

## STRANDED AT THE DRIVE-IN – The Introductory Chapter

*Stranded at the drive-in*

*Feeling a fool*

*What will they say*

*Monday at school?*

The above lyric, taken from the song Sandy as sung by John Travolta in the film version of Grease, lends this book an appropriate title. Not only do we get a cinema reference, but a neat summing-up of a few of the key elements of teen fiction: thwarted romance, peer pressure, school, the quest for night-time pleasure, fear of humiliation.

Grease's perennial popularity lies in its inter-generational understanding of the pain of being a teenager, and its ability to see those growing pains from both sides of the gender divide. The fact that the songs are catchy and the jokes are dirty and sweet doesn't hurt either. But Grease is just one of many films about being a teenager that resonate with cinema audiences long after their initial release. And I figured it was high time someone took a long, hard look at the reasons why. Ergo Stranded At The Drive-In, an attempt to choose the 100 best teen movies since the 1950's and search out the meanings and messages that have made the teen movie the most vibrant sub-genre in modern film.

An outrageous claim? I don't think so. Here's a quick list of great movies of the last few years: Juno; Twilight; Napoleon Dynamite; The Class; Superbad; Kidulthood; Donnie Darko; Teeth; Hard Candy... yep – all teen movies. Now let me have it with a list of recent non-teen movies that are good as that bunch. The

Lives Of Others? OK, I'll definitely give you that one. Wal-E and Waltz With Bashir? You're right... works of genius. Anything else that *isn't* a cartoon? Slumdog Millionaire? Well, actually... that would be a teen film *and* a cartoon to all intents and purposes. And not included in this book. But we'll get back to that later...

The point I'm trying to make is that film – and especially Hollywood film – is going through a moribund phase. The thrillers, dramas, action movies and adult comedies that make up the central seam of mainstream film seem to have been in perennial decline since the Golden Age of the '30s and '40s. Horror and sci-fi have lost their souls to cynical gore and comic book CGI flash respectively. And while I obviously admire the sophisticated wit of, say, *Sideways*... it's neither as funny, nor as universally relevant, nor as 'real' as *American Pie*.

The one topic that continues to provoke screenwriters and directors into their best work and persuades studios to fund innovation and substance over piledriver special effects overload is the perennial well of deep and difficult emotions that is Teenage. Sadly, the piece of classic screen fiction that forced me to really sit up and take notice of this phenomenon is something I can't write about in *Stranded At The Drive-In*. And that is, of course, the greatest television series ever made: *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*.

Joss Whedon's massively influential horror-comedy-soap about a 15-year-old girl (played by Sarah Michelle Gellar) who is forced to protect the world from a constantly encroaching horde of evil demons was given a total of 144 43-minute episodes to explore every dimension of its real subject – the agonies of a young girl's journey from 15-year-old ingénue to parentified 21-year-old woman. Every vampire, demon, beast, God and monster evoked over the series' six-year run

was a metaphor for another facet of the nightmare of adolescence. Hell – the girl even died (twice!) to save the world, yet still endured her worst moments at the hands of three dashing but emotionally stunted boyfriends who either tried to kill her (Angel), smother her (Riley) or rape her (Spike) in their efforts to take away the power she acquires, not just as The Slayer, but as a woman. In the mythical Californian suburb of Sunnydale, the high school is literally built on top of the mouth of Hell, and Whedon and his ridiculously talented cast and crew make merry with that universally understood metaphor until you understand that there is no possibility of freedom for Buffy and her equally charming and funny pals except razing the school to the ground. Again... twice.

Some readers, at this point, will be doing the equivalent of thrusting one hand in the air and hissing, 'Miss! Miss!' under their breaths at the back of the class in their impatient attempts to point out that there is a Buffy The Vampire Slayer feature film. But, lest we forget, *Stranded At The Drive-In* is an attempt to locate the 100 *best* teen movies – and the movie version of Buffy is an almost unwatchable dog. Indeed, it was the mess made of a brilliant idea that forced Joss Whedon to take it to television where he could keep tighter overall control of the project.

But enough about Buffy... for now, at least. The point is that Buffy led me to look at teen fiction in a completely different way, and to notice how many teen movies are based on very adult metaphors for very adult themes. The monster as male sexual predator. The school as symbol of repression and psychic imprisonment. The quest to lose one's virginity as arm-wrestle between innocence and experience. The teen obsession with popularity as vacuous desire to conform. And, most powerfully perhaps, the adult's mourning of teenage friendships,

when bonding with one's peers meant everything, before career, marriage, mortgage, kids and the very adult fear of appearing needy get in the way and reduce the intensity of our youthful friendships to dinner parties planned months in advance and cards swapped at Christmas. We all miss the spontaneity and passion of our teen friendships, but have no idea how to regain those bonds as adults. Many of the best teen films are driven by that sense of loss.

Yet, when most adults are asked whether they would go through their teenage years again if given the chance, we shudder involuntarily at the torments and embarrassments that never entirely leave us, and say never again. Another reason, perhaps, why good teen movies resonate far beyond the youth demographic they are generally aimed at. Adults get to relive both the infinite possibilities of youth, and the humiliations and terrors that come with those infinite possibilities, at something like a safe distance.

But one thing that I do think unites all good teen movies is that they make you remember what it was like to be young without leaving you full of disappointment and regret at the dreams that you didn't follow. That's best left to talky adult dramas, Radiohead records and the whole middle-youth culture of resigned disappointment. And you're welcome to it, frankly.

So – lets get down to definitions. What, for the purposes of this book, is a 'teen movie'? Actually, it's pretty simple. It's a movie made about, or from the viewpoint of, protagonist(s) aged between thirteen and nineteen. This, sadly, forces me to leave out spectacularly creepy Swedish vampire movie *Let The Right One In* and Penny Marshall's superb *Big* because the central male protagonists are actually supposed to be twelve-years-old. Guess that means that

pre-pubescent sex is a pretty rich source of metaphor, too. But teen says teen, so twelve-year-olds have got to go.

I've also left out films where the teens just happen to be the most interesting characters among a cast of all ages (there goes *The Addams Family*, *The Brady Bunch* and *Apt Pupil*) or where the fact that the main characters *might* be teenagers doesn't really make any difference to the main thrust of the movie (bye-bye *The Blair Witch Project* and *Halloween*). A teen movie concerns itself with teenage life first and foremost, and takes its plot and explores its other themes from a teen perspective.

After that, it's all down to personal opinion – mine. Like my previous three books, the list presented to you here is a purely personal choice of what constitutes quality, irrespective of box-office figures or critical reputation. The wide variety of styles within teen movies reflects the equally wide variety of teen experience, and it's perfectly fitting that a book that wants to look at heavyweight critical faves like *The 400 Blows*, *If...*, *Rebel Without A Cause* and *Badlands* from a fresh perspective, also attempts to unpick the subtleties and nuances in presumed 'trash' such as *Harold And Kumar Get The Munchies*, *Bring It On* and *I Know What You Did Last Summer*. The teen movie, like all the great film sub-genres, is a place where the high and low-brow talk to each other, across generations, and against the grain of received notions of good or bad taste.

Which brings me neatly to *Slumdog Millionaire*, and why the most popular and praised film of this weird generation is not in this book. You know the bit where the boy is walking around covered in shit? I know how he felt, after sitting through a movie that depicted every adult Indian as a psycho Nazi and that suggested that the only way to make that better was to escape it by winning a

million pounds on *the game show that financed the film*. Oddly, the adults who celebrated *Slumdog* as if it was some kind of political rebel movie are the very adults who love to personify teens as consumerist sheep blindly buying into the product placement culture of rap videos and *The X Factor*.

The excellence of the best recent teen flicks puts this kind of hypocrisy into perspective. Teen movies get better and better because each generation of kids is smarter, more culturally informed and less willing to accept being patronised than the last. Filmmakers have constantly risen to that challenge and ensured that any list of great teen movies operates as a shadow list of the finest, funniest and most thought-provoking movies ever made.

*Stranded At The Drive-In* is an attempt to tell a part of that story, from Brando in 1953 to Pattinson in 2008, and with a couple of dozen proto-Buffys slyly emancipating young women inbetween. And if watching these 100 gems has told me anything, its that teen movies are always concerned with power; the spending power of youth in the post-war years that invented the phenomenon of the teen; and the perennial struggle of these teen movie characters to exercise adult power in a world that insists that they are still children. The horror, comedy, drama, rebellion and sexual anticipation and panic that buoys these 100 movies often leaves these characters stranded, and feeling like fools. But we love them for it, because we felt exactly the same.

So invite the girls round, break out the pyjamas and popcorn, and let's bitch and braid each other's hair while we enjoy the best that screen teen fiction has to offer. But behave. 'Cos you know what they'll say, Monday at school.



## **Movie Content List**

### 1950's

1. The Wild One
2. Rebel Without A Cause
3. Blackboard Jungle
4. I Was A Teenage Werewolf
5. Where The Boys Are
6. The Cool And The Crazy
7. The 400 Blows
8. The Blob

### 1960's

9. The Loneliness Of The Long-Distance Runner
10. A Taste Of Honey
11. West Side Story
12. Beat Girl
13. To Sir With Love
14. If...
15. Kes

### 1970's

16. A Clockwork Orange
17. Harold And Maude
18. The Last Picture Show
19. Le Souffle Au Coeur
20. That'll Be The Day
21. A Boy And His Dog
22. American Graffiti

23. Badlands
24. Black Christmas
25. Martin
26. Carrie
27. National Lampoon's Animal House
28. Grease
29. Halloween
30. The Warriors
31. Quadrophenia
32. Little Darlings

#### 1980's

33. Class Of 1984
34. Taps
35. Back To The Future
36. Risky Business
37. Over The Edge
38. A Nightmare On Elm Street
39. Made In Britain
40. Meantime
41. Night Of The Comet
42. The Outsiders
43. Rumble Fish
44. Red Dawn
45. War Games
46. River's Edge
47. The Breakfast Club
48. Ferris Bueller's Day Off

49. Dirty Dancing
50. Lucas
51. Pretty In Pink
52. Footloose
53. Edward Scissorhands
54. Heathers
55. Society
56. Dazed And Confused

#### 1990's

57. Heavenly Creatures
58. Before Sunrise
59. Starship Troopers
60. Clueless
61. Totally F\*\*\*ed Up
62. Scream
63. The Faculty
64. Kids
65. Pleasantville
66. La Haine
67. Romeo & Juliet
68. Cruel Intentions
69. Rushmore
70. But I'm A Cheerleader
71. American Pie
72. Spanking The Monkey
73. Election
74. The Virgin Suicides

## 2000's

75. Final Destination
76. Ginger Snaps
77. Battle Royale
78. Bring It On
79. Ghost World
80. Donnie Darko
81. City Of God
82. Elephant
83. Bully
84. Mean Girls
85. Thirteen
86. Mysterious Skin
87. Hairspray (Remake)
88. Eurotrip
89. Hard Candy
90. Kidulthood
91. Napoleon Dynamite
92. Juno
93. Superbad
94. Teeth
95. The Class
96. Twilight
97. Dogtooth
98. Precious
99. Fish Tank
100. The Social Network

*The Blackboard Jungle*

1955

Starring: Glenn Ford, Sidney Poitier, Vic Morrow

Dir.: Richard Brooks

Plot: The inner-city classroom as Theatre Of War

Key line: 'Take it easy, Chief. He's crazy. He's high. He's floatin' on Sneaky Pete wine!'

Famously, this movie started a riot in a cinema in South London. The British teen was apparently such a hormonal explosion waiting to happen that, in a picture-house in rough old Elephant And Castle, an unruly horde of Teddy Boy types heard the opening blend of hep cat jazz drum solo and military tattoo segue into Bill Haley's 'Rock Around The Clock', and went bug-eyed mental, dancing frenziedly in the aisles and slashing the seats with flick-knives, the '50s juvenile delinquent equivalent of a mobile phone with Bluetooth. The same sort of thing reputedly happened in America and, once the controversy and hand-wringing had calmed down, a new genre was born. No self-respecting capitalist could turn down the kind of free publicity generated by teenage film.

