

## Rebels Without a Cause: Youth and Terrorism in Contemporary Italian Film

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### Synopsis

This essay explores the representation of Italian terrorists in recent generational films set in the 1960s and 1970s. While they foreground the protagonists' youth and celebrate it as a historically new condition, these coming-of-age narratives typically present radicalism either in terms of youthful idealism or youthful error, with corresponding nostalgic or revisionist approaches that obscure its ideological basis. An analysis of the selective generational appeal deployed by four recent films through narrative structure, style and casting highlights an alternative reading of the post-ideological approach to the representation of terrorism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### Biography

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Portrait of the terrorist as a young man, or a young woman: this could be the subtitle of several recent films depicting the experience of political violence in Italy in the 1970s. Cinema has played a prominent role, as Alan O'Leary has argued, "in articulating the ongoing impact of the *anni di piombo* (leaden years) and in defining the ways in which Italians remember and work through the events of the long 1970s" (O'Leary, "Anni di Piombo" 244), and a number of mainstream films of the last decade shape that collective memory in generational terms. Several recent films set in that period focus on coming-of-age narratives and define the parallel coming-of-age of a nation reborn after the end of the fascist dictatorship and the war. Youth is a trope frequently employed to depict on the screen the desire for change underlying the Italian economic boom and the ensuing protest movements: personal conflicts between parents and children easily become a social and historical clash between the old and new social order; youth's larger autonomy, favored by a newly thriving economy, parallels the country's increased independence from foreign powers. In celebrating Italy's coming-of-age as a democratic nation, contemporary Italian cinema celebrates a new notion of youth that is both origin and consequence of the social and cultural changes characterizing the long 1968.<sup>1</sup> The representation of terrorism plays an important role in the articulation of both the historical narrative and the generational discourse, even in movies that are not ostensibly about radicalism. Examples included here are taken from four movies of varying degrees of commercial and critical success, only one of which is explicitly about a terrorist group: *La prima linea* (Renato De Maria, 2009). The other three, *La meglio gioventù* [*The best of youth*], (Marco Tullio Giordana, 2003), *Mio fratello è figlio unico* [*My brother is an only child*] (Daniele Luchetti, 2007), and *Il grande sogno* [*The big dream*] (Michele Placido, 2009) introduce the choice of armed struggle in the context of

broader historical portraits that celebrate youth's emergence as a prominent social force in the 1960s and 70s. They present radicalism as a product of the new notion of youth affirming itself in that period, but then relegate terrorists off screen as they challenge social norms on the basis of that new definition. These narrative choices assume a significance that goes beyond the historical accuracy of each account, and ought to be considered in a discussion on the ways in which Italian cinema contributes to the constitution of popular memory of "the years of lead". On one hand these movies celebrate youth and the time in Italian history in which youth is being socially and culturally redefined: no longer a moment of transition to be overcome in the trajectory towards adulthood, but a moment of fracture, a break with the generation of the fathers in search of existential, social, and political renewal. On the other hand, in defining that experience as an experience of youth, these films seem to reduce its political impact. Since nostalgia and revisionism are key elements in the representational strategies employed by these movies it may be useful to consider their functioning as more than reactionary approaches to the past. In other words, rather than simply focusing on what "reality" these nostalgic approaches obscure, on what they don't show us of terrorism, it may be interesting to consider what the success of this approach reveals of the audience's relationship with that past. The question isn't simply what *The best of youth* obscures about Italian terrorism in the 1970s, but what its success tells us about the audience's desire to remember or imagine that period, a desire that inscribes terrorists in the ambiguous space occupied by youth in contemporary Italian society: a mythical condition disconnected from contemporary political practice. Likewise, *La prima linea* isn't problematic because it presents a mature terrorist who has reconsidered his views, but because he assigns those views to youth.

