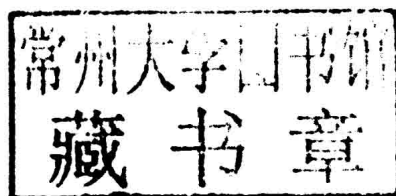


SIMONA BONDAVALLI

Fictions of Youth

Pier Paolo Pasolini, Adolescence,
Fascisms



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FICTIONS OF YOUTH

Pier Paolo Pasolini, Adolescence, Fascisms

Fictions of Youth examines Pier Paolo Pasolini's redefinition of intellectual commitment through his lifelong contribution to the discourse of youth. In this book Simona Bondavalli explores the many ways in which youth, real or imagined, shaped Pasolini's poetics and critical position; simultaneously, she shows how Pasolini's poetry, films, fiction, and non-fiction served as a source for representations of contemporary young people, in Italy especially, during a key period in the formation of national identity. This period begins with Pasolini's own intellectual coming of age during Fascism in the 1940s, and ends with the emergence of neo-capitalism in the 1970s, which he labelled a "new Fascism" because of its disastrous effects on young people. In the decades between these two Fascisms, youth symbolized innovation and rejuvenation, innocence and peril, idealism and rebellion. Pasolini's portrayals of young people in literature and visual media both reflected and shaped those ideas.

The book consists of six diachronically arranged chapters, each centred on a paradigm of youth, which is explored in several genres and analysed in the context of contemporary discourse. *Fictions of Youth* is the only work to date that systematically addresses Pasolini's focus on youth and establishes it as a fundamental category for understanding his eclectic body of work.

(Toronto Italian Studies)

SIMONA BONDAVALLI is an associate professor in the Department of Italian at Vassar College.

In loving memory of my parents.

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Le Lettere: 1945-1954. Edited by Nico Naldini, Turin: Einaudi 1986

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The Selected Poetry of Pier Paolo Pasolini: A Bilingual Edition. Edited and translated by Stephen Sartarelli. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2014.

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FICTIONS OF YOUTH

Pier Paolo Pasolini, Adolescence, Fascisms

Introduction

Adulto? Mai – mai, come l'esistenza
che non matura – resta sempre acerba ...

Adult? Never, never – like life itself
which never matures, forever green ...¹

Writing about youth in Pier Paolo Pasolini's work means, in a sense, writing about his entire oeuvre. He was, after all, the poet who popularized the phrase "*la meglio gioventù*," or "the best of youth," which television and cinema audiences, in Italy and twenty-seven other countries, now associate with the popular 2003 miniseries by Marco Tullio Giordana. Pasolini did not invent the expression, but Italianized a verse from a World War I song from Friuli, the region of his maternal family, in northeastern Italy. He chose the phrase, which in the song mourned young lives lost to the war, as the title for a collection of poems in Friulian dialect. The "best of youth," in those poems, was celebrated as an idyllic condition, lost or inaccessible to the poet, and invariably tinted with nostalgia. The collection contained Pasolini's early poems, several composed before he was twenty years old. That premature nostalgia for lost youth marked the beginning of a literary and cinematographic career characterized by a persistent idealization of youth. The literary construction of adolescence as a natural force, uncorrupted by civilization, and in constant flux, shaped Pasolini's poetics and provided a subject for identification.

However, Giordana's miniseries, which claims to tell "the story of a generation," namely of Italians who came of age during the 1960s, also evokes, without direct quotation, Pasolini's most famous pronouncement

about young protesters in 1968: a verse libel in which he polemically sided with the young policemen who had clashed with protesting students at the University of Rome.² Pasolini's controversial position with respect to the student movement, still remembered by many Italians over four decades later, introduces the opposite pole of his interest in youth: the social subject that gained great visibility in the 1960s.³ As a social observer, Pasolini was deeply aware of the attention devoted to adolescents in modern Italy. He dedicated many articles and interviews to analysis of young people, their habits, and their political aspirations. Having grown up during Fascism, he had also experienced firsthand the translation of a cult of youth into social and cultural policies aimed at controlling the young. The generational discourse, which had shaped his own coming-of-age, reappeared twenty years later when he addressed the young protesters as "sons" and "daughters." The intersection of those two concepts of youth – a cultural construction and a specific historical subject – which can be traced in many of his works, structures this study.

