

REVIEWS

***Rebel Without a Cause: Approaches to a Maverick Masterwork*, edited by J. David Slocum. State University of New York Press, 2005**

DELIA KONZETT

According to J. David Slocum, the legacy of the 1950s seminal film *Rebel Without a Cause* lies not only in its powerful depiction of youthful rebellion but in its affirmation of the mainstream institution of cinema as a subversive force. Just as James Dean's portrayal of a typically maladjusted, rebellious teenager profoundly calls into question middle class values of family, education, and citizenship, Nicholas Ray's film, Slocum claims, affirms "the potential of cinema to be at once part of institutional culture and distinctly, authentically outside it (20)." This legacy with its foregrounding of the radical potential of internal or self critique is what has appealed to the film's diverse audiences over the years, who "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 (20)."

Edited by Slocum, *Rebel Without a Cause: Approaches to a Maverick Masterwork* is an exceptional and diverse collection of essays that delves into the film's legacy as a masterpiece, addressing its existential message of rebellion and critique expressed at the various levels of content, form, history, and institutional and economic practices. According to Soren Kierkegaard, a masterpiece or classic is the fortuitous meeting of a work of art and the appropriate moment in history. This chance encounter of art and history certainly occurs in the case of *Rebel*. Featuring a timely script about alienated teens, a celebrated auteur director, and a charismatic star who embodied the image of America's restless youth and whose premature death would transform him into Hollywood myth, *Rebel Without a Cause* reflects upon an era manifestly marked both by social anxiety and mass-market expansion. The untimely and sensational death of James Dean, killed in an auto accident on his way to compete in a car race three days before *Rebel's* heralded release, carried the film's plot over into the reality of history, at once stressing a unique historical era and retroactively the classic nature of art anticipating and articulating history in its making.

Slocum's informative and comprehensive introduction contextualizes the film and its multilayered articulation of rebellion, discussing the history and institutional practices that frame its production and reception. Stressing the significance of cinema as a social, cultural, and economic force, he is especially interested in how *Rebel* reflects not simply the widespread social concerns of the 1950s but also those of the film industry adjusting to its

trying economic circumstances in the postwar era. The film's subject of teenage rebellion thus not only reproduces the nation's concern about the rise in juvenile delinquency but just as significantly reveals Hollywood's keen interest in expanding into the newly developing teen market. With the breakup of its vertically integrated system of production, distribution, and exhibition in 1949, changes in the growing consumer economy with movies now having to compete with numerous new forms of leisure, the advent of television, suburbanization, etc., Hollywood was "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 (3)." Similarly, the genre of melodrama, with its critical address of middle class life, domesticity, and gender roles in the 1950s, calls into question the ways in which filmic conventions represent conflict and/or resolution. A film such as *Rebel*, says Slocum, challenges not only social mores but also the "narrative means by which society's cultural institutions organized and legitimized certain experiences (9)."

Complementing the film's inquiry into social institutions and the narratives that frame these experiences are the innovative techniques employed by the film's director, Nicholas Ray, and its leading star, James Dean. Ray practiced, writes Slocum, "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 (12)." The director deliberately "underscored... 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 (12)." In his visceral portrayal of the rebellious Jim Stark, James Dean also employed untraditional techniques, particularly his "use of method acting to break through the conventions of Hollywood performance and to reveal what many perceived as the 'authentic' pain and alienation felt by teenagers (8-9)." For Slocum, it is precisely this type of curious subversion of classical Hollywood conventions practiced within its own system that makes *Rebel* "a maverick masterwork," one that affirms the dissident potential of mainstream cinema.

The volume's essays expand on Slocum's assessment of the film, offering a rich variety of perspectives on the film, its historical context, its production, and reception. The majority of the essays are original publications and range from an analysis of filmic conventions and themes of violence and rebellion as well as the film's reflection of the history of the 1950s to the its influence on more recent films produced in Hollywood and its reception in Europe and far flung places around the globe. The collection opens with an important 1956 essay by Nicholas Ray himself that discusses his role in the development of the script and shaping of the film's production. This work is especially significant for those interested in Ray as an auteur (he was hailed by New Wave filmmakers as a "cinematic poet") as it discusses and explains the overall function of the producer, writer, and particularly the director. According to Ray the privilege of encouraging creative talent belongs not so much to the film's producers and executives but to the director. A sympathetic producer, Ray proposes, should first and foremost aid the director, "fighting the director's battles" (26) and acting as a supportive liaison between the director and his crew, the director and his writers, and the director and the front office. As its title suggests, "Story into Script" details how Ray's story outline "The Blind Run" began its difficult transformation into the script of *Rebel*.

All of the volume's essays (with the exception of one) refer directly to the film's notorious "chickie run" scene. This scene centers upon a dangerous competitive car race that can be constructively interpreted as rite of existential and social bonding or more negatively as a Darwinian survival of the fittest in an era of late consumerism and capitalism

with absurdity and chance as its major elements. It also captures the distinctly American fascination with the automobile and the liberating experience of driving and being “on the road.” This crucial scene draws a wealth of original interpretations from the contributors and highlights the seminal influence of this film.

