

EDUCATION AND PEDAGOGY IN THE CHANGE OF AGE. A PANORAMIC VIEW ON SOME EXAMPLES OF RECENT CHILDREN'S LITERATURE.

ANDREA DESSARDO

Abstract

We are going through a time of transition, that is perhaps declaring the end of post-modern. This new epoch seems to claim for a new axiology, while society is worried by the need of protection and control, and invokes for limiting freedom in order to guarantee security.

This perspective has consequences also in education, that is maybe experiencing a quick change of paradigm. The present essay tries to outline this new trend, particularly through the analysis of some recent books for children written during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Key-words: hyper-modernism; axiology; Covid-19 pandemic; environmentalism; feminism.

Francis Fukuyama, who in 1992, after the Soviet Union collapse, solemnly declared *The end of history*¹, was clearly wrong, we can serenely affirm today without any doubt. But also that time, while they were fighting in Yugoslavia, it seemed too early. Actually, how we had always known, history never ends, if anything it re-presents itself always again in different forms.

The time we are living, for instance, has something in common with what our ancestors experienced a century ago, when a long period of economic development and wealth, the so-called *belle époque*, suddenly vanished in the World War blood-bath, to which at least twenty years of totalitarianism followed, until another war blew up, greater and hugely more savage and violent than the first one.

¹ F. FUKUYAMA, *The end of history and the last man*, Free Press, New York 1992.

Some important milestones of the period we are going through, are clearly the terroristic attacks on September 11th 2001 – this event was an evident watershed in our lives, as we realised in those exact moments -, followed by the wars in Afghanistan and in Iraq together with a massive wave of Islamistic terror all around the world, then the Lehman Brothers' bankruptcy in 2008, the short era of the "Arabic spring", followed by the massive migrations from Africa to Europe, and perhaps also the Covid-19 pandemic, that increased the general feeling of insecurity and, consequently, the public control on our everyday routine. We well know the rule of this trade-off: ceding freedom for security.

In the present paper I would like to present a reflection about the responsibilities of education and pedagogy in our epoch, an epoch that seems to be marking an authentic turning point in the values we share and in the economic system, in the geostrategic scenario. As I am going to explain in these pages, it seems that the way we used to educate children in the past decades is outdated, because the axiological frame in which it was conceived, has been overcome. Through the concept of «hyper-modern» suggested by some scholars, I will try to outline the main characteristic of our epoch, supporting the idea that something crucial is going on also in educational matters.

Romano Luperini², among others, situates the end of the so-called post-modernism on September 11th 2001, arguing that it changed, from different points of view, common people perception of their reality. Among them, he identifies a general renaissance in civic and moral responsibility and a lesser inclination to the black humour, a typical post-modern characteristic and literary *topos* of the second half of 20th century. Facing the downfall in invincibility of these Western countries winners after the Second World War and in the cold war, intellectuals and scholars felt the duty to product counter-narratives, that oppose to violence and fear of terrorism.

Pope Francis³ sharply observed that ours is not just an age of change, but instead a change of age. He affirmed that in Florence in 2015, during the Italian Catholic congress about «new humanism». Another famous

² R. LUPERINI, *La fine del postmoderno*, Guida, Napoli 2005.

³ FRANCESCO, *Il nuovo umanesimo in Cristo Gesù*, speech at the Italian Church 5th National Convention, Florence, November 10th 2015, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/speeches/2015/november/documents/papa-francesco_20151110_firenze-convegno-chiesa-italiana.html

definition he expressed, it is that we are already fighting the Third World War, but «into pieces». We are called to meditate about hope, when the attitude in thinking the future and the place of human beings on planet Earth is in fast transformation, and when even what actually is a human being, is no more so evident⁴.

Also the very idea of hope is in question, when the only accepted authority seems to be the positive science: but we know that hope is not just a statistic projection or a mathematical probability calculus.

1. *Back to modernity*

This change of age is been defined by some scholars in the first years of the new millennium⁵ as «hyper-modern», in order to mark the discontinuity with the previous period, that we used to call with Lyotard⁶ – especially in the United States - «post-modern» or, after Zygmunt Bauman⁷, «liquid modernity».

