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Portrayals of Female Teen Rebellion in Hollywood Films of the 1950s

In writing on postwar teenage rebellion in his book *Growing Up Absurd: Problems of Youth in the Organized System*, social critic Paul Goodman declares, “Our ‘youth troubles’ are ‘boys troubles’” (Goodman 13). Since its publication in 1960, his book has come under criticism for its dismissal of female rebellion, particularly by sociologist and anthropologist Wini Breines in her book *Young, White and Miserable: Growing Up Female in the Fifties*. While Breines asserts that female rebellion was present in more nuanced forms than male rebellion, she still overlooks the various and prominent cultural portrayals of girl rebels.

In *Rebels: Youth and the Cold War Origins of Identity*, author Leerom Medovoi states:

Rebel girls...actually played a much larger imaginative role in postwar American culture than Breines might grant. Many of the decade’s principal bad-boy narratives, after all, featured an (admittedly overshadowed) rebellious girl who acts as the bad boy’s female counterpart and romantic partner. (Medovoi 266)

These rebellious girls were not just limited to the role of romantic interest. In juvenile delinquency exploitation films such as *Teenage Devil Dolls*, *High School Hellcats*, *Girls’ Town*, *Reform School Girl*, *The Violent Years*, *Teenage Doll* and *So Young So Bad*, teenage girls take center stage, acting out rebellion in ways that may depart from the traditional rebel boy narrative, but can hardly be called nuanced.

In this paper I will look at the portrayals of female teen rebellion within both mainstream and exploitation film. In my examination of four films – *Rebel Without A Cause*, *Teenage Rebel*, *High School Hellcats* and *The Violent Years* – I will pay specific attention to the roles that sexuality, class and family life play in the rebel identity of teenage girls.

Rebel Without A Cause

Nicholas Ray's 1955 *Rebel Without A Cause* focuses on the rebellious Jim Stark (James Dean) and presents the character of Judy (Natalie Wood) as his love interest. However, Judy acts out her own rebellion throughout the film.

One of the ways Judy does this is through her relationship with Jim. In his book, Medovoi, picks up on this trend in 1950s film and literature:

It may be said that postwar girlhood obtained rebelliousness by establishing a romantic bond with the bad boy as companionate opponents of suburban domesticity. All of the girl characters under discussion here, in one way or another, become linked to a suburban counterimaginary through their romantic relations with a boy whose masculinity exceeds and challenges domesticated manhood" (Medovoi 313).

As Judy falls in love with the sensitive Jim and rejects the more typically masculine Buzz (Corey Allen), we can see this at play. However, Judy also rebels in ways that have nothing to do with Jim or her romantic relationships.

We first see Judy at the police station, wearing red coat and matching red lipstick. Compared to the dull browns of the police station, Judy in red stands out as representative of desire and sexuality. As Judy explains to a police officer why she was wandering the streets at night, we see how she uses sexuality to rebel. Judy says that her father hates her: "He called me a dirty tramp, my own father." Judy explains that she put on a new dress to go out to the movies with her family and when her father saw her in her red lipstick, he began to rub it off.

Clearly, Judy is struggling in her attempt to both assert her independence and sexuality, while at the same time, maintain a relationship with her father and be his little girl. As we see in some of the subsequent films, this is hardly unusual and many of these rebellious female

characters represent a place of struggle for the conflicting demands of young women in the 1950s.

Judy's rebellion manifests in other ways, as well. Judy smokes cigarettes before school and is part of an informal gang of teenagers who torment Jim and Plato (Sal Mineo). Judy again expresses her rebellion through her sexuality as the gang surrounds Jim's car. Judy looks seductively at Jim, sidling up against his car and sitting on the hood. The camera zooms in on Judy's dangling legs as Buzz takes a pocketknife and punctures the tire. Judy appears thrilled by the violence of Buzz and Jim's subsequent knife fight as well as the "chickie" race they partake in.

While Judy acts brazenly sexual among her peers, at home she still must negotiate being a good daughter and a sexual young adult. At breakfast one morning, she kisses her father on the cheek. He tells her she's getting too old to be doing that, so she kisses him again and he slaps her. Upset, Judy yells, "This isn't my home!"