I wonder if these crazy kids even bothered to look at the words of warning that roll across the screen at the outset of *The Blackboard Jungle*. In true cake-and-eat-it style, just to assure the censors and adults generally that the movie's makers had America's best interests at heart, the captions assure us that *The Blackboard Jungle* is 'concerned with juvenile delinquency' and performs a necessary social function because 'Public awareness is a first step towards a remedy.' For a few weird years in the 1950's, juvenile delinquency was an

American obsession and rivalled communism as the No.1 source of dread under the bed. Blame rock 'n' roll, or post-war affluence, or working mothers, or a decline in the practice of respecting your elders, but a series of lurid headlines and learned academic reports insisted that America's kids were out of control and coming for your daughters. In the end, it was the U.S. military coming for your sons that gave this apparently causeless rebellion a sense of purpose and genuine anti-establishment threat.

But right now, in 1955, at New York's North Manual High School, those rough boys have something less noble on their minds.

In the opening scenes of this wonderful black and white orgy of hysteria, these thugs' idea of communicating with the laydees involves becoming literally animal – rattling and gurning through the bars of the school fence, topped off by much post-*The Wild One* bottle play. Vic Morrow's Artie West, the villain of this piece, goes as far as holding the bottle of pop at his groin like a phallus before despatching the foamy contents roughly in the direction of a sophisticated blonde.

This is one of the things I love most about pre-'60s movies. Nowadays, if a kid in a teen film – or a guy in a grown-up one, for that matter – pulled the bottle-as-cumming-penis gag, the character would know exactly what he was doing, and would shake it all about with knowing irony. In movies like *The Blackboard Jungle*, the male aggressor doesn't appear to know anything about symbolism. He is shoving his dick in our faces in deadly earnest, which is both scarier and funnier.

But as well as a movie about juvenile delinquency, *The Blackboard Jungle* is also about male humiliation. Or, to be precise, the potential humiliations men suffer

at the hands of a society that had changed radically since the Second World War. As we know, men risked their lives to fight fascism between 1939-45 and, if they made it back whole, soon realised that no place had been found for them in civic life. Women had entered the job market while they were away and many had no intention of returning to domestic drudgery. The US economy needed to rebuild. So vets like Rick Dadier (Glenn Ford) found themselves pleading for work.

In the opening scenes we see that Dadier – who only seems to get this unlikely French name so the kids can call him Daddy-O - is among a large group of teachers looking for a job at Hooligan High. Most are men. When Dadier enters the office for his interview he is greeted by a cold, pompous, authoritarian Principal . This Dadier is nervous and cringing. It turns out that he earned his teaching degree at a girls' school that made a place for ex-military. His interviewer barks at him about his quiet voice, and forces him to recite Shakespeare at top volume. Staff and rival interviewees smirk at the sound of his desperation. Dadier is being humiliated at every turn.

So *The Blackboard Jungle* is, on one major level, about an emasculated man who must quest to find his testicles. Instead of traversing across dangerous terrain, he has to locate his bollocks by taking on a bunch of children whose entire demeanour is a threat to the authority of the adult male. And he's not going to get any help. After getting the job, Dadier asks about 'the discipline problem'. He is brusquely and aggressively informed that it doesn't exist. Principal Halloran is King of Denial.

This school is a war. The Principal is the aloof General, cosseted away from the action. The teachers are the foot-soldiers on the frontline. The men, led by uber-cynic Murdoch, immediately hit Dadier with war stories and call the school, 'The

garbage can of the educational system,' while making wisecracks about the sentences for statutory rape that would apparently be inevitable if they worked at a girls' school. The one female teacher that wanders into view is gawked at like a stripper on a building site. 'Uplifting' ending aside, *Blackboard Jungle* is a bitter and angry movie that implies that the education of children can only be improved by an individual – a strong leader – who is prepared to meet violence with violence. And that men of any age are unable to control their primal desires when confronted with any female under the age of 40. We're not in William McKinley High anymore, Toto.

But enough about Daddy-O and the wrinklies. This is a book about cinematic teens, right? And the best thing about *The Blackboard Jungle* is the best schoolroom bad boys this side of a Daily Mail editorial. Immaculate in their rockabilly rags, greasy of hair and sneery of lip, these multi-ethnic Bad Bwoys are exactly the JDs you've always wanted to hang out with. They talk in high-pitched Beastie Boy whines and yelps. They read the Racing News at school assembly. They drive stolen wheels so fast that they knock parked cars a-rolling and a-tumbling into shop windows, 'cos being stationary is strictly Squaresville. And they snap their fingers and bebop to Bill Haley, all day and all night. OK, that last bit might get wearing after 15 minutes or so, but otherwise, this is the gang of your wildest rock 'n' roll dreams. What's more, the fantastic Morrow (who famously and tragically died in a stunt-gone-wrong on the set of *The Twilight Zone* movie in ???) and his partners-in-grime actually look like boys you would prefer not to meet in an alley no matter what the lighting situation was, unlike your usual podgy whitebread '50s hood-from-Central Casting. Morrow's West, in particular, looks like he lives on speed and raw roadkill.

Poitier's Gregory Miller is from some other planet entirely. Luminously beautiful, he looms over teacher and pupil alike, dwarfing anyone else's attempts to attract viewer attention, no matter how wildly they overact. He is, of course, the redeemable Bad Lad. But it is still fascinating and bravely progressive that Brooks chose a young black actor to be the movie's pop idol and moral compass while much of America was still living under pre-civil rights apartheid. How the Hell did he convince the studio to risk alienating half of Blackboard Jungle's potential audience? Or was everybody involved aware, perhaps prompted by the young's love of mutant rhythm 'n' blues, that racism was already the older generation's problem, and that the coming decade's politics, art and entertainment would sweep the last vestiges of Klanism away? I know – a lot to project onto a dumb old movie. But someone took the decision, and, although Poitier was already 27-years-old and a veteran of six previous movies, it was his impact as Gregory Miller that set the extraordinary Poitier on the road to being Hollywood's first black Best Actor Oscar winner (in 1963 for *Lilies Of The Field*) and, in 1967, America's No.1 box office leading man.

We soon suss out the eternal triangle being drawn here. Dadier and West are locked in a battle for the souls of the class, who, like most humble infantry, are little more than easily led by the toughest tough guy in close proximity. But, in order to win, they have to win over Miller, who, apart from being the coolest and handsomest – and, because he is black, the most authentic - dude in the theatre of war, is tough... but reasonable. If he has been a bad boy up to now, it's not his fault. He's a strong and intelligent young man – which means he knows when to conform and when not to. Nope, he's a victim of society, poverty, bad environment, and, until Daddy-O comes along, untrustworthy authority figures.

Being the 1950's, the best role model for a misguided black boy is a white soldier.

But Daddy-O's blend of military experience and Psych 101 is a little too blatant at first. After the first fractious class meeting he pulls Miller aside, flatters him with a bunch of shuck and jive about being 'a natural born leader', and basically asks him to control the animals for him. Miller seems to agree. But nothing comes that easy.

By the time hierarchy and order are inevitably restored, we've had an attempted rape (including an awesome fight scene where the foiled teen rapist attempts to escape Daddy-O by diving headfirst through a window!), a neat exercise in civil disobedience as the boys deliberately get a blackboard exercise wrong, a kid who just grins who's creepier than all the scowlers combined, teachers sadistically clobbered in a back alley, the symbolic destruction of briefcases and swing-era record collections, a visit to a 'good' school where the kids appear to hail from Stepford, the constant backdrop of unbearable train and workshop noise, showing rather than telling us about the distractions and pressures of the big bad city, a racism debate featuring more 'niggers' and 'spics' than the average episode of Oz, Miller successfully finding that Dadier isn't quite the anti-racist crusader he wants to be, a violent truck-jacking, and West reasoning that jail time is better than the draft, his blank glare when the rest of the class are watching a cartoon Daddy-O brings into class proving that he's the kinda guy who even sees laughter as compromise, with his insistence that the real meaning of Jack And The Beanstalk is, 'crime always pays.'

The tiresome subplot of Miss Hammond – a single woman of child-bearing age who doesn't seem eager to be a mom, so therefore A Monster – chucking herself

at the completely asexual Glenn Ford does serve a plot purpose. Having kept most of his cool even after a savage beating, it has to be something real bad to force the inevitable showdown with West. Writing notes and making calls about Daddy-O's alleged infidelity to his pregnant wife, until she gets so freaked out she gives birth prematurely and almost loses it... that does the trick nicely. West finally forces Dadier to make their conflict physical, daring him to back down in front of the class. West is also happy to disobey Dadier's corporal Miller and break their uneasy alliance with his own racist abuse. Even the most enthusiastic teen rebel would, by this time, want grey, earnest Daddy-O to discover his inner animal and put West down. Miller makes the right choice, and, with the liberal tough guys now aligned, the rest of the class fall, somewhat pathetically but entertainingly, into line. The last bad guy gets overpowered by... an American flag!!!

Does that mean West is some kind of symbol of communism? Erm... no. It means that Brooks was kind of worried that all this bullish anti-racism might be construed as anti-Americanism by what was left of the McCarthyite witch hunters, and thought he'd pre-empt with hilariously overstated patriotism.

We close on Miller and Dadier agreeing a 'pact' that feels more like a political reconciling of black and white, of youth and manhood, than anything to do with teacher and pupil. You almost feel they should turn to camera, warmly shake hands, and walk into the White House. Instead, Brooks just gives the kids 'Rock Around The Clock' again. And very nice it is, too.

But my very favourite thing about *The Blackboard Jungle* is... no matter how many times I watch it, I can't exactly tell whose side its on. Brooks was seriously ingenious at the cake-and-eat-it attitude you needed to make funky films before

the last vestiges of the paranoid Hays Code was finally swept away in the late '60s.

The scene that best exemplifies this is the one that features a familiar character... the 1950's teen movie *Therapy Cop*. *Therapy Cop* has different cop names and is always played by a different actor. He sometimes takes the pure Freud route, and at others veers more toward cracker barrel sociology. But he's the same *Therapy Cop*, setting the audience straight every time.

This time he's an oldish feller in a detective hat and trench coat. He's supposed to be at the school to find out who beat up Daddy-O and poor wimpy teacher Josh Edwards, but is somewhat distracted by a desire to sum up ten years of weighty newspaper theories about the juvenile delinquency problem. 'They were five or six years old in the last war,' he drones. 'Father in the army, mother in a defence plant. No home life. No church life. No place to go. They formed street gangs...'

This is obviously designed for the grown-ups in the cinema (or the critics who'll tell the parents what to think about the film), who want to know that little Janet and Johnny with their wild music and flipped-out hair aren't going to see a gratuitous orgy of teen violence. You could make these films, and even occasionally get mainstream affirmation, as long as they had *A Message* that reaffirmed the status quo.

But, as *Therapy Cop* drones on, we see Daddy-O's Class of 55 Flick-knives file past him, giving him a sidelong glance and sneering. Last of these, the only boy allowed to walk across the screen behind *Therapy Cop*, is Poitier's Miller, looking, literally, too cool for school. Every boy looks fucking brilliant, and you can't help suspecting that, while the parents nod contentedly at just how comforting it is that such wise older men will keep the heathens in line, Brooks is

simultaneously saying to the teen viewers: I know. They really do talk bollocks, don't they? Let them think you're listening and I'll give you the altogether sexier future to look at. Deal?

This goes as far as something very weird, which I only noticed on this viewing. Dadier and Miller are at the garage where Miller works after school as a mechanic. He is explaining, in case we hadn't got it, that there is no point in a poor black boy taking school seriously, because he's 'coloured', and therefore barred from social mobility. He explains that he worked hard at first, 'but what's the use? Nobody gives a...'

What you hear is the word, 'hoot'. But it is slightly louder than the rest of the talk track. It's also doubled, almost comically, by the double hoot of a car-horn. But I swear you can hear the beginning of an 'F...' sound, and that Poitier is mouthing the word 'fuck'.

This couldn't have been in the original script, for obvious reasons. So... maybe Poitier got so into his part that he said the offending word, and Brooks decided to keep that take and drop in the hoots. But this is not an intense scene. Miller is being amiable and matter-of-fact as he lays down the facts of black life for his white mentor. It just doesn't add up that he'd need to curse to make the scene work. Was Brooks trying to give his teen audience a swear word subliminally? One of the great pleasures of *The Blackboard Jungle* is unavoidable. Its view of everything is so outdated that none of us hip modern things can resist the belly laughs. One of the ironies that became apparent while doing this book is that the terribly serious and 'concerned' likes of *The Blackboard Jungle* are generally more laugh-out-loud funny than the knowingly daft likes of *The Blob* (see P.???). Like the bit where Dadier plies his pregnant wife with champagne (and how thrilled

she is that she's getting ravioli, too!). The bit where Dadier is recounting the tale of a teacher's sexual assault to the missus and just gets a response that the teacher 'provoked it' by being too sexy, before she rejects female solidarity completely and gives him the third degree about whether he'd like to take Miss Hammond roughly up the refectory as well. Or the scene where the Principal accuses Daddy-O of being a racist... and then asks him to direct the school Christmas show! Or the well-meaning but misguided inverse racism of the scene where the black boys prove what fine men they are by singing a negro spiritual round the old Joanna.

