

Introduction

Rebel Without a Cause, Fifty Years Later

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FIVE DECADES AFTER ITS PRODUCTION and initial release, *Rebel Without a Cause* holds a singularly broad sway over the imagination of motion picture fans, critics, and scholars. An accepted cinematic masterwork, the movie retains an unusual cult status. A throwback to the studio era, it is also among the finest credits of a celebrated auteur director. A sprawling Cinemascope Technicolor feature, the action supports an intensive character study that takes place in almost theatrical terms, over roughly twenty-four hours. A breakthrough in its presentation of a social problem with specific historical roots, juvenile delinquency, the film has persistently retained its currency in succeeding years. A pointed commentary on the 1950s United States and, particularly, on the nuclear family and suburbanization, it has informed visions of adolescence and rebellion in far-flung societies. And while *Rebel* offers a potent and abstract reflection on the nature of rebellion in modern life, viewing the film released shortly after its star's untimely death at age twenty-four has always foregrounded the import of popular culture to our understanding of the world.

Rebel Without a Cause had its origins in—or, at least, took its title from—a 1944 case study of an imprisoned delinquent written by Robert Lindner in which the psychologist used hypnosis to probe his subject's

proclivities toward antisocial behavior and criminality.¹ Ten years later, director Nicholas Ray produced a story outline about juvenile delinquency that Warner Bros. encouraged him to develop. Though the filmmaker claims explicitly not to have otherwise used Lindner's work, the title stuck. At least three screenwriters, with the advice of dozens of professionals who worked with troubled teenagers, as well as youthful offenders themselves, shaped the eventual production. The very tangle of voices involved in the film's preproduction enriched the eventual production but also reflected the complicated contemporary concerns over the causes and social significance of juvenile delinquency.

The "JD" problem was an uneasy one for Hollywood and the Production Code Administration charged with policing the content of its productions. It was at once of immediate interest to filmgoers, being, as the eventual trailer for *Rebel* would blare, "torn from today's headlines," and also alienating to some viewers or constituencies. While "social problem" films had arguably formed a coherent category of production since the 1930s, they characteristically relied on the careful reworking of sensitive topics such that the films presented actual social or political problems only to offer individually based moral resolutions.² Juvenile delinquency was made to fit this mold, in which the solution to widespread problems was constructed as local and moral, despite the anxiety-making potential of the subject's appearance on-screen and the emergent recognition of a discrete teenage audience for motion pictures.

During the 1950s, the emergence of teenage audience or market segments, and of teenage subculture, was both symptomatic of, and contributed to, sweeping changes taking place in Hollywood and U.S. society. In his standard study of the "juvenilization of the American movies in the 1950s," film historian Tom Doherty notes that the challenge for Hollywood was not only to produce stories *about* teenagers but to shift their operations so that their productions were more explicitly created *for* teenage markets increasingly understood as active and profitable.³ Films like *The Wild One* (Laslo Benedek, 1953), *Blackboard Jungle* (Richard Brooks, 1955), and *Rock Around the Clock* (Fred Sears, 1956) not only featured stories of teenagers: they also challenged the conventional understanding that movies were to be viewed by the family—by Dad, Mom, and children together—by being marketed specifically to teenagers. That many of these films showed teenagers testing social boundaries and predominant standards for behavior (both on the motion picture screen and outside the theater) fit Hollywood's more general contemporary desire to be provocative, spectacular, and timely while also emphasizing the discrete social, emotional, and marketplace experiences of teenagers.

The concurrence of the juvenile delinquency problem and the emergence of the teenage market is indeed telling, particularly in light of

popular cultural forms like movies that engaged issues of widespread social concern. It is necessary to keep in mind, though, what might be seen as the reflexive quality of these concerns. The controversies that erupted over *Rebel* and other teenpics at the time were often as much about the role of cinema as a social institution, and how it operated in representing experience to viewers, as about the specific, sociological subject of teenage delinquents. Hollywood during the year following World War II was forced to adjust to a changed society. Among the sweeping developments usually recounted in histories of the period are the breakup of Hollywood's integrated system of production, distribution, and exhibition ordered by the Supreme Court's *Paramount* antitrust case in 1949, the breakdown of the Production Code that had regulated the content of motion pictures for three decades, the proliferation of television, the suburbanization of America, and the broader consolidation of mass consumer society—with its delineated market segments and targeted advertising. Hollywood, as an industry that refracted social experience and told stories to viewers about themselves, was thus confronted by the need both to modify the stories it was creating and to resituate itself as a cultural institution. The teen market epitomized the changes occurring in society and in Hollywood itself, vexing to many, which appear more dramatically in the film's narrative of antisocial behavior and troubled families.

Premiering on October 3, 1955, *Rebel Without a Cause* appeared in the middle of a decade of profound social and economic consolidation for the twentieth-century United States and the motion picture industry that arguably provided its primary cultural expression. The film was well-received upon initial release, and would receive three Academy Award nominations (earning one for Ray for “original story”), though most critics wrestled more with the sociological issues of delinquency than with their cinematic presentation. Dean's acting was often singled out for comment, not always favorably, and particularly after his death, subsequent viewing would invite for many a fuller appreciation of both the specific social issues at play in contemporary debates about delinquents and the abstract reckoning of rebellion and marginalized individuals, notably adolescents, in modern society. That appreciation would also grow with the embrace by French writers and critics of Dean as American antihero and, especially, Ray as a maverick director and visual poet who dwelled on the nature of individuals facing hostile environments in a way that cut to the heart of life in contemporary society.

Historical Contexts

“The late James Dean, for one, was a hipster hero.” That epigraph, from Caroline Bird,⁴ opens Norman Mailer's seminal essay, “The White Negro,”

originally published in the Summer 1957 issue of *Dissent* magazine. Mailer argues that the white hipster is a “philosophical psychopath” derived from and akin to the earlier black hipster. Beyond its celebratory invocation of Dean, the essay speaks to broader concerns and, especially, anxieties about social deviance. It draws linkages between violence, criminality, and juvenile delinquency and looks to family relations and domesticity as the core of social experience.