Indeed, throughout the film, Judy's attraction to Jim and his alternative masculinity seems to be a rebellion against her parents' white, middle-class, suburban existence, which she finds herself struggling to fit into as she gets older. However, by the end of the film, Judy's rebellion takes a traditionally maternal turn. While in an abandoned mansion, she and Jim pretend to be newlyweds on a tour of their new home, in a way playing versions of their own parents. She, Jim and Plato sit on a couch in a family-like pose. As she sings Jim a lullaby and tells him she wants a man who is gentle and sweet, she seems to take on her inevitable role as a maternal figure. At the end of film, Jim reconciles with his father and introduces Judy to his parents, welcoming her back into a domestic setting.

Judy seems to embody the paradoxical desires of young women of the 1950s, caught between their own desires of independence and sexuality and the demands of society to be

wives and mothers. While Judy does not actually partake in the violence featured in *Rebel Without A Cause*, she clearly rebels in her own, less overt ways.

Teenage Rebel

Edmund Goulding's *Teenage Rebel* (1956) is an Oscar-nominated melodrama about a teenage girl, Dodie (Betty Lou Keim), who stays with her estranged mother, Nancy (Ginger Rogers), while her wealthy father secretly gets married.

Dodie begins the film being precocious, snobby and overly formal with her mother, stepfather and half-brother. It's revealed, however, that Dodie is acting in self-defense, as she feels neglected by her wealthy father and abandoned by her mother.

Nancy is only able to break through to Dodie's when she is firm with her, showing that Dodie's life has been severely lacking in discipline. Nancy explains to Dodie that leaving her was the hardest thing she has ever done, but it was necessary as she was very unhappy with Dodie's father. This confession seems to soften Dodie, as she has had to live with her father her entire life.

Dodie's rebellion is not sexual, but plays out in being independent and indifferent. Throughout the film Dodie attempts to let people into her life, but has difficulty. Dick (Warren Berlinger), a neighbor boy who is paid by Dodie's step-father to take her on some outings so that she can get out of the house, ends up earning Dodie's affections. Dodie claims she is in love and seems open to letting people into her life, until Dick's girlfriend from Texas shows up. This male rejection, compounded with the rejection she feels from her father, puts Dodie over the edge. The issue with Dick never gets resolved and Dodie makes plans to return home. Before she can return, Dodie learns the truth of why she came to stay with Nancy – her father is getting married. Dodie becomes more withdrawn and

tells her father she'd like to spend the rest of summer vacation at her boarding school. Without hesitation her father calls the school to make arrangements, but Nancy protests that Dodie will be lonely there. As Nancy leaves, Dodie chases after her car and falls down. Nancy stops to let her in and Dodie says she hates living with her father and wants to come live with Nancy. The two hug and drive away together.

While Dodie's rebellion takes a very different form than Judy's, the basis of the rebellion is similar: feeling disconnected from her father. Dodie is drawn to Nancy because she offers both attention and discipline. This type of rebellion is very much what Breines writes about in her book:

Middle-class white girls' disaffection was barely discernible because no one thought to consider it and because its expression was often oblique. In contrast to boys, stricter gender rules for girls dictated covert dissidence. Girls' deviance was more circumspect and less dramatic than boys. (Breines 129)

Dodie's cold, indifferent behavior stands out as different from the other types of rebellion discussed in this paper, but nevertheless is a form of rebellion.

High School Hellcats

Edward Bernds' *High School Hellcats* (1958) is a film that uses the trope of a good kid who gets involved with a bad crowd but redeems herself in the end. Joyce (Yvonne Fererson) is the new girl who attends a nice, suburban all girls' school where she meets Connie (Jana Lund), the bully of the class.

Early on, the film shows similarities to *Rebel Without A Cause*, as Joyce's father complains about her sweater being too tight and her wearing too much lipstick. The film

also shows similarities to *Teenage Rebel*, as Joyce is an only child whose father is a lawyer and mother is always busy playing cards. In a scene very reminiscent of *Rebel Without A Cause*, Joyce's father slaps her for wearing only her slip in the house.