Three essays discuss the scene in detail, making it central to their respective arguments. Murray Pomerance’s “Stark Performance” sees it as Jim’s “rite de passage and his social debut” (35): “The chickie run is ultimately a kind of soirée to which he has been invited, attendance at which is a vital signal of membership” (40–41). Contrasting it to earlier scenes of antagonism, he notes the curious civility that Buzz now extends to Jim as well as their intimate interaction at the edge of the cliff. Pomerance argues that the two teens represent different and conflicting ways of performing identity and action. While briefly acknowledging a shared social bond, the teenagers conflict in their ways to perform this interaction. Jim’s performance is that of an idealistic unperformed self as opposed to Buzz’s “performance of macho dominance” (44). Jim’s desire for a naked transparent self is reproduced in Dean’s “Stark performance” where “Stark utterly disappears and Dean himself is attributed with the qualities one sees depicted on-screen” (46). In “Growing up Male in Jim’s Mom’s World,” Jon Lewis interprets the scene as representing an absence of dad in a world now ruled by mom. Cold War era films such as *Rebel*, *The Manchurian Candidate*, *While the City Sleeps*, and *Psycho*, writes Lewis, articulate a crisis of masculinity “rooted in the distrust of women” (91). Jim participates in the chickie run because his father Frank fails to be a masculine role model, to assert his authority and stand up to his wife. The film, Lewis argues compellingly, is ultimately “about Frank’s journey, not Jim’s” (96), asking “[Is] there any way to hold onto your masculinity in a suburban marriage? (98).” Mick Broderick’s “Armageddon Without a Cause: Playing ‘Chicken’ in the Atomic Age,” addresses the film scene in the context of the 1950s atomic culture and the Eisenhower administration. The chickie run scene, Broderick claims, in which two rivals race side by side reproduces the arms race with its “exponential cold war expenditure on nuclear arms” (160). Like the earlier scene at the planetarium showing how the world will be destroyed “in a burst of gas and fire” (154), the race scene with its accidental death and explosion of cars ends in a type of “cinematic apocalypse” portending a nuclear holocaust (161).

Focusing briefly on the chickie run scene, Jon Mitchell argues like Jon Lewis that Jim suffers from the decline of masculinity widespread in the 1950s linked to suburbanization, the growth of white-collar employment, and Cold War paranoia. His essay “Jim’s Stark’s ‘Barbaric Yawp’” also discusses Jim’s relationship with his weak father and his puppy killing pseudo-gay pal Plato; however, Mitchell presents an interesting twist, saying “one might nevertheless read the film as a challenge to Jim’s perspective [dad as a man dominated by his wife and mother] in which his father becomes a model of a caring and encouraging masculine identity,” a sensitive man willing “to do his share in the domestic sphere” (141). Thus at film’s end “Jim is redeemed in his manhood by his association with the lead female, Judy” (143), and “abandons his romantic ideals of authentic masculinity and accepts his father’s pragmatic view of life, just as he accepts his father’s jacket (136).” This revision, says Mitchell, contributes to the film’s problematic ending, which embraces conflicting notions of mainstream conventions and teenage activism. Mitchell quotes Michael DeAngelis who writes: “The narratives retain an ambiguity that accommodates readings of the protagonist as either assimilationist or rebellious, and sometimes, paradoxically, as both” (144).

George M. Wilson’s contribution “Nicholas Ray’s *Rebel Without a Cause*” similarly centers on the conflicting tensions within the film’s complex point of view narration. Though the film “seems to operate as a fundamentally reassuring contemporary morality

play” that calls for “a renewed commitment to the traditional American family structures and ideals”(111), *Rebel*'s idiosyncratic narration simultaneously questions this conventional message. Analyzing the film's representation of space and spatial relations in several key scenes, Wilson shows how the mise-en-scène, framing, editing and other filmic techniques visually render the teens' subjective sense of entrapment and claustrophobia in a hostile environment. Filmed at odd, flat angles, the police station, their suburban homes, and schools thus represent their everyday experiences as “a senseless imprisonment” (114). The chickie run scene, like the earlier the planetarium scene, “introduces the boundlessness of space” as an alternative to this restrictive lifestyle and forms the bond between Jim and Judy as they stand at the edge of the world looking into the chasm that has claimed the life of Buzz. While dangerous, the planetarium's infinite black cosmos and the edge of the cliffs represent an ecstatic and exhilarating liberation, one that slips away from the teens at the film's close as they are now “enclosed in black cars” (127). *Rebel*'s complicated narrational strategies, says Wilson, cannot be explained satisfactorily with current critical methods, suggesting the need to refine and extend traditional discussions of cinematic point of view.

