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Author(s)	Éric Rohmer Éric Rohmer
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Ajax or the Cid: An Examination of

Ray's 'Rebel Without a Cause'

By Eric Rohmer

(Editor's Note: The following review of *Rebel Without a Cause* was written by Eric Rohmer in 1956 for *Cahiers du Cinema*. Then a critic, and like all French critics a fervent admirer of Nicholas Ray, Rohmer is now a leading director in France — *My Night at Maud's*, *Claire's Knee*, *Chloe in the Afternoon*. Published for the first time in English, at a time when Ray's work is gaining the appreciation here which it always enjoyed abroad, the text was translated by Constance Rowell.)

The readers of *Cahiers* know that we consider Nicholas Ray one of the greatest — the greatest Rivette would say, and I will gladly go along with him — of the new generation of American cineastes who only began their first campaign after the war. Despite the apparent modesty of his subjects, he is one of the rare individuals to possess his own style, his own vision of the world, his own poetry; he is an author, a great author. To be able to discover a constant theme throughout a work is a double edged weapon: proof of personality, but also, in certain instances, of dryness. Nevertheless it is the way of life imposed by the industry on the cineaste — the crew, technical directors, and administrators being so numerous that the presence of a leitmotif is, *a priori*, a favorable sign. The diversity of the subjects treated by Nicholas Ray, the richness of the variations with which he embellishes his three or four favorite themes would tend rather to make his originality less easily accessible than that of some of his rivals. It is impossible to find an easy label for his "message" as one can for John Huston. The kind of problems that interest someone like Richard Brooks do not interest him; it is the people themselves. There are no psychological subtleties of the kind dear to Mankiewicz. There is no flashy lyricism that immediately wipes you out, as in Aldrich's films. His tempo is slow, his melody the simplest, but there is an exact plan, such a gripping pace that not for a single moment are we able to become side-tracked. The most stunning scenes, as brilliant as they are, only emerge after a slow crescendo. It is harmonious rather than dazzling art.

The spirit of this film (*Rebel Without a Cause*) is similar to those preceding it and even the situations themselves offer very precise analogies. The youth of the heroes, their restive eagerness are the same for the characters in *Knock on any Door*, and *They Live by Night*. We have the theme of violence in *On Dangerous Ground*, and *In a Lonely Place*. The futile heroism of James Dean is also that of Mitchum in *The Lusty Men* or of Cagney in *Run for Cover*. The characters played by Natalie Wood is not so different, despite the age difference, than Joan Crawford's in *Johnny Guitar*. I will go further. All the feminine leads in his films, without exception, Kathy O'Donnell, Gloria Grahame, Susan Hayward, Ida Lupino, Viveca Lindfors and the two already mentioned, take on a rather surprising physical resemblance under his direction. Poet of violence, he may also be the only poet of love: it is the inherent fascination of these two emotions that obsesses him more than the study of their origin and of their near or distant repercussions; not rebelliousness or cruelty but that particular kind of ecstasy that a physical act, a situation, or violent passion can plunge us into, not desire, as in the case with most of his American colleagues, but the mysterious rapport that allies two people. I will add to all that, a sense of nature, discernible in the background — in the real as well as the figurative sense — that goes better with his feelings for color — even in his black and white films — than with his feeling for the plastic arts.

No other director knows how to impress such an evident family likeness on his character. They are marked with the seal of the same fatality, of the same moral or physical evil but which is not the result of an innate flaw. Look at the feminine faces with their soft cheeks, but with dark eyelids and heavy lips, or the masculine athletic silhouettes of the Ryans, the Dereks, the Mitchums — crushed, or rather, hunched over on themselves. James Dean pushes this appearance even further, a chrysalis unfolding with difficulty



James Dean in "Rebel Without a Cause"

from its cocoon. Withdrawn? A solitude more than wanted, an anguished search for affection, love, or friendship. I was speaking a moment ago of a linear development; I don't mean one of those beautiful straight lines characteristic of Hawks, that wide route of the epic, its calm advances, its haughty carriage. Here everything is circular, from gestures of love to the journey of the stars, from looks that linger rather than flee to those roving pursuits, those deaths that tie the final knot and give the heroes back their first innocence. Yes, that's it, that's what these men-children are missing — that kind of virginity with which the story tellers usually adorn their characters. They don't have the resigned complacency, nor the willful abasement of the man in the modern novel. They're not exactly guilty either.

Without a doubt, Nicholas Ray is a poet, but today I would like to stress the tragic side and not just the lyrical side of his latest film. Its form, first of all, a superficial aspect, but one which is not negligible. *Rebel Without a Cause* is a real

drama in five acts.

Act One: Exposition. The two adolescents and a young girl have just been rounded up by the police. Intervention of the parents. Discussion. The dialogue takes on the moral connotations from the very start which it will keep during the remainder of the film: why this rebellion? It doesn't even have the kind of particular depth necessary to the absurd. Neither is it the normal reaction of young disobedient animals. It is the honor of these boys and this girl which is at stake, an honor badly conceived, but which cannot be otherwise because of the milieu, and the circumstances, cannot provide any more noble training ground. Certainly too much naive psychoanalysis weighs heavily on the script, but I don't think it's necessary to think of it as an explanation or an excuse: it's part of the American decor. At least that is my final opinion. This psychological hodge-podge bothered me at the time as did the amorality, listlessness, I would even go so far as to say, stupidity, on the part of the characters. But the drama requires them to be that way. Let's move on and get to *Act Two*.

