Modern Italy, 2014
Vol. 19, No. 2, 169–181, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13532944.2014.910505

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

A family affair: the depiction of disability in contemporary mainstream Italian cinema

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Despite a grim history of marginalisation and oppression of people with disabilities, Italy has been praised for its early de-institutionalisation and attempts to adopt a more inclusive educational approach. Do recent Italian films provide evidence that these approaches have made a difference to how disability is made visible on film, or is it still depicted largely as an individual or family affair rather than a societal or political issue? Over the last decades, numerous scholars in disability studies have argued that cinema is an important location for understanding the formation of ideas about disability and have analysed the representation of people with disabilities in film, particularly in mainstream cinema. Moving from a focus on stereotypes and the description of 'positive' and 'negative' portrayals of disability, more recent scholarship examines filmic images of people with impairments in the light of a conception of disability termed by Snyder and Mitchell a 'constructed social space'. Yet this extensive body of work has had limited impact in Italy in disability studies and film studies. This article applies it to some contemporary Italian films, considering the ways in which they represent disability and focusing in particular on Andrea Molaioli's *La ragazza del lago* (2007).

Keywords: cinema; disability studies; stereotypes; 'normality genre'; 'disabled visibility'

Introduction

Until the late 1970s, many people with disabilities in Italy lived in often appalling conditions in institutions where they were kept out of sight and out of mind of the general public. As Leslie A. Fiedler suggested, 'perhaps such sequestration in institutions represents only an alternative way of making [them] invisible, as good as dead' (1982, 67). It reflected a secret (and at times, not-so-secret) belief that their death would in fact be the best thing for all concerned, based on what Rosemarie Garland-Thomson calls the 'eugenic logic' that aims to 'eliminate disability and by extension disabled people from the world' (2012, 339–340). Yet at the same time, a long visual history exists of disabled people in Italy. In the photographic era, it goes from the illustrations (derived from photographs) of the 'deformed' and 'feebleminded' of Cesare Lombroso's *L'uomo delinquente* (*Criminal Man*, 1879) to works like Carla Cerati and Gianni Berengo Gardin's photographic study *Morire di classe* (*Dying of Class*, 1969) and Marco Bellocchio, Sandro Petraglia, Silvano Agosti and Stefano Rulli's 1975 film *Matti da slegare* (*Mad People to Untie*). Such works contributed to the passage of the 1978 'Basaglia' law (180/1978) that closed the

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https://doi.org/10.1080/13532944.2014.910505 Published online by Cambridge University Press

institutions in which the mentally ill and intellectually disabled were confined together. Together they constitute a profoundly distressing album of the mistreatment of people with disabilities. More recently, however, Italy has been praised abroad for the way it has sought to de-institutionalise residents of such 'homes' and find ways to enable people with disabilities to live satisfying lives within the community. One example is the integration of children with disabilities into state schools, which took place much more rapidly in Italy than in many other countries (Lauchlan and Fadda 2013; on the limits of the integration policy in practice see Vadalà 2011).

But is this more forward-thinking approach reflected in the ways in which people with intellectual and physical disabilities are represented in the culture more broadly? This article looks at the portrayal of disability in three contemporary Italian films and asks how it functions. Do these cinematic images of disability reinforce or contest the societal devaluing and 'othering' of disability? Are there any signs that images that challenge 'a degrading visual inheritance' and the 'repeated representational patterns that function to the detriment of disabled people's social identity' (Snyder and Mitchell 2006, 172) are becoming possible? I argue that mainstream Italian film tends to frame disability in relation to broader societal anxieties, particularly about the institution of the family and the role of parents, especially fathers.[1] These anxieties sometimes relate to questions of material impairment and (even more rarely) its effects within a disabling society, while at others the impairment stands in for the unknown and frightening, which must be brought under control. Using Paul Darke's theorisation of the 'normality genre' and Sharon L. Snyder and David T. Mitchell's formulation of 'narrative prosthesis', I contend that an analysis of these films from a disability studies perspective provides a useful insight not only into perceptions of disability, but, even more importantly, into the power of definitions of 'normality' in contemporary Italian society. Furthermore, such an analysis shows how these cinematic representations of disability also serve to highlight the disjuncture between the significant changes that have taken place in the institution of the Italian family over at least the past 50 years and the political and societal rhetoric that still defines the 'normal' Italian family.

