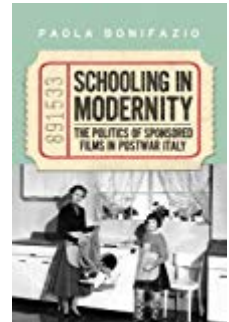


**Paola Bonifazio.** *Schooling in Modernity: The Politics of Sponsored Films in Postwar Italy.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014. 304 pp. \$34.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-4426-1598-4.



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Paola Bonifazio's book concerns documentary films produced in Italy between the late 1940s and the late 1950s by a variety of sponsoring institutions. These include US-funded agencies such as the ECA (Economic Cooperation Administration), namely the American agency that implemented the Marshall Plan in Europe (subsequently replaced by the Mutual Security Agency, MSA), and the United States Information Service (USIS). Films produced by Italian sponsors, such as the government-funded Centro di Documentazione (CdD), SPES (the Christian Democrat [DC] propaganda film division), and private companies (Fiat, Olivetti, Edisonvolta, Pirelli) also constitute an important part of this monograph, which is the outcome of a prolonged archival research, in Italy and abroad.

The declared aim of the book is to assess the role that films funded by the United States, private companies, and the government played in the process of modernization in Italy. The book is organized thematically. Chapter 1 discusses how the ECA and CdD dealt with the issue of postwar

unemployment; chapter 2 analyzes how industry-sponsored films commented on the same theme; chapter 3 analyzes films that advertised government housing programs; chapter 4 shows how postwar documentaries illustrating the alleged renaissance of the South were ultimately aimed at educating southern people on the imperative of work, productivity, and efficiency; chapter 5 analyzes a specific class of films by the MSA championing the homogenization of Western Europe through productivity and advocating a "Northern" conception of the world as a model for Southern European counties. Finally, chapter 6 looks at how compilation films produced by various institutions used archival footage in order to make sense of the past, promoting a specific and rather conservative reading of recent Italian history. Bonifazio stresses the double nature of many of these cinematic texts: half documentary, half propaganda. Adopting interpretative models from sociology (i.e., Michel Foucault's "pastoral power"), the author convincingly argues that these films were meant to educate Italian people, facili-

tating the transition to democracy and promoting a Western lifestyle. The United States, DC governments, and private enterprises seemed to support this endeavor. Private enterprises also tried to “sell” a modern and consumerist lifestyle as a precondition for the creation of suitable markets for their products. The fatherly and patronizing approach of these films towards their viewers is discussed throughout the book, as well as their anti-communist subtexts. The films in question invited Italians to “fit in”, that is, not to oppose the model of economic development established after the war, and to trust the government. This would have guaranteed happiness for everyone in the long term. The kind of happiness these films promised had precise characteristics: a dignified and permanent job, the possibility to access consumer goods, and a society organized according to traditional gender roles and family models.

The specialist reader will probably be familiar with some of the films discussed by Bonifazio. For example Ermanno Olmi’s films for Edisolvolta have reached cult status among experts, while some industry-sponsored films were recently analysed by Giulio Latini.[1] Many other films, however, are analyzed here for the first time, and this is just one of this book’s many merits. The principal merit of *Schooling in Modernity* is, in my opinion, that it proves that the study of non-feature films can be as important as the study of feature cinema for an understanding of a country’s political and cultural history, in that they also reveal their sponsors’ political motivations and cultural prejudices. It would have also been interesting to have some insight into how influential these documentaries actually were in swaying Italian public opinion. The book does not provide figures, and it comments very little on these aspects. This is, however, excusable, given the book’s objectives and scope. If we are to find a shortcoming in Bonifazio’s book, it might be that the rationale behind the selection of the films is, in some specific cases, open to criticism. For example, the combined analysis of ECA and CdD films (chapter 1) does not

have a self-evident motivation. The author explains that both ECA and CdD films present similar motifs and overall tone, and that often the same production companies, and indeed the same professionals, worked for both sponsoring institutions. However, these documentaries were not co-productions, and it may be argued that the Italian government and the ECA, which was based in Paris, plausibly had their own, not completely overlapping political agendas. However, this really is a minor issue for a book which offers so much valuable insight into the mentality and political strategy of both American and Italian civil servants employed in government cinema agencies, as well as into the educational/commercial purpose behind company-sponsored films. For example, the reading of some CdD films as anti-neorealist cinematic texts is very interesting. Bonifazio explains that the films in question, while borrowing stylistic and thematic features from neorealism, would reverse the political message of neorealist films, depriving the neorealist aesthetic of the political significance traditionally associated with it. The analysis of cinematic texts is carried out with competence and shows vast knowledge of cinematographic language codes. The author discusses the documentaries she analyses with respect to narrative structure and shooting style, highlighting the influence of documentary traditions, particularly the pioneering work of John Grierson, Robert Flaherty, and Pare Lorenz. Finally, the book offers a very detailed filmography which can represent a starting point for future research in this field.

In conclusion, this important empirically rich and theoretically nuanced book is certainly of great interest to researchers in modern Italian history as well as to scholars studying propaganda. Because it explores a hitherto little-known class of cinematic texts, it will be probably regarded as an essential reading by those studying Italian cinema.

Note

[1]. Giulio Latini, *L'Energia e Lo Sguardo. il cinema dell'Eni e i documentari di Gilbert Bovay* (Rome: Donzelli, 2011).

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