Domesticity is a telling discourse for exploring the postwar years. The wartime home front, despite the threat of physical injury and death in distant battle, had been concerned with the emotional violence of mostly female communities. The return of men from the war, where they had enjoyed the simpler communities of the all-male combat unit, compelled changes in the gender relations that helped to constitute American society and to construct individual identities. A “crisis of masculinity” was not surprisingly a recurrent if inconsistently resolvable topic for postwar films, perhaps most recognizably in film noir but informing many other genres as well. The provocation of strong female identities was one way in which Hollywood films represented the new complexities of postwar society and, specifically, the threat and uncertainty facing returning and maturing males. Shifting discourses of masculinity and femininity alike combined to generate new narrative conflicts with ambiguous resolutions unthinkable in prewar productions.

Which is not to say that the 1950s simply represented a period of decay for conventional male and female domestic roles in society or its films. Elaine Tyler May has asserted “that postwar American society experienced a surge in family life and a reaffirmation of domesticity that rested on distinct roles for women and men.”⁵ One cause of the surge was the economic abundance and political stability that followed two decades of uncertainty; both the Depression and the Second World War “laid the foundation for a commitment to a stable home life, but they also opened the way for a radical restructuring of the family.”⁶ After the war, motivations for “restructuring” withered and the inscription of the domestic became pervasive. Hollywood films of the 1930s and 1940s had celebrated the strong and professional woman only as an alternative to the homemaker and mother. Independence for most female characters did not mix easily with depictions of home and family life. By the postwar period, representations of independent women were increasingly unsympathetic and often damning, marking a danger to the domestic society (and the authority of men).

Notwithstanding these frequent indictments of women and questions about the institutions associated with them, a more widespread anxiety had to do with the continuing plausibility of stable domestic roles determined by gender. It was unclear that many of the social norms repre-

sented by Hollywood since the mid-1930s—inequitable gender relations, the stability of the family and domestic home (especially as a core institution of the larger society), and the socially regenerative quality of violent actions—remained in a vastly changed postwar culture. The dangers of unconventional gender roles produced alienation and less clearly explicable acts of brutality that refused the resolution they had previously enjoyed. One group of Hollywood productions in particular, the melodrama, called attention to the uncertainty—and the potential for violence—of conventional gender relations.

Though graphic violence in film was not, per se, a consistently controversial issue during the immediate postwar period, its links to controversies over delinquency and sexuality are pronounced. On one level, film narratives inscribed by discourses of domesticity carried forth the emotional violence represented in wartime home front films. “The external violence in representations of the war front,” to recall Dana Polan’s words, “finds a parallel moral and emotional violence in narratives about the home front which read that front as a similar site for a similar story of a disruptive violence.”⁷ Though the war was over, narratives provided a continuation of homefront emotional violence by other means. Those eruptions of brutality, essentially connected as they were to contemporary questions of social relations, punctuate *Rebel* as well as many of Nicholas Ray’s other films during the period.

As Elaine Tyler May notes, a pervasive cause of uncertainty was the “symbiotic connection” between the discourse of domesticity and Cold War culture. The emergence of the Soviet Union and, more generally, Communism as the basis for a pervasive culture of threat and fear took place rapidly during the late 1940s and early 1950s. From the activities of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) and the rabid pronouncements of Joseph McCarthy to the Korean War and the emergence of a national security state, the threat of communist subversion and conspiracy was seen as global but also quite personal, involving individual beliefs and relations. Hollywood, as an institution, was caught up in these fears when various filmmakers were targeted by the HUAC to defend their politics. On-screen, the air of paranoia is evident in both films explicitly about political beliefs, most memorably, *My Son John* (Leo McCarey, 1952), and others in which the core institutions of U.S. society and beliefs in such values as American individualism were questioned. In fact, anxieties about the Soviet Union and the atomic bomb are recognizable in productions that ostensibly focused on apolitical or at least domestic political concerns; in these terms, *Rebel* can be seen to demonstrate how discourses of domestic stability and national security were mutually reinforcing and even defining of the period.

1950s Hollywood and Melodrama

The far-reaching postwar question of reconciling changes in social standards of behavior appeared in Hollywood productions concerned with the social standing of teenagers, the gender roles of males, and the stability of the institution of the family. Every decade has its social transitions and shifting notions of deviance and normality: in the 1930s, for instance, the social emphasis refracted by Hollywood was on criminality and lawlessness as socially unacceptable behavior. Following World War II, with the consolidation of demographic and consumer trends and especially the emergence of the ideological conflict of the Cold War, U.S. society self-consciously focused on the links between the behavior of individuals as consumers, family members, or citizens and the larger integrity and security of U.S. society and way of life. Hollywood cinema was a cultural form that powerfully communicated patterns of behavior that were identifiable as “normal” or “deviant”; indeed, popular narratives often turned on the opposition between prevailing standards and individual actions and featured eventual conversions and reconciliations or final separations. “Rebellion,” in this way, functioned dramatically to foreground social expectations and individuals’ relations to them. Writing on the relations between the rebel and society in Nicholas Ray’s films, film historian Thomas Elsaesser puts it well:

Either they [Ray’s rebels] attempt to escape from society altogether and retreat into a world of tranquility—in which they themselves are doomed, and their actions become suicidal. Or their revolt itself is an attempt to revalidate “degraded” ideals, of the social system itself, and then their reconciliation is bought at an exorbitant price. . . . These rebels try to live the explicit dreams of their society, while their very natures—or their alter egos—constantly belie any possibility of permanent reconciliation.⁸

Rather than a simplistic culture of consensus, in other words, the era and the films emerging from it participated in a complex and ongoing process of social relations in which individuals and the social standards themselves are tested and retested in postwar years. The newly populous demographic category of teenagers, for decades already a group of special concern for their vulnerability to inappropriate, immoral, or antisocial ideas, fit readily into broader sociological and popular cultural concerns about deviant behavior, its causes and remedies.

