

Troubling teenagers: how movies constructed the juvenile delinquent in the 1950s

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*The story you are about to see is about violence and immorality – **teenage** violence and immorality. Children trapped in the half-world between adolescence and maturity, their struggle to understand, their need to be understood. Perhaps in this rapid progression into the material world, man has forgotten the spiritual values which are the moral fibre of a great nation: decency, respect, fair play. Perhaps he has forgotten to teach these values to his own. He has forgotten to teach his children their responsibility before god and society. The answer may lie in the story of the delinquents, in their violent attempt to find a place in society. This film is a cry to a busy world, a protest, a reminder to those who must set the example.*

These portentous words are intoned over the opening titles of Robert Altman's first film *The Delinquents*, shot in 1955 but not released until 1957. In fact, they are preceded by a pre-credit sequence, which begins with the black rhythm and blues singer Julia Lee entertaining the entirely white clientele of a bar. When a group of young people enter and attempt to buy drinks, they are told to leave because they are under age. After a tense confrontation, they eventually depart, smashing the window behind them, and the credits begin.

The trailer for *The Delinquents* strikes a rather different tone. Over scenes of violence, sex, drinking, vandalism and jive dancing, it promises to show 'the screen's most shocking portrait of the babyfaces who have just taken their first stumbling steps down Sin Street USA.' 'Here,' the trailer continues, 'is a picture that dares to put on film the ravaged lives in the adolescent jungles of America today...' Likewise, the publicity posters screamed: 'The hoods of tomorrow! The gun molls of the future! The kids who live today as if there's no tomorrow!'

The film was shot in suburban Kansas City, Altman's home town, and its central character is Scotty, a rather clean-cut middle-class young man. When his girlfriend's parents forbid the couple to be together (for reasons that are not fully explained), he resorts to deceiving them, with the help of the nefarious group introduced in the opening scene. Scotty's rapid descent into crime seems partly accidental, and partly a result of the evil intentions of the group: he is forced to drink a bottle of whiskey, and then left to take the blame for the killing of a gas station attendant, assaulted with a pump nozzle during a bungled robbery. Scotty is essentially a victim of bad luck rather than the product of a poor social environment – although what motivates the 'delinquents' who lead him astray remains quite unclear.

Nevertheless, the film's conclusion is unequivocal about the need to deal with the problem:

Violence and immorality like this must be controlled and channeled. Citizens everywhere must work against delinquency, just as they work against cancer, cerebral palsy, or any other crippling disease. For delinquency is a disease. But the remedies are available: patience, compassion, understanding, and respect for parental and civil authority. By working with your church group, with the youth organization in your town, by paying close attention to the needs of your children, you can help prevent the recurrence of regrettable events like the ones you have just witnessed. You can help to beat this disease before it cripples our children, before it cripples society.

From what we know of Altman's subsequent career, as a kind of anti-establishment auteur (his films include *MASH*, *The Long Goodbye* and *Nashville*), it is tempting to read these inflated words as a kind of parody. For, like most juvenile delinquent films of the period, *The Delinquents* is a movie that wants to have its cake and eat it. Despite the claims of its marketing campaign, it is hardly salacious; but it does nevertheless provide the forbidden pleasure of witnessing violence, immorality and other such 'regrettable events'. However, this is framed by assertions about the film's moral and social purpose, and by warnings that such actions should not be admired or emulated.

Disclaimers and moral warnings to concerned older citizens (the 'you' of the last quotation) of the kind I have quoted were almost *de rigueur* in such films, at least in the mid-1950s when they first appeared. Like many of the other texts I have considered in these essays, these films seem to have a *dual address*: they are targeted both towards young people and towards adults – and in this case, towards adult authority figures as well as to adult viewers in general. As such, they tend to offer contradictory messages. And as we shall see, these contradictions reflected the film industry's attempt to deal with the conflicting economic and social demands that were being placed upon it at the time.

The JD films, as they have come to be known, were a movie 'cycle' of the kind that was characteristic of Hollywood in its heyday. (Perhaps the most obvious precursor, both in terms of theme and approach, were the gangster films of the early 1930s.) Successful breakthrough films spawned countless imitators, often with remarkably similar titles, seeking to cash in on box office success. Inevitably, it's hard to draw a line around them: studies of such films (such as McGee and Robertson's book *The JD Films*) tend to blur the boundaries with other Hollywood cycles such as rock-and-roll movies, or films about beats or other counter-cultural groups. Yet not all films featuring youth crime, or even 'delinquent' or anti-social behaviour (such as drug-taking or violence), are necessarily 'juvenile delinquent' films. Hollywood was making movies about youth crime throughout the 1920s and 1930s – Ronald Reagan's appearances as a caring social worker in the *Dead End Kids* series are particularly notable in this respect; and of course there have been countless films on the topic over the past fifty years. What distinguishes the JD films of the 1950s – and is apparent in the quotations from Altman's film – is the explicit framing of such behaviour as a *social problem* – a problem that requires both explanations and remedial actions to prevent it.

In this essay, I'll be exploring how the social problem of juvenile delinquency was defined and constructed at this time, and the ambivalent ways in which the film industry tried to respond. I will look fairly briefly at the three breakthrough films that effectively initiated the JD cycle in the United States – *The Wild One*, *Blackboard Jungle* and *Rebel Without a Cause* – and subsequently at a group of British films that have not been so widely discussed. I'll look at three films from the end of the 1940s and early 1950s that preceded the Hollywood cycle, and then in more detail at *Violent Playground*, a British film released in 1958. As I hope to show, these films offered some distinctively different perspectives on the issue of delinquency – albeit ones that were equally riven by tensions and contradictions.

Constructing delinquency

The wave of concern that was both reflected and constructed in the JD films of the 1950s was by no means a new phenomenon. As historians like Geoffrey Pearson and John Springhall have shown, there is a long history of anxiety about youthful misbehaviour, dating back many centuries. Perhaps inevitably, young people often serve as a focus for a whole range of hopes and fears about the future. The idea that the younger generation is out of control is often taken as evidence for much broader claims about cultural or moral decline. The early twentieth century psychologists who defined – and effectively invented – 'adolescence' as a unique life-stage clearly saw it as a period of fragility, vulnerability and risk. With the advent of modernity, young people increasingly came to be seen as both troubled and troubling.

Yet what remains striking – and in need of explanation – is that these waves of concern often seem to bear little relationship to the actual incidence of youth crime. Indeed, as criminologists like John Muncie suggest, the 'facts' on youth crime are almost impossible to establish, because the evidence is so unreliable. Official crime statistics – as well as other data such as victim surveys and self-report studies – vary significantly depending upon which kinds of behaviour are perceived as crimes, which measures are used (for example, whether crimes are reported, or recorded, or result in arrests and convictions), as well as how these figures are interpreted.

