

IMMAGINI DEI NOSTRI MAESTRI. MEMORIE DI SCUOLA NEL CINEMA E NELLA TELEVISIONE DELL'ITALIA REPUBBLICANA

By PAOLO ALFIERI (A CURA DI). Roma: Armando, 2019, 160 pages. ISBN: 978-88-6992-602-0

The study of School Memories, viewed from three different perspectives – the individual, collective and public – represents one of the most innovative territories currently being explored in international research on the History of Education. A recent Italian volume, *Immagini dei nostri maestri. Memorie di scuola nel cinema e nella televisione dell'Italia repubblicana* (2019), focuses on Collective School Memories in the form of representations of teachers and past school experiences, as portrayed in audiovisual sources such as films, TV series, TV programmes, documentaries, etc.

The book, edited by Paolo Alfieri – assistant professor of History of Education at the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart in Milan (Italy) – offers some first glimpses of the main issues investigated by a research project of national relevance (PRIN) entitled *School Memories between Social Perception and Collective Representation (Italy, 1861-2001)*. The volume's introduction and the following five chapters outline some of the new “heuristic horizons” opened up by the international research into School Memories, within the wider framework of *Visual history* and the *Historia de la cultura escolar*, which aims to generate a deeper knowledge of the *Black Box of Schooling* and improve the initial and ongoing training and professional development of teachers.

Through the various educational issues explored in the movies and media, all the contributions offer interesting reflections on the images, models and school experiences of the past, which are useful for the promotion of a “pedagogical conscience”. Further interest is added by the

close interconnection they reveal between the real and the imaginary, and between personal and collective school experiences. Moreover, they offer scope to improve the professional training of teachers, through a daily reflection on their own behaviours, educational choices, didactic tools, methods, etc. Thirdly, they pay particular attention to teaching methods, values, norms and school routines which are considered as parts of a *historical-educational heritage*, developed over time by a given community.

In recognizing the originality of the volume, it is important to underline how varied and rich in suggestions the audiovisual sources analysed in each contribution are. The first chapter, by Simonetta Polenghi, concerns the many representations and filmic new interpretations of the well-known Italian novel *Cuore*, published in 1886 by the writer Edmondo De Amicis in the form of the diary of a pupil, Enrico Bottini, written over the course of a school year. Polenghi focusses on two films and two TV series, that over the decades have conveyed Collective School Memories inspired by the novel. She emphasises how the representation of the traditional teacher-pupil relationship, as depicted in *Cuore*, has assumed different meanings and features, according to the ideological use made of the different socio-political scenarios in which the audiovisual sources were produced (Polenghi, pp. 45-52).

The subsequent chapters offer specific case studies concerning extraordinary Italian school experiences from the second half of the XX century. Respectively, they deal with: the study of several Italian films and documentaries about Father Lorenzo Milani, a young priest who opened a popular school in Barbiana, near Florence (Alfieri-Frigerio, pp. 53-76); an analysis of the TV film *Diario di un maestro*, loosely inspired by the teaching experience of Albino Bernardini at Pietralata, in Rome, during the sixties (Debé, pp. 77-97); a presentation of the four documentaries *Quando la scuola cambia*, directed by Vittorio De Seta for the RAI (Radiotelevisione italiana) network and focusing on various innovative Italian school experiences of the seventies (Felini, pp. 99-127); and an analysis of a video-interview and TV film about Adalberto (Alberto) Manzi, the protagonist of the TV programme *Non è mai troppo tardi*, broadcast in the sixties by RAI, as a means of tackling illiteracy in the adult and elderly population (Aglieri, pp. 129-154).

Why did the authors choose these issues? The main reason lies in their particular contribution to the history of recent Italian school culture, which is fundamental to promoting a new connection between the History of Education and the real educational experiences of the younger generations, but also to exploring new ways of creating the best possible initial and ongoing teacher training, which pays more attention to the complex nature of the teaching-learning process than in the past. Secondly, all the case studies relate to authoritative Italian teachers of the second half of the XX century, such as Father Lorenzo Milani, Albino Bernardini, Mario Lodi, Carmine De Padova, Caterina Foschi and Alberto Manzi. These were all “engaged” primary teachers, who were focused on solving the contradictions of the Italian school system – which was selective and unable to meet the real needs of children, in a historical period of profound and abrupt changes – through a pedagogical renewal based on effective teaching, starting from the Italian language and innovative educational practices, to enable their students’ self-recognition as valuable human beings and their emancipation from a deprived social, economic and cultural background. They are described in the audiovisual movies as modern, unconventional and creative teachers, who were more authoritative and demanding of children. For example, Father Lorenzo Milani opened a “new” full-time, inclusive primary school, outside the Italian State school system, in Barbiana in 1954, to promote the personal development and social integration of his lower-class pupils. According to Alfieri and Frigerio’s analysis, the films and documentaries depict him as a teacher “involved” in fighting against school selection and the risks of school dropout among poor children. In particular, he was interested in the promotion of their personal and social growth through authentic educational relationships, in keeping with the Christian message.

