

“Special” Narrations: The Photographic Albums of the Medical Pedagogical School Padre Gemelli in Turin [†]

Francesca Davida Pizzigoni

Researcher Indire—Istituto Nazionale Documentazione Innovazione e Ricerca Educativa, 50122 Firenze, Italy; f.pizzigoni@indire.it

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Abstract: A wide photographic documentation, consisting in 12 listed albums, is collected in the historical archive of the primary school Padre Gemelli in Turin. The most surprising element is represented by the fact that it is a collection of photos of “School for abnormal psychic” of the City of Turin, furthermore it is grouped in thematic albums that are characterized even for their temporal wholeness starting from 1930 to 1960. This intervention aims to study the pictures themselves within a special school, finding out the possible narrative lines that intend to suggest. The purpose in this case is not to reconstruct through the images the teaching history in a special school but the purpose is about questioning the images in all perspectives, in order to make the historical object itself be able to speak. This paper will focus on some of the narrative phenomena identified: the Padre Gemelli school images compared to the “Great History”, to the micro-history, to the school history (labs, educational supports, ...).

Keywords: photographic album; special school; visual narration; labs; education

1. Introduction

A wide photographic documentation, consisting in 12 listed albums, is collected in the historical archive of the primary school Padre Gemelli in Turin. The most surprising element is represented by the fact that it is a collection of photos of “School for abnormal psychic” of the City of Turin, furthermore it is grouped in thematic albums that are characterized even for their temporal wholeness starting from 1930 to 1960.

This intervention aims to study the pictures themselves within a special school, finding out the possible narrative lines that intend to suggest. The purpose in this case is not to reconstruct through the images the teaching history in a special school but the purpose is about questioning the images in all perspectives, in order to make the historical object itself be able to speak.

As a matter of fact the study of the school materials offers interesting elements to learn about the different disciplines, as well as the environments of learning, the didactic benefits, the setting, the time management and finally the transversal elements of real school life. Unlike the other historical school materials, the photographic image is not very meaningful itself: its power lies in its content, in what it represents, in fact it picks up the photographer mind, as well as the one of the possible costumer or of the audience.

This contribution intends therefore to question about different matters: why, in a moment in which the school laws prefer the separation of “normal” from “abnormal” pupils, it is pointed out this difference by publishing this abnormality through pictures? What is the issue with that? Which context do we have to relate it with? Which elements can we gather today, after over fifty years, from

these images? The albums of the school Padre Gemelli in Turin represent thus a meaningful case-study of visual narration.

2. The Medical Pedagogical School for Abnormal Psychic

In 1960 the Medical Pedagogical school was named after Padre Agostino Gemelli. The same name is kept even after the abrogation of special schools with law 517/1977 (all the quotes from the Padre Gemelli archives will be indicated with the initials ASPG, as the whole archive was reorganized by the archivist Daniela Marendino with the support of Soprintendenza Archivistica del Piemonte e Valle d'Aosta). The school was born in 1928 as an institute for the education of those students that were identified as "late and deficient children" [1] (p. 137). The school had welcomed students between the age of 6 and 14 that had "abnormal intelligence or nature but able to be taught and not dangerous". The students' QI needed to be between 0.70 and 0.45 but also between 0.70 and 0.80 in case they had serious personality issues. The school was equipped with specialized teachers and with a medical *équipe* for the examinations and the clinical and psychological vigilance. The school was inspired by the teachings of the mental retardation school in Rome. After the entry visit and the observation period every pupil had two special briefcases: a psychopedagogic one and clinical one, finally these two become part of a specific diary called "diario bioscopico".

In 1933 the number of students was more than doubled (from 70 to 160 students), that is the reason why in 1937 the school was moved to a bigger building that was just finished and realized according to the classical architectural canons promoted by the fascist regime: that is the same moment when begins the production of the photographic documentation that we have today.

The images show on one side the school spaces and rooms and, on the other side, the school activities. Most of all the two main relevant aspects were the medical one and that lab one (Figure 1).