Through its entertainments, Hollywood had for decades played an important role in representing American society to itself. The film indus-

try did so by employing various visual and storytelling approaches that had evolved over decades and could be adapted to engage various topics of concern or fascination. One of these approaches, the social problem film, sought to provide moral or personal—or, best of all, familial—resolutions to more wide-ranging social problems. In words resonant with our discussion of the 1950s, critic Michael Wood has observed that essential to this narrative process was the transmutation of contemporary concerns and the creation of a myth that “there is only one problem,” namely of deviance from normalcy.⁹ For teenagers, particularly delinquents, that deviance took the form of antisocial behavior. The roots of that deviance, moreover, were sought by society and especially Hollywood in carefully circumscribed places: the cause put forward, for Peter Biskind, was simply, “bad families, not bad neighborhoods.”¹⁰ The dysfunctions (to use a term popularized later) of the families in *Rebel* are thoroughgoing, allowing not only a displacement of responsibility from society to the family but also generating sympathy for the teenagers themselves. In the very structure of films about delinquency as social problem were tensions arising from how the problem being represented was constructed as social.

Shaping the tensions in social problem films and many other Hollywood productions was a mode of organizing experience and telling stories that emerged in the early nineteenth-century novel and popular theater and has remained central to popular cultural narratives in the twentieth.¹¹ This mode of melodrama emphasized clearly drawn conflicts built on loss, or threat of loss, of family, home, and community, a risk or threat readily transferable to the viewer’s own life. Among the constitutive features often configured in different combinations in different works are pathos, emotionalism, moral polarization, and sensationalism. Pathos and emotionalism are closely linked, but also point to crucially distinct operations. “Pathos” turns on the Aristotelian notion of “pity”: “a sort of pain at an evident evil of a destructive or painful kind in the case of somebody who does not deserve it, the evil being one which we might imagine to happen to ourselves.”¹² It is the visceral discomfort experienced by the viewer of unjust suffering that also requires association between the two. This association emerges in part from filmmaking practices, notably the familiar format that positions a viewer as being familiar with the fictional world being represented and also as having an affinity with the suffering protagonist. Importantly, these emphases conduce to suppress the viewers’ awareness of their own participation—indeed, sharing—in the production of meaning and emotion.

Yet the presentation of pathos and the resulting, often intense association between viewer and suffering protagonist are complicated in another way. It is bound up in the ideology of the experiences being

represented. In fact, according to Jane Shattuc, the Hollywood melodrama involves a “dual hermeneutic” comprising both the emotional authenticity of the “good cry” and a complicity with the predominant white male ideology; the result is the production of a “bourgeois uplift story.”¹³ Shattuc’s formulation is perhaps too schematic in its oppositional casting of positive and negative hermeneutics: when viewers cry and, especially, deem it “good,” they do so both because of their humane values and culturally inscribed standards. Her insight, though, is that even the most visceral engagement with the perception of moral injustice or victimization remains closely linked to particular, ideologically inflected visions of individuals, families, and communities. Viewing Hollywood productions of the 1950s, this broader insight urges attention to the specifically American ideological underpinnings of the postwar worlds being constituted—worlds of stable domesticity, conventional family life, and tolerant community that were defined by the dramatic portrayals of individuals either being recuperated by these worlds or rebelling against them.

The critique of society evident in many productions of the 1950s is biting because it targets exactly those institutions of mass social or bourgeois life—family, home, school—meant to be uplifting, stable, and safe but that can turn out to be alienating and victimizing. Film theorist Laura Mulvey has written that, “the Hollywood narrative tends to resolve itself around marriage, as critics and theorists have frequently pointed out. . . . [T]his form of closure balances the stability of a story’s opening, and both are frequently realised in the figuration of ‘home’ which the hero first leaves and then reconstitutes.”¹⁴ When melodramas address the institutions of home or family, in other words, they also engage Hollywood’s own tendencies in portraying social conflict, closure, and resolution. A result, as in the melodramas of director Douglas Sirk such as *There’s Always Tomorrow* (1956), *Written on the Wind* (1956), *All That Heaven Allows* (1955), and *Magnificent Obsession* (1954), was the critique both of romantic relations and standards of masculinity and of the artificiality of filmmaking conventions that portray them. *Rebel Without a Cause* took the provocation further by exploring the problems not of adults but of youth. A handful of earlier films had examined (for some, exploited) juvenile delinquency but these productions, such as *Youth Runs Wild* (Mark Robson, 1944) and *I Accuse My Parents* (Sam Newfield, 1945), had been low-budget efforts of smaller studios. *Rebel* was a major studio production that brought together social critique of teenage life with self-conscious attention to the role of popular cinema in portraying contemporary society.

Part of that self-consciousness, as described below, would emerge from James Dean’s galvanizing use of method acting to break through conventions of Hollywood performance and to reveal what many per-

ceived as the “authentic” pain and alienation felt by teenagers. In *Rebel* and other films made for and about teenagers, the realization that institutions like families to which instability and tensions were often displaced in the social problem film, and to which critical attention or responsibility for individual ills was shifted from society at-large, were nevertheless still defining social institutions. Compounding these tensions in the 1950s were the unprecedented challenges to popular film’s preeminence as a cultural form through which social values could be contested and negotiated. Both society and cinema struggled at the time with the legacy of World War II on family life and, especially, the status of the young.

