

Coming of Age on Film

Coming of Age on Film:
Stories of Transformation in World Cinema

Edited by

Anne Hardcastle, Roberta Morosini
and Kendall Tarte

**CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS**

P U B L I S H I N G

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INTRODUCTION

A boy loses his father, is adopted by another, and explores his dawning sexuality with the prostitutes of his Parisian neighborhood in the 1960s. Another, in contemporary Naples, is forced to renounce his relationship with a local priest. A third, a modern gypsy Romeo, finds love in a rival family.¹ These three films portray a typical coming of age for their adolescent protagonists as they move from childhood towards adulthood, embrace their emerging sexuality and a new awareness of themselves and their world. Another kind of coming of age also characterizes these and other films, which depict, for example, the historical development of Mexico, the transformation of 1960s Paris, or the evolution of African cinema.²

Coming of age offers a rich source of material for filmmakers. The moment of adolescence—the transition from childhood to adulthood that Patricia Meyer Spacks defines as “the time of life when the individual has developed full sexual capacity but has not yet assumed a full adult role in society”—is often at the heart of coming-of-age films.³ In broad terms, moreover, coming of age designates the discovery implicit in any moment of transformation.⁴ Indeed, although many of the traditional rites of coming of age have faded from contemporary Western society, the idea of transformational moments lingers in both real experience and artistic representation. The present study considers the theme of coming of age in films from Latin America, Europe, and Africa. A product of a 2006 conference organized by the Department of Romance Languages at Wake Forest University, these collected papers testify to the diversity of approaches to cinema in French, Italian, and Spanish. The films studied here treat different times and cultures; they use a variety of styles and display a range of cinematic influences. Even so, an examination of the theme of coming of age reveals common threads and unexpected resemblances that point to the complex issues at stake in an exploration of what it means to come of age.

Theories drawn from the diverse fields of literary studies, anthropology, and psychology elucidate the many interpretations of coming of age in world cinema that this volume will explore. As the moment of transition from childhood to adulthood, coming of age is often considered a natural process through which positive development of the adolescent protagonist

occurs. The young characters in François Dupeyron's *Monsieur Ibrahim et les Fleurs du Coran* (2003) and Tony Gatlif's *Exils* (2003), for example, reach a new understanding of themselves and their surroundings in the course of the films.⁵ Yet the essays in this volume also reveal tensions in the treatment of coming of age: other films overturn positive expectations about coming of age, showing how such development is often thwarted by time, place, politics, and other external and internal factors. As Áine O'Healy shows, Antonio Capuano works against the image of childhood typical of many recent Italian films in which the child is innocent, capable of insight and redemption. In *Pianese Nunzio 14 anni a maggio* (1996), Capuano instead embraces the ambiguities of the adolescent protagonist's coming of age in the slums of Naples. Similarly, Margarita Vargas argues that Alfonso Cuarón's *Y tu mamá también* (2001) presents an image of two comings of age—of the young protagonists and of Mexico itself—both frustrated by the circularity of narrative and of history, respectively. Many of these essays suggest that coming of age often diverges from a natural or successful process and involves unexpected results and ambiguous significance.

As Vargas's article suggests, both history and geography influence the various comings of age that these essays discuss. From the Second World War and the Spanish Civil War to 1960s Paris and 1990s Naples, from the Chadian landscape to the geography of Mexico City, these films foreground their settings in particular times and places. In some, the filmmaker sets the protagonist's coming of age—whether realized or frustrated—in parallel with that of a specific place. As Ashlee Headrick argues, the cultural, economic, and demographic transformations of Paris to which Dupeyron's film testifies mirror the transition of Momo from boy to man. Nicoletta Marini-Maio shows that, in the Frazzi brothers' *Certi bambini* (2004), the chaotic mental journey of the young protagonist traveling on the subway to commit murder offers a metaphor for the unwieldy nature of the contemporary world. In their examination of African films, Sally Barbour, Debra Boyd, and Gerise Herndon point out the importance of considering African cinema on its own terms rather than through the lens of the European and American film industries. The history of that industry in Africa—namely, the economic and political challenges that have faced filmmakers there—gives rise to a particular coming-of-age story, that of African cinema itself. Coming of age, then, appears not only as a psychological or biological process, but as a product of society where culture influences individuals and itself becomes a part of the development pictured in these films.

These essays draw attention to an array of cinematic and literary

influences on the films they study. For example, Derakhshani and Zachman, and Vargas, discuss the influence of road movies—in particular the assertion of a developmental journey—on *Exils* and *Y tu mamá también*, respectively. The authors of both essays on Italian film consider the legacy of the neorealist period in more recent films. *Pianese Nunzio 14 anni a maggio, Il cielo cade* (Andrea and Antonio Frazzi, 2000), and *Certi bambini* depart from those traditional influences and use new strategies to depict the perspective of the child or adolescent.⁶ Perhaps not surprisingly given the abundance of coming-of-age novels and stories, many of these films are adaptations. Ashlee Headrick considers the direct borrowings and subtle divergences in François Dupeyron's adaptation of Éric-Emmanuel Schmitt's novel *Monsieur Ibrahim et les Fleurs du Coran*. Will Derusha notes the elimination of a critical element from Antón Reixa's 2003 film of Manuel Rivas's novel *El lápiz del carpintero*: the very ghost of this ghost story is absent from the film. Derusha argues that the purging of the ghost indicates an attempt—unsuccessful, in his evaluation—to present a fantastic story as a more grown-up history. Ana León Távara and Itzá Zavala-Garrett show the extreme departures from Shakespeare's play *Romeo and Juliet* in two recent Spanish-language films, Fernando Sariñana's *Amarte duele* (2002) and Vicente Escrivá's *Montoyas y Tarantos* (1989). Whether a direct or more subtle interaction, these diverse allusions enrich the perception of coming of age in each film.

The genre of the Bildungsroman in particular offers an apt literary parallel to the films under discussion here.⁷ A term borrowed from fictional patterns in German literature, *bildung*, according to Jeffrey Sammons, indicates “the early bourgeois humanistic concept of the shaping of the individual self from its innate potentialities through acculturation and social experience to the threshold of maturity.”⁸ The process of *bildung*, whether or not it succeeds, hinges on “a sense of evolutionary change within the self.”⁹ In the Bildungsroman as in many of the films discussed here, the conflicts inherent in coming of age—between social convention and individual desires, for example—lead to the loss, or to the growth, that these films explore.