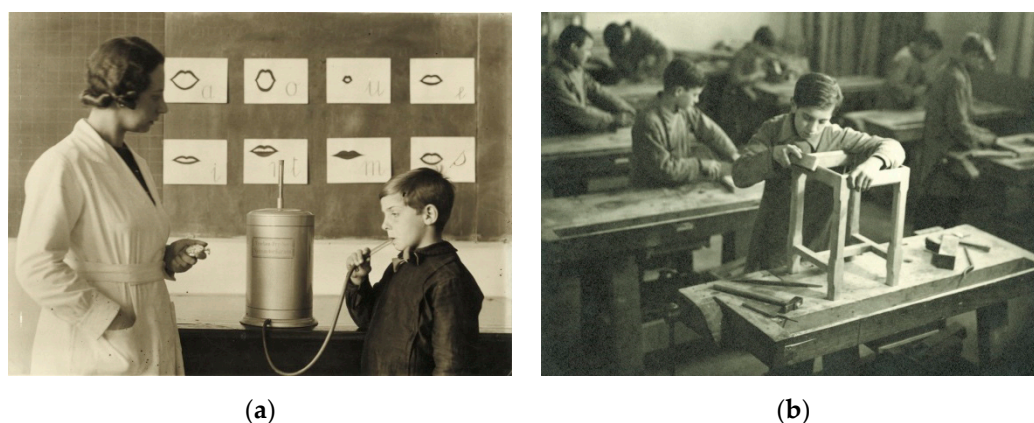


Figure 1. (a) Medical aspects (ASPG, file 3488); (b) Lab aspects (ASPG, file 3492).

As a matter of fact one of those albums shows mainly the "physician-curative spaces", insisting on the modernity of environments and tools. The central focus of the photographic documentation is the medical clinic and shows all the exams to which the young students were submitted to: measurements, vaccinations, tests of equilibrium and coordination, control of sight and hearing (ASPG, file 3488).

A second album is focused instead on the practical activity that were ongoing during the classes: carpentry labo, pack basket, ceramics, typography, music, choral song (ASPG, file 3492).

While analyzing these albums it is possible to understand their inner message thinking of the historical period: indeed it was the full ascent of the fascist period. These elements make understand the whole narrative power that generate this artificial view constituted by the photographic albums of Padre Gemelli school.

3. The Padre Gemelli School Images Compared to the “Great History”

The photographic album dedicated to the opening of the new center of Lombardia avenue n. 28 shows wide corridors, infirmary and medical room, equipped classrooms, gym for regulatory gymnastic (regulatory gym is a specific practice that allow teachers to assign a specific spot for students), wide balconies where to make lesson, showers, the inner courtyard, and finally the Manager’s office, to wich is dedicated the greatest number of pictures (Figure 2a).

The images of this office represent paintings, documents and the “Podestà” while carefully reading and examining papers. The album allows to appreciate the furniture and the decorations (that can even be thought as a “specific preparation” functional to the message that is intended to be communicated) in fact it has specific enlargements of the notice-boards.

Those noticeboard were specifically made by the Turin municipality and they represent the numbers of Padre Gemelli school.

Therefore it is possible to see to the weekly hour panel, the enrolled students, the graphic representation of the treated cases of “abnormality, etiology and anamnesis of the students” in the first year of activity of the school (1928–1929) up to the year 1935–1936 distinguishing personality abnormality from the intellectual one, the mixed abnormality from the abnormality itself and their origin. A second notice-board shows the activity of the neuropsychiatry clinic not only underlining the progressive increase of activities, but also the value of the distributed medicines, and still other numerous notice-boards devoted to show the sanitary assistance granted to the students; or to the presents for the disabled pupils during the celebration of the fascist Epiphany; or to the increase of the consistence of the volumes of the school Library, with the motto “book and musket”; or to the abnormal pupils sendt to the colonies and also the number of students of the physician-pedagogic school of the Balilla national activity (Figure 2b).



Figure 2. (a) Opening of the new school’s center: Manager’s office (ASPG, file 3488); (b) Panel representing number of students of the physician-pedagogic school of the Balilla national activity (ASPG, file 3488).

Above all it is the representation and the celebration of what the Municipality of Turin does for these disabled pupils, a desire to show offered charity and assistance, an exaltation of the efforts devoted to these “abnormal psychic” that show besides the new school building, continuous and notable resources devoted to this issue.

