

**DISABILITY AND CREATIVITY: PROMOTING PATHS OF KNOWLEDGE AND RESILIENCE
THROUGH IMAGES**
**DISABILITÀ E CREATIVITÀ: PROMUOVERE PERCORSI DI CONOSCENZA E RESILIENZA
ATTRAVERSO LE IMMAGINI**

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ABSTRACT

The paper proposes a reflection on the representation of disability and on the transformative potential of images and creativity in promoting resilience paths in contexts of disability. Cultural products potentially play an important role in raising public awareness and building representations that reflect a progressive image capable of supporting the transition towards a society that can be defined as "inclusive" at all levels.

Il lavoro propone una riflessione sulla rappresentazione della disabilità e sul potenziale trasformativo delle immagini e della creatività nel promuovere percorsi di resilienza nei contesti di disabilità. I prodotti culturali hanno potenzialmente un ruolo importante per la coscientizzazione dell'opinione pubblica e la costruzione di rappresentazioni che rispecchino un'immagine progressista in grado di supportare la transizione verso una società che possa definirsi "inclusiva" a tutti i livelli.

KEYWORDS

Disability, creativity, resilience, images, education
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1.The social representation of disability

Each historical period has its own recognizable style, its own unconscious constructions with respect to the interpretation and representation of disability, which determine its gaze, behaviors, practices (Bocci, Stranieri, 2020). The very definition of what is meant by disability has changed radically over the ages. For this reason, the issue of disability, of the disabled body and its representation cannot be insularized but must be inscribed in a cultural context, defined in a correlated set of meanings shared by the members of a group or a society (Goussot, 2009; Gardou, 2006). As with other phenomena that concern human beings, a social representation has also been built up with regard to disability, i.e. a shared perception within the community, conveyed by a stratified system of images that refer to constructs and concepts of various nature. In our culture, disability has traditionally been generally perceived as a calamity, a radical nonsense, an absurdity, an abject thing that nothing can justify (Goussot, 2009). The person in question is experienced by others and experiences himself as a socially devalued being. Western society, starting from classical antiquity, was founded on ethical and aesthetic principles (the *kalos kai agathos* of the Greeks) which praised proportion, harmony and physical well-being which corresponded to moral rectitude. Precisely for this reason, for a long time, it rejected in the categories of "monstrosity" and "diversity" those people who - due to physical, psychic and sensory impairments - deviated from the dominant aesthetic canons. The (real or represented) body image of the disabled person has always aroused concern, repulsion and fear, as it cannot be framed in predefined aesthetic canons and deviates from a "normality" felt as predictable and reassuring. Adopting a psychological analysis perspective, we could say that the person with deformities, malformations, anomalous physical characteristics active, in spite of himself, of ancestral fears, reifies the terrifying specter of suffering and death from which the human being tends to defend himself strenuously putting in implement complex defense mechanisms which include the denial of the condition of disability, the normalization of the same, the control, the exclusion from society of people considered deviant from the norm. Despite the ICF (WHO, 2017), by adopting the bio-psycho-social model it has shifted the focus from the reductive view of disability as a physical or mental impairment to an idea of disability as one of the possible characteristics of the human condition, an experience that we could all find ourselves experiencing throughout our lives, still today the person with disability

