that accompanied its release in the Cannes Film Festival, France, the United States and Spain do not provide any details of the age. Neither has the filmmaker specified the age in any published interview.

modernization as the cause of the eradication of distinctive places; his worries come from a sense of 'placelessness' created by globalization (Relph 1976; see also Augé [1995] on non-places). As a reaction to this process, he clings on the farm – completely isolated from society – as the space in which to build an alternative place for his daughters, a place where both Gelsomina and her sisters can belong. Although he does not attempt to derive his identity from an essentialist attachment to the region, he does hold on to 'local modes of belonging as a way of resisting the imperialism of some forms of globalization' (Heise 2008: 7).

The problem with Wolfgang's views on place is two-fold. First, it altogether ignores the social relations which are integral to a progressive notion of place (Massey 1991). Paradoxically enough for someone coming from communal living experiences, he fails to establish any fruitful bond, either with his family or with other members of the community. He loves his wife and daughters, but he rules the family in an authoritarian and patriarchal form, refusing to integrate – or even to listen to – any idea that diverts from his views. His work ethic is equally controversial. He burdens Gelsomina with the responsibility of helping him with the honey-making process, and forces her to perform tasks way beyond her physical abilities (i.e. pouring the honey bucket when it is full). He takes Martin in the farm just as workforce – 'have you seen his muscles?', he asks Angelica – without any regard to his personal circumstances. Wolfgang might be well-intentioned in his attempt to provide the family with a stable home, but a progressive attachment to place is incompatible with an individualistic disregard of social relations. Second, Wolfgang's views are marked by what Ursula K. Heise calls an 'excessive investment in the local' (2008: 10). For Heise, the claim to a sense of place as a necessary condition for environmental awareness is insufficient, inasmuch as it ignores the inexorably global nature of our lives. Similarly, Wolfgang's attempt to completely isolate from the global dynamics of the world results in a dismissal of its potential benefits – for example, the presence of Martin. By focusing too much on the local – his beehives, his farm, his sheep – as the elements that will provide his family with a place, he fails to realize that the world around him, in both positive and negative ways, is already global.

Within Wolfgang's mindset, Gelsomina is not only the eldest daughter but, in the words of the filmmaker, 'the Crown Princess [and] daddy's little girl', the one in which he invests all his hopes for the future (Rohrwacher 2014: n.pag.). Gelso – as her family often calls her – is once referred to as the *capo famiglia* ('the head of the family'); and, quite literally, this is how she is portrayed in the scene that introduces the family in the film. Gelsomina and Marinella wake up in the middle of the night. Marinella sees this as an opportunity to sleep next to her mother. Gelsomina scolds Marinella, only four years younger than her, for disturbing their mother, and then she sends Wolfgang – who is asleep in the living room, with the TV on – to bed. Next, she walks to the barn to check on the honey extractor. While the image slowly fades into black and the title of the film appears, the soundtrack remains with Gelsomina as she replaces the full honey bucket for an empty one, turns off the light and goes back to bed. An ironic contrast is established between the image (the 'wonders' of the title) and the soundscape (Gelsomina's responsibilities as a grown-up). Next morning, she wakes up early, puts her overalls on, and leaves with her father for the beehives. While her sisters idle in the surroundings, she works with the bees, a contrast that is highlighted as the soundtrack oscillates between the buzzing of the bees and the quietness of the countryside. In the completion of all these

tasks, Gelsomina is placed in a juncture between responsibility and idleness, childhood and adulthood, stasis and movement – a tension between work and play already read by Danielle Hipkins, from a gender perspective, as mobilizing ideas of the performance of girlhood in the film (2017). In a broader sense, her childlike appearance clashes with the grown-up attitude expected of her in her domestic and farming duties. Crucially, she is shown to be dissatisfied with this situation. She barely smiles, and she is constantly angry at her sisters. As she contemplates a small postcard from Florida stuck to her bed, she seems to yearn for a different and faraway land and also for a more mobile, more dynamic and probably more common life than the one she has.