This images tale makes understand the historical context: as a matter of fact in 1937 the agreement “Asse Roma-Berlino” had already been signed. Since 1934 in Nazi Germany it started a sterilization campaign that involved 400,000 Germans affected by mental pathologies that were considered genetic [2–4]. In 2014 the German Society of Psychiatry (DGPPN) in collaboration with the Foundation Memorial for the Hebrews murdered of Europe and the Foundation Topography of the Terror Berlin made an exhibition named “*Schedati, perseguitati, sterminati. Malati psichici e disabili durante il nazionalsocialismo*” that shows the killing or the deportation of mental

disabled people. The Italian opinion during this period has been recently illustrated by a search held by Scientific Historical Committee of the Italian Society of Psychiatry (SIP) and it underlines the adhesion of the official psychiatry to the fascist ideology (“Malati, manicomi e psichiatri in Italia: dal ventennio fascista alla seconda guerra mondiale” is an exhibition that shows the Italian case study at the Vittoriano in 2017. The exhibition is also made by the Dutch part *Schedati, perseguitati, sterminati. Malati psichici e disabili durante il nazionalsocialismo*.) [5]. Even though the example of Padre Gemelli school is not a mental institution itself, it is still an important point from where to start some studies.

Padre Gemelli school represents an important historical proof as Giovanni Gonzi affirms: “in the whole fascist period, especially after 1933 [...] it is done a great deal for disabled people, foreseeing a defined integration strategy only for you blind and deaf-mute” [6]. This narrow bond among the school for abnormal psychic and the fascist comes out of the laws: as a matter of fact despite the law 786/1933 that established the management transfer of the town schools to the State, the art. n. 28 of the same law established that the Municipality or the Corporate that promoted the institution of a special elementary school had to deal with the burdens for the regular operation of the subsidiary services and assistance. On 27 January 1934 a specific convention between the State and Turin established the transfer of the school management to the office of Hygiene of Health, from this point the direction is exclusively medical (no more didactics principles). As a proof of that, the Manager-physician was directly named by the “Podestà” in Turin and at the same time work became a central part of the school, as recovery and ennoblement element. This aspect was held by four new “job teachers”. Furthermore since 1934 the enrollment rules changed: they started to consider the working issue since “the institute could not turn into a refuge” and according to the desire of “being able to turn them into people able to provide a convenient job to their needs so that they don’t represent a weight but rather generate some advantage for society” (art. 33 of the “Dispositions for the operation of the special elementary schools” in ASPG, file 3, Organization of the Physician-pedagogic School).

On 20 November 1942 a bombing occurred, that is the reason why the school activities were moved from Lombard Avenue for the following five years.

4. Padre Gemelli Pictures in Relationship to Micro-History

The images of the catalogues of Padre Gemelli school reveal their importance even in relationship with local history: the district, the City in the 1930s and all the city life. As testify one of these images it is possible to see the pupils of the Physician Pedagogic School visiting the Bonafus institute that represents an important element in the school history of the City (Figure 3a).

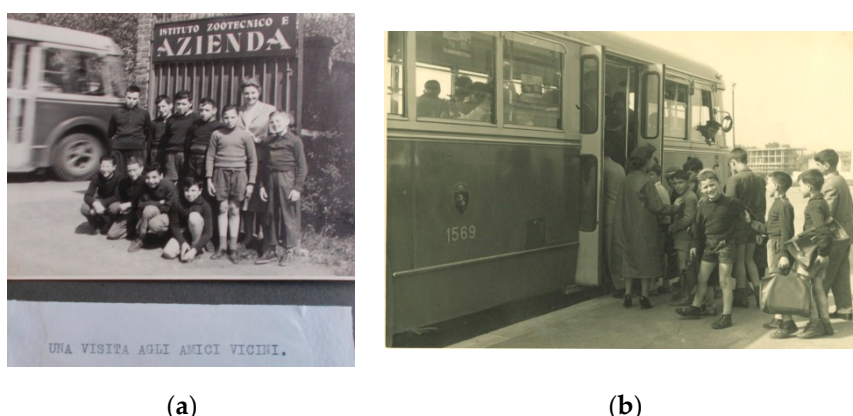


Figure 3. (a) Pupils of the Physician Pedagogic School visiting the Bonafus institute (ASPG, file 3492); (b) special trams to go to school (ASPG, file 3494).