Jackie Byars claims that *Rebel Without a Cause* goes a step beyond melodramas like *The Man With the Golden Arm*: whereas the latter film “deals with rejection from and reintegration into the social and domestic order,” the former “questions this order” itself.¹⁵ The order achieves restoration only at the price of having its central conflicts and contradictions exposed. Even more, implicated in the questioning of social and domestic order is the *cinematic* order by which Hollywood had institutionalized itself as the nation’s predominant storytelling and image-making apparatus. *Rebel Without a Cause* suggests not only contradictions and conflicts at the heart of the familial relations that constitute contemporary society but also the very narrative means by which society’s cultural institutions organized and legitimized certain experiences.

Nicholas Ray

Raymond Nicholas Kienzle was born on August 7, 1911, in Galesville, Wisconsin, the youngest of four children and the only boy of a builder who died when the boy was fifteen. Growing up in the nearby city of La Crosse, Ray early expressed interest in literature and the theater, and he earned a college scholarship based on his proposal of a series of radio plays. He initially chose the University of Chicago, but attended only for a year before returning to the La Crosse campus of the University of Wisconsin. More familiarly, he also attended Taliesin, the artists’ colony, where he studied architecture with Frank Lloyd Wright and served as a “master” in theater. Throughout these wanderings in formal education, Ray worked in theater, especially with traveling productions around the Midwest.

At twenty-one, Ray moved to New York and became associated with a number of left-leaning and even radical theater groups, including the Group Theater, the Theater of Action, and the Workers’ Laboratory. Among those with whom he worked were some of the major figures in twentieth-century American drama: Elia Kazan, Lee Strasberg, Harold Clurman, Clifford Odets, John Houseman, and Joseph Losey. In the late

1930s, Ray would work for the Federal Theater Project under the sponsorship of the Works Progress Administration and traveled widely around the country, recording folk music and pursuing a love of folklore. He would continue his radio producing, becoming a notable figure in the rise of folk music around 1940. With the onset of the war and the establishment of the Voice of America, John Houseman appointed Ray to produce for radio about American folk music.

The postwar years saw Ray's initial encounters with Hollywood film, mostly thanks to former theater colleagues, alternating with returns to work on the New York stage. In 1945, he served as an assistant director for Kazan on *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, and in 1947, with Houseman as producer at RKO, Ray made his first feature, *Thieves Like Us*, which would be released two years later as *They Live By Night*. Ray directed eight films between 1947 and 1952, six for RKO and two for Humphrey Bogart's production company at Columbia. Of these, *Knock on Any Door* (1949) was especially well-received for its portrayal of juvenile delinquency. During these same years, the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) investigated Hollywood and, especially, filmmakers like Kazan and Losey with roots in the political New York theater of the 1930s. Strangely for some, understandable to others, considering his wartime service to the Voice of America, Ray's name never appeared. By the early 1950s, Ray had established a reputation as an effective, workmanlike director that even earned him an invitation from studio owner Howard Hughes to become head of production; though Ray declined, he did contribute to a range of projects at various stages of production.

Ray's own films during this period ranged across conventional Hollywood genres but almost always revealed something of the director's individual vision and guiding concerns: the relations between individuals and cruel, unforgiving environments or authority—in particular, the status of adolescents as marginalized figures—the nature of masculinity, and violence as a defining attribute of social relations. A later critic, Dave Kehr, would offer a generally incisive observation about Ray's work when writing of *In a Lonely Place*, the 1951 portrait of obsessiveness and decay of the Hollywood dream factory: "the film's subject is the attractiveness of instability, and Ray's self-examination is both narcissistic and sharply critical, in fascinating combination."¹⁶ To express and reinforce that thematic coherence, and corresponding to the emotional turbulence of characters and actions on the screen, his films also display a visual flair and recognizable style marked by restless camera movement and quick editing uncharacteristic for the wide-screen productions favored by the director.

Between 1954 and 1956, Ray directed six films that extended many of these concerns and demonstrated how they could be expressed through

distinctive and often self-conscious revisioning of Hollywood genres and conventions. *Johnny Guitar* (1954) is a singular Western that features *female* antagonists vying for such generic objectives as property, law and order, and home and settlement, while *Bigger Than Life* (1956) showed the descent into megalomania of a small-town teacher and father who nevertheless fails in his grander schemes like sacrificing his son to escape his suburban life. It is worth emphasizing that these productions were each made with different Hollywood studios, both an indication of Ray's standing as an individual filmmaker and of the deteriorating control of the studio system over film production. It was also during this time that the championing of the director as cinematic poet and auteur by French critics, including later New Wave filmmakers like Truffaut and Godard, first appeared. In the United States, meanwhile, critics recognized the filmmaker's distinctive vision and, especially, his ability to elicit strong performance and the powerful use of wide-screen technologies to enhance the dramatic tensions of his narratives. Ray would direct another half-dozen films in as many years, still ranging broadly from the biting antiwar drama, *Bitter Victory* (1957) and the musical gangster romp of *Party Girl* (1958) to the biblical epic nearly played as Western in *King of Kings* (1961).

In 1962, Ray collapsed on the Spanish set of *55 Days at Peking*, alternately described as suffering a heartache or utter exhaustion. Whatever the precise cause of his collapse, the film, completed as it was by others, would be his last major Hollywood production. He looked forward, upon recovery, to continuing to develop and produce film projects, but, staying in Europe, found himself unable or perhaps not fully committed to filmmaking. The 1960s did witness a return to the passionate political activism that guided him in the 1930s and less able to follow through on productions. Ray claimed to be on the streets of Paris in May 1968, filming, and also shot some thirty thousand feet of film of the conspiracy trial of the Chicago Seven in 1969. A year later, rumors circulated that he would direct a reconstruction of the trial, titled "The Seditious Seven," but, like many other such rumors, they led to disappointment. Ray's renown among younger filmmakers continued to grow, however, and in the early 1970s he lectured widely at colleges and even taught filmmaking at Harpur College in Binghamton, New York. A film he made with those students, *The Gun Under My Pillow* (an allusion to Plato in *Rebel Without a Cause*), screened at Cannes in 1973. Working again in New York, Ray continued to try to develop new projects, appearing as himself in Wim Wender's *The American Friend* (1977), and then starting a new project, which became *Lightning Over Water* (1980), with Wenders. On June 16, 1979, having been withered by cancer, Ray died at age sixty-seven.