While post-modern was characterised by a general sense of nihilism and lack of stability in ideological issues and in axiology, hyper-modern seems to try, in an instinctive, confused and de-structured way, to frantically restore the most affordable aspects of modernity, looking for new meanings. This effort is largely spontaneous and not properly organised, but presents some common signs. «Lipovetsky highlights how hyper-modern does not see just consumerism and hedonism extension [...], but also the affirmation of some forms of solidarity, of ethical responsibility, of ecological activism: a logic of emergency [...], which prevents to speak of a current nihilism dominion, since it represents instead a remedial»⁸. Raffaele Donnarumma, trying to justify its choice for this definition of our time, explains that the

⁴ Y.N. HARARI, *Homo Deus. A brief history of tomorrow*, Vintage, London 2016.

⁵ F. ASCHER, *La société hypermoderne*, Éditions de L'Aube, La Tour d'Aigues 2005; N. Aubert, *L'individu hypermoderne*, Erès, Toulouse 2004; G. Lipovetsky, S. Charles, *Des temps hypermodernes*, Grasset, Paris 2004.

⁶ J.F. LYOTARD, *La condition postmoderne. Rapport sur le savoir*, Les Éditions de Minuit, Paris 1979.

⁷ Z. BAUMAN, *Liquid modernity*, Polity, Cambridge 2002.

⁸ R. DONNARUMMA, *Ipermodernità. Dove va la narrativa contemporanea*, Il Mulino. Bologna 2014, p. 21. All the translation from Italian into English are made by the author of this paper.

prefix «hyper- is the must to be of contemporaneity, its prestational obsession»⁹. While he, after Gilles Lipovetsky, prefers to label our years as «hyper-modernity», other authors have explored different possible definitions, like «new realism»¹⁰. Umberto Eco¹¹ rather used to refer to the attitude of living in this period as «negative realism». The most significant characteristic of our time - I believe - is the reaction, perhaps not always totally conscious, to the values depreciation, in a sort of «comeback to order».

This renewed impulsive need for order and clearness translates, on one hand, into the request for social control, security and protection, as shown by the increasing results of populist and right-wing parties worldwide, especially in Western countries, and on the other hand with the growth and strengthening of laws, rules but also social conventions, a sample of which is offered by the woke movement and the cancel culture, and, on a different level, by the empowerment of supranational organisations like the United Nations, the World Health Organisation, NATO and the European Union, to which the global government is progressively transferred, often without directly consulting the citizens. These organisations are no more just organs of coordination among allied sovereign countries, but they tend to state rules and mandatory political goals, that seriously limit the voters' freedom.

In a pedagogical perspective, we can notice, instead of the support to critical thinking, that was the basis of education in the second half of 20th century until the 1990s, a new wave of conformism and the demand of compliance is arising, some-way that is similar to the social context of years 1920s. Also a hundred years ago, in the middle of the post-war crisis, European societies reacted with a strong and dramatic demand for safety and control in politics and in economy, that, as we know, tragically carried to authoritarianism.

2. *Sickness of a system*

I believe that the way we faced the recent pandemic in 2020-2021 offers a persuasive evidence of what I mean.

⁹ *Ivi*, p. 20.

¹⁰ R. LUPERINI, *La fine del postmoderno*, cit.

¹¹ U. ECO, *Cari filosofi, è l'ora del realismo negativo*, in «La Repubblica», March 11th 2012.

I analysed, in some previous studies¹² some Italian books that tried to explain the pandemic and its medical and social effects to children and teenagers, looking for their educational aims. I think that a fruitful perspective to analyse how the emergency has been perceived and, above all, which values and practices have been particularly promoted, is to read books and magazines addressed to children, because of their intrinsic and necessary clarity and conciseness. A book conceived to be read by a child (or with a child) must avoid complexity and it expresses unambiguously the message the author means the most urgent, with simple words, convenient examples and with persuasive narrations. I have reviewed some of the main works published in Italy in the last years, with an analysis approach of qualitative type, in order to classify the primary elements of what we could name the “social pedagogy” of the Covid-19 pandemic. I have identified the most sold books and the ones printed by the main national publishing houses and then I have observed who the authors are, on which aspects they focus, which style they adopt, trying to sum up the “pedagogical code”, that seems to be promoted among the youngsters facing the medical emergency, but also in a more general perspective. In facts, we can infer that some suggestions do not seem to respond just to the present conjuncture, but they hint to long-term horizon, that implies a wider change in everyday habits.

