

Mothers of invention: Maternity, disability and family in Italian film

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ABSTRACT

Until quite recently, as Laura Benedetti (2007) has noted, mothers were rarely considered in Italian fiction or film as subjects in their own right. Religious, societal and family conventions have promulgated an image of the perfect mother as self-abnegating and self-effacing, and consequently of little creative interest. Mothers with disabilities and mothers of children with disabilities have tended to occupy an even more liminal position within this cultural context, as they are doubly subject to “oppressive mothering ideologies and disabling environments” (Ryan & Runswick-Cole 2008: 199). Such ideologies and environments enforce norms of motherhood and frame it according to expectations of extreme self-sacrifice, attaching blame to mothers who are seen as failing to live up to those expectations. Within this normative cultural framework any perceived “imperfections” of the child are blamed upon “imperfect” mothering. This article explores these cultural dynamics in the context of cinematic representations of maternity and disability, an area that has received very little critical attention. Drawing on theoretical work in disability, gender and film studies, it assesses the ways in which mothers are portrayed – and invented – in these films in relation to guilt, blame, anxiety and activism. It argues that analysing Italian cinema from this perspective provides insights both into changing attitudes towards disability and maternity in Italy and into wider anxieties about the institution of motherhood in Italian society.

Mothers are everywhere in Italian cinema. From Roberto Rossellini’s Pina in *Roma città aperta* (1945) to the eponymous mother in Nanni Moretti’s *Mia madre* (2015), they are an almost inescapable and always heavily-loaded presence. Yet until relatively recently, mothers were rarely considered in Italian fiction or film as subjects in their own right.¹ Instead, they tend to serve as a focal point for family dynamics, or as an emotional counterpoint to or psychological explanation of a film’s main characters. For most of the history of Italian cinema, on-screen mothers have been defined exclusively

in terms of moral standards of maternal worth. As Marga Cottino-Jones writes, they either accept “the cultural codes set up as correct patterns of motherly behaviour” and therefore “fit within the model of ‘good’ motherhood” or deviate from them and “are labelled as ‘bad’ or ‘phallic’ mothers” (2010: 2). While she notes that Italian cinema provides more examples of “good” mothers than “bad” ones, “bad” mothers are shown as to blame for the troubles or flaws of their children and the dysfunction or distress of their families. “Good” mothers, by contrast, are defined as “carers” in every sense of the word, bearing the prime responsibility within the family for looking after the physical and emotional needs of their children while sinking supportively into the background of their lives.

There are a number of similarities between how fictional mothers and characters with disabilities have been “invented” in literature and film. While characters with disabilities have been used for metaphorical and symbolic purposes in fiction for millennia and in film almost since the invention of the medium, they too are rarely portrayed as protagonists in their own right. Disability studies scholars and disability rights activists have long lamented the enduring power and pernicious effects of stereotypes of people with disabilities, such as the saintly, asexual sufferer or the diabolical, sexually deviant or superhumanly powerful freak.² As Rosemarie Garland-Thomson explains, such reductive representations of disability “not only restrict the lives and govern the bodies of people we think of as disabled, but [...] limit the imaginations of those who think of themselves as non-disabled” (2005: 1567).³ Likewise, Giuseppe Vadalà notes in the Italian context that “[r]ispetto alla disabilità, le nostre azioni, le nostre opinioni, la nostra conoscenza, i nostri atteggiamenti e comportamenti sono determinati dalle rappresentazioni sociali e dalle immagini che le sottendono” (2013: 125). These kinds of representations are therefore not just offensive or distasteful, but have concrete effects in the world.

This article examines the representation of mothers and families of children with disabilities in a number of Italian films made within the past decade.⁴ It focuses in particular on *Pulce non c'è* (2012), directed by Giuseppe Bonito and based on Gaia Rayneri's autobiographical novel, with a screenplay by Rayneri and Monica Zapelli. It also touches on other recent films including the documentaries *Genitori* (Alberto Fasulo, 2015) and *Una destinazione imprevista* (Mirko Locatelli, 2010) and the feature films *Per amor vostro* (Giuseppe M. Gaudino, 2015) and *Indivisibili* (Edoardo De Angelis, 2016). It explores how these films underscore both the societal inventions of motherhood that lay the “blame” for a child's impairment on “bad” mothering, as well as the ways mothers of children with disabilities are often forced to invent themselves as subjects, asserting their own personhood and agency in order to valorise those of their children. This takes place sometimes exclusively within the domestic sphere and family relationships, sometimes through more public advocacy and activism. These films highlight and contest cultural tropes of maternity and disability and their impact on dynamics of gender, family and society.

