



***Quadrophenia* (1979)**

If you like this film try: *Brighton Rock* (Boulting, 1948); *24 Hour Party People* (Winterbottom, 2002); *Human Traffic* (Kerrigan, 1999); *A Clockwork Orange* (Kubrick, 1971); *This is England* (Meadows, 2006); *Saturday Night Sunday Morning* (Reisz, 1960); *The Outsiders* (1983, Ford Coppola)

Based on The Who's 1973 rock opera of the same name, *Quadrophenia* (1979) is set in Brighton in 1964 at the height of the Mods and Rockers phenomenon. These youth subcultures became the focus of widespread media attention and public anxiety, prompting sociologist Stanley Cohen's influential study *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (1972), on how young people were constructed as threatening social deviants through processes resembling modern-day witch hunts.

At its heart, however, *Quadrophenia* is a sympathetic coming-of-age story about a young person's search for identity, belonging and purpose. Phil Daniels stars as Jimmy Cooper, a charismatic but troubled Mod whose life revolves around scooters, style, music, collective identity and drug-taking as part of the British Mod youth subculture that emerged in the early 1960s.

Writing for *The Quietus*, music journalist and teen culture historian Jon Savage argued that the film was not entirely historically authentic. He recalls that *Quadrophenia* "annoyed me at the time ... because it was not historical. It was smearing late seventies ideas of street credibility over sixties mod." Yet Savage ultimately acknowledges the film's enduring appeal, describing it as "an excellent teen movie" with "a great soundtrack, strong cast" and "an archetypal loner-vs-the-gang storyline." He also highlights the young cast, including Phil Daniels, Ray Winstone, Phil Davis and Mark Wingett, many of whom later enjoyed successful careers.

The film's enduring coolness, combined with its universal themes of fitting in, standing out and finding oneself, helps explain why *Quadrophenia* achieved cult status. According to film historian Stephen Glynn (2014), it developed a dedicated audience beyond its original release. Its association with Mod culture, revivals, home video releases and continued circulation enabled it to remain culturally relevant for decades. Glynn argues that the combination of subcultural specificity and broader themes of youth, identity and belonging allowed *Quadrophenia* to evolve from a film about a youth cult into a cult film in its own right.

For Phil Daniels, *Quadrophenia* represented an important role. Three years earlier, he had appeared in a small part in *Bugsy Malone* (1976), which featured in our previous season, *Films of '76*. Earlier in 1979, Daniels had also appeared alongside Ray Winstone in Alan Clarke's notorious borstal drama *Scum*.

Although Daniels became something of a cult heart-throb, his appeal differed from that of a conventional leading man. Cult film scholars Kate Egan and Sarah Thomas (2013) describe the "cult star" as a performer whose status derives from dedicated fan investment and cultification rather than mainstream popularity alone. Such figures are often valued for their distinctiveness, marginality or association with cult texts, and Daniels embodied this model through his authentic working-class image, "cheeky London lad" persona and rebellious edge rather than being a polished teen idol.

Quadrophenia can also be understood as a social realist film because it focuses on the everyday experiences of working-class youth, exploring their frustrations, limitations and social pressures in a relatively authentic, unglamorous way. This contrasts with more romanticised representations of 1960s Britain associated with "Swinging London".

Director Franc Roddam's background in television was crucial in shaping the film's social realist aesthetic. Roddam emerged from a tradition of British television drama characterised by location shooting, working-class characters, everyday social issues, naturalistic performances and documentary-like immediacy. All of these

qualities are evident in *Quadrophenia*. Roddam's casting methods and the improvisational freedoms granted to the young cast contributed significantly to the youthful vitality visible on screen. As a result, the film avoids romanticising the Mod subculture and instead presents it as a believable social world shaped by class, youth alienation and everyday experience. While Savage may be correct in identifying certain historical inaccuracies, the film nevertheless captures something authentic about youth, identity and belonging.

References

Cohen, S. (1972) *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers*. London: MacGibbon & Kee.

Egan, K. and Thomas, S. (eds.) (2013) *Cult Film Stardom: Offbeat Attractions and Processes of Cultification*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Glynn, S. (2014) *Quadrophenia*. London: Wallflower Press.

Savage, J. (n.d.) 'Baker's Dozen: Jon Savage's favourite teenager films'. *The Quietus*. Available at: <https://thequietus.com/interviews/bakers-dozen/jon-savage-favourite-teenager-films/10/> [Accessed: 4 September 2026].