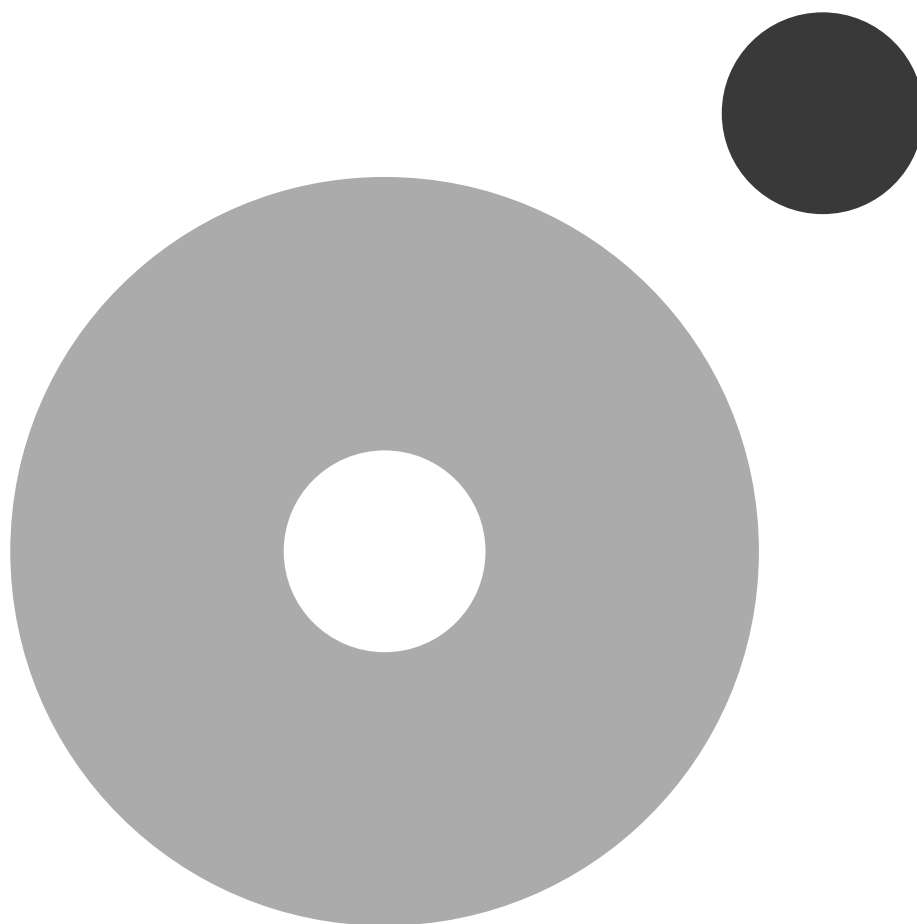


MEMORIA SCOLASTICA



The School and Its Many Pasts

edited by Juri Meda, Lucia Paciaroni and Roberto Sani

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These volumes contain the official proceedings of the International Conference «The School and Its Many Pasts. School Memories between Social Perception and Collective Representation» (Macerata, 12-15 December 2022), organized by the University of Macerata in partnership with the Catholic University of Sacred Heart of Milan, the University of Florence and the University Roma Tre.

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The School and Its Many Pasts

III: Collective Memories of School

edited by Juri Meda and Roberto Sani

Images of School Inclusion: Education for Persons with Disabilities in 1970s Italy across Big and Small Screens

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Introduction

Within the rich and diversified domain of films produced in 20th-century Italy on the schools of the past, the theme of special education occupies a marginal place. In this study, a keyword search of the “Database of audiovisual materials on schools and teachers” – published on the website *memoriascolastica.it* as part of the National Research Project PRIN 2019 “School Memories between Social Perception and Collective Representation (Italy, 1961-2001)”¹ – was conducted, with a view to quantitatively analysing the over 90 records that currently comprise this electronic directory. On the topic of special education, the most frequently recurring terms were *disabilità* [*disability*] (four audiovisual productions), *classi differenziali* [*differential classes*] (three audiovisual productions), *disabilità mentale* [*mental disability*], *disabilità visiva* [*visual impairment*], *esclusione sociale* [*social exclusion*], and *integrazione scolastica* [*school integration*] (two audiovisual productions each)². Overall, these terms are associated with a relatively small number of audiovisual productions, some of which, while touching upon the issue of special education, only represent it in a fragmentary fashion. Once the latter cases have been excluded, only four productions offer a representative image of the theme of disability in the schools of the past. Specifically, these are two documentary films (*La bicicletta* [*The bicycle*] directed by Luigi Comencini from 1970 and *I “diversi”* [*The “different”*] by Vittorio De Seta from 1978) and two drama films, one produced for the cinema (*Rosso come il cielo* [*Red like the sky*] directed by Cristiano Bortone from 2007) and the other for television (*La classe degli asini* [*The class of dunces*] by Andrea Porporati from 2016).

