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Intellectuals Between Dissociation and Dissenting A Commentary on Two Essays by Pier Paolo Pasolini and Christopher Lasch

1. Introduction

Pier Paolo Pasolini and Christopher Lasch come from completely different worlds and obviously different backgrounds and cultural formations. However, the idea to write this article, in which I try to compare some of their ideas, came to me not only because I profoundly admire the moral highness of these two intellectuals, but also because in their models of thought one can find more than a few issues in common. Firstly, both Pasolini and Lasch considered Marx the fundamental philosopher who inspired their entire system of thought, though the former has always looked at Antonio Gramsci as a master and the latter was deeply influenced by the social criticism of the Frankfurt School. Secondly, both recognized in the 1970s, that the Left vision of the society was only apparently progressive, insofar as it deplored the erosion of authority, the educational standards in the schools, the spread of permissiveness, the lack of moral principles in politics, the diffusion and the increasing of individualism, but refused to acknowledge the connection between these developments and the rise of what Christopher Lasch called “monopoly capitalism”,¹ and Pasolini

¹ Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism. American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*, New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978, p. 232.

called “American-like hedonistic ideology of consumerism”.² Thirdly, their engagement was not just theoretical, since they were politically and socially involved and actively participating in their societies. In his article on Christopher Lasch, James Seaton claims that “his [Lasch’s] career reveals the moral and spiritual depth that becomes possible when an intellectual disdains the consolations offered by the intellectuals’ view of themselves as morally and mentally superior to the rest of humanity.”³ On the other hand, Pasolini himself, addressing Italo Calvino, gives a description of his personal way to be an intellectual:

I know well, dear Calvino, how intellectuals’ life goes over. I know it because, partly, it is also *my* life. Readings, solitude [...], circles of a few friends and many acquaintances, all intellectuals and bourgeoisies. A life of work and substantially good behavior. But I have another life, like Mr. Hyde. In order to live this life, I have to break the natural and innocent class barriers, break down the walls of little, good provincial Italy, and drive myself then, to another world: the rural world, the sub-proletarian world, the world of labor. The order in which I list these worlds does not concern their objective importance, it concerns the importance of my personal experience.⁴

Pasolini’s sociological survey involves him not only through analysis and study, but also through those aspects of Pasolini’s private life which his detractors endlessly reminded him of as a *maudite* version of his personality, for Pasolini himself constituted a fundamental part of his cognitive research.

For the purposes of this article, I will discuss, in particular, two works by these authors: Pasolini’s *Scritti corsari* (1975) and Lasch’s *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* (1995).

² Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Scritti corsari* (“Corsair Writings”), Milano: Garzanti Novecento, 2008 [first edition, 1975], p. 40. The translation from Italian of all the excerpts from Pasolini’s *Scritti corsari* in this article is mine.

³ James Seaton, “The Gift of Christopher Lasch”, *First Things* 45/1994, www.leaderu.com/ftissues/ft9408/seaton.html (accessed May 7, 2009).

⁴ Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Scritti corsari*, p. 52.

2. Pasolini's *Scritti corsari* and Lasch's *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy*

Scritti corsari was the last work of Pier Paolo Pasolini published during his lifetime. In this collection of short essays – in particular of articles written between January 1973 and February 1975 for the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera* – Pasolini draws on contingent situations, inherent in Italian political and social events. Nevertheless, by discussing these events, the author takes the opportunity to argue, debate and above all defend his own political and philosophical position against criticism expressed in other newspapers by other Italian intellectuals like Umberto Eco, Italo Calvino and Pasolini's close friend Alberto Moravia. In Italy, in the first half of the 1970s political debates included questions on the legalization of abortion or divorce, but Pasolini, in the brief pages of his essays always succeeds in orientating the discussions toward general positions.

As Pasolini himself often claims, the sociological aspects in his works are not new at all. In *Scritti corsari* there is nothing which has not already been said in the past. Commodity fetishism, repressive tolerance, effects of the mass cultural industry: all these subject matters have been investigated and deeply analyzed decades before Pasolini, for example by the critical social theorists of the Frankfurt School. Thus the originality of *Scritti corsari* does not pertain to historical or social analysis, even though the application of this kind of analysis to the particular Italian situation is absolutely new and Pasolini displays both original assumptions and conclusions. On the contrary, Pasolini's analysis being so closely related to the Italian situation, one could say that *Scritti corsari* is not a work for easy international diffusion. In fact the author was, and probably still is, recognized worldwide more for his films than for his novels, poems or essays. Nevertheless, *Scritti corsari* is characterized by an interesting element of novelty which is worth emphasizing for at least three reasons. The first reason concerns the radicalization of the questions Pasolini faces. The second is the originality of this brief essay's style, a sort of closing speech which handles objections from other intellectuals and tends to counter them by adopting a

strictly rational criticism, where rational means ‘totally adherent to facts’. The third reason, the most original one, perhaps unique, at least within the Italian cultural scene, regards Pasolini’s way of coping with contingent questions to get to the core issue that is the function and the role to which intellectuals are always, with no exceptions or compromises, duty-bound. Part of this function consists of a real and pragmatic interest, or “love” for every single individual which tends to refuse the official (sociological or political) analysis of society’s problems based on general aspects and general nominalizations. Talking, for instance, about consumeristic hedonism in Italian society Pasolini claims:

