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## Whaddya Rebellin Against? : Youth Rebellion and Domesticity in "The Wild One" and "Rebel Without a Cause"

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# Whaddya Rebellin' Against? *Youth Rebellion and Domesticity in The Wild One and Rebel With- out a Cause*

*Rebel Without a Cause* and *The Wild One* are both classics of American cinema. They helped establish the careers of James Dean and Marlon Brando respectively, whose portrayals of angst-ridden teenage rebels greatly influenced their own public images. One might even risk the statement that these characters are more iconic than the films which introduced them to audiences. Both James Stark, played by Dean (*rwac*), and Johnny Strabler, played by Brando (*wo*), have become widely recognized as icons of youth rebellion, to the point that their behavior and clothing style have become signifiers of a disdainful stance towards authority, often parental. However, as this article will argue, their rebellion was not a reaction against parental authority and the domestic sphere, but the absence and non-normativity of that authority. Although in the context of the 1950s the fact that both characters begin to show signs of conforming provided audiences with a happy ending to the films, it also undermined the rebellious potential of their protagonists. As a, viewers connected with certain non-normative subcultures identified with secondary characters, who they saw as the true rebels of these films. Such a subcultural reading will be discussed in the second part of this article.

The rebellion of both protagonists has similar roots. They may be seen at first as making a stance against society in general, as can be illustrated by Jim's behavior at the police station in the beginning of *rwac* and Johnny's famous answer to the question "Whaddya rebellin' against Johnny?" – "Whaddya got?" in *wo*. However, the source of their rebellion can be traced back to the domestic sphere. This issue is fairly straightforward in the case of Jim Stark, as the viewer is provided with insight into his family life and witnesses the quarrels of the Stark household. The situation is not as obvious in the case of *wo*. The viewer never sees Johnny's parents, and the only piece of information the viewer gets about his family is through Johnny's quip "My old man used to hit harder than that" uttered when he is beaten by a vigilante mob. As this is the only reference to Johnny's family, the audience never learns the extent of domestic violence and abusive behavior in the Strabler family home. One cannot even be certain whether Johnny is being truthful, although the movie does seem to support such a notion. In the context of the 1950s, when the normative nuclear patriarchal family was considered to be the cornerstone of society, the fact that Johnny seems to lack any relationship with his closest relatives is in itself a strong suggestion that his behavior is caused by aberrations in the domestic sphere.

Before proceeding to an analysis of these characters, the situation of young people in the 1950s needs to be briefly discussed. Youth culture was a new phenomenon, which was connected to a greater amount of leisure time and financial resources at the disposal of young people. This was, amongst other things, a consequence of the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, which regulated child labor. Apart from such tasks as babysitting, newspaper distribution or acting, it prohibited nonagricultural child employment below the age of 14, set limited work hours for children aged between 14 and 16, and prohibited people under the age of 18 from working in hazardous occupations, such as coal mining or the manufacturing and storing of explosives (FLSA, sec. 203 (l), 212, 213 (c), 213 (d)). By giving children more leisure time this act revolutionized the domestic sphere, and, along with the rapid rise in the number of schools and school attendance in the interwar period, facilitated the development of youth culture. The postwar affluence of Americans gave young people more financial independence and created a demand for goods targeted at the youth market, which in turn caused supply to grow. This was already acknowledged

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in the late 1940s, when marketers recognized the validity of young consumers coining a new term to describe this demographic: teenager.

Adults were wary of these changes, fearing that they may lead to a spike in juvenile delinquency. Comic books, music, movies and other forms of entertainment meant for young people were seen as corrupting agents and were subsequently censored (Cohen 257–261). In 1953, the United States Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency started its work, and in 1954 Fred-eric Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent* was published, influencing the said committee to focus on comic books. These fears were fueled by the belief that young people were prone to corruption, and that they required strong moral guidance and protection not to give in to delinquent tendencies (Cohen 256). This was also connected with the protestant work ethic, and the belief that idleness may facilitate negative behaviors among teenagers. Furthermore, this *de facto* moral panic can be associated with the second Red Scare, during which many believed that the abandoning of normative American values of the period might result in undermining the position of the US during the Cold War (Cohen 256). Needless to say, youth subcultures, owing to their non-normative values, were seen as particularly problematic.