¹ The database was assembled by the research unit at the Catholic University of Milan, in collaboration with the University of Padua research unit.

² A further series of keywords were associated with one audiovisual production each, namely: *bambino difficile* (problem child), *educazione speciale* (special education), *esclusione scolastica* (exclusive education), *pedagogia speciale* (special pedagogy) and *scuola speciale* (special school).

It is not surprising that, in addition to their shared general theme, all four films were made or set in Italy in the 1970s. As is well known, this decade was a turning point for Italian schools, which were then encouraged to open their doors to those who had previously been excluded from them. More specifically, students with disabilities were the beneficiaries of a series of legislative measures, including the decisive laws No. 118/1971 and No. 517/1977, which provided for the design of individualized and inclusive educational pathways. The transition to school integration was certainly not without its challenges and complexities, given that it required both the system as a whole and individual teachers and pupils to revise their understanding of schooling³.

This controversial phase has been widely investigated by history of education scholars⁴. Still, there appears to be little awareness of it outside academia. Films produced for TV and cinema, as instruments that «reduce or eliminate the distance between the past and the present»⁵, can help to shed light on the theme and draw it to the attention of the wider public.

In this essay, I set out to analyse the four earlier-listed audiovisual productions, with a view to establishing how they recorded contemporary reality (in the case of the documentaries) or re-evoked and revisited a past historical period (in the case of the drama films). Following other studies of school memories⁶, I compare these media products, assessing whether and how their representations of an extremely important development for our country reflect changes in the collective mindset of Italians over time.

1. La bicicletta by L. Comencini

Over October and November 1970, the documentary series *I bambini e noi* [*The children and us*] was broadcast on Rai 2, the second national TV channel. The film director Luigi Comencini, who was already well-known at the time, used the series to denounce the marked rift in Italian society that divided wealthy and privileged children from their poor and exploited peers. The six-part series was mainly focused on schools, where social inequality was often amplified by a “one-size-fits-all” approach to teaching and by the fact that teachers generally lacked the tools required to bring about genuine

³ Cf. A. Canevaro, L. De Anna, *The historical evolution of school integration in Italy: some witnesses and considerations*, «Alter», vol. 4, n. 3, 2010, pp. 203-216; S. D'Alessio, *Inclusive education in Italy. A critical analysis of the policy of integrazione scolastica*, Rotterdam, Sense Publishers, 2011.

⁴ See F. Pruneri, *La politica scolastica dell'integrazione nel secondo dopoguerra*, in G.M. Cappai (ed.), *Percorsi dell'integrazione. Per una didattica delle diversità personali*, Milano, FrancoAngeli, 2003, pp. 55-80; S. Polenghi, *The History of Educational Inclusion of the Disabled in Italy*, «Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education», 28 June 2021, <https://oxfordre.com/education/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.001.0001/acrefore-9780190264093-e-1608> (last access: 04.01.2023).

⁵ P. Alfieri, *Introduzione*, in Id. (ed.), *Immagini dei nostri maestri. Memorie di scuola nel cinema e nella televisione dell'Italia repubblicana*, Roma, Armando Editore, 2019, p. 12.

⁶ C. Yanes-Cabrera, J. Meda, A. Viñao (edd.), *School Memories. New Trends in the History of Education*, Cham, Springer, 2017.

change⁷. Nevertheless, by the same token, schools could also represent children's best hope of social redemption, as borne out by testimonies presented during the final episode in the series.