It has never been spoken about the Italian problem. [...] The happy nominalization of the sociologists seems to die within their own circle. I live within the things and I invent the way to name them as well as I can. Of course if I try to ‘describe’ the terrible aspect of an entire generation which has been affected by the imbalance of a stupid and dreadful development, and I try to ‘describe’ it in ‘this’ young man, in ‘this’ worker, I won’t be understood: because neither ‘this’ particular young man nor ‘this’ particular worker do personally matter at all to professional sociologists and politicians. On the other hand, this is precisely the only thing that matters to me.⁵

As a historian and cultural critic, Christopher Lasch is probably best known for *The Culture of Narcissism*, which became a best-seller in the United States in the late 1970s. *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* is a collection of essays which was published after Lasch’s death, in 1994, and it can be considered the summary of Lasch’s thought. Divided into three parts and thirteen chapters, this work mainly deals with the state of American society in the mid 1990s. Like Pasolini’s *Scritti corsari* the lucidity and the extent of the analysis contained in Lasch’s book could easily address the whole of Western society. Lasch claims that though privileged classes have always operated throughout history, they have never been as isolated from the rest of the society as they are at the pres-

⁵ Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Scritti corsari*, p. 74.

ent time. For those classes, “which include not only corporate managers but all those professions that produce and manipulate information”,⁶ the idea of success is strictly associated with mobility. This is a relatively new concept that has previously always figured only marginally in the definition of career advancement or career opportunity. The new privileged classes become more and more cosmopolitan or in fact ‘migratory’ and have not only definitively lost their contact with ordinary people, but also their attachment to the idea of nationality or community.

The privileged classes in Los Angeles feel more kinship with their counterparts in Japan, Singapore, and Korea than with most of their own countrymen. The same tendencies are at work all over the world. In Europe referenda on unification have revealed a deep and widening gap between the political classes and the more humble members of society, who fear that the European Economic Community will be dominated by bureaucrats and technicians devoid of any feelings of national identity or allegiance. A Europe governed from Brussels, in their view, will be less and less amenable to popular control. The international language of money will speak more loudly than local dialects.⁷

The new elites do not specifically provide for the government of the community, on the contrary, the artificial character of politics reflects their isolation from the common man. Unlike the ‘old’ capitalistic elite, the new privileged class is not interested in wealth or culture redistribution, which is one of the fundamental characteristics of a democratic society. In fact, the wane and exploitation of democracy are the main subjects of Lasch’s book. According to Lasch, they drive the community to breaking-point. Firstly, the community is the simple spectator of fierce debates and ideological battles fought on peripheral issues. Secondly, the society itself reflects a secret conviction that the real problems are insoluble.⁸

⁶ Christopher Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy*, New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995, p. 5.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 3–4.

Due to the lack of democratic exchange within the society particular groups tend to shut themselves away, in order to defend the remains of their own identity or even diversity. Thus the society becomes less and less democratic. Among those groups, Lasch identifies a category of intellectuals, specifically scholars, who, in hiding themselves behind an apparent liberalism, take an active part in the general involution of the present. Lasch believes that the apparent liberalism of a certain kind of American scholar actually coincides with its opposite, that is racism.⁹ On this matter, it is interesting to notice Pasolini's point of view on intellectuals and culture twenty years earlier:

We intellectuals always tend to identify 'culture' with our own culture; moral with our own moral and ideology with our own ideology. This means that: 1) we do not use the word 'culture' in a scientific way; 2) we express a certain insuppressible racism towards those who live, precisely, a different culture.¹⁰

Pasolini's passage about the racist tendencies of Italian intellectuals is related to the one exposed by Christopher Lasch, when he describes the position of liberal American intellectuals as regards the two major fears which – according to Lasch – paralyze our society: fanaticism and racial warfare. Lasch claims that “those who worry overmuch about ideological fanaticism often fall into a complacency of their own, which we see especially in liberal intellectuals. [...] They see themselves, these devoutly open-minded intellectuals, as a civilized minority in a sea of fanaticism.”¹¹ In this way, that is by shutting themselves up in an ivory tower of emancipation, this kind of intellectuals, far from having overcome prejudices operates a culturally racist divide between themselves and the rest of the society.

⁹ Ibid, p. 184.

¹⁰ Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Scritti corsari*, p. 56.

¹¹ Christopher Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites*, pp. 89–90.