The protagonists of these movies embody these fears. The first scenes of both productions depict their antisocial behavior. In the case of *WO*, Johnny Strabler's gang rides into a small town where it disrupts a regular (i.e. non-subcultural) motorcycle race and steals a trophy. *RwaC* begins with a scene in which Jim Stark lies down in the street, drunk, and falls asleep. He quickly is established as a loner who shuns society in general and has a tendency of getting into trouble, which already caused the family to move several times. This is later reinforced when he gets into a switchblade fight with a greaser on his very first day of school. During the film's first scene the audience also meets two other characters that have trouble confirming, and with whom Jim will later run away: Judy, who is taken into custody suspected of solicitation, and Plato, arrested for shooting puppies with a handgun. The scene also establishes the domestic problems these characters struggle with. Plato's parents are divorced, and he has no contact with his presumably estranged father, and virtually none with his constantly traveling mother. Judy pines for her father's attention, but she does not receive it, which leads her to consciously behave in a manner that she knows he would disapprove of. This is made clear during the police station scene, when Judy allows officer Fremick to call her father to pick her up from the station and is subsequently angered by the fact that it actually will be her mother who will retrieve her.

In *RwaC*, Jimmy is portrayed as a troubled individual, but he is not a menace to society. This role is played by members of the greaser subculture, represented in the film by Buzz's gang. This is not surprising considering that during this period deviant youth subcultures were seen as a serious social problem that greatly contributed to the rise of criminal behavior among young people. For this reason, *WO* shows Johnny Strabler as a more dangerous individual. Not only is he a member of such a subculture, but he is also the head of a motorcycle club that engages in asocial behavior. Furthermore, he is partially responsible for the chaos that ensues after his gang comes to the unnamed town in which the films action takes place. Wanting to emphasize the sub-cultural characteristics of the group, the movie's creators included elements of jive in the slang spoken by Johnny's gang. This is surprising, as jive was not used by white teenage subcultures in the 1950s (Dalzell ch. 5); it was used among African Americans, and people associated with the jazz scene,

including hipsters. As such, this can be read as tying the group with African American culture, which, owing to the racial tension and widespread discrimination in the 1950s, frames Johnny and his colleagues as social outcasts. This depiction of them as under the influence of cultural elements that came from a discriminated group furthered their association with groups that were then deemed a danger to society. One may ponder whether this racial element has influenced the name of Strabler's gang, Black Rebels Motorcycle Club.

Although both protagonists initially are portrayed as severely troubled or menacing, they are also shown as having the capacity for conforming, which strongly depends on their re-connecting with the domestic sphere, particularly in relation to the father or a father figure. In the case of *RwaC* Jim's father, Frank, is presented as weak and effeminate, although from our contemporary perspective he could be seen as a good parent who is tender, willing to support his son and understand him rather than to impose a strict set of rules and be emotionally aloof. Yet the film strongly emphasizes that such behavior is not only feminine but also unbecoming of a man. During a scene in which the father, in a frilly apron, is cleaning up after he dropped a tray with a meal he was carrying for his ill mother, Jim actually mistakes him for his mother. As Jim desires his family to fit into the patriarchal schema characteristic of the period, he proceeds to scold his father for the situation, strongly suggesting that wearing an apron, preparing a meal, and getting down on his knees to clean up the mess he made are inappropriate for the man of the house.

The following scene emphasizes the contrast between Frank and a "real" father. It focuses on Judy's family, and further elaborates on the establishing scene from the police station, which showed her as unable to cope with the fact that her father no longer shows her the affection that he used to when she was younger. It also reinforces the suggestion found in the initial scene that Judy's desire for her father's affection is misguided and inappropriate of a woman of her age, carefully underscoring that she is the source of the problem, not her father. From a modern perspective, her father's behavior is far from acceptable fatherhood, and includes calling his daughter a "dirty tramp", violently rubbing off her lipstick, and slapping her when she gives him a peck on the cheek. However, the interpretation that Judy's father is also portrayed as a non-normative parent is possible. In such a reading he can be seen as representing the opposite end of the spectrum when compared with Jim's father: he is overly detached, terse, violent, and abusive. Whereas the first interpretation shows her as an immature individual who is emotionally unstable – a sexist view of women common in that period – the latter shows her problems to be a product of a dysfunctional family, as in the case of Plato and Jim.