«One of my finest works about children»⁸: such was assessment of the director himself, who had already made other films on the theme of childhood, beginning with his first popular success *Bambini in città* [*Children in city*] (1946), and would go on to make others, such as *Cuore* [*Heart*] (1984) and *Marcellino pane e vino* [*Marcellino bread and wine*] (1992), and of course *Le avventure di Pinocchio* [*The adventures of Pinocchio*] (1972)⁹. The aim of *I bambini e noi* was to tell the true stories of the many Pinocchios then living out their existences in Italy. In each episode, the part of Pinocchio was metaphorically played by a different child, chosen by Comencini as the puppet of the moment. The director did not audition children for these lead roles, but rather selected those who emerged as having a difficult life, because they were «the most beleaguered, the most unhappy, or the scoundrel»¹⁰ of the situation.

The Pinocchio of the fourth episode, entitled *La bicicletta* and broadcast during prime time on 27 October 1970, is Maurizio Gualà, a 10-year-old schoolboy who lives with his family in the working-class district of Prima Porta, on the outskirts of Rome. Chosen by Comencini because he obstinately wears the ribbon on his school apron backwards, Maurizio, who is also stubborn in personality, attends a differential class of third-grade students at an elementary school that has been set up, due to a lack of alternative spaces, in a couple of apartments inside a residential building¹¹. Comencini's documentary narrative draws out the complexity of life at this school, which is bound up with the personal and family history of the child protagonist. The Gualà family, which has immigrated to Rome from Abruzzo, is presented in all its «brutality», beginning with the father who guilelessly declares that he uses the whip to discipline his son. The child was assigned to a differential

⁷ For further background on this documentary, see L. Agostini, *Una teleinchiesta a puntate sul mondo dell'infanzia*, «Radiocorriere TV», n. 38, 20-26 September 1970, pp. 32-34; S. Finetti, *I bambini e noi*, in P. Alfieri (ed.), *Banca dati degli audiovisivi sulla scuola e sugli insegnanti. Vol. 1*, Milano, EDUCatt, 2021, pp. 1-8.

⁸ L. Comencini, *Davvero un bel mestiere! Infanzia, vocazione, esperienze di un regista*, Milano, Baldini&Castoldi, 2016, pp. 123-127.

⁹ Cf. G. Gosetti, *Luigi Comencini*, Roma, La Nuova Italia, 1988, pp. 7-8. For Comencini's complete filmography, see D. Monetti, L. Pallanch (edd.), *Luigi Comencini: architetto dei sentimenti*, Roma, Centro Sperimentale Cinematografia, 2007. In relation to *Cuore*, a highly successful TV drama, cf. S. Polenghi, *Remembering School Through Movies: The Films of the Book Cuore (1886) in Republican Italy*, in Yanes-Cabrera, Meda, Viñao (edd.), *School Memories*, cit., pp. 203-217.

¹⁰ Agostini, *Una teleinchiesta a puntate sul mondo dell'infanzia*, cit., p. 34.

¹¹ In Italy, differential classes were instituted in the early 1900s to accommodate children who were «late» developers or «deceptively abnormal», in other words who did not display obvious intellectual deficits but yet had difficulty learning, often because they were disadvantaged by an unfavourable social and familial context. For further background on how differential classes came to be introduced, cf. B. Di Pofi, *L'educazione dei minori «anormali» nell'opera di Giuseppe Ferruccio Montesano*, Roma, Nuova Cultura, 2008, pp. 50-52. On their rapid spread in the *Scuola media unica* (unified junior high school) introduced in 1962, see A. Zelioli, *1963-1978. Dalle classi differenziali all'integrazione scolastica degli handicappati*, «Scuola Italiana Moderna», n. 5, 1978, pp. 14-19. On the *Scuola media unica* programme itself, cf. E. Damiano, B. Orizio, E. Scaglia (edd.), *I due popoli. Vittorino Chizzolini e «Scuola Italiana Moderna» contro il dualismo scolastico*, Roma, Studium, 2019.

class due to his lack of familiarity with standard Italian and his aggressive behaviour, which the teachers – one of their number affirms – were unable to «solve».

Although Comencini avoids taking an explicitly controversial approach, he implicitly conveys his critique of this system in various ways, firstly by means of the pressing questions he puts to his interviewees. For example, when – during his conversation with Maurizio's teacher – he asks if she thinks that creating differential classes could negatively impact on the self-perceptions that children build up by comparing themselves with peers, she replies – with evident discomfort – that the pupils in the regular classes are not meant to know which of their companions have been assigned to the special classes, which of course is a highly unlikely state of affairs. Similarly, when asked whether selecting for superior intellectual abilities is one of the functions of schooling, the teacher says she thinks it unfair that the «most advanced minds» should have to wait for the «less capable and more handicapped». Thus, the teacher's own words convey an image of differential classes as places where the rejects of the public school system may be received.