Watching *The Blackboard Jungle* is like taking a holiday in the pre-enlightenment world that the brilliant *Mad Men* TV show mocks, at a point where it was still utterly convinced of its moral and ethical rectitude. As such, its overload of messages, subtexts, contradictions and unintentional laughs makes it a far richer text than the majority of the wiser, politically correct teen movies of later years. It's *Tradio*, Daddy-O, and all the better for it.

*A Taste Of Honey*

1961

Starring: Rita Tushingham, Dora Bryan, Murray Melvin, Robert Stephens, Paul

Danquah

Dir.: Tony Richardson

Plot: A very English lament for the unwanted child.

Key line: 'A bit of love, a bit of lust and there you are. We don't ask for life. We have it thrust upon us.'

Tony Richardson and Shelagh Delaney's seminal snapshot of life in a '60s northern town deserves its place as one of the best of all British films. It was adapted from Delaney's hit play, which was also directed by Richardson. It stars the wonderful Rita Tushingham in her debut role as the quintessential mousy teenage Goddess and the equally wonderful Dora Bryan as the world's worst mother. And the kind of ribald and poetic dialogue that befits a tale set in Manchester, home of the sharpest tongues in England. *A Taste Of Honey* is a key example of what came to be known as 'kitchen sink drama' and the British new wave. Oh... and the song of the same name, which The Beatles covered in 1963 and was initially written as a recurring instrumental motif for the American version of the play, doesn't appear here at all.

Tushingham is Jo, a 15-year-old in her last few days of school, parentified by her slutty and neglectful mother who has never hidden the fact that she never wanted a child. When Lovely Rita dreams, you dream right along with her. Her eyes – huge, slightly off-centre, blank yet full of vim and vigour – express something quintessential about longing to be anywhere but where you are.

Broad hips and chubby legs aside, there's a startling resemblance between Tushingham and Malcolm McDowell, star of *If...* (see P.???) and *A Clockwork Orange* (see P.???). His slight femininity and her edge of butch make them equally unnerving. There is some special knowledge in their eyes and voices, a feeling that they represent not just threatening youth but the rise of a New North. More than occasionally, Richardson just puts a close-up camera on Tushingham here, knowing that her thousand yard stare says more about frustration and imminent change than any amount of self-conscious speechifying. In a different age that fierce androgyny would have made her a superstar. But the '60s and '70s offered worse parts for subversive actresses than any other period of screen time, and this was not a face to play vapid romantic lead, nor victim, nor whore.

The opening credits – which occur after scenes of Jo playing netball at school and explaining to a friend that she can't go out because she has no clothes and 'we might be moving home again' – show the influence of *The 400 Blows*, as does the brutal, documentary-style monochrome and relentless authenticity of light and location. Jo and her ma Helen (Bryan) have had to do a 'flit' – that is, leave their flat in secret owing rent – and take their worldly belongings on a bus to who knows where, giving us a tour of Manchester as the credits roll and a kiddie choir sing the children's song 'The Good Ship Sails'. Richardson's camera is rightly obsessed with Tushingham's face, an unforgettable mix of big-eyed soulfulness, startled rabbit and sulky pout, topped off with androgynous pudding-bowl haircut. This is the stuff of Smiths record sleeves and working-class beauty amidst damp northern grit and poverty. Like Truffaut, Richardson chooses a lyrical orchestral soundtrack that lightens the mood, reflecting the optimism of the young and their ability to endure the worst possible starts in life.

Because *A Taste Of Honey* is a love letter to mordant pessimism, the life-blood of the British northern working-class. Barely a conversation passes without a mention of death, and an implication that it would be a blessed relief. A definitive exchange between daughter and mother occurs early when Jo remarks that the new bed is like a coffin and Mother replies, "Well, that's where we all end up, in the end."

I find this strangely comforting. I'm a born and bred Londoner but my mother's family all hailed from Hebburn, a tiny town near Jarrow in the north-east of England. Their entire narrative was drenched in mortality and miserabilism, and their favourite reading matter was *The Spiritualist News*, as if they'd all been waiting to die since they'd been born. Considering they'd all been born into service, raised as children to know their place, wait on the rich and never move on, they all had a fair point. The constant sighing resignation to life-stinks-and-then-you-die can and did suck the joy out of a young 'un. But... they all meant well. And, in hindsight, it was both funny and true, and mitigated against the kind of 5-a-day, salad-munching, hair-shirt, no fun today lest we suffer tomorrow, western middle-class delusion that, if one behaves and does what one's told, one will never, ever die.

By this time we've met Peter (Stephens), who, with his too-bright suit and bow tie, rakish moustache and used car business, is the very essence of slippery spivery, a wolf in wolf's clothing. We've also seen how uncomfortable he looks when Ellen entertains the boozers with a mildly bawdy song in the pub. This surely won't end well.

It turns out that Jo is days away from leaving school and wants to get a job and leave her mother as quickly as possible, and that she is an artist... something

she's never bothered to share with Mother. But a far more controversial Jo secret becomes the meat of *A Taste Of Honey*. She begins a relationship with a sailor who happens to be black. Or rather, coloured. Brits of that generation still think 'coloured' is the enlightened term, what with it being less abusive than most of the terms used at the time. These were times when a white girl could say to a black man, "There's still a bit of jungle in you somewhere", and he would, apparently, think it was a funny joke. No black people were involved in the writing of this film.

Oddly, the age difference... he looks at least 25, Jo can be no more than 15... is not raised as an issue, whereas the eight-year difference between Helen and Peter is, repeatedly. But have things changed that much in this regard? Isn't older man-younger woman still seen as more 'natural' than older woman-younger man? By now we know that Jo is condemned to repeat the unwanted pregnancy mistakes of her mother. But who can blame her? There's a shot of Jo and her beau standing beneath a street light, shot from below, framing them in shadow against the windows, walls and fences of a dark street, that captures every thrill of young night-time romance. Besides, the boy's hot, kind, attentive and represents exoticism and escape.

Despite the snotty insults to mother - "You don't look 40. More a well-preserved 60." - and professed desire for independence, Jo is more vulnerable and childlike than she wants to admit. She insists on joining Helen and Peter on a day trip to Blackpool when, theoretically, she could have had Jimmy The Sailor-Man and the flat all to herself. She may be an outsider, but she is still lonely.

The day trip, which also includes a couple we haven't met until now, is a small and beautiful nightmare, and one that can only be dreamed in cramped, grey

England. Peter, who we learn has a glass-eye, sees Jo as both an impediment to sex and a terrifying bringer of home-truths. He reveals that he's already bought a house for his impending marriage to Helen... a bungalow with bay windows, every working-class Brit's paradise.

But the childish seaside japes that delight the adults leave the child cold. She's a fabulously disapproving onlooker, a study in blank, bored insolence. By now, Richardson has unleashed the trashy British rock 'n' roll and the shaky hand-held camera, and, like many a middle-class Brit director of the '50s and '60s, he is not a fan of the working-class at play, as they laugh manically at things that aren't funny, eat junk and chase cheap thrills. Still, can't really knock him for that. I love my background but largely hated its idea of fun. That's why we peasants needed all these working-class bohemian art-schoolers – The Beatles and The Who and Bowie and the Sex Pistols – to make intellectual noise and allow us to believe we could find better things to do, to *be*. The Swinging '60s hasn't really hit this Blackpool yet. It needs Jo to grow up, put that disgruntlement to good use and become the Shelagh Delaney she obviously is. Of course, the day turns to disaster when Peter loses patience with Jo's taunting and gives Helen the me-or-her ultimatum. And of course, it rains. And of course, Jimmy is waiting for Jo when she gets off the bus, injecting life and love and the old I-sail-away-tomorrow spiel into her bleak world at a time when she's far too vulnerable to say no. Uh-oh.

The film is haunted by the biggest English obsession of the 1960's – the unmarried mother. Helen's offhand description of Jo's absent-presumed-dead father as 'a bit simple' is cruel and exactly the kind of thing ashamed working-class single mothers tell their children. Again, I know, from experience. No

matter what happens at the end of *A Taste Of Honey*, Jo will live her life convinced that she has inherited an unimaginable madness. Helen tells her she has her father's eyes. It is not a compliment. The Pill may have turned out to have side-effects, medically, emotionally. But it was, briefly, the salvation of the woman who refused to be a virgin until marriage. This was all such a short time ago, really. It feels like another millennium.

Dora Bryan is quite brilliant in these scenes. As she explains that Jo was conceived in her first sexual encounter, she makes something that seems initially kind and romantic – that our first time is something we always remember – into something frightening and charged with dread, using little more than a wayward glance, a thoughtful pause, a wrinkle of her angry mouth. She then goes off to get married, having never considered inviting her own daughter, utterly disinterested in the fact that her only child left school yesterday and enters the world of work in two days time. The pessimism of *A Taste Of Honey* touches everything, but nothing is tainted quite as firmly and finally as love and sex, the working-class woman's killer drug of choice. 'I hate love', Jo whimpers, in a cave, which is fitting.

With Helen and Jimmy gone, the film moves from superior soap to something altogether more extraordinary. It becomes a kind of travelogue through the life of a precocious teenager's first taste of independent adult life in atmospheric Manchester, made yet more non-conformist by the introduction of Geoff, Jo's gay best friend, charismatically played by Murray Melvin. One of the first fully-rounded and utterly believable gay characters in mainstream cinema, Geoff is a gaunt and sallow student of 'textile design' who understands, at first glance, that Jo is not like everybody else. With him, a night at the fair is pleasure not trauma.

He introduces Jo – and the young female viewer of the time, one imagines – to the delights of male friendship without sexual agenda. Although the bullying way she demands information about ‘you people’ proves that Jo is her mother’s daughter, when all is said and done. He becomes her flatmate – and domestic Goddess - anyway.

Inevitably, Jo’s one night of comfort and joy has left her in the family way. Geoff tries to make himself straight for her, ‘for the baby’s sake’, but this is one strop-py modern girl who isn’t marrying anyone for anything’s sake. ‘I’d rather be dead than away from you,’ he confesses, and, again, the summoning of The Void feels unavoidable. Jo is soon looking ruefully at a boy with Down’s Syndrome, her pessimism an engulfing shroud.

Helen’s attempts to reconcile with Jo are undermined by drunk lunk Peter in a scene of rich and tragic-comic character acting. When Helen gets inevitably dumped and moves herself in to their brilliant bohemian loft, you just know that poor Geoff’s days are numbered.

But the best scenes belong to Tushingham and Melvin, playing out their strange kinda love by the dirty side of the Manchester Ship Canal, where Jo’s lover seduced her and sailed from her. They are often surrounded by urchin children and they say things like: “You need someone to love yer while you’re looking for someone to love.”

“Have you been unhappy with me?”

“Who’s happy?”

Bloody marvellous. The pair fittingly won Best Actor and Actress awards at 1962’s Cannes Film Festival.

The movie's other great supporting actor is Manchester itself, shot in all its dank, sinister, post-industrial glory. There are no dark satanic mills, but plenty of dark satanic factories, looming over the drama, impervious except for providing physical proof that there's no point cheering up, because it probably will happen. If all this sounds like one long Smiths song, you are not wrong. Morrissey fans will already know that he pinched one of his most famous lines – "I dreamt about you last night/And I fell out of bed twice", from 'Reel Around The Fountain' on The Smiths' debut album – straight from the mouth of Jimmy The Sailor-Man. The Smiths' love of pretty-ugly working-class glamour, and view of Manchester as a beautiful but dangerous place with 'so much to answer for', finds its absolute definition in these 96 minutes, right alongside Moz's identification with the young outsider, too clever to conform but too fatalistic to ever escape a chronic loneliness. All this, and its smart placing of black, gay and working-class woman as equally excluded outsiders whose time is quickly coming makes *A Taste Of Honey* prophetic and inspiring.