The role of the proverbial "man of the house" in the Stark household is taken over by Jim's mother and his grandmother. They are strong-willed, demand respect, and have the final word, often shutting up the father. This suggests that Jim's feelings of being torn apart are actually caused not by the fact that his father and mother disagree on many issues as he claims, but that they do not fit into the normative gender roles of the 1950s. The screenplay notes confirm this, straightforwardly stating that the movie was supposed to depict a tender yet troubled teenager whose confusion is caused by his parents' non-normative behavior, describing his gentle father as a "nowhere" person, and his dominating mother as "wounding" and destructive (Halberstam 485). Indeed, in the final scene in the movie, Jim's father vows to assume a typical patriarchal role, subjugating the mother, for the greater benefit of the family, even if he would prefer to be a tender man. The family's troubles seem

to disappear instantly, and they walk away happily, forgetting Plato's death, which occurred only minutes earlier.

Jim's tenderness, referenced in the script, can easily be read as closely tied to his lack of knowledge how to "be a man". From the modern standpoint it is easy to treat his tenderness as a positive element. However, the movie is ambiguous on the issue, as can be seen on the example of Jim's tender approach to Plato. Recognizing that Plato, virtually abandoned by his parents, has had a difficult life, he approaches him in the emotional manner that was considered essentially feminine in the 1950s, rather than a more 'masculine' approach based on discipline. Owing to this, Jim plays a role that contributes to Plato's death as he is incapable of effectively coming into control of the situation during the film's climax. His conduct not only becomes a token of his incapability to 'be a man' in the 1950's meaning of the term, but also of his naïveté and immaturity. Jim, by relying too strongly on emotions rather than on discipline, becomes an example of the negative effects of "Momism," in which emotional attachment to the mother hamper a child's – particularly a male child's – development (Campbell and Kean 198). However, in the context of the movie this is only indirectly linked to the mother, as it is Frank who is incapable to "act as a father" towards Jim and teach him "how to be a man". This, however, is a consequence of the domineering attitude of his own mother, who still lives with her middle-aged son, and over whom she still exercises her influence.

As mentioned previously, such themes of domesticity are not as explicit in *The Wild One*, yet they are nonetheless present. Apart from a reference to the protagonist's presumably abusive father, he tellingly lacks any domestic elements and never mentions any other family ties. Johnny is the head of a motorcycle gang comprised of juvenile delinquents who live by their own rules; it can be said that structurally the gang serves as a substitute for family for its members. The movie emphasizes the incompatibility of such a subcultural lifestyle with family life a number of times, including numerous cases of law-breaking, brawls, drunkenness, reckless behavior, and vigilantism. The issue is also reflected on a symbolic level (in a somewhat heavy-handed manner) during Johnny's fight with Chino, the head of a rival motorcycle club. Johnny punches Chino, who falls through a store display in which two mannequins are dressed in male and female wedding attire. The next shot shows Johnny pulling Chino out of the ruined display; the mannequin in the wedding dress is gone, and the one in a bridegroom's attire is leaning on the smashed window, decapitated – the traditional family has been symbolically destroyed by a juvenile brawl.