In addition to literary and cinematic influences, the work of theorists from the fields of anthropology and psychology illuminates several key issues in the present study. *The Rites of Passage*, anthropologist Arnold van Gennep's study of initiation rites, considers those ceremonies that mark life's transitions: birth, puberty, marriage, and death, for example. Although the films studied here do not foreground the ceremonies of coming of age, van Gennep's work provides a useful metaphorical framework for this discussion. Van Gennep defined a now well-known

pattern of three phases in the initiation ceremony: separation, transition, and reincorporation into society. With its emphasis on the passage from one phase or place to another—on the journey—this model is germane to our discussion of cinematic transitions, coming of age in and of film. Movement from one place to another implicitly defines two spaces that are separate. Central to van Gennep's pattern are both the movement across and the marker of that separation—the threshold. Ashlee Headrick discusses the notion of the “threshold figure”—from other critics' analyses of Homer's *Odyssey*—who guides another through a transition, namely, that from childhood to adulthood. In *Exils*, as Mana Derakhshani and Jennifer Zachman show, the main characters cross borders that are both real—between countries—and metaphorical. Defining the boundaries of transformation, crossings and metaphorical thresholds play an important role in coming-of-age stories.

Building on van Gennep's work, Victor Turner explores the marginal nature of such transitions in his theory of liminality. For Turner, transition implies a floating social status, a state of undefined identity and potential.¹⁰ Because it is set outside society, the liminal state offers the possibility of new insights, which imply both critique and opportunity for growth. Adolescence, of course, is such a liminal state, that between childhood and adulthood. Nicoletta Marini-Maio applies Turner's theory, along with sociologist Zygmunt Bauman's notion of liquidity, to the status of the adolescent protagonists in *Il cielo cade* and *Certi bambini*. Similarly, Áine O'Healy argues that Naples is an interstitial—or liminal—space in *Pianese Nunzio*. Like Rosario in *Certi bambini*, the title character in Capuano's film lacks a place in society. As the conflicts between the priest who is his lover and the local gang show, Nunzio is considered neither child nor adult, neither completely innocent nor fully responsible for his actions. Moments of transition in coming of age take place on the periphery of society and between social roles, creating perspectives that may lead to both critique and opportunity for growth.

The work of psychologist Erik Erikson raises the question of the individual, subjective experience of coming of age. In his study of the stages of human psychological development, Erikson notes that the move from one stage to the next necessarily involves a “turning point, a crucial moment, when development must move one way or another, marshalling resources of growth, recovery, and further differentiation.”¹¹ Successful resolution of this crisis, through increased self-awareness, leads to “healthy” identity formation that “employs a process of simultaneous reflection and observation.”¹² For Erikson, then, coming of age involves the development of individual identity and reflection upon that identity.

Derakhshani and Zachman analyze the psychological development of the protagonists of *Exils*. For both Zano and Naïma, the physical journey from France to North Africa includes a metaphorical development, through self-reflection and increasing self-knowledge. Erikson's framework is also relevant to the situation of African cinema explored in this volume's final essay. There, the self-reflexivity of coming-of-age films also draws attention to the coming of age of African cinema itself.

The films studied in this collection address the characteristics of coming of age explored in this introduction. Films about individual comings of age treat adolescence while also addressing other levels of development as protagonists stand in for abstract bodies. Franco Moretti points to connections between these levels and argues that youth "acts as a symbolic concentrate of the uncertainties and tensions of an entire cultural system" and that the protagonist's "growth becomes the narrative convention or fiction that permits the exploration of conflicting values."¹³ Coming of age applies not only to individuals but also to whole societies, industries, and nations for which the metaphor of transition from adolescence to adulthood resonates with important processes of social and artistic development. The essays that follow offer a few diverse examples.

* * *

The opening essay, Áine O'Healy's study of Antonio Capuano's *Pianese Nunzio 14 anni a maggio* (1996), considers the coming to manhood of an adolescent in contemporary Naples, site of chronic poverty and endemic organized crime. The story centers on the title character, who has been seduced—apparently not against his will—by a priest, who himself has been working to quell the crime that engulfs the city. Capuano's portrait of Nunzio works against conventional images, common to many contemporary Italian films, of childhood innocence. The film instead resists judgment of the boy as well as of the priest, embracing the complexities of their situation. O'Healy's consideration centers on the film's stylistic design, which she analyzes using the framework of Bakhtinian heteroglossia. The film's visual and aural hybridity reflects its multiple viewpoints. Strikingly, O'Healy also reveals that the city of Naples itself can be considered a character in the film. In his careful depictions of the city, Capuano overturns stereotypical images of Neapolitan beauty and vitality. The variety of the urban landscape accentuates Nunzio's unique passage to manhood, which, as O'Healy shows, involves submission to the power of the *camorristi*, the crime ring that maintains its power over the city, rather than new understanding or

accomplishment typical in many stories of coming of age.

In her analysis of François Dupeyron's *Monsieur Ibrahim et les Fleurs du Coran* (2003) in Chapter Two, Ashlee Headrick proposes three comings of age in the film—of the boy Momo, of his mentor Monsieur Ibrahim, and of the city of Paris in the 1960s. The film—an adaptation of the eponymous novel by Éric-Emmanuel Schmitt—depicts a traditional coming of age, that of the protagonist Momo. Headrick uses two ancient models of mentoring—Homer's *Odyssey* and the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*—to frame her discussion of the budding friendship between the young Jewish boy and his elderly Muslim neighbor. The archetypal mentoring relationships depicted in the classical works—Athena who, disguised as Mentor, helps Telemachos act as an adult, and Metaneira, who offers companionship and shelter to Demeter—provide models for the modern story of Momo's coming of age. Monsieur Ibrahim acts as a mentor, guiding Momo in his transition to adulthood as the boy discovers sexuality, deals with family strife and loss, and takes on new responsibility. In a twist on this traditional coming-of-age story, a parallel transformation takes place in Monsieur Ibrahim himself. Here, as Headrick argues, Momo assumes the role of a threshold figure as he coaches Monsieur Ibrahim through his driving test and accompanies him on the journey east, back to his first home, Turkey.¹⁴ François Dupeyron situates the dual coming-of-age stories of Momo and Ibrahim in early 1960s Paris. Headrick shows that the attention to sounds and images of the era—rock-and-roll music, fashion, trends such as swing dancing and the Hula-Hoop, and depictions of the working-class, immigrant neighborhood—highlights the city's coming of age as well. Like Momo and Monsieur Ibrahim, Paris itself is experiencing a moment of transition, with shifts in its demographics and its popular culture at mid-century.

