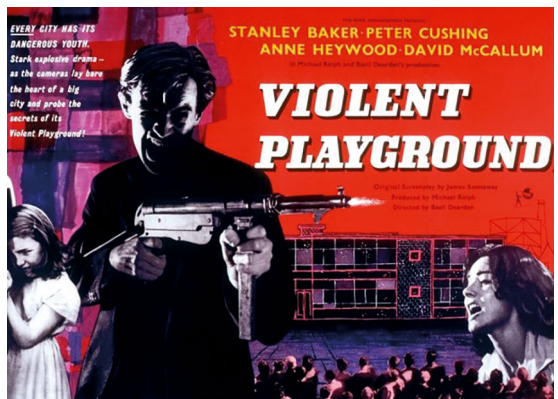


Violent Playground (1958)

Christian Krug

dir. Basil Dearden; prod. Michael Relph; screenplay James Kennaway; photography Reginald Wyer; music Philip Green. 35mm, black/white, 106 mins. Rank Organisation, distrib. Carlton Films.

Violent Playground is a British »social problem« film of the 1950s, a commercially and critically successful group of films now overshadowed by the better-known New Wave films of the late 50s and early 60s. These films addressed, and attempted to solve, »social problems« that seemed to threaten the ideological fiction of an affluent and consensual society in postwar Britain. Director Basil Dearden and producer Michael Relph had already dealt with racial conflicts amongst dock workers (*Pool of London*, 1951) and would go on to focus on racism faced by immigrants (*Sapphire*, 1959) and the laws governing homosexuality (*Victim*, 1961). The topic they returned to most often in their films, however, was class-inflected discussions of juvenile delinquency (*The Blue Lamp*, 1950; *I Believe in You*, 1952; and *Violent Playground*). Specifically, *Violent Playground* poses the question of whether a new generation of unruly working class youths can be successfully integrated into the social-democratic vision of a homogenous and affluent post-industrial Britain. In Marxist terms, the film enquires into the »reproduction of the relations of production«—a suggestive phrase, since this movie is both obliquely and centrally concerned with (blocked) commercial and sexual (re)production (Krug). The film projects this question onto the interplay between its two main protagonists, juvenile liaison officer Jack Truman (played by Stanley Baker), a former CID detective and now the representative of a newly professionalized welfare state, and Johnnie Murphy (David McCallum), the 16-year-old leader of a youth gang controlling the playground of a large housing estate for working class families in Liverpool. Reminiscent of 19th century domestic stage melodramas, the film »solves« its symbolic blockages paradigmatically, by re-shuffling its cast of characters so that the roles of »father« and »mother« (both conspicuously absent in this film) are reassigned, and heterofamilial structures reaffirmed: Truman not only sends



Johnnie to prison, but also falls in love with Johnnie's sister and then takes his place in the Murphy family as a new ersatz-dad to his younger siblings.

For all their ostensible social realism, British social problem films frequently rely on the conventional patterns and affective configurations of melodrama. On its release, reviews considered *Violent Playground* »an exploitation melodrama in the clothing of documentary realism« (Chibnall 148), and a trade publication, *Kine Weekly*, aptly referred to the film as a »sociological melodrama« (Burton and O'Sullivan 222). Dearden and Relph's films highlight melodrama's entanglement with realist traditions—still all too frequently simply considered its ›other.‹ For example, Johnnie is responsible for petty crimes that escalate quickly: He soon sets fire to warehouses (the film's suspense plot follows the arson investigation), and the last third of the movie features a tense hostage situation with Johnnie threatening to shoot a classroom full of children with a machine gun. This steady escalation is both an example of the film's melodramatic »mode of excess« and, at the same time, is anchored ›realistically‹ in contemporary sociological discourses whereby criminal acts invariably follow a logic of progression that cannot be controlled by the criminals themselves: Unless they are stopped, their behavior will inevitably spiral out of control. And while the film is based on actual policy enacted in 1949, and shot, on location, in the semi-documentary style of Dearden's *The Blue Lamp* (1950), these locations (a church, a school, an upper class hotel, or a working class playground) are highly selective emblems charged with a surplus of meaning. Characters similarly veer towards emblematic types (aptly called ›Truman,‹ ›Mary,‹ and ›Heaven‹), their bodily acts ripe with somatic meaning—and the film's overt didacticism turns out to be emotional and affective, rather than cognitive and rational. The film also borrows directly from American teen melodramas, specifically Richard Brooks' hugely successful *Blackboard Jungle* (1955). Demonstrating melodrama's transcultural adaptability, such intertexts are given a very specific British inflection: Johnnie obtains the submachine gun from a guitar case carried by ›Slick,‹ a youth dressed in the fashion of popular American crime films. At the film's specific historical juncture, this gun clearly conflates two threats—that of an encroaching Americanized popular culture and that of the recent past, since for a contemporary audience, Slick's MP 40 was readily identifiable as the standard weapon used by the Wehrmacht in World War II.