For contemporary criminologists, the issue here is more to do with labeling – that is, how it is that some kinds of behaviour are defined as 'delinquent' in the first place. In the case of youth, there is a particular issue of *status offences*: that is, types of behaviour that are defined as problematic when committed by young people, yet are not seen in this way when adults commit them. There is a history of such youth-related crimes – often of a very minor kind – being 'legislated into existence' in this way. In other words, public debate, and then the legal system, effectively *criminalises* particular kinds of youth behaviour. Furthermore, as Muncie argues, it was the creation of alternative sentencing and punishment regimes for juveniles – such as reform schools – that enabled 'juvenile delinquency' to be identified as a distinctive social problem requiring particular solutions. As is often the case, this construction of the 'youth problem' may tell us much more about adults than it does about young people themselves.

Although there is a long history of young people committing crimes, the label 'juvenile delinquent' only really entered into public debate in the post-war period,

when it came to be defined as a specific, and somewhat new, social problem. Nevertheless, public anxiety about the problem of delinquency was oddly out of step with the apparent incidence of youth crime. As the historian James Gilbert has shown, there were waves of concern immediately after the war, and then again in the mid-1950s (1953-58). Public debate on the issue eventually faded away in the late 1950s, although statistics (however unreliable) do not suggest that youth crime had fallen at this time: in effect, what had disappeared or at least declined was the particular way of formulating the 'problem' – or in other words, the *label* of 'juvenile delinquency'.

As Gilbert argues, there were some underlying social changes in the period, for which 'juvenile delinquency' became a kind of surrogate, or shorthand. Changes in family life during the war – men fighting and women working – led to concerns about a breakdown in family communication and socialization. As in the conclusion of Altman's *Delinquents*, many commentators were reasserting traditional notions of family and community as a means of preventing impending social collapse. Meanwhile, the 1950s was a period of increasing affluence, and greater youth autonomy: the social and generational changes that eventually erupted in the 1960s were already beginning to appear. In this context, 'delinquency' became a coded term for much broader shifts in young people's behaviour. As Gilbert explains, part of the concern here was provoked by the gradual integration of distinct racial groups (the black rhythm and blues group in the preface to Altman's film is also not coincidental); and to some extent by fears about middle-class white Americans being somehow corrupted by their increasing access to 'lower-class' fashions and styles of behaviour, not least through the institution of the high school. Such changes, would, it was feared, turn young people into premature adults.

The uneven response to juvenile delinquency may simply have reflected that fact that public opinion was slow to catch up with these changes. However, Gilbert also points to the role of the numerous intermediaries and commentators who took it upon themselves to define and explain the phenomenon: journalists, campaigners and lobby groups, ambitious politicians, philanthropic foundations, academics, social workers and law enforcement agencies all had different motivations for talking up the problem of juvenile delinquency.

Numerous explanations of the apparent epidemic of delinquency were proffered at the time, not least by academics; and these different ways of framing the 'problem' also inevitably implied particular solutions to it. Where sociologists tended to emphasise the breakdown of mechanisms of social control (especially among immigrant groups), or the role of social class and poverty, psychologists were more inclined to consider the precarious nature of the modern family, or the difficulties of social adjustment during adolescence. However, as the debate evolved, much of the concern came to focus specifically on the influence of the media and mass culture.

Delinquency and the movies

The psychologist Frederic Wertham's enormously influential book *The Seduction of the Innocent*, published in 1954, drew attention to the effects of comic books, and especially so-called 'horror comics', on young people's behaviour. It led to public

campaigns in which children were encouraged to incinerate their comic book collections, as well as to new regulatory codes within the industry (all documented in detail by the historian David Hajdu). Meanwhile, the ambitious senator Estes Kefauver initiated and subsequently led a Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency, whose hearings lasted for several years between 1953 and the end of the decade (although it continued for many years thereafter). Here again, comic books came under scrutiny, but the movies were also an increasing focus of concern.

The movie industry responded to these concerns in several ways. Its formal submissions to Kefauver's Senate investigations were keen to play down the influence of movies – and in this respect, it was supported by many academics, as well as professional experts such as social workers. Like many participants in these debates, Kefauver was wary of the charge of censorship, during a period in which the power of Joseph McCarthy's House Un-American Activities Committee was starting to wane.

However, the industry was quite ready to censor itself, or at least to strengthen its regulatory codes. All the Hollywood films I consider below – as well as a great many others – were subject to detailed scrutiny by the industry's Production Code Administration. As Jerold Simmons has shown, the original script for *The Wild One* was rejected on the grounds that it might encourage gang violence. The dialogue was eventually adapted to reduce the explicit violence, and to strengthen the pro-social message by playing up the redemption of the central character. Likewise, the script of *Blackboard Jungle* was adapted to reduce elements of sex, violence and profanity, although this did not enable it to escape criticism (and bans in some cities) once it was released. Other strategies of this kind included the provision of extensive 'health warnings' in the opening titles, although these were rarely as elaborate as those in Altman's *The Delinquents*. In other instances, the 'voices of authority' within the film – such as the sheriff in *The Wild One* – were strengthened; and moral ambiguity or complexity was eliminated. Even so, voices within and beyond the industry were not altogether convinced of the effectiveness of such strategies: concerns continued to be expressed about the dangers of young viewers 'identifying' with the delinquent characters, however painful their ultimate come-uppance, or however convincing their ultimate redemption might have appeared.

At the same time, the industry faced a more fundamental dilemma. Prior to the 1950s, the cinema had been a genuine mass medium: movie-going was typically an intergenerational experience, with whole families attending together. As the decade progressed, this began to unravel. The advent of television was part of the explanation, obviously; but there were also changes in film production and exhibition (the break-up of the studio system, and legislation that made it impossible for studios to retain control of local cinema distribution). The industry gradually came to realize that it was targeting an older audience that was no longer going to the movies very much; and it began, albeit belatedly and uncertainly, to focus on the increasingly lucrative audience of teenagers and younger adults.

By the late 1950s, *Time* magazine was estimating that US teenagers had a combined spending power of 10 billion dollars, of which 16% was spent on 'entertainment'. This duly led to what the film scholar Thomas Doherty calls the 'juvenilization' of

American movies: the targeting of young people via movies and stars designed specifically to appeal to them. It also led to changes in film exhibition: teenagers were keen on drive-in movies, and on double-bills where they could spend a longer time socializing (or necking).

The JD movies were one consequence of this – even if (as we shall see) elements of them still appear to be implicitly targeted towards an older adult audience. Selling representations of juvenile delinquency as a form of entertainment might well have offered a vicarious (and perhaps quite superficial) sensation of power for younger viewers, who experienced relatively little power in their own everyday lives. However, they posed a dilemma for the industry. On the one hand, it was keen to target the teen audience, not least by promising apparently salacious content; yet on the other, it needed to convince adult authority figures of its own moral legitimacy. Anxieties about juvenile delinquency made for good box office, but they also increased the visibility of those who criticized the industry for its irresponsibility. Placing overt moral messages alongside sensational portrayals of deviancy was thus a risky strategy, but an economically profitable one.

