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**Tesi di Laurea**

**Ashes of Gold**

*Loss of innocence and rites of passage: selected tales from 1950's  
Hollywood rebels to 1960's youth gangs*

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## INTRODUCTION

In both American literature and cinema, the prototype of the young rebel has been presented, analyzed and discussed according to many perspectives. It is commonly believed that two of the cinematic cornerstones which introduced this particular kind of character appeared in the Fifties: *Rebel Without a Cause* by Nicholas Ray (1955) and *The Wild One* by Lászlò Benedek (1953). Both the movies were in part based respectively on a psychological study<sup>1</sup> and on a short story that reported a true event<sup>2</sup>. A good deal has been said about the more or less evident sociological aims of such films, which form a significant trio together with *Blackboard Jungle* by Richard Brooks (1955).

In the first two cases, the central figure is represented by the young rebel who gradually enters in contrast with the surroundings, with what he considers as the Other and eventually with himself. *Blackboard Jungle* offers a teacher's point of view, an interesting statement made by someone who was meant to be part of

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<sup>1</sup>Lindner, Robert Mitchell. *Rebel Without a Cause: The Hypnoanalysis of a Criminal Psychopath*. New York: Grune and Stratton, 1944. Print.

<sup>2</sup>Rooney, Frank. "The Cyclists' Raid". *Harper's Magazine*, New York: January 1951. Print. Concerns the so-called "Hollister Riot", caused by a bikers' gang in California on the 4th of July 1947.

the system, in many cases considered as the Other. In all three movies though, we witness the individual's self-affirmation: it is palpable in Jim Stark's desire to fit in, Johnny Strabler's thirst for challenge and Miller's inner struggle against the overwhelming of resignation. In contrast with the individual, the gang is a recurring element and the protagonists' actions get influenced by it in different ways, but in spite of the presence of an occasional, insurgent doppelgänger (Buzz, Chino, or Artie West), the young rebel is anyhow perceived more as a detached entity. Even in Johnny Strabler's case, the gang's hierarchy is not structured and the various roles are not so well defined; Johnny is the absolute leader, therefore he and the other members are too wide apart.

In the movie version of *West Side Story*, directed by Jerome Robbins and Robert Wise (1961), we see a different interaction between the main characters and the gang: they are already part of it, whether Sharks or Jets, and their decisional power clashes against the clan's will. Apart from the fact that racial matters are now a consolidated reason for conflicts between gangs, we are introduced to a urban setting (Manhattan, New York) which, with its appearance, strengthens the background already conceived in *Blackboard Jungle*, far from L.A.'s middle-class cottages in *Rebel Without a Cause* and from Wrightsville's doziness in *The Wild One*. With the emphasis on the gangs, goes the related concept of "turf".

As a reaction to *West Side Story*, two later novels (and related movies) offered divergent solutions to the teenage rebel and gang's fiction and cinema at that point. *The Warriors* was written by Sol Yurick in 1965, and *The Outsiders* by S. E. Hinton came out in 1967. The movie versions were produced in 1979 for *The Warriors* and in 1983 for *The Outsiders*. Both movies show the main

characters as part of a gang from the very beginning of the events. When Sol Yurick wrote *The Warriors*, he portrayed groups of adolescents divided into tribal organizations with a rigid hierarchy made of well-defined roles. The border between the Dominators and the Other is repeatedly highlighted, and the general vision of the story's subject is rather pessimistic: the gang is now seen as the only valid organization in which the protagonists feel accepted and vested with a necessary role, but at the same time, being part of the Dominators implies continual tests of manhood and strength that often result in recurrent episodes of nihilistic violence.

Walter Hill's movie version seems more optimistic in showing a trace of hope for the characters' future, and even if the novel's facts are set in the Seventies, the gangs' attitude towards each other and the Other is well represented, together with a significant, post-apocalyptic portrait of the city (the Bronx and Coney Island) in which the events take place. Both the place and its inhabitants are crumbling.

Two years after Yurick's novel, *The Outsiders* by Susan Eloise Hinton was published. Both the book and the movie (directed by Francis Ford Coppola) are far more optimistic than *The Warriors*. The author collected her material during her teenage years in Tulsa, Oklahoma, where gangs from different sides of town and social class were fighting one another over the territory. One of the main characters acts as the narrator of the events (in the movie version, they appear as a flashback in the protagonist's mind), and enough space is dedicated to the gang members and their lives. The Greasers appear less like a military division, and more like a bunch of survivors and friends, some of them are blood brothers. The reason of conflict revolves mostly around economic differences between Greasers

and Socials, but once again the protagonists are teenagers facing troubled lives made of gang fights, poor living conditions and dysfunctional or damaged familial structures.