Only at the end of the film, citing a recent article in the *Corriere della Sera*, does Comencini explicitly point the finger at the segregative nature of these classes, which «isolate the weakest without providing them with the slightest means of redemption». Differential classes reflected the social inequalities then forcing large segments of the Italian population into difficult living conditions. Inequalities that are in plain sight in the footage of *La bicicletta*, which shows a socio-economically backward neighbourhood marred by illegal construction. Given the cultural climate of the period, which was even further exacerbated by the civic unrest of 1968, special educational pathways were meeting with increasing opposition. Thus, the purpose of the documentary film was not only to illustrate a contemporary problem, but also to make its audience more sympathetic to a change of course that would require universal support. Comencini himself attempts to do his bit by gifting Maurizio – who has declared himself ready to try harder at his schoolwork – with a bicycle, soon to be broken by his drunken father, and by openly condemning the miserable life that the child was forced to lead, both at home and at school.

2. I “diversi” by V. De Seta

In the 1970s, Vittorio De Seta – a director renowned especially for his films of social inquiry – turned his attention to the world of school. While in his docudrama *Diario di un maestro* [*Diary of an elementary school teacher*], which aired for the first time in 1973, he had placed a teacher-actor in charge of a class group put together ad hoc for the production, towards the close of the decade, he took a different approach with the four-part docuseries *Quando la scuola cambia* [*When the school changes*]¹². Advised on

¹² On De Seta cf. A. Rais (ed.), *Il cinema di Vittorio De Seta*, Catania, Maimone, 1995; *Il mondo perduto: i cortometraggi di Vittorio De Seta, 1954-1959*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 2008; P. Nappi, *L'avventura del reale: il*

this second project, as on the first, by education specialist Francesco Tonucci, De Seta documented life at four schools, in different regions of Italy, which were then successfully experimenting with innovative teaching methods in response to the needs of an increasingly large and diverse student body.

I “diversi”, first broadcast on Rai1 – the national flagship TV channel – on 24 June 1978, is the closing episode in the series and explores a project implemented by the Italian Association for Assistance to Spastics (AIAS) at Cutrofiano Rehabilitation Centre in the province of Lecce¹³. The Centre’s initial far-sighted experimentation with including children with disabilities in ordinary school pathways only lasted a few years, however it subsequently remained in operation as an outpatient and administrative service¹⁴.

The episode is divided into three parts. In the first part, the narrative voice of actor and playwright Stefano Satta Flores, accompanied by a sequence of photographs and video clips of children in a range of unidentified educational settings, offers a harsh critique of contemporary educational and healthcare institutions for the “handicapped” as they were then labelled. Described as «places of concentration» and «segregation», these institutions stood accused of reducing children with disabilities to mere objects of care, with an exclusive focus on medical health. Indeed, it was their awareness of such limitations that had prompted the directors of the Cutrofiano Rehabilitation Centre to revisit the centre’s aims and structure, leading to a series of attempts in the early 1970s to include children with disabilities in regular school pathways, as presented in the second segment of the episode.

Specifically, the school-related experiences of four children with disabilities are shown to the viewer. Through the testimonies of practitioners involved in these children’s individual educational pathways (teachers, social workers, psychologists, and education specialists), together with the observations of parents and classmates, the many positive aspects of transferring pupils from the rehabilitation centre to ordinary schools are brought to light. Importantly, building up a network of friendships in a mainstream classroom allowed the children to break out of the social isolation they had previously been forced into. The same mechanism also extended to their parents, who thus no longer felt marginalized on account of their situation. While the film director does not hide the challenges that the teachers encountered in striving to appropriately adapt their teaching methods, his main focus is on their insights and experiments, which – although only mentioned in passing by the interviewees – proved key to drawing out the potential of the individual students. The third part of the episode reinforces this last point by interviewing a physical education teacher at an elementary school in Lecce. Based his

cinema di Vittorio De Seta, Soveria Mannelli, Rubbettino, 2015. For more in-depth background on *Diario di un maestro*, see A. Debè, *Constructing Memory: School in Italy in the 1970s as Narrated in the TV Drama «Diario di un Maestro»*, in Yanes-Cabrera, Meda, Viñao (edd.), *School Memories*, cit., pp. 231-244.