As we shall see, much of this debate (and of course the movies themselves) spread across to the UK. The industry's dilemmas here were also quite similar – although they arguably took longer to become apparent. Britain experienced its own home-grown moral panic about the effects of comic books, as Martin Barker has documented, although there was rather less concern about the harmful influence of the cinema. Nevertheless, the release of *Blackboard Jungle* in 1956 was apparently greeted with 'riots' in some UK cinemas, and (astonishingly) *The Wild One* was banned by the British Board of Film Censors until 1967. Meanwhile, the affluent teenager took a little longer to appear on this side of the Atlantic, only becoming apparent to researchers and social commentators towards the end of the decade. Perhaps for some of these reasons, the British film industry's response to the 'problem' of juvenile delinquency was generally rather more restrained, and perhaps even sedate; although it was by no means less contradictory.

Screening delinquency

How were these tensions and contradictions manifested in specific films? In this section, I consider the three Hollywood films that effectively initiated the JD cycle: *The Wild One*, *Blackboard Jungle* and *Rebel Without a Cause*. These are all very well-known, and have been the subject of extensive critical commentary, so I will refrain from offering detailed summaries here. Rather, I would like to contrast the three films especially in terms of their point of view, and how they construct the figure of the 'delinquent'.

The Wild One, directed by Laslo Benedik and produced by Stanley Kramer, was released in 1953. It stars Marlon Brando (aged 28 at the time of filming) as Johnny Strabler, the leader of a leather-clad motorcycle gang, the Black Rebels. The film is based on a true story about a small California town called Hollister that was apparently terrorized by such a gang – a story that was written up by the journalist Frank Rooney for *Harper's Magazine* in 1951. Despite this basis in fact, the opening title is keen to reassure viewers:

This is a shocking story. It could never take place in most American towns – but it did in this one.

It is a public challenge not to let it happen again.

The claim recurs in Johnny's opening voice-over: 'it couldn't happen again in a million years', he says. But the voice-over also reveals a little of the outcome of the story: after referring to 'the whole mess' and 'the trouble' that occurred, he tells us:

Mostly I remember the girl. I can't explain it, a sad chick like that. But something changed in me, she got to me...

As this implies, *The Wild One*, like many JD movies, is ultimately a story of redemption. On one level, Brando's Johnny is charismatic, cool and sexy. He appears to spend his life (or at least his weekends) travelling aimlessly from place to place with the gang: 'you just go', he says. He is a natural leader, whose authority is unquestioned by the other members; and he easily outfights the leader of a rival gang. He speaks in a kind of hip jive talk, and his drawled one-liners are like comic epigrams – most famously, of course, in the exchange with a local girl, who asks 'what are you rebelling against?' 'Whatta you got?' he replies.

Johnny's contempt for authority is clearly part of his appeal. He defines himself as an 'outlaw', and refuses to make a deal with the sheriff to leave the town quietly – 'nobody tells me what to do'. The sheriff is represented as weak and ineffectual: the other inhabitants urge him to run the gang out of town, accusing him of being 'too soft-hearted'. The vigilantes eventually take matters into their own hands and beat Johnny up just as he is about to leave: 'someone needed to beat some respect for law and authority into him', one of them says. Yet this authoritarian approach ends in disaster when they knock Johnny off his bike, causing the death of an elderly resident.

However, the ultimate judgment on Johnny is delivered by Kathie, the girl he meets in the town bar (and who happens to be the sheriff's daughter). Despite her conventional appearance, Johnny is attracted to her, in preference to the more available biker girls who are pursuing him; but at least initially, she dismisses him as a 'fake'. At one point, Johnny apparently rescues Kathie from being assaulted by other members of the gang, but his initial romantic overtures towards her are clumsy and violent. Meanwhile, throughout the movie, he spends a good deal of time clutching a trophy, which the townspeople believe he has won at a motorbike contest, but which is actually stolen: it is a kind of emblem of his lack of authenticity. Towards the end of the movie, the sheriff finally asserts himself, telling Johnny:

I don't get your act at all. And I don't think you do either. I don't think you know what you're trying to do, or how to go about it.

In the final scene, Johnny returns to the bar, where he presents Kathie with a gift of the stolen trophy, before driving off. As evidence of Johnny's redemption, this conclusion isn't wholly convincing: the sheriff's authority has already been undermined, the trophy is stolen in the first place, and we don't see any kind of romantic consummation between Johnny and Kathie. Even so, all these things work

to undermine any potential identification with Johnny: he is undeniably cool, but he is also somewhat of a phoney.

Ultimately, the reasons for Johnny's 'delinquency' are not explained. Brando's method-acting performance is all about troubled frowns, distant stares and mumbled complaints, but there is little indication of any psychological or sociological causes of his behaviour. The authoritarian response of the townspeople is clearly rejected, but the more 'soft-hearted', liberal approach of the sheriff is also less than effective. In the end, it would seem that only romantic love can redeem the likes of Johnny – although this too seems faintly implausible.

By contrast, ***Blackboard Jungle*** (directed by Richard Brooks from the novel by Evan Hunter, and released in 1955) is much more explicitly a 'social problem' film. Before the opening credits, over a soundtrack of military drumming, the following message scrolls:

*We, in the United States, are fortunate to have a school system that is a tribute to our communities and to our faith in American youth.
Today we are concerned with juvenile delinquency – its causes – and its effects. We are especially concerned when this delinquency boils over into our schools.
The scenes and incidents depicted here are fictional. However, we believe that public awareness is a first step toward a remedy for any problem.
It is in this spirit and with this faith that BLACKBOARD JUNGLE was produced.*

However, as the message fades into the opening credits, the drumming gives way to Bill Haley's 'Rock Around the Clock' – a tune that is not used elsewhere in the film, and seems to have been included in the hope of increasing its appeal to the younger audience. (It may well have been this, rather than anything about the film itself, that prompted the teddy boy 'riots' that occurred on its release in the UK.)

Unlike the other two films considered here, the central focus of *Blackboard Jungle* is not on the delinquents, but on their teacher, Richard Dadier (played by Glenn Ford). The narrative follows Dadier as he confronts a recalcitrant high school class in a racially mixed, working class area of the city; and it also follows him into the staff room, and into his home. We are told about the home environments of his students, but we do not see anything of them. The narrative is driven by questions about Dadier's dedication to his task: will he become disillusioned and leave the teaching profession, or will he at least move to an easier, more middle-class school 'where the children want to learn' (an opportunity he is offered by his former professor)? In parallel with this is an element of suspense introduced right at the start of the film. Dadier's wife is pregnant, but she has previously lost a baby. She narrowly avoids a car crash and subsequently comes under pressure when one of Dadier's students sends her anonymous messages alleging that her husband is having an affair with one of the other teachers: Dadier is afraid that she will lose the baby once again.

The narrative of the film is essentially a series of tests of Dadier's dedication. He saves a woman teacher from being assaulted, he and a colleague are attacked in the street, he witnesses some of his students stealing a newspaper truck, and his class smash up the math teacher's treasured collection of jazz records. This all causes him to question himself, but he does not give up. He adopts modern teaching methods,

using a tape recorder to record his students' stories, and appears to be having some success with a debate that takes place after he has shown them an animated film of *Jack and the Beanstalk* – an approach that even seems to impress one of his most cynical colleagues. However, he also gives voice to bitterness about the teachers' lot, at one point comparing their poor rates of pay with those of other groups of workers.