Cinema and disability

The starting point for this article is the work of scholars in disability studies, in particular Tom Shakespeare, Sharon L. Snyder and David T. Mitchell, and Paul Darke, who have long argued for the importance of studying the way disability is shown on screen. As Shakespeare contends, film images of oppressed groups 'offer a measure by which we can identify shifts in social attitudes towards marginalized groups, and an indication of particular sites of resistance to change' (1994, 287). He points out that since discrimination stems from prejudices rooted in language, socialisation and cultural representation, it is at least partly the result of a history of representations of people with impairments as 'other', and is reflected and perpetuated in images that stress separation and difference (1994, 287). Similarly, Colin Barnes has described how 'disabling stereotypes which medicalise, patronise, criminalise and de-humanise disabled people abound in books, films, on television, and in the press'. He argues that 'attitudes towards, assumptions about and expectations of disabled people' are often based on these stereotypes, which contribute to the discrimination and exclusion that disabled people face (1992, 39). Darke also notes that 'images matter', since 'for the disabled, images of themselves are ... presumed by virtually all critics and audiences to be essentially self-evident in the truths they reveal about impairment, the "human condition" and, as such, disability' (Darke 1998, 181). A careful analysis of the ways disability is constructed and displayed on screen helps to reveal how these images 'are as socially constructed, illusionary and functional as any other images (be they of the

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oppressed or not)' (ibid.). Snyder and Mitchell in turn have made the claim that since 'most people make the majority of their life acquaintances with disabled people in film, television and literature, the representational milieu of disability provides a critical arena for disability studies analysis' (2006, 158). If that is the case, then analysis of Italian film from a disability studies perspective offers a valid avenue for exploring the social construction and meaning of images of disability in contemporary Italy. At the same time, a cultural disability studies approach also affords an opportunity to read Italian cinema in new ways (Cheyne 2009).

As these and numerous other scholars have pointed out, disability in literature and film is not invisible, but rather 'pervasive' and 'hypersymbolic' (Mitchell and Snyder 2001, 16). While other marginalised identities may be excluded from the cinema, disability is 'highly and continuously present on screen' but 'not always agential' (Chivers and Markotić 2010, 1). The marginalisation of disabled people therefore takes place in a context of extreme visibility, in which fictional characters with impairments bear a heavy load of symbolic and metaphoric meanings. These characters are most often used to define and police the boundaries of 'normality', a concept that exists purely, as Darke writes, as 'a social construct, within an almost total consensus, in a largely medical-model nexus' (Darke 1998, 164).[2] They create what he calls a 'normality drama genre' in which 'normality is reinforced as superior and abnormality is made abject in comparison' (Darke 1998, 188). Such representations often contrast out-of-control disabled bodies with orderly, controlled, able bodies and depend upon 'shared cultural scripts of disability as that which must be warded off at all costs' (Snyder and Mitchell 2006, 163). They also serve as a vehicle for wider anxieties, where impairment functions as a metaphor for various societal ills. In the vast majority of cases, mainstream film 'misrepresents disability as personal tragedy, bodies in need of cure or repair, unseemly human dependency, and/or abominations to be banished from the contexts of polite society' (Snyder and Mitchell 2008, 19). These portrayals take no account of 'the way in which disability is a relationship between people with impairment and a disabling society' (Shakespeare 1994, 287). Instead, they frame disability within a narrative of individual misfortune, isolated from any socio-political context.

Early work in the area noted that disabled characters were generally reduced to stereotypes and it tended to focus on identifying and criticising these stereotypes: the tragic figure or plucky battler who 'endures' or 'overcomes' the 'tragedy' of his or her impairment; the sinister or embittered avenger; or the 'supercrip' who triumphs over adversity with almost superhuman determination and courage (Shakespeare 1999, 164). Secondary characters tend to be employed either as props to demonstrate the kindness of the film's able-bodied protagonist, as background colour to create a sinister, exotic or perverse atmosphere, or as beings with 'special powers' (Shakespeare 1999). Other scholars called for greater social realism in cinema, informed by political awareness and activism. Both of these approaches tended to consider the representation of people with disabilities to be static, unrelentingly negative, uninformed by disability studies perspectives and largely unrelated to the ideological concerns of a particular historical time and place. Some more recent studies suggest the usefulness of moving beyond the 'positive image toolkit' approach in order to explore the ways in which '[d]isability discourse is often more complex and multifaceted than it first appears' and to analyse how images of disability relate to the times and places in which they are made (Shakespeare 2005, 59).