3. Elites, progress and democracy

There is one fact which, whether for good or ill, is of utmost importance in the public life of Europe at the present moment. This fact is the accession of the masses to complete social power. [...] ¹² Today we are witnessing the triumphs of a hyperdemocracy in which the mass acts directly ¹³ [...] This world [...] furthermore suggests to those who dwell in it the radical assurance that tomorrow it will be still richer, ampler, more perfect, as if it enjoyed a spontaneous, inexhaustible power of increase ... ¹⁴

These words are excerpts from *La rebelión de las masas* (*The Revolt of the Masses*), which the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset wrote in 1930, when the Bolshevik revolution had already taken place, Stalin held power in the Soviet Union, and in many European nations fascism was dominating the scene. Today one can say that the political power of the masses and their revolt, which Ortega y Gasset was afraid of, are far from being realized and the perspectives of the mass-man have been considerably downsized. Today one certainly cannot claim that the mass-man feels omnipotent or that he thinks everything is allowed or possible. Least of all he believes that the level of well-being he has reached is destined to increase. On the contrary, Christopher Lasch claims that most of the peculiarities which, in Ortega's opinion, pertained to the mass-man in the 1930s, today can be attributed to the above-mentioned elites, which are mainly the alumni of institutions of higher learning which control the instruments of cultural production and therefore define the terms in which the public debate takes place. ¹⁵ In Lasch's opinion,

¹² José Ortega Y Gasset, *La rebelión de las masas*, Pinto Madrid: Mateu Cromo S.A., 2002 [first edition 1930], p. 47. See the English translation at <http://www.globalchristians.org/politics/DOCS/Ortega%20y%20Gasset%20-%20The%20Revolt%20Of%20The%20Masses.pdf>, p. 1 (accessed January 20, 2009).

¹³ Ibid, p. 54. See The English translation at the same website, p. 4.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 97. See The English translation at the same website, p. 24.

¹⁵ Christopher Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites*, p. 26.

brokers, bankers, real estate promoters and developers, engineers, consultants of all kinds, systems analysts, scientists, doctors, publicists, publishers, editors, advertising executives, art directors, moviemakers, entertainers, journalists, television producers and directors, artists, writers, university professors¹⁶

belong to these elite groups. As they are extremely varied, these groups are not characterized by a common political orientation; neither can they be considered or defined as movements.

Pier Paolo Pasolini, by considering the Italian context, describes how the process which brought these elites to power in today's society took place. In Italy, in the mid 1960s, a transformation occurred which, in Pasolini's opinion, was crucial and irreversible. Principles and beliefs did not fundamentally change between the pre-war period and the republican post-war period. In fact, after the end of the Second World War Italy had simply shifted from a fascist regime to a clerical-fascist regime, dominated by the Christian conservative party called Democrazia Cristiana. Most representative seats of power had remained in the same hands, while the main ethical and practical principles endorsed by the new State and the new government were exactly the same as those sustained by the fascist rhetoric: Church, motherland, family, savings, social order, morality. But in the mid 1960s these rhetorical values suddenly did not matter anymore. Italy entered the industrial era and the only real values became production and consumption. Goods became the new idol and replaced political and clerical power.¹⁷ Pasolini's analysis of the Italian context could be extended, *mutatis mutandis*, to many Western societies after the Second World War. But the crucial matter in this transformation, as pointed out by Pasolini, is that the democratic process developed together with hedonistic myths of production and consumerism.

This democratization process dates back to the early twentieth century and is connected with the ideas of all the European and American socialist parties. However, it is completely new when the industrial establishment takes possession of it, starting from the mid 1960s.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 34.

¹⁷ Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Scritti corsari*, pp. 128–131.

This process of democratization of culture becomes a synonym for vertical social mobility. Theoretically everyone is given the ‘opportunity’ to move upward quickly to higher levels of society. This principle of democratization started as a positive progressive principle, but under the control of the new elites its foundations are set on an imbalance and a consequent dissociation in society and individuals: this imbalance derives from the contradiction, inherent in western modern societies, “between egalitarian ideology and the hierarchic division of labor required by modern industry”.¹⁸

According to Lasch, the democratization of culture began after the Great Depression in the United States, much earlier than in Europe, and potentially extended to everybody the chance to attend the same schools and therefore to have the same opportunities of success. Due to the practical impossibility of achieving each individual’s goal, this idea led the majority of the people who ‘could not make it’ not to blame the system, but to give “moral judgement on their own lack of ambition or intelligence”.¹⁹ Thus the most relevant and historically new consequence of democratization is a sense of guilt and self-denigration, due to the failure in social fulfilment. Within a society which claims that there are the same opportunities of success for everybody and which spreads through the media a vision of the world essentially based on success and individual distinction, just being ordinary is perceived as a social failure. As a consequence in political praxis, in many western European countries, where people with their protests had achieved increased salaries, reduced working hours, better conditions and rights recognition for employees, today a countertrend is clearly in action: the uncertainty of jobs, decreasing salaries, diminishing workers’ rights, and worsening work conditions. Moreover, the tendency of the working classes is not to join in common protest but to yield to individualism, which represents a definite renouncement in modifying the established order. This is not the only form of dissociation which weakens the non-elitist part of western society. Pasolini also sets out the concept of “progress” and “develop-