In fact even if this school has now been moved out of Turin, it has been founded in 1871 with the purpose to give “the agrarian education and comparable arts to the youngsters, giving them suitable subsistence”. The Bonafus institute was born thanks to the legacy of the entrepreneur Carlo

Alfonso Bonafus to Turin with the purpose to found an Institute for the education of unfortunate and abandoned youngsters.

This picture represent thus a sort of exchange between unfortunate students: those coming from Padre Gemelli school because of their psychic issues, those in the Bonafus institute because were left behind. Furthermore this image need to be contestualized in a spacial context: the Luento district was at the edge of the City with very few buildings and lots of fields. The spacial isolation represent itself annother element to analize: in fact students had to commute daily from their own houses to the very far school. The Municipality provided students with dedicated free means of transport to go to school, in addition to this for students with special needs and that were not able to use other services, the Municipality has special trams, with specific stops with teachers whose task was to help those pupils to reach the tram and go to school (Figure 3b).

As written before those images are representative of local parties and popular traditions. In particular some pictures of the Padre Gemelli school show the choice of the Municipality and the association “Famija Turineisa” to promote since 1926 the figure of Gianduja and his wife Giacomina masks in carnival representing those two masks in the pictures while visiting the school.

5. Padre Gemelli Pictures in Relationship to School History

5.1. The Labs

The importance of images lays in gathering all the medical aspects of school life as well as the didactic and methodological issues, thus the first albums were made in the 1930s, right when a new headquarter was set and a new educational experimentation was held: the teaching is established on laboratories. As shown by the images below there were fully equipped carpentry labs, basket maker labs, feminine arts labs, pottery labs and so on (Figure 4a).



Figure 4. (a) Basket maker labs (ASPG, file 3492); (b) Typography labs (ASPG, file 3494).

The first school statute declared as main aim of the institute “eminently scholastic educational purposes”: as a matter of fact the final target consisted in making students reach the acknowledgments of 3rd grade elementary school within the double of years. In fact the report “The Physician Pedagogic school organization for Abnormal psychic in Turin”, showed how the school was mainly concerned on “growing the subordinate scholastic culture, although the pupils had for the most part mid-high psychic deficiency degree” and this involved as “result that after attending the first school year a lot of sutdents ended up with no profit and therefore they went back to their lives and routine looking for some other refuge”.

It is clear that images were taken to show and celebrate methodological innovation, active learning and teaching, that lead to practical work. In fact pictures show a real sawmill as well as the realization of furniture; futhermore students look busy while painting walls, sewing and interlacing baskets. This new attention to the job, as in paragraph 2, represent the new core aim of the school, the political ideology of job starting.

Nevertheless the photographic documentation concerning the lab methodology goes far beyond to the Second World War period, this is the reason why this new educating technique becomes a specific mark of Padre Gemelli school. Thus these documents represent the foundation of lab activities: as a matter of fact the images representing the 1950s show a brand new lab, the typography one. The pictures point out that the lab was based on Freinet techniques: that means the distribution of students in teams, the working organization and the students' periodical production (Figure 4b).

In addition to this lab start the ones of horticulture, mechanics, artistic dance, weaving and furthermore the Manager final report recalls the need "to consider the labs as a second house for the training, learning how to work and how to handle more and more utensils" (ASPG, file 415). Skimming through the albums of the 1960s it is possible to notice how the lab learning method become more and more important as it is turns into real working activity that brings the students, to create products on commission under the guide of artisan teachers [7].

5.2. The Mongoloid Section

A specific illustrated album in a following period point out a new section dedicated to the mongoloid students. The album reconstruct precisely these students school life, their activities, the hourly scanning, the teaching method (Figure 5). The images accurate explanations in fact clarify as the use of sensorial stimulations and practical games, plastic manipulations, seams, insertion beads, clippings and theatrical activity represent the core practices, besides long walks and games.