Joyce is impressed with Connie and her friends and eagerly accepts Connie's invitation to meet her at a theater in town. The theater is actually abandoned and is the meeting place for the Hellcats, Connie's gang. Connie describes the Hellcats as "a home away from home...unless you don't need us." The Hellcats drink alcohol, perform poorly at school and only respect their young teacher Miss Davis (Rhoda Williams), because she actually respects them as people.

Joyce half-heartedly becomes a Hellcat. She shoplifts but leaves money on the counter and secretly meets up with studious college boy Mike (Brett Halsey), whom Connie has forbade her from seeing. Mike disapproves of Joyce's involvement with the Hellcats, but she explains, "I have to belong – it's a long story Mike and you wouldn't understand. For someone like you it's easy, you seem so secure." Joyce says her parents ignore her and that's why the other girls joined, too. "If we had the right kind of homes, we wouldn't have to...if our parents showed some interest in us," she explains.

The only interest Joyce's parents show in her is negative. Again, in a scene reminiscent of *Rebel Without A Cause*, Joyce's father tells her she wears too much lipstick. Regardless of her parents' complaints, Joyce remains well behaved. At a Hellcats party, Joyce refuses to drink and dumps her date that Connie had set up for her. During the party, Connie's date introduces "sardines," a game in which the lights are turned off and people grab each other. Connie falls down the stairs during the game and dies. Because the Hellcats broke into a home while the family was away, Connie is left in the basement as the party disperses.

At school, Dolly (Susanne Sidney), Connie's second in command, starts a rumor that Connie was pushed down the stairs. Dolly clearly doesn't like Joyce and so Joyce plans to quit

the Hellcats. Before she does, Dolly asks that she meet at the theater one more time for an emergency meeting. When Joyce arrives, Dolly is the only one there. Dolly confesses that she pushed Connie down the stairs out of jealousy. Dolly lunges at Joyce with a knife, but Joyce ducks and Dolly falls off the balcony to her death.

Joyce is let off with a warning from the police about how telling the truth about Connie's death could have prevented Dolly's death as well. Miss Davis calls Joyce's parents to let them know what happened. She explains that Joyce is a good girl and that she will be coming home with Mike, whom Miss Davis says can help Joyce. As the two return to Joyce's home, they are welcomed into the arms of her parents in an ending that is again similar to *Rebel Without A Cause*. As mentioned before, throughout the film Joyce remains a good kid who gets involved with questionable people but never truly does anything wrong. Like Judy, her rebellion stems from feeling neglected and misunderstood by her parents. The simple act of them taking some interest in her seems to right everything in the end.

The Violent Years

William Morgan's *The Violent Years* (1956) is an exploitation film about a violent gang of teenage criminals led by rich girl Paula Parkins (Jean Moorhead). The Opening credits show each of the girls walking by and looking disdainfully at a chalkboard on which is written the tenets of "Good Citizenship." The male narrator says, "This is a story of violence, of violence of the uncontrolled passions of adolescent youth and nurtured by this generation of parents, those who in their own selfish little world of self interest and confused ideals or parental supervision, refuse to believe today's glaring headlines." Like the other films, *The Violent Years* also blames uncaring parents as the reason for teenage rebellion.

Paula is portrayed as coming from a very wealthy home in which her parents give her everything she could ever want, except for affection. At home, Paula wears white clothing and is

very sweet to her parents. However, after being given a blank check by her mother, Paula heads out with her gang to rob a gas station. Dressed like men, they hold the gas station attendant at gunpoint and hit him over the head with the gun before driving away. This is their 17th heist, a reporter reveals to Paula's dad, who owns the local newspaper.

Paula uses her father's news connection to get police tips, listening in on the reporter who says the gang has tried to kill but has been unsuccessful. Clearly, the type of female rebellion portrayed in *The Violent Years* is extremely violent, but it is also sexual.

The girls rob a young couple that is parked in a car on lover's lane. They call the young man "pretty boy" and once they see he doesn't have much money, make other plans. They tie up his girlfriend and take him into the woods and begin to undress him. Paula starts taking off her own top before the camera cuts away. A newspaper headline from the next day suggests that the girls raped the young man.