¹⁸ Christopher Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites*, p. 52.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

ment” within those societies. **Development** is a pragmatic and economic issue, supported by the dominant elite and the consumers; **progress** is an ideal – social and political – issue, supported by groups whose goal is to reduce social, cultural and economic differences. The problem is that, in present society, those who support progress experience the “progress idea” **in their conscience**, but, at the same time, they experience the consumerist ideology, the “development idea”, **in their existence**. Pasolini urged intellectuals to openly face this problem which is a true matter of conscience.²⁰ In other words Pasolini sets out the problem of the functionality of democratic systems: as a matter of fact a society with fewer differences does not necessarily correspond to a more democratic society.

According to Pasolini, one of the main duties of intellectuals is to be rigorous in doing a critical analysis of historical facts. This duty the older intellectuals failed to accomplish during the 1968 protests, when most of them firmly believed in the advent of a revolution. This belief was considered by Pasolini to be one of the most serious mistakes in twentieth century critical thinking. These intellectuals revealed themselves as unable to critically read historical facts. In Pasolini’s view, the reasons behind the protest did not have objective meaning. In fact, young people and workers protested also for the masses, but for the masses the real historical novelty was not the potential Marxist revolution, it was the new reality in which they were already living: “consumerism, well-being, and the hedonistic ideology of power”.²¹ This misunderstanding of historical facts was even more serious because in the meantime the traditional forms of power (clergy, industrial middle class, school and family) were undergoing deep transformation and the traditional society was showing a crisis of leadership. It included both the authoritarian and reactionary kind of leadership as well as the institutions dealing with knowledge and education such as school and family. In such a complex society as Western society, this crisis of traditional authority led not to new forms of debate, but to a proliferation of a completely different kind of leadership. These leaders are experts, specialists, such

²⁰ Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Scritti corsari* (see the brief essay entitled “Sviluppo e Progresso” – Development and Progress, pp. 175–178).

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

as doctors, psychologists, engineers, sociologists, or journalists. ‘Competence’ has replaced idealism.²²

Many of the intellectuals, who have joined in this new variegated liberalism of competences described by Pasolini, seem today to form the new dominant elite identified by Christopher Lasch. Both Pasolini and Lasch deal with categories within the society which can potentially include powerful elite groups. On the one hand, in all of Pasolini’s essays, his aversion to certain Italian conservative and catholic politicians and clerics is well known, but Pasolini is not particularly afraid of them. In fact, he does not consider them a threat to democracy anymore, as they pertain to a very ‘old’, traditional and almost extinct system of power:

The future does not belong to the old cardinals, the old politicians, the old magistrates, or the old policemen. The future belongs to the young middle classes who do not need to exert the power anymore by using traditional instruments; who do not need the Church anymore [...] The new middle classes’ power needs a totally pragmatic and hedonistic spirit for the consumers: a purely technical and earthbound universe.²³

On the other hand, Pasolini, as well as Lasch always mentions the new system of power, the one of the elites, or of the ‘competence’ in general terms, regardless of specific individuals. Nevertheless, it is worth noticing that Pasolini and Lasch often engage in controversy with individuals who pertain to their own political tendency and to their own ‘category’, progressive, liberal, non-conservative intellectuals and scholars. Pasolini argues and debates with intellectuals and writers such as Eco, Calvino, Moravia and others,²⁴

²² Therefore, as the Italian scholar Claudio Giunta points out in his book, “it is not a paradox that in our present society, where traditional authority apparently has disappeared, we live hetero-directed lives and we get advice and instructions even in fields such as nutrition, children education, leisure activities, where individuals’ will had always been sovereign”. Claudio Giunta, *L’assedio del presente. Sulla rivoluzione culturale in corso (The Siege of the Present. On the Current Cultural Revolution)*, Bologna: Il Mulino, 2008, p. 54. The translation from Italian is mine.

²³ Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Scritti corsari*, p. 15.

²⁴ Ibid. For the controversy against Umberto Eco, his prejudices against homosexuals and his ideological point of view on abortion, see the brief essay entitled “Febbraio 1975. Cani” (“February 1975. Dogs”), pp. 115–121; for the one against Italo Calvino, on some historical and political considerations of his, see the brief essay entitled “8 luglio 1974. Limitatezza della storia e

while Lasch's book includes a vibrant controversy against a group of influential and respected university professors.²⁵ Pasolini and Lasch do not directly accuse their colleagues of being part of those groups of specialists (the elites) which hold the new and real power. Nevertheless, both *Scritti corsari* and *The Revolt of the Elites* clearly develop the concept that, due to the complexity of today's world even the most aware progressive intellectuals can be (more or less unconsciously) caught by reactionary or, more precisely, elitist ideas.

