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Two Ordinary People; One Special Day

👤 Gwendolyn Audrey Foster (<https://www.sensesofcinema.com/author/gwendolyn-audrey-foster/>). © January 2017

📁 CTEQ Annotations on Film (<https://www.sensesofcinema.com/category/cteq/>). 📁 Issue 82 (/issues/issue-82).

"From childhood, history was a subject that fascinated me, and what I kept wondering was how everyday life might have been different, if Caesar or Mussolini had changed course. My sympathy always went to those millions who didn't participate in those choices, but had to follow them." – Ettore Scola¹

Ettore Scola had a prodigious career as a writer and director; Scola is one of the most influential and important Italian cineastes, with a career spanning more than half a century, from his first credit work as a screenwriter on Sergio Grieco's *Fermi tutti... arrivo io!* (1953) to his final film as a writer/director, *Che strano chiamarsi Federico* (*How Strange to Be Named Federico*, 2013) before his death at the age of 84 on 19 January 2016.

In all, Scola was responsible for some 87 screenplay or writing credits on both his own films and those of other directors, including the script for Dino Risi's memorably acidic comedy / tragedy *Il Sorpasso* (1962). As a director, he has at least 42 credits, both short films and features, starting with *Se permettete parliamo di donne* (*Let's Talk About Women*, 1964), but without a doubt, his relatively late film *Una giornata particolare* (*A Special Day*, 1977) is one of his most transcendent and trenchant films.

The plot of *A Special Day* is deceptively slight, and the staging of the film is deliberately understated; the film covers the activities of a single day, "May 6, 1938, when Adolf Hitler and his chiefs of staff, including Joseph Goebbels and Joachim von Ribbentrop, came to Rome to pay a state visit to Benito Mussolini, Il Duce" (Young). Despite this rather grandiose premise, the film is deliberately set on a small scale, with just three major characters – Antonietta (Sophia Loren), a housewife married to Emanuele (John Vernon), a minor fascist party functionary, and their neighbor Gabriele (Marcello Mastroianni), a radio announcer who has been fired from his state-sponsored post because of his homosexuality, and is due to be arrested for "perversion" by the local au-

thorities at any moment. Most of the action in *A Special Day* is confined to the apartment block that seemingly imprisons Antonietta and Emanuele; we never see the rally outside, other than in newsreel footage used at the start of the film.

As Deborah Young notes, “rather than try to re-create Hitler’s visit, Scola made the bold decision to show official newsreel footage and to use commentary from a contemporary radio announcer. The film opens with six uninterrupted minutes of archival images showing the pomp and circumstance with which Hitler was greeted by ‘imperial Rome’ (which) comes from a public service film entitled *The Führer’s Trip to Italy*, which details the key events of the day. It was shot and edited by official propagandists, who deftly emphasize the importance of the personalities and confer the dwarfish king of Italy, the oversize Duce, and the preening Führer with mythic status as they parade before soldiers in formation, saluting in unison with Leni Riefenstahl enthusiasm. As fascinating as it is repulsive, this black-and-white footage is presented without any introduction and is the last time Mussolini and Hitler appear on-screen.”²

Emanuele, filled with fascist enthusiasm, departs for the rally after breakfast, leaving Antonietta alone in their depressingly functional apartment, which is part of a huge complex of flats striking in their impersonal similarity. But in her drab surroundings, Antonietta has one touch of individuality; her pet mynah bird, which offers her some escape from the tedium of her otherwise arid existence. This day, however, the bird escapes, bringing her in touch with Gabriele for the first time, at a time when Gabriele is earnestly contemplating suicide as a way out of his troubles, and is more than happy for any diversion that might come along. At this point, the film becomes essentially a “two-hander,” set within the confines of the apartment complex, completely immersed in the budding relationship between Gabriele and Antonietta, while radio loudspeakers broadcast the Hitler/Mussolini reception with bombastic pomp and circumstance.

The apartment complex is almost deserted; nearly everyone else is at the rally, and thus Antonietta and Gabriele have, for the first time in a long time, some degree of personal privacy, and within this bond of shared intimacy, both are subtly transformed. Superbly played by Mastroianni, Gabriele is entirely convincing as a man whose entire life has been consumed by the act of hiding in plain sight, keeping his sexual orientation a secret from the rest of the world simply to survive. For her part, Sophia Loren’s Antonietta is a remarkably complex characterization of a woman who has been treated as chattel by her husband – who plans to have a seventh child with her in order to qualify for a government tax credit – who gradually begins to realize that Il Duce’s regime is a ghastly fraud, depriving the public of hope, genuine leadership, and most of all personal freedom.