The girls act out sexually again at Paula's birthday party. Because her parents are too busy to celebrate with her, Paula plans a "pajama party," in which the girls wear pajamas and invite over boys to make out and drink alcohol with. Paula complains that her parents get her the same thing every year – a new watch and a new car. Paula ends the party early because the girls are getting paid by a woman with Communist Party affiliations to trash their school.

The police arrive while the girls are still at the school and a shoot out ensues. Two of the girls are shot and Paula drives away with the other. As the cops chase them, they crash into a building and Paula's friend dies and she is arrested.

Paula is found guilty of murder. The judge rules:

You have all money could give you, but it was not enough. You became a thrill seeker with an over-inflated ego. This thrill seeking became the one great thing in your life, you became much like the drug addict, increasing doses until the climax

– murder. To kill for a thrill. The thrill seeker comes from all walks of life, the rich as well as the poor. It comes from the home, a home where the parents are too busy in their own affairs to take time to teach their children the importance of self-restraint, self discipline, politeness, the love for the mother and father, the church and their country. It all adds up to that one great essential of living: self respect...through this utter disregard for life itself that the thrill seeker finds his eventual end – a prisoner of the state.”

We learn that Paula doesn't receive the death penalty because she's a juvenile, but she gets a full life sentence. At the sentencing, Paula's parents blame themselves and we learn that Paula is pregnant. Her dad muses, “Ever since I can remember we've given Paula everything – everything but real love. We must now look forward. Paula's lesson to us was strong, but her child will profit by our mistakes.”

Paula doesn't know who the father is and when her parents visit her in the hospital, she seems completely apathetic to everything that has happened. Paula dies in childbirth and her parents once again face the judge to see what will happen to the child. The judge makes another long speech, declaring, “No child is inherently bad; he's made what he is by his upbringing, his surroundings.” The judge blames Paula's parents for her mistakes and says he support locking up juvenile delinquents rather than returning them to their parents. For that reason, he refuses to grant them custody of Paula's child. The film ends with a shot of a jail cell and a baby crying.

The female rebellion portrayed in *The Violent Years* is the most overt and exaggerated of any of the films. Paula and her friends are neglected by their wealthy parents and so act out violently and sexually. Their rebellion perhaps most closely resembles male rebellion of the 1950s. Breines writes, “Middle-class white girls who rejected dominant values had no choice but to utilize and adapt male versions of rebellion and disaffection,”(Breines 130).

The rebellion portrayed by the girls of *The Violent Years* is significant in that it is just as violent as that of some of their male cultural counterparts.

Conclusion

All four of the films discussed show female teenage rebellion as a problem of the middle-class. In each of the films, it stems from parents not paying enough attention to their daughters. However, the way in which the rebellion is expressed ranges from film to film, in such ways as: acting sexual, being cold and indifferent, taking part in a non-violent gang, and violent criminal behavior. These portrayals of rebellion are indeed more varied than the portrayals provided by male rebels of the time.

In the first three films, the ending serves to bring the teenage girls back into the family. However, in *The Violent Years*, tragedy happens, yet the film still cautions against rebellion and focuses on the family. As Rachel Devlin discusses in her article “Female Juvenile Delinquency and the Problem of Sexual Authority in America, 1945-1965:”

“A girl’s rebellion became tied not to an angry but nevertheless autonomous self, but rather to a self-defining relationship with her father. The adolescent girl could clearly rebel from dominant, middle-class norms – but the constant invocation of the etiology of Oedipal disturbance linked the nature and meaning of that rebellion inextricably to her father, and thus brought her, full circle, back home” (Devlin 101).

In this light, the ending of the films skew quite conservative, suggesting that the eventual fate of all rebellious girls is to return home to resume their roles as daughters and eventual wives and mothers. However, as Breines suggests, the fact that these portrayals of female rebellion of the 1950s exist at all, suggests something more transgressive at play:

Middle-class white girls were engaged in changing the terms of feminine lives in the midst of what seems a most conservative time. I interpret their activity with an eye toward the spaces and strategies that signal resistance, acknowledging, at the same time, only minor opportunities and minor movement. But I believe those small movements away from prescribed roles were of great significance. (Breines xi)

Indeed, these varied forms of rebellion – from nuanced emotional rebellion to exaggerated violence – not only signal resistance of young women to the conservative time period, but also demonstrate this resistance came in many forms.

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