In a way, Wolfgang's attempt to build a place removed from the wrongs of globalization isolates Gelsomina from the rest of the world, and dooms her to behave like an adult earlier than she wished to. As the film develops, she is offered two possible means of escape: the TV contest, *Il paese delle meraviglie*, and the arrival of Martin. The family learns about the programme when, while swimming in a nearby lake, they run into the shooting of the TV commercial for the show. After being asked to lower the noise they are making, they are allowed to stay on one side and watch. From the point of view of Gelsomina, the film shows the whole shooting of the promotional video for the reality show. At the bottom of a waterfall, the TV presenter (Monica Bellucci), dressed in an all-white Etruscan-inspired costume, recites the text of the commercial for the camera: '*Il paese delle meraviglie* will be here, among the riches of the Etruscan region, among the families who live like they did once upon a time'. She is surrounded by the production team – the gaffer is right next to her – and by the extras, who wear a combination of kitsch Etruscan-inspired costumes and traditional costumes from the region. Some toss flowers at the presenter, others pretend to play instruments, and others just stand there, looking at the camera while a soft, diegetic harp tune plays in the background.

The commercial presents an essentialist vision of the rural. Alluding to the Etruscan heritage of the region explicitly and through costume, it constructs the local countryside by means of the pastoral: as a pure space, a space out of time, which has stayed untouched by the changes of modern society, and which somehow can bring us back to a natural state of being (Natov 2003). Gelsomina – shot in close-up, lit by the sunlight, smiling as the presenter talks – is clearly mesmerized by the show. It offers her an evasion from the world she knows; an alluring, shiny version of the past in which she might find the sense of belonging that she lacks in her family life. Yet, the way in which the scene is rendered visually already opens this idyllic vision to critical scrutiny. The film never fully invests in this essentialist approach to the rural. By making the apparatus behind the shooting constantly visible, it emphasizes the constructed nature of the pastoral countryside there portrayed. It reveals it as a fiction, a set of codes that the audience can identify as fake. While Gelsomina does not realize it at this point, and she will push the family to participate in the contest, she will ultimately become aware of the artificiality of the show. In a highly symbolic gesture, once the family has lost the contest, the presenter – who epitomizes Gelsomina's fascination with this rural idyll – removes her platinum wig in front of the child. Behind the façade of an Etruscan goddess, she reveals herself as a plain, average-looking woman, visibly tired after hours of pretending to be someone who she is not.

The TV show is a commodification of the appeal of the local in order to attract tourism to the region. Presented as a celebration of traditional modes

of life, in fact it commodifies a particular rural heritage (the Etruscan) and a particular rural landscape (the border region where the film takes place) to sell it as a 'mosaic of countrysides' fitted for its consumption by urban tourists (Ehrentraut 1996: 21). Mr Portarella, the final winner of the contest, declares that he will use the prize to 'turn the farm into a country B&B so that people can admire our natural beauties'. What underlies the logic of the show is a fixed, inward-looking understanding of place. A sense of place, as portrayed in the commercial, is to be found in the mythicized history of a region, in a supposedly shared past that shapes contemporary agricultural activities. It thus becomes a source of stability – 'the families who live like they did once upon a time' – and unchanging identity in times of constant flux (Massey 1993). It is the opposite of movement, 'a break or pause in movement […] that allows a location to become a centre of meaning' (Tuan 1977: 14). In that sense, and despite the apparently opposed ideological standpoints, the TV contest is not so far from Wolfgang's mind-set. Wolfgang is well intentioned, and he actively works to preserve the natural and cultural beauty of the region from all the menaces (productivity, disregard for the environment, disregard for the history of a country) that the TV show represents. Yet, his response echoes the strategies of the TV programme. Prompted by a perceived sense of detachment intrinsic to modern life, both attitudes are 'rhizomic attachments and reterritorializations' that attempt to fill the gap through an evasive return to the local (Hannam et al. 2006: 3). Both understand place as a static, unchanging reality, and both disregard the social hybridity implicated in an increasingly global world.

