Never Rarely Sometimes Always (2022)

“He makes me do things I don’t want to do.”
—“He’s Got the Power” by The Exciters

Major Credits

Writer and Director: Eliza Pittman
Cinematographer: Helene Louvart
Cast: Sidney Flanigan (Autumn), Talia Ryder (Skyler), Theodore Pellerin (Jasper)

Production Background

Released during the pandemic after receiving major awards at several prestigious festivals, Never Rarely Sometimes Always is Eliza Pittman’s third feature, all of them dealing with the lives of young people. The film takes up the same subject as Cristian Mungiu’s 4 Months, 3 Weeks, and 2 Days (2008), which won an Oscar for Best Foreign Film. Never Rarely has also reminded viewers of the films about working class characters made by Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne, particularly Rosetta (1999). Sidney Flanigan makes her debut performance here, having earned the role over more than a hundred actresses who auditioned. Kelly Chapman, who plays the counsellor at Planned Parenthood, is not, in fact, an actor but a pregnancy counsellor.

Cinematic Qualities

1. Long Takes: The filmmakers minimize rapid cutting to enhance the documentary quality (sometimes called kitchen sink realism or cinema verite) of the editing. Note, in particular, the extended close-up of Autumn as she responds to the questions that give the film its title. Katie Rife, critic for AV Club, has noted that director Hittman is “more interested in conveying reality than in manufacturing drama.”
2. Script: The dialogue is unusually spare, so much so that the only character’s name you can hear clearly is Autumn’s. There is no extended dialogue, no cri de coeur, no epiphany, an aspect that bothered a few critics.
3. Music/Sound: The non-diegetic sound reflects the dialogue in that it is deliberately limited. The two instances of diegetic music, Autumn’s mordant renditions of The Exciters’ upbeat early ‘60s hit, “He’s Got the Power,” and Gerry and the Pacemakers’ “Don’t Let the Sun Catch You Crying” provide the film with a sense of dramatic structure as well as insights into the protagonist’s life.

Questions for Discussion

1. Consider the film’s opening sequence: a high school talent show. How do the performances that precede Autumn’s serve to frame the narrative that follows? (Check out The Exciters’ original version of “He’s Got the Power” on YouTube.)
2. Never Rarely Sometimes Always might be described as a road movie (like Thelma and Louise) or a coming-of-age story (like Juno), but it deliberately avoids the melodrama, sentimentality, and polemics that mark those genre films… and make them popular. If its
method is to show rather than tell, what, then, is the project of this film? Put another way, what scene constitutes the moral center of the film?

3. In a film that avoids messaging, a couple of images nonetheless take on symbolic significance. Consider how the nose pin and the suitcase resonate with the characters’ circumstances.

4. It’s possible to imagine Autumn making the same trip to the city alone. What role do her two unnamed (to my ear) companions, Skyler and Jasper in the script, play in developing the movie’s themes?