As scholars and activists have amply demonstrated over the past twenty years and more, disability cannot be reduced to bodily impairment, but must be understood as “a relationship between people with impairment and a disabling society”, as Tom Shakespeare succinctly puts it (1994: 287). More recently, feminist disability studies scholars such as Garland-Thomson have defined disability “as a vector of socially constructed identity and a form of embodiment that interacts with both the material and the social environments” (2005: 1559). The 2006 United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities does not specifically define the term, but recognises that it is:

an evolving concept and that disability results from the interaction between persons with [physical, mental, intellectual or sensory] impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinders their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.⁵

This account of disability reflects the movement away from the medical model of disability to one which recognises the barriers to inclusion that lie beyond the individual, and which emphasises the rights of people with disabilities rather than their needs, recognising their personhood rather than treating them as pitiable objects of charity or paternalistic benevolence.

The films discussed here focus their attention on the experiences of characters with disabilities and their families. While it is individuals with impairment who bear the full brunt of the “attitudinal and environmental barriers” that prevent their full and equal participation in society, these films show that these barriers also have direct consequences for those who care for people with disabilities, which are further inflected by considerations of gender. Outside Italy there is an established body of scholarly work that examines representations of disability in cinema and seeks to understand the formation and impact of such representations, but as yet there is little research in relation to Italian cinema. This article therefore argues that disability studies – and particularly feminist disability studies – offers a useful means of investigating and contesting assumptions about how normality and difference are understood and defined in Italian film and how these affect the representation of both characters with disabilities and gendered family dynamics in Italy.

Such assumptions are long-standing and rooted in and reinforced by the long-established ideologies of an ableist, patriarchal society in which the ideal body is implicitly assumed to be white, male and without physical, mental, intellectual or sensorial impairments. In such a society, bodies that cannot conform to this ideal are interpreted and treated as imperfect and represented as such in cultural forms. Monica Malfatti outlines how nineteenth- and twentieth-century Italian literature provided an image of people with disabilities as “*personaggi handicappati, tipi e non persone.*” Disability in fiction functioned as a means “*per rispondere al bisogno dell’uomo [sic] di confermarsi nella sua identità normale e di differenziarsi dal diverso ponendo una distanza sociale*” (2013: 40). Such narratives present disability as a matter of individual “suffering” to be cured or endured rather than, as Tom Shakespeare puts it, “a relation between people with impairment and a disabling society” (1994: 287). In the words of Lennard Davis, “the alterity represented by disability is shocking to the liberal, ableist sensibility, and so narratives involving disability always yearn for the cure, the neutralizing of the disability” (2002: 99). Yet, as he goes on to argue,

[n]ovels have to tell this story over and over again, as do films and television, since the patient never stays cured and the disabled, cured individually, refuse to stop reappearing as a group. Indeed, modern subjectivity is a wounded identity that cannot cure itself without recourse to cure narratives, which means that it cannot cure itself at all, since the disability of modern subjectivity is inherent in the environment, not in the subject (99).

The key function of disabled characters on film has therefore been to police the boundaries of the so-called “normal” by attempting to restrict the incurable “wound” of alterity to figures of explicit excess or lack, physically, mentally and morally.

Numerous scholars have also analysed the equally long cultural tradition of either demonising or mythologising mothers and of expectations of maternal self-sacrifice and suffering, which has particular impacts on mothers of children with disabilities.⁶ As Claudia Malacrida explains:

As a result of the unnatural expectations that are attached to ideal motherhood, it is certain that no woman, however motivated, can possibly achieve the ideal. On the other hand, however, because the stakes are so high, ideal motherhood is also attached to a persistent culture of mother-blame. In this culture, women’s presumed natural ability and overwhelming responsibility to mother selflessly and without limits means that to fail (as is inevitable) is seen as a personal, unnatural and moral failing (2009: 100).