By assuming an authoritative position in the hierarchy of the group, Johnny can be seen as a father figure for it. However, similarly to Jim Stark, he lacks the patriarchal male qualities that would allow him to be successful in this task. The gang follows him under normal circumstances, yet he is incapable of stopping or containing the chaos that follows his group's arrival in the small town. He is even unable to command any respect when they accost Kathie, his love interest and the facilitator of his slow, but visible turn towards domesticity. The only way he can help her is by physically removing her from the scene, an act that certainly requires some sort of agency, but raises doubts whether he really has any authority among the group. The situation is only resolved when the police arrive to the town and separate the vigilante mob formed by the townsfolk and the two gangs. Johnny's potential for conforming to the rules of society is then acknowledged by sheriff Stew Stinger, who makes the decision not to jail him, recognizing that his actions ultimately



were not directly his fault, but a reaction caused by the lack of proper guidance. As such, the sheriff's role is akin to that which Ray Fremick assumes towards Jim at the police station in *RwaC*: both become father figures, willing to help the two adolescent men find their way, although the viewer can easily surmise that they also do not intend to tolerate any further behavior of the sort that originally got the protagonists into trouble.

Both movies ultimately have a didactic message: conform to the normative American values of the time, or play an active part in the deterioration of the social order. This message seems to be intended for adults, emphasizing the negative impact the lack of male guidance has on young people, a view that was present even in academic publications about preventing juvenile delinquency at the time (e.g. Rosenfeld 138–140). As such, the movies actually addressed one of the more problematic issues of the period. The normativity of the 1950s was tiring for many, and this didactic aspect may be seen as an attempt to counter what Barbara Ehrenreich in her book *The Hearts of Men* called the “flight from responsibility”. It pertained to men who rejected the standards of the times and abandoned their patriarchal role, often along with their families, leaving them in a very precarious position. In *RwaC* this is illustrated with a lack of a strong father figure, which impedes the child's development and leads to violent, reckless and delinquent behavior, an issue even more pronounced in the case of Plato, whose father is absent. *wo* is more extreme in this context, insinuating that by abandoning one's familial duties one may cause or contribute to a chain of events the implications of which are much more serious than those portrayed in *RwaC*. In the movie, the bikers' presence in the town leads to a disintegration of the social balance among the townsfolk, and allow old conflicts to reemerge, as a result of which the area descends into chaos. This acts as a catalyst that allows some of the denizens to justify the acting out their own violent tendencies.

However, younger audiences and those of a more non-normative persuasion often preferred to view the rebellious figures in these movies in a romanticized manner, either ignoring or overlooking the didactic message of these productions (see Kerouac 24; Lee 779–780; Raskin 126), which strongly influenced the way that Johnny and Jim were culturally remembered by later generations. However, certain subcultures that adopted non-normative values seem to have been conscious of the fact that both these characters were effectively rebelling *for* domesticity, which likely is the underlying reason for which they have not resounded deeply with such subcultures, which offered a different reading of these texts. It is true that the “Whaddya got?” exchange was often associated with the outsider or rebel image, and that both protagonists helped popularize a certain visual style associated with non-confirmity, yet today both may be considered popcultural clichés, which are referenced mostly in mainstream texts. For example, *Indiana Jones and the Crystal Skull* established Mutt, Indiana Jones' son, as a rebel by having that character first appear on-screen dressed the same way Marlon Brando was in *wo*. However, this claim should not be understood as deprecating the cultural value of the movies, the acting, and their innovative quality owing to the fact that issues of juvenile delinquency were a new topic in cinema.

Why these characters were not as influential for subcultures can be explained by Sarah Thornton's notion of subcultural capital, which creates a distinction between traits that are considered “authentic” by subcultures and those which are not. Thornton notices that subcultures tend to create “us-against-them” dichotomies, in which they see themselves as alternative, cool, independent,

authentic, non-conformist, having insider knowledge, being heterogeneous, young and classless. This is contrasted with the perceived characteristics of society-at-large as being mainstream, square, false, conformist, basing on easily accessible information, being homogenous, family-focused and classed (Thornton 115). As such, both protagonists' authenticity is severely undermined: Jim desires to have a "normal" family, and Johnny ultimately proves to be a person who will uphold the law rather than break it, as can be seen in the scene in which his gang starts participating in the riot. Furthermore, upon finding a love interest, which symbolizes his yearning for the domestic, he starts realizing that his tumultuous lifestyle is incompatible with a stable home.