According to Lasch, who tries to categorize and define their social coordinates, the new elites are allergic to all the boundaries and reject those values (including laws and the national identity itself) which are not directly related to the further acquisition of power and money. These elites consolidate their power by creating false public debates. False because they are induced by the same elites, who decide what the debate must concern.²⁶ Paradoxically, with the great amount of information sources, we lose the focus on function and quality of the information itself. An obvious example is the management of the Italian television system. But also quality newspapers comply with the functions required by the elite of power. One example is the amount of advertisement in daily newspapers. Moreover, about forty percent of the news comes from a few specialized agencies and public relations experts. Such news is reported by the newspapers without meaningful editorial vari-

immensità del mondo contadino" ("July 8, 1974. Limitations of History and Immensity of the Rural World"), pp. 51–55; for the one against Alberto Moravia and his sexual prejudices applied to Pasolini's ideological view of history, see the beginning of the brief essay entitled "11 luglio 1974. Ampliamento del 'bozzetto' sulla rivoluzione antropologica in Italia" ("July 11, 1974. Expansion of the 'Sketch' on the Anthropological Revolution in Italy"), pp. 56–64 and the brief essay entitled "30 gennaio 1975. 'Sacer'" ("January 30, 1975. 'Sacer'"), pp. 105–109.

25 Christopher Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites*. See the controversy against the 1989 report entitled "Speaking for the Humanities", pp. 181–187. The whole report is accessible at http://archives.acls.org/op/7_Speaking_for_Humanities.htm (accessed May 11, 2009). Lasch blames the authors of the report – George Levine, Peter Brooks, Jonathan Culler, Marjorie Garber, E. Ann Kaplan and Catharine R. Stimpson – for sustaining an unjustified optimism about the academic situation in the U.S. Particularly, Lasch points out the fact that the report does not mention one of the crucial problems of this situation, that is the profound ignorance of the students who graduate from college. According to Lasch, this seems not to have occurred to the authors of the report, nor to trouble them.

26 Significantly, on this matter, the ninth chapter of Lasch's *The Revolt of the Elites* is entitled *The Lost Art of Argument*.

ations. Therefore even the everyday news and information we read consist basically of advertisement.²⁷

“Does democracy deserve to survive?” This is the title of one of the chapters in Lasch’s book. What has already been said about information refers exactly to this issue, that is democracy and its function.

When Pasolini died the internet did not exist and when Lasch died it had not yet developed all those technical tools and devices (YouTube, Facebook, MySpace, Dailymotion, PureVolume and so on, each with a related blog) which today make an enormous amount of people potentially able to communicate with each other in real time about any subject.

A vast body of literature exists on the social and psychological impacts that the invasion of the internet and its communication devices can produce (or have already produced) in people’s daily life. On the internet the audience seems to determine the form and the contents of the medium; the consumer is apparently able to organize and control and – most importantly – to generate his product. But in *Against the Machine* Lee Siegel explains how the concept of total democracy which seems to pertain to the internet is deeply incorrect and distorted. When the *Los Angeles Times* and other papers abolished their book review section numerous literary blogs performed a sort of “dance of triumph”²⁸ which, according to Siegel, was “an example of [their] antidemocratic egalitarianism”²⁹. Paradoxically and ironically, “in their attempts at being iconoclastic and attacking big media [...], the bloggers are playing into the hands of political and financial forces that want nothing more than to see the critical, scrutinizing media disappear.”³⁰

This can sound rather incongruent with the aforementioned distortion of everyday news and information. But the incongruity here stands precisely at the core of today’s democracy and constitutes its

²⁷ See Scott M. Cutlip, Allen H. Center and Glen M. Broom, *Effective Public Relations*, Upper Saddle River (New Jersey): Prentice-Hall Inc, 2000 [first edition, 1952], pp. 305–313.

²⁸ Lee Siegel, *Against the Machine. Being Human in the Age of the Electronic Mob*, New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2008, p. 140.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

more dangerous threat. On one hand the threat is inside the traditional democracy, as their political and financial authorities, by controlling the most powerful media, hide or distort the information itself, or create false public debates. On the other hand the threat is outside the traditional democracy, as the power could easily concentrate and be at the mercy of the unchecked and hostile ego and will of a single blogger.

But it is also worth emphasizing another aspect of the internet which is more related to the psychological attitude of the internet audience. The internet is not a disinterested place to go. People do not go online without knowing what to do or what to find (to write or read an e-mail, search for specific information, find the news, buy something, meet someone, talk about politics, and so on). People do not go online as they would enter a bookstore or a park, without knowing what they will find and what they will encounter. That is the crucial point in Siegel's statements: People go online to look for something, like everyone else. So the internet is not only "the most deliberate, purposeful environment ever created",³¹ but far from assuring a new era of democracy, it creates, according to Siegel, a more potent form of homogenization. In fact:

On the Internet, an impulse is only seconds away from its gratification. Everyone you encounter online is an event in the force field of your impulses. The criterion for judging the worth of someone you engage with online is the degree of his or her availability to your will. 'There is little difference between thoughts and Internet-enabled action ... The Internet provides immediate gratification that affects one's ability to inhibit previously managed drives and desires.' In other words, the Internet creates the ideal consumer.³²

Moreover, computer information technology, instead of reducing global and local differences, has increased the gap between com-

³¹ Ibid, p. 175.