The centrality of childhood in the Italian cinematic canon requires no demonstration: Marcia Landy's "A cinema of childhood" accurately summarizes the various functions of children as signifiers of innocence, "unknowing" or "knowing" victims of social forces, and generally vehicles of a perspective lacking from the adult world (Landy 234).<sup>2</sup> If young children respond to the need, repeatedly felt in post-war Italian cinema, to provide an innocent and honest view on society, or at times a poetic one, the fascination with adolescents, to a certain extent a legacy of Neorealism, has come to the foreground particularly as cinema has started to deal with political events of the long 1968. Coming-of-age narratives seem particularly appropriate for the representation of a period in which young people became protagonist of profound cultural and political transformations, and family conflicts provide a stage on which the rebellion against all institutions can be played. Generational portraits, of the best and the worst of Italian youth, highlight the collective element of the struggle. What has often been read as an Oedipal conflict can perhaps be more productively viewed as the affirmation of a new notion of youth, off and on screen, which questions assumptions on what constitutes maturity. Youth as the trans-historical pastoral, signifier of innocence, is replaced by youth as historical subject, agent of innovation. Many recent films articulate and celebrate this epochal shift, from youth as a necessary path towards socialization and adulthood to desirable outsider condition questioning the values of adults. By taking that transformation to its extreme, terrorism challenges conventional coming-of-age patterns and, consequently, is either excluded or justified on account of

traditional connotations of young age: irrationality and irresponsibility, naiveté and aimless rebelliousness.

The young age of the protagonists of the four films chosen here is immediately highlighted through their characterization as sons and daughters of variously worried, understanding, unknowing, uncomprehending parents. The contrast of personalities organizing *La meglio gioventù* is introduced through each brother's relationship with his parents and professors. Matteo is conflicted and anguished, and his dissatisfaction manifests itself in firm oppositions that meet with the incomprehension of his elders, while Nicola's natural openness facilitates his rapport with authorities, even when expressing disagreement. Replicating the brotherly antagonism of *La meglio gioventù*, *Mio fratello è figlio unico* also bases the characterization of its young protagonists Accio and Manrico on their familial relationship.<sup>3</sup> Consistently with the same generational struggle, Laura and her brother Andrea in *Il grande sogno*, are characterized first and foremost through the conflicted relationship with their bourgeois family. Their coming of age as *Sessantottini* is explored as a rebellion against an authoritarian and unsympathetic father, who alternatively threatens and guilts his children into obedience to an obviously superseded code of conduct. As the titles explicitly indicate, these films focus on the creation of a generational identity: a brotherhood/sisterhood in which age commonality is stronger than blood ties, a collective utopia that brings together young people of different social classes and political stances. Terrorism is "a family affair" in many Italian movies, as Lombardi argues for Gianni Amelio's *Colpire al cuore* and Giuseppe Bertolucci's *Segreti Segreti* (Lombardi 88-100).<sup>4</sup> However, unlike their 1990s predecessors, portrayals of terrorism as family conflict in the new millennium don't highlight civil war as a consequence of political acts, but rather reduce or complicate the political significance of those acts by foregrounding the protagonists' young age and the radical novelty of their experience.

*La meglio gioventù* and *Il grande sogno*, but also *Mio fratello è figlio unico*, celebrate the emergence of youth as a distinct social group, identified by specific social practices and forms of cultural consumption. Popular songs, experimental movies and beat poetry, dress style and dance parties, *vespas* and cars, backpacking trips and sexual promiscuity signal adolescents' independence and function as generational markers even before sit-ins, rallies and strikes identify young people as antagonistic with respect to older generations. The young protagonists of these films embody a new idea of youth: no longer a moment of transition between childhood and adulthood, it is rather the result of a fracture, a moment of discontinuity with respect to other existential conditions, an ontological status that overcomes class divisions and challenges all authority: family, school, church, police. Rebellion and anti-authoritarianism, regardless of specific political allegiances or economic background, define a new historical subject. Change is implicit in its being and finds expression in a variety of actions that validate this notion of youth: university occupations, peace marches, workers' rallies, but also the indefinable frustration that leads Matteo to join the police and Accio to become a member of a neo-fascist group. Adolescents are the agents of a renewal of society, propounders of ideas that are a priori incompatible with those of their elders and the idea of youth they embody is celebrated. While the contrast between siblings – Nicola and Matteo, young protester and young cop; Manrico and Accio, young Communist organizer and young Fascist radical – structures the narrative, it is their common trait,