Italian cinema and disability

What might be the complexities of cinematic images of disability produced in Italy in the first decade of the 2000s? Italian cinema studies in and beyond Italy have largely neglected the

https://doi.org/10.1080/13532944.2014.910505 Published online by Cambridge University Press

extensive body of Anglo-American work on cinema and disability, despite the fact that disability is as common a feature in Italian films as it is in those of Hollywood and other film traditions. Indeed, representations of disability in Italian cinema have tended to follow many of the same patterns as Hollywood cinema. Disability stereotypes similarly abound, with a particular preference for 'plucky battler' and 'saintly sufferer' narratives.[3] Yet other kinds of images also appear, with greater or lesser degrees of filmic and political effectiveness, including in films in which disability is not the central subject of the plot.

Two relatively recent films that centre on the experiences of disabled protagonists and make a sincere attempt to present a different view of disability are Francisco José Fernandez's *Ti voglio bene Eugenio* (*Eugenio, I Love You*, 2002) and Gianni Amelio's *Le chiavi di casa* (*The Keys to the House*, 2004). The former might best be characterised as a sort of aspirational fairy tale, in which the eponymous protagonist, who has Down's Syndrome, achieves an enviably rich and rewarding life, with satisfying employment, fulfilling voluntary work at a hospital trauma centre, adoptive paternity and a blissful romantic and sexual relationship with a beautiful woman. His story is framed by another narrative in which his satisfying existence persuades an anguished woman not to abort her pregnancy. Despite its very worthy intentions, the film ultimately reinforces a number of stereotypes (as much about gender as about disability). The latter film, loosely based on Giuseppe Pontiggia's novel *Nati due volte* (*Born Twice*, 2000), tells the story of the meeting of Gianni (Kim Rossi Stuart) and his son Paolo (Andrea Rossi) 15 years after the father abandoned the boy, who has cerebral palsy and some intellectual impairment, after his wife died giving birth to him. It aims for a higher level of realism and avoids the tidy closure of a fairy-tale reconciliation at the end, even as it outlines the halting progress the pair make in getting closer to one another and beginning to establish a relationship.

Of the many differences between the two films, one of the most interesting is the use of disabled actors. Both films are unusual in that they make use of disabled actors as protagonists, but, in the case of *Ti voglio bene Eugenio*, only in flashbacks to the teenage Eugenio, played by Alfredo Scarlata. Giancarlo Giannini, one of Italy's best-known actors, plays the adult Eugenio (the temporarily motor-impaired character of Laura whom Eugenio helps recover is also played by an able-bodied actor, Chiara De Bonis) (see Figure 1). As Sally Chivers and Nicole Markotić point out, '[o]ne of the quickest paths to critical acclaim for an able-bodied actor is to play a physically disabled character in a manner that a largely uninformed audience finds convincing' (2010, 1). The same can be said for cognitively unimpaired actors playing intellectually disabled

Figure 1. Eugenio (Giancarlo Giannini) comforts Laura (Chiara De Bonis).

https://doi.org/10.1080/13532944.2014.910505 Published online by Cambridge University Press

characters. Although the film was criticised for its directorial failings and for the stilted performances of the female leads, critics lauded Giannini's portrayal of an intellectually disabled character in terms very similar to those used to praise other actors who play comparable parts, such as Tom Hanks, who won the Academy Award for Best Actor in 1995 for his role as an intellectually disabled man in *Forrest Gump*.[4] Giannini received a David di Donatello for his performance and was widely praised in Italian reviews of the film for its 'authenticity'. He was also praised for his dedication in wearing facial prostheses around his mouth and jaw and rubber ties to change the shape of his eyes so that he would look the part – a sort of disability black-face that puts the emphasis squarely on the actor's 'virtuoso' performance and provides the viewer with a titillating but ultimately reassuring disability spectacle whose visual pleasure stems from the enactment of disability.