The characters that appealed to certain subcultures as true rebels actually are secondary characters: *wo*'s Chino and *rwac*'s Plato. In gay readings of the latter movie, Plato often is interpreted as homosexual. The movie's screenwriter, Stewart Stern, claimed that Plato was not intended to be gay, but he also added that if he had the chance to re-write the film he would strongly emphasize the fact that his rebellion stems from the fact that he is discriminated against because he is believed to be gay (*The Celluloid Closet*). Although other interpretations of Plato are possible, Sam Kashner's *Vanity Fair* article "Dangerous Talents" made the claim that Nicholas Ray, the movie's director, James Dean and Sal Mineo, who plays the character, all intended Plato to be gay, to the point that Jack L. Warner had been told to make sure that the final cut of the movie does not include any references to homosexuality. Nonetheless, certain elements that allow for the interpretation of Plato as a gay character remained in the movie, such as a picture of Alan Ladd in his school locker, his strong attraction to Dean's character, as well as several lines of suggestive dialogue. Owing to Plato, *rwac* is sometimes recognized as a movie the plot of which focuses on gay themes (e.g. Dyer, Castiglia 209–212). Mineo himself later made the claim that he portrayed the first gay teenager in American cinema (Kashner).

Plato, unlike Jim, does not strive to return to the status quo – he desires to be accepted as he is. He ultimately is killed by a police officer when he refuses to throw away the gun he is holding. Within the context of gay readings, this scene has been interpreted in many ways. Christopher Castiglia sees Plato as becoming mentally unstable as a result of the fact that Jim looks at him as a son rather than as his love interest (209–210), while Richard Dyer considers Plato's death symbolic punishment for his sexual orientation (*The Celluloid Closet*). Regardless of the interpretation of that scene, Plato is the true rebel: he does not consider conforming a possibility, and he is prepared to assert himself despite the risk it poses within the hyper-conformist culture of the 1950s.

Lee Marvin's performance as Chino in *wo* was based on one of the leaders of the Boozefighters Motorcycle Club that participated in the Hollister Riot in 1947, of which the exaggerated press accounts served as a basis for the films plot. The movie further contributed to the negative view of bikers. This depiction had a massive impact on the one-percenter (i.e. outlaw) biker gangs and contributed to the growth of such movements. Hunter S. Thompson describes the deep fascination with Lee Marvin's character among members of the Hell's Angels, and mentions that the president of the San Francisco chapter, Frank Sadilek, bought the sweater Lee Marvin wore as Chino (60).<sup>1</sup> Other one-percenters had a similar approach. Sonny Barger,

1 Dwayne Epstein claims that it was Barger himself who bought the sweater (90). Thompson's account is corroborated by pictures.



one of the founders of the Oakland chapter of the Hell's Angels writes in his autobiography that he always identified with Chino much more than with Johnny. Barger also noted that the clothing of the members of Johnny's gang was so similar one could consider them to be uniformed (26), which introduced an element of homogeneity that again has very low subcultural capital, a somewhat ironic statement taking into consideration such elements as the leather vests with the Hell's Angels logo worn by members of the mc. This contrasts with Chino's gang, in which each member dresses differently, emphasizing individuality.

The rebel is a problematic figure in American culture. On the one hand, such characters are seen as self-reliant individuals who represent a number of American ideals and are capable of changing the us for the better. On the other hand, rebellion has its negative connotations, particularly in light of abandoning certain American core values and having a potentially negative impact on society. This issue was exceptionally problematic in the 1950s, during which conformity, despite being seen as a characteristic trait of communism, became a widespread phenomenon in the us, to the point that towards the end of the decade voices of criticism against it – including in the context of men – were sometimes raised by the popular press (Ehrenreich, ch. 3). Both these movies gently prod this issue, but never adopt a positive view of rebellion, seeing it as a symptom of deeper social problems. In *RWAC* the protagonist rebels against the non-normativity of others, while in *WO* Johnny's rebellion is caused by the fact that he had to flee the domestic sphere. Nonetheless, both protagonists – and, in some cases, secondary characters – managed to attain iconic status as rebels, which emphasizes the romantic manner in which rebellion is viewed in American culture.

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