In Chapter Three, two films by Andrea and Antonio Frazzi, *Il cielo cade* (2000) and *Certi bambini* (2004), provide the focus for Nicoletta Marini-Maio's study of the cinematographic techniques used to create the perspective of a child in contemporary Italian films. As Marini-Maio shows, the Frazzi brothers pay homage to the neorealist tradition, in particular the films of Vittorio De Sica; however, these films, like those of several other contemporary Italian directors, create a new vocabulary for depicting the experience and point of view of the adolescent main character. Marini-Maio coins the term "visual psycho-mimesis" to designate this new means of expressing the child's vision. Techniques such as low focalization and montage of chaotic flashbacks contribute to this perspective. Marini-Maio draws on Victor Turner's theory of liminality and Zygmunt Bauman's notion of liquidity to argue that these

techniques contribute to a new postmodern vision of the child's perspective. Like many examples in this collection, these films are grounded in their setting. Marini-Maio's analysis reveals the importance of the villa that offers refuge to the two young sisters, protagonists of *Il cielo cade*, during the retreat from Italy of German troops in 1944, and of the urban chaos of the working-class city of *Certi bambini*.

Tony Gatlif's *Exils* (2003) depicts the journey of two young Parisians, Zano and Naïma, from Paris through Spain and into North Africa. In our fourth essay, Mana Derakhshani and Jennifer Zachman show that *Exils* is not a typical road movie: for both Zano and Naïma, each of whom has family ties to Algeria, the trip represents a discovery of their history and their identity and, thus, a coming of age. Gatlif brings to light the challenges—both physical and psychological—of the movements over borders and between worlds that result from immigration and emigration, exile, and diaspora, showing the effect of these challenges on identity. Derakhshani and Zachman call this unusual film a “kaleidoscopic, sonoric vision of a world where borders and boundaries are blurred or overlap.”¹⁵ Their discussion of the film's striking cinematic language centers on Gatlif's use of diegetic music and images of landscapes, both physical and human. Gatlif conveys the experience of the coming-of-age journey through his use of hypnotic rhythms and images of lush fruits, old photographs, and a visit to a grandfather's grave. Zano and Naïma experience confusion and loss of control along their journey, and Gatlif's techniques illuminate their histories as well as their present journey. The viewer's experience of the film mirrors that of the protagonists: as Derakhshani and Zachman show, Gatlif's camerawork occasionally results in sensorial overload. They argue that the disjointed nature of the film reveals the coming of age not only of Zano and Naïma, but of Gatlif himself, who returned after a long exile to his birthplace, Algeria, to make this film.

In her essay “Sexual and Political Disillusion in *Y tu mamá también*” (Chapter Five), Margarita Vargas shows that the film takes a traditional approach to coming of age: the film's protagonists, Tenoch and Julio, must make the transition from adolescence to adulthood in the summer after high school. However, in a cultural and historical parallel to the boys, Alfonso Cuarón's 2001 film interlaces this typical coming-of-age story with an exploration of the coming of age of Mexico itself. As Vargas points out, Cuarón draws on a number of cinematic and literary genres: the quest, the road movie, and the sexual coming-of-age comedy from film; and the Bildungsroman from literature. She finds that Cuarón's film follows expected patterns, “reinforc[ing] our conventional belief in stories

of progress and formation.”¹⁶ However, drawing on Mascha Gemmeke’s elucidation of the Bildungsroman, Vargas shows that the film also subtly undermines this narrative of personal development. Gemmeke argued that traditional Bildungsromane are circular rather than linear in their development. Vargas shows that Cuarón, using such a circular process, creates an illusion of change and transformation that marks the dual narrative, at once fictional and historical, of *Y tu mamá también*. Here coming of age is not a transcendent experience of growth and arrival at maturity but rather a sad continuation of corruption and underdevelopment. Despite several thematic and structural devices that lend the film the appearance of linear progress or development, Vargas concludes, its predominant themes are illusion and betrayal. “Growing up” in Mexico and for Mexico means not so much a dawning consciousness but resignation to stagnant established patterns.

In Chapter Six, Ana León Távora and Itzá Zavala-Garrett examine two Spanish-language adaptations of the Romeo and Juliet story: *Amarte duele* (Mexico, 2002) and *Montoyas y Tarantos* (Spain, 1989). Here coming of age involves awakening to sexuality and to the limitations of the customs and expectations of the adult world. These are again films of place: each director transfers the political and social tensions of the original story to a new location, highlighting specific cultural challenges. In the chaos of contemporary Mexico City in Fernando Sariñana’s *Amarte duele* or in the community of traditional gypsy families in Vicente Escrivá’s *Montoyas y Tarantos*, as in Shakespeare, transgression of accepted social conventions remains central to the story. Examining the social structure of these two adaptations, León Távora and Zavala-Garrett consider the particular ways in which the filmmakers frame the disruption of accepted social codes. Both focus on the clash between the social classes, bringing to light the patriarchal structure of society and the importance of fidelity to the group, or clan. Setting is crucial to these adaptations of the Romeo and Juliet story: Sariñana and Escrivá depict the world of gypsies in Spain and that of Mexico’s indigenous peoples, respectively. In a study that moves from sixteenth-century England to the community of gypsies in twentieth-century Spain, from the world of flamenco to the urban shopping mall, León Távora and Zavala-Garrett show the importance of history and culture to these new Romeo and Juliet stories.