tends to be associated almost exclusively with characteristics of weakness of a body considered sick, in need of care, therapy and rehabilitation. In other words, there is a tendency, more or less unconsciously, to highlight above all the limitation, the difficulty and the suffering of the person with disability and not the potential and the resources available. Furthermore, there is a tendency to distance this condition from the representations of everyday life, only to then accentuate the aspects of extraordinaryness, pietism, sensationalism. This reductive and devaluing representation particularly concerns women with disabilities who, as also recognized in the context of the Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities, are subject to multiple discrimination as people with disabilities and as women. In the past and until very recently, the very fact of being a woman was, moreover, considered a disability (Bernardini, 2018). Excluded among the excluded, women with disabilities therefore do not enjoy equal opportunities either with respect to other women, or with respect to the category of disabled men (Galati et al., 2005), they are still found on the margins of all movements for the recognition of human rights and remain mired in a clearly unfavorable position in society. If the woman has been seen as an "object", considering her physical appearance to the detriment of intelligence and other qualities, the fact of being disabled even makes her a "defective object" (Leone, 2018). These women do not receive the right social support and recognition and often suffer the limiting influence of both gender stereotypes and prejudices concerning disability (based on which, for example, they could not have access to a sexual or relationship life, motherhood or a satisfying career). It remains the essential task of pedagogy to rethink educational paths in a gender perspective that also integrates the dimension of disability, in order to welcome and value individuals in their peculiarities and differences and to provide cognitive tools and valid identification models on which to base a sense of self-centered and creative

2. Disability, creativity and resilience in the story of Frida Kahlo

The exciting and troubled human story of the painter Frida Kahlo, who has by now become an international icon of a strong and independent woman despite her disability, takes place against the backdrop of a post-revolutionary Mexico in the early 1900s. Frida possessed an innate talent for art and a disturbing and unusual beauty that attracted her attention, with thick raised eyebrows and a confident gaze. She is described as a fickle and passionate woman, a born leader. At the age of six, she was stricken with polio, which caused severe pain in her leg and kept her bedridden for several months. To regain strength after the illness, the doctor recommended that she follow a program of physical activity and her father

encouraged her to play sports, even those that usually the girls did not compete in. She managed to recover from polio, but her right leg always remained a little shorter and thinner than the other. For this characteristic, the children of the neighborhood gave her the nickname of "Frida Gambadilegno" and although those words hurt her, she never showed it and became even more daring and adventurous, demonstrating that, despite her physical limitations, she could accomplish great feats, such as climbing trees and jumping hedges (Barbezat, 2017). The traumatic event that forever marked the life of the Mexican artist was the terrible bus accident that took place in 1925 in which Frida was pierced by the handrail of the bus and risked losing her life. She sustained extensive injuries, multiple fractures to her spine and pelvis, as well as a broken collarbone, two ribs, and right leg; her right foot was crushed and her left shoulder was dislocated. In an attempt to straighten the spine, the girl had to face treatments of all kinds, some of which were painful to the point of torture. It was precisely during the long period of convalescence and immobility in her bed that Frida began to paint: her father encouraged her in this sense by giving her colors and her mother ordered her a special easel which allowed her to paint from lying down; they also attached a mirror to the canopy of her bed, so that she could see herself and make self-portraits. In this way Frida was able to cope with boredom, the sense of loneliness, the physical and mental suffering that would accompany her for a long time. Thanks also to a supportive environmental context, she managed to leverage her resources and transform the condition of forced immobility into an opportunity to learn, create, explore new sides of herself and express herself through painting. You will find in her art her only integrity, her means to survive the decay of the body, the disability, her distressing questions. Her human and artistic parable ended in 1954. A year earlier, her right leg had been amputated due to the risk of gangrene and yet her latest painting, a still life of juicy watermelons with "Viva la vida" written in red on it, executed eight days before her death, is an extreme tribute to life. Her story represents a paradigmatic example of how suffering can activate new resources and even turn into art and beauty. As is known, as far as creative activity is concerned, psychoanalysis has essentially given a double indication, considering art as a means to satisfy unconscious desires (frustrated in reality) and as a way of reparation, or as a means by which the artist elaborates the pain, the affection connected to some traumatic event (Treglia, 2020). In this context, on the basis of the reflections advanced by Ferrari (2007) and Barbieri (2008), we will adopt the perspective that considers artistic creation not as a manifestation of a "disease" or a neurosis, but rather as a way to contain, face and process the fear, discomfort, physical and mental suffering that often follow traumatic experiences. Frida's life,

