

Pump Up the Volume

starring *Christian Slater* (1990)

I. Sociopolitical/Historical Context and Synopsis

- “Do you ever get the feeling that everything in America is completely fucked up?” The film is set in late 1980s during a time of gross materialism, rapidly alternating social trends, and a trend of indifference approaching apathy.
- Socially-inept high school student Mark Hammond, in failing to make contact with his friends back east via short-wave radio, goes on the air as Happy Harry Hard-On as a means to vent his frustrations. His unrestrained broadcasts generate a huge following among his fellow students (as well as a few teachers), and tremendous conflict as he begins to mockingly expose dubious practices by the school's faculty at large.

II. Human Nature

- Mark Hammond begins his transmissions purely as self-interest, which grows into enlightened self-interest as he discovers that his broadcasts provide the means for his fellow students to cope with the same trials and tribulations.
- The way he brushes off one listener's query about suicide prompts the fellow student to follow through with it, awakening Mark towards a higher calling – not merely enduring a bad situation, but taking active steps towards rectifying those conditions and prompting his listeners to do likewise.
- The heart of the film rests upon how so many people are afraid to speak up over things which trouble them greatly. Mark first does so through the anonymity of his pirate radio broadcasts, and many of the students begin speaking out as well through what anonymous channels are available to them. The proliferation of protests gradually breaks through to give many the courage to speak out directly.

III. The Good

- The film does a wonderful job of presenting “g's” by way of the numerous cliques students tend to divide themselves into and the “G” of the universal truth that they are all parts of a greater whole. Groups who normally despise one another find a common voice in Happy Harry Hard-On and some to discover that their similarities are far more significant than their differences. At the start of the movie, listeners are isolated as they listen to his broadcasts individually and converse with other individuals over the phone. They later begin to congregate at a baseball field “where the reception's the coolest”, breaking down social barriers in their pursuit of a greater reality.
- Throughout the movie, Hard Harry questions evidence of “g's” conflicting with the “G” - ranging from simple teen angst to betrayals of basic trust to challenging the fact that the authority they all must answer to is detrimental to its purpose. While the students lack the power to bring about needed reform, they gradually draw the attention of the adults who can – and eventually do.

- As Hard Harry, Mark comments about the unrestrained idealism of the 1960's and how so many of those ideals fell by the wayside and the current generation is the one which must contend with the results. This is further embodied in Mark's father, Brian Hunter – once a prominent voice in “fighting the system”, he's now “part of the system” as the school commissioner for the State of Arizona.
- During the PTA meeting (as well as several other conferences among adults), there is a clear division of “g's” – while some express that it's just “kids being kids”, others promote censorship (“Are we going to let this person be heard by anyone who can turn a dial?”), while others call for becoming a vigilante mob (“I say we go after this guy!”). Creswood opts for a “politician's approach” (small-g, talking a lot yet saying nothing), while Brian Hunter tries to invoke rational discussion to arrive at a mutually-beneficial solution (big-G).
- The school's principal, Loretta Creswood, is a clear-cut avatar of utilitarianism. The fact that she 'roots out undesirables' (“trouble-makers” and those with low SAT scores) by expelling students for trivial offenses and simply hounding others into dropping out of school, as well as retaining public funds for those students in order to provide better education to 'desirable' students (which is illegal), are perfectly acceptable as “it's all for the good of the school”.

IV. Other Relevant Course Concepts

- The First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States is predominant throughout the film – not only in Mark's pirate radio broadcasts, but in the subsequent actions taken by numerous students. Musical selections throughout along with banners and graffiti pronouncing “the truth is a virus”. Arthur Watts, representing the FCC, pays a lot of lip service to First Amendment rights, though he's quick to complain when people expressing those rights target him.
- The Human Predicament is reflected on multiple levels. On a higher level, the students as a whole revolt against the obscured tyranny being perpetrated by Creswood and Murdoch. On a lower level, the anarchy of being teenagers forms into the various competing cliques among students – the “stoners”, the “jocks”, the “yuppies”, the “loners”, the “geeks”, and so forth.
- Though primarily focused on Administration (rather than Government), Creswood repeatedly violates Generality, Prospectivity, and Due Process.

V. Political/Historical Reality vs Hollywood

- Most of the film's portrayal of the high school microcosm is fairly accurate. Much of the source material for the film was taken from the screenwriter's own journals he kept during high school and his sister's experiences as a teacher in a similarly-acclaimed school in Canada – though, by and large, there's a certain universality to being a high school student in the western hemisphere.
- While some aspects such as “the boy gets the girl” exist, the movie is largely devoid of many traditional “Hollywood” elements. The only real violation I have been able to determine is the delay in calling the FCC into the pandemonium.
- If anything, *Pump Up the Volume* was a decade ahead of its time. The “pained voice crying out into the darkness” has evolved into the less-controversial medium of the internet by way of blogs, FaceBook, and other online journalism.