Instead of – as I naively expected – helping the youngsters in overcoming the lock-down shock, the discouraging isolation and the loneliness of a long period during which they were not allowed to meet either their mates and their relatives, particularly their grand-parents, the great majority of these books just limited themselves to recommend the strict respect of some rules like wearing the surgical mask, washing hands and avoiding personal contacts. These books were often nothing more than “good manners manuals”, without caring much about children’s psychological well-being. Grown up in a Western democratic country, I had never seen before a more extreme case of political compliance in culture and among intellectuals, who just in very few cases dared to claim against the almost total denial

¹² A. DESSARDO, *The pandemic in children's books: toward a hyper-modern society? The Italian case*, in «Lubelski rocznik pedagogiczny», XLI, n. 2/2022, pp. 87-100; Id., *La pandemia da Covid-19, frontiera del postmoderno? Qualche ipotesi a partire da alcuni recenti libri per bambini*, in F. De Giorgi, D. De Salvo, C. Lepri, L. Salvarani, S. Scandurra, C. Sindoni (eds.), *Passaggi di frontiera. La storia dell'educazione: confini, identità, esplorazioni*, Messina University Press, Messina 2024, pp. 193-202; Id., *Educating in a discouraged epoch*, in «Educa. International Catholic Journal of Education», n. 10 (2024), pp. 79-91.

of some obvious rights like meet, freely gather, go to work and even go on strike. Some doctors had been disbarred from their professional register and prevented to exercise, just because reluctant in accepting ministerial instructions. In any other circumstances, also feebler measures would be harshly criticised as dangerous attacks to democracy.

Children would never forget these two years and so we adults will do too, of course, with different degrees of awareness. But we must admit that we cannot foresee how children will elaborate this experience as grown up, in their future political and social decisions, and how they will judge the way the pandemic was managed. I fear a radicalisation of our youth in the next decades, as a consequence of the impoverishing of democratic debate in these two years and as a reaction to the actual injustice with which their childhood has been treated.

I think that the damages caused to economy, but above all to democratic life and even to our psychological health, will be largely worse than the benefits achieved in fighting the contagion, if any. According to Giorgio Agamben¹³, one among the very few intellectuals that have raised their voices against the rules implemented by the Italian authorities, I believe that health, *per se*, is just a relative worth, for which we should not sacrifice our fundamental freedoms, on which we built our societies. Agamben, during the pandemic emergency, wrote: «The first thing that the panic wave which has paralysed the country clearly shows, is that our society does not believe any more in anything but in bare life (in Italian: «*nuda vita*», literally «naked life»). It is obvious that Italians are ready to sacrifice almost all, ordinary life conditions, social relationships, job, even their friendships, the loved ones and religious and political beliefs for the danger to get sick»¹⁴. And moreover, pointing out the real risk, more dangerous than the simple provisional sanitary restrictions: «A society living in a perpetual emergency cannot be a free society. [...] What that worries is not at most and not only the present, but the further. As wars left as legacy to peace a variety of ominous technologies, from barbed wire to nuclear power stations, it is very likely that they will try to continue some experiments that governments did not reach to achieve also after the sanitary emergency»¹⁵.

¹³ G. AGAMBEN, *A che punto siamo? L'epidemia come politica*, Quodlibet, Macerata 2021.

¹⁴ *Ivi*, p. 17.

¹⁵ *Ivi*, p. 18.

During these months there were almost no contrast among political parties, that supported, on the left and on the right wings, the government almost unanimously, no more parliamentary debate, very few critical positions in media and press, that use to comment the government measures, the most extreme too, sometime even with enthusiasm, like it is done in totalitarian countries. When the distance from the events, in some years, will permit to consider with more serenity the experiences, analysing media and the cultural production of these days, historians in the future would (hopefully) notice the anomaly of the uniformity in communication, that, instead to educate citizens to critical thinking, aimed to melt the individuals into the mass and to involve them in a greater project¹⁶ that in that specific situation was the fight against Sars-Cov-2, but that could easily change in the next years, just identifying and defining new political goals.

At the moment, we can be surprised that, although the great success of Foucault's theories¹⁷ on control society and biopolitics, long-lastingly worldwide discussed in universities, almost nobody, either in academic milieu and among progressive intellectuals, seems to be worried by the drastic reduction of freedom spaces and by some authoritarian impulses.