¹³ On the broader project, see works by Damiano Felini, including *Una proposta pedagogica sullo schermo. La scuola in due produzioni televisive di Vittorio De Seta (1970-1979)*, «Orientamenti Pedagogici», vol. 62, n. 2, 2015, pp. 273-291; *Quando la scuola cambia*, in Alfieri (ed.), *Banca dati degli audiovisivi sulla scuola e sugli insegnanti. Vol. 1*, cit., pp. 1-6.

¹⁴ S. Dinelli, *Al Centro di Cutrofiano*, «Riforma della Scuola», n. 1, 1974, pp. 24-29.

own experience, he believes that the presence in the classroom of children with disabilities is a stimulus not only for the other classmates, but also for teachers, who must acquire the competence required to fulfil the right to education of all students.

It is evident that De Seta's goal was to illustrate the feasibility of an inclusive education system, almost as though to support the legislation on school integration that had recently been introduced. He had also set out to promote inclusion, albeit not exclusively in relation to disability, in *Diario di un maestro*. In that docudrama however, his simulation of reality was viewed as unconvincing by some critics¹⁵. In *Quando la scuola cambia*, in contrast, De Seta presented real-life examples of innovation, recording replicable teaching practices and bringing to the television screen a sort of «in-service teacher training course»¹⁶.

However, *I "diversi"* is in a somewhat different style to the other three episodes in the series. The Cutrofiano project is presented without practical suggestions on how to include children with disabilities. In contrast, the other episodes place much more emphasis on the practical dimension. For example, in the first episode, entitled *Partire dal bambino* [*Begin with the child*], concerning the work of teacher Mario Lodi with his primary school class in Vho di Piadena, a small village in northern Italy, the teacher's educational approach is conveyed in great detail, being outlined and explained by the teacher himself¹⁷. In *I "diversi"*, on the other hand, the accent is on offering a positive message to encourage school inclusion rather than on indicating the concrete steps required to bring it about. The teachers interviewed in the episode discuss their experience, but rarely define their chosen educational practices in detail. It is likely that this reticence reflects the climate of uncertainty generated by the introduction in the 1970s of the previously mentioned legislation on including children with disabilities in public schools. Many teachers were unprepared for the speed with which the change was implemented and only gradually did school practices come to be revisited¹⁸.

3. Rosso come il cielo by C. Bortone

Directed by Cristiano Bortone, the drama film *Rosso come il cielo* was released in 2007. A considerably successful production, it was screened all over the world and won multiple awards¹⁹. Set in 1970, it tells the story of 10-year-old Mirco, who following an accident with a rifle, loses his sight, first partially and then completely. Leaving Pontedera, near

¹⁵ Nappi, *L'avventura del reale*, cit., pp. 133-138 and A. Debè, *The Italian TV series «Diario di un maestro»: a new way of experiencing school in the 1970s*, in P. Alfieri, I. Garai (edd.), *Individual and collective school memories. Research perspectives and case studies in Italy and Hungary*, Roma, Armando editore, 2022, pp. 132-154.

¹⁶ Felini, *Una proposta pedagogica sullo schermo*, cit., p. 289.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 277-279.

¹⁸ Cf. Pruneri, *La politica scolastica dell'integrazione nel secondo dopoguerra*, cit.

¹⁹ For further background, see A. Debè, *Rosso come il cielo*, in P. Alfieri (ed.), *Banca dati degli audiovisivi sulla scuola e sugli insegnanti. Vol. 2*, Milano, EDUCatt, 2022, pp. 1-5.

Florence, where he lives, he moves to Genoa to attend the local institute for the blind. Being separated from his family, along with the strict rules imposed by the director and the nuns who run the school, and severe difficulty with learning because he does not know Braille alphabets, makes life at the institution unbearable for the child²⁰.