In this context of mother-blame, the position of mothers of children with disabilities is even more difficult, given societal perceptions that the child’s impairment is the exclusive responsibility or even “fault” of the mother, and therefore proof of maternal failure.⁷

This is reflected in two recent Italian films, *Per amor vostro* (2015) and *Indivisibili* (2016), in which aggressive, deadbeat fathers accuse browbeaten and subjugated mothers of being to blame for their children’s disabilities. While the son’s hearing impairment in the first of these films is not the central storyline, *Indivisibili* centres on conjoined twins, Viola and Dasy (played by identical twins Angela and Marianna Fontana and with names that are a clear reference to the British conjoined twins Violet and Daisy Hilton [1908-1969], famous for their sideshow, vaudeville and film appearances), whose singing career supports their family and their father’s gambling habit. Nevertheless, in the first case, Anna (Valeria Golino) is accused by her unscrupulous and abusive husband, the failed singer and petty criminal Gigi (Massimiliano Gallo), of causing the deafness of their son Arturo (Edoardo Gero) by having been on the pill before she became pregnant. In the second, Dasy and Viola’s father Peppe (Massimiliano Rossi), who has hidden from them the possibility that they could be medically separated, accuses their mother Titti (Antonia Truppo) of causing the twins to be born joined at the hip and thigh by not giving up alcohol and marijuana during her pregnancy. In both cases, these accusations serve as a turning point in the film, after which both Anna and Titti, in quite different ways, manage to stand up to their hectoring and abusive husbands and to assert, at least to some extent, their own and their children’s rights to autonomy.

Sara Ryan and Katherine Runswick-Cole contend that most academic studies of mothers of children with disabilities portray them “as delusional, grief stricken and/or self-interested”, while the disability rights movement has tended to frame them as at best allies and at worst oppressors of their disabled children (2008: 200). Yet, as mothers of children with disability themselves, they argue that “mothers of disabled children are more than allies to their disabled children, as they experience directly and by proxy many of the discriminatory practices and attitudes their disabled children face” (201). Feminist disability studies provides a framework for recognising and contesting the marginalisation of people with disabilities and their mothers and for understanding how fictional representations of disability “both register and materialize social patterns of bias and exclusion based on ability norms that operate similarly to

gender and racial systems”, as Garland-Thomson puts it. In her view, a key aim of feminist disability studies is therefore

to show that the always overdetermined metaphoric uses of disability efface and distort the lived experience of people with disabilities, evacuating the political significances of our lives and mitigating the influence of disability culture (2005: 1565).

This approach offers a way to analyse “how people with a wide range of physical, mental, and emotional differences are collectively imagined as defective and excluded from an equal place in the social order” (1558). This also means the exclusion or suppression of voices and experiences of difference in cultural forms such as literature and film.

In Italian cinema, as in many national cinemas, children with disabilities and their supposedly “flawed” or “failed” mothers have generally tended to serve a purely symbolic narrative function, representing, for example, the unravelling of the nuclear family, the decline of society, or intergenerational betrayal.⁸ The lived experiences of disabled people and their families have largely been ignored, and with them the possibility of exploring a wider range of subjectivities. However, documentary and independent films have played an important part in expanding the range of representations of disability on screen in Italy, and a number of recent films (including more mainstream productions) attempt to investigate different images of both disability and motherhood.⁹ While there is much to be said about the situation of mothers with disabilities,¹⁰ this article focuses on films in which the relationship of children with disabilities to their non-disabled mothers and families is a key element. As I will argue, films like *Pulce non c'è* resist the stereotypical, oppressive and condescending images of disability that contribute both to the “othering” of people with disabilities, and to what anthropologists Rayna Rapp and Faye Ginsburg call the “m/othering” of mothers of children with disabilities (2007: 108).¹¹ As they note, “nonnormative motherhood takes on specific ideologies associated with ‘damaged goods’ in a market-oriented, consumer culture that devalues mothering disabled children, multiracial children, adopted children, and much more” (108). These children’s mothers find themselves placed in a position of otherness by a consumer society that speaks of motherhood in saccharine tones but profoundly undervalues the maternal care of children who are seen as different from the norm: either blamed for their children’s “imperfections” or celebrated as “special parents of special kids”, whose exceptionality is read as making any kind of structural change or assistance redundant (see Landsman 1999).