It may be useful to read again Roberto Esposito's *Immunitas* (and also its precedent work *Communitas*¹⁸):

When politics takes on life as object of direct intervention, it ends to reduce it to a state of absolute immediacy. [...] That is like if politics, in order to face life, would need to deprive it of any qualitative dimension, to make it «just life», «plain life», «naked life»¹⁹.

This paradigm could have decisive implications in pedagogy and education: «The relationship between me and the other – between the immune one and the common – is represented in terms of a destruction, that in the end tends to involve the both into the conflict»²⁰.

Starting from their Latin etymology, Esposito explains how the two terms *immunitas* and *communitas* are in opposition: a suggestion that may be important to have present. The main educational paradigm, that the

¹⁶ E. CANETTI, *Masse und Macht*, Claassen, Berlin 1960.

¹⁷ M. FOUCAULT, *Surveiller et punir. Naissance de la prison*, Gallimard, Paris 1975.

¹⁸ R. ESPOSITO, *Communitas. Origine e destino della comunità*, Einaudi, Torino 1998.

¹⁹ ID., *Immunitas. Protezione e negazione della vita*, Einaudi, Torino 2002, pp. 17-18.

²⁰ *Ivi*, p. 21.

pandemic may have produced, seems to be more concentrated on hygiene and health safety, rather than on social bonds or, we could also say, more focused on «immunity» rather than on «community». And it is maybe an axiological paradigm that concerns not only the emergency months of Sars-Cov-2, but the next future decades.

3. *Wash your hands and trust in science!*

Probably the book for children that got the highest success among the audience, due to the reputation and the notoriety of its author, was *Ti conosco mascherina*, written by the well known scientist, specialised in veterinary medicine, Ilaria Capua²¹, formerly member of the Italian Parliament (2013-2016) and at the present researcher at the University of Florida, almost permanently present on TV channels in the early months of the pandemic emergency, because of her past researches about the avian influenza, for which, at that time, she became popular to the largest audience.

It is a colourful hardback book with holes, levers and windows to open, published by La Coccinella, the first publishing house to produce this sort of books in Italy since the 1970s. The book, of which the main character is a young girl, begins explaining in an easy but incisive way, coronavirus nature and how it spilled over from animals to human beings (that concerns the author's main competence, dr. Capua is a veterinarian): this was the most accredited hypothesis, before the speculation about its artificial origins in the laboratory of Wuhan. Then there are some advices for preventing the spreading and protect you and the other people, especially the weakest ones.

The book main concern seems to be simply disciplinary and precautionary, as if the biggest challenge for children would be just hygienic and not existential. However, in my frank opinion, *Ti conosco mascherina* has been above all a sly commercial operation, that exploited the reputation of a well known personality present for a long time on the main media, in whom ordinary people trust more for her political and television fame than for her scientific competence, that, of course, is not questioned. Capua has also written a book for adult people, *Il dopo. Il virus che ci ha costretto a cambiare mappa mentale*²².

²¹ I. CAPUA, *Ti conosco mascherina*, La Coccinella Milano 2020.

²² Ead., *Il dopo. Il virus che ci ha costretto a cambiare mappa mentale*, Mondadori, Milano 2020.

Less ambitious, addressed to children in pre-school age, are the two little books by Nicole Vascotto published by Scienza Express, *Laila e il coronavirus*²³ and its sequel *Laila, il coronavirus e la mascherina. Torniamo a scuola!*²⁴. Also here the main character is a girl.

In the first volume mummy explains to Laila, a four years old child, why she cannot any-more attend the infant school, because of the coming of a new mysterious disease. The second one just clarifies how to restart everyday life safely, keeping distances and wearing masks. The idea of publishing the first book came after the author, an architect and designer actually mother of a young girl, posted some sketches on Facebook, that soon became viral and appreciated among infant schools teachers. The contents are very simple, but the drawing are colourful and joyful.

Another very simple work, but released by one of the biggest Italian publishing houses, Rizzoli, which owns the most read newspaper in the country, «Corriere della sera», is an illustrated e-book freely available on the Internet, *La nostra partita*, written by the sport reporter Marco Cattaneo²⁵. The fight against corona-virus is compared by Cattaneo to a football match, using joyful concepts and happy and trustworthy words. In its second part, the book requires the direct involvement of the young reader, who is encouraged to paint and draw his team to win the match. In comparison with other publications, I particularly appreciate this one because less pedantic and more positive. The sacrifice theme, however, is heavily present, even though in a less ideological way.