3. GELSOMINA AND MARTIN: THE RECOVERY OF CHILDHOOD

The arrival of Martin is, in a way, the result of that hybridity. A German teen put into a reintegration centre after a conviction for petty crime, he is sent to Italy in the hope that he will learn to adjust to society as he helps the family with the farm. In line with the elliptical narrative of the film, Martin is a mysterious character. His lack of speech – it is unclear whether it is a deliberate refusal or an inability to speak, but he does not utter a word in the entire film – and his strong reaction against any form of physical contact hint at a traumatic past. His appearance is equally enigmatic. Depicted by a dark-skinned, blue-eyed actor of Hispanic descent, he is visibly different from the stereotypical German boy. A foreigner in Italy unwilling to communicate, he is portrayed as an 'other' to the family, and to Gelsomina in particular. Wolfgang only addresses Martin when he wants something from him; he treats him as a worker in the farm rather than a member of the family. On the contrary, Gelsomina slowly develops a bond with him. Despite the lack of verbal interaction, she seems to understand him and she cares about him when he is around. In this, she shows the certain disposition of 'openness to the world […] in light of the encounter with the Other' that Gerard Delanty finds at the heart of critical cosmopolitanism (2012: 41). It is also a feature usually associated with childhood. In her analysis of the representation of childhood friendship in films, Deborah Martin highlights the potential of child characters for that type of encounter since 'their similarity as children, despite their vast cultural differences, enables a connection which overcomes divisions present in the adult world' (2019: 73). Unlike her father, Gelsomina is able and willing to transcend the differences that separate her from Martin and connect with him.

Gelsomina is on the verge of adolescence, and her interest in Martin is partially coded in terms of a potential sexual awakening. In different moments of the film, her gaze lingers on him while they are both at work. Yet, the film briefly hints at that narrative trope – the 'first love' plotline within a coming-of-age story – only to subvert it. Their bond is built upon small moments that they share, always away from the authoritative rule of Wolfgang: they swim in the lake with Angelica and Gelsomina's sisters, he teaches her how to whistle, they help each other when the honey bucket is spilled all over the barn. During the TV contest, Martin runs away and disappears on the island – set in the middle of the lake – where the programme takes place. Next morning, Gelsomina leaves the farm alone, swims to the island and finds him, hidden in a cave. This is her first independent mobility, the first time she goes somewhere without the company of an adult (Murray and Cortés-Morales 2019). For Silvia Angeli, the image of Gelsomina as she swims across the lake encapsulates her 'decision to align herself with a marginalized character': she literally and metaphorically crosses the border towards a full encounter with the other (2020: 348). As Gelsomina enters the cave, she sits next to Martin. Very gently, she offers her hand to his, and for the first time, he accepts someone else's physical contact. The scene then cuts to a later moment that very same night. They have fallen asleep next to each other. The camera slowly tilts up to the ceiling of the cave. After a moment of complete darkness, two shadows appear, moving in a playful manner. They are soon revealed to be the children's shadows. As they giggle, they swing their bodies and move their arms and legs up and down. After a few seconds, the camera tilts down again to find Martin and Gelsomina still asleep, in the same position they were before.

Described as a 'departure from naturalism into earthly fantasy', this shadow-playing scene moves the film from reality into the realm of dreams (Yáñez 2018: n.pag.). Is this Gelsomina's dream? Is it Martin's? In either case, in this quasi-magical night they spend together, they dream of playing together like two small kids. Playing, as understood in Winnicottian psychoanalysis, is a fundamental element to childhood, associated with a child's development of agency (Winnicott 1971). It is often thought of as a subversive activity, by which 'children resist, transform, or redefine adult prerogatives, making their own uses of cultural materials and enacting their own fantasies' (Jenkins 1998: 27). Gelsomina's desire for play, in this context, can be seen as a reaction against Wolfgang's expectations of her. Through play, she rebels against her role within the family, her working responsibilities, and her father's isolating mindset. She does not want to grow up towards adulthood. Instead, in her dreams she regains her child self, denied thus far by a mode of life imposed on her. Similarly, as potentially a victim of abuse, Martin might also be reclaiming a normal, playful childhood denied to him in the past. It is in this position as children, inattentive to the 'divisions of the adult world', that they can fully bond as mutual others (Martin 2019: 73). In light of this scene, Gelsomina's relationship with Martin can be seen as an inverted coming-of-age story, in which the encounter with the other does not lead to a sexual awakening but to a recovery of one's (long-denied) child self.