Sadly, much of the critical commentary *A Special Day* when it was first released focused on the supposed “daring” or “difficulty” of accepting Mastroianni as gay, when his international persona as a ladies’ man has been so firmly established in his many comedies and dramas from the 1950s onward. Mastroianni and Loren first worked together in Alessandro Blasetti’s hilarious romantic comedy *Peccato che sia una canaglia* (*Too Bad She’s Bad*, 1954), and subsequently in numerous other farces and dramas, but Mastroianni had no difficulty with the role of Gabriele – indeed, he is entirely convincing as a very private man who has had to exist in enforced isolation for most of his life. As the relationship between the characters deepens, in a tender and clumsily human scene, Antonietta makes love with Gabriele as a desperate gesture of shared humanity, but is surprised when Gabriele tells her that despite his ability to “perform” with women, his sexual identity remains unchanged.

The end of the film offers little hope for the future, either for the characters or Italy as a nation; Gabriele is arrested and led away by the fascist police, while Antonietta has to contend with the brutish attentions of her husband, who brusquely orders her into the bedroom for sex – he still has that seventh child, and the tax credit, on his mind. Life will go on much as it had before, though Antonietta has now seen a glimpse, however brief, of a world beyond her own, and for the first time understands the repressive dimensions of both her personal and political situation.

Photographed in suitably muted tones by the gifted Pasqualino De Santis, the film was both a commercial and critical success, and perhaps the highlight of Scola's long career, winning the Golden Globe Award for Best Foreign Language Film, nominated for Academy Awards for Best Actor in a Leading Role (Marcello Mastroianni) and Best Foreign Language Film, winning three Nastro d'Argento awards for Best Actress, Music and Script, along with two David di Donatello awards for Best Actress and Best Director.

In France, *A Special Day* won a César Award for Best Foreign Film, and was nominated for the Golden Palm at the 1977 Cannes Film Festival. In many ways, then, this intentionally modest but deeply moving film is a high watermark for all involved; for Mastroianni in his deft portrayal of the tortured Gabriele, Loren for her entirely convincing turn as the drab housewife Antonietta, and for Scola as both director and co-scenarist. The brilliant Ettore Scola is to be credited for his feminist critique of women under fascism, his modern understated treatment of homosexuality, and his successful examination of fascist politics – through the lens of a seemingly simple, human story that turns into an allegorical tale of immense significance. *A Special Day* reminds us that the human spirit can prevail even under the most totalitarian regimes. It is a timely reminder that all fascism must be resisted with vigilance, sacrifice, and bravery.

Una giornata particolare (A Special Day 1977 Italy / Canada 106 min)

Prod Co: Compagnia Cinematografica Champion, Canafox Films **Prod:** Carlo Ponti **Dir:** Ettore Scola **Scr:** Ruggero Maccari, Ettore Scola, Maurizio Costanzo **Phot:** Pasqualino De Santis **Ed:** Raimondo Crociani **Prod Des:** Luciano Ricceri **Mus:** Armando Trovajoli

Cast: Sophia Loren, Marcello Mastroianni, John Vernon, Françoise Berd, Patrizia Basso

Endnotes

1. Sam Roberts, "Ettore Scola, Italian Film Director of Satire and Farce, Dies at 84", *New York Times*, 20 January 2016 www.nytimes.com/2016/01/21/movies/ettore-scola-italian-film-director-of-satire-and-farce-dies-at-84.html? r=1 (<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/21/movies/ettore-scola-italian-film-director-of-satire-and-farce-dies-at-84.html? r=1>) ↩
2. Deborah Young, "A Special Day: Small Victories," *Criterion Current* (15 October 2015) <https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/3745-a-special-day-small-victories> (<https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/3745-a-special-day-small-victories>) ↩

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1&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.sensesofcinema.com%2F2017%2Fcteq%2Fa-special-

day%2F&media=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.sensesofcinema.com%2Fwp-content%2Fuploads%2F2017%2F01%2FCteq-A-Special-Day.jpg&description=Two%2BOrdinary%2BPeople%3B%2BOne%2BSpecial%2BDay)

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(<https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2017/cteq/divorce-italian-style/>).

Laughing at Him and With Him: Marcello Mastroianni in *Divorce Italian Style* (*Divorzio all'italiana*, 1961).

(<https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2017/cteq/divorce-italian-style/>).



(<https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2017/cteq/the-piano-teacher/>).

The Avoidance of Love: *The Piano Teacher* (2001) as Anti-Melodrama

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Gwendolyn Audrey Foster is an experimental filmmaker and Willa Cather Professor Emerita of Film Studies at University of Nebraska, Lincoln. She has written extensively on race, gender and class in film, experimental film, LGBT+ film, and film history. Among her many books is *Experimental Cinema: The Film Reader*, co-edited with Wheeler Winston Dixon. Her documentary on early women filmmakers, *The Women Who Made the Movies*, is distributed by Women Make Movies. Her award-winning hand-made films are screened around the world in museums, galleries and film festivals.

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