A melodramatic mode thus organizes the diverse elements of the film—its social and documentary realism, its ideological concerns, and some set pieces lifted straight from 19th century domestic melodrama—and furnishes them with a new aesthetic articulation. It also advances the sentimental politics of the film: In *Violent Playground*, supposedly intimate and personal ›feelings‹ are organized according to specific moral values and ideological norms and are recast as social and public (Krug). Questions of ›shared‹ or ›public feelings‹ are all of central importance in the film, which didactically teaches its characters (and audience) how to ›feel right.‹ Juvenile Liaison Officer Jack Truman, for example, starts off feeling too little; he is unable to emotionally connect to children or women, and cannot even properly ›read‹ emotions. In a series of lessons, he is literally being taught how to decode tears, develop empathy, and attain emotional maturity. By the end of the movie, his character combines the compassion demanded by a social worker with the strictness of a policeman. In the process, ›Truman‹ has also become a ›true man‹—with his rough masculinity tempered (Chibnall 148), he nostalgically evokes an early Victorian masculine ideal of bourgeois respectability achieved through discipline and emotional regulation (Krug).

As part of its sentimental politics, the last third of the movie also sets out to affectively interpellate both the film's public and audience. *Violent Playground* invites sentimental responses—pity, compassion, empathy—through displays of suffering. Again, this is done in a didactic fashion, and the setting is quite appropriately a classroom—school literally functions as an (affective) ideological ›apparatus‹ in the movie. In a series of shots in tight framings, filmed from just inside or just outside the huge classroom windows, Johnnie displays a series of terrified young hostages to a schoolyard full of parents, police, and mass media, threatening to kill the children. The windows serve as picture frames for this affective staging of intense emotions, as an interface for their projection onto the ›public‹ below—and as obvious metaphors for the cinema screen. This procession of bodies in distress is intercut with close-ups of faces from the masses of crying mothers, their faces full of anguish and despair. The film takes great care to establish their social inclusiveness, and the schoolyard, doubling for the cinema audience, becomes a model for a national community united through shared suffering. Fifteen years earlier, representations of war facilitated such community building. Now, the movie employs a working class juvenile delinquent, Johnnie, to do the job.

The film's sentimental politics and its melodramatic mode also ›affect‹ its ending. *Violent Playground* offers a bourgeois-familial solution to the problem of juvenile delinquency: According to Sergeant Truman, society simply misses ›a lot of Mum and a little bit of Dad.« In an effortless ideological sleight-of-hand, a policeman-turned-social-worker becomes a symbolic father. Having learned to feel right, the reformed ›true man‹ is inscribed into a sentimental myth that generalizes ›family‹ and ties patriarchy to the (post)industrial nation. It turns out that Truman descends from a lineage of shepherds, and the very last shot of the film shows him taking a mixed race child (aptly referred to as ›Sonny‹) by the hand and guiding him through the industrial wastelands of Liverpool, symbolically incorporating him into the national family—an extended patriarchy of a ›multi-ethnic Britain.«

While Johnnie has no place in Dearden's liberal vision for Britain, his emotive performance lingers on. Clearly intended as an identificatory figure for a British cinema audience that got progressively younger throughout the 1950s (*Violent Playground* was considered one of Britain's earliest teenpics, and David McCallum was lauded as the ›British James Dean« [Burton and O'Sullivan 220]), Johnnie and his gang represent an emerging ›structure of feelings‹ which this film only barely manages to contain—for now. Ten years later, Johnnie's gun-toting doppelgänger, played by Malcolm McDowell, will return to school in Lindsay Anderson's *If* (1968).

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