In this move, Gelsomina comes to embody Massey's progressive understanding of place. Place, for Doreen Massey, 'is constructed out of a particular constellation of social relations' (1991: 28). Rather than sites with clear boundaries and a fixed, essential identity, places 'can be imagined as articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings' (1991: 28). In her attentiveness to social relations with the other, Gelsomina displays

an intuitive acknowledgment of the dynamic and socially oriented nature of places in the global world. If for both Wolfgang and the TV programme ethos place is understood as a *noun* – a 'thing, a finished entity' – for Gelsomina it is a *verb*, an element in continuous flux and becoming (Merriman 2012: 58). She rejects both her father's isolating idea of place and the TV show's promise of an essentialist rural identity. Instead, she adopts 'a sense of place which is extroverted, which includes a consciousness of its links with the wider world, which integrates in a positive way the global and the local' (Massey 1991: 27). Her response to the question 'where is here?' is then similar to Massey's. Here – for both Gelsomina and Massey – is 'no more (and no less) than an encounter' (2005: 139). In this case, the encounter between Gelsomina and Martin, two outsiders that are able to bond through a reclaiming of childhood. The film, in sum, uses Gelsomina's heightened openness to the other, a feature associated with her condition as a child, as a vehicle to explore a global and progressive sense of place.

After the night they spend on the island, Gelsomina comes back to the farm alone – whatever happens to Martin remains a mystery. She rejoins the family, who are all asleep together on a mattress outdoors. As the camera pans back-and-forth, the family has suddenly vanished. The film then cuts to the interior of the house. In what is the last shot of the film, we see the former living room now completely empty, with the exception of an old curtain that moves slowly as the wind blows. In an elliptical manner, this low-key ending suggests that the family has eventually been evicted. Wolfgang's project to build a haven for his daughters, a place removed from the evils of the modern world, has been a failure. Yet, in the process, Gelsomina has learnt that a sense of place does not need to be attached to a stable location. Rather, place lies in the encounter, in the 'here' and 'now' that is granted by the contact with the other.

4. CONCLUSION

In its depiction of the family's static and inward-looking lifestyle and Gelsomina's increasingly uneasiness with it, *The Wonders* negotiates different understandings of place in the context of the global. Both Wolfgang's world-view and the TV programme are localizing responses to the threats of globalization, which implicitly invest in a notion of place as stable and static. In opposition, Gelsomina, as she reclaims her child self and shows a heightened ability to engage with Martin, opens the film to a *progressive idea of place*. Through her attitude, the film contends that hybrid social bonds are the constitutive element for a fruitful attachment to place in times of fragmentation and flux.

Yet, any engagement with the figure of the child should be attentive to its Western origin. As Debbie Olson argues, 'the western framework for "The Child" relies on problematic notions of innocence or purity, which are then used to privilege white, suburban, middle-class notions of childhood' (2018: xi). As argued above, *The Wonders* works to subvert the Romantic notion that associates childhood with the purity of nature and essentialist ideas of belonging. However, at the same time, it draws on a different trope – a child's heightened openness towards the other – that is equally derived from the perceived and illusory innocence of children. The movie deconstructs the rural childhood myth but, at the same time, is deeply anchored in another, that of the 'open' child. Also, it invests on certain assumptions of childhood

– its direct opposition to labour and work-related activities – that are equally Western oriented. Although progressive in its reaction against reterritorializing attempts that deny the social fabric of globalization, the film's use of the figure of the child as an embodiment of a global sense of place should be thought of as a western European approach to this question. Only from an awareness of the film's Eurocentric point of view, we will be able to think of ways in which this progressive idea of place might be extended beyond the West.

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