And, for me, *A Taste Of Honey* holds a special place. I look at it as close as I can get to story of my mother, before I was born. Okay... my mum was in London. Her mother was depressed puritan rather than strumpet extrovert. And she was 23 when she had me, not 16. But... she had an accidental child in the early '60s with a black man called Jimmy who quickly disappeared. She painted. She had friendships with men who volunteered to be stepdads, but chose her mother, for better and for worse. And, like Jo, she was something new in her family, modern and angry and doomed to never marry. I don't know that Jo would never have married, but I suspect that, like my mother, by the time she'd devoted every last second to her child in order to avoid making the mistakes of her own mother, she

wouldn't have had anything left to give a man, especially trust. So I watch *A Taste Of Honey* and feel both illuminated and somewhat uncomfortable, as if I've watched something I was never supposed to have seen.

It's got to be a pretty great movie to do that to someone who wasn't even born when it was made. The best British teen film bar none, and far more besides.

*West Side Story*

1961

Starring: Natalie Wood, Richard Beymer, Russ Tamblyn, George Chakiris, Rita Moreno

Dir.: Jerome Robbins and Robert Wise

Plot: The jazz hands *Romeo And Juliet*.

Key line: 'Life can be bright in America/If you can fight in America/Life is all right in America/If you are white in America.'

How different would the greatest teen musical of all-time have been if one of the many other actors considered for Tony had got the part? Let us consider, for a moment... Anthony Perkins? Nah... too psycho. Burt Reynolds? Too moustachy. Warren Beatty? Too vain. Bobby Darin? Too vapid. Richard Chamberlain? Too smooth. Dennis Hopper????!! Really, I don't know where to start *or* finish with that level of weirdness.

But here's one to think on. At one point it was a real possibility that the tragic Romeo in this New York gangland/hoofer orgy could have been... Elvis Presley. No, really. The producers of this movie version of an already huge Broadway hit dearly wanted Elvis to be their juvenile lead. Apart from his looks, voice, popularity and all-round Elvisness, he had form: he'd played a knife-wielding punk with a heart of gold in *King Creole* (see *Popcorn*) and been great. How perfect: the biggest pop star of the day in the biggest pop musical of the times? But Hollywood didn't reckon with Presley's huckster manager Colonel Tom Parker. Once Elvis had done his patriotic stint in the U.S Army, Parker wanted Elvis to make the smooth transition to family-friendly MOR entertainer. Despite

having already made millions out of rock 'n' roll, Parker believed this jungle music was a teenage fad and that his protégé had to move away from it as quickly as possible. Of course, *West Side Story* doesn't have a note of rock in it; it is based around the immaculate jazz-classical compositions of Leonard Bernstein (music) and Stephen Sondheim (lyrics). But it had rock 'n' roll attitude, with its jive-talkin' juvenile delinquents and themes of inner-city poverty and racial tension. So Parker kept his boy well away from the project.

Picture poor old Elvis, kicking back with his Memphis Mafia at one of the private screenings he would demand at his local cinema, watching a movie that won Ten Academy Awards including Best Picture – more than any other musical in history – and spawned the biggest-selling soundtrack album of its times, while he pondered making a fool of himself in one of the musicals Parker preferred; maybe *Fun In Acapulco*, *Tickle Me* or *Clambake*. What a sap.

But, while its fun to imagine him uh-huh-huhing his way through “Something's Coming”, Elvis couldn't have starred in *West Side Story*. What would they have done about the singing? There's no way Presley could've performed these arty melodramas without making it sound like he was taking the piss. And would they really have gone as far as having the hottest singing star on the planet lip-syncing to the operatic tenor of Jimmy Bryant, who provides the vocals for the guy who did get to play Tony, one Richard Beymer? It's all a non-starter, even within the world of pleasure provided by Elvis Presley 'What If?'s.

So lets stick with Richard Beymer. Even at the time, even in light of the Oscars and the millions of box office dollars, many were bemused by how poor a lead Beymer was. With his pleading eyes, weak chin, tombstone teeth, and pouty top lip, it's like someone dumped Cliff Richard into the middle of *Cabaret*. So much so

that *West Side Story* became the end of a conventional film career for Beymer, rather than a beginning.

After *WSS*, Beymer scored a minor success among a star-studded cast in 1962 war epic *The Longest Day*, before sidelining acting for a career as an activist. He decamped to Mississippi for the great civil rights voter registration drives of 1964, and directed a documentary, *A Regular Bouquet: Mississippi Summer*, based upon his experiences. He directed an avant-garde movie called *The Innerview* in 1974. And then virtually disappeared from sight until being cast in the role of Ben Horne in David Lynch's seminal cult TV show *Twin Peaks* in the 1990's.

As a creepy postscript to all this, Beymer began a relationship around the time of *West Side Story* with a girl called Sharon Tate. He encouraged her to go into acting, a decision that ended with her violent slaughter by Charles Manson and his 'Family' at Roman Polanski's Hollywood mansion in 1969. Careers advisor not a job option, then.

So... interesting guy, all told. But a genuine contender for a non-Academy award for Worst Actor In A Lead Role In A Movie That Turned Out Great Despite His Presence. I suspect Beymer is the major reason why a film so famous and successful doesn't inspire the same level of acclaim and affection in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as the likes of *Cabaret*, *Singin' In The Rain*, *The Sound Of Music* or *Grease*. You just can't get past the guy.

But I really do adore *West Side Story*. And my love remains true purely through three of its musical set-pieces, two of which prominently feature Beymer. Don't get me wrong: I love the gritty New York locations and lurid colours, and the way Wise (despite his co-director credit, Robbins, the *WSS* stage director who was essentially there to choreograph the dance sequences, was fired during the

production) makes squalor look so beautiful. I love the toe-tappin', finger-snappin' presentation of the violence and posing of young working-class men. I love Wood and Moreno and Tamblyn. I love the bizarrely gymnastic way Tamblyn – as Jets leader Riff – dismounts from a high rail early in the movie; a death-defying move that would now form the entire centre-piece of some amateur film on YouTube, here dispensed with in a couple of seconds. And I especially love the ingenious basis of the whole enterprise, courtesy of Bernstein, Sondheim and Arthur Laurents's original 1957 stage musical... Shakespeare's saga of warring families the Montagues and Capulets recast in the image of teen gangs the Puerto Rican Sharks and the Caucasian Jets indulging in America's favourite pastime: race war.

But its *West Side Story's* three best songs that have taken up permanent residence in my psyche and which, for me anyways, represent the high watermark of non-rock-based American Song.

The first is "Maria". This is, visuals-wise, a Beymer solo. But I don't care that he's rubbish because it's all about the song; a melody so romantic that it entirely defines that unforgettable moment when one is first smitten by someone, usually some time in your teens. You remember: time stood still, your heart pounded and your stomach and legs did things you that you couldn't understand, invisible birds chirp merrily and all that talk of paradise and Heaven which you'd just learned to be cynical about suddenly made perfect sense because you realised that it had nothing to do with God. An orchestra swirls in your ears and its definitely a waltz, but one where the rhythm is replaced by the rush of your own blood.

If you don't recall, "Maria" ... original cast recording, sung by Jimmy Bryant... will bring it all flooding back. Make you sad that love and lust can never feel that new and shocking again. Make you happy that someone or something designed human beings to feel it at all. Make you remember that the pain of everything that happened at the time made you feel as alive as the pleasure, if you were lucky enough to get any, particularly the part where loud music backdrops the line, 'Say it loud and there's music playing', and then soft music frames the whisper, 'Say it soft and its almost like praying.'

And then there's the raucous satire that is "America". After Maria's (Wood) patrician Big Brother Bernardo forbids her to see Tony, future Oz star Rita Moreno, as earthy heroine Anita turns *feminista*. 'Girls here are free to have fun. She is in America now!' But Bernardo has the anti-multi-cultural answer to that. 'Puerto Rico is in America now.' The scene and the following song and dance are played for laughs, but sometimes one needs to sugar the bitter pill. "America" and its surrounding dialogue hits the nails of economic migration and the gap between the realities and fantasies of integration squarely on the head. And the song, from its mutant Latin sound and the cartoonish joy of the Hispanic accents, through to the cruel irony of Sondheim's lyrics, still stands as the truest, funniest art statement on the lie of The American Dream, while its ebullience says something significant about the genuine freedom that America does offer. It's good-natured anger defines the coming Civil Rights crusades as perfectly as Sam Cooke's "A Change Is Gonna Come", the cultural miscegenation of rock 'n' roll and the speeches of Martin Luther King. It is ten minutes of pure pleasure which gives anyone a crash course on the conflict between the liberal desire to assimilate and the conservative qualities of cleaving to one's own culture, and

then punches the point home that none of this is about race. It's about class. It's about money. *Its always about money.*

And finally... possibly my favourite song in the world, and a song very powerfully connected to the previous couple of masterpieces. A duet that comes very close to illuminating the core element of *The Human Condition*. A melody so beautiful I can't listen to it, not even in company and when I'm feeling my most butch and stoic, without gushing tears like a likkle girlie girl who has just watched Justin Bieber, her teddy bear and a kennelful of puppies being run over by a tank. It is called "Somewhere", and... and... sorry... wait a minute... No, I'm fine, just something in my eye...

That's better. Where was I? Oh yeah, possibly the greatest song ever written, and I say that in an entry that mentions "A Change Is Gonna Come" so don't you dare write this off as hyperbole. "Somewhere" is about a vision of Heaven. Of peace of mind, and escaping the traps that most of us live in, again, largely due to money. It's about hope, and our extraordinary ability to keep looking at the stars, even when the gutter is about to engulf us. It is astonishingly short here, which only goes to show how little time you need to transcend, when you have the right means at your disposal. There's a fantastic cover version by Tom Waits on his *Blue Valentine* album, which, by way of his rusty drain of a voice, makes the point that it's not just the young who need hope and poetry to carry on living.

So, there you go. *West Side Story* is one of those pieces of art that does make you feel somewhat in awe of what human beings can achieve, so deftly does it shuffle complex themes and then find the ideal pictures and music to bring them home. But I think this lofty excellence might be the other reason why *WSS* is not loved like, say, *Grease*, which is, in comparison, a tacky piece of am dram.

There's this gag in Seth McFarlane's scabrous cartoon show *Family Guy* – bear with me – where the Griffin family are locked in a panic room and are forced to make conversation. They find themselves talking about films, and *The Godfather* in particular. Peter Griffin doesn't like Coppola's masterwork because, he says, 'It insists upon itself.'

*West Side Story* insists upon itself. It knows just how clever and classy it is. And that's why its 145 minutes long, instead of a comfortable 90, and why, though it's an easy film to respect, it's a hard film to love. You can't imagine anyone turning up to a late-night screening in Jets or Sharks gear, or getting the girls round to watch it and laugh and bond nostalgically. It has a superior air, an arrogant distance from its audience that is only closed when the best songs swell and make you swoon.

Which is also why, when I've talked to various friends about this book, and they've started to reel off a list of what they feel are quintessential teen movies, not one person has mentioned *West Side Story*. Its an extraordinary film, and deserves its place here. But it's not an extraordinary film about teenagers. It isn't really interested in them, except as ciphers on which to project an intellectual-philosophical Big Statement about class, race, young love, Shakespeare, jazz and the true meaning of America. Maybe Elvis would have mocked the enterprise enough to prick some of the pretensions and make *West Side Story* less admirable, and more lovable.

*Badlands*

1973

Starring: Martin Sheen, Sissy Spacek, Warren Oates

Dir.: Terrence Malick

Plot: When they met, it was moider.

Key line: 'He was handsomer than anyone I'd ever met. He looked just like James Dean.'

In November 1958, a young man called Charley Starkweather, who had just turned 20-years-old, embarked on a road trip through Nebraska and Wyoming with his 14-year-old girlfriend, Caril Fugate. It began with Starkweather shooting Caril's father, and ended in late January 1959, with a further ten people dead.

Often labelled the first modern American serial killer, Starkweather was executed by electric chair in June of '59, and Fugate spent 17 years in jail. She was still in jail in York, Nebraska when she served as an informal consultant on a movie about her crimes. The movie changed the names and moved the action to South Dakota, but made no real attempt to cover up its true-life subject.

The maker of the movie, an Assyrian-American called Terrence Malick, became a sort of myth in himself, partly because he has gone on to make just four further films in the ensuing 38 years, and partly because he has steadfastly refused to be either interviewed or photographed by the media. In fact, just about the only sighting of Malick is in this very movie, where he has a small role as a man who knocks on a door. Martin Sheen reckons that the only reason the scene is there is because Malick was let down by an actor and Sheen steadfastly refused to re-

shoot the scene with someone else. So now we know that Malick was a tall, dark-skinned, chubby but handsome guy in 1973. Nice.

