



MEMBER PICKS

Rumble Fish

‘A dreamy coming-of-age film, soundtracked by Stewart Copeland.’

Katie Sawyer, BFI Member

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away the film’s ending.

A contemporary review

Francis Coppola’s recent history – from the shabby forced sale of his Zoetrope studios through to the bloated antics surrounding *Cotton Club* – gives you no preparation for the sudden, heady rush of pleasure that comes with *Rumble Fish*. Shot back to back with *The Outsiders*, in Tulsa, and based again on a novel by teenage diarist S.E. Hinton, it could not be more different from the previous film. *The Outsiders* addressed the stagey Technicolor manners of 50s Hollywood melodrama (with a dash of Laughton’s *Night of the Hunter* thrown in). Too ritualistic to seem contemporary, too casual to look like a period pastiche, the film failed to fill the defiantly artificial space it had chosen. By contrast, the new film achieves the status of monochrome dream-poem almost effortlessly. It’s ironic, since the aesthetic models for *Rumble Fish* come not from Hollywood but lie embedded in European cinema, from Cocteau and Buñuel to the Nouvelle Vague.

More than anything, the dialogue (filtered by a sound mix of expressionist extremes) sets the tone: ‘What is this? Another glorious battle for the Kingdom?’ asks the Motorcycle Boy (Mickey Rourke), poet, dreamer, living myth, unthinking Adonis with his lazy smile. And in the moment of abstraction provoked by such articulacy, such vision, his younger brother Rusty-James (Matt Dillon) finds his belly sliced open by the knife of a defeated teen gang leader. The Motorcycle Boy is truly a figure briefly returned from the dead – an unexpected, unwelcome visitor, eventually killed for keeps by the bullet of the town’s unforgiving cop. What it is from the past that needs to be forgiven never becomes entirely clear. Contemporaries claim him as an idol, a dream lover, a creature who has been to California, where the dreams are made. And through all this barrage of intention and desire, the Motorcycle Boy remains an enigma – as charming to the audience out here as he is to the audience of hangers-on that he would vaguely like to cast off in the film.

Monochrome. Black and White. Where Mickey Rourke is ‘the Pied Piper’, a soul searching for destiny, Rusty-James is a soul beset by dogmatic certainties. Lusting after the lissom Diane Lane, actively trying to recreate the days of the gangs and rumbles which he associates with his elder brother, he is blind to his brother’s sense of the fragile beauty of the world (symbolised perfectly in the sequences where the fish in the pet shop window, but only they, are revealed to possess brilliant colour). His eyes are open only to immediate consequences – fighting for status, mouthing off against school, reaching straight for the liquor cabinet at an impromptu lakeside party in someone’s empty house. And presiding over these two balls of mercury, hair matted with sweat, cigar butt clamped between teeth, Dennis Hopper turns in one of his relaxed performances as their amiably alcoholic father. ‘You poor baby,’ he calls Rusty-James, an assessment that’s damningly simple. ‘It’s too bad,’ he says of his elder son’s eventual and inevitable death, shot while liberating fighting fish (rumble fish) from the pet store and carrying them to the

river. Both descriptions are complete, and both remain as enigmatic as the Oedipal crisis of the boys themselves – brought up in the absence of a mother who ran away to California and teamed up with a man of substance.

But the substance of this narrative, simply described, is not much more than a kind of winsome adolescent nostalgia. The substance of the film as a whole lies elsewhere. It lies in the fabulous Expressionist compositions, where frame angles tilt alarmingly to turn buildings into precipices and streets into mean alleys. It lies in the jazzy sound and nervy jump-cuts of the Motorcycle Boy walking down the Strip at night, a scene that would almost match into one of Belmondo's manic strolls in *Breathless*. It lies in the heavy-lidded lyricism of the two boys' fantasies, charmed by their own physical beauty, figures from Cocteau, with Matt Dillon looking down on his own inert body and dreaming of a series of tearful tributes after he has been coshed with a tyre iron. And, most improbably of all, it lies in the cynical moments of fantasy (à la Buñuel) which show Dillon's convent girlfriend leering down at him, dressed in nothing but black panties and bra, from a schoolroom cupboard or the shelf over a machine-tool shop floor.