Le chiavi di casa also casts a major Italian star and received numerous awards, but in this case Rossi Stuart plays the able-bodied father and Andrea Rossi plays his disabled son. Here Rossi Stuart's self-admitted ignorance about cerebral palsy was an advantage to him in playing a character who is struggling to learn about his son's condition and treatment, while Rossi's ebullience and intimate acquaintance with many aspects of the world the film explores made him well suited to playing a son who must teach his father how to care for him in the most practical and concrete ways (see Figure 2). The film largely avoids pathos and sentimentality, helped by the use of humour and Amelio's practice of encouraging improvisation from his actors. It repeatedly emphasises Paolo's agency and independent spirit, while also showing the limitations and constraints with which he has to deal. As in so many recent Italian films, and certainly in all the films discussed here, parental and especially paternal absence, weakness and inadequacy are central concerns. In the context of an Italian cinematic tradition that privileges father–son relationships, the predominantly male gendering of parental failure is particularly interesting and perhaps reflects a widespread perception that the 'fathers' of contemporary Italian society have failed the next generation. Whether that is the case or not, these films certainly express an anxiety around the institution of the family in a historical moment in which responsibility for what are in fact wider socio-political and economic issues of oppression, discrimination and exclusion are increasingly thrust back onto the individual and his or her family.

Both *Ti voglio bene Eugenio* and *Le chiavi di casa* fit the genre of the family drama, and as such they take their place in a long line of Italian films that focus on issues of imperfect

Figure 2. Son comforts father in *Le chiavi di casa*.

https://doi.org/10.1080/13532944.2014.910505 Published online by Cambridge University Press

parenting, intergenerational conflict and challenges to traditional notions of the family. The two films' focus on issues of disability adds another facet to this picture, but what of films that include disabled characters yet where disability is not a primary focus? I want to focus now on another genre, that of the *giallo* or detective film, and on a particular example of it that employs some of the more common disability stereotypes, while also expressing a more complex web of anxieties about and through disability. Taking Snyder and Mitchell's appropriation of Linda Williams's concept of 'body genres' (2006, 159) and Darke's notion of the 'normality genre' as my starting point, I will argue that the film I examine both reveals and to some extent challenges 'the degree to which disabled bodies are made to demarcate the culturally policed borders of respectability' and, indeed, 'normality' (Snyder and Mitchell 2006, 163).

La ragazza del lago

Andrew Jakubowicz and Helen Meekosha have argued that 'the detective story is the quintessential disability case study' with the brilliant detective hunting down the deviant villain who must be removed from society for the safety of all (2004). Images of impairment, illness and inability permeate director Andrea Molaioli's debut feature film, *La ragazza del lago* (*The Girl by the Lake*, 2007), in which deviance from a presumed norm appears to *be* the norm. Based on Norwegian crime writer Karin Fossum's detective novel *Se deg ikke tilbake!* (1999), published in Italian as *Lo sguardo di uno sconosciuto* and in English as *Don't Look Back* in 2002, the film was transposed into rural Friuli by Sandro Petraglia (who was also one of the three screenwriters for *Le chiavi di casa*, and one of the co-directors of *Matti da slegare*). It won 10 David di Donatello awards in 2008, including Best Film, Best Director, Best New Director, Best Screenplay, Best Cinematography (Ramiro Civita) and Best Actor (Toni Servillo) and achieved a moderate success at the box office. Inspector Giovanni Sanzio (Servillo) is called from Udine to a small village in response to the apparent disappearance of a young girl, Marta, but soon finds himself investigating the murder of lovely young athlete Anna Nadal, whose drowned body is found unmarked by signs of struggle and arranged beside a nearby lake. The father of a teenage daughter himself, Sanzio's investigations lead him to a series of absent, unsuccessful or sinister parents and their resigned, hapless or victimised children.

Disability plays a significant role in many of these relationships, since almost all the characters are shown to have or be affected by a form of physical, cognitive or emotional impairment or some incurable condition. These are introduced very early in the film, although rarely given a specific diagnosis. Viewers quickly meet Mario (Franco Ravera), who has an unspecified form of cognitive impairment and is known to the other villagers as 'il matto' ('the madman'), and his curmudgeonly father (Omero Antonutti), who uses a wheelchair (neither actor is disabled). We also discover that Sanzio's wife (Anna Bonaiuto) has a degenerative cognitive disorder and lives in an institution rather than the family home with Sanzio and his daughter Francesca. As the film goes on, Sanzio finds out that Anna Nadal had a brain tumour and would have died within the year, and that she was the devoted babysitter of a little boy, Angelo, who died by choking and seems to have suffered from a developmental disorder such as ADHD (although this is left to the viewer's interpretation based on the descriptions of him provided by his mother Chiara). Sanzio himself has a minor but telling disorder: an atopic dermatitis, which means, as he tells his assistant Siboldi, 'che nessuno saprebbe come si cura' ('that nobody knows how to cure it'). As Chiara tells Sanzio, speaking of the beautiful rugs in her shop, 'Sembrano perfetti, vero? E invece in ognuno c'è un piccolo difetto, un nodo fatto male' ('They look perfect, don't they? In fact in each one

https://doi.org/10.1080/13532944.2014.910505 Published online by Cambridge University Press

there's a small defect, a badly tied knot'). Through the work of the investigator, the film seeks out the 'nodi fatti male' of all its characters.