Ray's legacy turns most pointedly on his recurrent exploration of the relations between troubled or rebellious individuals and their unstable, even dangerous social or environmental settings. As a filmmaker, he underscored these narrative tensions by motivating vivid performances from his actors, themselves often cast against type, and often employed quick editing and close framings to contrast with the Technicolor and wide-screen formats popular during the 1950s. Ray practiced a self-conscious, often subversive awareness of working within Hollywood's relatively stable set of generic and institutional conventions, and production after production exhibits both dependence upon and departure from familiar filmmaking forms. Yet as critic Jonathan Rosenbaum has observed, "even within a vision as fundamentally bleak and futile as Ray's, a clear view of paradise is never entirely out of mind or definitively out of reach. This is the utopian promise of the '30s and the '60s that his work keeps alive."¹⁷

James Dean

James Dean was killed three days before the release of *Rebel Without a Cause* at age twenty-four. He had been born on February 8, 1931, in Marion, Indiana. Out of financial hardship, the family moved to Los Angeles five years later, but in 1939, Dean's mother died, and the boy returned to the Midwest—initially accompanying her body on a train ride back to Indiana. He was mostly raised on the farm of his aunt and uncle in Fairmount, Indiana, and, in high school, participated in basketball, debate, and drama. Graduating with honors, he left again for California, joined the father who had since remarried and was attempting to win back his son, and enrolled in the pre-law program at Santa Monica City College. Despite his father's resistance to the love of theater (as an unreliable career choice), Dean transferred to the University of Southern California, Los Angeles, to study the performing arts.

Dean appeared in one student production at UCLA, of *Macbeth*, and received mixed reviews. The performance was enough, though, to persuade one agent to represent him, and he thereafter left the university and pursued acting full-time. Dean then appeared in a number of bit parts in films and in television commercials, mostly as a fresh-faced All-American boy, and also began training in method acting from actor James Whitmore, who eventually persuaded the young man to attend the Actors Studio in New York. Borrowing money from his aunt and uncle in Indiana, Dean moved to New York in 1952. He began auditioning for roles in theater and television, studying acting, and reading widely, especially what was seen as the "culture of cool" of the day: Beat poets like Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, and Gide, Sartre, and Camus. Dean also modeled

himself as an actor after Montgomery Clift and Marlon Brando. He did receive a number of bit parts, though survived more on odd jobs like being a busboy and, according to some, a hustler.¹⁸ Two Broadway roles, in *See the Jaguar* and, as a homosexual Arab youth in Gide's *The Immoralist*, impressed critics and led to a screen test for Elia Kazan's upcoming film version of *East of Eden*.

Dean earned the role and returned to Los Angeles in March, 1954, living on the Warner Bros. lot. His performance as the troubled son, Cal, in Steinbeck's tale of family jealousy powerfully conveyed the often tragic gap between restless youth and maturity. *East of Eden* premiered on March 9, 1955, and many reviewers singled out Dean, though, unkindly, for his derivative style. As Bosley Crowther put it bluntly in the *New York Times*, he "is a mass of histrionic gingerbread . . . all like Marlon Brando used to do. Never have we seen a performer so clearly follow another's style."¹⁹ The shooting of Dean's second and third features would occur in short order in the spring and summer of 1955. *Rebel* was shot from late March through May of that year, and *Giant*, George Steven's epic production of Edna Ferber's novel of Texas life during the early twentieth-century transition from cattle to oil fortunes, would consume the rest of that summer. In fact, Dean had just wrapped his final scene of Stevens's film before leaving for a weekend road race on the drive that would take his life at the end of September. Both of the films would be released posthumously, *Rebel* in early October and *Giant* nearly a year later, in October 1956.

The outpouring of emotion following his death quickly transformed Dean's persona into popular cultural legend. Dean was nominated for a best supporting actor Academy Award for *Giant*, but beyond the quality of individual performances, his perceived embodiment of the rebellious, outsider roles he played was celebrated for its authenticity and power. Thousands attended his funeral in Indiana, tens of thousands of fan letters continued to arrive in Hollywood throughout the later 1950s, and fan clubs grew around the country and world. A documentary, *The James Dean Story* (codirected by Robert Altman), was released in 1957 and proclaimed its eponymous hero as "the First American Teenager." Writing in these expansive and celebratory terms about *Rebel*, Graham McCann claims that the film's theme is nothing less than

the evolution of a new generation. The process is mythic (it takes place in a single day) and the young generation grows up at night (it is a night journey). The characters depict the biological, sexual and moral shifts of adolescence, the changes from child into adult. Jim Stark is the loner spirit of the adolescent retreat that reinterprets its

isolation as a function of the world's defects. Everything around him seems "phoney."²⁰

As enacted and personified by Dean, who employed method acting techniques unconventional for Hollywood to convey alienation and genuine feeling, the story of adolescent striving to strip away society's artifice could be viewed as having an "authentic" core. That relationship between story, actor, and historical moment retains its power as a statement about more timeless oppositions both between generations and between the genuineness of individuals clashing with the constraints imposed by society and its institutions.

