

ely
 film
 society
 august
 2016
 the
 notes

LATEST NEWS

Owing to unforeseen problems, the committee has taken the decision to change the February film. Instead of the Hungarian film DAMNATION we will now be showing the German film THE ENIGMA OF KASPAR HAUSER instead.

An acknowledged masterpiece by Werner Herzog, it tells the strange (and largely true) story of an inarticulate country boy, reputedly a royal foundling, who was deposited in the middle of Nuremberg in 1828 and left to discover the basics of civilised behaviour from scratch.

We hope to offer something from Hungary in a future season.

Rebel Without A Cause

Nicholas Ray, US 1955

James Dean Jim Stark
 Natalie Wood Judy
 Sal Mineo John 'Plato' Crawford
 Jim Backus Frank Stark
 Ann Doran Mrs. Carol Stark
 Corey Allen Buzz Gunderson
 William Hopper Judy's Father
 Rochelle Hudson Judy's Mother
 Dennis Hopper Goon
 Edward Platt Ray Fremick

Lurid celebrity reputations take on a life of their own, and of no-one is this more true than James Dean. The peculiar voodoo of cinema makes actors who die young especially powerful – something proved before Dean's own lifetime by Rudolph Valentino. *Rebel Without A Cause* has had fame thrust upon it beyond what it intended, and possibly beyond what it might have deserved in the canon

had Dean survived and flourished. But it turned up at a crucial time and set in train a crucial set of events that became a legacy for American culture.

Its beginnings were relatively modest. The director, Nicholas Ray, was a middleweight Hollywood hand whose previous success was the moody *In A Lonely Place* [1950] starring Humphrey Bogart, at the height of the great film noir spasm and considered one of its greatest expressions (making Time magazine's All-Time 100 list). Initial filming for *Rebel* began



in monochrome, but the casting of Dean, who had already achieved a reputation with *East Of Eden*, saw it uprated and reshot in full Technicolour and Cinemascope on the orders of studio boss Jack Warner, yielding the first mythical relic, Dean's bright red windcheater jacket. Ray had written the script, which used the title of an optioned 1944 psychology book by Dr Robert Lindner though in the end none of its content.

While *film noir* was definitely film for adults about adults, however basic their miseries, American society, led by the postwar craze for psychology, was beginning to pay attention to the problems of dissatisfied youth. The door had been kicked open in Hollywood by *The Wild One* [1953] which made Marlon Brando – seven years Dean's senior and with a strong reputation as an actor - a breakout star with the famous exchange: "What are you rebelling against, Johnny?", "Whaddaya got? Angry youth was in, and with *Rebel* the studio put its best efforts into milking the trend.

The film made the reputations of three actors: besides Dean as conflicted, father-despising Jim Stark, Natalie Wood played Judy, also an adolescent with father issues, and Sal Mineo as "Plato" Crawford, the school runt with no parents in sight at all. While Dean was 24 but playing 17, Wood was rising 17 and Mineo was 15.

For all its American lushness (the comfortable suburbs of Los Angeles) *Rebel* is almost a classical tragedy in form. The protagonists are brought low by their own failings, and the action in effect takes place over the space of a long day, obeying the unity of time as well as place. It begins at night in a police station, and at the end the sun rises over the Los Angeles Observatory, lighting it like a theatre or a gladiatorial arena.

Jim hates his parents, newly moved to the area to escape some unspecified misdemeanour of his, and ends up in the police station for "plain drunkenness". In the next room, Judy wails of how she has run away from her parents who cannot deal with her burgeoning womanhood. "He called me a dirty tramp! My own father!" (The crime: red lipstick, and a savagely red dress. The film plays neatly with a colour scheme of black, white and the fierce scarlet only Technicolour can

render, against a background of murky pastels: it would have had quite other merits in moody monochrome). Plato is hauled in for shooting a puppy with a handgun. They eye each other as members of a secret tribe, the misfits adrift in complacent prosperity.

At school the next day, Jim crosses the local gang bully, with whom Judy is querulously involved. A "chicken race" with their cars is declared to see who has honour and it goes tragically wrong for the gang boy (in an eerie foreshadow of Dean's own fatal crash six months later) and the three are now in more serious trouble. They form a co-dependent triangle, finally making emotional commitments they cannot find at home, with Jim and Judy becoming a couple while Plato hero-worships Jim for standing his ground against the gang. (It is much suggested by critics that Plato is gay, or at least as gay as the cinematic codes of the time could dare show, and his affection for Jim is homoerotic rather than a lad adrift from his parents, but at this remove it takes careful scrutiny to stand this up. Quiet clues such as a photo of Alan Ladd inside Plato's school locker, whose hairstyle he attempts to copy, have been pored over).

On the run from the gang and the police, they break into a deserted mansion in the Hollywood hills which Plato has used as an escape. In a strange parody of the nuclear families they are fleeing (or which Plato cannot attract), Judy and Jim become the parents admiring the wreckage as though it were a holiday let, while Plato becomes increasingly their surrogate son. By candlelight they lark around in the drained swimming pool (built as a location for *Sunset Boulevard* [1950] but then left unfilled), finding a strange freedom. But the net closes in, Plato makes a fatal mistake with his stolen gun, and Jim is left with the tragic guilt of his best efforts going wrong.

Rebel left a long trail of influence, with its own voodoo. The "youth movie" of the next two decades owes it much of its lineaments, and in 1973 George Lucas made *American Graffiti* which riffs sardonically on many of *Rebel's* key tropes (it opens with a spoof of Plato's backfiring scooter, and climaxes with a car drag race) in an if-only-we'd-known style

that acknowledges what happened to *Rebel's* original teenage viewers during the unanticipated Sixties. Apart from Dean's gruesome end, Natalie Wood, who went on to star in *West Side Story* [1960] – a film that might not have happened without *Rebel*, and Leonard Bernstein might have carefully listened to its soundtrack before composing his: judge for yourself – died aged 43 in 1981, drowning in mysterious circumstances that may have involved drugs and her then husband Robert Wagner, and Sal Mineo was dead at 37, stabbed in a random street attack in 1976.

But watch for one ferret-faced blond boy in the gang with very little dialogue. For much of his 50 year career, Dennis Hopper carried the unwanted curse of having had the luck that Dean didn't. Mostly he refused to talk about Dean in interviews, but in his last one he opined:

I had never seen anyone improvise before. I really did think at that point that I was the best young actor in the world. And then I'm on set, and the first thing we're doing is the scene in Rebel at the police station, where he gets arrested. And suddenly, Dean starts making siren sounds. When they search him, he starts to laugh because it's tickling him, and I'm thinking, "Where the hell is this on the page? Where is this coming from, man?" I'd never seen anyone improvise before. Because I was a Shakespearean actor, I had preconceived ideas, line readings—everything was a gesture, everything was conscious.

Hopper went on to follow Dean's path of studying with Lee Strasberg. His became the enduring face and fierce method of American contrarian film: he aged and darkened and tarnished as Dean never would, and the movies darkened with him. Cinema went a long way into the psychology of rebellion, but *Rebel Without A Cause* has a claim to be where it saw the dawn.

**NEXT MONTH'S FILM IS
BLACKMAIL**
(Alfred Hitchcock UK 1929)
Wednesday 21 September
(note changed weekday)

www.elyfilmsociety.com

[www.meetup.com/
ely-film/](http://www.meetup.com/ely-film/)