youth, that highlights their rebelliousness above and beyond their political views. Manrico's activism affirms precisely the notion of youth as new agent of history, whereas Accio's devotion to Fascism is presented as the expression of an immaturity that he will outgrow with time. The coincidence of his renunciation of radicalism with sexual initiation, a classic milestone toward maturity in coming-of-age stories, confirms the origin of his involvement in political violence. In *La meglio gioventù*, youthful rebellion drives the narrative, whether through the aided escape of a young patient from a mental institution or the occupation of a university; the verbal dispute with an old-fashioned professor or a spontaneous and carefree backpacking trip to northern Europe.

Although armed struggle was a product of the change that these films celebrate as youthful rebellion, radicalism itself is nearly excluded from the screen. In *Il grande sogno* Libero's transition from student organizer to terrorist is left to the epilogue, and juxtaposed to Laura's happy motherhood. In *Mio fratello è figlio unico*. Manrico's decision to join a radical armed group is never explained. No information is provided about the group and his role within it. The anonymity reinforces the sense of an activity that does not concern the viewers until Manrico loses his life to it and Accio has to step in as surrogate father for his brother's child. The exclusion is particularly significant in *La meglio gioventù*, given the scope of its narrative: not only are the most famous terrorist actions of the period notably unmentioned in a movie that presents itself as "the portrait of an entire generation". The token terrorist in this exemplary family is portrayed unsympathetically as the cold, conniving woman who relinquishes her maternal duties for the alternative family of her armed group. The ideological reasons for Giulia's transition from student protest to radicalism are as elusive as Matteo's youthful angst, and her decision to go underground stops time for her like suicide does for Matteo. Her autonomous decision, conflicting with traditional rites of passage into adulthood, removes her from viewers' attention and comprehension. Her husband Nicola, by contrast, outgrows his rebelliousness and channels his desire for change into specific reform ideas, which do not interfere with his parental responsibilities.

Boys will be boys, these movies say: they will rebel against their parents, establish a new code of conduct, and introduce a new culture. But then they will grow up to become successful doctors, bankers - and parents - or die. In a society in which adulthood is determined by parenthood, the choice to be a terrorist instead of a father or a mother is a rejection of maturity. The youthful idealism and rebelliousness are only acceptable inasmuch as the break with society they impose can be recomposed. Despite apparently celebrating a new notion of youth, one that represents a fracture with the past and the promise of a regeneration of society on completely new bases, these films reject all forms of action that do not re-inscribe youth within its pre-established societal role. The best of youth, these movies say, are the ones that subvert the order established by their elders only to strengthen it. They realize that renewal of bourgeois society through preconceived forms of confrontation that Pasolini recognized in his infamous commentary on the student riots of Valle Giulia in 1968.<sup>5</sup>

The exclusion of terrorism from the screen in historical and generational narratives like *La meglio gioventù*, however, is functional to the selective audience engagement essential to their success. Reversing the meaning of the song from which the film title is taken, the best of youth does not end up "*soto tera*", killed or underground

