

Paolone, A. R. (2023). „The ‘Work Grammar’ educational documentary film format in the Italian VET context (1958-1978): Some considerations on the evolution of film content and language”. In C. Nägele, N. Kersh, & B. E. Stalder (Eds.), *Trends in vocational education and training research, Vol. VI. Proceedings of the European Conference on Educational Research (ECER), Vocational Education and Training Network (VETNET)* (pp. 196–203). <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8209101>

## „The ‘Work Grammar’ Educational Documentary Film Format in the Italian VET Context (1958-1978): Some Considerations on the Evolution of Film Content and Language”

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### Abstract

**Context:** This paper is part of my research on the birth and evolution of the „work grammar” VET audiovisual format in the second half of the XX century, aiming at clarifying how historical, cultural, and political circumstances have contributed to shaping a new educational discourse in the Italian audiovisuals for vocational training.

**Approach:** The research is based on multiple approaches: A) the study of VET audiovisual production and policies (and their relationship to the general VET policy in Italy and the general background of Italian society), since the days when the „work grammars” were first issued in the 1950s. It is also based: B) on the attempt to analyse the cinematic discourse of these films through the study of their content and structure and the interpretation of the cinematic language they use and its evolution.

**Findings:** Crossing these two approaches, some original research themes have emerged. One is being developed in this paper: some important developments in the content and style of the „work grammars” were not only consequences of intentional educational or VET policy. They were rather caused by the evolution of Italian society into a modern free market.

**Conclusion:** The work grammars evolved (in form and content) not only under the pressure of Italian VET policy and of parallel didactic evolutions in other forms (e.g. traditional non-audiovisual courses) of VET, but also under the influence of the laws on cinematographic production and fruition and eventually, thanks to the advent of commercial television and the changes that ensued in the Italian audiovisual scenario.

**Keywords:** Industrial documentary film, audiovisual for VET, post-World War II Italy, ”work grammar” film format, audiovisual language analysis.

### 1 A documentary film format conceived for VET

In this paper I will discuss an Italian serial film format (the „work grammar”) which consists of series of documentary films, conceived for training or re-training workers, in jobs or unemployed. I will not mention the films produced for schools, which in Italy had and still have a distinct and specific nature and function.

The „work grammars”, which were developed since the second half of the 1950s, constituted a formula that had no precedents in the panorama of documentary film in Italy. They consisted of thematic series of films which dealt systematically and exhaustively with the know-how and techniques relating to various traditional trades: the construction worker, the tailor, the (mechanized) peasant, etc.; and to new trades: the telephone technician, the metal press



fitter, the motorcycle mechanic, etc., with the aim of training workers by the means of filmed lessons (A. Paolone, 2018a, pp. 45 -46).

In this paper, I will focus on the analysis of three of such thematic series of documentaries for vocational training. They are: the „Grammatica dell'operaio edile“ (The Grammar of the Construction Worker), the „Grammatica della massaia“ (The Grammar of the Housewife) (both produced in 1961), and the „Corso per soccorritori“ (Course for Ambulance Rescuers) (1978)<sup>1</sup>. These documentaries are emblematic, in terms of cinematic language, of the transition from an old form of training film (designed for specialists), to a more modern one which is somehow „dual-purpose“ (for specialists, but also for the general public. Today we would say: for VET but also for lifelong learning).

When the first two „work grammars“ were made, most VET documentaries in Italy were produced by and for the private sector. Private companies financed the production or co-production of films for purposes ranging from workforce training, to educating citizens, to promoting corporate image and advertising. Sometimes the films were also sponsored by philanthropic institutions (e.g., Centro per il Progresso Educativo) and think tanks (e.g., CEPES: Comité Européen Pour le Progrès Economic et Social) (Paolone, 2018a, p. 34). Since productions depended above all on funding from industry, in this period VET documentaries in Italy fell under the broader title of „industrial films“ or „work films“ (Verdone, 1961). From a filmological point of view, at the time of the „Grammatica della Massaia“, few film and pedagogy scholars had tried to systematize the analysis of this sector.