Studying coming of age in children’s fiction, Victor Watson notes the prevalence of the phrase “playtime was over” to describe maturation.¹⁷ This expression aptly describes Will Derusha’s perspective on ghosts in his essay “Ghosts of the Spanish Civil War: *El lápiz del carpintero* and *El espinazo del Diablo*” in Chapter Seven. Derusha takes as his starting point

the observation that “growing up” typically involves the relinquishment of childhood fantasies such as ghosts. The suspension of superstition—the disappearance of ghosts—and the arrival of historical consciousness mark coming of age—except, perhaps, in the cinema. Two films about the Spanish Civil War—Antón Reixa’s *El lápiz del carpintero* (2003) and Guillermo del Toro’s *El espinazo del diablo* (2001)—make use of the theme of the supernatural along with various cinematographic techniques, resulting in a vision of history that is not so historical. Such mass-marketed, melodramatic genre films about the Civil War diminish the historical reality of the conflict; their portrayal, Derusha concludes, remains immature, despite the appearance of authenticity that characterizes many historical films. Both directors use cinematic flourishes—from the jarring imaginary interludes of *Lápiz* to the special effects of the ghost in *Espinazo*—that eventually overwhelm the war. In Derusha’s terms, these techniques transform the war into a “plaything of history” and eventually a “ghost of itself.”¹⁸ Coming of age here concerns the journey of the Spanish Civil War in and through cultural consciousness, in search of a grown-up perspective on the war.

In the closing essay, Sarah Barbour, Debra Boyd, and Gerise Herndon examine the theme of coming of age in a series of African films from the last two decades. They define “coming of age” broadly, applying it to the varied contexts of recent African cinema. On a thematic level, fictional and documentary films depict young characters as they move towards autonomy and independence. Beyond this traditional use within a film, the term “coming of age” applies to recent developments in African cinema. In their discussion of the critical discourse about the development of African cinema and the role of the filmmaker, Barbour, Boyd, and Herndon identify a coming of age of African film. For a people with a valued tradition of oral storytelling, cinema is the new medium, and the filmmaker has evolved into a modern *griot* who tells stories of contemporary reality. The authors consider five films produced between 1989 and 2002: *Keïta* (Dany Kouyaté, 1994), *Abouna* (Mahamat-Saleh Haroun, 2002), *Ali Zaoua: Prince de la rue* (Nabil Ayouch, 2000), *Woubi Chéri* (Philip Brooks and Laurent Bocahut, 1998), and *Quartier Mozart* (Jean-Pierre Bekolo, 1992). These works reflect upon a variety of contemporary issues such as absent fathers in Chad, the plight of street children in Casablanca, the community of homosexuals and transsexuals in the Ivory Coast, and sexual politics in Cameroon. In these stories of coming of age, African cinema itself comes of age in a diversity of styles and “a dynamic film language that celebrates African landscape, people, music, tradition, and orality and provokes social debate.”¹⁹

* * *

The present essays examine the coming of age of adolescent and adult protagonists, of societies, of cinema. Indeed, film itself has come of age over the last quarter century. The academic discipline of film studies has grown in universities across the globe. Access to film-making equipment and software in the digital age has made film an expressive medium available to almost anyone, while websites such as YouTube.com promote such short films as a way to share transformational moments with the world. Film transforms, not only through the potential of its subject matter, but also through its impact on the audience who experiences narrative, image, music, and personal interaction directly. As this volume shows, coming of age offers an appropriate metaphor for the transformative moments, spaces, and images that signal the end of one vision and mark the arrival of new perspectives that redefine us and our world.

Notes

¹ The films in which these characters appear are *Monsieur Ibrahim et les Fleurs du Coran* (François Dupeyron, 2003), *Pianese Nunzio 14 anni a maggio* (Antonio Capuano, 1996), and *Montoyas y Tarantos* (Vicente Escrivá, 1989). See in this volume Ashlee Headrick, Áine O'Healy, and Ana León Távora and Itzá Zavala-Garrett on these films, respectively.

² See Margarita Vargas on *Y tu mamá también* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2001), Headrick on Paris, and Sarah Barbour et al. on recent African cinema.

³ Spacks, *The Adolescent Idea*, 7.

⁴ On coming of age in literature, see Marjorie Garber, *Coming of Age in Shakespeare*, and Spacks, *The Adolescent Idea*. Spacks studies literary representations of adolescence from the eighteenth century to the 1960s. Garber's excellent introduction discusses the theories of anthropologists Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner and of psychologist Erik Erikson; our discussion of those theorists here is indebted to her work. The quintessential American coming-of-age novel, J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, provides the starting point for much scholarship on coming of age, especially in the discussion of American novels and films: see Karen R. Tolchin, *Part Blood, Part Ketchup: Coming of Age in American Literature and Film*, Lawrence E. Ziewacz, "Holden Caulfield, Alex Portnoy, and *Good Will Hunting*: Coming of Age in American Films and Novels," and Kirk Curnutt, "Teenage Wasteland: Coming-of-Age Novels in the 1980s and 1990s."

⁵ See Mana Derakhshani and Jennifer A. Zachman on *Exils*.

⁶ See O’Healy on the first film, Marini-Maio on the second and third.

⁷ Vargas discusses the Bildungsroman in her study of *Y tu mamá también*.

⁸ Sammons, “The Bildungsroman for Nonspecialists,” 41. Scholars of German literature such as Sammons and James Hardin argue for the cultural and historical specificity of Bildungsroman for a particular set of German texts and complain of the widespread misuse of the term by scholars who apply it to other national and literary contexts. Nevertheless, the word has come to be an accepted term to refer to the novel of formation.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Turner, *The Forest of Symbols*, 95-97.

¹¹ Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, 16.

¹² Ibid., 22.

¹³ Moretti, *The Way of the World*, 185.

¹⁴ For a discussion of the term *threshold figure*, see Headrick’s article and Nancy Felson-Rubin, *Regarding Penelope*.

¹⁵ See below, 58.

¹⁶ 70.

¹⁷ Watson, Introduction to *Coming of Age in Children’s Literature*, 8.

¹⁸ 93, 94.

¹⁹ 124.