This first Malick film, discounting a 1969 student short called *Lanton Mills*, was, in part, a film about celebrity, because Malick's version of Starkweather, Kit Carruthers, played by Martin Sheen, is convinced he is one because he murders people. When he is caught, he doles out souvenirs to the arresting cops and poses self-consciously for imaginary cameras, a kind of rockabilly version of Gloria Swanson at the end of *Sunset Boulevard*, waiting for his imaginary close-up, delighted by the fact that one of the cops thinks he looks like James Dean (see P.??). It is haunting and chilling and funny 'cos its true and probably tells us why Terrence Malick ain't gonna be showing us around his beautiful home in the pages of Hello! anytime soon.

Because Malick has scarcity value he is routinely referred to as a genius. I don't know about that – *The Thin Red Line* was a pretentious mess - but I do know a thing or two about *Badlands* because it has fascinated me ever since I first saw it as an eleven-year-old. If Malick's reclusiveness makes him cinema's very own J.D. Salinger, then *Badlands* is his *Catcher In The Rye*: a tale of American youth that seems to both encapsulate the darker impulses of teenage and say something far wider and deeper about America and the world. In many ways, Malick uses incredible shots of the American landscape, a soundtrack of subtle, bucolic optimism (courtesy, mainly, of a gently undulating xylophone instrumental called "Gassenhauer" by Carl Orff, an insidious repeating motif with an almost Aboriginal feel) and the charisma of Sheen and co-star Sissy Spacek to suggest that serial killers are beautiful things. Not the killings, mind... they are ugly,

brutish and short. But the young killers, with their worlds of deluded fantasy that protect them from their actions.

The movie is (unreliably) narrated by the skipping southern drawl of Spacek as Holly Sargis, and hers is the voice we hear as the film innocently begins with a girl playing on her bed with a dog. We soon meet Kit, who is a dustman. His entire demeanour, even when dumping garbage, is a knowing take on rock 'n' roll juvenile delinquent, with his slouchy swagger, side-parted quiff, cowboy boots and wiry frame squeezed into white t-shirt and bluest blue jeans. At times Sheen looks so much like his magnificently errant son Charlie that it's just plain weird. Of course, if this was a Charlie Sheen movie he'd just be down the local bar trying to get laid and having a good time succeeding. But Kit has other ideas about love.

While attempting to court Holly after spotting her twirling her baton, Kit gets fired, leaving him with much too much time to devote to hitting on his underage quarry, despite his next job on a farm, which he of course glamourises as being a cowboy. While Holly regales us with her love-struck narration, words and images clue us in to their incipient madness. Why *does* Kit want Holly when she'd 'never been popular at school and didn't have a lot of personality,' especially as 'he could've had any girl in town'? She changes their ages to suit her fantasy, subconsciously reminding us that Kit is, in essence, a paedophile. He plays with dead animals like a naughty child and she throws gasping fish into the garden because they're 'sick', and you can feel the sickness they've spotted in each other, even while the music skips lightly and their picnics in the Montana countryside look like paintings by Manet. Their conversation is stilted to the point of banality. Kit takes Holly's virginity like he'd just performed an annoying chore.

Meanwhile, Holly's father, played by the ever-excellent Warren Oates is too busy working on his own paintings to notice that his child is going out with a grown man.

There's 20 minutes of this mesmerising visual poetry before the surreal road movie rampage begins. There is no rhyme or reason to Kit's actions. People just get in his way, in shacks and mansions, amidst stunning landscapes and immaculately designed interiors, and he dispatches them like a man swatting flies. He shoots his friend Cato in the gut, and Holly perches on a seat in front of Cato, mildly interested in his inevitable death, and asks him about a spider he keeps in a bottle. This is madness evoked as something almost innocent, a mere extension of a child's mix of curiosity and low attention span. But even here Sheen and Malick come up with something special. When Kit runs, shoots, moves, he seems almost impossibly kinetic, and lighter than air. As if he was built to kill. And, all the time, Kit points out which souvenirs people could keep to tell of his coming, revelling in his status as the most wanted man in America. He is the star of his own hit movie, a lurid melodrama that, as Holly explains, makes him dread 'the idea of being shot down alone without a girl to scream his name.'

But when the end comes, Holly abandons Kit anyway. She is not a victim of hopeless love, prepared to risk her life for a daredevil escape. She's just a spoiled girl whose story about being loved by the handsomest man in town got out of hand. She doesn't get to scream his name. But then, he doesn't die a cinematic death. He's just caught, like any other criminal.

The irony is, of course, that the two cops who catch Kit are happy to be cast in his movie. Having caught an outlaw who has been handed mythical status by the media, they are stars now, too. The older one is less impressed, throwing Kit's

hat out of the cop car when he begins to patronise them in his brilliantly insane way. But the younger one is awestruck, in the way you would be if you'd met your favourite action movie star. He asks Kit why he did it. 'I always wanted to be a criminal, I guess,' Kit replies, sucking in his cheekbones. 'Just not this big a one. Takes all kinds, though.' The three grin conspiratorially and you don't know whether to laugh or take a shower.

So the cop tells him he looks like Jimmy Dean and we're suddenly in an aircraft hanger watching Kit, strapped to a light plane, holding court. The soldiers and cops surrounding him aren't peace officers anymore. They're journalists. They fire questions at him, press conference style.

'Who's your favourite singer?'

'Eddie Fisher. Who's yours?'

'How old are you?'

'Don't you read the papers?'

Kit and Holly have a final inane conversation – 'Too bad about your dad.' – and Malick adds some final bleak jokes. A shot of a father holding up his small child and pointing out the famous serial killer is contrasted with a quicker shot of a postman carrying a sack of mail, oblivious to the star in his midst, holding the evidence that life carries on and Kit is now yesterday's news. Holly informs us, in voiceover, that, once Kit got the electric chair, she was set free and married her lawyer. A cop remarks that Kit is 'quite an individual.' Kit gives him a dumb insolent, open-mouthed stare, and sneers, 'Do you think they'll take that into consideration?' Holly grins shyly and we fly into a perfect sunrise. What a fucking ending.

Kit Carruthers is in the Jim Thompson tradition of Southern Gothic psychopaths: men with good manners and bad intentions who are much smarter than they appear, but far less smart than they think. And Malick's debut is a perfect film, utterly complete in its making on a budget of next-to-nowt, but so full of loose ends and unresolved implications that you never get to the bottom of it, no matter how many times you watch. It was showered with acclaim upon release, but bombed at the box office, possibly because, after Arthur Penn's 1967 *Bonnie And Clyde*, the public had had just about enough of sympathetic travelling serial killers who symbolise youth rebellion.

Back in the real world... when Caril Fogle was released from prison in 1976, she began a new life as a medical aide. She never married. At the trial, Starkweather had maintained that she had carried out some of the murders. The jury didn't believe him, but they didn't believe Fogle's claims that she was an unwilling hostage either. She has continued to maintain her total innocence to this day.

But the existence and cult popularity of *Badlands* means that the world will always see Fogle as a delusional child, living in a fantasy world where life and death are irrelevant. It seems strange that she was happy to advise on a film that made her look like that. But then, the important thing about celebrity is being famous, not what you happen to be famous for. Kit Carruthers would surely have approved.

*Grease*

1978

Starring: John Travolta, Olivia Newton-John, Stockard Channing, Jeff Conaway

Dir.: Randal Kleiser

Plot: Why girls are great and boys are rubbish.

Key lines: 'I could stay home every night/Wait around for Mr Right/Take cold showers every day/And throw my life away/On a dream that won't come true.'

From 'There Are Worse Things I Could Do'

Who the fuck is Randal Kleiser?

For shame, Garry. I've already written about this movie in my previous book *Popcorn*, with the much-needed assistance of my lovely wife, Linsay. I've seen the damned thing a million times. And I've only just noticed that the director of the most popular film musical ever is... some bloke I've never heard of. *Randal Kleiser*. Ring any bells? No? Didn't think so. Best we find out who he is, then, and see if there are any clues as to why the guy remains completely obscure.

Kleiser hails from Philadelphia and was a University of Southern California room-mate of George Lucas, even playing a bit part in Lucas's graduation short. He earned his shot at features by directing for TV, including a couple of episodes of *Starsky And Hutch*. The big break came in 1976 with TV movie *The Boy In The Plastic Bubble*, a cult true-life potboiler about a boy who lived in a plastic bubble, 'cos he was allergic to everything. The star? John Travolta.

*Grease* was Kleiser's first feature film. And here's where it all goes a bit Orson Welles. He followed it up with *The Blue Lagoon*, a remake of a 1949 hit which was a none-too-subtle attempt to exploit the underage sexuality of 15-year-old

model Brooke Shields. It was an expensive and legendary turkey, and once you make one of those in Hollywood it's tough to come back. Kleiser was typecast as a kids' director, his only minor hit a Disney sequel *Honey I Blew Up The Kid*. After attempting a remake of Hitchcock's *Shadow Of Doubt* in 1998, he has mostly been teaching and developing the digital technology around filmmaking. His house was used to shoot scenes in *Scream 3*. It's all a bit... disappointing, shall we say. Imagine how that feels: your very first film is the biggest musical *ever*, and... that is basically that.

This has surely got to be a case of bad luck rather than lack of talent. Because *Grease* is extraordinary work for a first-time director, mainly because so much is happening so entertainingly onscreen that you don't notice a director at work. And that, perhaps, was the problem. What would anyone refer to as 'the Kleiser style'?

But Kleiser did make a key decision that has made *Grease* the kind of megahit that endures. Warren Casey and Jim Jacobs' musical may have been a hit on stage since 1971. The songs and the all-important '50s nostalgia setting may have been bequeathed to him. And no-one can deny how cleverly screenwriters Bronte Woodard and Allan Carr mixed innocent family fun and cynical smut in their screenplay. But somewhere along the line the director chooses the emphasis of any movie. And the emphasis Kleiser chose was the right one, commercially, aesthetically, morally. Because *Grease* went out of its way to be the first mainstream kids's movie to assure teenage girls that wanting sex was healthy. And then punched the point home by giving the female characters a rounded, mature and honest attitude to sex, while the male characters were children so out of their depth about sexuality that their only real agenda, until being civilized

by the girls, was impressing each other with lies about shagging. In that sense, *Grease* completes the work begun by Henry Levin's proto-feminist 1960 gem, *Where The Boys Are* (see P???)

Travolta's Danny Zucco may have been the film's big box-office draw. And it may feel, to some boys especially, like *Grease* is Danny's story. But his real mirror character isn't Sandy, but Betty Rizzo, made into one of cinema's most subversive teen characters by the wonderful Stockard Channing. Rizzo is the force of nature and the bringer of truth. While the lyrics of 'Summer Nights' finger Danny as an insecure liar – shown up by the delicious beach movie-parodying irony of the opening scene – Rizzo's 'There Are Worse Things I Could Do' tells the truth about teenage sexuality and gives a good, hard kicking to the perennial coming-of-age story of boy-who-fucks-is-cool, girl-who-fucks-is-whore. The result is '70s movie gender roles turned upside-down... Rizzo is the central protagonist and the rounded character. By the end of the film, Danny is nothing more than the pretty dunderhead. The gender reversal is even reflected by names: we know Danny by his first name. We know Rizzo by her surname. Who even recalls that her given name is Betty?

Whether *Grease* improved things for generations of schoolgirls I severely doubt. But it did establish a new attitude to female sexuality in popular entertainment that becomes increasingly obvious as you read this book and see how many more strong and sexualized female characters take centre-stage in teen films from 1979 onwards. So Randal Kleiser didn't just do something very right. He did something brave too, because, if *Grease*, with its celebration of adolescent female sexuality and graphic references to tit, pussy and periods, had fallen foul of paranoid parents and moral guardians and resolutely bombed... well, he

probably wouldn't have got to make *Honey I Blew Up The Kid*, and then where would we be?

As I'm figuring that anyone who buys a book about 100 teen movies has seen *Grease* more than once, I'm not going to waste your time with the plot, which, after all, is just a knowing parody of cheap '50s teen romances packed with enough holes to drop songs into. I thought, instead, that I'd chew over a few *Grease* factlets that give rise to a few choice 'What If?'s.