Rebel: Production and Release

Warner Bros. had purchased the rights to Lindner's book in 1946. The case study documented the violent life of Harold, who had started a life of crime at the age of twelve. In it, Lindner defined the rebel as "a religious disobeyer of prevailing codes and standards . . . an agitator without a slogan . . . a revolutionary without a program."²¹ When Ray wrote "The Blind Run," a seventeen-page original story idea, and submitted it to Warners in September 1954, they suggested the director adapt Lindner's case study.²² Ray demurred, claiming the case of Harold was "too abnormal" and expressing his desire to make the project about "normal delinquents."²³ By the time shooting began on the film six months later, the director had eliminated everything but the title from Lindner's study, and declined even to use Lindner, who had volunteered to help with the movie, as a consultant.²⁴

Ray later recounted that " 'The Blind Run' was an original idea for a film without a dramatic structure but with a point of view."²⁵ Initially composed of a series of vignettes, Ray proposed three possible lines of development for a plot involving three characters: Jim or Jimmy, Eve, and the Professor (who became Plato).²⁶ Ray wanted to work with Clifford Odets on the script but Warners assigned another of its top screenwriters, Leon Uris, to the project. With Uris and producer David Weisbart, Ray set out to do firsthand and on-site research in order to transform his story idea about juvenile delinquents into a screenplay.²⁷ They met and corresponded with judges, probation officers, criminologists, child analysts, and the California Youth Authority. The director also spoke to young offenders themselves: "What they felt, when asked about their families, was a bitter isolation and resentment. All told similar stories—divorced parents, parents who could not guide or understand, who were indifferent or simply 'criticized,' parents who needed a scapegoat in the family."²⁸

The “normality” of delinquency, or at least of the social pressures within families to produce normal children and relations, consistently impressed Ray and shaped his thinking.

Uris produced a screenplay adaptation of the story idea, though it ended up being entirely unused. Ray then selected another Warners scriptwriter, Irving Shulman, who had impeccable credentials for the project: he had penned an early novel about “wayward youth,” *The Amboy Dukes*, in 1946, which was adapted for the screen as *City Across the River* (Maxwell Shane, 1949).²⁹ Shulman produced a 164-page script that, almost immediately upon submission, he requested and received permission from Warners to reproduce as a novel, which appeared in 1956 as *Children of the Dark*.³⁰ It would also serve as the basis for Ray’s and Weisbart’s continued revision, as well as screenwriter Stewart Stern’s further reworking (he saw the film as “a modern day *Peter Pan*: three kids inventing a world of their own”³¹). Stern’s final effort, the shooting script, was dated March 26, 1955.

Despite such professional input about the problems of juvenile delinquency, the film suffered problems in production for its controversial central subject. As historian Jerold Simmons has shown, the Production Code Administration, and PCA chief Geoffrey Shurlock in particular, was preoccupied by films about delinquents, scandalous teen behavior seen as inappropriate or immoral, notably deviant sexuality, and also sought to regulate images of disrespect for authority.³² Shortly before Warners submitted the *Rebel* script for PCA review in late March 1955, the *Saturday Evening Post* had inflamed public (and Hollywood institutional) fears about juvenile delinquency in a five-part series entitled “The Shame of America.”³³ Following two routine script conferences between Warners and the PCA, the list of problems remaining numbered nineteen and addressed such issues as images of girls smoking outside the high school, the possible reading of homosexuality into Plato’s relationship with Jim, and Judy’s rebelliousness. In the dinner scene between Judy and her father, for example, where Judy is upset that her father will not kiss her, kisses him, and then he slaps her, Shurlock called for a more tasteful handling in which family strains and violence would not be so directly highlighted. Also of special concern was the possible illicit sexual relationship between Jim and Judy—particularly as suggested by the interlude at the mansion—and the scenes of violence such as the “chickie run” and the knife fight. Focusing on the latter scene, the “blade game” between Jim and Buzz at the planetarium, Shurlock insisted that there be no implication that high school kids really fought with knives. All of these addressed the causes of the juvenile delinquencies of such concern to the PCA.

With the script undergoing review, Ray was busy completing the casting of the film. The director had settled on James Dean for the lead role during a December 1954 trip to New York and the two agreed, reportedly with a handshake, on the arrangement despite there being only fifteen pages of solid screenplay at that time.³⁴ Auditions took place early in 1955 at UCLA and elsewhere in Los Angeles and yielded Corey Allen, Nick Adams, and Dennis Hopper for secondary roles as teens. Hopper was a leading candidate for the Plato role early on, as were Jeff Silver and Billy Gray (the latter known from his role in the 1951 *The Day the Earth Stood Still*), but a meeting featuring sparkling improvisational work with Dean led the director to select Broadway actor Sal Mineo for the part. For the last key role, of Judy, Warner Bros. preferred an established young actress and fixed on Debbie Reynolds, Carroll Baker, and Natalie Wood, who, at fifteen, was already a veteran of more than twenty Hollywood productions. Though experienced and interested, Wood had never before appeared as a mature adolescent and was anxious about taking the step from her image as a child star; ironically, Ray finally settled on Wood after the young actress was involved in an automobile accident (with Dennis Hopper) and informed her of his decision when she was still in the hospital. The choices of Jim Backus and Ann Doran as Jim's parents were also unorthodox, Backus especially being chosen to play against comedic type, but Ray prevailed in both cases.

Filming began on March 30, 1955, and was scheduled to continue for thirty-six days. Only four days later, however, an important decision was made: rather than the monochrome Cinemascope in which shooting began, the film would be made in Technicolor. The reasons vary by source, from Jack Warner claiming that Technicolor was appropriate for such an important project to Cinemascope asserting that their contract with Warners required Technicolor processing. Whatever the ultimate reason, the change was made and the remainder of the shoot went mostly smoothly and according to schedule. The script and story continued to be modified slightly based on the PCA's demands, as detailed earlier, with the knife fight, smoking scenes, and teenagers' intentions to kill each being softened to accord with prevailing standards. What had been Christmas in the original script also became Easter (to decrease the number of set changes). Other concerns also arose, such as Wood's lack of familiarity and seeming comfort with the improvisational technique preferred by Dean and encouraged by Ray, but the shoot concluded well, finishing eleven days behind schedule on May 26, 1955. A further, noteworthy upshot of the production was a recognition of the sensibility shared by Ray and Dean in addressing issues of alienation and individual

marginalization; after their work together on *Rebel*, Ray developed at least two projects with Dean for Dean.