CHAPTER ONE

A NEAPOLITAN CHILDHOOD: SEDUCTION AND BETRAYAL IN *PIANESE NUNZIO 14 ANNI A MAGGIO*

ÁINE O'HEALY
(LOYOLA MARYMOUNT UNIVERSITY)

Loosely based on events that had recently unfolded in the crumbling heart of Naples, Antonio Capuano's *Pianese Nunzio 14 anni a maggio*¹ opened at the Venice Film Festival in 1996, eliciting both controversy and critical acclaim. Though it met with an enthusiastic response from the festival audience, it also provoked the irritation of conservative Church members, and inspired a heated debate among the censors regarding its suitability for general audiences.² Shot against a backdrop of crime-ridden Neapolitan neighborhoods, the film narrates the seduction of a thirteen-year-old boy by a priest committed to undoing the stranglehold of organized crime in the area served by his parish. Capuano's narrative constructs both the priest and the adolescent in complex ways that defy conventional assumptions of guilt and innocence. Far from articulating a straightforward condemnation of the bond that evolves between them, the film offers a complex account of events as they unfold, culminating with the boy's surrender to the pressures placed on him by members of the *camorra* to reveal to the authorities the sexual nature of his relationship with the priest.³

Like Capuano's other films, particularly *Vito e gli altri* (*Vito and the Others*, 1991) and *La guerra di Mario* (*Mario's War*, 2006), *Pianese Nunzio 14 a maggio* subverts the pattern found in many recent Italian films centering on children or adolescents where, when confronted by disquieting discoveries in the world around them, the younger characters prove capable of a level of insight or purposeful action that is unavailable to their adult counterparts.⁴ Capuano's work, by contrast, explicitly challenges

middle-class assumptions about childhood innocence, and rejects the redemptive or salvific image of the younger generation that has become predominant in contemporary Italian cinema.

In this essay I will examine some of the questions raised by *Pianese Nunzio 14 a maggio*, teasing out the stylistic strategies through which they find expression. In the debate that followed the film's release it became evident that this narrative, at a superficial level, may be read as a sympathetic portrait of what many would describe as a pederast or a pedophile. To summarize the film's impact in these terms, however, is to ignore the tensions and contradictions that are productively set in motion by the script, musical track, casting, and mise-en-scène, tensions that discourage any definitive judgment on the relationship between the priest and the adolescent. In effect, *Pianese Nunzio 14 a maggio* subtly prompts its viewers to ask if the distinction between child and adolescent, or between adolescent and adult, is a useful one that can hold up across different social and historical contexts. Searching beyond rigid legal definitions of minor and adult, it also invites us to contemplate specifically what it means to grow up—or come of age—in the slums of Naples, where, like the neighborhoods represented in Luis Buñuel's *Los Olvidados* (1950), Mira Nair's *Salaam Bombay* (1988), and Fernando Meirelles's *City of God* (2002), childhood itself seems perpetually under siege.

Following the publication of Philippe Ariès's influential work *Centuries of Childhood* in the early 1960s, many historians adopted the view that childhood, understood as a distinct stage of human development, is a relatively recent invention. Though subsequent scholars have challenged Ariès's position by claiming that our contemporary concept of childhood can be traced back at least as far as the Middle Ages,⁵ the crux of his argument has retained a persuasive force, that is, that childhood and adolescence, far from being "natural," biological stages of development, are mainly the products of society, culture, and history. According to Ariès's position, a clear separation between childhood and later life existed in the Classical period, even if this division was constructed with different boundaries than those we use today. Ariès maintained, however, that the distinction made in the Classical era became blurred in the Middle Ages, which lacked a discourse of childhood.⁶ Once childhood was reconceptualized as a specific developmental category in post-revolutionary modernity, the situation of the young person in Western societies changed again, and an idea of childhood innocence began to emerge. As a consequence, it was now thought desirable to protect young people from adult realities, that is, from the potentially painful or disturbing facts of birth, death, sex, and political upheaval. Simultaneously, the imperative of

universal schooling for the young began to take hold for the first time.

If Ariès's argument holds true for the time-space of Western modernity in general, what of those peripheral or interstitial spaces where the civic institutions of modernity unfolded in a delayed or uneven fashion? With its complex, multi-layered history, its crumbling grandeur, belated industrial development, broad span of class differences, and powerful network of organized crime, Naples is just such an interstitial space. If childhood is time- and context-bound, the experience of young people and the meanings attached to childhood in Naples must surely possess distinctive contours that reflect the city's complicated social history and cultural terrain.

Known to foreigners since the time of Goethe for the exceptional beauty of its natural surroundings, the baroque splendor of its architecture, and the teeming vitality of the impoverished neighborhoods that form its ancient core, Naples lends itself to mystification and stereotyping. Over the years, the city has been alternately idealized and vilified in the national imaginary. Although conventional images of Naples tend to reduce the city's complexity to its folkloric elements, a handful of recent filmmakers—sometimes described as the “new Neapolitan school”—have resolutely attempted to wrest the city from the layers of stereotypes that have for so long encrusted its representation. Along with Mario Martone, Pappi Corsicato, Stefano Incerti, Antonietta De Lillo and Giuseppe Gaudino, Antonio Capuano helped to restore the southern metropolis to a position of prominence in the national cinema during the 1990s. Capuano, however, is the only filmmaker in the group whose work insistently foregrounds the experience of children and adolescents.

According to Capuano, Naples has always possessed large numbers of highly visible children—boys in particular—who are accustomed to spending most of their days on the streets.⁷ The image of the *scugnizzo*, the archetypal Neapolitan urchin, has become something of a postcard cliché, but like many stereotypes it has a kernel of truth, as it implies that children—even very young children—are a dynamic part of the urban landscape. Far from a passive creature sheltered or coddled by adults, the street child is a dynamic participant in the life of Naples. The *scugnizzo*, who first appeared in Neapolitan painting of the seventeenth century under Spanish influence, is in fact one of the emblematic icons of the city. The filmmaker also claims that the cinematic portrayal of children in the neorealist period drew on the long literary and pictorial tradition of *scugnizzerìa* which, by the middle years of the twentieth century, had accumulated multiple layers of meaning. Furthermore, in Capuano's view, Vittorio De Sica, who considered Naples to be his second home, explicitly

drew on the iconic traditions of *scugnizzaria* for his cinematic constructions of childhood. In effect, since the *scugnizzo* is a denizen of the streets, who manages to go wherever he pleases, this figure has become an extraordinarily useful vehicle for the filmic exploration of the urban landscape.