³² Ibid, p. 175. Siegel is following here particularly Al Cooper, the American psychologist who pioneered the study of sex and the internet.

puter users and those who do not have access to ICT technologies. It should have increased ‘public knowledge’, but it is not a mystery – and the latest global economical and political events testify it – that in terms of functioning of public administration (justice, economy, politics, business, or finance), today we do not know much more than in the past. As the audience is submitted to a constant flow of information, surprisingly the public debate tends to fade away. Actually, according to Lasch, it is public debate, indeed, which gives the basis for a real democracy. “What democracy requires is vigorous public debate, not information. Of course, it needs information too, but the kind of information it needs can be generated only by debate.”³³ Nowadays, public debate tends to decline as it is induced by the same groups of power who exert great control over the media, and because the news produced by the media is mostly unreliable or exempt from control. Moreover, the media process being unidirectional (it goes from the source to the public), it lacks a fundamental issue: the public itself is prevented from verifying information and asking questions which can orientate the debate. “We do not know what we need to know until we ask the right questions, and we can identify the right questions only by subjecting our own ideas about the world to the test of a public controversy.”³⁴

Despite commentators such as Noam Chomsky and Naomi Klein, at present the ‘universal’ intellectuals, responsible for speaking for the whole of society, intellectuals like, for instance, Pasolini was, are less and less common. Thus the question is not whether a social criticism could be related to a universal sphere. The question is: Does the possibility of a social criticism of **any kind** still exist? On this subject Pasolini and Lasch share a common point of view related to language. According to Pasolini, the adherence of society to the so-called consumerist centre implies that “verbal language is entirely reduced to communication language, with an enormous impoverishment of expressiveness”,³⁵

³³ Christopher Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites*, pp. 162–163.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

³⁵ Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Scritti corsari*, p. 54.

whereas Lasch claims that “people lose the capacity to use language precisely and expressively, or even to distinguish one word from another”.³⁶ This is a core subject. In fact, this impoverishment, this difficult relationship between ‘public’ and words, or ‘public’ and language, means that the difficulty in creating a real (not induced) public debate and in asking the right questions largely depends on the fact that people know less and less ‘how’ to debate and ‘how’ to ask questions.

The academic system should be concerned about these problems; however the academic language often tends to be very specialized: instead of opening up to a solution, it manages to exclude the non-professional public.³⁷ This fact, which apparently subverts common sense, could be explained, according to Lasch, essentially because

they [the academic system, particularly Left-wing academics] defend their incomprehensible jargon as the language of ‘subversion’, plain speech having been dismissed as an instrument of oppression. The language of ‘clarity’, they maintain, plays a dominant role in a culture that cleverly and powerfully uses ‘clear’ and ‘simplistic’ language to systematically undermine complex and critical thinking.³⁸

On one hand – as Lasch concludes his argument – the over-specialized academic language could reinforce the academic self-image; on the other hand it produces a gap between scholars and ordinary people. Due to its self-isolationism the academic world risks missing out on opportunities to create public debate and, as a consequence, any criticism of the dominant elite.³⁹

As regards the previous question on the survival of democracy Lasch’s answer is obviously yes, democracy deserves to survive. The

³⁶ Christopher Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites*, p. 175.

³⁷ On this matter, Claudio Giunta, with particular reference to the Italian humanistic academia, maintains that “in the last fifty years scholars have competed in creating the most abstruse jargon [...] Being incomprehensible it has become synonymous with profundity and scientific seriousness.” Claudio Giunta, *L’assedio del presente*, p. 134 (see footnote 24). The translation from Italian is mine.

³⁸ Christopher Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites*, p. 178.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

point is that it should be re-founded on a new basis. According to Lasch, democracy “has to be judged by its success in producing superior goods, superior works of art and learning, a superior type of character.”⁴⁰

All these *superiorisms* induce a certain worry and suspicion, but Lasch intends a superior general awareness about the meaning of democracy and about expectations from democracy itself. In our hierarchically-organized capitalistic society democracy is unable to provide everybody with a top career. A really democratic organization of society must give everybody the possibility of asking questions in order to raise public debate on themes and issues which come from the society itself and not from its elites. Schools and universities are the only institutions left that can potentially contribute to form, not only in the students, but in the whole of society, a critical consciousness on the complex mechanisms of society itself. The elites who dominate our society exert also a certain control on universities. Particularly, it is well known that industrial and financial powers tend to divert funding from humanities studies in favour of technological research. Technological research very often supports military research. The educational role of the university and the contribution of the university to form critical consciousness can be fully regained only if a great part of academics react critically to this control and counteract the iniquitous trend which seems to have definitely relegated the humanities to a subsidiary role. A real and useful criticism – not pertaining to the self-referential jargon which Lasch calls “religion of criticism”,⁴¹ adopted by a certain academic world – should think about re-establishing a connection with the whole of society. Significantly, in a society characterized by an “upward

⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 86.

