

“Narration, Expectation, Experience”:

Subproject 2: “Intellectual” Disability in Contemporary European Film

The research interest of the second sub-project of the DFG-funded project “Narration, Expectation, Experience” (2020-2023) is the representation of so-called “intellectual” disability in contemporary European feature films. Depending on the film and genre, the medium provides information about a society's ideas about “intellectual” disability and is a suitable means of making the topic (more) accessible to a broad public. The comprehensibility of the films corresponds to the categories into which the films were divided within the framework of the sub-project, namely comedies (“feel-good movies”), dramas, and films that do not fall into either category.

The most accessible films are so-called “feel-good movies”; easily digestible comedies, accompanied by cheerful music, which are often box office hits. The films are often intended for a mainstream audience. The plot follows a familiar pattern and deals with the topic of “intellectual” disability in a humorous and unproblematic way, such as in *Campeones* (Javier Fesser: Spain, 2018), *Ho Amici in Paradiso* (Fabrizio Cortese: Italy, 2016) and *Die Goldfische* (Alireza Golafshan: Germany, 2019). However, the fact that the potential of the films does not go far beyond the mere thematization of “intellectual” disability is evident from the lack of in-depth exploration of the topic. The social circles of the characters with disabilities and the characters without disabilities are often portrayed as two different spheres and maintained as such, as can be seen in the congruent final scenes of the films *Campeones* and *Ho Amici in Paradiso*, for example. Such films allow a first encounter with the subject of disability but are rather unsuitable for a deeper new experience with “intellectual” disability. Their strength lies in the first encounter of people without disabilities and without a concrete reference to disability with the subject, analogous to the experience of the protagonists without disabilities in the films. Similarly, the German comedy *Die Goldfische* portrays the character with Down syndrome Franzi in such an exaggerated way that the inhibition to laugh about disability is removed.

In the cinematic dramas, “intellectual” disability (the protagonists all have Down syndrome) is portrayed as a burden for the environment and shows conflicts caused by paternalism. This manifests itself in the family's tense coexistence in *Las Palabras de Vero* (Octavi Masiá: Spain, 2005), escalates into threatening letters presumably written by neo-Nazis in *Mio Fratello Rincorre i Dinosauri* (Stefano Cipani: Italy, 2019) and the attempt at an extended suicide in *AfterLife* (Alison Peebles: United Kingdom, 2003). The film *Sanctuary* (Len Collin: Ireland, 2016) deals with the sexual autonomy of characters with “intellectual” disabilities, embedded in the overarching theme of the search for autonomy.

Films about “intellectual” disability outside the framework of a “feel-good movie” or a drama are more difficult to judge, which is where the special potential of these films lies. In *Théo et les Métamorphoses* (Damien Odoul: France, 2021), *León y Olvido* (Javier Bermudez: Spain, 2005), *Olvido y León* (Javier Bermudez: Spain, 2020) and *The Room* (Giles Daoust: Belgium, 2006), people with disabilities are (also) portrayed as perpetrators, which forms a refreshing contrast to their familiar depictions as victims. Disability is also thematised as a difficulty for the social environment, albeit as part of conventional everyday conflicts within the family. Films that leave room for viewers to engage with what they have experienced are rare, as are films in which disability is simply a part of identity (*Detective per caso*; Giorgio Romano: Italy, 2018), and *Dafne*; Federico Bondi: Italy, 2019), as well as films that do not explicitly address

the topic of disability (*Théo et les Métamorphoses*). These films are therefore of particular value for the work of cultural studies.