In Italy there were studies on films for schools (e.g., Laporta, 1957), but almost nothing on films for lifelong learning. Mario Verdone stands out, with his studies on what he calls „Cinema del Lavoro“ (1961). In Verdone's technical nomenclature, the industrial documentary for VET and lifelong learning is defined as „tecno-film“; he indicates Filippo Paolone<sup>2</sup> as the main Italian representative of the genre (Verdone, 1993, p.47). In this sense, Paolone is credited by Verdone for inventing the „work grammar” film format.

The „work grammars” were invented under the pressure of the needs related to industrial and economic reconstruction (such films are among the „consequences” of the Italian law on work and training n. 264 of 1949, meant to ease the economic crisis which followed the Second World War) (Ghergo, 2009, pp. 35-44). The type of VET implied by law 264, helped to shape the form of the „work grammars”, which were created to meet the educational and professional needs linked to that law and to the economic, social and productive scenario which stood in its background.

In the following years, the „work grammars” evolved (in form and content), not only under the pressure of Italian VET policy and of parallel didactic evolutions of other forms (e.g. traditional, non-audiovisual courses) of VET, but also under the influence of the Italian laws on cinematographic production and fruition and ultimately, under the influence of the advent of commercial television and the changes that ensued in the Italian audiovisual scenario.

Therefore, in Italy the evolution of the form and contents of VET films did not only strictly depend on general VET pedagogical achievements, and developments in actual teaching, as regulated in the laws on training and work, but also depended on the dynamics of the market (e.g. the advent of commercial television) and their transformative impact on the consumption of audiovisuals products.

In this paper I will shortly analyse this phenomenon by looking in particular at the way in which, under the pressure of the laws on film industry and of the end of State TV (RAI) monopoly, the screenplays of the „work grammars” changed in the period between 1961 and 1978,

<sup>1</sup> These films can be viewed on Youtube at the following addresses: <https://youtu.be/ZrRubzdnQe> ; <https://youtu.be/izbEkZiV10g>

<sup>2</sup> Filippo Paolone (1917-1993) was a screenwriter and film director, especially active in the field of documentary film. He has directed over 200 documentaries and hundreds of television broadcasts. He also elaborated a filmological theory which he exhibited in three books (1958, 1959, 1983) and in a series of academic articles.

passing from very schematic, and focused on the teaching of work practices (in which cinematic elements such as dramaturgical storytelling and actors were rare), to new forms which progressively incorporated more and more of such elements.

## **2 The legislative background of VET in Italy, in the days of the early „work grammars“**

The „work grammars” were born in the second half of the 50s, when in Italy a system of vocational training, initiated through various legislative interventions since the end of the 1940s, was developing. Legally speaking, in Italy the vocational training system following the Second World War was based on two articles of the 1947 Constitution: art. 35 declares the commitment of the State to create and have vocational training carried out, while article 117 gives to the autonomous regions (which were implemented after 1970) the task of providing for the concrete establishment and functioning of this particular type of training process, albeit within the ambit of the general principles indicated by the laws of the State (the actual relocation to the regions has been thoroughly implemented only in 1978).

According to some scholars (Bertagna, 2006, p. 38) the fact that the art. 35 is inserted in part I, title III of the Constitution (entitled to economic relations) means that the vocational training referred to in the Constitutional Charter is that which takes place in the companies. Therefore, when the article speaks of that training, it intends it not so much at the service of the integral maturation of the person, but at the service of work, which has as its aim the improvement of the company work processes, involving the entrepreneur and the improvement of the professional position and salary of the worker. It is with this same intention that in the „work grammars”, introduced since the end of the 50s, the educational element is less important, while the structure is mainly didactic and aimed at teaching work techniques.