Ultimately, when his son is born (and survives a difficult birth) and his wife urges him to continue, Dadier decides to re-dedicate himself to the profession, as the sounds of New Year celebrations play on the radio. Highly sentimental as this may be, the film provides a powerful endorsement of the idealistic mission of inner-city teaching. On one level, Dadier is a familiar 'teacher hero'. He claims that he wants to 'help shape young minds' and to 'sculpt lives', and he struggles to achieve this: yet his dedication is not seen as self-righteous, and the working lives of teachers are by no means glamourised.

All this implies that the film is constructed from Dadier's point of view. Some of his students display the brooding menace of Brando's Johnny Strabler – especially the ultimate villain, Artie West (played by Vic Morrow). On one occasion, West appears to justify himself with the claim that he has no hope for the future; but, like his fellow delinquents, he is ultimately presented as a coward – 'you're not so tough without a gang to back you up', Dadier tells him. In the final classroom confrontation, his supporter Belazi is actually impaled with an American flag, before they are both marched downstairs for the punishment they clearly require.

However, with the possible exception of Gregory Miller (played by Sidney Poitier), we learn very little about what motivates these students. The debate about the causes of delinquency, and the potential treatment of it, is placed in the mouths of the adult characters. Dadier's professor offers a *mea culpa*: 'we at the university were to blame – we did not prepare the teachers to teach certain children of this generation...' Later, a police officer offers a more extended historical account:

I've had lots of problem kids in my time, kids from both sides of the tracks. They were five or six years old in the last war. Father in the army, mother in the defence plant. No home life, no church life, no place to go. They formed street gangs... Maybe the kids today are like the rest of the world: mixed up, suspicious, scared. I don't know, but I do know this. Gang leaders have taken the place of parents, and if you don't stop them...

The policeman is interrupted before he can finish, but the onus is clearly placed on dedicated teachers, effectively to take the place of parents. The issue is not so much poverty, but the failure of the family.

If *Blackboard Jungle* refuses any explanation based on social class (these things happen on 'both sides of the tracks'), it does explore the question of race. One of Dadier's first moves in attempting to win the control of his class is to seek the support of Gregory Miller. If Artie West is the 'bad delinquent', who ultimately proves to be beyond redemption, Miller is the 'good delinquent', who can be saved. Being black, Dadier tells him, is not an excuse for failing in school; and right at the end of the film, Miller responds to Dadier's encouragement by agreeing to stay on at school for a

further year. Meanwhile, however, Dadier runs into trouble when he uses racial slurs in an attempt to counter the prejudice and abuse he sees happening among his class, and receives a strong lecture from the school principal. Although he is not guilty in this case, he later gets into a confrontation with Miller and unthinkingly calls him 'you black –' – only to be consumed with remorse. In a particularly striking scene, we see him joining Miller and his black friends as they sing a version of the spiritual 'Go Down Moses' in preparation for the school's Christmas concert. Significantly, Miller urges them not to syncopate (or 'jazz up') the melody, implying the need for a 'respectable' version of African-American culture. In all these respects, the film's treatment of race is decidedly liberal, although it needs to be understood in its time: the *Brown v Board of Education* decision that ended racial segregation in US schools took place only two years before the film's release, and was still being massively resisted in many Southern states.

Like *The Wild One*, *Blackboard Jungle* was a highly controversial film, and underwent close monitoring from the Production Code Administration. While the violence (especially the beating of Dadier and his colleague) may be relatively explicit for 1956, the central concern appeared to be that younger viewers might emulate the delinquent characters, especially Artie West. While Brando was clearly older (and intended to be so), Artie and his gang were definitely teenagers (although Morrow was in fact 26 when the film was released). The Administration's director Geoffrey Shurlock also worried that the film might purvey a negative image of America's schools for international audiences, although ultimately there was very little direct censorship imposed. Nevertheless, Shurlock received more criticism for his approval of this film than for any of the others he endorsed during his first five years as Director. Along with *The Wild One*, the film went on to be cited in submissions to Senator Kefauver's Senate committee as evidence of the harmful effects of the movies – although it appears that the Senator himself was unconvinced. Such anxiety seems particularly strange in this case, given the film's adult focus and point of view: it clearly says much more about the motivations of those involved in the debates rather than about the film itself.

Rebel Without A Cause (directed by Nicholas Ray and also released in 1955) is probably the most celebrated of these films, but it is strikingly different from the others. Shot in colour and in Cinemascope, it appears quite melodramatic by comparison with the low-key black-and-white of the other two. Unlike Johnny Strabler and Richard Dadier's students, the central character Jim Stark (played by James Dean) is clearly middle-class, and the setting is affluent suburbia. In the opening scene, we are introduced to Jim and two fellow students at his new high school, Judy and John (also known as Plato): all of them been picked up by the police for various infractions. Later there is a knife fight, and the famous scene of the 'chickee run', in which hotrod cars are driven off a cliff, with fatal consequences. Yet the film's explanations of these forms of delinquency are essentially psychological rather than sociological.

Jim's problems, clearly flagged as the film proceeds, essentially derive from the tension between his parents. His father is seen as emasculated, and in a later scene, he is famously wearing a frilly domestic apron – 'you thought I was mom?' he asks, as if we didn't quite get the point. According to Jim, his mother and grandmother 'make mush out of him', and the father doesn't have the 'guts' to stand up to them.

Meanwhile, Judy (played by Natalie Wood) is the victim of her father's confusing signals: he calls her 'a dirty tramp' for wearing slightly sexy clothes, and still wants her to be his 'little girl', yet he rejects her (and indeed hits her) when she seeks affection from him. Plato (Sal Mineo) is possibly the most disturbed of the three: his parents have divorced after years of fighting, and although he is supposed to live with his mother, she is rarely present. He responds to his abandonment by torturing and killing animals; and there are small indications – which attracted the attention of the censors – that he might be gay (he has a picture of Alan Ladd in his locker at school, whatever that may signify...).

Delinquency, in this quasi-Freudian account, is essentially a consequence of the dysfunction of the family – and, more specifically, of the parents. Jim, Judy and Plato all struggle to communicate with their parents: Jim repeatedly screams at them in anguish, 'you're tearing me apart!' and 'you're not listening to me!'; Judy wanders off alone at night, apparently because she is 'seeking attention'; while Plato claims that 'nobody can help me'. While Plato has received psychiatric help from a 'head shrinker', Jim's parents have had to move house several times when he has got into trouble at school. All of them, it would seem, are fundamentally in need of love, although in Jim's case he also needs to find a certain masculine strength – the quality his father is so sorely lacking. He repeatedly urges his father to 'stand up for me' and to give him a 'direct answer' to his questions, but he fails to do so until the very end.

The three characters eventually come together to form a kind of surrogate family. Jim and Judy apparently discover that they love each other within 24 hours of first meeting, while Plato clearly wants to adopt both of them as his surrogate parents. In the closing scenes, Jim clothes Plato in his iconic red jacket, and shortly afterwards, Jim's father (having discovered the need to be 'strong') puts his own jacket around his son. To some extent, Jim and Judy are integrated back into the normal, middle-class family; but they leave together, and there is no reassuring voice of adult authority to reassert order at the very end of the film. As James Gilbert argues, it is as if the ending, in which the adults suddenly recognize their own failings, is too contrived to be plausible.