Other focal points concern the unusual and utopian nature of the alternative methods of schooling introduced by these teachers, through innovative but less well-known educational experiences that were led by personal faith in the ideal dimension of teaching-learning processes and in the inclusive aim of a school that was closely connected to pupils’ lives. In terms of those aspects, it is fundamental to underline how the directors of those movies concentrated on the original and charismatic personalities of the teachers portrayed; they were particularly successful

in communicating a clear and well-defined image of the educational model they followed (Alfieri-Frigerio, pp. 227-228; Debé, pp. 90-95; Felini, pp. 123-127; Aglieri, pp. 151-154).

Like the protagonists of the four documentaries *Quando la scuola cambia*, these teachers were interested in creating a different school, through promoting school change from below, directly involving all their pupils, especially those with more difficulties. Their representations are very different from the traditional image of the Italian primary teacher, tasked by the State since unification with promoting literacy and the civic development of young Italian generations through a rigid style of frontal didactics and authoritarian discipline, as in the case of the teacher Perboni, the protagonist in the novel *Cuore*.

As explained in the chapter by Damiano Felini (pp. 105-106), the director Vittorio De Seta expressed two original messages through his documentaries: that the Italian primary school needed to renew itself in order to provide adequate answers to new problems and social and cultural situations; and that this interior renewal could be realized starting, first of all, from didactic innovations introduced by teachers. In fact, all his four documentaries are characterized by the introduction of typical active methods based on “learning by doing” and a representation of a school that is open to the needs and conditions of its local area and that, as an inclusive school, is interested in listening to children’s expectations.

The last chapter of the volume offers another interesting example, in which Michele Aglieri examines two audiovisual sources that relate to the experience of Alberto Manzi. Manzi was a primary teacher engaged for the TV programme *Non è mai troppo tardi*, which was very different from the wider project “Telescuola”, set up in 1958 as a collaboration between RAI and the Ministry of Education as a first attempt at distance education. *Non è mai troppo tardi* had a very large audience of over a million illiterate adults, who were given the opportunity to complete their primary school education through watching the programme. Manzi was a “special” teacher, because he gave lessons in the TV studio with little in the way of teaching aids, and was followed by millions of viewers. His past experience as a young teacher in a juvenile prison in Rome, his collaboration with the Department of Education at the University of

Rome, his frequent journeys to South America with an in-depth knowledge of Liberation Theology and the philosophy of Paulo Freire, and his recent work as a teacher in a primary school in Rome all exerted a profound influence on his teaching style. In particular, he strengthened his communication skills to make his lessons interesting and amusing, encouraging many adult students to overcome the dislike of school they had developed from their previous negative experiences (Aglieri, pp. 130-133). Manzi was a passionate and professional educator, well-aware of the power of TV programmes: for example, he began his lessons by drawing something on a whiteboard paper, without explaining what he was drawing. This raised his viewers' curiosity, making them concentrate more. Like the other "unconventional" teachers depicted in this volume, Alberto Manzi also considered literacy a fundamental competence that all people required, and he believed in the importance of study and ongoing training as the main tools that would improve the professional role of teachers.

Through these issues, we can affirm that the main aim of *Immagini dei nostri maestri. Memorie di scuola nel cinema e nella televisione dell'Italia repubblicana* is to show how audiovisual sources can have a clear "heuristic function", because they activate a process of semantic negotiation between Individual School Memories and Collective School Memories. They involve the school's image of each person and the evocation of common past school experiences. In this sense, they can contribute to reducing the gap between past and present, underlining the persistence of certain elements and the gradual nature of the changes in the school system. Moreover, they can also redesign, in a collective manner, our own school memories, because they offer a media-based and social reconstruction of the school past. In this sense, it's interesting to underline how in the movies considered in this volume, the representations of teachers and the teaching-learning process are aimed towards leading viewers to reflect on certain *clichés* or specific models of teaching and of school, to redefine their memories of their own past school experiences. In other words, the Collective School Memories conveyed by audiovisual sources can produce a process of negotiation between reality and its many possible interpretations by the viewer. They can feed the scholastic images held by the public and be reinterpreted on the basis of the public's attitudes: in fact, they speak not only to individual experiences,

but also to collective ones. For a History of Education researcher, it is an original challenge to consider these interpretative issues, taking into account the different nature of the films, documentaries, TV series, etc., in order to promote a more effective and authentic contribution to the epistemological nature of the scientific discipline and its implications in teacher training.

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