in the civil war that tears the family apart, but outgrows its revolutionary spirit and puts family first. *La meglio gioventù* does not eulogize those for whom time stopped in the 1970s because they stepped out of the pre-established path towards adulthood. It celebrates those who somehow survived, compromised, grew up; those who in 2003 enjoy watching the Sixties on prime time TV drama. As it defines the best of youth on the screen, *La meglio gioventù* involves its viewers in its generational discourse. We can recognize, as O'Leary argues, "an effort of interpellation or hailing of a certain constituency in Italian society and at the same time [...] an organic expression, so to speak, of the makers' own part in that constituency" (O'Leary, "Giordana" 225). While the film purports to provide a portrait of an entire generation, its treatment of terrorism betrays its favor for the point of view of the *Sessantottini* who, like the authors, outgrew their rebelliousness and adjusted to the system they once dreamed of overthrowing. Appealing to them in these terms, through a representation of radicalism as a refusal to assume adult responsibilities, an "immersion in conventional means of television narrative" (id.), and a warm color palette, means acknowledging what that constituency has become: a generation of nostalgic, tv-watching forty-somethings who can look back on the Sixties as a site of pleasurable contemplation and yearning because that world no longer belongs to them. The ones excluded from this collective recognition are those who rejected the traditional form of *Bildung*, based on a compromise between individuation and socialization, and therefore are not recognized as adults. They might as well have jumped out the window, like Matteo, because they are not engaged as participants by this text.

The exclusion of the terrorist from the traditional coming-of-age experience shared by "the best of youth" articulates the utopian aspirations of the 1960s and 70s in terms that help the audience deal with the present without admitting to a failure of those aspirations. In discounting the radical choice as juvenile, these films discount its underlying ideological framework and privilege a form of post-ideological commitment that is more acceptable in what Robert Gordon defined as the "age of after-ness".<sup>6</sup> In Nicola's successful career as a psychiatrist, engaged in the reform of mental health services, viewers can identify a form of *impegno* that is not at odds with the desire for change inherent in the *Sessantotto*, and does not appear outdated in the post-Cold War era. Similarly, they are encouraged to appreciate Accio's civil action at the end of *Mio fratello è figlio unico*, which does not require him to relinquish his new parental responsibilities, but is instead inspired by them. A manifestation of his innate sense of justice that never found productive expression in politics, the collective occupation of project housing that Accio organizes in his hometown indicates the kind of *impegno* that the movie recommends:

the alternative to rigid ideological definitions, in other words, is an 'emancipatory' or 'reformistic' *impegno*, a shift from macropolitics to micropolitics, or perhaps – in Simon Critchley's terms – an 'ethical anarchy', which respects the 'multiple singularities of the encounter with others that defines the experience of sociality.' (Antonello and Musgnug 11)

While the films discussed thus far employ the discourse of youth to define and involve the *Sessantottini* who did not choose terrorism, *La prima linea* deploys it to interpellate the "worst of youth" and justify its radical choices. Although to a certain extent the movie attempts to bring the viewers closer to the experience of armed

struggle, it nevertheless presents the young radicals' decisions as the result of youth and inexperience. "We thought we were right, then, instead we were wrong. But at that time, we didn't know it." This is the summary, in the narrator's voice, of his experience of radicalism as a young man. In a flashback from the 1980s, Sergio, a member of the group Prima Linea, explains his path to political violence, while a montage of archival footage and original shots takes the viewer to the rallies and demonstrations of the 1960s. The choice of radicalism, however, is presented in terms of continuity not only with that historical moment when "*tutto cominciava a muoversi* everything was starting to move", but more importantly with his upbringing and his parents' struggle.