The films I address here provide insights into prevalent models of maternity in Italy and how mothers of children with disabilities relate to those models. They also reveal and contest the gendered assumptions about caregiving roles that see maternity and caregiving as synonymous. This kind of analysis also allows for a comparison with accounts of the experiences of people with disabilities and their families, who often comment on the absence of authentic representations of lives like theirs on screen. This absence was the motivation for the documentary *Genitori*, directed by Alberto Fasulo and released in 2015. The film was the result of five years of filming of a group of thirteen family members (mostly mothers) of people with disabilities living in the small northern Italian town of San Vito al Tagliamento who meet to provide one another with support and share information. In an interview, the director (himself a native of San Vito al Tagliamento) explained that the film was commissioned by the group, who call themselves “*Vivere insieme*”, because its members could not recognise themselves in

the films about disability they were seeing (Fasulo 2015).

Without voiceovers or any kind of directorial pontificating, the film's power lies in the way it focuses on the faces and voices of these parents to communicate their experiences of their children's disability. At the same time, Fasulo's careful direction and editing of the film around a set of often difficult themes (such as the parents dealing with their children's sexuality, figuring out how to foster their children's autonomy while keeping them safe, and planning for their children's support after their deaths) allow the viewer to slowly get to know the different characters. One of the most striking elements of the film is the way in which it shows mothers who themselves have faced significant obstacles to their own full participation in a patriarchal society finding their voices through advocacy for their children. While it avoids any kind of triumphalist rhetoric or Hollywoodian happy ending, the film ends on a hopeful note with the women of the group publicly challenging the town's mayor to do more to support opportunities for people with disabilities.

Fasulo's *Genitori* emerges from and reflects upon a context of real experiences of disability. In this it recalls Mirko Locatelli's 2010 documentary, *Una destinazione imprevista*, which recounts the experiences of parents coming to terms with the medical diagnoses of their children's disabilities, and is similar in its refusal of pitying or celebratory rhetoric and its determination to let the parents recount their stories in their own terms. Films such as these "operate as opportunities to overturn debasing forms of disability-based image consumption" (Snyder & Mitchell 2008: 23). These parents' dignified, sometimes sad, sometimes comical discussions of what it is like to raise a child with an impairment in a disabling society send a quiet but powerful political message about the many ways in which experiences of disability are marginalised in society, as well as about the judgements faced by parents and especially mothers of people with disabilities.¹²

Like other independent films that address the issue of disability and motherhood, such as Filippo Ticozzi's short film *Lilli* (2008), these documentaries are rooted in an intimate, familial experience of disability. While by no means a documentary, Bonito's *Pulce non c'è* is similarly based on an attempt to represent lived experiences of disability. The film, which won the special jury prize at the Rome International Film Festival in 2013, is based on Gaia Rayneri's autobiographical novel of the same title and tells the story of nine-year-old Margherita Camurati (Ludovica Falda), affectionately known as Pulce (Flea) and her family: her older sister Giovanna (Francesca di Benedetto), her father Gualtiero (Pippo Delbono), and her mother Anita (Marina Massironi). The film is told mainly from the perspective of Giovanna, and examines a number of assumptions about who is responsible for caring for and representing the interests of people with disabilities. As a result of congenital brain damage, Pulce does not speak and at the beginning of the film, Anita is an enthusiastic advocate for the use of facilitated communication (assisted writing), which she believes is helping Pulce to communicate more with her family and teachers.¹³ When one of the teachers finds what she thinks is evidence of sexual abuse in what Pulce writes, her father Gualtiero is accused of the abuse and Pulce is taken away from her family and placed in the care of social services. Anita then begins a fierce legal battle to free her daughter, clear her husband's name and reunite the family.