⁴¹ Ibid, pp. 217–223. According to Lasch, after Freud's theories and discoveries a therapeutic view of the world emerged and replaced the previous religious view of the world. In the second half of the twentieth century therapeutic concepts and jargon have deeply penetrated into American culture. In this culture the activity of certain criticism – and the degeneration of its “analytic attitude” into an all-out assault on ideals of every kind – has itself been assimilated to self-therapeutic purposes and has become a sort of private religion. Lasch defines this kind of criticism “religion of criticism”.

mobility”,⁴² both Pasolini and Lasch looked at the grassroots level of the society, the former with a pessimistic sense of irreparable loss of the rural world (with which he tried to keep a relationship by staying as long as possible in the so-called developing countries), the latter, on the contrary, relying on popular culture with the hope of bringing up again the question of the public debate. I have already mentioned Pasolini’s words about his personal involvement in the rural and sub-proletarian world.⁴³ He acknowledges that he still misses

the unlimited pre-national and pre-industrial rural world, which survived until a few years ago [...] The people of this universe did not live in a golden age [...] They lived [...] in the *bread age*. This means that they were consumers of extremely necessary goods, and it was perhaps this fact which made their poor and precarious lives extremely necessary, while it is clear that superfluous goods makes life superfluous.⁴⁴

This world view, undoubtedly unusual for a Marxist intellectual, pertains to Pasolini’s private sphere, as he maintains:

whether I miss or not this rural universe, in any case, it is my own business. A business which does not prevent me at all from exerting my criticism on the present world *as it is*, and the more I am detached and I accept to live in it just in a stoic way, the more lucid my criticism will be.⁴⁵

On the other hand, Lasch’s vision is perhaps less pessimistic than Pasolini’s even though he is well aware that “optimism about our prospects would be foolish – even more foolish in 1993 than it was in 1963”.⁴⁶ By quoting Philip Rieff’s *Fellow Teacher*, Lasch mentions with certain positivity the fact that

⁴² Ibid, p. 52.

⁴³ See the quotation referred to by note 4 above.

⁴⁴ Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Scritti corsari*, p. 53.

⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 53.

⁴⁶ Christopher Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites*, p. 223.

sooner or later our remissive elites will have to rediscover the principle of limitation. The modern project may have run its course. The idea that men need not submit to any power other than their own is by no means discredited, but it is losing its capacity to inspire heady visions of progress.⁴⁷

Moreover, Lasch considers “the persistence of old-fashioned moralities among the ‘less educated’ as another reason to hope. Popular resistance to the ‘religion of criticism’ enables us to hope for a renaissance of guilt.”⁴⁸

4. Conclusion

Pasolini died more than thirty years ago, Lasch fifteen years ago. Although Western society has undergone a sweeping transformation since then, it is remarkable how thorough and sharp their ideas still appear, as well as their coherence in counting on the grassroots level of societies, the ‘culture of necessity’ of the so-called developing countries, wistfully admired by Pasolini, and the popular culture that Lasch championed.

Historically, culture is divided into two categories: ‘high’ or ‘dominant’ culture which has always been identified with ‘official’ school and academic culture, and ‘low’ or ‘popular’ culture subordinate to the dominant one, often connected with non-official centers of education (family, rural world) and non-official educational systems (such as oral history, empiricism, learning through imitation). Both members of dominant and subordinate culture have traditionally known and recognized hierarchies pertaining to cultural facts.

It is no longer like this. Dominant elites drive public debate and information through media conglomerates encompassing radio and television networks and newspapers that they control or possess. These media also act in a pervasive way in order to promote a sort of ‘culture of entertainment’ based on sport, fashion and show-business, all profitable ‘audio-visual’ fields connected to advertising.

⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 223.

⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 223.

This ‘culture of entertainment’ was, until a few decades ago, of secondary importance with respect both to high and low culture. The result, far from representing the ultimate democratization of culture rather constitutes a total standardization of high-, low- and entertainment-culture,⁴⁹ with a progressive loss, within society – especially within the youngest generations, those most closely related to the world of media – of the very sense of cultural hierarchies.

It is a fact that ‘audio-visual culture’ (which can be defined as video clips, movies characterized by astonishing special effects, interactive computer devices and, in general, all those kinds of programs which pertain to the infotainment television genre) has succeeded in captivating new generations. Behind this success is media’s fundamental contribution to making ‘audio-visual’ culture dominant in the present age.

