Youth Culture and the Post-war Novel: From Teddy Boys to Trainspotting

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With *Youth Culture and the Post-war Novel* Ian Ross has persuasively contributed to a somewhat neglected element of contemporary literary discourse, blending a fresh approach to close reading and narrative scrutiny with elements of wider discourse analysis, locating – despite his initial protestation – the sociological in the modern novel via an understanding of the skilful weaving of youth cultural awareness and the zeitgeist with the time-honoured problematics of simply *writing about youth* and their transitions.

On encountering this book – the subject matter of which I have anticipated for some time – I found myself aware that the synthesising of the duality of the important role of post-war youth in the dynamics of social, economic and cultural change, and the 'representation' of such dynamics in literary fiction, had been arguably underplayed in literary and sociological academic dialogue until now. As an introduction to such discourse this book works well, taking the broader approaches of contemporaries such as Dominic Head (2002) and working instead with a forensically detailed analysis of a variety of dynamics present – as one may imagine – in novels that have, at their heart, young people encountering what Ross acknowledges as transition and change within British society from the 1950s to the dawn of the new millennia, and in the interconnected flow of time and experience itself. It appears, therefore, as literary in character as it is sociological and, to be sure, there are moments at the outset where Ross attempts to wrong-foot sociologists of literary form, declaring boldly that this work is not 'sociological' but merely 'popular literary criticism' (2019: 9). However, despite the undoubted strengths of his researches and the presentation of his theory, the distancing from sociology is perplexing; it is arguably a strength of its academic vanguard that this work may join a plethora of studies into youth culture that focus on mass societal and media affront and associative moral panics, retrospective urbanity and the subcultural, the creative and the musical, and resistance to the mainstream (e.g. Cohen, 1972; Hall and Jefferson, 1976; Hebdige, 1979; McRobbie, 2000; Bennett, 2000). While Ross certainly pays attention to these mentioned criteria, his work prioritises *the novel* and narratives of youth, the subject matter enveloped by his choice of case studies arguably *intersectional*, with masculinity, sexuality, race, and social class particularly strong throughout, though female subjectivity/identity could feature more. However, the apparently minor – but crucial – distinction between *youth* 'culture' and *sub*culture can be problematic. In his defence, Ross claims that the novels chosen for analysis involve or reflect youth culture rather than just rites of passage, but the reader is challenged to see this beyond the conventional microanalysis of identity and strategy, plotting a path into life often from sunken platforms of inferiority that essentially point towards rites of passage (sex, independence, employment, education etc.) rather than 'youth cultures' that are more conventionally associated within the public oeuvre via obtrusive styles, popular musical genres, and liminality. Consequently, one detects a *socially reproductive* element in the narratives of, inter alia, *Absolute Beginners*; *Saturday*

Night, Sunday Morning; *A Clockwork Orange*; *The Rachel Papers*; *The Buddha of Suburbia*; *Trainspotting* et al., incorporating an intergenerational pattern of reproduction via various bildungsroman/picaresque approaches, as well as the attachment of signification to the narratives via an explanation of the embedding of such works into their places in history alongside the technique of conjoining the narratives to the prevailing 'youth cultures' of their era. However, the big question is whether such works adequately and actively *represent* the era or the culture; the connectivity is occasionally precarious. The novels chosen all broadly do 'the same thing' in representing transition, resistance, and social experimentation attached to the absent certainties of identity; the 'youth culture' association often appears peripheral. Thus, one is left with a sense that the afterlife of the novels attaches more significance to a representation of youth culture via a centrifugal effect in critique and interpretation – via script treatments, soundtrack music, leading actors etc. – with the original novel on the *inside*, the written text existing in its own time and the textual analysis benefitting from decades of development. Thus, *Absolute Beginners*, *A Clockwork Orange*, and *Trainspotting* are merely stories about youth and experience and only the associative and attentive media can be described as pertaining to youth cultural significance; it is therefore possible that Anthony Burgess did *not* 'create the skinhead' (as Ross debates within), but instead that the skinhead saw himself reflected in *A Clockwork Orange*'s celluloid exhilaration and attendant media controversy that simultaneously attached further significance to the perceived connection between youth, violence, style/fashion, working-class identity, and music. It's a fine line between lived realities and commercial exploitative hegemony. Thus, I found myself early on wondering whether Ross planned to incorporate the notion of self-aware authorship throughout, namely that the authors that he chose to feature conscientiously conjoined their own creative narratives with the presence of a youth culture, or whether such association became coincidental and conceivably developed an external youth culture as an effect of readership. This issue was never convincingly resolved or, indeed, credibly encountered throughout the duration but perhaps that was never the point. Ross argues convincingly that *generational conflict* fashioned the writing he analysed, but it is also possible that dislocated writers produced dislocated writing that simply drew upon, or was applied to, prevailing subcultural mores and values.

Despite these slight (and they are, on the whole, only *slight*) reservations on what may be seen as an unresolved tension in the subject matter, this is a valuable book because, via its engagingly written style, Ross manages to convince the reader (perhaps unintentionally) that the sociological is inherently present in the contextualising of youth culture and modern British literature, meshing together the intersectional drivers of identity and the macro dynamics of social and economic change, situating literature in time and creating a useful dualism of synchronic and diachronic understanding of mores, values, music, style, prevailing norms, and reflexivity. Ross elevates his narrative into a discussion of the frictional parent- and youth culture duality in fictional narrative and his choices clarify the relationships between social, cultural, and literary history and the battle for definitive authority within novels concerned with transformation. This is where this book works best; it is a poignant reminder that youth transition, via chance and circumstances, can be connected to what we *have* and what we *lack* and rarely do these kernels of fortune relate to one another for long. Ian Ross therefore demonstrates that the post-war novel is a useful device to contemplate how we all become what we are.

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