



## Movie Club

### Rebel without a Cause (1955)

1. Although tame by today's standards, the film had trouble getting through the censors. As with other Production Code era films (like [The Maltese Falcon](#)), several changes were required to be made to Rebel. But unlike with films like The Maltese Falcon, the Production Code Administration had a "special caution regarding teen films", which sometimes led them to "find objectionable meaning when none was intended" (Simmons, "The Censoring of Rebel Without a Cause", p. 58). The required changes to the script including a reduction in the tone and number of kisses between Judy and Jim (one kiss was removed as with two "the scene ended 'on a note of mounting passion' that pointed to sexual intimacy after the fade-out") and the fight scenes (Simmons, p.59). There was originally a complete fight scene early in the film (before the opening credits) that was removed, and elements of the knife fight were altered, including a change of the instruction of "no killing" to "no sticking" (Simmons, p.60-61). Other examples including language are the exclamation "Good Lord" being "not used entirely reverently" and phrases like "keep a cool stool" or "damn hands" being considered vulgar or profane (p.58). Scenes were also cut and the film given an "X" Rating (equivalent to today's "18" certificate) in the UK (Nikkhah, "[To cut or not to cut – a censor's dilemma](#)", The Telegraph, 21 Jun 2009) and banned outright in New Zealand in 1955 (it would be released on a R16 certificate in 1956) ("[History of Censorship 1955](#)" Office of Film and Literature Classification) in both cases for fear of encouraging "juvenile delinquency" or copycat behaviour. Did you find anything particularly objectionable? Would these elements have altered the film significantly for the worse? Would their inclusion, or did their exclusion, create a less or more 'moral' film? Can you think of any comparable modern treatments of similar themes or scenes?
2. Image is highly placed in the film. We see people repeatedly comb or adjust their hair, apply lipstick, or adopting a certain swagger. The teens at the school are especially concerned with appearance, from not stepping on the school insignia, to orchestrating themselves as a group. Despite this concern for look, there is pretence towards not being looked at: "What are you looking at?", asks Buzz when Plato stares at him at the observatory. It also serves heavily to determine character, as in the case of Jim's father wearing a frilly, floral apron, or the gang members all dressing similarly in black leather jackets in opposition to Jim's red jacket in the second half. We also have other moments where characters mirror others. A clear example of this is before the chickie-run, where Jim asks Judy for dirt in a similar fashion to Buzz. This is not done functionally, but rather to mimic his rival. What is the purpose of this posturing and displaying? How is it contrasted with the adults in the film?

3. "As causes go, Jim's doesn't rank with civil rights and war resistance, but the movie's point is that Jim is denied even a reason for his discontent." (Ebert, "[Rebel Without a Cause](#)" [Review]). Jim is not the only rebel, with all three acting out: Judy attempts to gain her father's attention, although she states that "I don't even know why I do it"; Jim gets drunk and has a severe temper with "a big tough character" in an attempt to define his masculine identity due to lack of role model; Plato seems to have deeper psychological issues with parental apathy driving this to extremes. The teens act out for reasons that are not certain ("Well you've gotta do something"), but equally they are not provided any answers from the adults: "It's just the age when nothing fits", opines Judy's mother; "I just want to show you how foolish you are", adds Jim's father. Some of the original advertising of the film used the lines "This is Jim Stark, teenager—from a 'good' family" and "...the bad boy from a good family". These were often accompanied by: "Warner Bros.' challenging drama of today's juvenile violence!" Is this just sensationalist advertising, or does the film actually tackle the issue of "today's juvenile violence"? Where do Judy or Plato play into this? What does it offer in way of an explanation of their actions, or is it more a case of simply putting this on the screen (i.e. are they really rebels "without a cause")? How does it link the concept of a 'good' family with the juvenile violence? Are their parents the only targets of the rebellion? (Think about Judy's split from Buzz's gang, Jim's assertion "I'm not interested in making friends", or Plato's unintentional ostracism from his peers).
4. The film has a heavy and sometimes troubling focus on gender. Judy's father sees her as a young woman and does not want her to dress a certain way (smearing off her lipstick) but also not wanting the paternal peck on the cheek, leading her to confusion and acting out. Judy is openly flirtatious with Jim and Buzz, and after Buzz's death, almost relinquishing herself as Jim's prize from the chickie-run. There is also Plato's homoerotic fascination with Jim which later transforms into Jim and Judy becoming paternal substitutes. Critics have also noted an "unspoken sexual tension in Jim's encounters with Buzz", and that both Plato and Buzz's death "points to the conservatism of the film's narrative about sexuality and gender relations" (Goldberg, "Rebel Without a Cause: using Film to Teach about Dating in 1950s", *Magazine of History*, Jul 2004 p.40). In the scenes where Jim and Judy talk, Ray both utilizes but also subverts convention by shooting the scene from an "'objective' point of view" rather than giving "privilege [of] the male lead's perspective over the female lead's perspective (the 'subjective' shot)", and although Jim is still the active subject, Ray uses "cinematic elements to work against them" (Goldberg, p.40). There is also tension of gender roles within Jim's home. His father is "hen pecked", and Jim's disappointment with his father is not only his lack of strength, but also his engaging in feminine activities like cooking and serving food. Earlier in the film Jim imagines a possible though troubling solution: "If he had the guts to knock Mom cold once, then maybe she'd be happy, and she'd stop picking on him." This rises when Jim asks him directly "what can you do when you have to be a man?", only to be greeted by the familiar uncertainty. Then, after the death of his rival and his moral conflict about dealing with it in an argument with his parents, Jim finally pleads with his father: "Dad, answer her. Tell her. Ten years. Dad, let me hear you answer her. Dad." [*Mr. Stark sits quietly*] "Dad, stand up for me." How does the film subvert or support gender roles? Does it have any clear ideas about "what can you do when you have to be a man?" What does it say about being a woman?

5. The film is by no means “perfect”. Ebert spoke of its “weirdness” that “bubble[s] just beneath the surface of the melodramatic plot”, the “oddness” of Dean’s performance (“more like marked-down Brando than the birth of an important talent”), “Mineo's narcissistic self-pity”, and the “cluelessness of the hero's father” (Ebert, “[Rebel Without a Cause](#)” [Review]). Others have also stated that “the thrust is lyrical and melodramatic, not realistic - a teenage opera” (“Rebel Without a Cause” Screening Loans). In the end, Ebert confirms all these flaws: “Like its hero, ‘Rebel Without a Cause’ desperately wants to say something and doesn't know what it is. If it did know, it would lose its fascination. More perhaps than it realized, it is a subversive document of its time.” Rebel is often listed as a generational film, and like other generational films it is by no means realistic. Others from the same era include [West Side Story](#) (1961), which heightened the operatic qualities of juvenile violence and teenage romance by both appropriating the Romeo and Juliet storyline as well as being a highly choreographed musical. Later in the decade it was [Easy Rider](#) (1969), where the delinquency evolved into outright criminality in a haze of psychedelia. By the 1980s it once again becomes wrought with angst in [The Breakfast Club](#)’s cloistered drama. And the 1990s saw [Fight Club](#), which addressed almost exclusively men in visceral violence. Have generational films remained “lyrical and melodramatic” rather than “realistic”? Have generational films gotten any better at knowing what they “desperately want to say”? Is this a strength or a weakness?