Youth, both as a socio-historical cohort and a literary ideal, with its changing connotations, influenced Pasolini's poetics, critical position, and self-perception. He identified with the infinite potentiality and transformational energy of adolescence, and positioned himself critically outside of a patriarchal order, which would be questioned by young people in the 1960s. He related ambivalently to generational discourse, particularly when it intersected with literary and ideological genealogies. On the one hand, he flourished in his youth, adopted models of youthful self-creation from Romantic and Symbolist literature, and embraced the non-conformist and anti-authoritarian stances that we associate with modern adolescence. His confessional style, as a poet and essayist, established in his work the "authority of the personal," which Patricia Meyer Spacks describes as a central feature of adolescence in literature.⁴

As the verses quoted in the epigraph exemplify, immaturity was a privileged position for Pasolini, though he developed an early sense of himself as an artist, identified a poetic lineage that he wished to enter and alter, and established a distinctive, mature, presence in the Italian literary world (if only to question that acquired authority whenever possible). Following the configurations of youth in Pasolini's works, consequently, provides a lens onto the creation of a critical subject, which converses with both literary tradition and contemporary society. Youth offers a space for identification, self-invention, or projection

of desires. Since its appropriation for symbolic purposes long predates Pasolini, he relies on a familiar metaphor and subverts its significance by changing the context. Frequently, adolescence offers a space for resistance: the interstitial position occupied by young people – or particular subgroups – in the social order represents a crucial feature in Pasolini's attention to youth. Adolescence embodies the author's critical position, questioning universal models of development and modernization. Finally, Pasolini often chose young people as interlocutors, even though, increasingly in later years, the dialogue turned into a monologue, and the "*maestro mirabile*" into a slightly pedantic pedagogue.⁵

Besides exploring the multiple ways in which youth, real or imagined, shaped Pasolini's poetics, this book also looks at Pasolini's oeuvre as a source for representations of young people, mostly Italians, in a key period for the formation of a new national identity. There are no doubts about the partiality of such representations. As Stephen Burt claims, "Poets do not, as a rule, react to cultural changes by striving to represent them fairly and comprehensively. Rather, poets react to changes that move them, to what they see in their locales and in their social strata (often, urban, educated elites), or else to popular impressions of a changing culture."⁶ Pasolini is no exception. His descriptions of young people, in any media, are always coloured by his subjective mood, be it nostalgia, delight, or frustration. However, rhetorical and stylistic choices foreground his subjective stance, and I read his impressions within a broader discourse of youth produced in other media and analysed by social and cultural historians. On the other hand, his sustained interest in the particularity of regional cultures leads to acute observations of changing youth styles and behaviours, both locally and nationally.

The focus on Italian youth in this book – which excludes Pasolini's representations of the young people he encountered in his frequent travels to Africa and Asia – is also, indirectly, a focus on Italy's self-creation between the 1940s and the early 1970s. This period begins with Fascism, which elevated youth to a political myth, and ends with the neo-capitalist era he referred to as "new Fascism," due to its disastrous effects on young people. Through the examination of adolescence as a sociological and ideological signifier permeating his work, *Fictions of Youth* highlights the crucial role played by Pasolini, both as a witness and a participant, in the contradictory mythologizing of adolescence that pervades Italian culture in the twentieth century.⁷