as well as that of many people with disabilities, was often studded with pain: every pain (physical or mental) is a traumatic event that bursts into life suddenly, which overwhelms and breaks the continuity of the usual sense of psychophysical safety by causing a loss of the previous state of functioning, whether it is momentary (in acute pain) or definitive (in chronic pain); loss that often socially translates into the loss of work, friendships, autonomy and independence. The emotional reaction to the painful perception, the one we define with the term suffering, is highly subjective and depends on the psychological modalities through which it is managed and on the horizon of meaning within which the subject inserts the trauma. The expressive activity constitutes a bodily and mental experience that allows the person with disabilities to feel active, overcoming the passivity of many traumatic experiences and to build/reconstruct their identity (Castelli, 2011). The latter, in fact, arises when the representation of oneself meets the real and concrete experience of oneself (Ruggeri, 2001). The creative drive, in other words, promotes and sustains a resilient attitude and is what saved, for example, Kahlo from depression and from what she herself defines in her diary as "centuries of torture". So it's not just about surviving or resisting adversity. In psychology, resilience is understood as the possibility of transforming a painful or traumatic situation into a process of learning and growth, as the ability to positively reorganize life (Cyrulnik, Malaguti, 2005). This construct is linked to modes of functioning that are also typical of creativity. Transformation and reorganization are in fact dynamics which, according to certain theoretical perspectives, also distinguish the creative act (Antonietti, Cesabianchi, 2003). The latter would in fact consist in applying an unusual scheme of interpretation to a situation and in reorganizing the elements of the situation in a new configuration. In this way latent meanings in the situation become manifest and ways out that previously could not be seen now appear evident. These mechanisms, which in the case of creative expression are appreciated because they lead to the production of something original and unexpected, in the case of resilience are important because they lead to a reinterpretation of one's condition which, despite its drama or problematic nature, takes on a meaning that leads to despair or closes to development, but opens to change or positive integration of critical life events.

3. Promote processes of knowledge and resilience through images

On encountering the artistic image, or rather by entering it and letting it enter us, we find ourselves wrapped up in a network of internal references (or resonances), played on analogy or contrast, whose complexity can never be completely defined

and identified, however the person may be aware or prepared. The image strikes with a primordial and subversive force, overcoming the limits of our rationality and individuality. The internal images that operate in each of us, that are rooted in individual and collective history, open up incessantly to a relationship of interaction and dialogue with the outside world, until they become shared images that substantiate our culture and the way to perceive reality. When we talk about disability today, we have to deal with a wealth of images from the past that have shaped contemporary culture, for better or for worse. Traditional cultural models have resulted in stereotyped and prejudicial approaches based on a passive, medicalized and caring image of people with disabilities or, in a compensatory logic, in super-homistic approaches that do not realistically represent their various daily experiences and realities. In other words we often have to deal with fragmented, rigid and stereotyped images that do not take into account the complexity and peculiarity of individual paths. In particular, social attitudes and prejudices have stigmatized women and girls with disabilities, contributing to their isolation and social exclusion. In practice, they are still mostly ignored today by the media who, when dealing with them, adopt a medical and asexual approach, ignoring their abilities and the contribution they could make to the surrounding environment. The implementation of inclusion processes therefore requires the transition to a pluralistic vision of people with disabilities as an active resource of their society with equal citizenship rights and equal opportunities for participation. The basic assumption is that there is no possibility of providing answers to needs if the plurality of existential paths and also their complexity are not recognized. Building a culture of inclusiveness therefore means changing the gaze and social representations (Goussot, 2009) because, as Schianchi (2012) reminds us, there is no handicap between the disabled and life, but the way in which you look at it. The first step in being able to counter reductionism, misunderstandings and falling into obsolete stereotyped images is the knowledge of what it means to live with a disability. It is not just a question of acquiring formal contents (although necessary considering the average level of disinformation about disability), but rather of the possibility of entering into resonance with the subjective experience of the other, of the different, of the disabled person, to grasp the meaning and the uniqueness of his experience. Cultural products potentially play an important role in raising public awareness and building representations that reflect a progressive image capable of supporting the transition towards a society that can be defined as "inclusive" at all levels. The artistic image, in particular, constitutes an irreplaceable resource for initiating and cultivating a "live" reflection around the relationship between inside and outside, and therefore for assuming a privileged point of view