Actually, the relationship between both protagonists, Sergio and his girlfriend Susanna, and their parents is key to their characterization, but also to the ultimate definition of their position. While the *irriducibile* Susanna has a worried mother who does not understand her choice ("*Io non ti ho cresciuta per questo*, I didn't raise you to do this," she tells her on the phone), Sergio has supportive, if worried, parents: his coming of age as a terrorist follows in the footsteps of his father, a factory worker who represents the "*operaista*" side of the protest movement from which Prima Linea emerged. The importance of that upbringing is clear from the opening of the movie, when he defines his hometown, Sesto San Giovanni as "*la città delle fabbriche*, the city of factories", and remembers its nickname at the time: "*la Stalingrado d'Italia*, Italy's Stalingrad". Sergio's choice of terrorism is presented as a continuation of his father's struggle with different means. Consequently, it is the breakdown of such continuity that induces Sergio to question his decision. When the father, after welcoming home the prodigal son, warns him that Prima Linea is the front line of a non-existent army, that the workers at the factory don't like what the organization is doing ("*non gli stan mica bene le cose che fate, e anche a me*, they don't agree with what you are doing, and I don't either"), the son accepts the criticism in an atmosphere of harmony and mutual respect absent from other representations of young rebels.

The same message is delivered to Sergio by his old friend Piero, a former member of the *Movimento* who didn't embrace terrorism and who tries to convince Sergio to abandon violence: "*Siete la Prima Linea di un corteo che non c'è*. You are the front line of a rally that isn't there". It seems no coincidence that in the same conversation Piero's imminent fatherhood is announced: Piero has abandoned youthful error and is following the path assigned to him by society. It is also no coincidence that the subsequent target of a Prima Linea action involving Sergio, Judge Emilio Alessandrini, is portrayed insistently as a father, driving his young son to school. Sergio's struggle becomes thus primarily human, between taking advice from his father, or becoming a father like his friend, and taking a father's life for the political cause. He carries out the action, but its incomprehensibility to the public marks Sergio's dissociation from the organization. Rather than the avant-garde of a revolution that has lost its followers, Prima Linea is thus redefined, in generational terms, as a group of young people who is refusing to grow up: "*una giovinezza a cui abbiamo negato il futuro*, a youth whose future we denied", says Sergio to Susanna to explain his mature view of youthful actions. Growing up requires dissociation from the irrational behavior of youth.

Unlike other cinematic portrayals of youth's political experience in the 1960s and 1970s, *La prima linea* does not obscure the profound connections between the social

and cultural transformations of the 1960s and the political violence of the 1970s. Those changes and the emergence of youth as a political subject are clearly linked in the protagonist's recollection of his political coming of age. And the transition from "the force of reason to the reasons of force" (*"il passaggio dalla forza della ragione alle ragioni della forza"*) on the part of some young students and workers is explained and defended more explicitly here than in the previously discussed films. However, the assumption underlying *La prima linea*, the wisdom of maturity that allows the narrator to see his youthful error, does not stimulate reflection, but rather reassures the audience in the conviction that yes, we had ideals back then, we really believed in them, but we were young and therefore naïve. It is not nostalgia for lost youth, but revisionism of youthful mistakes. A particular but important casting choice confirms the "portrait of the terrorist as a young man" approach, which offers the protagonist's youth as a justification for his political choices. Riccardo Scamarcio, introduced on the big screen by *La meglio gioventù* and projected to teen idol stardom by popular romantic comedies directed by Federico Moccia or adapted from his books, was Manrico in *Mio fratello è figlio unico* and Nicola, the young undercover cop infiltrated in the *Movimento* in *Il grande sogno*, before becoming Sergio in *La prima linea*.<sup>7</sup> Whether or not this casting choice undermines the audience capacity to distinguish a Prima Linea radical from the bad boy of a teen romance, as some Italian critics fear, it effectively inscribes the film in the sub-genre of generational coming-of-age movies and, perhaps, in the post-ideological position that all of these films inhabit. *La prima linea* seems in fact to offer to the "worst of youth" a generational engagement similar to that offered to the "best of youth" by the other movies. If *La meglio gioventù* addresses its constituency in the visual language of television narrative, *La prima linea* speaks the language of *engagé* cinema, in its new millennium incarnation. A cool palette, voiceover narration, non-linear structure, and a lack of resolution and catharsis connote a product aimed at a slightly more selective audience. *La prima linea* can thus be read as a generational portrait addressed to those whose radical choice "denied a future" to their youth: the smaller constituency of the *Sessantottini* who chose violence and must now find a way to reconcile with the rest of their generation.