La ragazza del lago perpetuates but also plays with disability stereotypes, both to create genre-appropriate red herrings and to touch upon a series of controversial issues in Italian society. These include disabled sexuality and reproductive rights, questions of institutionalisation and independence and the role of family in managing impairment, euthanasia, and the changed structure of the contemporary family. For example, the film exploits the conventions of the crime-film genre as well as the pernicious stereotyping of the 'threatening' sexuality of intellectually disabled people when it shows Mario picking up young Marta on her way home from her aunt's house and taking her to see his pet rabbits, including Maciste (whom Mario tells her is sick but still his favourite). Reinforced by the slightly otherworldly and sinister music, a sense of menace and potential sexual violence pervades the scenes of the young girl alone with the much larger, stronger man, especially when he is shown peering at her when she asks to use the lavatory in the shed where he keeps his rabbits. The two of them are also observed from within the house by the silent figure of Mario's father, who glides over to an internal window with his wheelchair. The film sets up multiple gazes and multiple possible perpetrators and victims (Figure 3), only to disappoint these expectations when both the victim and criminal turn out to be other people.

The scene in which Sanzio comes to interview Mario is particularly interesting in its treatment of disability. As it opens on the dining room of Mario and his father's isolated house, its walls covered with stuffed game birds and a prominently displayed set of crutches, only Mario, Sanzio and the local police inspector, Lorenzo Siboldi (Fausto Maria Sciarappa) are visible. The camera tracks in towards the dining table where Mario and Siboldi sit, with Sanzio standing between them, and angles down as he seats himself at the table. As he does so, while asking Mario whether he is afraid to talk because of his father, the camera continues to move to the right and track in, hiding Siboldi and revealing Mario's father and his dog seated behind Mario. The father is tautologically marked as disabled by his wheelchair and the crutches on the wall behind him (Figure 4), which bisect the space between Mario's physical bulk and his father's perspectivally and symbolically reduced stature. On the other side of the frame, and opposed to the other two characters, Sanzio represents the able-bodied, neurotypical 'norm' from which they both 'deviate'.

The relative patience with which Sanzio treats Mario – whom Siboldi has earlier described as a 'matto buono' ('good mad guy')– stands in stark contrast to his treatment of Mario's father. When the latter not unreasonably accuses Sanzio of barging into his home, and asks him, using the informal style of address, 'cosa sei tu, un commissario?' ('What are you? A police

Figure 3. Disability framed.

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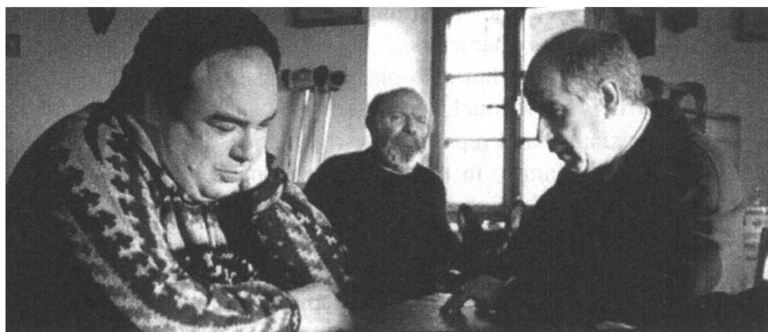

Figure 4. Disability obscured, revealed and disavowed.