Rebel Without a Cause premiered on October 3, 1955. Reviewers most often fixated on the credibility of the narrative's presentation of delinquency and fallen youth. One *Variety* critic wrote that the plot was about ". . . what happens to three young people who are in great need of love and understanding."³⁵ Another *Variety* reviewer was preoccupied that the delinquents in the film come from a middle class neighborhood. "Does the contrast between their healthy-seeming exteriors and their restlessly cruel natures occasionally strain credulity? The debate could go on long into the night with newspaper clippings and police court statistics arrayed on one side and belief in goodness on the other."³⁶ In *Cue*, the reviewer inquired whether the word "delinquents" should be replaced with "mixed-up kids." He went on, "Some may share their elders' restlessness and uneasiness in the shaky times in which we live—and seek in sudden excitement and 'kicks' emotional release from pressures they cannot understand, or resist."³⁷ Many of the contemporary critical responses thus followed from the underlying logic of the social problem film that children transform into juvenile delinquents when they are not receiving guidance and attention from their families.

Other critics linked this sociological attention to issues of performance and visual style in the film. In the *New York Times*, Bosley Crowther fixated (again) on Dean's "imitating" Brando, though also at least suggested that such a choice might accord with the actions of teens being presented. "The tendency," he wrote, is "possibly typical of the behavior of certain youths." More than typical, as we have remarked, Dean's emotionally tortured portrayal also challenged conventions of Hollywood performance for expressing emotion in ways with which many teenage viewers would identify. Interestingly, Crowther concluded his review with another pregnant but undeveloped observation, "There is, too, a pictorial slickness about the whole thing in color and CinemaScope that battles at times with the realism in the direction of Nicholas Ray."³⁸ That "battle," or, at least, frequent contrast, between wide-screen Technicolor melodrama and the depiction of contemporary social problems likewise offered a formidable and self-conscious critique of Hollywood's own mode of storytelling.

French director François Truffaut would comment at the time,

In James Dean, today's youth discovers itself. Less for the reasons usually advanced: violence, sadism, hysteria, pessimism, cruelty and filth, than for others infinitely more simple and commonplace:

modesty of feeling, continual fantasy life, moral purity without relation to everyday morality but all the more rigorous, eternal adolescent love of tests and trails, intoxication, pride and regret at feeling “outside” society, refusal and desire to become integrated and, finally, acceptance—or refusal—of the world as it is.³⁹

To extend Truffaut’s remarks, moreover, we might observe that it was through youth that the shifting postwar consumer society of the 1950s discovered itself. Dean’s significance and legacy emerged in part because his persona was at the nexus of concerns about social relations and the status of new standards for normal and deviant behavior.

Contents

This volume brings together chapters—all original, save two—and an account of the film’s origins by the director that reassess the film’s layered meanings. They examine both the complicated historical moment in which *Rebel* was made and first appeared as well as its persistent resonance for filmmakers and audiences. They track how the film continues to speak to viewers about a complex range of contemporary experiences of adolescence, family, marginalization, rebellion, mass society, and the movies themselves. While employing multiple analytical approaches and ideological perspectives, these pieces also reveal the frequently personal responses evoked by the film among contemporary viewers and critics alike.

The volume opens with a rare piece of writing by the director of *Rebel*, Nicholas Ray, of his recollections of the preproduction of the film. Originally appearing in the British journal *Sight and Sound* in 1956, this account expands on the development of the script offered previously and details of filmmakers involved in the film’s production. It also lends heft to those viewers who celebrate Ray’s shaping of the production and who approach the film as an auteurist vision.

Murray Pomerance’s chapter examines the construction and meaning of the “chickie run” sequence of the film. He does so, methodologically, through a virtuosic analysis of performance and, particularly, the reverberating portrayal of Jim Stark by James Dean. The result is an argument that grounds, in a close reading of the filmtext itself, the passionate if often unfocused reverence for Dean’s stirring role.

In “‘You want a good crack in the mouth,’” Susan White assesses the place and meaning of behaviors interpretable as violent in *Rebel* and then offers a fascinating overview of how this range relates to images in Nick Ray’s other films. Her work is at once a probing inquiry into the

nature of violent individual and social actions of the postwar years *and* an appreciation for the constancy and power of the filmmaker's vision. The result demonstrates how one film may be used as the basis for considering basic questions about how images of interpersonal relations often turn on social constructions of violence.

Jon Lewis develops an original reading of masculinity by focusing on Jim's parents. "Growing Up Male in Jim's Mom's World" situates *Rebel's* family drama in both cinematic and wider cultural histories, tracing the centrality of troubled mother-son relationships in "Cold War hate-mother films" from *While the City Sleeps* through *Psycho* to *The Manchurian Candidate*, and recognizing how unusual and meaningful Ray's film is for including a father in the relationship.

Drawn from his provocative study of point of view in cinematic storytelling, *Narration in Light*, the contribution by George Wilson reprinted here argues that *Rebel* is a "social problem" film. An insightful reading of the film as historical document, Wilson's piece also assesses how Hollywood reworked the depiction of social problems such that they would both be adapted to repetitive (for viewers, recognizable and dependable) popular narrative forms and yet remain a cause for controversy and scandal.

In "Jim Stark's 'Barbaric Yawp,'" Jon Mitchell explores the "Cold War crisis of masculinity" enacted in the film and, conspicuously, the characters of Jim, his father, and Plato. Employing cultural and gender studies to illuminate identity politics in the film, Mitchell probes links between social panics over juvenile delinquency and concerns over the meaning of masculinity in contemporary society. In the process, he critically considers the normative roles and behaviors associated with suburban family life in the 1950s and foregrounded by Dean's Jim Stark.