From his university years in Bologna, the city where he was born in 1922, to his last days in Rome, where he was murdered in 1975, Pasolini

occupied a variety of positions in the Italian cultural world: he was a poet in dialect and in Italian, an experimental novelist, a literary critic, a playwright, and a filmmaker.⁸ He edited journals and poetry collections, wrote essays on a range of subjects from linguistics to film theory, held columns in popular magazines and newspapers, translated classical drama. His novels and films received prestigious awards, but more frequently were charged with obscenity or religious offence, requiring frequent appearances in court and gaining him the reputation of a controversial, or even scandalous, intellectual. He often embraced that reputation, and nourished it with the relentless "introspection and experimentation" which, as Robert S.C. Gordon observed, set the boundaries of his work.⁹ His homosexuality, which was the cause for his first trial and expulsion from the Communist Party, instigated prosecution and the sense of exclusion that informs many of his writings.¹⁰ Despite a passionate defence of Communism, his re-evaluation of irrationality as a critical tool alienated him from the cultural politics of the Italian Communist Party in the post-war years. Considered and self-identified as a Gramscian intellectual, committed to the ideal of culture as a means for political emancipation, he believed, more than he was willing to admit and more than Antonio Gramsci did, in the value of "high" culture.¹¹ However, he also appreciated "popular" culture in the sense of folk and oral traditions (*cultura popolare*, as opposed to "pop"), and lamented its erosion due to neo-capitalism in the 1960s.

Adolescents populate the pages and screens of Pasolini's work: street urchins in Roman slums, peasant *giovinetti* in the Friuli countryside, proud and ancient youths in Persia, American flower children and Italian Teddy boys are recurrent protagonists of his fiction and non-fiction, of his written as well as cinematographic works, creating what French theorist Michel Foucault defined as a "great saga of youth."¹² One of the few elements of continuity in his eclectic and multidisciplinary production, adolescence is invested with a symbolic meaning that is peculiar to the author's aesthetics, but at the same time strongly influenced by changing cultural models. From the early journalism in Fascist youth organizations, to the unfinished pedagogical treatise published in the weekly *Il Mondo* a few months before his death, the discourse of youth was the arena in which the author negotiated, with readers, viewers, institutions, and other intellectuals, his assessment of the substantial changes taking place in the country. Beyond the pedagogical passion and erotic desire usually cited, Pasolini's attention to adolescence can be traced to a wider

debate in which young people embody, or directly express, the hopes and fears of a young nation.¹³

Because Pasolini's life coincided with the culmination of what historian Patrizia Dogliani called "the long century of youth," the configuration of adolescence in his works partakes in a multifaceted discourse that includes literary *topoi*, historical and cultural changes, and media representations.¹⁴ As adolescence acquired importance in both the historical landscape and collective imagination, its symbolic connotations became progressively unstable. Throughout the "long century," youth stood for innocence and vitality, anti-authoritarianism and rejection of traditions, rejuvenation and revolution. Increasingly, however, youth also connoted fluidity and uncertainty, potentiality and incompleteness.¹⁵ Thanks to its ambiguity, youth could thus become synonymous with both opportunity and danger, and be appropriated as a mobilizing myth at opposite ends of the political spectrum. Modern notions of youth, both compelling and ambivalent, became available to Pasolini through an official Fascist education and a cultural "anti-Fascist" self-education via poetry: school and the extra-curricular activities for the young imposed by the regime promoted the qualities of vitality, strength, and courage, as an antidote to bourgeois decadence; the writings of Rimbaud, the Symbolist poets, and Dostoevsky offered young Pasolini the myth of youth as self-discovery, singularity, and self-creation.¹⁶ Keenly self-aware as a young man, likely encouraged by the practice of writing about youth in Fascist journals, Pasolini found a space for identification in the polyvalent concept of youth, which shaped his critical stance and poetics early on.¹⁷ The aura of exceptionality and the values projected onto adolescence by modern society gave him a sense of mission, which ought to be carried out both individually and collectively. He depicted himself and his peers as endowed with a special task: to renew the poetry of tradition by running it through an "anti-traditional filter" available to the young. Stylistic innovation combined with an underlying ethical purpose, which would soon acquire pedagogical overtones, characterized his identification with youth thereafter.¹⁸

More prominently, perhaps, adolescence in Pasolini's work often functions as a correlative of the poet's self-exclusion from the locus of power. Characterizations of Pasolini in terms of marginality are by now canonical, and they have been since his 1954 poem "Le Ceneri di Gramsci" (The Ashes of Gramsci) offered a concise and powerful self-identification via contradiction: "tra i due mondi, la tregua, in cui non siamo" (2.1; between the two worlds, a truce not our own).¹⁹ The two