commissioner?'). Sanzio replies testily 'sono uno che vuole che gli si dia del lei' ('I'm someone who wants to be addressed in the polite form') and tells him that if he doesn't keep his dog from growling, he will shoot it in the head, and that he must wait outside the room. Mario's father gruffly refuses Siboldi's offer to help him, saying that he needs nothing, and wheels himself out. While neither the viewer nor the policeman has as yet had a chance to judge Mario's father's character and motivations, it seems that the supposedly objective investigator has already assigned him the role of the stereotypical disabled villain, embittered and emasculated by his physical disability and resentful of the able-bodied. Later Sanzio returns to talk to Mario's father alone, standing over him aggressively in a way that emphasises the policeman's able-bodiedness and Mario's father's disability (Figure 5), something that is further highlighted when Sanzio asks the older man about what he is and is not capable of and has him squeeze his arm as hard as he can to see if he would be capable of drowning a young woman. As Figure 5 shows, the visual effect of Sanzio standing above and invasively close to Mario's father is a powerful statement of the detective's domineering use of his able-bodiedness. To a viewer familiar with wheelchair users, it might also register as a moment of either inauthenticity, given that the actor playing Mario's father is able-bodied, or denial of disabled agency, in that a wheelchair user capable of moving himself away, as Mario's father is, would be unlikely to allow himself to be forced to crane his neck upwards to look at his interlocutor. On the other hand, the older man's refusal to back away might also be read as a sign of his determination to hold his own against Sanzio, who uses similar bullying techniques against Anna's able-bodied and equally innocent boyfriend, and whom Mario's father directly accuses of taking advantage of the fact that he is a wheelchair user.

Figure 5. Standover tactics.

https://doi.org/10.1080/13532944.2014.910505 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Sanzio suggests that Mario's father is resentful of Anna's physical perfection and that he might have killed her to stop her from running past his house, or to stop Mario from looking at her. Indeed, Mario has earlier told the investigator that his father hates Anna because 'Anna ha le gambe lunghe e magre. Invece lui . . . .' ('Anna has long, thin legs, while he . . . '). But the stereotype of the bitter, crippled avenger also turns out to lead away from the truth, and Sanzio, who is repeatedly described as 'scorbutico' ('cantankerous') will in fact turn out to have more in common with Mario's father than at first appears. Sanzio accuses the father of hating his son, to which he replies that while he hated him when he was younger, now they keep each other company: 'il paralitic e il mat' ('the cripple and the mad guy'). He tells Sanzio: 'Come faccio a spiegarglielo a lei? Magari lei ha dei figli belli, sani, intelligenti. Come faccio? Pensi male di te. Pensi che sia colpa tua. Tutto finisce, tutto diventa nero. Solo chi ci passa lo può capire. Solo chi ci passa' ('How can I explain it to you? Perhaps you have attractive, healthy, intelligent children. How can I explain? You think badly of yourself. You think it's your fault. Everything stops, it all turns dark. Only people who go through it themselves can understand'). Sanzio uses very similar language when he talks about the difficulty of telling his daughter that his wife's condition is worsening and will never get better: 'come faccio a spiegare una cosa simile a Francesca?' ('How can I explain something like that to Francesca?').

The character who seems to stand at the opposite extreme from Mario and his father is Anna, whose beautiful body is found by the lake early in the film. Yet she is distorted in death, her head twisted drastically to one side and her right arm caught under her in such a way that from some angles it appears to have been amputated – a visual rather than literal mutilation that hints at the medical secret hidden by her apparent bodily perfection. According to the pathologist who performs her autopsy, she had a brain tumour that would have killed her and that might explain why she did not struggle against the person who drowned her. The progressive appearance of police, medical personnel, technicians and photographers around the beautiful, peaceful crime scene (filmed as ghostly apparitions that slowly solidify) marks the shift from the fable-like version of events told by Mario and Marta – of a serpent whose spell sent Anna to sleep – to a full-scale murder investigation. It also marks the transition of Anna's body to a new, medicalised and institutionalised visibility that in some ways recalls the on-screen disabled visibility theorised by Snyder and Mitchell, that of disabled bodies that become 'spectacles of bodily difference' and 'legitimate' objects of scrutiny (2006, 157), treated as though they were in fact dead. They point out that film seduces its spectators with views of 'the extraordinary body displayed for moments of uninterrupted visual access – a practice shared by clinical assessment rituals associated with the medical gaze' (2006, 158). Sanzio's contemplation of Anna's corpse emphasises precisely this kind of uninterrupted visual access – the privilege of the detective as well as the doctor. Linked by equally strong bonds of filmic and narrative convention and the composition of the shot itself, the viewer's gaze aligns with that of the investigator. Sanzio progressively uncovers the scrutinised body, caught between two cameras and a triangle of (able-bodied male) gazes (Figures 6 and 7). The body is

Figure 6 and 7. Anna as object of scrutiny and 'spectacle of bodily difference'.