From a history of education perspective, the film combines two key dimensions. First, there is the narration of Mirco's personal story. Although the situation in which he finds himself causes him great suffering, he gradually manages to attribute meaning to his new everyday existence, rediscovering through sound the world that he can no longer perceive with sight. At the same time, the film also tells the story of the institute, presenting its educational aims and teaching methods. The task of narrating everyday educational life at the institution is mainly entrusted to the visual dimension of the film, the soundtrack by Ezio Bosso, and brief remarks by the story characters. The resulting representation is that of an educationally functional school: the classroom is a well-equipped to meet the sensory and mobility requirements of the blind; the religious sisters who form the teaching staff are conscientious and well-trained; there is an emphasis on vocational education, with a view to teaching each individual students «an occupation suited to his needs». Alongside this apparent efficiency, however, everyday life at the school is drab, marked by cold, impersonal spaces and a rigid sequence of predefined activities. «We eat, we study, and we sleep», states one child in the film.

These two dimensions – that of the main character and that of the institute – are closely intertwined, and so, the change in Mirco catalyses the transformation of the entire institute, which – the viewer is left to infer – is ultimately destined to transcend its self-referential and marginalizing approach. However, as the plot unfolds, the dimension of life at the school becomes increasingly less prominent compared to the dimension of Mirco, the true protagonist. Bortone himself stated that the purpose of the film was to present «an extraordinary story that deserved to be told», referring specifically to the story of the child²¹. This choice is conducive to eliciting strong empathy on the part of the viewer. Indeed, comments from audiences typically allude to Mirco's tenacity and fortitude and also to the director's ability to portray the potential for personal redemption of persons with disabilities. «Touching» and «moving» are among the most frequently used terms in reviews, both in Italy and abroad²². Even a journalist with the daily newspaper *la Repubblica* described the film as «touching and poetic»²³. The film's sentimental character

²⁰ The story is based on the life of Mirco Mencacci, today a well-known sound editor in the Italian film industry. For further background on the film, cf. C.Z. Baruffi, *Il cinema tra percorsi educativi e sentieri formativi*, Padova, Libreriauniversitaria.it edizioni, 2011, pp. 141-143; Laura, Luisa and Morando Morandini (edd.), *Il Morandini: dizionario dei film e delle serie televisive*, Bologna, Zanichelli, 2021, p. 1325.

²¹ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ve7W0juiXXo> (last access: 04.01.2023).

²² The reviews analysed for this study were drawn from several different websites, both Italian and international (given that the film was also screened in other countries). The main platforms consulted include *amazon.it*, *mymovies.it*, and *rottentomatoes.com*.

²³ P. D'Agostini, *Quando il cinema è suono storia di un cieco di talent*, «La Repubblica», 9 March 2007 (<https://www.mymovies.it/film/2005/rosso-come-il-cielo/rassegnastampa/143577/>, last access: 04.01.2023).

is strongly to the fore then, so much so that it was described by a critic writing for the newspaper *Liberazione* as a «sweet tale about the blind»²⁴.

Clearly, therefore, the film resonates with changes over time in public sensibilities surrounding the theme of disability. At the same time, however, the film director's efforts to describe the characteristics of the institute's educational program have mostly passed over spectators' heads. Only an attentive and expert eye can clearly discern the image of the school that is conveyed by the film, which encompasses both a directional and self-referential educational approach, and teaching methods that are partially effective in meeting the needs of the student. The one-sided perspective adopted by most of the film's audience is exemplified in the words of an anonymous reviewer, who merely describes the institute attended by Mirco as a «distant and unknown place, where all the children were marginalized from the outside world»²⁵. While there is an undeniable grain of truth in this statement, it was certainly influenced by the commentator's emotional engagement with Mirco's heartbreaking story, which likely prevented him or her from fully apprehending the characteristics of the educational institution.

4. *La classe degli asini* by A. Porporati

Directed by Andrea Porporati and first broadcast on Rai1 on 14 November 2016, the film *La classe degli asini* is set in Turin between 1970 and 1971 and presents part of the personal and professional life story of Mirella, a meticulous middle school teacher and champion of the “old-fashioned” method of knowledge transmission, who at a certain point finds herself questioning all of her strongest convictions. A colleague, a male teacher called Felice, opens her eyes to the limitations of a teaching method that excludes those who are different, marginalizing disabled and maladjusted students by relegating them to “dunce” classes, special schools and institutes, or differential classes. In response to this situation, Felice sets up an after-school program that is open to all those who have been rejected by the school system.