Such a mixture of impossibly distinct visions may sound like a kind of cinematic raspberry sundae. But Coppola's sense of excess is teasingly well controlled. Stewart Copeland's bulging, swinging, rapping musical score suggests something on the edges of musical time – an amalgam of swing, reggae and romantic slush. And in Benny the Barman, Coppola supplies a figure who summarises the tightrope act of the film – played like some gibbering character role from a 40s B-movie, the part is in fact filled by contemporary musician-poet Tom Waits. It's clear the pool-bar has always been there, and yet with every appearance on camera it seems that the whole locale is a fiction which he (and the cinema) calls into being at will.

With clocks ticking crazily on every wall, falling silent only in the looming presence of the policeman, *Rumble Fish* advertises itself as a film about the desperate loss of innocence that reduces life after childhood. But the experience of the film catalogues a thousand moments of adult restlessness. It makes a history of them, almost, by its regular reference to the Motorcycle Boy's trip to California, and by his brother's eventual fulfilment of his dream-riding to the edge of the ocean. When the Motorcycle Boy first appears to save Rusty-James it's on the icon of 50s macho – a Harley Davidson motorcycle, native American-built, symbol of postwar prosperity, bearer of a thousand simple dreams with its own simple 1,000cc engine. When, at the end, Motorcycle Boy steals a motorcycle and prepares for his personal sacrifice in freeing the fish, it's on a Kawasaki (albeit with the name scratched out), a Japanese import, symbol of foreign sophistication, icon of consumerism, with its delicate clockwork of moving parts and dull, modern efficiency. *Rumble Fish* draws the arc between the eras marked by the two machines, from the romantic to the prosaic – and the spark that passes along it, however ignited by European cinema, is the continuing vitality of the American dream, pictured in the images and sounds of teenage angst.

Chris Auty, *Sight & Sound*, Spring 1984

RUMBLE FISH

Director: Francis Ford Coppola
Production Companies: Hot Weather Films, Zoetrope Studios
Executive Producer: Francis Ford Coppola
Producers: Fred Roos, Doug Claybourne
Associate Producers: Gian-Carlo Coppola, Roman Coppola
Unit Production Manager: Thomas M. Hammel
Production Supervisor (Effects): David Marconi
Production Co-ordinator: Teri Fettis
Location Manager: Paul Tompkins
Researcher: Lillian Michelson
Assistant Directors: David Valdes, Mark A. Radcliffe
Screenplay: S.E. Hinton, Francis Ford Coppola
Based on the novel by: S.E. Hinton
Director of Photography: Stephen H. Burum
Effects Photography: Robert Primes
Camera Operator: Bokhof
Computer Camera Operator: Mat Beck
Assistant Photographers: Dustin Blauvelt, Steve Hiller
Video Engineer: Brian Lee
Video Technicians: C. Mitchell Amundsen, David Smith
Electronic Cinema/Systems Engineer: Murdo Laird
Special Visual Effects: Marty Bresin, Robert Spurlock
Process Co-ordinator: William G. Hansard Jr
Special Effects Co-Ordinator: Dennis Dion
Special Effects: Ralph S. Winiger
Graphic Designer: Dennis Gassner
Editor: Barry Malkin
Production Designer: Dean Tavoularis
Set Designer: Robert Goldstein
Set Decorator: Mary Swanson
Set Artist: Roger Dietz
Set Dressing Co-Ordinator: Carl Carlson
Set Dressers: Don Elmlad, Sue Belknap
Costume Designer: Marge Bowers
Wardrobe: Ernie Misko
Women’s Wardrobe: Kathleen L. Gore
Make-up: Tim McNally, Jeff Kennemore
Title Design: Tavoularis Design
Titles: Pacific Title
Opticals: Computer Opticals
Music Composed and Performed by: Stewart Copeland
Music Editor: Robert Randles
Choreography: Michael Smuin