https://doi.org/10.1080/13532944.2014.910505 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Figure 8 and 9. Under the detective's eye and in his hands.

laid bare, then literally and metaphorically dissected and its pieces assigned to the detective's exclusive control (Figures 8 and 9), as the scene in which Anna's father begs Sanzio to be able to take her body from the police morgue makes clear. The film implicates the viewer in the grisly pleasures of this process of uncovering, which is of course the central metaphor of detective film and fiction. At the same time, it also lays bare the scopic regime upon which the process depends. A reading of the film from a disability studies perspective is particularly helpful in mapping these visual structures and seeking to understand the assumptions about 'normality' and 'deviance' that lie behind them.

After a series of red herrings, Sanzio comes to realise that Angelo's death is central to Anna's. Angelo's mother, Chiara Canali, describes her son as not 'normal', although no more specific diagnosis is provided. She tells Sanzio:

> Angelo era malato. Era chiuso in un mondo suo, pieno di paure con cui non faceva altro che lottare. L'unico fatto su cui i dottori erano d'accordo era che con l'età non sarebbe migliorato. Non stava mai fermo, non dormiva mai. Piangeva, piangeva sempre, da quando era nato. (Angelo was ill. He was closed in a world of his own, full of fears that he just struggled against. The only fact the doctors agreed on was that he wouldn't get better as he got older. He never kept still, he never slept. He cried, he always cried, since he was born).

Anna was the only one who could calm him, and Chiara says that this made her jealous: 'Come le madri che sanno di non essere all'altezza dei problemi dei figli e se la prendono con chi è più bravo di loro' ('Like mothers who know they aren't able to deal with their children's problems and get angry with anyone who does better than they can'). Angelo appears in the film only through his mother's words, as a name on a gravestone and in the photograph of Anna holding him (see Figure 9), but he is the key to the mystery. It ultimately becomes clear that it was his father, Corrado Canali – perhaps the most 'normal' character of all – who murdered Anna because she witnessed him allow Angelo to choke to death.

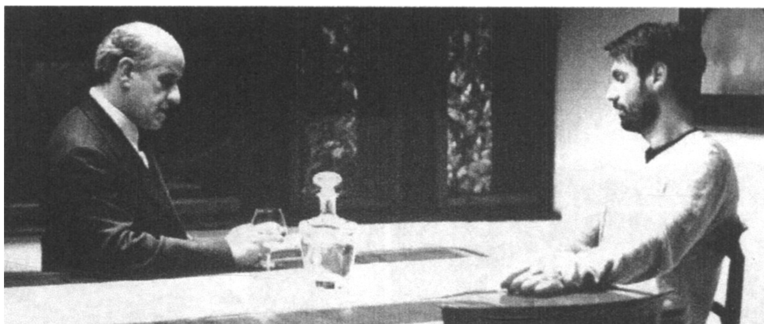

Figure 10. A picture of normality.

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The final scene in which Sanzio confronts Corrado is a picture of 'normality', as Figure 10 shows. Two white, middle-class, professional men sit down together over a glass of liqueur, their postures emulating one another in a kind of symmetry that seems to underline the many things they have in common. Sanzio has spoken to Corrado sympathetically about how most murderers ultimately hope to be caught, since 'ad un certo punto non ce la fanno più, a tenersi tutto dentro, e hanno bisogno di parlare, no?' ('they get to a point where they can't keep it all inside them and they need to talk, don't they?'). Corrado has trotted out his carefully rehearsed confession, claiming that he and Anna were having an affair and that she had become obsessive about it, and that is why he killed her. Sanzio tells Corrado that in other circumstances he would be offended by such a huge lie, and then tells him (and, most importantly, the viewer) that it was Anna who called the ambulance the day that Angelo died, that she saw him choking through the window, that she saw Corrado deliberately standing by, and that she would not let him forget it, so he killed her. Corrado replies that he has just given him a murder confession. 'Ho ucciso io Anna. Adesso basta' ('I killed Anna. Now let's stop') and Sanzio agrees 'Va bene, basta' ('OK, let's stop'). In a gesture that is typical of many Italian *gialli*, the full truth emerges but will go no further.