On top of this vaguely psychoanalytic explanation of delinquency, there are occasional signs of a more fashionable, existentialist view. Judy in particular is fond of cool nihilistic remarks: when Jim asks her where she lives, she says 'who lives?', and later in the movie she describes herself as 'just numb'. When Jim asks his rival Buzz about the reasons for the 'chickie run' – 'why do we do this?' – Buzz responds with a Brando-esque 'you gotta do something, don't you?' A key scene takes place during a school visit to a planetarium, where the students are told about the potentially imminent destruction of the universe, and learn that humans are essentially alone – a theme that is reasserted in the closing scenes, where the characters return to the now-empty planetarium.

Rebel Without A Cause does have several points of similarity with the other two films I have considered here. As in *The Wild One*, it is romantic love that brings about Jim's redemption, although here it also leads to the reassertion of the family – a family in which Jim has learned to be a real man, unlike his father. As in *Blackboard Jungle*, there is also a benevolent, liberal authority figure, in the form of a police officer named (surely not coincidentally) Ray. Here again, we find the 'good delinquent' who

is capable of redemption, as opposed to the ‘bad delinquent’ who must be punished, or in this case simply killed off (as is the case both with Plato, who is too damaged to survive, and with Buzz, who seems to have very few redeeming qualities to prevent him from plunging over the cliff).

Nevertheless, the basic perspective of the film is quite different. Aside from Ray, the adults in the film are all represented in very negative terms – as in some way failing to live up to their responsibilities in respect of their children. Even Ray is absent at a crucial time when Jim comes looking for him towards the end of the film. The focus is very definitely on the three young characters. We see the world from their point of view, and in several respects they are glamourised. As the critic Thomas Doherty argues, James Dean as Jim Stark had a ‘representative power’: he was ‘the first American teenager’ – at least in the movies.

Each of these films was massively successful at the box office, and each spawned a legion of imitations, as well as some more considered representations of delinquency, in the years that followed. Merely the titles reflect what Thomas Doherty calls the ‘exploitation’ in these movies: controversial topics were filmed on a low budget, accompanied by sensational promotion targeted specifically at the teenage audience. *Teenage Crime Wave*, *Teenage Thunder*, *Teenage Rebel* and *Teenage Doll* all appeared within a year or two of the films I have discussed here, and they were swiftly followed by *Teenagers from Outer Space*, *Dragstrip Riot*, *Juvenile Jungle*, *Riot in Juvenile Prison*, *Live Fast - Die Young*, *The Rebel Breed*, *The Cool and the Crazy*, *High School Confidential*, *High School Hellcats*, *Hotrod Rumble*, *Hotrod Girl*, *Untamed Youth*, *Young and Wild*, and many, many more before the decade was out. Rather than following this road, however, I would like to take a sideways step, to look at a selection of British films that sought to address the same kinds of issues.

Debating juvenile delinquency: the UK

Perhaps surprisingly, the cinematic debate about juvenile delinquency seems to have begun earlier in the UK than in the United States. Here too, it’s possible to identify many films from the 1930s and 1940s where young people are shown committing crime, although their *youth* rarely becomes an issue in itself. Perhaps the most celebrated of these precursors is John Boulting’s adaptation of Grahame Greene’s 1938 novel *Brighton Rock* (released in 1947), starring the young Richard Attenborough. Yet even here, the youthful status of Attenborough’s psychopathic Pinkie is barely addressed; and generically, the film owes more to the gangster movies of the 1930s – as was apparent from its US title *Young Scarface* – than to the ‘social problem’ films of the 1950s. By contrast, in this section I want to consider three British films from the late 1940s and early 1950s that explicitly address youth crime as a problem of *youth*, and engage in different ways with the wider debate about the causes and treatment of juvenile delinquency.

As in the US, concerns about youth crime in Britain have a very long history. As historians like Geoffrey Pearson, John Springhall and John Davis have shown, the concern about increasing juvenile delinquency in the post-war period can be traced back to earlier concerns about ‘hooligans’ and specific youth gangs such as the ‘scuttlers’ and ‘peaky blinders’ of the late nineteenth century. As in the US, there

was little reliable evidence that rates of youth crime had actually risen, but the issue did attract growing public attention. It was frequently argued that juvenile delinquency was a consequence of the disruption of the war years (in shades of *Blackboard Jungle*), and of the influence of (particularly American) mass culture – although here again, there was already a long history of ‘panics’ about the impact of popular media on young people. More broadly, as Bill Osgerby points out, there were growing proportions of young people in the population at the time, with increasing amounts of disposable income – although the figure of the teenage working class consumer did not really appear on the social radar until a series of studies by the market researcher Mark Abrams right at the end of the decade.

As we shall see, explanations of juvenile delinquency in post-war Britain also invoked a range of psychological and sociological arguments, while responses to the problem veered between reformist and authoritarian. Yet the issue also invoked much broader concerns about social change, about morality and about the national culture – and about the media as a particular agent or index of change. These debates were a focus of concern for social researchers – most notably in a Mass Observation study by H.D. Wilcock, published in 1949 – but they were also apparent, both implicitly and explicitly, in several films of the period.

The earliest of these films is a Gainsborough Studios production, ***Good Time Girl***, directed by David MacDonald, and released in 1948. The film tells the story of Gwen Rawlings (played by Jean Kent), a teenage girl who is led astray by a succession of ill-intentioned older men. Accused by her lecherous employer of stealing, and then beaten by her father, she leaves home to live in a cheap boarding house. She meets Jimmy, a sharply-dressed ‘spiv’ who gets her a job as a coat-check girl in a nightclub. Jimmy becomes jealous of her growing relationship with Red, an older member of the nightclub band, who is a more benevolent figure. Jimmy beats Gwen, causing him to be fired from his job, and he then frames Gwen for the theft of her landlady’s jewellery. Gwen is sent to a reform school, but quickly escapes and returns to working in another nightclub. She becomes involved with another man, and when they are out for a drunken drive one night, they accidentally run over and kill a policeman. After another beating, Gwen goes on the run with two American soldiers who have gone AWOL. They flag down a car, and she recognizes the driver as Red: realizing this, and in fear of being caught, the soldiers shoot him dead. All three are duly apprehended and imprisoned.

As this suggests, *Good Time Girl* is very much a cautionary tale. In fact, the film opens with a scene where Miss Thorpe, the chair of the Juvenile Court, is seen giving advice to another troubled teenager, Lyla Lawrence (played by a young Diana Dors). She tells Lyla that her life is similar to that of Gwen, and proceeds to tell her Gwen’s story. At the end of the film, Lyla thanks Miss Thorpe, and leaves for home, her warning duly heeded. Despite this moralistic emphasis, the film was initially banned by the British Board of Film Censors for its ‘dubious dialogue’.