On one hand, academic faculties and departments of humanities seem to reject the idea of being part of a subordinate culture, and react with a strategy of critical consciousness, with a strategy of cynicism, according to which it is possible to understand a ‘fact’ just by denouncing it as false, corrupted or ambiguous. This strategy has usually been successful, not because it pertained to ‘high’ culture, but for the reason that ‘high’ culture also happens to be dominant. Since ‘high’ culture has been losing its dominant position, the application of the same strategy in Western schools and universities is now destined to fail. On the other hand, faculties and departments seem to seek media appeal by creating new forms of market visibility,⁵⁰ or by creating new

⁴⁹ It is worth noticing that on the homepages of many online newspapers from different countries “Culture” and “Entertainment” or even “Arts” and “Entertainment” are presented in the same menu bar. Some samples: the menu bar “Cultura & Spettacoli” (Culture and Entertainment) appears on three major Italian newspapers: *La Repubblica*, *La Stampa*, *Il Messaggero*. The menu bar “Culture and Leisure Time” appears on the most important Italian economic newspaper *Il Sole 24 ORE*. In the UK *The Independent* and *Times Online* present in the same menu bar respectively “Arts & Entertainment” and “Arts and Ents”. The Catalan (but nationally distributed) *Periódico de Catalunya* presents “Cultura + Espectáculos”. The American newspapers *Los Angeles Times* and *Washington Post* present in the same menu bar respectively “Arts/Entertainment” and “Arts & Living”. (Home pages of all the aforementioned newspapers accessed June 23, 2009).

⁵⁰ In Italy, several universities inclined to run after media appeal bestowed *Laurea Honoris Causa* (Honorary Degree) on celebrities like the motorcycling champion Valentino Rossi (University of Urbino, 2005), the national rockstars Luciano Ligabue (University of Teramo, 2004) and Vasco Rossi (University IULM, Milan, 2005), the anchor Mike Bongiorno (University IULM, Milan, 2007).

degree courses⁵¹ with the result of reducing funds and time for 'classic' humanities courses. In this apparently disassociated condition, academia might do well to focus on the fact that the culture of reading is still alive and well. The fundamental difference between these two cultures (which has not been properly investigated by specialists yet) is that although audio-visual culture certainly can create works of genius, by its very nature it cannot replace the book-based 'classic culture'. In fact, the peculiarity of audio-visual culture is high speed. While a song or a movie can be thought-provoking, the fact that they have to be 'consumed' in a short time discourages reflection. In other words, audio-visual culture is not able to stimulate those ideas, moral principles, deep reflections on facts, events, characters, ideals, justice, sufferings and disparities brought on by reading. In conclusion, the reaction of humanities faculties and departments to the culture of entertainment should start from the premise that high speed and easy consumption, which are the main reasons for the success of the new dominant culture, constitute also its neuralgic limit. The matter does not concern adherence to a literary canon or the foundation of a new one. After almost a hundred years of 'scientific' discussions about texts, it is perhaps time for a turning point, for a different approach to texts. It is a question of treating them not only as texts which refer to themselves or to other texts (see the aforementioned abstruse 'scientific' scholars' jargon), but – in a more 'humanistic' way – as texts that can change one's life.

⁵¹ The degree course in Communication Sciences at the University of Cagliari includes courses such as Language of Cinema, Television, Advertising and New Media or Semantics of the Web, but it does not include any courses of literature. See <http://www.unisofia.it/corsi/comunicazione/piano/> (accessed June 26, 2009). The same degree course at Alma Mater Studiorum Università di Bologna includes courses in Analysis of Advertising Texts and Analysis of Musical Youth Language but, again, no compulsory courses on literature. See http://www.comunicazione.dsc.unibo.it/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=5&Itemid=46 (accessed June 26, 2009). University of Rome, La Sapienza, offers a degree course in Science of Fashion and Costume. See <http://lettere.uniroma1.it/> (accessed June 26, 2009). University of Venice IUAV offers a degree course in Fashion Design. See <http://www.iuav.it/Facolta/facolt—di1/lauree-tri/claDEM/index.htm> (accessed June 26, 2009).

ABSTRACT

Intellectuals Between Dissociation and Dissenting
A Commentary on Two Essays by Pier Paolo
Pasolini and Christopher Lasch

Scritti corsari (1975) was the last work of Pier Paolo Pasolini published during his lifetime. This collection of short essays focuses on political and cultural issues which characterized Italy in the early 1970s. *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* (1995) is a collection of short essays which was published after Christopher Lasch's death, in 1994, and it can be considered the summary of Lasch's thought. It is an analysis of American society in the 1990s.

Obviously, Pasolini and Lasch come from completely different backgrounds and cultural assumptions. Nevertheless in both the authors it is possible to find references applicable to the 'globalized' world of recent years. Pasolini and Lasch, from different societies and periods, define it in similar ways – by stigmatizing and engaging in controversy with the academia and the 'official' cultural establishment – and question the identity and function of intellectuals and their role within a society in which pluralism, tolerance and permissiveness have turned into reactionary rather than progressive matters.