In *Pulce non c'è*, Anita's activism on behalf of her daughter leads to her own realisation as a political subject. As Tobin Siebers writes, "political membership relies on the ideology of ability" in a society in which

if a person does not display rational thinking, healthiness, or technical skills, that person risks being seen as less than human and losing the rights bestowed by membership in the human community (2008: 179-180).

Pulce non c'è therefore reflects a social reality in which it is often mothers who may themselves have been excluded from full political and economic participation in their society by virtue of societal expectations about gender and motherhood who take action to demand these rights on behalf of their disabled children.

The film also explores how the traditionally female and above all maternal role of caregiver is in fact very often shared among many members of a family. This is certainly the case for Pulce's parents, sister and grandparents, who all contribute to ensuring that she is happy, cared for and loved. Nevertheless, despite this portrayal of collective care, the film pays particular attention to the role of the mother. It opens with a close-up on Anita's face while she is in the last stages of giving birth to Pulce. The scene emphasises Anita's status as a mother, and also visually links motherhood to the effort required not only to bring children into the world but also to protect them afterwards, particularly when, like Pulce, they are vulnerable in ways that others are not.

At the same time, as mentioned above, much of the film is focalised through the viewpoint of Pulce's thirteen-year-old sister Giovanna. After the initial images of Anita in labour, the film follows her journey home from school, before the camera sweeps up to provide a bird's eye perspective on Pulce at the playground with her father, with a voiceover from Giovanna saying:

Se qualcuno chiede a mamma qual è il problema di Pulce, lei risponde tutto d'un fiato: encefalopatia epilettogena da sofferenza fetto-connatale con ritardo mentale grave e disturbo pervasivo dello sviluppo che rientra nelle patologie dello spettro autistico. Per conto mio, Pulce non è un problema: è mia sorella, mica un trattato di medicina neuro-come-si-chiama. La prima cosa speciale a proposito di Pulce è che lei non parla. Ma questo non significa che lei non abbia niente da dire.

The images of Pulce and her family which follow show how the responsibility for her care lies not only with her mother, but is rather part of the dynamics of the family as a whole. If the role of caregiver is most often perceived as a maternal one, then we might define the model of care suggested by *Pulce non c'è* as one of "diffuse maternity", in which all members of the family participate, as for example in the scene in which Gualtiero is shown helping Pulce to get back to sleep after a nightmare. It is only when the family's equilibrium is destroyed by the intervention of outside authorities that Anita finds herself with the exclusive responsibility for fighting against that authority to have her daughter back.

The film's representation of Anita's encounters with the various figures who represent the legal and health systems shows a clear awareness of the battles that people with disabilities and their families often face in trying to contest the almost automatic medicalisation of disability. For example, when Anita takes the suitcase she has packed for Pulce to Dr Castelli, the director of the children's home where Pulce has been sent, she places the emphasis on all the things Pulce is able to do, her likes and dislikes and her preferred ways of communicating. She tries to explain to the doctor how best to help her daughter while allowing her the maximum level of autonomy. At the end of

her explanation the doctor, who has remained aloof throughout, ignores what she has said and asks her a series of absurd and accusatory questions about all the things Pulce is not able to do. His approach – all too familiar to many parents of children with disabilities in their dealings with health and educational authorities – forces Anita to be the one who reminds him: “*Dottor Castelli, mia figlia è cerebrolesa*”. Castelli inflicts this painful return to the language of a medical model that accounts for disability in terms of “deficit” on Anita because of his refusal to engage with the narrative of care and individual, personal preferences and abilities. The film underlines the importance of the language used to speak about difference: the impersonal, monolithic language of the institution is contrasted with the personal, familial and intimate language of the mother; the language of deficit versus that of affection and support.

In an equally revealing scene, the viewer observes Anita and Giovanna watching Anita’s home movies of her daughters. After a series of images of Pulce walking down some steps with her sister’s help (something the assistant at the children’s home earlier claims Pulce is unable to do), the shot shifts to show first the back of Anita’s head as she watches the images on their living room TV, then Giovanna by her side. Meanwhile, Anita’s voice can be heard from the video as she directs her daughters’ on-screen movements. Anita occupies her maternal role as the active director, spectator and narrator of her own and her children’s story, but also as part of the rich and complex exchange of affectionate gazes between the two sisters on film and between the mother and daughter who watch them and glance at one another as they do so. In this reciprocal exchange of gazes, the film offers an alternative to conceptions of children with disabilities and their mothers as objects of a pitying or blaming gaze, instead underlining their active subjectivity.