Our hero, played by James Dean, has promised to be good and go back to school. Sarcastic remarks from his comrades who know all about his pretensions to being a real "heavy" (tough guy). First lyrical interlude, comes in the class given at the Planetarium. Evocation of the apocalypse which barely succeeds in hiding the anxiety or pretended indifference in the empty eyes of our high school students. A rather simple idea on paper, but strong and profound in the manner of its presentation, stripped of all that is grave or silly. At the exit, new provocations. Dean tries to get out of it but his honor is at stake — not his honor as a small-time hood, but his honor, period — if he tries to duck out. Next a ruthless knife fight set against such beautiful countryside that one forgets that it's just a teenage ritual. That's not all, the second half has to be played that same night in an even more absurd and perilous game. That will be *Act Three*.

Note that up to this point it has been the willfulness of the characters motivating the plot: it will continue like this until the end of the film. Like Achilles, the hero retires briefly into his tent — that is to say his family — in order to think things over. Then he goes to the duel. Another scene of bravado, this time at night. Action packed events: they are going to drive their cars right off the cliff and try to jump out at the last moment. The rival gets killed. General all-round confusion. Dean has saved his honor, and won the love of the victim's girlfriend, the police commissioner's daughter, played by Natalie Wood. He goes home and tells his parents he is thinking of giving himself up to the police. They try to dissuade him. He is outraged by this show of cowardice. His father's weakness not only explains his son's obsession with the notion of honor, it justifies it, in the moral sense of the term, calls for it, demands it. Violence, distasteful scenes done with rare frankness. He gives himself up to the police, but the police don't want to take him in. During this time his comrades begin to suspect that he has betrayed them and begin searching for him. His only friend, a Chicano curiously named Pla-

tened, shoots; entrance of the police, pursuit in the bushes; nor the theatrical display, in the good sense of the word, (the cars with the blinding lights that circle the planetarium, the dialogue in the shed where Dean tries to reason with his comrade); nor the tragic conclusion (when the cop shoots down Plato as he appears at the top of the stairs, nervously squeezing his revolver that Dean, without his knowing, has unloaded). *We hang right in there*. We have gotten rid of the distance that we prudently use to separate the characters from ourselves. Their reasons are our reasons, their honor our honor, their insanity ours. They have left behind, to use modern jargon, the inauthentic. They have acquired, mer-



Nicholas Ray

ited, a tragic and heroic dignity that we couldn't quite make out in the beginning.

May one pardon my favorite vice of invoking the memory of the ancient Greeks. I can't help thinking, in good faith, that the parallel is not completely unintentional in the film. The idea of destiny pervades the works of all ages and of all nations. It is not sufficient in and of itself as a basis for tragedy: there must be some great issue at stake between the forces continually present around men and the forces in man, between the pride necessary to the individual and the pride necessary to society — or nature: and it punishes and plays pranks on whomever cannot accept it. A tragic hero is always, to some extent, a warrior geared to the pitch of battle, and then suddenly forced to perceive that he is not God. The person, once out of school, who enjoys reading Greek plays, will be struck by the presence of a theme which the critics have little touched upon, and which has had little influence on our French classics: the theme of *violence* (or if one prefers *hubris* or *orge*), a dangerous and culpable violence, but intoxicating and beautiful. The modern idea of destiny is not the banal and stupid kind of accident in which James Dean was killed, an actor at the height of his career. It is not the absurdity of chance but the absurdity of our condition or of our will. It is the discrepancy that exists between man's nobility and the futility, the uselessness of his endeavors. It is not that the preceding ages have been more wise than us, or have not given the best of themselves in their battles, as pointless as ours: but their more strictly regulated rules of honor at least offered some motive to enter even the most absurd conflict. What I like about this film is that the word *honor*, even though it is voiced by childish, blase, middleclass kids, loses none of the inalterable purity of its brilliance that these kids have kept alive just like their counterparts rodeo mavericks, the outlaws of the prairies, even though, moreover, their vanity, their stupid obstinacy, society, morals, and whatnot, even destiny, in short, may condemn them. They are not entirely guilty, nor are they entirely innocent, tarnished perhaps, only by the faults of their century. It is the role of the politicians and of the philosophers to show humanity brighter horizons than those she has decided to settle for; but it is the mission of the poet not entirely to believe in that kind of optimism, to extract from the dregs of his time the rare stone, to teach us how to love and at the same time to judge, to always keep alive in us the sense of tragedy. These reflections came to me one day, in a neighborhood cinema which was showing *In a Lonely Place*. Each time I see a new film by Nicholas Ray, these reflections come back to me, and especially after this last one, his masterpiece.

(Editor's Note: As the central programs in its current retrospective of *The Films of Nicholas Ray*, and for its first presentations in the newly remodeled Wheeler Auditorium, The Pacific Film Archive will host director Ray in person with four programs tonight and Tuesday, 7:30 and 9:30 both days.

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Tonight at 9:30, and Tuesday at 7:30, Ray will present his most famous film, *Rebel Without a Cause*, in a 35mm color cinemascope print from Warner Brothers studio vault. In recent years, *Rebel* has only been seen in 16mm or on television. At 7:30 tonight, Ray will introduce another of his color cinemascope classics from the fifties, *Bigger Than Life*, starring James Mason as a schoolteacher whose life is destroyed by drugs — in France, *Bigger Than Life* is considered Ray's greatest film, for its vigorous style, thematic integrity, and masterful acting.

Tuesday at 9:30 will feature the American Premiere of *More Wet Dreams*, a recent Dutch multi-episode feature with sections directed by Ray and Dusan Makavejev, among others. Ray was to have presented his new feature *We Can't Go Home Again*, but is still engaged in completing the editing. Sections from *We Can't Go Home Again* will be shown at the Pacific Film Archive as "work in progress" in the coming weeks.)