Although young people appear in all of Capuano's work, three of his films are devoted specifically to the problems of growing up in the slums of Naples: *Vito e gli altri* (1991), *Pianese Nunzio 14 anni a maggio* (1996), and *La guerra di Mario* (2005). All three narratives are based on events that had occurred in the city in the recent past, embellished with fictionalized elements. In casting these films, Capuano recruited children and adolescents—none of whom had previous acting experience—from the same locations and social strata portrayed in the narratives, a practice that renders his work distinctly reminiscent of the early films of Pier Paolo Pasolini. Immersing himself in the language of his subjects, Capuano also encouraged his young actors to invent much of the dialogue in the films.⁸

The plot of *Pianese Nunzio 14 a maggio* unfolds in relatively straightforward fashion, though the narrative is marked by occasional ellipses. Don Lorenzo Borrelli (Fabrizio Bentivoglio), a young priest from the north of Italy, is assigned to serve in the Sanità neighborhood in the heart of Naples, an area plagued by lethal violence and everyday harassment on the part of the *camorristi*. While still attending school, the thirteen-year-old Nunzio, who has been abandoned by both parents and sleeps in his aunt's cramped apartment, earns whatever money he can muster by singing at weddings and making cheap tape recordings. A frequent visitor to the church, the boy quickly responds to the kindness of the handsome young priest, who offers him the opportunity to play the organ for his own amusement and to do his homework in peaceful surroundings. Though not unresponsive to Don Lorenzo's romantic interest in him, Nunzio also begins to pursue a young girl of his own age, who is soon killed by a stray bullet as they wait together for a train.

Appalled by the violence that engulfs the city, the priest denounces the *camorra* from the pulpit and musters the support of his parishioners to resist its power, inviting a reformed *camorrista* to speak to the congregation from the altar. Suspecting that Don Lorenzo's relationship with Nunzio is a sexual one, the local criminals decide to bring the matter to public attention so that the priest will be prosecuted and his influence with parishioners undermined. Although the boy resists telling the truth about a relationship he experiences as consensual, he is finally pressured into making an official statement that will lead to the priest's arrest.

The film ends with a highly dramatic montage sequence. Here, in the

pouring rain, Don Lorenzo leads a procession of the Stations of the Cross through the Sanità neighborhood, as he and the parishioners modify the liturgical text to describe the tyranny of the *camorra* and the suffering of those caught in the cross hairs of violence. Images of the ritual procession are intercut with the scene of Nunzio's detailed statement to the authorities regarding the circumstances of his relationship with the priest. In the film's final moments—set in an ancient cemetery as the procession winds to its conclusion—Don Lorenzo turns to face the camera directly. Presumably speaking to those who have come to arrest him, he then states his full name along with the place and date of his birth, and concludes by announcing his willingness to comply with the demands of the law.

Capuano has claimed that *Pianese Nunzio 14 a maggio* was specifically inspired by the bravery of a handful of Catholic priests who have attempted to undermine the power of the *camorra* over the residents of the city's poorest neighborhoods by activating resistance among parishioners. Such cases are well documented, and the priests in question have been silenced or imprisoned on spurious evidence, or have been otherwise disgraced thanks to the collusion of the *camorra* with the structures of institutional power in the city. Yet, for all its documentary relevance, this is not a "realistic" film in the conventional sense, nor is it a film driven by any naive belief in the socially transformative power of cinema.

Using an extraordinarily varied and hauntingly evocative musical track that underscores the melodramatic potential of the story, *Pianese Nunzio 14 a maggio* builds an atmosphere of pathos wherein both protagonists emerge as victims of a corrupt system that holds the entire city in its grasp. Trapped between competing definitions of justice, Nunzio and Don Lorenzo emerge as neither entirely guilty nor entirely innocent. In fact, one of the myths that Capuano has consistently sought to dispel in his work is the widespread belief in childhood innocence. The young characters envisioned in his films are selfish, knowing, and often cruel.⁹ Far from passive victims, they are tenacious survivors, who attempt to defend themselves with all possible means at their disposal. Thus, unlike many other recent films by Italian directors, where the innately "moral" child or adolescent is implicitly positioned as the hope of the nation's future, Capuano's work refuses to deploy young characters as figures of redemption vis-à-vis the body politic.

The experience of childhood, or, more specifically, the experience of Neapolitan childhood, emerges in Capuano's films as a site of struggle. The protagonist of *Vito e gli altri* states: "A me mi pare di stare sempre in guerra, ma ogni tanto capisco pure che la guerra è bella" [It's like I'm

constantly in the middle of a war, but sometimes I even think that war is great]. The director associates childhood with warfare most explicitly in *La guerra di Mario*, which is replete with a boy's vivid imaginings of deadly battles, and whose very title alludes to his inner war. Trapped in a field of competing influences and material dangers, the young characters in Capuano's narratives must constantly struggle to make sense of the discourses that vie for their allegiance.

Pianese Nunzio 14 anni a maggio presents Nunzio—the character named in its title—as an intelligent but vulnerable youth whose fantasy is torn between the construction of love presented to him by Don Lorenzo and the values of his immediate surroundings. Poised on the threshold of manhood, he is aware that the society he inhabits construes masculinity as a performance that can readily accommodate practices of violent aggression such as murder and rape. To become a man in this environment involves adopting a stance of unambivalent heterosexuality. In order to lure Nunzio away from Don Lorenzo and thus prepare the way for the priest's downfall, a woman complicit with the *camorra* takes the boy to her home and seduces him. The scene, which constitutes the only sexual encounter fully visualized in the *mise-en-scène*, presents the event as a banal initiation to sexual maturity that is consonant with the dominant social ethos. Within this scheme of things, the erotic encounter that the thirteen-year-old boy experiences at the woman's home is a time-honored rite of passage, and his consensual participation is taken for granted. Furthermore, the logic of the narrative further implies that there will be no legal repercussions for the woman who takes him to her bed. In Don Lorenzo's case, however, Nunzio's age—which is foregrounded in the film's very title—will become a prominent factor in the eventual judicial proceedings.