The title of my dissertation *Ashes of Gold* derives from Robert Frost's poem *Nothing Gold Can Stay*<sup>3</sup>. The poem is mentioned in *The Outsiders*, and the protagonists, Johnny and Ponyboy, speculate about its meaning. In the middle of such problematic lives, every character deals with his coming of age, and how can you "stay gold" when you are a rebel? My intention is, therefore, to build a bridge between the traditional Hollywood teenage-rebel forefathers in American cinema, and some selected later works which involve group/gang processes that tend to complicate the theme of "staying gold" even more. I intend to discuss topics related to the loss of innocence and the entrance into adulthood, to trace what it means to be a man and, at the same time, preserve one's "goldness": some of the characters manage to do it while others turn to ashes. In this case, death and redemption will be discussion matters, too.

Some space will be paid to the interaction between the main characters and the surroundings they live in, from the general setting of the city to personal and specific places (and non-places), in order to understand in which way such backgrounds contribute to one's personal growth. Moreover, a chapter will be dedicated to the relationship between the rebel and the Other, in a way that examines the causes of external conflicts and inner distress in which the protagonist is involved. Apart from gangs, rumbles and machismo, I intend to say something about female counterparts in the chosen movies: girls' attitude towards such male-centered realities, the way in which they pursue their personal

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<sup>3</sup> Frost, Robert. "Nothing Gold Can Stay", written in 1923 and published for the first time in the *Yale Review*.

aspirations, their roles according to males' expectations and how they relate to the "staying gold" parameter.

The whole analysis will follow a path which mainly makes references to the movies, but it is my intention to support my considerations with excerpts from the above mentioned novels and a selected bibliography.

## CHAPTER I

How locations contribute in shaping the rebel's identity

“It begins here for me, on this road.”

At the very beginning of *The Wild One*, Johnny Strabler (Marlon Brando) and his gang, the Black Rebels Motorcycle Club, appear on the screen in a rolling flash. Like modern-day cowboys, they invade the quiet and peaceful town of Wrightsville, which is represented as a typical village from the Old West Frontier. Jon Lewis clarifies how such an opening scene helps the spectator in determining the characters' roles:

*The Wild One* is a politically conservative film. It is structured like a Hollywood Western. The bad uncivilized gang rides into a town populated by weak, civilized, basically good adults. [Lewis, *Growing Up Male in Jim's Mom's World*, 101]

Therefore, the primary intuition associates the bad character with the road and the good one with the village. Wrightsville gives us the idea of immobility and security, as if those few houses have always been there, where people know each other and a sheriff is enough to show law and order. The growing sense of menace brought by the gang is amplified by the fact that their members seem to come from nowhere, moving from a place to another like a destructive, rumbling storm.

Recalling a Ford composition, the camera is placed close to the ground, at a slight low angle, in the center of a highway, looking far down the empty open road toward the vanishing point where sky and land meet. As the voice-over and credits begin, the shot holds firm with almost forced patience, building suspense by virtue of watching and waiting: the audience knows something will come down this road. Eventually we hear the faint hum that gradually becomes a furious collective roar, as tiny specs come into view, finally emerging as motorcycles, racing right into and right past the camera. [Laderman, *Blazing the Trail: Visionary Rebellion and the Late-1960s Road Movies*]

The road is a key element in order to understand Johnny's psychological characteristics; his voice introduces us to the facts and states that it is on the road that everything began, giving us hints to the protagonist's past which was probably bound in a sense of being constantly on the run and always in trouble with the fear of being caught. This vision of the road as an escape device enters in contrast with the image of himself Johnny wants to display.