Very different is the perspective adopted by *Guida galattica al coronavirus! Per bambini e bambine curiosi* (officially translated in *A curious guide for courageous kids*, a non-literal translation), written by Erika Nerini and Daniela Longo²⁶ and promoted by the Children's Museums of Milan, Verona, Rome and Genoa, freely downloadable from the website of the last one, published simultaneously both in Italian and in English. It consists of twenty-four very colourful pages, in which prevails, in an almost obsessive way, trust in science as the key to leave the emergency: the word "scien-

²³ N. VASCOTTO, *Laila e il coronavirus*, Scienza Express, Trieste 2020.

²⁴ Ead., *Laila, il coronavirus e la mascherina. Torniamo a scuola!*, Scienza Express, Trieste 2020.

²⁵ M. CATTANEO, *La nostra partita. Tireremo un calcio anche al virus, e vinceremo noi!*, Rizzoli, Milano 2020.

²⁶ E. NERINI, D. LONGO, *Guida galattica al coronavirus! Per bambini e bambine curiosi*. Museo dei Bambini, Genova 2020.

tists” recurs four times in the pamphlet total nine written pages. Other two pages (19-20) report six rules to prevent the contagion. Actually it is hard to categorize it as a real book, being more effectively an informative brochure produced by the communication offices of the museums (that maybe explains also the particular concern for science).

The incipit says: «This story starts in a distant city, near the banks of the Blue River, in China. The city of Wuhan». Suddenly the character of dr. Li Wenliang is introduced, specifying that he discovered the new disease because he was «very curious». Consistently with its ambition to offer a “scientific” product, the book describes for a while Sars-CoV-2 specifics like the virus size and its possibility to spread, telling i.e. that «a sneeze is enough to make it travel almost 2 meters». There is no more space for narration: the pamphlet is indeed a “guide”, a simple handbook, that at most can say:

Not being able to go out with your friends is kind of sad. But it’s important that you don’t, because a sneeze, a hug, or even a handshake could be enough to get you sick.

Scientists say the virus spreads very quickly in closed quarters and crowded places.

It really gets on well with everyone, no matter what language you speak, where you come from, or how old you are.²⁷

4. *Other perspectives*

Among the various works circulating in Italy in this period, I think that the ones deserving more are *Nano Gianni e i granelli rossi* by Fabio Sbattella²⁸ and the short novel *Noemi nella tempesta*²⁹ published by De Agostini and written by Alberto Pellai, doctor and researcher in hygiene at the State University of Milan, but also psychotherapist and well known author for children and about children and teen-agers, and by his wife Barbara Tamborini, psycho-pedagogist. Aside *Noemi nella tempesta*, during the pandemic Pellai wrote also *Mentre la tempesta colpiva forte. Quello che noi genitori abbiamo imparato in tempo di emergenza*³⁰.

²⁷ *Ivi*, p. 15.

²⁸ F. SBATTELLA, *Nano Gianni e i granelli rossi*, Giunti, Firenze 2020.

²⁹ A. PELLAI, B. TAMBORINI, *Noemi nella tempesta*, DeA Planet, Milano 2021.

³⁰ A. PELLAI, *Mentre la tempesta colpiva forte. Quello che noi genitori abbiamo imparato in tempo di emergenza*, De Agostini, Novara 2020.

Differently from the other works, the authors of *Noemi nella tempesta* do not focus on the disease and on its prevention, neither they give a list of rules to follow or simple scientific information, but they catch conveniently the occasion of the pandemic, experienced traumatically by the youngsters, to offer a really educative story, even if frankly conventional and somewhere a bit stereotypical.

The plot, told using the first person like it was written in a diary by Noemi, a young girl attending the primary school in a town in Northern Italy, and by her brother Luca, attending the middle school, is plain but effective: Noemi does not want to work to a school project together with her Chinese mate Li, so she makes the wish to see him never more, using a little mirror given her by the grandmother, that is supposed to be magical. In the same evening, on February 21st 2020, the government announce the suspension of classes and of almost every economical activities in the region. That day, as also the book recalls, was actually discovered the first case of Covid-19 in Italy, in a 38 years old man of Codogno, a little town in Lombardy. The so called «red zone» would be enlarged in the following days to other several provinces in the North and to whole Italy from March 9th, ceasing almost all the economic activities and citizens' social life. Italians reacted to that extremely severe measures with unexpected obedience, strictly respecting the lock-down rules.