The scene raises disturbing issues about the value of the life of a child who is not considered 'normal' and asks the viewer to consider whether or not Sanzio is right to let Corrado get away with only confessing to murder. It is immediately followed by a scene in which the public prosecutor, the pregnant Dottoressa Giani, asks Sanzio to tell her husband, who does not want to attend the birth of their child, that he regrets not being there for his own daughter's birth. Parental, and above all fatherly failings, from the catastrophic to the relatively minor, are a constant theme of the film and the background onto which its images of disability are projected. For Mario's father and for Angelo's parents their child's disability is an unmitigated disaster that destroys their relationship with the child and with their spouse (Anna's diary claims that Mario's mother left because 'non reggeva il figlio matto' ['she couldn't cope with her mad son']). The film is not interested in the question of why this should be the case, and the responsibility for disability is left squarely in the realm of the family – a personal misfortune that is dealt with according to the strengths and weaknesses of individuals.

While this fails to account for the effects of a disabling and ableist society, in highlighting the difficulties faced by families and the likelihood of all lives being touched by disability eventually, *La ragazza del lago* raises very real social issues and addresses them in a more complex way than one might expect from a film that is not 'about' disability. Yet troubling aspects of disability representation remain. In the film's final scene, Sanzio takes his daughter Francesca to see her mother at the institution where she now lives. He has told Francesca the

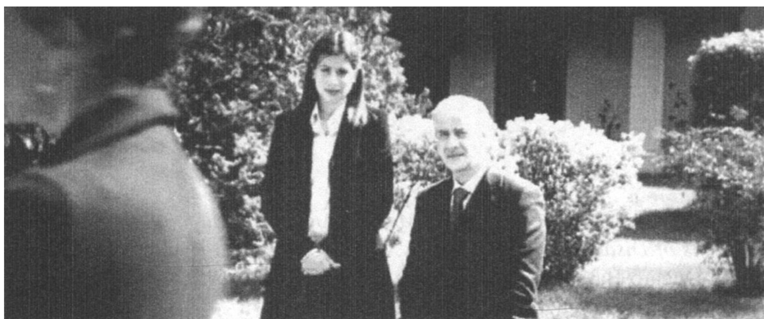

Figure 11. Disability disappears and the family is redefined.

https://doi.org/10.1080/13532944.2014.910505 Published online by Cambridge University Press

truth about her mother, who is shown walking happily arm-in-arm with a fellow patient with whom she has fallen in love. She now recognises neither Francesca nor Sanzio, but pauses and smiles at Francesca before walking on and out of the shot (Figure 11). While the scene suggests a happy resolution to the theme of failed fatherhood, at least for Sanzio, and an acceptance of a new family model, it also intimates that disability has been tidied away into the realm of institutional invisibility – a reminder of the 'eugenic logic' that seeks to eliminate disability by removing disabled people from the world.

Nevertheless, in its ambiguities and in its intense scrutiny of both able-bodied and disabled characters, the film questions assumptions about normality and deviance and shows an interest in locating disability as part of the spectrum of human experience, not as something that is other to it. Given the sad history of representations of disability, this is already a notable move in the right direction. Similarly, even as it reflects anxieties about single parenthood and the disintegration of the traditional Italian family, the film resists the idea of a single definition of what a 'normal' family should be. Looking at this and other films through the lens of disability studies suggests some of the ways in which such a reading enriches our understanding of contemporary Italian cinema and of the problem of the 'normality genre' and the assumptions that inform it – assumptions that can have profoundly negative effects for people with and without disabilities.

Notes

1. On the changing nature of the Italian family, see for example Bernini (2008) and Saraceno (2004). to On the relation of debates about the Italian family, masculinity and fatherhood to contemporary Italian cinema, see Sutton. On contemporary Italian anxieties around parental violence or failure to protect children from violence, see Nerenberg (2012), particularly chapters 6-8.
2. For the original formulation of the social and medical models of disability, see Oliver 1990.
3. Some of the most revered films of Neorealism provide examples of disability representation, such as Romoletto in *Roma città aperta* (1945).
4. One of the most revealing things about *Ti voglio bene Eugenio* is the language used by critics in newspaper reviews of the film. They describe Eugenio as 'afflicted' (Silvio Danese in *Il Giorno*, 26 January 2002) and 'sick' (Lietta Tornabuoni in *La Stampa*, 3 February 2002) with Down's Syndrome, and the film as one that honours the 'personal tragedy' (Adriano De Carlo in *Il Giornale*, 6 February 2002) of the director, whose son Eugenio has Down's Syndrome.

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https://doi.org/10.1080/13532944.2014.910505 Published online by Cambridge University Press