Attending to another major (and related) discourse of postwar cultural history, Mick Broderick considers how *Rebel*, and the "chickie run" sequence especially, can be read as allegories for the atomic age and nuclear arms race. While historically specific, this incisive reading of the film is also an exemplary instance of how film narrative and images can be linked to social and cultural contexts—both at the time of production and later.

The next chapter focuses upon the historical reception of *Rebel* in some Western European countries where the movie was the subject of both success and controversy. Indeed, Daniel Biltereyst claims that the very focus on censorship, controversy, and "troublesome images" in the film may have been productive in studying social response to the representation of core social and ethical issues. As background, Biltereyst's essay draws a wider picture of the influence of American movies such as *Rebel Without a Cause* on Western European youth culture in the 1950s.

Elena Loizidou turns to theorist Hannah Arendt's study of revolutions to assess how issues of alienation and estrangement from the encroaching consumer and teen culture of the 1950s can be understood in terms of citizenship and political participation. In the process, her elegant meditation scrutinizes the cultural and philosophical notion of rebellion itself as a mode of action and expression in the film and beyond.

Images of rebellion would become even more pronounced and graphic in later films about youth. Yet as James C. McKelly makes clear in his piece focusing on the 1989 film, *Heathers*, the debts owed to *Rebel* by makers of films about youth hostility and the social anxiety surrounding them are complex and unmistakable.

Timothy Shary's contribution assesses more broadly the extensive and continuing legacy of Dean's portrayal of teen rebellion and alienation in Hollywood films of the last five decades. In particular, he is interested in the characterization of the figure of the youthful rebel at the heart of many of these films and, he goes on, the understanding of youth widely propagated by these popular cultural productions.

The final chapter, by Claudia Springer, considers the cross-cultural reach of *Rebel* by considering how the iconic figure of James Dean's rebel and broader, Hollywood-inspired ideas about adolescence and rebellion circulate globally. Looking closely the 1973 Senegalese film, *Touki-Bouki*, and the 1995 French production, *La Haine*, she proposes that the "rebel film" is a far-reaching popular cultural form that both relies upon its early, notably American, formulation and is importantly adaptive to local contexts and conditions.

The reflexivity Springer identifies in later renderings of the rebel figure in productions set far away from 1950s Los Angeles can be seen to reiterate many of the same cinematic and social concerns at issue during the production and initial reception of the film. Her reading, like the other pieces gathered here, also affirms how diverse audiences—what scholars might call "multiple interpretive and viewing communities"—have continued to see *Rebel Without a Cause* as a touchstone for imagining anxieties over coming-of-age, traditional values of family and community, threats from abroad, and the provocations of mass or consumer society. Fifty years after it first appeared, the specific sources of individual and social insecurity have changed, some of the particular motivations for rebellion have shifted, and the role of cinema and its heroes in U.S. and other societies have been forever altered. What has persisted is *Rebel's* singular power both to represent rebellion in what could otherwise be seen as the everyday and to affirm the potential of cinema to be at once part of institutional culture and distinctly, authentically outside it. This volume celebrates that continuing legacy.

Notes

1. See Lindner.
2. See Roffman and Purdy.
3. Doherty (esp. 48–53).
4. Bird's epigraph is signed, "'Born 1930: The Unlost Generation,' by Caroline Bird; *Harper's Bazaar*, Feb. 1951." See Mailer.
5. May (9).
6. May (20). To speak of "radical restructuring" is, perhaps, already to say too much. May goes on to claim that, "Even the most radical measures of the New Deal, created to alleviate hardship, failed to promote the possibility of a new family structure based on gender equality" (47).
7. Polan (76).
8. Elsaesser (15).
9. Wood (131, 135).
10. Biskind (199).
11. In this way, Ben Singer insightfully views melodrama as a "cluster concept," a term "whose meaning varies from case to case in relation to different configurations of a range of applicable features." He identifies five such constitutive features that are configured in different combinations in different works: pathos, emotionalism, moral polarization, nonclassical narrative structure, and sensationalism. Much attention to melodrama in film studies, he contends, has dwelled on the first two of these features. Singer (44).
12. Aristotle, quoted in Butcher (237).
13. Shattuc (152).
14. Mulvey (127).
15. Byars (129). The observation follows from a point made with some regularity by critics of the genre that melodramatic crises and conflicts occur within the social and domestic order. For example, Stephen Neale terms these crises and their resolutions "an in-house arrangement"; see Neale (22).
16. See Kehr.
17. See Rosenbaum.
18. See, for example, both Alexander and Spoto.
19. Crowther (March 10, 1955).
20. McCann (148).
21. Lindner (2).
22. Some have questioned Ray's "original story idea" credit, claiming that Ray adapted *The Blind Run*. See, for example, Eisenschitz (229–32).
23. Eisenschitz (231, 232).
24. The director even recounted later that he had met Lindner at a cocktail party, emphasized his decision not to base the film on the case study, and declined the psychoanalyst's persistent offers to offer guidance. "The idea of filming his study of the young delinquent who related fantasies of violence under hypnosis seemed almost to obsess him. He almost begged me to do it; he offered his services as a consultant." Ray (1956, 74; reprinted as chapter 1 in this volume).
25. Ray (1956, 72).

26. Eisenschitz (233).
27. Ray (1956, 72).
28. Ray (1956, 72).
29. Shulman's preoccupation would continue, as he later penned the novelization of *West Side Story* in 1961.
30. Shulman (1956).
31. Eisenschitz (238).
32. Simmons (56–63). See also McGee and Robertson (93).
33. Clendenen and Beaser (17–19, 77–78).
34. Eisenschitz (234–38).
35. Brog (October 21, 1955).
36. Land (October 26, 1955).
37. "What Makes Juveniles Delinquent?" (October 29, 1955).
38. Crowther (October 27, 1955).
39. Truffaut, quoted in McCann (141).

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Nicholas Ray (center) during the shooting of *Rebel Without a Cause*. (Courtesy of Photofest)