Li, the Chinese school-mate, gives up to attend his classes. Feeling guilty, believing that all the situation is caused by her selfish wish, Noemi, with the help of Luca and the girl he likes, Francesca, tries to find Li and to fix the situation, apologising and making him accepted. They discover that Li's family manage a tobacconist's, so they go to talk to his mother.

The happy end comes, but it is not so obvious either silly: the parents reconcile themselves but without getting together again, Noemi and Li do not become really friends, Luca and Francesca do not become a couple. Above all, the pandemic remains a worrying threat, we have not yet overcome.

The moral is explicit and it is explained directly by the authors:

We will learn the lesson that this experience taught us, that we cannot live without friends, that school seems to be a struggle, but its absence drives us to madness. And that life is the most beautiful thing we received and that we must celebrate it everyday and live it intensively without wasting anything of what it can gift us. We also learnt that we cannot control everything. But when you see a gigantic wave running toward to you and that is going to submerge you, you have to

run to find out a board and surf on it, finding new balances and trying to do what you have never done before³¹.

I particularly like this care, unfortunately lacking or not highlighted enough in other works, this attention to what that makes life worthy to be experienced, beyond the basic biological data, beyond health aspects, beyond the obsession of which we are the victims during these two years.

More interesting to us was the fable by the psychotherapist Fabio Sbattella, *Nano Gianni e i granelli rossi*³², published by Giunti with an afterword, in the form of a letter to parents, by the philosopher Umberto Galimberti.

Sbattella recounts the ongoing epidemic in an allegorical manner, without explicitly referring to Sars-Cov-2, but to generic «red grains», that infest Madia's fantasy realm. It is precisely this distancing from the chronicle that allows the author to avoid falling into the precepts of a pandemic «manual» or «etiquette», seeking instead to draw a moral lesson for dealing with the emergency. The solution is found by the wise Dwarf Gianni of the title, who enjoins the inhabitants of Madia to «make themselves small» just like the grains that cover their kingdom, so that they can destroy them from within, instead of looking for miraculous solutions in military force and technical-scientific development.

Making oneself small corresponds to taking care of everyday life with passion, accepting the hardships of the emergency, but without being crushed by them: children play with each other, grandmothers bake cakes experimenting with new recipes, merchants rest from their trade. In the book appendix, Sbattella himself offers young readers some hints on games to play at home and how to better spend time with mum and dad who are forced to stay home from work. The allegory is clarified by Galimberti³³, who invites adults to spend the suspended time of lockdown together with their children, perhaps reading together, not hiding from them the seriousness of the moment humanity was going through, and caring for their inner selves and their family relationships.

³¹ A. PELLAI, B. TAMBORINI, *Noemi nella tempesta*, cit., pp. 231-232.

³² F. SBATELLA, *Nano Gianni e i granelli rossi*, cit.

³³ *Ivi*, p. 33.

5. *Girls' power!*

In the most ideological specimen of book I examined, *Il dottor Li e il virus con in testa una corona* by Francesca Cavallo³⁴, the same author of the worldwide feminist best-seller for young girls *Storie della buonanotte per bambine ribelli*, the faith in science and the obedience to it were not just limited to the pandemic, but they were openly connected to the engagement for a fairer and more equal society. Therefore, who had some doubts about the actions against Covid-19 contagion, seemed to suggest the author, in some way could be an obstacle also along the way for the general scientific progress, for the safeguard of natural environment, the fight against racism and prejudices, for a more equal economic system and so on.

All the protagonists of the books published in Italy during the pandemic, in order to reason about it, were girls. Thus, while boys embodied, also in several literary works, the vanguards of 20th century ideologies – fascism and other authoritarianisms – girls seem now to be the forerunners of our 21st century hyper-modern times. Greta Thunberg herself could be considered the ideal leader of this crowd of «rebel girls». After her famous school strikes for climate, she has again and again demonstrated for other humanitarian causes: the migrants in the Mediterranean, the right of Palestine to independence (and the condemn to Israeli politics, quite often marked by anti-Semitism) and of women to safe abortion, Ukrainian freedom against Russian aggression and so on.