Beverly Allen claims in "They're Not Children Anymore" that representing the terrorists as children in novels and films of the 1980s allows for their exclusion not only from the body politic but also from the nation (Allen 74). Representing them as young people who refused to grow up in the films of this past decade confirms that exclusion, and reassures "the best of youth" in the non-radical choice that allowed them to grow up. However, it may also allow for a redefinition of that body politic that is suitable for the new millennium. Insofar as these movies can be said to address their audience as nostalgic spectators, their appeal lies in positing the 1960s as an irretrievable past, pleasurable on the screen because removed from the present. Equally removed from the present experience is the ideological framework required to understand the radical choice, and youthful naiveté may be a way, however simplistic, to recognize the irrelevance of those ideals in the age of post-hegemonic micropolitics. It is perhaps in the acknowledgment of the distance separating the events and ideas of those years from the present that the contribution of generational films to the memory of the long 1968 can be found.

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<sup>1</sup> Films produced in the new millennium portraying coming-of-age experiences in the 1960s and 70s include: *Tutto l'amore che c'è* (Sergio Rubini 2000), *I cento passi* (Marco Tullio Giordana 2000), *La meglio gioventù* (Marco Tullio Giordana 2003), *Romanzo criminale* (Michele Placido 2005), *Mio fratello è figlio unico* (Daniele Lucchetti 2007), *Il grande sogno* (Michele Placido 2009), *Cosmonauta* (Susanna Nicchiarelli 2009), *L'estate di Martino* (Massimo Natale 2010).

<sup>2</sup> In addition to Landy's essay, a discussion of the role played by children in post-war Italian cinema can be found in Millicent Marcus' essays on Rossellini's *Open City*, De Sica's *Bicycle Thief*, and Taviani's *Night of the Shooting Stars* included in the volume *Italian Film in the Light of Neorealism*. Most recently, the role of the child as focalizer for the film's testimonial impulse was discussed by Millicent Marcus in the paper "Film in the Face of Atrocity: Giorgio Diritti's *L'uomo che verrà* and the Massacre of Marzabotto" presented at this conference on September 10, 2011. An argument for the evolution of the child's perspective in contemporary Italian cinema vis-à-vis its absence in society is found in Paul Sutton's analysis of Michele's role as "physical rescuer", rather than passive witness of traumatic events, in Salvatores' *Io non ho paura* (See Sutton 353-59).

<sup>3</sup> The structural similarity between the two movies can be at least partially explained by the shared authorship by screenwriters Stefano Rulli and Sandro Petraglia, who seem to have a predilection for brotherly and oedipal conflicts as a way to articulate social and political dispute. They employed similar brotherly and oedipal conflicts to articulate mafia allegiance in *I cento passi* (2000), illegal immigration in *Quando sei nato non puoi più nasconderti* (2005) both directed by Giordana, crime as social rebellion in *Romanzo Criminale* (Michele Placido, 2005), among others. See O'Leary, in *Postmodern Impegno*, Antonello and Mussgnug eds., for an argument in favor of the recognition of equal importance to the screenwriters as authors of these films. Sandro Petraglia also co-wrote the screenplay for *La prima Linea*.

<sup>4</sup> See On the use of family as a political allegory see also Millicent Marcus, *After Fellini: National Cinema in the Postmodern Age*.

<sup>5</sup> See Pier Paolo Pasolini, "Il PCI ai giovani!!" in *Empirismo Eretico*.

<sup>6</sup> The term is borrowed from Robert Gordon's essay "Postmodernism and the Holocaust in Italy", in *Postmodern Impegno*.

<sup>7</sup> For a more detailed discussion of "the Scamarcio films" and the critics' difficulty in accepting this particular role see Catherine O'Rawe "The Italian Spectator and her critics".

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