Nevertheless, the film treats the issue of juvenile delinquency in broadly liberal terms. The social welfare system (the Juvenile Court and the reform school Gwen attends) is shown to be benevolent rather than disciplinarian. Gwen (and indeed Lyla) are led astray through no fault of their own: they may have ‘bad’ parents (Lyla’s father is an alcoholic and her mother is mentally ill), but they also suffer from a

succession of bad luck – as Gwen’s rather aimless narrative clearly shows. Gwen has to be punished (she is sentenced to fifteen years), but Lyla appears to be saved. Such young people will come round, it seems, if they are treated with care, understanding and tolerance.

Even so, the element of moral warning isn’t entirely effective, not least because Gwen’s motivations – why she wants what she appears to want – remain rather obscure. We understand why she wants to escape from home, but the narrative logic of what happens after that seems rather arbitrary. She takes to drink (although not much of this is actually shown, presumably for fear of encouraging emulation); and she hooks up with a series of inappropriate or criminal older men (although there is little indication of any sexual dimension to this). Even the ‘good’ men – Red, a married man who refuses to take advantage of her when given the opportunity, and to some extent the nightclub owner Max – both meet a sticky end. Everything seems to happen at some distance, and we have very little sense of Gwen’s own perspective on events. While the overt message might be that such young people need ‘understanding’, the film itself gives us very little help in doing so.

Boys in Brown (1949) was another Gainsborough picture, directed by Montgomery Tully. The boys of the title are young delinquents who meet at a Borstal (a reform school for under-18s) – although they are hardly boys. Richard Attenborough (who plays the lead character Jackie Knowles) was 26 at the time of filming, while his co-stars Dirk Bogarde (Alfie) and Jimmy Hanley (Bill) were 28 and 31 respectively: they look especially stylish in the Borstal uniform of heavy-duty brown woolen shorts.

On one level, *Boys in Brown* is a ‘prison break’ adventure movie; although it also has a strong element of social documentary. The Borstal is run by a sympathetic Governor, played by Jack Warner, who went on to star in the long-running BBC TV series *Dixon of Dock Green* (1955-76). In this role too, Warner is a kind of embodiment of British post-war social consensus: while somewhat prone to moralizing, he is dependable, paternal and wholly benevolent. The early scenes in the Borstal include documentary-style footage (presumably shot with amateur actors or inmates) showing how the institution works. The Governor is a liberal defender of the Borstal system – it is all about ‘making good’, and moulding the boys into ‘decent citizens’, rather than punishment – and he complains about the prejudice against ex-Borstal boys once they return to society.

However, the main focus of the narrative is on Jackie and his cohorts. Although initially reluctant, he is manipulated by Alfie and Bill to become involved in an escape plan. Jackie is assigned to steal a suit from one of the officers, but he is interrupted and manages to escape after hitting the officer over the head with a table lamp and fracturing his skull. The boys get away, but they are quickly recaptured, and face a possible murder charge. They give the Governor conflicting confessions, but eventually the officer recovers. Meanwhile, as in *The Wild One* and *Blackboard Jungle*, romantic love provides an additional motivation. Jackie mistakenly believes that his girlfriend Kitty has taken up with Bill, and this causes him to go along with the escape plot, in despair. At the end of the film, Kitty appears, and the Governor bends the rules in order to allow her to be reunited with Jackie, and give him something to look forward to on his release.

Like *Blackboard Jungle*, *Boys in Brown* establishes a clear distinction between the 'good' delinquent who is capable of redemption and the 'bad' ones, who are not. Jackie is led astray by other, more hardened criminal types at the start of the film, which is why he ends up in Borstal; and while there, he is easily manipulated, particularly by the predatory Alfie (played with a vaguely camp, demonic quality by Bogarde). Alfie fixes the lottery among the group so that Jackie (rather than he) has to steal the officer's suit, and he eventually tricks him into confessing; but when they are all given the opportunity to recant and apologise, only Jackie and Bill do so. We are invited to conclude that Jackie is weak and gullible, and somewhat out of his depth, but not basically evil or beyond saving. Meanwhile, Bill struggles to make it in the outside world, because of the prejudice he encounters when his background is revealed; but he too is essentially good. By contrast, Alfie and the other escapees are seen as beyond redemption. As the Governor concludes (a little sententiously) in the closing scene, his job is not just to separate the wheat from the chaff, but to understand why the chaff got the way that it did.

The film does not go far in attempting to answer this question, but (as in *Rebel*) it is clear that parents are to some extent to blame. We learn that Alfie was beaten by his father, and that Bill was an illegitimate child who was given up for adoption: when the Governor finds his real mother, she refuses to have anything to do with him. However benevolent the welfare system may be, it appears there is only so much it can do to address the causes of delinquency.

A very different solution is offered by my third film here, ***Cosh Boy***, directed by Lewis Gilbert and released in 1953. Also named *The Tough Guy* and *The Slasher*, it was among the first British films to receive the new X certificate, meaning it could only be shown to adult audiences. This may partly have been a response to the controversy surrounding the real-life case of Derek Bentley, a nineteen-year-old who had been hanged for the murder of a police officer earlier that year. Unlike the other films considered here, it also seems to have required a prefatory health warning of the kind familiar from the US films I have described:

By itself, the 'cosh' is a cowardly implement of contemporary evil; in association with 'boy', it marks a post-war tragedy – the juvenile delinquent.

'Cosh Boy' portrays starkly the development of a young criminal, an enemy of society at sixteen.

Our Judges and Magistrates, and the Police, whose stern duty it is to resolve the problem, agree that its origins lie mainly in the lack of parental control and early discipline.

The problem exists – and we cannot escape it by closing our eyes. This film is presented in the hope that it will contribute to stamping out this social evil.

This gives some insight into the film's analysis of the causes of delinquency, and its recommendations for treatment. While *Boys in Brown* and *Good Time Girl* show 'good' young people being led astray, the hero of *Cosh Boy* is brutal and violent, with no redeeming qualities. And while the other films are keen to offer a benevolent version of adult authority, *Cosh Boy* is much less sympathetic and much more authoritarian in its response.

The film's central character is Roy Walsh (played by James Kenney), the leader of a small gang who are seen mugging women in the opening scenes. Roy becomes infatuated with Rene (played by a young Joan Collins), the sister of one of the gang members. Although she rejects him at first, Roy eventually forces her to submit. When she informs him that he has made her pregnant, and urges him to marry her, he refuses to have any more to do with her: she subsequently tries to kill herself, and loses the baby. Meanwhile, Roy's mother Elsie (who is a single parent) is getting involved with a Canadian named Bob, who urges her to marry him so he can take Roy 'in hand' before it's too late. Bob works as an assistant manager at a dance hall, which becomes a target for the gang: in a bungled robbery, while a wrestling match is going on at the hall, they shoot and injure another member of staff. Later that evening, Bob arrives and learns what has happened. He decides to give Roy a thrashing before the police appear, in the belief that if the judge hears about this, his sentence might be lighter, which would be easier for his mother to cope with. The police arrive just as Bob is brandishing his belt: he tells them he is the boy's stepfather, as 'his mother and I were married this morning'. Seeing the belt in his hand, the police officer smiles, and suggests to his colleague that they go and arrest the other gang member first and come back for Roy later. Bob begins thrashing Roy; and in the final shot, we see the police walk away down the street as we hear Roy crying and howling in pain.