It is in the wake of the Constitution that, in order to alleviate the dramatic unemployment emergency of the post-war period, Law n. 264, which deals with the qualification of the unemployed and the requalification of the employed, was introduced in 1949 (Colletta, p. 599 and following; Pergolesi, 1974, p. 277 and following). All in all, a valid law, which subsequent scholars have often judged negatively. It would be more constructive to criticize its inappropriate use in irrelevant contexts. In fact, until the framework law of 1978 (which has revolutionized the system, transferring vocational training to the regions), law 264 has remained the main legislation on the subject, and the reference standard for the start-up, structuring and consolidation of the out-of-school vocational training system.

## **3 The Law 264 and its influence on the „work grammars“**

In the articles 53-56, Law 264 also regulates the retraining of the workforce. Law 264, in fact, provides for industrial companies which employ at least 1,000 employees, the possibility of organising training courses for workers younger than 45 years of age.

Similarly, industrial companies with less than 1,000 employees, can request to organise intra-company courses, provided that 2/3 of the workers wish to attend them (art. 53). The purpose of these courses is especially to avoid the dismissal of workers by trying to adapt their professional skills to the changed production needs.

The authorization process for the courses followed this path: the companies addressed a „documented request“ to the Ministry of Labor through the Labor Inspectorates, which expressed an opinion on the appropriateness of the course and on the rationality of its organisation. The Ministry granted the authorization in agreement with the Minister for the Treasury and for Industry.

The management responsibility of the courses fell on the companies that implemented them; the students who obtained the qualification were employed by the companies within the limits of their possibilities (art. 55). While the sponsoring companies were left with the burden

of expenses for the provision, the equipment (including any audiovisual supports, such as the „work grammars“) and the functioning of the courses.

It is precisely in this context that some Italian entrepreneurs active in the think tank of the ECSC (European Community for Steel and Coal): the CEPES (European Committee for Educational and Social Progress) and led by the then president of the institution, the CEO of FIAT Vittorio Valletta, appointed documentary film maker Filippo Paolone to study a new audiovisual format for vocational training (De Dominicis & Pinto, 1986, p.97). The documentaries would have been sponsored, in principle, by the same companies that intended to train their employees. This was the stimulus to produce: the Grammar of the Tractor Driver (1958, sponsored by Esso Italia), the Grammar of the Motorcycle Mechanic (1959, sponsored by Guzzi) the Grammar of Industrial Tailoring (1962, sponsored by Necchi), and many more. This format conceived by Paolone would have been taken up by other authors on behalf of other companies and would have spread in the 60s, before being transformed by the influence of television, which in the meantime had become one of the main channels for showing them.

RAI TV broadcasts had begun in 1954 in a monopoly regime, justified among other things by the fact that the state broadcaster performed public service functions, aimed at supporting the national educational system in the work of broadcasting educational content on the whole national territory (Anania, 2021). For this reason, on November 25, 1958, the RAI sector known as „Telescuola“ (tele-school) was inaugurated. The early courses had a „replacement“ nature: that is, they were aimed at allowing children residing in localities without secondary schools to complete the compulsory education cycle. On November 15, 1960, the famous „Telescuola“ course for illiterate adults „It's never too late“ taught by Alberto Manzi began. On 16 October 1961 in Rome, in the new building of the Telescuola Center, two television studios went into operation. The Unified Middle School television courses had begun. Educational programming would be strengthened in February 1967 with the beginning of the adult education television broadcasts of the „Sapere“ (knowledge) series and the launch, a few months later, of new broadcasts which performed an „integrative“ rather than a substitutive function of the normal school education. It is in this context that RAI began, as a public service, to broadcast the first televised „work grammars“. They were made available to all citizens, and anyone could use them individually, or they could act as a support for institutional courses organized for example by the autonomous regions, as in the case of the „Course for Ambulance Rescuers“ which we will discuss shortly.

After the RAI reform of 1975, Telescuola was discontinued and the DSE, School Education Department, was created in its place, being active until 1995.

#### **4 The new „work grammars“ for television**

The DSE was the cradle of many „television grammars“ which were co-produced by the public service (RAI-DSE) and by other stakeholders in the field of VET. In this new guise, grammars lost their original name of „work grammars“ and became thematic series of training documentaries, aimed at several different users at the same time: no longer aimed only at specialists (e.g. skilled workers) but also at the general public, to whom the introductory sections of the documentaries were dedicated, with the intention of explaining the subject matter to everyone, in order to open up new cognitive and operational possibilities for them (F. Paolone, 1983, p. 89).

