

FILM

Kolkata Film Festival

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Fortified by retrospectives and tributes to Jacques Tati (France), Ernst Lubitsch (Germany), Carlos Saura (Spain), Theo Angelopoulos (Greece), Rainer Werner Fassbinder (Germany), Eric Rohmer (France), Alain Tanner (Switzerland), Werner Herzog (Germany), Doron Eran (Israel), Tom Tykwer (Germany) Kim ki Duk (South Korea), Hollywood masters, Debika Rani (India), 90 years of Len Films (Russia), and Iranian Independents, the Fourteenth Kolkata Film Festival (Nov 08) displayed how the spectacle of perpetual motion contributes to understanding of the human condition. Cristiano Bortone's "**Red Like the Sky**" (Italy, 2007, colour, 95 mins) is based on a true story, and has debut in Tuscany of summer 1970, where children are playing blind folded, trying to catch each other. Ten-year-old, Mirco (Luca Cariotti) has dinner with his parents, where there is a radio broadcast. As a child he rushes to the cinema with his father, and is thrilled with horse drawn coaches and gunfights, as portrayed in westerns.

One day while at home, Mirco steps on a stool, and tries to pull his father's gun from the high wall. Mirco slips from the stool, and the gun fires off. The bullet hits Mirco's eye, and the parents rush Mirco to hospital. Mirco is treated by a surgeon, but loses his eyesight. He cannot attend a normal school, as per the then Italian law. The parents, Balleri and Teresa admit Mirco in an appropriate boarding school in Genoa, for blind children. The school is a religious order, where the principal also wears dark glasses, and assisted by a mother superior. With dark glasses, Mirco sits in a field, watching other children play football. At school, he has to learn a trade suitable to his abilities. The school is near Pontodera, close to Pisa. Mirco becomes friends with Felice, another visually impaired child. The children dine, play outdoors, and touch and pull each other. Hauling a gardner's ladder, they climb trees. They eat, study and sleep in a dormitory. There is an annual trip to a sanctuary. Felice has been born blind, and does not know colours. When Mirco fights with another boy, the sister Nun Santa intervenes. The children walk, with hands stretched on adjacent shoulders. Vocational training extends to knitting, sewing, and handicrafts. From a school almirah, Mirco pulls out a transistor radio and tape recorder. In the fourth grade, Mirco listens to lectures on geography, on tape; and learns braille for writing dictations. A hole is made for every letter. Leaves and plants can only be touched, but an essay has to be written on the change of seasons. Unable to see, Mirco gets disinterested in the classroom, and throws away the mechanical tablets for the braille machines.

The teacher explains there are five senses, so why use only one of them? The school caretaker's daughter, Francesca becomes friends with Mirco, and takes Mirco to the school store room. Francesca takes Mirco on a cycle ride through town, and stops at a cinema hall showing, "clan of two borsalinos". The streets are full of people and there is a leftist march. Mirco meets a blind young man, Ettore (Marco Cocclis), with a stick. Ettore, a switch board operator, takes the children back to school. On the audio tape with one reel, Mirco does research on birds, water and falling rain. He blows into a bottle to get the presence of winds, and entitles his story, "Rain is over, and here comes the sun."

Neglecting braille studies, Mirco does audio research on the sounds and noises of the seasons, rains, sunlight, and flowers on a dry day. The class teacher Don Giulio (Paolo Sassanelli) is sympathetic, but the school principal wants special observation on Mirco, for good behaviour. At night, Mirco puts on and off, the electric bulb switch. He stops eating, and is convinced that if god had loved him, he would not have allowed him to play with the rifle. Mirco's mother, Teresa (Rosanna Gentili) visits him in school. Touching his face, she weeps. Mirco is producing a school play, with intense rehearsals. Francesca tells the story of a queen, recorded on tape. Mirco wants more voices and music, sound synchronization covers a factory with iron bars and furnace, a dragon, and children's footsteps. The story of princess Elisa and the castle dragon requires Mirco to hammer on iron doors, Francesca to blow into hollow drums, and other children to bang utensils.

The school principal tries to restore discipline, and seizes the tape recorder. Sister Santa's orthodox instructions recall the witch, the dragon's assistant. Francesca's mother speaks to her. The principal decides to send Mirco home, and tries to convey that freedom is a luxury that blind people cannot afford. But the class teacher Don Giulio is impressed with the tapes, and recognizes that there is something special in Mirco. When news of the oppression in the blind school trickles to college students and workers, Ettore with weavers and switch board operators leads a demonstration, "Down with Cassom Institute—Liberate Institution". The demonstrators march with red flags. College students go on strike, and the town's blast furnaces are closed. There is a delegation of workers from mills. The parents arrive and blind folds are distributed. The towns people and parents attend Mirco's play, putting on blindfolds. The princess and dragon story is retold in light and sound shows, full of mysterious sounds from Piano, drums and the clanging of utensils.

As seagulls flutter on wings, Mirco returns home. He joins in game of blind man's bluff with wayside children. In real life, Mirco grew up to be a gifted and successful sound editor in Italy. In 1975, a law was passed in Italy, abolishing special schools for the blind. The force of "Red Like the Sky" is in the interior of the mind and the senses, where there is no vision out of blindness. The interior mental space relates to the claustrophobia of the orthodox classroom for blind children. The lack of vision is ultimately pulverized by human feelings, physical touches and sounds all around. The narrative and powerful performances bring out the troubled blind boy and the troubling blind boy. Cristiano Bortone's script avoids collisions between sentiments and Mirco's actions. The visuals are elegant and the editing rigorous. Vladan Radovic's camera has a simple and direct style in interpreting the symbols devised by the blind children. □□□