Sound Design: Richard Beggs
Sound Recording: Randy Thom
Sound Mixer: David Parker
Sound Re-Recording: Richard Beggs, James Austin
Supervising Sound Editor: Edward Beyer
Sound Editors: Maurice Shell, Michael Jacobi, C.J. Appel
Sound Effects Recording: Allan Beyer, Randy Thom, Doug Hemphill
Stunt Co-Ordinator: Buddy Joe Hooker
Stunts: Buddy Joe Hooker, Bill Hooker, Tim Davison, Freddie Hice, Dick Ziker
Pool Adviser: Charles Ursitti
Physical Adviser: Mark Johnson

Cast

Matt Dillon (*Rusty-James*)
Mickey Rourke (*Motorcycle Boy*)
Diane Lane (*Patty*)
Dennis Hopper (*father*)
Diana Scarwid (*Cassandra*)
Vincent Spano (*Steve*)
Nicolas Cage (*Smokey*)
Chris Penn (*B.J. Jackson*)
Larry Fishburne (*Midget*)
William Smith (*Patterson the cop*)
Michael Higgins (*Mr Harrigan*)
Glenn Withrow (*Biff Wilcox*)
Tom Waits (*Benny*)
Herb Rice (*black pool player*)
Maybelle Wallace (*late pass clerk*)
Nona Manning (*Patty’s mom*)
Domino (*Patty’s sister*)
Gio (*Cousin James*)
S.E. Hinton (*hooker on the Strip*)
Emmett Brown (*Mr Dobson*)
Tracey Walter, Lance William Guecia (*alley muggers*)
Bob Maras (*policeman*)
J.T. Turner (*maths teacher*)
Keeva Clayton, Kirsten Hayden, Karen Parker, Sussannah Darcy, Kristi Somers (*lake girls*)

USA 1983
94 mins

REGULAR PROGRAMME

Projecting the Archive: Trottie True (aka The Gay Lady) + intro by BFI Curator Josephine Botting
Tue 6 Jul 18:00
Silent Cinema: Nell Gwyn + intro by BFI Curator Bryony Dixon
Sun 18 Jul 15:30
Seniors’ Free Archive Matinee: Cabin in the Sky+ intro by writer Marcus Powell
Mon 19 Jul 14:00
Experimenta: Born in Flames + discussion
Thu 22 Jul 18:00
Relaxed Screening (tbc)
Tue 27 Jul 18:00
Terror Vision: Children Shouldn’t Play with Dead Things
Thu 29 Jul 21:00
Seniors’ Free Matinee: Personal Services + intro and Q&A with author, Graham Rinaldi
Mon 9 Aug 14:00

BFI SOUTHBANK

Welcome to the home of great film and TV, with three cinemas and a studio, a world-class library, regular exhibitions and a pioneering Mediatheque with 1000s of free titles for you to explore. Browse special-edition merchandise in the BFI Shop.
We’re also pleased to offer you a unique new space, the BFI Riverfront – with unrivalled riverside views of Waterloo Bridge and beyond, a delicious seasonal menu, plus a stylish balcony bar for cocktails or special events. Come and enjoy a pre-cinema dinner or a drink on the balcony as the sun goes down.

Join the BFI mailing list for regular programme updates. Not yet registered? Create a new account at **www.bfi.org.uk/signup**

Projecting the Archive: The Blue Lagoon + intro by actor Susan Stranks (young Emmeline)
Tue 10 Aug 18:00
Member Picks: Almost Famous
Thu 12 Aug 17:45
Silent Cinema: The Wit and Wisdom of A.A. Milne + intro by Bryony Dixon, BFI Curator
Sun 15 Aug 12:40
Thundercrack! + intro by Jane Giles, author of ‘Scala Cinema 1978-1993’
Sat 21 Aug 17:00
Relaxed Screening: Stand Clear of the Closing Doors
Tue 24 Aug 18:00
Woman with a Movie Camera Preview: Souad + pre-recorded Q&A with director Ayten Amin
Tue 24 Aug 18:00
Terror Vision: Dr Terror’s House of Horrors
Thu 26 Aug 20:40

BECOME A BFI MEMBER

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at **bfi.org.uk/join**

BFI PLAYER

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view.

See something different today on **player.bfi.org.uk**