Travolta had played minor *Grease* character Doody on Broadway, but was still considered too young to play Danny onstage. Ms Neutron-Bomb had not acted at all since a disastrous 1970 British sci-fi-rock flick called *Toomorrow* (directed by B-movie king Val Guest, who did pull off a classic musical with *Expresso Bongo* in 1959), which was made before her pop career took off. She had so little confidence in her ability that it was she that insisted she do a screen test when the producers had already made their minds up.

Rumours persist that Sandy was initially offered to Marie Osmond who turned it down because she was too virginal to do the bad girl stuff at the end, but this is possibly apocryphal. What does appear to be true is that first choice for Danny was originally Henry Winkler aka The Fonz, who decided that he didn't want to be typecast as a '50s tough teen.

Henry Winkler. In love scenes with Olivia Newton-John. And singing, and dancing. Oh Lord... can you imagine? Still, at least he didn't get typecast, eh?

If you notice blurry signs inside the Frosty Palace soda bar, you're right, they do look like Coca-Cola signs. That's because the producers took money for Pepsi product placement and neglected to tell the director. So, to save money reshooting the Frosty Palace scenes, the Coke signs got fuzzied.

The original choice for Coach Calhoun was a porn star called, wait for it, Harry Reems. Someone came to their family movie senses and cast comedy legend Sid Caesar. And... *Grease* has a legendary 'cut scene'. Kleiser originally shot a bit involving a row between Rizzo and Kenickie (Conaway) which was so angry and brutal that one of the crew members compared it to Martin Scorsese. It was such a bizarre change of mood for the film that they snipped and chucked it, which presumably means we'll never get to see Stockard Channing say, 'You think I'm funny? What, I amuse you?' before kicking Kenickie to death and shoving his head in a vice.

The drive-in scenes – where an animated hot dog does an outrageous symbolic in-and-out with a bun onscreen behind Travolta as he sings 'Sandy' – were shot at the Burbank Pickwick Drive-In in L.A. Its now – you guessed it – a shopping mall.

And the last thing is personal. When *Grease* was released I was a punk rocker, so I wouldn't allow myself to like that clip of Travolta and Newton-John doing 'You're The One That I Want' in black leather at a fairground that was on Top Of The Pops forever as the record stayed at No.1 for weeks. How Danny Zucco, now I think about it. But I watch it now and I really do get chills, and bugger me if they ain't multiplyin'. A big old delayed reaction, I guess, to a song and piece of film that I share with my entire generation, which is something that is going to happen less and less in the fractured post-internet age.

I'm sorry Randal Kleiser didn't become as big as his swotty classmate George. But I don't feel for sorry for anyone who has pulled off a piece of mass entertainment which co-invented everything from *Dirty Dancing* to *Buffy* to *Glee*, and which will be delighting people and educating teens about gender hypocrisy

long after me, you and good old Randal Kleiser are long gone. There are worse things he could have done.

The Breakfast Club

1985

Starring: Judd Nelson, Molly Ringwald, Emilio Estevez, Anthony Michael Hall, Ally Sheedy

Dir: John Hughes

Plot: One learns valuable lessons at school. But not from teachers.

Key line: 'When you grow up, your heart dies.'

The death of John Hughes in August 2009 felt significant to the over-35's. The obvious irony of a man so associated with teenagers dying relatively young – of a heart attack, aged 59 – twinned naturally with shared memories of seeing films like *The Breakfast Club*, *Pretty In Pink* and *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* for the first time, and gave us one of those short, sharp insights into our own mortality. Hughes is also entirely associated with the 1980's, which has been the hip decade to reference in pop culture for some years now. He directed his last film in 1991, and although he continued to write and produce through the '90s, nothing made the impact of his '80s movies. He slid into a reclusive semi-retirement in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, unable, perhaps, to really excel at writing adult stories, yet equally unable to relate to The Kids anymore. *Home Alone* was Hughes' big commercial blockbuster, and he enjoyed some adult comedy success at the end of the '80s with *Planes, Trains And Automobiles* and *Uncle Buck*. But it's the run of mid-'80s teen comedy-dramas that have become enduring cults, defining both the 'Me Decade' and the art of the teen movie for many.

*The Breakfast Club* remains the key Hughes film because it changed teen movies overnight. Before *The Breakfast Club*, the introspective, self-analytical teenager in film was always an outsider, or rebel, occasionally even a monster; a fledgling intellectual made lonely and driven crazy by insisting on thinking rather than acting. *The Breakfast Club* insisted that even the pretty, popular, athletic teens had 'issues' which could only be made bearable by talking them out, preferably with other teens. This dialogue-heavy, almost-theatrical film made teen movies into therapy. From *The Breakfast Club* onwards, we have expected our screen youths to be hyper-articulate about culture, the social world, and, especially, themselves.

It begins with one of the great all-time openings in teen cinema: the ludicrous "Don't You Forget About Me" by Simple Minds plays, and the credits morph into a delicious 'you grown-ups will never understand!' quote from, of all things, "Changes" by David Bowie. 'And these children that you spit on...' etc, etc.

The black background shatters to the noise of dubwise breaking glass revealing the exterior of Shermer High School. A montage of still shots of key American high school images – the cafeteria, a piece of wood where a bored pupil has scratched 'I'm eating my head', vandalised lockers, 'I don't like Mondays' etched into a wall, classroom, gym – ensues, while a voiceover by the as yet unseen Brian Johnson reads out the beginning of the essay that he has written as part of his Saturday detention punishment for bad deeds unknown.

'You see us as you want to see us, in the simplest terms and most convenient definitions. You see us as a brain, an athlete, a basket case, a princess and a criminal. Correct? That's the way we saw each other at seven o'clock this morning. We were brainwashed.'

In three minutes, we are able to understand not only that this is a high school movie about troubled teens, but that, as far as Hughes is concerned, it's the very stereotypes created and established by teen fiction that are the major reason for the travails of the angst-ridden adolescent. We are then treated to what is essentially an exceedingly talky stage play made cinematic by Hughes's ability to make the most drab and unpromising interiors into bright, shiny, vibrant playgrounds for the head games of unusually self-analytical, articulate and media-savvy children.

In Hughes's world adults are monsters. For a start, this example of American detention involves going into school on a Saturday at 7am and spending nine hours in one room, theoretically neither speaking nor moving. And we are introduced to our five protagonists by way of them arriving for detention in their parents' cars. The pouting princess (Molly Ringwald as Claire Standish) has been made so by a wealthy father who thinks it's adorable that his precious cut class to go shopping. The brain (the ever-underrated Anthony Michael Hall as Brian Johnson) is ordered to break the rules and study by his hot-housing, shrewish Mom. The athlete (Emilio Estevez as Andrew Clark) is obviously being pushed toward a wrestling scholarship by a macho Dad. The criminal (Judd Nelson as John Bender) ambles toward school in shades and that enduring symbol of existential male cool, the long overcoat, apparently parent-less. And the basket case (Ally Sheedy as Alison Reynolds) is simply dropped off without a consoling or angry word by sinister creatures that we cannot see as they drive away. The scene creates such a feeling of Us vs Them at the outset that you want to see these unfeeling bastards drive straight into trees and over cliffs. Hughes was a master of short, punchy manipulations of audience emotions, of taking well-

worn storytelling clichés and breathing new, post-modern life into them. You know he's setting you up. He knows you know. And we can't help but join his crusade for youth over adulthood because we all want to be innocent.

From there, *The Breakfast Club* is simplicity itself. Virtually the entire film is shot on one set, the school library, as the five fight, talk about their feelings, rebel, acquiesce, smoke dope, flirt, bully, confess, dance, fall in love, and learn that none of them are what they initially seem, or, more pertinently, that none of them want to fulfil the destinies and embody the stereotypes that their parents and teachers have projected upon them. It's both a great ensemble acting piece, and a cunning statement about teen fiction itself, and how its exploitation of teenagers has led to the young being labelled and dehumanised by the simplistic fantasies of popular culture. The library is like a jail, and so, Hughes argues, is American teen culture.

Of course, even a prison that big needs a warden. And that unfortunate role goes to Paul Gleason as Dick Vernon, one of the most evil representatives of the teaching profession ever created for the screen. While our students are given so many dimensions over the next 90 minutes you almost want to make them cease and desist being so goddamn complex, Vernon has but one. He hates kids. He loves punishing them. He is almost sexually aroused by the wielding of arbitrary power. He uses the phrase 'monkey business' without irony. He is a fascist buffoon for no reason other than the fact that he is over twenty-one and terminally disappointed with his lot in life. He exists only to be broken, and we immediately know that it won't take much. Like the adults in *Home Alone* and *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, Dick is a John Hughes grown-up, which means he's a deluded bully and no match for the cheek, intelligence and resourcefulness of

The Kids. Although you can't help having a sneaking empathy for Dick when he calls our famous five 'smug little pricks' under his breath.

We also pick up quickly that two into five won't go. And, despite Hughes' confounding of the most obvious couplings being much of the point of the movie, we know early on that the skinny, plain, nerdy boy ain't getting one of the girls. Hughes may have had subversive qualities, but the film was a benchmark of the Reagan 1980's, and intelligence wasn't going through one of its more popular phases. No matter how misunderstood and complex Claire and Alison are, it's always the Jock and the Bad Boy who pull in these situations, and poor Brian will probably have to settle for being a girl's *quasi-gay* best friend for the rest of his days in high school Hell.

It's Nelson's tough-but-vulnerable-deep-down rebel who gets all the best clothes and all the best lines, mainly at the expense of the all-American wrestler, Andrew: 'I wanna be just like you. I figure all I need is a lobotomy and some tights'; 'You're an idiot anyway. But if you say you get along with your parents – you're a liar, too.'

Hughes also gives Bender lines which attempt to invent a brand new '80s hipster slang: 'Face it – you're a neo-maxi-zoom dweebie' (translation: 'You are a nerd') and 'So, Ahab – kybo my doobage?' ('Sir – do you still have the marijuana that I gave you for safe-keeping?'). As you can probably gather, this gambit failed to create thrilling new catchphrases among the planet's youth, although *Breakfast Club* fans are still intrigued by one specific insult Bender throws at Dick Vernon: 'That guy's a Brownie Hound'. This, we BC nerds suppose, can only mean one of two things: a homophobic insult in the vein of 'shit-stabber' or 'fudge-packer'. Or

an accusation of paedophilia; ie: this man chases after Girl Guides and Brownies. Whichever way, it didn't catch on either.

Nevertheless, a film this talky wouldn't work unless the dialogue sparkled, and Hughes locates many incisive epithets about the eternal struggles of being a tweener, the best of which include: 'Everyone's home life is unsatisfying. If it wasn't people would live with their parents forever' and 'If you say you haven't – you're a prude. If you say you have – you're a slut. It's a trap.'

Bender is undoubtedly a Brando throwback with dangerous '60s and punk tendencies, singing Cream songs under his breath, rocking the plaid shirt look, refusing to lose the battle of wills with Vernon, no matter what the cost. But the important battle of wills is fought between Bender and Ringwald's 'pristine' Claire.

Both are immediately attracted to each other, both are trapped by their personas, and Bender's initial solution to this is typical of all young men... verbal sexual bullying. Bender seeks to degrade her into submission with 'jokes' about gang rape and virginity. But Claire's winning response isn't verbal, where she mostly can't compete. It's all in the Ringwald face – The Pout Of Steel. Her glare is a beautiful symbol of the woman who refuses to be broken by male cruelty, even though she suffers. She takes Bender's childish misogyny apart with that pale and sallow stare, tames him and leaves him potentially house-broken and ready for domestication. No wonder Ringwald became a teen girl icon of the time, with her ability, in *The Breakfast Club* and as Andie Walsh in *Pretty In Pink*, to physically manifest feminism without having to say the word that '80s girls were being brainwashed into believing meant nothing except looking butch and lacking a sense of humour.

Hughes's take on class is interesting, too. At one point, a janitor makes an entrance and responds to a Bender insult with a knowing humour that forces a respect from the kids that Vernon is incapable of commanding. And Bender's verbal supremacy and courage in the face of authority is unmistakable – the working-class social outcast dominates the film. His mirror is Sheedy's near-invisible Alison who barely says anything at all, yet effortlessly disturbs everyone with her witchy ways and almost joyful embrace of apparent madness. She is entirely classless, of course – but she reinforces the theme that it's the three middle-class kids-most-likely-to who seem out of their intellectual depth and in desperate need of permission to rebel.