Mirella's change of heart is strongly influenced by the experience of Riccardo, one of her young students. The oldest child in a Southern Italian family that emigrated to the North and now lives in poverty on the outskirts of Turin, Riccardo has been abandoned by his father, and is restless and unruly, leading his teachers to mistakenly categorize him as of below average intelligence. The teachers decide to exclude him from mainstream schooling, assigning him to a differential class – although in the film, Riccardo is placed in a residential centre that deploys mainly coercive and violent methods. At the same time, Flavia, Mirella's daughter who has severe mental and physical disabilities, is also sent

²⁴ B. Sollazzo, *Gli altri occhi del piccolo Mirco*, «Liberazione», 9 March 2007 (<https://www.mymovies.it/film/2005/rosso-come-il-cielo/rassegnastampa/144255/>, last access: 04.01.2023).

²⁵ See <https://www.mymovies.it/film/2005/rosso-come-il-cielo/pubblico/> (last access: 04.01.2023).

home from the private school where she is enrolled, on the grounds that she is incapable of learning.

Seeking help for her family situation, Mirella contacts the Turin branch of the National Association of Families of Subnormal Children (ANFFAS). Thanks to her encounter with this group and spurred on by her colleague Felice's "revolutionary" drive to revisit educational practice, she comes to the conclusion that the public school system needs to be reformed so that it can cater for all different kinds of special needs. When she becomes headteacher of the school, Mirella allows Riccardo to re-enroll, and with him also Flavia and other previously excluded children, thus launching an experiment in school integration²⁶.

In contrast with *Rosso come il cielo*, this TV drama was not primarily driven by the desire to tell the story of its main character, but rather by the goal of shedding light on the process of school integration that took place in Italy in the 1970s. In 2013, Antonio Nocchetti, president of the Neapolitan association "Tutti a Scuola", whose mission is to safeguard the rights of students with disabilities, had written a letter to Francesco Pinto, then head of Rai, to enquire «why the public [broadcasting] service had never attended to an important law such as that which, in 1977, abolished differential classes»²⁷. Getting the message, Rai chose to televise the real-life experience of Mirella Casale Antonione, on whose story the drama is based, as an example of farsighted advocacy for educational inclusion²⁸.

The film firmly condemns "special" institutions, whether they take the form of differential classes, special schools, or combined healthcare and education institutes, which in the film overlap and are confounded with one other. These institutions are critiqued because they act as a means of exclusion and are self-referential. The institute that takes in Mirella's student is in practice a containment centre, which offers little or no education and has nearly no teachers or educational staff. At the other end of the spectrum, there is the inclusive project that Mirella launches at the middle school where she is headmistress. Although the film does not touch on the educational details of this project, it presents Mirella's school as a place where all students can grow and develop.

It is thus very clear that the film director's position is one of full approval of school inclusion and condemnation of segregation processes. While we may be sympathetic to his support for inclusive education and admire the fact that he represented Italy's courageous change in special education policy on TV, nevertheless, the film omits some of the historical nuance surrounding that change. Specifically it overlooks the fact that

²⁶ C. Gumirato, *La classe degli asini*, in Alfieri (ed.), *Banca dati degli audiovisivi sulla scuola e sugli insegnanti*, Vol. 1, cit., pp. 1-4.

²⁷ M. Basile, *Disabili a scuola, il sogno di Insinna: un Paese che non lascia indietro nessuno*, «Corriere del Mezzogiorno. Campania», 12 November 2016, p. 11.

²⁸ A secondary school teacher, Casale was headteacher at the "Camillo Olivetti" middle school in Turin, where in the early 1970s, she launched some successful experiments in inclusion. A member of ANFFAS from 1964, she held various positions within the association over time, up to that of national vice president. For fuller biographical details, see M. Levita, *Mirella Antonione Casale: la battaglia per i minori con disabilità tra ieri e oggi*, «Quaderni di Intercultura», vol. XI, 2019, pp. 192-210.

the strength of traditional educational facilities for the disabled lay in their deployment of specialized teaching methods, and that, at the same time, the new pattern of “wild integration” of the disabled was not without its challenges²⁹.

The director’s simplified portrayal of the process of school inclusion has not gone unnoticed outside the education sector. The journalist and television critic Aldo Grasso, for example, wrote that «The topic is beyond dispute [...]. The content is so important that the script inevitably becomes secondary», yet the film «reflects [...] a somewhat dated view [of the public service] that is strongly characterized by a pedagogical mission and a paternalistic tone. It doesn’t make it to the next level»³⁰. Furthermore, the journalist Andrea Fagioli commented on the «many stereotypes» in the film, which «clearly divides the “good guys” from the “bad guys”... [it is] all somewhat simplified. But perhaps this is the way to reach a general public that is thirsty for simple and positive messages, and for characters who fight worthy battles and with whom they can identify»³¹.