on the totality of human experience, with its lights and its darkness (Maragliano, 2008). Images have the power to convey complex contents in an immediate, pre-verbal way, making them easily accessible to consciousness. The empathic activation induced by some images favors a fundamental process for understanding which is to go beyond the explicit information depicted and produce inferences on the subjective state of the character represented. Encounters with symbolic reality mediated by art, to the extent that they enrich and make the architecture of the contents of the mind more plastic, actually make the experience of reality more understandable, predictable and intelligible (Levorato, 2007). In our culture, however, there is a tendency to make a clear distinction between the procedures that characterize scientific research and those that characterize artistic creation, assuming that the first brings us closer to the knowledge of reality, and the second operates the deformations of reality, a dichotomy that tends to be overcome by modern epistemology. Art has an enormous cognitive potential: by building an imaginary reality it is able to represent reality itself in its most exemplary and typical forms, it is capable of clearly illustrating what in real life appears confused and devoid of true meaning. The image evokes and is the bearer of symbolic references which, in themselves, have a transformative value; it can contribute to modifying the object it represents, what semiologists call the referent: this is the case, for example, of synthetic images which support the creation of real objects. Images can also contribute to changing their viewer: this is the principle of all pedagogies in images, whether they are centered on the transformation of the personality or on the transformation of knowledge. Let's take for example "The Broken Column", a work painted by Frida Kahlo in 1944 in which the artist portrays herself standing in El Pedregal, with an impassive gaze but her face flooded with tears. From the waist down, Frida is wrapped in a white cloth, while her torso is covered only by an orthopedic brace. Her chest is broken in two and inside her, instead of a spine, an ionic column can be seen, while her face and body are pierced with nails. The tortured body, the palpable pain and the fixed gaze of the portrayed woman generate a profound impact. This work, far from arousing mere pietism or heroism, can activate in the user, through a single perceptive act, a knowledge articulated on different levels: on the one hand the symbolic representation allows the unconscious identification (in the free and protected space of the mediated experience) with the character/author and the contact with an affective nucleus of physical suffering (see the nails driven into the body which refer to the idea of martyrdom) and psychic (the impassive face marked by tears). On the other hand, the user can grasp the aspect of "redemption", proactivity and resilience inherent in the very creation of the self-portrait, as an expression of a creative act by a

woman with disabilities. This last aspect is particularly relevant considering the importance, especially for girls with disabilities, of being able to access valid reference models (not always easily accessible in reality) for the development of identity and the construction and perception of the self.

4. Conclusions

The hope of the authors is that in the educational field there will be an awareness of the crucial value that the perspective of proposing and realizing education in and through the universe of images, in a serious, convincing way, is destined to assume, accepting the idea of using them and being used, proposing an immersive, projective and identifying use of it to contact the complexity of reality and what we perceive as diversity. The presence of disturbing elements in the images (often present when a human condition of disability is represented) should also be recognized as a "problem" and as such treated, with a critical spirit also in an educational key. Finally, access and use of the cultural heritage of images should be guaranteed and encouraged because this can increase the richness and sensitivity of our gaze also on the world of disability. In addition to the active fruition of images, psycho-educational interventions aimed at people with disabilities should be developed, based on the use of expressive and creative tools that can offer, on the one hand, support for individual therapy and, on the other, a space within which person can recognize himself and also express his own pain, transforming it into learning and new possibilities. In fact, the resilience process has as a premise that of starting from the person involved and their potential, making them the active protagonist of their path of acceptance and change.

***Rosella Tomassoni è autrice del paragrafo 1**

***Eugenia Treglia dei paragrafi 2, 3 e 4**

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