Examples of this are the series for the professional training of paramedics co-produced by RAI DSE and various Italian hospitals, and broadcast in the evening by the state television channels between the end of the 70s and the 80s. In such series, on the one hand, paramedics were trained in new therapies and medical protocols; on the other hand, the general public was being informed about the existence of these new therapeutic possibilities, with a view to the permanent health education of citizens.

Among these TV series, the aforementioned Course for Ambulance Rescuers from 1978, and many other „medical“ grammars, including the „Update themes for paediatric nurses“ in 11 instalments, 1982 - RAI 1; the „Update topics for professional nurses“ in 14 instalments 1984 - RAI 3 ; the „Update topics for paediatric nurses 2nd series“ in 12 instalments - 1983 broadcast on RAI 1; and finally „Cancer as a social disease“ in 5 instalments -1985, RAI 1, all of them directed by Filippo Paolone.

The new „twofold“ educational target (specialists and general public) could be reached because these television documentaries had lost the strictly specialistic approach of the early work grammars, which had been based on screenplays devoid of any element extraneous to the simple teaching of work skills.

This early form of „work grammars“ had in fact progressively become more complex and enriched with elements from other types of documentaries, such as dramaturgical storytelling, the presence of actors - the possibility of such upgrades had been theoretically devised by Paul Rotha- (Rotha, 1939) and some spectacular scenes, used to connect the didactic parts of the film.

In the context of Italian VET history, such changes were not planned by policymakers but, as I have already mentioned, they were the result of the evolutionary history of the „work grammars“, under the pressure of factors that are not restricted and limited to the needs of teaching vocational training, but which derive, as we will see in the following pages, from the Italian national legislation on cinema and from the dynamics of the audiovisual market, which in Italy has become much more complex and lively with the advent of commercial television, starting from the end of the 1970s (Piazzoni, 2014).

In such new context, the state television broadcaster RAI (former monopolist) found itself for the first time competing on the free market with commercial televisions, and in order not to lose its audience and advertising revenues (Livolsi, 2005), was forced to transform its schedule in the sense of approaching the contents of its commercial competitors.

For this reason, the televised „work grammars“ had to incorporate some elements of dramatic and spectacular storytelling, so as not to be too „boring“ for viewers and not induce them to change the channel in search of more interesting programmes. This is evident in the TV series „Corso per soccorritori“ (1978), in which, for example, action scenes are inserted, with road accidents and ambulances whizzing by with sirens blaring, mimicking the analogous scenes in Italian-style detective films, at the time in full blooming.

However, this process of „spectacularizing“ had already begun since the 50s, long before the arrival of commercial TV, and rather under the impulse of the law on cinema known as the „Andreotti law“<sup>3</sup> which provided for the screening in cinemas of documentaries produced in Italy, in combination with a feature film, of which they would have shared the revenues. This had progressively encouraged documentary authors to change their style in pursuit of a wider audience, in order not to lose the economic opportunities offered by this new law (Beltrame 2016).

Thus, the evolution of „work grammars“ towards spectacularization had already begun by the 50s, and the elements they later absorbed from television, in this sense were not a complete novelty.

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<sup>3</sup> The Andreotti Law (Law 29 December 1949, n. 958) established the essential requirements that every short film must have: a duration of no less than 250 meters (about 9 minutes of projection, at 24 fps ) and no more than 2000 meters in length ( 73 minutes of projection). From the point of view of revenues, each feature film distributed in theaters was combined with a „short film produced in Italy“ (which could also be an industrial documentary) to be screened before the feature film, and which would share the profits with the latter. In this sense, the law provided for the concession (subject to the opinion of a Technical Committee) of a contribution equal to 3% of the gross earnings of the shows in which the documentary.