The scene where Vernon locks Bender in a classroom and threatens him with a beating is still shocking in what, up until this moment, has largely been a comedy. And it's because the violence is reinforced by Vernon's loathing for Bender's working-class background and the sadistic pleasure he takes in predicting the boy's hopeless, ugly future. To call *The Breakfast Club* an anti-Reagan movie is perhaps overegging the pudding a little. But it does display a loathing for middle-class values and the bourgeois obsession with money and status that reaches a peak of genuinely disturbing intensity in this scene.

Nevertheless, affection for *The Breakfast Club* does come with a healthy dollop of kitsch appreciation. This is because Hughes occasionally loses faith in his audience and allows scenes that overstate the case to an embarrassing degree.

The moments when our heroes do their crazy dance bit, and when Nelson starts acting out Bender's violent home life and ends up chewing the scenery over a pointless splurge of synth music, are the kind of scenes which force you to laugh to keep from squirming. They mark the film forever as typical, dated '80s

Hollywood, when a desperation for nostalgic values led directors to encourage inappropriate pre-60's melodrama without the old-school production values (or acting talent) to back it up. Nelson's a good enough rebel without a cause to carry much of *The Breakfast Club*, but he ain't no James Dean... or Gene Kelly, for that matter.

And it's a big disappointment, in terms of the movie's sexual politics, when Alison gets her guy because Claire gives her a cutesy-pie makeover. I suspect I am just one of many who boo that scene, and not simply because it reinforces the idea that girls must conform to male standards of femininity before a man will deign to fuck them, and that that, in the end, is all any woman wants. It's also because Ally Sheedy looks far hotter in all the 'black shit'. It's one of the most sexist and aggravating 'ugly duckling' rip-offs in screen history. Like I say, Reagan '80s.

But Hughes does pull off most of the stuff that matters. For example, the vast majority of '80s youth films date horribly because the fashions are so bad, and quite obviously chosen by people who only see kids when they're in other films. The clothes and hairstyles in *The Breakfast Club* have barely dated at all, and everything about the film exudes a genuine knowledge of and fascination with the detail of being a teenager - not just circa 1985, but from any era you care to name. At one point, Hughes makes superb silent comedy out of nothing more than the kids' packed lunches and the perennial food fads of the young. Hughes' best movies were made out of spot-on observation, and I suspect the concerns of *The Breakfast Club's* five protagonists will make as much sense and provide as much pleasure to 21<sup>st</sup> century teens as they did to the 1985 model. Hell - even the gloriously shallow, trebly 'new wave' synth-pop has come back into fashion.

This is among the many reasons why I love *The Breakfast Club*, and why its faults – or rather, the bits I don't personally agree with – are part of its excellence. I've watched it many times, and no amount of familiarity with the text renders the film mere entertainment. It's a work of art, to argue against and agree with. It makes you shout at the screen as much as laugh or cry with recognition. It is provocative and dissuades the viewer from being passive. Its key scene is not the typically gung ho '80s, much-parodied and copied, air-punching ending. It is the part where, for a full 20 minutes of screen-time, five actors sit in a semi-circle and bond and break over the agonies of parental and peer pressure. The scene is a masterpiece of movie dialogue, and one of the finest ensemble acting scenes on celluloid – one that none of the actors came close to again – because it dares to risk both boring its audience and being seen as pretentious. But, if you watch the scene – and if you have, watch it again! – you'll see that it explores every single one of the key themes that the movies in this book are concerned with.

That's an extraordinary achievement for one 92 minute movie set in one feature-less building. *The Breakfast Club* is, in its tacky, plastic, manipulative, hugging and learning way, an absolute bloody masterpiece. Now excuse me, won't you, while I watch it all over again.

*Heavenly Creatures*

1994

Starring: Kate Winslet, Melanie Lynskey, Sarah Pierse, Clive Merrison, Diana Kent

Dir.: Peter Jackson

Plot: Worried about what your daughter and her BFF get up to in her bedroom?

You should be...

Key line: 'All the best people have bad chests and bone diseases. Its all *frightfully* romantic.'

I'm writing about *Heavenly Creatures* bang in the middle of immersing myself in most of the entries from the 1950's to the 1970's. And really, I couldn't have chosen a film that better exemplified the radical shift in attitude by filmmakers towards teen screen fiction from the 1990's onwards.

*Heavenly Creatures* is based upon real events: the murder of a woman called Honora Parker in Christchurch, New Zealand in 1954. She was murdered by her 15-year-old daughter Pauline and Pauline's best friend, 16-year-old Juliet Hulme. This was a notorious crime in New Zealand, whipping up emotions in a similar fashion to the Moors murders or the Jamie Bulger case in The UK. So, rather than make up an exploitation script from media cuttings, co-writers Peter Jackson and Fran Walsh researched like historians. They interviewed dozens of people who knew the teen killers, and got access to the incriminating diaries of Pauline Parker, which went into detail about the dark fantasy world she and Juliet conjured out of the intensity of their friendship. They used Pauline's diary entries word-for-word as the film's voiceover narration, and even went so far as to shoot the film in the locations where the events took place. They then

auditioned hundreds of girls for the two leads, and discovered one who is acknowledged as one of the great actresses of her generation, and another who should be. The resulting film was so extraordinary that it not only invented Kate Winslet, but gave Peter Jackson the opportunity to shoot overnight from admired maker of cult comedy splatter movies to director of the three most perfectly realized fantasy spectacles ever made... that would be the *The Lord Of The Rings* trilogy, in case you were in any doubt. And no wonder, because watching *Heavenly Creatures* is one of those film experiences which leaves you in a state of shock, so effectively does it cleave the power of imagination onto the horror of true events. Its only teen movie antecedent is *Badlands* (see P.???) , which is also about true-life young killers, and also eschews docu-drama for an expressionist view of the fantasy world the murderers inhabited. But *Badlands* is all irony and iconic poses, while *Heavenly Creatures* is profoundly upsetting.

In short, it ain't *I Was A Teenage Werewolf*.

The film begins with scene setting. New Zealand in the early 1950's, a society that ran roughly 20-30 years behind its Brit or American equivalent. An opening contrasting a BBC voice narrating a tourism documentary of Christchurch in the 1950's, contrasting with the blood-curdling screams and frantic running of two girls covered in blood.

Christchurch has upper-class Brit pretensions and the girls' school where our two murderers meet is a case in point. Uniforms and bonnets and bicycles and teachers who call a girl a 'gel'. Juliet Hulme is the new gel at Christchurch Girls High School, the English daughter of the rector of nearby Canterbury College; a pedigree so charmed that even the obnoxious teachers genuflect in her general direction. The scene establishes two crucial themes: one is the overbearingly

snobbish worship of everything English and upper middle-class; the other is the blackly comic contrast between the two girls. Juliet Hulme is beautiful, aristocratic, fragrant, smug, arrogant, glamorous. Pauline looks like the kind of girl who keeps spiders in her hair and eats bogies.

Winslet is great. But Lynskey is immediately astonishing, communicating everything about her secretive, alienated misfit persona without saying a single word. She is Denise The Menace, her face a picture of internal mischief and eternal discomfort, like a neurotic Denise The Menace. If she was a 21<sup>st</sup> century teen she'd be studying emo and considering options in death metal, suicide and automatic weaponry.

We know, immediately, that she thinks she is as above her surroundings as Juliet. They've come at the same conclusion from different perspectives; one from beauty, breeding and entitlement; the other from somewhere private, dark, amused and smelly. When Ms Hulme corrects and humiliates the French teacher with immaculate superciliousness, it's love at first sight for the misanthropic Ms Parker.

The pair bond through their eroticized desires escape from reality into fevered fantasy. Juliet's parents – her mother is a marriage guidance counselor whose technique for keeping couples spliced involves shagging the better-looking husbands – leave her alone to go traveling at every available opportunity, even when she is hospitalized with tuberculosis (the film occasionally implies that they murdered the wrong mother). Both girls suffered from life-threatening childhood diseases that have left scars, physical and otherwise. And Pauline, like any normal teen, is just hideously embarrassed by her normal parents, poor enough to have to take in lodgers to get by, but not poor enough to be exciting.

Their escape from the repressed confines of a New Zealand childhood involve fantasizing about podgy pre-rock popera legend Mario Lanza, movie stars including James Mason, Mel Ferrer and Orson Welles, and the creation of an entire parallel universes called Borovnia and The Fourth World. The greatest moment in the picture comes immediately after Juliet learns that her parents are leaving her again. Bereft, Juliet begins to escape to her safe place. But, by sheer effort of will and telepathic bond, she takes Pauline with her. The girls' faces glow, the sun opens up a wound in the sky, and a magical land of ornate gardens, unicorns and supersized butterflies literally erupts from the rugged New Zealand landscape, and if you don't well up at the sheer beauty and virtuosity of this image, then you should probably stick with your Guy Ritchie flicks and give up on life's wonders entirely.

It's the enforced separation caused by Juliet's T.B. that spins the girls' world into madness. The pair write to each other as imaginary prince and princess Charles and Deborah, and fantasise about having a son who is a serial killer. Honora's fate is sealed when she slaps Pauline and call her a tart after one of the male boarders sneaks into her bed. Again, the normality hits you... murdered for being a typical, decent mother. Pauline loses her virginity to the boarder, still aged just 14, and hates it so much she slips off to the altogether sexier Borovnia, with its constant Lanza soundtrack and man-sized plasticine sculpture people who look and sound a bit like James Mason. Juliet's fantasy has become Pauline's has become Juliet's. The real consequences of actions have begun to cease to matter. Finally, both sets of parents panic about teen lesbianism and force Pauline to go into therapy. The shrink is ridiculous and grotesque, like all the adults here... except Honora Parker, significantly and respectfully. He assures her that there's

an answer coming from 'medical science' for Pauline's disease of homosexuality coming any second now. Suddenly, Pauline is out of school and into the typing pool.

Each part of the tale – Dr Hulme's sacking from his college, the infidelity of Mrs Hulme and the resulting divorce, the heartless decision to send Juliet to South Africa with an aunt - leads inexorably to the inexorable. *Heavenly Creatures* wears its class war lightly, but it's impossible to avoid seeing that each amoral act of the upper-class Hulmes hammers another nail in the coffin of the *petit bourgeois* Honora Parker. Pauline Parker is the sicker girl and she falls in love with the Hulmes, for their class, their worldliness, their touch of bohemian glamour. They can have extraordinary fantasies projected upon them. Poor Mother simply can't.

So it is that Mrs Hulme comes up with the wizard wheeze of allowing Pauline and Juliet to spend three weeks together before Juliet leaves, and that the intimidated and battered Parkers can't assert common sense. Just enough time for two lost girls to plan a killing.

The murder is one of the most horrible of all cinematic crime scenes. The banal conversation in the build-up, the familiarity of the walk in the woods, the brutality of the deed, how much you want to warn the victim, the plain injustice of it all... and the bravura contrast with a monochrome depiction of what their crime means to the lives and futures of the girls, shot in the style of the movie melodrama they've been living in for too long. It breaks your heart.

Jackson really did justice to the truth here, which is, no matter how visually sumptuous or dramatically entertaining you make a killers' story... killing itself is just ugly and barbaric. I don't really want to describe it: if you've seen *Heavenly*

*Creatures* you'll know exactly what I mean, and if you haven't... well... it's pretty weird to say that I don't want to spoil it. What I *mean* is... the shock should stand. That's what Jackson wanted you to feel – shock – and therefore, in this case, I reckon you should. It's up there with the murders in *Man Bites Dog* and *A Short Film About Killing*, in the forcing-you-to-face-your-own-love-of-screen-death department, if that's any help.

Back to the film's minor but important pleasures. There is a tiny Hitchcockian cameo from Jackson as the wino Winslet kisses after seeing Mario Lanza on the big screen. And big ups and shout outs to the reliably marvelous comedy actor Clive Merrison as Juliet's submissive father Dr Henry Hulme, suffering a life of being routinely humiliated by two spoiled princesses in typically quiet English desperation. In real life, Dr Hulme apparently went on to head Britain's hydrogen bomb programme. You couldn't make this stuff up.