Such alternatives offer what Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell call a “critique of normalcy as a false standard of human value” (2008: 28) and of gendered assumptions about responsibility and blame for a child’s impairment. Films that attempt this kind of critique show the possibility of finding strategies for representing disability and maternity in ways that neither demonise nor mythologise them but provide alternative visions of difference that are intimate and affectionate, rooted in the experience of difference and stripped of stereotypes of disability founded on pity, victimism, heroism, moralism, normalism, or symbolism. By concentrating on family dynamics of dependence and independence, solidarity and affection, they call attention to modalities of exclusion and inclusion and offer a different perspective on the experiences of people with disabilities, their mothers and families.

As the examples cited above show, attending carefully to textual and visual representations of disability provides an opportunity to contest “the hidden norm that lurks behind our understandings of disability, one that makes some bodies seem naturally deficient or excessive and others seem superior” (Garland-Thomson 2005: 1559). This deficiency or excess is most commonly represented as both abject and threatening, something to be repressed, hidden or “cured”. Likewise, representations of motherhood have most often focused on maternal deficiency or excess and, in the case of mothers of children with disabilities, have drawn a causal link between maternal “failure” and the child’s impairment. Just as feminist disability studies plays an important role in contesting “the dominant premises that cast disability as a bodily problem to be addressed by normalization procedures rather than as a socially constructed identity and a representational system similar to gender”, so too does it offer an opportunity to rethink representations of motherhood and disability (1559). Analysing representations of disability, motherhood and their points of intersection through this lens offers a way to look for alternative representations that avoid

narratives of suffering and cure, failure and success, and neither demonise nor mythologise people with disabilities and their mothers.

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¹ See for example Benedetti, who summarises the traditional literary portrayal of mothers as follows: "[t]oo weak socially to act as a positive role model, and at the same time too closely linked to her biological role, the mother proves incapable of posing a challenge to society" (2007: 5).

² See for example Barnes 1992 and 1997; Chivers & Markotić 2010; Darke 1998 and 2010; Mitchell 2001 and Mitchell & Snyder 2001; Snyder & Mitchell 2006 and 2008; Norden 1994 and 2001; and Smit & Enns 2001.

³ See also Paul Darke, who notes that "for the disabled, images of themselves are especially important as they 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. In fact, they are as socially constructed, illusionary and functional as any other images (be they of the oppressed or not)" (1998: 181).

⁴ An earlier version of parts of this article was published in Italian in a volume that appeared after the FasCINa *Studiosse di cinema e audiovisivi* annual conference in Sassari in 2015 (see Hill 2016). I am

grateful to the editors and organisers for their feedback and encouragement to develop these arguments further.

⁵ The purpose of the Convention is to “promote, protect and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all persons with disabilities, and to promote respect for their inherent dignity” <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities-2.html>.

⁶ See for example Hays 1998; Landsman 1999 and 2008 and, in the Italian and European contexts, Benedetti 2007; D’Amelia 1997 and 2005; and Albanese 2006.

⁷ On the issue of *mother-blame* in the context of disability, see for example Blum 2007.

⁸ On the use of disability as a symbol of anxieties about the family, see Hill 2014a.

⁹ On the representation of disability in Italian independent cinema, see Hill 2014b.

¹⁰ As Garland-Thomson notes, “[w]hereas nondisabled women must often struggle to escape the mandate of motherhood, disabled women must often battle to claim motherhood” (2005: 1572).

¹¹ On the “othering” of people with disabilities in film, see for example Church 2006.

¹² For another interesting and original example of a documentary that engages with the experience rather than the stereotypes of disability, see also Locatelli’s 2005 documentary, *Crisalidi* (Officina Film). On this documentary, see Hill 2014b.

¹³ For an interesting discussion of a recent controversy regarding the use of facilitated communication, see Engber 2015.