

Rebel Without a Cause

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August 2002*

This film is coming up to its 50th anniversary and it is timely that we analyse its relationship to generation X and today's modern world effected by meaningless outbursts of violence. It is also important to discuss whether it is an entertainment and interesting film for the postmillennial audience.

The world of 1950's America was an uncertain time and almost revolutionary situation where narcissistic and nihilistic feelings predominated as the cold war and the threat of nuclear attack bearing over America. In the area of cultural significance there are parallels with the post September 11th world in which the threat of terrorism and chemical warfare loom large.

This troublesome interpretation of teenage rebellion gone wild sees three teenagers victimised by their parents; Jim Stark (James Dean) starved of attention from his mother and the dominant discipline required from his father. He joins with two other reprobates in the form of Judy and Plato.

Judy is another youth denied love by her parents. Her father rejects her because she has reached a sexually mature age. Plato also suffers from parental denial as his parents are absent from their homestead. At school their problems draw them together.

It is in the school sphere that screenwriter Stewart Stern (from Nicolas Ray's story) creates his most interesting insight into American teenage life with a broad anthropological study. The film shows different social sectors and the hierarchies' discrimination against people who differ from social normality.

This prejudice causes aggressive feelings to build up between Jim and Judy's boyfriend Buzz which, eventually leads to a flick knife fight and then an unlawful game of 'chicken run', which ends in Buzz's death.

When Jim informs his parents of the irreversible events that have taken place they try to persuade him to conceal the truth, this could be perceived as immature representation of matriarchal and patriarchal figures. Jim Stark's parents are portrayed as immoral people who have driven him to these inconceivable actions. This of course is rather a Freudian ideal and denies the fact that every individual has the freedom of choice, Jim did not have to take part in the chicken run contest.

The ensuing argument between parents and child leads to Jim's rather cliched escape from home. Judy also leaves home and because of her admiration for Jim, he replaces

*The original version of this text can be found at <http://cinetext.philo.at>.

her father. Plato also leaves home for this reason. Together the trio embarks on a mini adventure in order to escape their emotional and social problems. By the end of the film they have all returned home and have at least gone some way to solving their problems.

Plato's significance is also important as his character and the name draw parallels with the famous Greek philosopher. Plato's character in the film is uncertain and aggressive he lashes out with violence when put under pressure. He is unsure of who his parents are as people, he is also unsure of who he is and who his friends are. This links with Plato's 'Notion of Friendship' in which the writer himself is unsure of a definitive definition of friendship. Also his friends are linked to him by strong moral attachments as the philosophical alter ego explored in his paper 'Lysis'.

This coverage of juvenile delinquency is hardly relevant to today's MTV audience. Furthermore these issues of post-pubescent anger are rarely pertinent to the spectator and are not covered in enough detail or brutality to show an in-depth historical record of this period.

Nicolas Ray's direction is restrained and competent but the intensity of the film might have been increased had it been shot in stark black and white like "The Wild One" (1953). Also while the story may have intrigued at the time the characterisations are broad but not defined, Dean is charismatic, but he is also over the top and lacking in the multi-layered core that we would expect.

This is another film much like a lot of its counter-parts from the 50's that has, unlike a fine wine, aged poorly. I feel that the issues of teenage rebellion stand true today but not the actions that the characters portray in this film. The film suffers from a debilitating lack of entertainment value because of this, but it does not have the power to shock and this leaves it like a dead fish in the water