Girls are more and more often the protagonists of numerous novels and films written and produced in the last years. The main reason, probably, could be that this is a sort of compensation for the absolute traditional male predominance in the past decades, but maybe this happens also because girls are stereotypically perceived as more trustworthy and more compliant in accepting new rules, and are considered more naturally social than boys: so they can be presented as smart civic models. This idea can be true even if very often female characters are shown as rebels or non-conformists, odd and eccentric, usually refusing the traditional roles that the society set for them. Nowadays heroines are no more princesses or fairies, who accept passively to be rescued by knights and to marry the charming prince, but they act directly in order to realise their dreams and to achieve their own goals. But precisely in this refuse of tradition and in the subver-

³⁴ F. CAVALLO, *Il dottor Li e il virus con in testa una corona*, Feltrinelli, Milano 2021.

sion of the old rules lays the new educative paradigm, which is arranging a new normality, a new obedience, a new need for compliance.

But it can be seen that this message seems to be possible in all the publications I read, through the pledge of a sacrifice, through the proof of personal surrender, in order to achieve a higher collective well-being in the future. Conceptually, there is no difference between such a discourse and, for instance, the call to enlist in the army to fight the enemy in the trenches, as our forefathers did a hundred years ago, and how children's books actually told about it in the 1920s³⁵. The individual life can be sacrificed for the higher collective benefit: nowadays no more for the nation, of course, but for humankind.

In the last decades, we have educated children to think critically, to deconstruct stereotypes and social constructs – such as family, sex and gender, religion, nation. Today, I think, we are facing the *pars construens*: a new worship is growing over the ruins of our civilisation and it requires compliance and obedience.

I can confirm my hypothesis, reading, among others, *Il dottor Li e il virus con in testa una corona* written by Francesca Cavallo and illustrated by Claudia Flandoli. The text was originally freely available on Cavallo's personal web-site and then published, by the well-known progressive publishing house Feltrinelli, after a crowd-funding action.

Francesca Cavallo had already achieved international fame thanks to *Storie della buonanotte per bambine ribelli*³⁶, which sold hundreds of thousands copies worldwide. She wrote it together with Elena Favilli, drafting a kind of feminist encyclopaedia, which collects a hundred short biographies (per volume) of different women (the third book is specially dedicated to migrant women³⁷, the fourth to «Italian extraordinary women»³⁸). The selection is really wide and various, including, at the same time, Serena Williams and Rita Levi Montalcini, Malala Yousafzai and Frida Kahlo, Margherita Hack and Michelle Obama, all proposed as different models to emulate. Some of the mottoes with which the books have been advertised

³⁵ Cfr. i.e. S. GOTTA, *Piccolo alpino*, Mondadori, Milano 1926.

³⁶ F. CAVALLO, E. FAVILLI, *Storie della buonanotte per bambine ribelli*, Mondadori, Milano 2018-2020.

³⁷ E. FAVILLI, *Storie della buonanotte per bambine ribelli. 100 donne migranti che hanno cambiato il mondo*, Mondadori, Milano 2020.

³⁸ EAD., *Storie della buonanotte per bambine ribelli. 100 donne italiane straordinarie*, Mondadori, Milano 2020.

were: «Once upon a time there was a young girl who dreamt of... marrying a charming prince? No, of going to Mars!» and «To the rebel girls of the world: the story you cannot find out in the book, is the one you are already writing». Elena Favilli published also *Guida per bambine ribelli. Alla scoperta del corpo che cambia*³⁹, a progressive handbook about puberty and growth. «Rebel girls» hence became a rich brand to exploit, with a great deal of audience understanding, and were the sign of a profound change in common sense.

Coming back to *Il dottor Li e il virus con in testa una corona*, this book clearly points at trust in science as the only way to go through the emergency. This book is addressed to an older audience (aged 8-12 years), so the attention is not focused just on prevention and rules, but also on some civic values to enforce. Dr. Li Wenliang, the Chinese scientist from Wuhan, who was the first to denounce the virus spreading, is frankly presented as a martyr of the scientific new worship, almost a secular saint for our days and similarly other scientists (*scienziate*, «women scientist», mum literally says) at work in order to find out the origin of the virus, a vaccine and a therapy.