## 5 The stages of development towards „spectacularization“: some emblematic examples

In the first „work grammar” examined here: the „Grammar of the construction worker“ of 1961, which had been intended simply as a support for VET courses and aimed only at skilled workers, the use of actors was limited. Those who were framed, were in fact only „film extras“ to show the technical movements necessary for the lesson to be done. The thematic backbone of such early films was not constituted by a story, but by the sequence of the technical activities which were taught.

Instead in the following series, the „Grammar of the housewife“, intended for screening in VET courses and in cinemas, in combination with feature films, the actors, in addition to carrying out technical activities (e.g. use and maintenance of modern household appliances), were included in a more articulated narrative, aimed at involving all spectators. This is because the film was also shown to the general public thanks to the aforementioned „Andreotti“ law.

The actress who plays the role of the housewife shows viewers how to use modern household appliances. But the type of involvement she must create for the „generalist“ public found in theatres is different from that necessary for an audience of specialists, found in the more „technical“ grammars.

To involve a housewife in watching the film, the logic of mere technical actions presented on the screen was not sufficient: it was also necessary to present a story and characters with which the „spectator“ housewife could identify. Therefore, in the series we can glimpse a timid „dramaturgical“ storytelling as well as the presentation of the technical actions to be learned. Such actions were now embedded in a narrative discourse, in which „real“ characters created interest for the viewers.

Once the main authors of VET documentaries (Besides Filippo Paolone, we cite by way of example Giuliano Tomei) learned this type of approach, they continued to use it in various forms also in subsequent „work grammars”.

If „The Grammar of the Housewife“ shows the changes that have occurred in the content and form of the „grammars“ due to their diffusion to a wider cinematographic audience, the „Course for Ambulance Rescuers“ (1978, prototype of the numerous RAI DSE grammars with medical content which followed), shows the changes that took place when such films were intended for television, at a time when RAI was no longer a TV monopolist in Italy.

In this series of documentaries for training paramedics, each different pathology to be taught is presented through a form of narration, which often draws on the language of the feature film. Furthermore, as already mentioned, there are action scenes that act as a glue between the various didactic moments present in each episode. The series, co-produced by RAI DSE and the Gaslini hospital in Genoa, was used as a basis for training courses for ambulance staff in the Liguria region. In this regard, the videotapes were shown during the lessons of those courses. But dealing with a subject of public utility (first aid skills) RAI broadcast the „Course for Rescuers“ several times in its evening programmes, while the competing commercial TVs were broadcasting entertainment programmes. In this sense, in order not to disperse its audience due to competition from other TV channels, RAI recommended that the authors of documentaries make them more interesting for the general public, adopting formal elements inspired by genre cinema (Paolone, 1983, p.85). However this „war of the audience“ between RAI DSE (which broadcast programs for training) and private commercial televisions, (based on pure entertainment shows to attract advertising), finally led to the disappearance of this type of hybrid documentary, half for the training of technicians, half for the general public. In its place, new formats of cultural dissemination broadcasts, of a more journalistic nature, emerged on the RAI programming. The „work grammars” in their original meaning have since then returned to the mainstream of specialized company training, from which they had started in the 1950s.

This „narrative turn“ of training documentaries (and in particular of „work grammars“) has had various consequences. We will focus here on the more strictly pedagogical ones. From this

point of view, there has no longer been the exclusive use of that form of display of contents that Jerome S. Bruner would have defined: paradigmatic (it communicates the „truth” through arguments and is susceptible of being verified) typical of the „no frills” didactics that these documentaries had in the first phase of their history. Another form was added to this previous, which Bruner himself would have defined „narrative“ (it uses the story not to establish the truth, but rather to establish likelihood) (Bruner, 1993, p.15). The result (to use Bruner's terminology) is that of having a text (in this case a documentary film) with a more articulate educational structure (Bruner, 2005, p.23).

So, with reference to the „work grammars”, we can conclude that their formal evolution, although influenced by the laws of the free market was, educationally speaking, fruitful. The original form based on the mere teaching of „doing“ has gradually been joined by a more complex and articulated structure, bearer of broader educational contents.

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