



● Lisa Langlois as a pink-haired gun moll in Mark Lester's *Class of 1984*, a film that raises the sword of anarchy only to fall upon it

Mark Lester's **The Class of 1984**

Filmed in Toronto in 1981, Mark Lester's *The Class of 1984* was released in the U.S. in '82, and has just received its Canadian release. It is easy to see why this exploitation action picture has taken so long to get a release; for whatever its virtues as cinema, it is virtually unmarketable.

The story is of a dedicated young teacher who arrives at Lincoln High (actually Toronto's Central Tech) to find it under a reign of terror by a gang of young punks. Driven beyond endurance by their assorted outrages, he finally decides to fight fire with fire, suggesting a remake of *The Blackboard Jungle* but with Charles Bronson in the Glenn Ford role. Unfortunately, the marketing of the film features the punk villains in full regalia under the logo "We are the future," — exactly the sort of campaign designed to drive away the adults who might be drawn to the sort of social problem film that *Class of 1984* pretends to be, while drawing in a punk crowd repelled by the way their own kind are portrayed as larcenous, destructive murderers, dope dealers and pimps. Having raised the sword of anarchy, *Class of 1984* promptly falls on it.

The picture was directed by American Mark Lester, a man with one of the more strangely cultish careers in the contemporary cinema. Best known for *Steel Arena* and *Truck Stop Women* (an impossibly lurid film about a group of

women, led by the late Claudia Jennings, who run a diner as a cover for prostitution, then must fight the encroachment of the Mafia. I am not making this up). Lester attempted to move into the mainstream with his one major studio film, *Roller Boogie*, for UA. An awesomely stupid movie mounted on the pudgy thighs of Linda Blair which was actually worse than William Levey's *Skatetown, U.S.A.* The Canadian industry was dumb enough to star Blair in *Wild Horse Hank*, but at least didn't put her in short skirts. People who think that the critic's life is one long film festival should spend a couple of months seeing everything that opens. It would be an illuminating and depressing experience.

Roller Boogie failed to aid Lester in crossing over to the mainstream and alienated those fans who enjoyed his claustrophobically violent earlier efforts.

Class of 1984 returns Lester to his earlier territory, with extremely mixed results. The final half-hour of the picture, when Perry King as the teacher turns the tables on the baby-faced psychotics, and the orchestration of the film's violent denouement rises to a bloody crescendo, with five deaths presented in quite novel ways and with a striking use of the possibilities provided by a modern high-school, is weird and fascinating.

These final scenes are the only time Perry King is especially convincing, because King is an actor with such very strange eyes that there is always something slightly demonic about him (cf. *The Possession of Joel Delaney*). Thus in the film's relentlessly flat dialogue scenes, the audience is always waiting for him to level the joint.

There is some very good acting in the film, particularly from Roddy McDowall as a biology teacher who flips out and

decides to teach his class at gun point; Stefan Arngim as Drugstore, the most convincingly criminal of the punk gang; and Timothy Van Patten as the head of the gang, in a thoroughly authentic portrait of a very bright psychopath. Someone — either Van Patten or the picture's writers — have done a thorough job of research on the symptomology of the classic psychopath, and Van Patten gives evidence of being by far the most talented of his sprawling family of actors.

Yet *Class of 1984* falls down on the very themes it proclaims. According to a title card, there are thousands of acts of violence committed every year in American schools, and the setting-up of Lincoln High as a hotbed of violence is quite thorough. Students are forced to pass through a metal detector, halls are covered with graffiti, and teachers sidle nervously through corridors, as if expecting to feel the bite of the blade every time they turn a corner. Yet the manifestation of undergraduate delinquency at Lincoln High suggests that it is a few bad apples committing all the crime.

While the anarchy is supposed to be pandemic, it is just as localized as it has always been in teen problem movies. The only time a filmmaker has been able to display a state of non-stop chaos in a high school was in Renee Daalder's overly intellectualized *Massacre at Central High*, which neatly eliminated all adult authority figures to present continuous anarchy as a social system.

Unfortunately, the makers of *Class of 1984* seem at odds over what the movie is about. On the one hand is director Mark Lester, whose attitude seems that of the character in his 1977 film, *Stunts*, who when told it was time for a real movie scene, said "Fuck dialogue, let's blow something up!!" On the other

hand is producer Arthur Kent, brother of Peter Kent, and, when I was at Carleton University, the fair-haired boy of the School of Journalism. Kent, with his background in journalism, no doubt wanted to make a serious film about the problem of violence in the schools.

There are also writers Tom Holland, the black wit who scripted *Psycho II*, who seems responsible for Roddy McDowall threatening to kill his students, and John Saxton, creator of the *Ilsa* series, whose main contribution seems to be turning the delicious Lisa Langlois into a pink-haired gun moll. But the basic creative tension between Kent and Lester seems to have turned the film into an exercise in creative schizophrenia, with the socially important dialogue scenes losing out to Lester's delight in destruction.

John Harkness ●

CLASS OF 1984 d. Mark Lester exec. p. Mark Lester, Merrie Lynn Ross p. Arthur Kent sc. Mark Lester, John Saxton, Tom Holland story Tom Holland d.o.p. Albert Dunk music Lalo Schiffrin line p. Marilyn Stonehouse loc. man. Barbara Kelly 1st. a.d. Tony Lucibello 2nd. a.d. Libby Bowden 3rd. a.d. Lee Knippelberg p. asst. David Hart, Simon Clary cont. Pattie Robertson p. coord. Angela Heald ad. rec. Peter Shewchuk boom Herb Heritage art d. Jeff Holmes hd. make-up Ken Brooke make-up artist Patricia Green hair Albert Paradis, James Keeler wardrobe Lynne Mackay, Nadia Ongaro ward. asst. Gail Filman gaffer Chris Holmes best boy Tony Eldridge rigging gaffer Paul Bolton electric Ronnie Chegwidin gen. op. Herb Reichl key grip Ronnie Gillham best boy Glen Goodchild grip John Davidson Jr., James B. Wood ed. Howard Kunin 1st. ed. asst. Tim Eaton 2nd. ed. asst. Gary Gegan stills Shin Sugino stunt co-ord. Terry Leonard, Bobby Hannah sp. eff. Colin Chilvers p.c. Guerrilla High Prod. Ltd. English Cda. dist.: Citadel Films 35mm/colour running time: 97 min. l.p. Perry King, Merrie Lynn Ross, Roddy McDowall, Timothy Van Patten, Stefan Arngim, Michael Fox, Keith Knight, Lisa Langlois, Neil Clifford, Erin Flannery, David Gardner.