The film's analysis of the 'social evil' of juvenile delinquency, and its recommendations for the solution, are unequivocal. Roy's father is absent (possibly killed during the war), and his mother is indulgent and unwilling to control him. Roy is a brutal thug and a liar, but he is also a coward who bullies other people to commit violent acts on his behalf. He treats his mother like dirt, palming off stolen goods as a present for her birthday (which he has forgotten about). He aggressively forces himself on Rene, and immediately abandons her when she becomes pregnant. Roy is thoroughly unattractive, but he is also vain, and is constantly seen combing his hair. He is also jealous of Bob's relationship with his mother, which gives him a further motivation to carry out the robbery at the dance hall. When Bob finally steps up to deal with him, the message is very clear: Roy's grandmother says that they need 'a man in the house', and when Bob marries Elsie, she proclaims him as 'the boss'. The sense of barely suppressed violence escalates through the scenes of the wrestling match, and in the final scene, the taller Bob physically overpowers Roy: 'now we'll see who's boss in the house', he says. The police, far from the benevolent authority figures of *Boys in Brown*, clearly condone him in doing what they cannot: 'the trouble's all over', they say as they leave.

While some form of punishment is eventually meted out in *Blackboard Jungle* and even in *Boys in Brown*, *Cosh Boy* offers a much more disciplinarian and brutal response to delinquency. The film works very hard to preclude the possibility that viewers might 'identify' with Roy (however we understand that), although that isn't to say it might not happen: there are some echoes of James Cagney and Edward G. Robinson here, but Roy is much less charismatic and appealing. Ultimately, the film offers no possibility of redemption, or of any more liberal response to the problem. Like the anti-social hero of its title, *Cosh Boy* is nasty, brutish and short.

Violent Playground

The last film I want to consider here was made a few years later, and deserves a little closer attention. *Violent Playground*, directed by Basil Dearden and produced by Michael Relph, was released by Rank in 1958. It was the first of a series of ‘social problem’ films made by Relph and Dearden around this time, which include *Sapphire* (1959), about race relations, and *Victim* (1961), about homosexuality. These films were seen by their producers as an attempt to fulfill the ‘social and educative responsibilities of film’: according to the film scholar John Hill, a group of forty boys on probation was taken to see *Violent Playground* to give them ‘a lesson on the futility of juvenile delinquency’. Despite these liberal intentions, these films have often been criticized for their allegedly staid and conservative approach to social issues – although, at least in this case, I would argue that the film is rather more ambivalent and contradictory than this would imply.

The film’s central character is a detective, the appropriately named Jack Truman, played by Stanley Baker. At the start of the film, Truman has been investigating the activities of an arsonist known as ‘the Firefly’, but he is reluctantly reassigned to the Juvenile Liaison division – which provokes a good deal of ribbing from his colleagues. Truman follows up a story about two seven-year-old twins who have been caught swindling and stealing from local shopkeepers, and soon encounters their older sister Cathie Murphy (played by Anne Heywood) and their brother Johnnie (David McCallum). The children’s parents are absent, and Cathie is their main carer; although Johnnie is the leader of a street gang which controls the neighbourhood. Despite her initial resistance, Truman successfully encourages Cathie to send the children to a local youth club, and he gradually becomes romantically interested in her. However, the ongoing investigations into the Firefly come to focus on Johnnie. When Johnnie is refused entry to a smart hotel – and is mocked by the gang – he decides to target it. When the police arrive, there is a sequence of chases across the city, in which Johnnie runs over and kills Alexander, a Chinese laundry worker who has been following his orders and carrying out the arson attacks. The film culminates in an extended final sequence where Johnnie holds a classroom full of children hostage with a machine-gun, using them as human shields: he apparently shoots one dead, although the child later recovers. Through Cathie’s intervention, the children are eventually freed, and Johnnie is taken away by the police to face manslaughter charges.

Violent Playground combines aspects of police procedural and action drama with elements of documentary realism. The film is set in Liverpool – although none of the characters speaks with an authentic Liverpool accent (the Murphys are Irish). Nevertheless, it does make striking use of real locations, not least the densely populated working-class council estate (a public housing project called Gerard Gardens) where the Murphy family lives. The street scenes show the continuing ravages of World War Two bombs, with groups of children running wild across urban wastelands. As with *Boys in Brown*, the film has a didactic element: it was apparently based on an experimental juvenile liaison scheme run in the city, and it both explains and demonstrates (for instance in the youth club scenes) how the system operates. The key concern is that younger children (like the Murphy twins) will gradually work up from petty crimes like shoplifting to more serious crimes (like those committed by their brother). The aim of juvenile liaison, Truman is told, is to

catch such children before they commit their second crime. According to a statistic shown on the film's original opening titles, 92% of young people reached by Juvenile Liaison Officers did not subsequently reoffend.

The film offers several potential explanations of the causes of delinquency. On one level, there is an implicit recognition that it is more likely to occur in conditions of poverty, although this is not directly addressed. More explicit is the fact that both the children's parents are absent: the father, we are told, is a stoker, while the mother seems to have absconded to London and possibly remarried.

At one point, Johnnie complains to Truman that there are no jobs for people like him, offering a further sociological explanation. Shortly afterwards, however, Truman follows him to their flat, where members of the gang are dancing to records – and specifically to the rock-and-roll tune that plays over the film's opening and closing credits. The lyrics emphasise the connection between rock music and violence: 'I'm gonna play rough, rough, rough – I'm gonna get tough, tough, tough'. Johnnie throws himself into the dancing with wild abandon, although his repeated looks towards the uncomfortable Truman also reflect a kind of homoerotic exhibitionism. Meanwhile, the twins look on, trapped behind a chair placed on a table, which resembles a kind of cage. Eventually, the group surrounds Truman, still twitching along to the music like a group of hypnotized zombies. The scene dramatizes contemporary anxieties about the harmful influence of pop culture to a level of almost comic absurdity; and this association is reinforced later in the film, when Johnnie is given the machine gun, carried by one of the gang members in a guitar case.

Ultimately, however, the main source of Johnnie's delinquency lies elsewhere. The local priest (played by Peter Cushing) eventually explains to Truman that Johnnie had saved one of the twins from a fire when he was younger, winning considerable acclaim from the local people. According to the priest, Johnnie now feels compelled to recreate the scenes of his former glory – and thereby recall a status that he cannot otherwise attain. As this implies, the primary explanation for delinquency, in Johnnie's case at least, is psychological rather than sociological – a matter of individual pathology rather than social environment. This is reinforced by the ways in which he is framed: we first see him only in a back view, and there are several instances (not least in the dancing sequence) where he is lit and filmed (from low or titled angles) in almost expressionistic ways more characteristic of *film noir*. This is carried through into the final scenes in the school, where the style seems to abandon any pretence at documentary realism and approaches that of a psycho-killer movie. Yet while Johnnie is undoubtedly charismatic, he is also shown to be weak (as when he is mocked by the gang for being refused entry to the hotel), and his desperation ultimately borders on a kind of personal psychosis: as with *Cosh Boy*, the film works hard to resist any potential identification.