It must be noted that Nunzio is not the only character in the film buffeted by doubt in the face of competing discursive imperatives. In fact, Don Lorenzo struggles in similar fashion between the imperatives of his religious training and the desire he feels for the boy. Unlike Nunzio, however, the priest has access to rationalizing skills that enable him to re-envision his actions in a different light, first by claiming as he prays alone in the chapel that his love for God is of a similarly erotic nature, and later by exploring the ideal of homoerotic desire in classical Greek civilization while teaching Christian doctrine to his catechism class. This scene, in particular, suggests that he is attempting to draw a parallel between his erotic attachment to Nunzio and the sexual bond forged in ancient Greek society between an adult male mentor and his adolescent protégé, wherein the function of the older man, known as the *erastes*, was to educate,

protect, love, and provide a role model for his beloved (the *eromenos*). Yet, while Don Lorenzo praises the erotic values of ancient pagan civilization to his young students, in solitude he repeatedly succumbs to a Christian sense of guilt, and pleads to God to help him overcome the yearnings of the flesh.

Rather than portraying these conflicts as individual and private, Capuano externalizes the psychological struggle of his characters by mobilizing a mixture of linguistic registers, generic forms and competing citations, thus foregrounding what Mikhail Bakhtin has described as heteroglossia, that is, the “plurality of social voices and opposing cultural traditions” that vie for dominance in every text.¹⁰ The concept of heteroglossia, which Bakhtin developed in his analysis of the novel form, suggests that “truth” is constructed from a multiplicity of competing truths, rather than found in a single objective position. In other words, all languages consist of centripetal and centrifugal elements, the conservative pull of the “official” register and the dispersive effects of multiple demotic idioms, which are perpetually engaged in a dialogical relationship. Bakhtin believed that the novel, more than any other literary form, facilitated the collision of centripetal and centrifugal forces through the dynamic interplay of different idioms. For this reason, he claimed, novels allow unique insight into the societies in which they are created. His theory of dialogic heteroglossia has in recent years been productively adapted to the study of film.¹¹ As a hybrid medium, cinema clearly offers an even richer terrain for the exploration of this phenomenon than the novel.

Pianese Nunzio 14 anni a maggio offers a particularly striking example of the workings of Bakhtinian dialogism, as competing discourses and citations are set in motion within the dialogue, the music, and the visual track. These elements not only point to the multiple layers of cultural and social history that constitute the chronotope of Naples, but also dramatize the conflicts that shape the lives of the central characters. Fascinated by the diversity that marks social life in Naples, and averse to the superficial charm of Italy’s “cinema carino” (the tastefully made “pretty films” that appeal to a predominantly middle-class audience), Capuano has forged a film aesthetic that is especially attentive to the conflicting political discourses and the plurality of cultural traces that mark this ancient city.

The composition of *Pianese Nunzio*’s opening moments serves to evoke the various thematic threads and hybrid visual influences that subtend the film as a whole. In the initial sequence, the camera moves in a left-to-right traveling shot along the viaduct overlooking the rooftops of the Sanità neighborhood, which we distinguish with some difficulty through the dense grid of a metal fence. The long expanse of the fence—

or, more specifically, the visual hurdle it offers to the viewers who are required to look through it—immediately suggests a sense of enclosure or incarceration. Arriving at the baroque dome of the church of Santa Maria della Sanità, however, the camera tilts upward, soaring above the spears that decorate the fence posts, and pauses briefly to take in the graceful structure of the dome and its serene backdrop of bright blue sky. This image is followed by a montage of shots, both interior and exterior, that evoke a wide array of allusions or citations—including well-known earlier films set in Naples and fleeting reminders of Caravaggio and Brueghel.

In the first street scene, a variety of elements vie for prominence. A limping man of uncertain age wearing a long blond wig aggressively makes his way through the crowded streets. Pushing a baby cart filled with eggs, he loudly advertises his merchandise in sing-song Neapolitan, and pauses here and there to make a sale along the way. Simultaneously, a colorful religious procession moves forward through the throng, providing competing music and competing noise. Hymns, spontaneous song, aggressive repartee, and the egg-vendor's sales pitch join together in the ensuing cacophony. The chaotic activity of this sunlit street scene—which recalls to some extent the vitality of the outdoor scenes in Vittorio De Sica's *Gold of Naples* (1954)—is then juxtaposed with the shadowy interior of a church, where a man, later identified as Don Lorenzo, bends in prayer before a crucifix, pleading to God to be relieved of his temptations. Almost immediately, however, a scuffle erupts in the off-screen space, as the priest is thrown to the ground by unseen intruders. Though we hear the struggle on the soundtrack, and realize that the thieves, after attacking the priest, focus on removing his watch, we never see the intruders. Instead the camera moves upward and remains focused on the painted statue of a saint for the duration of the encounter. The fact that the priest has been injured in the scuffle is revealed through a brief close-up of his broken glasses lying on the floor. When Don Lorenzo steps out into the street in the subsequent scene, two youths approach him on a motorbike, one of whom, stripped bare to the waist, resembles a figure in a Caravaggio painting. Greeting the priest in insolent tones and proffering a bunch of grapes, the youths taunt him about the loss of his watch. Though Don Lorenzo responds calmly to the mockery of those he realizes are his assailants, it is clear that his authority in the neighborhood is already under siege. This richly textured prologue condenses some of the dialogic elements that recur throughout the film, and introduces us to the principal elements of Nunzio's world—including the crazy, dialect-speaking egg-vendor, who turns out to be his father, and the educated, cassock-clad Don Lorenzo, who is already marked as a target of aggression by the mob.

The dominant visual design of *Pianese Nunzio 14 anni a maggio* is baroque, an effect achieved through chiaroscuro lighting effects, virtuoso camera movements, a keen attention to the plasticity of the human body, and the heightening of emotional effect through a variety of visual and musical cues.¹² The baroque space of the basilica of Santa Maria della Sanità, adorned with both refined and flamboyant works of liturgical art, is additionally deployed within the mise-en-scène to impressive effect. While the cultivation of a baroque aesthetics helps to suture the viewers to the emotional drama taking place on screen, this is occasionally undercut with the intrusion of competing visual and aural cues. For example, the influence of the *sceneggiata*—a distinctly Neapolitan tradition of popular theater consisting of schematic melodramas with broadly drawn characters, which are staged to the accompaniment of popular music—is sharply present in the film. The appearance of Nunzio's father, in particular, signals the intrusion of the exaggerated, even grotesque elements associated with popular theater.