It might be said that the purely historical dimension of this film is overshadowed by its educational dimension, in terms of educating the public to accept and include those who are different. This is confirmed by the words of Eleonora Andreatta, director of Rai fiction in 2016, who stated that «*La classe degli asini* is an integral part of the editorial line of the public [broadcasting] service, whose aim is to engage all viewers and to offer respectful [treatment] of themes, values, and civic dedication and effort»³². At the same time, however, it must be noted that this emphasis on inclusive practices and the values of solidarity and sharing, as well as on arousing spectators’ emotions rather than engaging their rational sphere, also fits with the need to please audiences. Certainly, the film won a large following. It attracted almost 6 million viewers and was the prime time offering with by far the highest ratings on the evening it was broadcasted.

Conclusions

This comparative analysis of four filmic productions shows that each of these works reflects cultural aspects of the period in which it was produced. For example, the films directed by Comencini and De Seta offer insight into the anti-authoritarian and emancipatory current that characterized 1960s and 1970s Italy, a movement that we know to have had key repercussions on the educational system. In relation to the inclusion of students with disabilities, these two works focused on a process that had just been initiated and that still needed to be fully embraced by public opinion. Hence, both films support the principle of inclusion, and are less concerned with providing viewers,

²⁹ Polenghi, *The History of Educational Inclusion of the Disabled in Italy*, cit.; L. Cottini, *Didattica speciale e inclusione scolastica*, Roma, Carocci Editore, 2017.

³⁰ «*La classe degli asini*» e la missione educativa di Vanessa Incontrada, «Corriere della Sera», 15 November 2016, pp. 11-12.

³¹ «*La classe degli asini*», valori e stereotipi, «Avvenire», 16 November 2016, p. 27.

³² *Incontrada e Insinna nella battaglia contro le classi differenziali*, «Il Tirreno», 10 November 2016, p. 36.

especially teachers, with educational guidance, than with pointing up the desirable and legitimate nature of the integration process. This means that the directors were aware that legislation alone would not be enough to bring about change in schools, but that a shift in the collective image of schooling was also required.

On the other hand, in the years in which the films by Bortone and Porporati were produced, the principles underlying inclusive education had become established. These works, therefore, were not aimed at promoting structural change in schooling, but rather at confirming the choices previously made and inviting the public to continue to support them, within a broader approach that extended from schools to the wider social context. To this end, the narratives of the two films – which are partly fictionalized – are designed to tug at the audience's heartstrings, in contrast with the documentaries, which by their nature offer a more objective perspective³³.

What the four filmic productions have in common, however, is their condemnation of the differential pathways for disabled and maladapted children that characterized the Italian school system prior to the 1970s. In contrast, the opening of schools to all students is portrayed as a completely positive experience. In pursuing this line of thinking, all the films take a rather simplistic approach, which, for example, leads them to avoid illustrating the valuable characteristics of some special education formats, especially in terms of targeted teaching methods³⁴. The outcome is a gap between the complex history of special education institutes and their representation in filmic sources, whereby the latter tend to perpetuate a stereotypical and univocal vision of the topic within the collective imagination, choosing to offer not a faithful historical picture but rather a set of values to be conserved over time.

³³ In relation to documentaries and how they go about capturing reality, cf. S. Bruzzi, *New Documentary: a critical introduction*, London, Routledge, 2000, p. 4; P. Warmington, A. Van Gorp, I. Grosvenor, *Education in motion: use of documentary film in education research*, «Paedagogica Historica», n. 4, 2011, pp. 457-472.

³⁴ See for example, the case of deaf people in Italy and the well-structured and specialized educational pathways that were offered to them from the late 1800s onwards. For background on this topic, cf. R. Sani (ed.), *L'educazione dei sordomuti nell'Italia dell'800: Istituzioni, metodi, proposte formative*, Torino, SEI, 2008; M.C. Morandini, *L'educazione dei sordomuti: Il lungo cammino verso l'inclusione*, in M. Gecchele, P. Dal Toso (edd.), *Educare alle diversità: Una prospettiva storica*, Siena, Edizioni ETS, 2019, pp. 137-159.

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