To some extent, *Violent Playground* seems to endorse a liberal approach to the problem of delinquency, although there are certainly limits to this. At the start, Truman favours 'walloping' miscreants, but he is quickly brought round to a less disciplinarian approach. Both Cathie and Johnnie initially resist his do-gooding overtures. She comments sarcastically 'you're going to put all this right, with your psychology and your big talk'; although when the twins do attend the youth club, she

seems impressed by their enthusiasm. There is a sense that Johnnie likewise might be capable of redemption. In one scene, he returns to the athletics club where he was formerly a star runner; although he is too out-of-condition to win the race.

Johnnie's running coach here is also the headteacher of the twins' school, a genial Welshman with the (not coincidental) name of 'Heaven' Evans. In earlier scenes, Heaven is portrayed as a powerful defender of his students' interests: he scolds one of his teachers for boring them, and warns Truman against 'fighting a war against my children'. All children are basically good, he assures Truman: they are not 'delinquents'. The priest also resists the intervention of the police, and their claim that they 'know better how to look after children': he supports Cathie and defends Johnnie, and appears to be making progress with him just before the net closes in on the Firefly. Even so, as the narrative proceeds, Johnnie evades or rejects these more liberal approaches; and when the priest tries to intervene in the final siege, Johnnie pushes him off a ladder.

At the same time, there are also contrary voices. In one key scene, Truman tells his police colleagues that Johnnie is 'potentially a good boy', but his views are contested by the Chief Inspector (played by George A. Cooper, who bears a striking resemblance to the authoritarian British politician Iain Duncan Smith). 'Everyone's potentially a good boy,' he says. 'Haven't we had enough of those crazy mixed-up kids who go around bullying, ganging up on people, beating up old ladies?' Truman protests, but the Chief Inspector continues: 'I'm a policeman. I've got respect for the law. I know it isn't fashionable. But let's spare a thought for the old lady. For you and yours. If these children want to try living outside the law, they can pay the price if they're caught. I'm tired of the tough guy fever.' He claims that the juvenile liaison approach won't make any difference to such young people – 'they're like lepers, only they don't warn you with a bell.' Truman resists this, claiming that what will make the difference is 'what always has – a lot of mum and a little bit of dad'. This is clearly framed as a debate: yet while Truman is the sympathetic hero of the film, the Chief Inspector is shot in close-up at the front of the frame, appearing to privilege his perspective.

The debate is cut short at this point, but it returns implicitly at the very end of the film. The police initially attempt to resolve the situation by force, but this proves impossible. Cathie agrees to go into the school to rescue the children on the basis that two ambulances will be sent – one for the injured child, and one (we assume) for Johnnie. However, the priest tells Truman that he has to 'do his duty'. When the siege is ended, Cathie is furious to find that there is only one ambulance: Johnnie is sent away in the police wagon, not as a sick individual in need of help, but as a criminal. While the child whom he apparently shot is revealed to be suffering from 'shock', and while he will only face manslaughter charges for killing Alexander, it's clear that he must be punished. As Truman concludes, 'you can feel too sorry for Johnny': 'we've had enough of this', he says. In one of the concluding scenes, Cathie seems to endorse his approach: there is a hint that there might be some romantic future for them, but ultimately (like Mary Magdalene) she kisses his hand and then crosses the street to where the priest is waiting in the church.

John Hill reads these scenes as evidence of the film's endorsement of conservative, and to some extent authoritarian solutions to the 'problem' of juvenile delinquency.

In my view, it is rather more ambivalent. As Paul Elliott points out, the film begins and ends, not with Johnnie but with the twins. After the other children are collected from the school by their mother, the (parentless) twins sit waiting on the stairs. Truman takes their hand, and together with Heaven, arranges to feed and look after them. Johnnie has to be punished, but the twins can be educated and thereby saved from a life of crime. There is no redemption for Johnnie, but the solution may lie in the next generation: if they can learn that the likes of Johnnie are not to be seen as role models, there is hope that the problem may be overcome. In the very last scene, we see Truman take the hand of a young black or mixed-race child whom he has prevented from stealing from a market stall. While far from radical, these conclusions imply a liberal, reformist approach, rather than a purely disciplinarian one, and certainly nothing of the *Cosh Boy* variety. As Tony Blair himself might have put it, the film calls for us to be tough on crime, but also tough on the causes of crime – an approach whose effectiveness certainly remains open to debate...

Conclusion

By the end of the 1950s, the juvenile delinquency film was pretty much dead. Of course, there have been countless films since that time which portray young people involved in anti-social behaviour or criminal acts of various kinds. From *Easy Rider* (1969), through *The Outsiders* (1983) and *Kids* (1995), and on to *American Honey* (2016), it's easy to think of examples. But it makes little sense to think of these as JD films. 'Juvenile delinquency' represented a particular way of framing the apparent 'problem' of youth crime that was especially characteristic of the 1950s. Within a fairly short period, it had become almost a cliché.

Indeed, shortly afterwards, the whole debate about juvenile delinquency was famously parodied in the 1961 film of *West Side Story* (directed by Robert Wise and Jerome Robbins). In the song 'Gee Officer Krupke', members of the Jets gang satirise the various explanations of delinquency, and many of the solutions proposed by the justice system, psychologists and social workers. Are delinquents 'sociologically sick' or just 'psychologically disturbed'? Are they 'depraved on account they are deprived'? Is juvenile delinquency a 'social disease'? And does it need to be treated by psychoanalysts or by the police? On one level, *West Side Story* might be seen as another film about juvenile delinquency; yet the most significant social problem it brings into focus is not so much about youth (or inter-generational conflict), but about race (in the ethnic rivalry between the two gangs). And of course, like its original text *Romeo and Juliet*, it is primarily a love story, for which social tensions and divisions serve primarily as narrative obstacles to romantic fulfillment.

On both sides of the Atlantic, the JD films were a key part of the wider social debate about juvenile delinquency. They helped to construct and frame the problem in particular ways, and to debate potential explanations and solutions for it. Yet in doing so, they were also compromised, both by the movie industry's attempts to reach the teenage audience, which would be vital for its future survival, and by its need to protect itself from public criticism. The industry actively courted controversy, not least because controversy is always good for box office; yet it also sought to reassure adult audiences of its responsibility and respectability. It is these

tensions that account for the contradictions within and between the films I have discussed.

By the beginning of the 1960s, several developments had rendered these dilemmas redundant, or at least replaced them with new ones. It wasn't that youth crime had somehow disappeared. Rather, the massive explosion of a commercially driven youth culture, followed in the mid-1960s by a more explicitly political youth-led counter culture, made the 'problem' of juvenile delinquency pale into insignificance, or at least seem quaintly old-fashioned. These developments, and their cultural consequences, will be addressed in future essays on *Growing Up Modern*.

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