The use of complex stylistic effects to convey an awareness of the narrative's deeper implications is reinforced in the film's soundtrack with a contrasting array of musical elements. These range from the genre of popular Neapolitan music known as the *neo-melodico*, represented in the film by the songs of Nino D'Angelo and Ciro Ricci, to the music of Mozart and Gluck, the contemporary "multicultural" taste of the Almamagretta group, and the sounds of brass bands, jazz, and drum rhythms. Unsurprisingly, the music that Nunzio chooses to sing in public conforms to the Neapolitan preference for the moody sentimentality of the *neo-melodico*. In sharp contrast to this vein, the haunting theme of the "Dance of the Blessed Spirits," from Gluck's opera *Orfeo ed Euridice*, repeatedly accompanies his intimate encounters with Don Lorenzo.

Capuano punctuates the film with Brechtian moments of diegetic rupture, temporarily alienating the audience's emotional identification with the on-screen drama. As though anticipating being called upon to testify in the prosecution of Don Lorenzo, almost all of Capuano's characters at some stage in the narrative step away from their immediate focus of activity, and without apparent motivation turn to address an invisible interlocutor. Looking directly at the camera, which occupies the space of the interlocutor, they then provide their name, address and date of birth, as well as a brief account of their relationship to the priest. This strategy seems to announce a symbolic call for accountability to the characters within the narrative. At a different level, it also suggests to the film's viewers that the story developing before their eyes may eventually be retold in a different way and with different effects. Ultimately, these

unexpected temporal displacements and shifts in performative register function to undermine the spectators' uncritical absorption in the diegesis, inviting in its place a more reflexive, more dispassionate spectatorial assessment of the unfolding drama.

At the heart of this drama lies the question of what constitutes manhood in the social microcosm formed by the chronically impoverished, chronically crime-ridden neighborhoods of Naples. Capuano ultimately construes Nunzio's coming of age, or coming to manhood, as a gradual, reluctant surrender to the demands of the violent, hypermasculine *camorristi*. Maturation thus becomes a process of capitulation rather than a process of conquest. Yet, in Nunzio's decision to succumb to the pressures imposed on him, the filmmaker also allows the viewers to glimpse the boy's sadness, his deep sense of compromise. After he obtains the long-coveted opportunity to sing a song on television as an "award" for deciding to collude with the *camorra*, Nunzio's awareness of the implications of his actions ultimately inhibits him finding any pleasure in this triumph.

Pianese Nunzio 14 a maggio provides no single viewpoint or judgment on the characters whose story occupies the foreground of the narrative. Instead, through the deployment of textual hybridity and heteroglossia, it attempts to convey the conflicting forces that constitute the social system they inhabit. Insisting on the specificity of the Neapolitan environment, Capuano evokes a world where certainties are aligned with the lethal forces of the mob, rather than with the religious or pseudo-religious discourses articulated by the priest. Using self-reflexive strategies that repeatedly draw attention to the constructed quality of the representation, the filmmaker deliberately unsettles any sense of narrative closure or epistemic mastery. Rather than facilitating the viewer's decision on the culpability of the priest or the adolescent, the film underlines the incompleteness of all the viewpoints presented, and suggests the futility of the search for definitive moral judgment on our part.

Notes

¹ Although the literal English translation of the film's original title is "Nunzio Pianese, Fourteen in May," the film has been distributed in the United States on DVD and videotape with the title *Sacred Silence*.

² According to one journalist, the discussion held by the censors to decide on the

suitability of the film for general viewing audiences lasted an entire afternoon. After a heated debate, it was restricted to viewers over the age of 14 (Robiony). See also Antonio Addonizio et al. on the film's initial reception, 127.

³ The term *camorra* is applied to the network of organized crime based in Naples and the surrounding area. It is comparable, though not identical, in its organization and methods to the Sicilian mafia.

⁴ These films include, for example, *La corsa dell'innocente* (Carlo Carlei, 1993), *L'albero delle pere* (Francesca Archibugi, 1998), *Il più bel giorno della mia vita* (Cristina Comencini, 2002), *Io non ho paura* (Gabriele Salvatores, 2003), *Quando sei nato non puoi più nasconderti* (Marco Tullio Giordana, 2005), and *Anche libero va bene* (Kim Rossi Stuart, 2006).

⁵ See Hanawalt, *The Ties that Bound*, and Pollock, *Forgotten Children*.

⁶ Following Ariès, Barbara Greenleaf describes the neglect and abuse of children in pre-modern times as follows: "Until very recently people considered childhood just a brief, unimportant prelude to adulthood and the real business of living. By and large they either ignored children, beat them, or fondled them carelessly. . . . When they gave serious thought to children at all, people either conceived of them as miniature adults, or as peculiar, unformed animals." *Children Through the Ages*, xiii.

⁷ See Fabrizio Colamartino's interview with Capuano, "Conversazione con Antonio Capuano."

⁸ See Addonizio et al., 25.

⁹ In one of his interviews Capuano asserted that "Children are not charming in the way that they are presented on television; they are cruel, nasty, poetic and intense"; see Colamartino.

¹⁰ "Discourse in the Novel" in *The Dialogic Imagination*, 269. Bakhtin writes, "Every concrete utterance of a speaking subject serves as a point where centripetal as well as centrifugal voices are brought to bear Every utterance participates in the 'unitary language' . . . and at the same time partakes of social and historical heteroglossia," 272.

¹¹ To date, the work of Robert Stam has provided the most crucial contribution to the development of Bakhtinian theory for film studies; see *Subversive Pleasures*.

¹² Apart from his activity as a filmmaker, Capuano holds the position of professor of art history at the Accademia delle Belle Arti in Florence. His films reflect his familiarity with and attachment to Italy's pictorial tradition. This is perhaps most noticeable in the baroque lighting effects of *Pianese Nunzio 14 a maggio*. Capuano has described the visual design of this film as his "tribute to Caravaggio." Personal communication, Los Angeles, October 2006.