Francesca Cavallo insists also on the possibility of an active role for children, apart from the pandemic, desiring a «fairer world». It is properly a call to action, where the pandemic seems to be just a pretext, an excuse to do active politics. Dr. Li Wenliang and Greta Thunberg have very few in common, but in this vision they fight on the same side, for science and against obscurantism, prejudice, economic liberalism and the exploitation of the planet resources. Therefore, doubting the measures adopted against Covid-19, becomes fatally next to questioning scientific progress itself, but also environmental concerns and even social justice, peace and international cooperation and security. In this way, a new system of values is arising. And values, by definition, are not questioned, values demand faithful adherence and obedient compliance.

With some exceptions, we must acknowledge that the great majority of the books written during the pandemic, are concerned at best with preventive measures, especially the importance of the correct way to wear the surgical mask, on maintaining the hands clean and keeping social distance, justifying and confirming the restrictions that have prevented the young readers to go to school, to meet their friends and to see their grandparents.

³⁹ EAD., *Guida per bambine ribelli. Alla scoperta del corpo che cambia*, Mondadori, Milano 2021.

We can say that a number of these works look more like handbooks containing pieces of advice, and in some case like good manners pamphlets, rather than like imaginative tales written to comfort the youngest readers in difficult times.

These books are usually filled with subtle optimism and overall with the fundamental confidence in the power of science. A recurrent issue is, in fact, the “scientific” basis, that tries to explain what coronavirus is, its origins, how it spreads and, of course, how it can be defeated and how children can play their part in this big historical challenge. Optimism, indeed, persuades that the pandemic could be treated as a historical challenge to accept and not as a catastrophe to cope with. A challenge to win all together.

I quoted books about the pandemic, but we can find out other features of hyper-modern styles in other literary works. Raffaele Donnarumma employed the category of hyper-modern to review the recent Italian and international literature, marking the recurring use of tales in the first singular person point of view, even when the story is clearly fictional, but pretending to offer an authentic testimony. And that because, according to Donnarumma, after the post-modernist dissolution of traditions and ideologies, with the loss of social relevance by parties and churches, only the individual seems to be reliable: in a broken up society only the individual subject, with his or her weaknesses, in his or her loneliness, seems to be authentic and trustworthy.

Among other common traits of hyper-modernist literature there is the re-discovering of realism and recurring references to the past, often object of nostalgic representations, as if the lost meaning could be found only in history (or just in memories), while the present appears void and insignificant. Actually many novels written for the youngsters in the last twenty years – at least the Italian books I read⁴⁰ – are set in the past, particularly during fascism and World War II, inspiring children to fight against present time injustice and discriminations and invoking a sort of new resistance. But many books also describe in realistic narrative, through their protagonists’ eyes, our present days with their problems, directly calling the young readers to act for improving them. Call to actions are other traits of hyper-modern and they often have clear pedagogical goals.

⁴⁰ A. DESSARDO, *Sulle tracce dell'ipermoderno nella recente narrativa italiana per ragazzi*, in «Pagine giovani» n. 1/2023, pp. 6-10.

Quite the opposite, we could object referring to the great achievement of the fantasy genre, emerged exactly at the end of the last century with the beginning of *Harry Potter's* saga, followed by a large crowd of imitations in the first decade of the third millennium. But, according to Darko Suvin's explanation⁴¹, science-fiction, fantasy, utopia and dystopia are all artistic representations of the detected tensions between the unsatisfying reality and its possible alternatives. Fantasy, a genre established by two Catholic writers like J.K.K. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis, reflects, according to Fredric Jameson⁴², to whom we owe the most influential essay about post-modern⁴³, an archaic and confused nostalgia for the agricultural and pre-capitalistic societies.

In fantasy novels heroes desperately, and sometime unsuccessfully, fight against obscure forces that pervertedly control their universes, with the aim to re-establish and restore an ancient and mythic order of justice.

Fantasy novels are in depth allegories of the disorder and troubles of our present days.

⁴¹ D. SUVIN, *Metamorphoses of science-fiction. On the poetics and history of a literary genre*. Yale University Press, New Haven 1979.

⁴² F. JAMESON, *Magical narratives. Romance as genre*, in «Critical challenges: The Bellagio Symposium», vol. 7 (1975), pp. 135-163.

⁴³ Id., *Postmodernism, or the cultural logic of late capitalism*, Duke University Press, Durham 1984.