

## Cheerleader Rivals and Other Maniacs: "Bring It On," "The Way of the Gun," and "The Watcher"

Written by Mike Schulz

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### **BRING IT ON**

It took me quite a while to catch up with the battling-cheerleader hit *Bring It On* because, quite frankly, most teen flicks these days make me feel about a hundred years old. It's not just that the casts of these films seem obscenely young, or that adults are completely marginalized – those qualities have been staples of the genre at least since *Rebel Without a Cause*

What's most bothersome to me is the routine crumminess of the presentation: stilted performances, terrible dialogue, and lame plotting, and I feel like I've seen them all a thousand times before. Like many of you reading this, I'm a John Hughes baby, whose teen years were filled with the likes of *Sixteen Candles*, *Pretty in Pink*, and our generations's Rosetta Stone, *The Breakfast Club*

. While the plots were nothing to shout about, even the most minor characters had some sharp lines, and although we were saddled with the likes of Andrew McCarthy, Judd Nelson, and Jon Cryer, we were also treated to the wit of Molly Ringwald, Anthony Michael Hall, and Ally Sheedy, who could take hackneyed situations and give them something resembling poignance.

Sadly, there are no current filmmakers who have been willing, or able, to approach the

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sensitivity-to-teens style of Hughes (our best hope, Amy Heckerling, recently crapped out with the aptly titled *Loser*), and the only thing that keeps me attending the latest crop of teen flicks are a few talented young women that occasionally appear in them, such as Julia Stiles (wasted in

*Down to You* but sensational in *10 Things I Hate About You*), Mena Suvari (always good), and the star of

*Bring It On*

, Kirsten Dunst. As far as presentation is concerned,

*Bring It On*

is typically trashy, with some crushingly bad dialogue (the script is by Jessica Bendinger) to boot and nothing in the way of interesting, or even adequate, plotting. But it has a great visual perk – well-choreographed cheerleader routines are a great guilty pleasure – and it has Dunst, who adds perk of a different sort.

Not that it matters, but the story centers on the cheerleaders of the white-bread Rancho Carne High School in California, who learn that their prize-winning routines were stolen from a squad in the mostly-black area of East Compton. Unless this is the first teen flick you've ever seen, it won't surprise you that the two schools start out as rivals for the cheerleading championship but eventually learn to respect one another (which has more to do with the film's crossover marketing than it does with real life), and the whole enterprise should be unwatchable. That it isn't is testament to the joyousness of the routines themselves – the only time that director Peyton Reed's work rises above the pedestrian – and the joy in Kirsten Dunst, playing the head of the Rancho Carne squad.

Dunst was amazingly enjoyable in last summer's unfairly neglected satire *Dick*, and despite playing a much more limited character here, she has the same frisky energy this time around, with an added dose of teen-vamp sensuality that's as comically charged as it is alluring. Like Mena Suvari in

*oser*

, it's obvious that Dunst deserves something better than the drippiness she has to work with here, but teen movies like

*Bring It On*

need every ounce of energy that she gives them. Teen movies might not be in better shape than they were in the John Hughes heyday, but at least a few of their performers still provide a spark.

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