Figure 5. (a) e (b) Album about school life of Mongoloid section (ASPG, file 3496).

The photos are impressive in their point of view and precision: shooting disability, the mongoloid section separated from other abnormal students, with a proper courtyard and cafeteria, is a striking subject nowadays. The reason behind those specific images may be the realization of the final exhibit of students' crafts: in fact the school for this special occasion was opened to physicians, teachers and managers of other schools. This album could thus testify the daily didactic routine of this particular section to colleagues and researchers, as a sort of scientific documentation or tool to study and update.

The article 100 of the Statute that goes back to the mid 1950s (ASPG, file 2, Studies for conventions, statutes and rules of the school Physician Pedagogic and of special schools in general) says that "the school represent the engine of forms of education and teaching more and more deep and specialized. The school, to such purpose, is honoured to welcome with joy every single visitor or group, or even students for internship, or teachers or suggestions coming from other special schools".

It is possible to find other similar examples of school life documentation in two albums belonging to the 1960s (ASPG, file 3494) in which every image is accompanied by explanation in Italian, French and English. These explanations in different languages documenting both mongoloid and behavioral unnatural, may suggest the school involvement into an international contest: as a

matter of fact Padre Gemelli school promoted many conferences, as it was a Clinic for childish neuropsychiatry too.

5.3. Educational Supports

The importance of these pictures lie aswell in testifying the “material” school so that it is possible to observe and reconstruct educational supports that were used in the Physician-pedagogic school.

For instance, in the images below it is possible to see a small blackboard, wood stick, illustrations made for reconstructing scenes in order to reproduce the same scene with the help of syllabals or wood stick (Figure 6).



Figure 6. (a,b) Self-produced didactic aids from Padre Gemelli school (ASPG, file 3491).

As shown by the images, a lot of supports were self made for example through illustrations clippings and rebuildt with glue on cardboard, others were drawing themselves. Still, many of them were geometric solids made with wood, “Froebel games”, “Agazzi tombola” that had animals rather then numbers, objects and situations to be described for facilitating understanding and socialization processes.

Every class was endowed with a didactic closet, as described by the Manager “to facilitate the individualized and cheerful learning, each class is equipped with a right quantity of didactic benefits (bingos, cards), picked in the didactic closet. To teachers it is advisable to conceive other benefits in collaboration with the pupils” (ASPG, file 182, Correspondences). The same paper testify the presence of an educational museum provided with illustrations of the decimal metric system, of plain and solid geometry, of a harvest of audiovisual benefits and projectors, screens, filmstrips, record players, radios. The pictures depict too the “montessoriane Bells” (26 bells in bronze on wood support that when hited created two musical staircases) and the “Discoforo Bonatta” (it was patented in 1928 and replaces the abacus. It is made by 100 red and white revolving disks on a black background in order to allow an easy visualization of the calculations) for arithmetic learning. Finally the pictures show the Paravia wooden bricks dated back to te 1950s: the boxes were equipped with 100 cardboard pieces like suqares, triangles, disks, wooden stick and other hand crafts as rings.

6. Conclusions

As learnt from the pictures, there are suggestions for lots of other narratives: individual learning, cooperative lerning method, school furniture, teachers (all women, except the for the Manager!), the creation of the Special Schools Society or still the sad and complex sore of the “false abnormal” and finally the huge number of children whose families migrated from the south of Italy for working reason (e.g., FIAT) and adressed to Padre Gemelli school as “abnormal”.

The same could be said for the themes mentioned in this paper: they deserve further and deeper examination. As a matter of fact it is a ongoing work. In this study it is worth to mention that thanks to Patrizia Fontana that teaches in Padre Gemelli school nowadays, the students starting from the

2nd grade discover these precious sources and begin to question with their natural curiosity and fresh look, contributing with observations to find out new narrative seams. Therefore I wonder if my personal point of view in reading those images is different from the ones that these grown up students will do. The same consideration can be done with the meaning that they gave to the pictures that belong to a recent past, but still more than 50 years have gone. Still in this variety of looks and interpretations lie the power of images, affected by the time that keep flowing, and at the same time milestones of moments that otherwise we would have inevitably lost.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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