I had a vaguely prepared thing in my head about an impassioned rant on behalf of Ms Lynskey, and how she's much better than Ms Winslet here, and how their different career trajectories are entirely about Ms Winslet's looks, and how this is another terrible example of the patriarchy at work, blahblahblah. But, after watching *Heavenly Creatures* for the third time, I've binned it. Simply because Ms Winslet is every bit as extraordinary and convincing here as Ms Lynskey, and is also luminously charismatic, which is what makes film stars film stars, when all is said and done. What I will say is that Lynskey's performance is generous as well as memorable, because, as the girls head towards the murder, Juliet, who is emotional and extrovert, is made even more beautiful by her extremes of feeling, while Pauline, who is insular and sociopathic, becomes increasingly like a screen killer: dead of eye, broody of brow, sallow, sickly pale and devoid of feeling,

frightening and ugly in her single-minded pursuit of an irrational solution. The pair's performances represent the real girls' telepathy so chillingly that it should, in fact, be seen as one performance with two heads. That good.

But the major thing about *Heavenly Creatures* is its surgical examination of what I think is a secret universal fear: that there is something too intense, too potentially dangerous, too just plain fucking weird, about one-to-one friendships between teenage girls. We've all been on the receiving end of the manic laughter at some private joke, the shared language no-one seems to understand, and the sexual threat of teen girls high on hormones and moments without consequences. It's a powerful, threatening, intimidating connection that Julie Burchill has written about so well, particularly in *Sugar Rush*. And, in *Heavenly Creatures*, it is taken, by Winslet and Lynskey and Jackson and Walsh, to its (il)logical extreme until you are willing to believe that the crime is not some act of madness, but the inevitable outcome of any teen female friendship that manages to successfully exclude the outside world. It is this, even more than the horror of the murder, that stays with you long after the credits roll.

And now, the creepy postscript. Both girls only spent five years in prison before making a life in Britain. When the crime was being investigated, one of the side-effect revelations was that Honora had never married Pauline's father Herbert Rieper. Which is why the film refers to both women as Rieper, but Pauline was tried under her mother's maiden name of Parker. Pauline Parker later ran a children's riding school in Kent, and was last heard of living in the Orkney Islands, off the coast of Scotland.

When the film was released the intrepid New Zealand media took it upon themselves to track down the real Juliet Hulme. She is now Anne Perry, a

successful writer of crime fiction, also living in Scotland. When tracked down and questioned she said she had no opinion of Winslet's portrayal of her, because she would never watch the film.

Bizarrely, she appeared on British television in 2005, talking about the murder on daytime talk show *Trisha*. She denied that she and Pauline were ever lesbians. So that's alright, then.

But it's been 17 years since *Heavenly Creatures* was made. Has Anne Perry really not watched it at all? If she has, what did she make of being portrayed for all-time as an insane, obnoxious princess who goaded a weaker person into killing her own mother? Did she and Pauline really never make contact after their releases from prison, as the courts ordered as a condition of their release, despite living in the same part of the world? What would two women who had done this as children... I mean... what would they... what could you... *say* to each other?

I suppose *Heavenly Creatures*, like most fiction, does raise more questions than it answers. But what an amazing, *amazing* puzzle.

Twilight

2008

Starring: Kristen Stewart, Robert Pattinson, Billy Burke

Dir: Catherine Hardwicke

Plot: 'About three things I was absolutely positive. First, Edward was a vampire. Second, there was a part of him, and I didn't know how dominant that part might be, that thirsted for my blood. And third, I was unconditionally and irrevocably in love with him.'

Key line: 'What if I'm not the hero? What if I'm the bad guy?'

Twilight is a nigh-on perfect example of the teen movie genre. On the surface, it is about a teenage girl who falls in love with a vampire. But its really about how teenage girls cope (or don't cope) with sexual awakening, divorced parents, distant fathers, moving to a new area, small towns, settling in at intimidating new schools - and the irresistible allure of the weird but beautiful outsider boy that your parents warned you against.

It also, like much contemporary teen fiction and all contemporary teen horror, owes much of its scenario to the *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* TV show. As with *Buffy*, we are immediately introduced to a pretty, witty but slightly strange teenage girl – Kristen Stewart as Bella Swan – who has moved to a small town with a single parent, appears to be suspicious of her new schoolmates, and seems to be guarding some kind of dark secret. Admittedly, there is no (in)convenient

'hellmouth' in the wet Washington State community of Forks and, this time around, the vampires are sitting next to our heroine in class and treating her at the local hospital rather than hanging out in the local cemetery. This allows screenwriter Melissa Rosenberg, director Catherine Hardwicke and the author of the *Twilight* novel Stephanie Meyer to play so successfully with the universally understood phenomenon of the deathlessly pale goth/emo boy who fills every girl at his school with either fascination or repulsion that *Twilight* became a global teen obsession and its star, the improbably cheekbone-alicious Robert Pattinson, an international pin-up.

But, unlike *Buffy*, *Twilight* is disinterested in many of the stereotypes – jock, nerd, rich bitch, bully – that have defined the teen fiction genre since *Carrie*. In *Twilight*, the key conflicts are within the wan and colourless Bella, rather than inflicted upon her by Bad Kids or Nasty Authority. And the key conflict is: When gripped by first pangs of uncontrollable lust for someone obviously dangerous – does a nice girl do it or not? It's the dilemma that dominates every young woman's growing pains, way beyond the loss of virginity. *Twilight* goes all out to make the dilemma as exotic, erotic, terrifying and beautiful as it can.

So who cares if all the boys at school fancy Bella despite her sickly demeanour and obvious shyness, and the girls are too sweet and friendly to mind? The movie wastes less than ten minutes on this irrelevant stuff before Bella and Edward are being hit by tidal waves of metaphorical sexual desire masquerading as supernatural bloodlust. Their first class together involves Edward holding his nose and glaring at poor Bella while she wonders if she smells – and if that isn't a universal teen nightmare, I don't know what is.

But it isn't long before Edward is saving Bella by stopping a skidding van with his bare hands, and now *Twilight* is making a strong fist of being the ultimate teen girl wish-fulfilment fantasy. The boy is tall, thin, beautiful, mysterious, deep, slightly threatening, seemingly obsessed with you... and he's a superhero to boot!

The direction is delightfully composed and elegant. The script and story spare and strong. The special effects occasionally magical. But *Twilight's* success as a benchmark youth phenomenon is all about Stewart and Pattinson and a sexual chemistry that stands comparison with the old school romantic leads of the Golden Age. As potential predator and willing potential victim, the pair have to get the tone exactly right to avoid questionable taste in paranoid times, and they do so, effortlessly, through finding an entirely recognisable kind of teenage awkwardness – an adorable fumbling toward the inevitable.

I mean, forget being a teen; when the object of your irrational lust pulls you aside and mumbles into your ear, 'If you were smart, you'd stay away from me', isn't that just red rag plus bull to the power of ten? Edward Cullen is a very wry post-occult obsession update of Brando in *The Wild One* and Dean in *Rebel Without A Cause* – the hot rebel boy who knows exactly how to make himself vulnerable enough to get the nice girl to fall for him.

The most unusual thing about *Twilight* is its very deliberate, almost satirical contempt for conventional teen life. Whereas *Buffy* and movies like *Clueless* and *Cruel Intentions* use their high concepts to submerge themselves in the detail of real teen life, taking the warp and weft of everyday adolescence into the realms of heady metaphor, *Twilight* treats the predictable dating and prom concerns of

Bella's friends as annoying distraction from the supernatural life she has accidentally stumbled upon. When two of her friends go to buy dresses for the prom, Bella goes along so she can go to an occult bookshop and research the possible origins of her weirdo stud-muffin. She barely manages to even feign interest in what, to her friends, is a clothing choice they'll remember well into adulthood... a vital rite-of-passage. Edward makes a very knowing reference to the rite-of-passage thing in a prom scene that goes through every prom night cliché in hyperspeed before our altogether superior couple take one last look around at normality – and skedaddle.

We never truly find out why Bella is so odd and distracted even before Edward appears, and it seems as if she has been waiting around her whole life for something undead to come along. While most teen fiction elevates teen obsessions to fall in with the preoccupations of its audience, *Twilight* sneers at high school life and normality, just like your average gothic youth. The fact that it struck a chord with so many suggests that we're finally getting bored with high school stereotypes – and that many more of us want to identify with the left-field outsider than one might have imagined. Its telling, at a time when assaults on goth and emo kids have begun to creep into western culture again, that the first threat Bella has to deal with isn't from vampires or from the equally supernatural native American friends of her father, but from pissed white male lads – the American equivalent of chavs. No surprise that she's saved by Edward... although it is a little disappointing that he rescues the damsel in distress in something as mundane as a flashy mass market car. At least Angel from the *Buffy* show would have swooped out of the sky, overcoat a-flailing.

In fact, *Twilight* turns back many of the feminist advances that inspired *Buffy*. It's men (or male creatures) that do the fighting here, and Bella is bashed about by blokes as much as she is buffeted around by her love for Edward. The heroine here literally spends much of the film clinging to her vampire boyfriend. The boys ask the girls to the prom and the girls talk about nothing except boys and clothes. *Twilight* may have some cool bands (and Muse) on the soundtrack and a whole goth-tattoos-and-piercing vibe going on. But its sexual politics is surprisingly old-fashioned when you consider that it was entirely shaped by women.

But all quibbles get swept aside when, around 50 minutes in, the pair finally talk about what Edward is, and he suddenly grabs Bella, and runs with her at impossible speed through imperious trees. *Twilight* gets past the whole vampires-can't-do-daylight thing by almost ignoring it (Edward just glistens, like an angel), and, when the gothic orchestral music rises up and pounds like blood, and Bella clings to her impossible man and leaves the rational world behind, it is one of the most beautiful wish-fulfilment moments in recent film. When Edward says, 'I'm the world's most dangerous predator. Everything about me invites you in. My voice, my face, even my smell', you wonder if he's talking about vampires or pale and beautiful teenage boys.

*Twilight* doesn't go for laughs *a la Buffy*, but the scene where Edward takes Bella home to meet the vampire folks is the film's subversively witty high-point. It's a rich twist on the I'm-so-embarrassed-by-my-family gag, as Edward grimaces through the awkwardness of his folks' struggle to not eat his girlfriend, and takes Bella upstairs for a little Debussy and a quick leap through the surrounding

treetops. Sex really would be a disappointment at this point and Hardwicke refuses to ruin the literal sweeping of Bella off her feet by having the pair do the soft-focus grab 'n' groan.

But Edward and Bella do attempt sex eventually, only to be thwarted by Edward's symbolic impotence. This is a development nicked from the *Buffy* character Angel. Angel can't have sex because he is cursed to lose his soul every time he experiences 'a moment of perfect happiness' – an orgasm, to you and I. Edward's problem is that the intensity of his bloodlust for Bella means that he can't 'lose control'. Different *deus ex machina*, same metaphor: these perfect tall, dark, handsome and alien lovers can't fuck... making them even more perfect idol material for young girls who are still frightened of sex... or frightened that doing it is the end of innocent, emotional love.

And, like Angel, Edward is noble and self-sacrificing and doesn't drink human blood. He fights 'bad' vampires. He listens to classical music and is cultured and somewhat taciturn. But Angel didn't play superhero baseball with his family, mainly because he'd eaten them all in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. And, of course, *Angel* and *Buffy* were equally in debt to earlier teen horror classics, especially *The Lost Boys* and Anne Rice's definitive *Interview With The Vampire*.

Eventually there has to be some proper peril in *Twilight*, and the flight from and battle with psycho vamp James is exciting enough. But not as interesting perhaps, as the only part of normal teen life that *Twilight* does concern itself with. Bella's struggle to connect with her cop Dad Charlie (the quietly excellent Billy Burke) forms a moving parallel sub-plot, and the film is revealed as a metaphor about the young female's struggle to understand men, especially men

whose strength derives from a macho inability to show their feelings and expose their vulnerabilities.

Charlie is also teen girl wish fulfilment, a strong, silent man who adores his daughter so much he can't express it, and is only vulnerable to his daughter and her fly-by-night Mom, who is travelling America as a baseball groupie. He stays out of Bella's life, but is handsome and adorable and generous and *there*. The perfect father.

But even Dad and an unlikely dream prom can't entirely save Bella. Stewart gives a memorable portrayal of a girl who is just too much in love. Murderous vamps are nowhere near as terrifying to her as the prospect of Edward leaving her. The sequel, *New Moon*, is on its way, and if its not about the true horror of losing yourself in impossible love, then it will be the most disappointing thing about a movie series that is going to inspire endless rip-offs, many of which will probably not be as good as the *True Blood* TV show.

*Twilight* is a massively important movie, not least because its two female creators have found a form of highly sexualised teen fiction that doesn't carry a hint of porn or bad faith. It treads a rare line between high school horror flick and art movie, and makes you remember how glorious, and terrible, your first love felt.