Susan White's ““You want a good crack in the mouth?": *Rebel Without a Cause*, Violence, and the Cinema of Nicholas Ray” is a wide-ranging and impressive exploration of the director's subtle construction of social violence in *Rebel* and other films. Ray's characters are at once collaborators and victims, often colluding to reap social rewards in a system that also ensnares them. The men in Ray's films, says White, are “at once powerless to change the social structures that oppress them and uncomfortable with the considerable power they do have and sometimes abuse” (54). She extends her discussion to include the romantic myth of Ray himself as an “outsider” and auteur in a failing Hollywood studio system, battling to maintain control over his projects as well as his drinking and personal problems. “The beleaguered middle-class white male,” she writes, “will tend to identify with artist-as-individual, especially in a world that demands ever-increasing enslavement to the corporation, suburbia, and consumption” (57). Similarly, Ray's women, like the homes they live in, are at once “attractive and threatening” (54). And just as the acknowledgement of film as a collaborative production is needed to balance the myth of Ray's authorship, there is also, White suggests, a need to explore the construction of social violence as a system and not as an individual and isolated act. Accordingly, she discusses *Rebel* in the context of Ray's entire oeuvre, critically exploring the various forms of social violence to which his films lend expression.

Elena's Loizidou's essay “Rebellion and Citizenship: Hannah Arendt, Jim Stark, and American Public Life in the 1950s” similarly takes a broad look at the practice of rebellion, placing it in the grand history of civil disobedience. Rebellion, for Loizidou, is first and foremost a civil and political act, one that “tells a story about citizenship” (192). A legal scholar, Loizidou is interested in analyzing *Rebel* not so much as “the story of juvenile delinquency or youth rebellion in suburban America during the 1950s,” which turns rebellion into a social pathology, but “rather as a story of youth's demand for recognition of their individuality and their political citizenship” (193). Daniel Biltereyst's “Youth, Moral Panics, and the End of Cinema” conversely views the film in its European reception and accompanying fears that Dean's popularity would lead to an increase in juvenile delinquency and social rebellion. Focusing on various European countries and their responses and censorship, Biltereyst shows how American culture in Europe represented a threat to conservatives but was also welcomed as a form of liberating self-expression, particularly among young French filmmakers such as François Truffaut who saw *Rebel* as one of the last outstanding youth films before youth culture turned to music as its true countercultural expression.

James C. Mc Kelly's "Youth Cinema and the Culture of Rebellion" likewise brings a European approach to bear by focusing on Gramsci's seminal concept of "hegemony" and Lyotard's notion of the "postmodern." Humankind is accordingly understood in the film's apocalyptic message "as an episode of little consequence" (210). Similarly, the act of rebellion is critically viewed as being potentially subversive but possibly contaminated by a capitalist economic order in which hegemony prevails (210): "Even in his role as nemesis Buzz is, like Jim, Judy (Natalie Wood), and Plato (Sal Mineo), a victim of hegemony, driven by self-destructive frustration" (211). *Rebel* thus points in McKelly's view to the inevitability of social responsibility as seen in the second half of the film where "Jim's decision to return to the conventional order . . . to accept responsibility for his role in the violence the social order has precipitated" (211).

The final two essays deal with the contemporary legacies of *Rebel*. Timothy Shary's "The Stark Screen Teen" looks at various recent teen rebels and their indebtedness to Dean's prototype. On a formal level, claims Shary, "Dean's influence could be detected within the frustrations of Ben (Dustin Hoffman) and *The Graduate* (1967) and Wyatt (Peter Fonda) in *Easy Rider* (1969)" (219). In recent years, actors such as Matt Dillon, Sean Penn, Johnny Depp, and Leonardo di Caprio appear "to emulate some of Jim/Dean's characteristics" (219–220). To be sure, the Dean persona has become a stock persona of the cultural rebel and can be found in various films such as *The Breakfast Club* (1985), *Heathers* (1989), and *Boyz N the Hood* (1991). The difference between past and present models of rebellion, however, is also noted: "Where Jim Stark struggled to articulate his confusion about gender roles and social order" present teen rebels have "moved from articulation to confrontation to disconnection," thus pointing to an exhaustion of the rebel model (226). Finally, Claudia Springer's "In the Shadow of *Rebel Without a Cause*: The Postcolonial Rebel" explores the film's global reception whereby "global youths often integrate American cultural products into their own traditions and practices to create new hybrid forms" (229). Springer discusses two films, namely *Touki-Bouki* (Senegal 1973) and *La Haine* (France 1995), which "revolve around the powerful attraction of American-style rebel iconography to postcolonial subjects" (230). Teen rebellion thus concerns the former colonizer or the new host country of marginalized immigrants. The two films, argues Springer, must also acknowledge the limits of the rebel stance, since "the rebel icon is no match for . . . devastating exclusivism and violence" (250) brought on by France's Eurocentrism and xenophobia. With its in-depth analysis of American cinema and culture in the 1950s, this remarkable volume makes a highly valuable contribution to the field of cinema studies. It would also serve as an excellent textbook for cinema courses interested in close analysis of film, cinematic discourse, and, of course, American film and history of the 1950s. *Rebel Without a Cause*, as this volume makes clear, continues to have a pervasive influence, even as we move into the 21st Century.

Delia Konzett is Assistant Professor of English, Film and American Studies at University of New Hampshire. She is the author of *Ethnic Modernisms* and is currently working on a new project *Imagining a Multicultural America: Orientalism, Hawaii, and Hollywood WWII Film*.

Copyright of *Quarterly Review of Film & Video* is the property of Routledge and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.