At one point he explains to Kathie (Mary Murphy), daughter of the town sheriff, that he and his gang "just like to go," without knowing where; that "it's cool" to not know where you're going, but to go anyway. – he is "the wild one" precisely because he is impelled to keep moving, purely for thrills. Regardless

of the social damage done, Johnny celebrates the private anarchy of driving around, breaking society's conventions and laws. [Laderman]

*Conventions* are here represented by Wrightsville's microcosmical immobility, in comparison with the possibility of going forward on the road, which offers a variety of possibilities. As Lewis said, the town is populated by adults that had already settled down and decided how and where to spend their lives (the only exception is Kathie, who dreams about leaving the town, anyway). Johnny still has the power of choice by being on the road, that is, being in his youth. The act of stopping by Wrightsville may represent his purpose of finding a place where to gain responsibilities, and from this perspective, the road acquires the form of a rite of passage.

Another breach through Johnny's arrogant attitude can be seen when the setting shifts from urbanized to natural. In the scene, he and Kathie ride outside the town, along a tree-lined and moonlit avenue. The nocturnal stop in a deserted park is full of romantic promises, but Johnny finds himself rather unprepared and disoriented, the road had guided him to a different environment which can be perceived as more feminine than the one represented by the organized and man-supervised village; here, Johnny enters in touch with his own feminine side, while the moon enlightens wishes and dreams that he forgot to have. He roughly kisses Kathie in the belief that doing so he will fulfill the girl's expectations, but he is in fact overwhelmed by the situation, his communication skills break down in a series of clumsy and wrong-timed gestures and words which alternatively bring Kathie closer and drive her away. Where actions are rambling, silence seems more talkative indeed: a lot is conveyed in Johnny's gaze, which contradicts his brisk manners by swaying from resentment to suspicion, confusion, interest, and finally to empathy, when he gets off his motorbike in order to squat down at Kathie's side. In that very moment, he drops his tough attitude and puts himself on

Kathie's level: she is the one who holds power. Such a subversion of roles seems to be possible only if it takes place in a special context, the deserted park at night gives the two protagonists the opportunity to share their vision of future and choices in a space which is meant just for them, and this chance would not be conceivable in an ordinary, adult-ruled reality as *Wrightsville*.

"You're not tearing me loose anymore."

Some of the last events in *The Wild One* are set at the police station, a recurrent element in *Rebel Without a Cause* which, in this case, represents the setting of the opening scene, where the main characters are introduced. While in the first case the general conditions of the office are rather neutral, in the second one the protagonists find themselves in a more hostile, cold and distressing place.

In his essay *Nicholas Ray's Rebel Without a Cause* George M. Wilson clearly describes such spaces and the effect they have on Jim, Judy and Plato:

The police station is partitioned into small, glassed-in cubicles that serve as private offices. Judy, Plato, and Jim are taken, in that order, into one or another of these windowed boxes to be examined by a specialist in juvenile misbehavior. During the ensuing exchanges, the kids are pictured as literally "pressed into a corner" with "their backs against the wall" and "trapped" without escape on any side. They are repeatedly shot in the medium to full close-ups so that the width of the Cinemascope image encompasses great stretches of the adjacent walls and windows. This device has the effect of flattening out the space that appears in the frame and merging the human

figures into the two dimensionality of the plane surfaces behind them... Such stylistic choices help make visible the intense feeling that the kids are being subjected to pressure from everything that surrounds them. [Wilson, *Nicholas Ray's Rebel Without a Cause*, 113]

The three protagonists see each other for the first time like fish in aquariums. The predominance of glass frames them into microscope slides, which are examined and tagged as “problematic”: they are compressed by society, and such a constriction instigates a subsequent outburst. Wilson, again: “It is emblematic that *Rebel* begins with its three protagonists under arrest, because it is a premise of the whole first segment of the film that they experience their normal activities as a senseless imprisonment.” [Wilson, 114]

If Johnny Strabler had the road as his home, in *Rebel Without a Cause* we enter the Starks' cottage. The whole middle-class neighborhood looks rather boring, each house is a carbon copy of the next one and separated by fences, a clear hint at a general sense of hypocrisy according to which the main aspiration is “to keep up with the Joneses” and “you don't air your dirty laundry in public”. This responds to Jim's mom's approach towards her son's problems: “Well, it doesn't matter anyhow... Because we're moving!”. Such a way of thinking clashes against Jim's desire not only to fit in somewhere, but also to *stay* in a place where to gain his responsibilities. Both the main characters of *The Wild One* and *Rebel Without a Cause* experience the sense of dislocation, but in the second movie, Jim Stark is literally dragged here and there, in the middle of his parents' arguments:

While they nag, quabble, and provoke one another over every incidental, the family members are shown to have packed themselves into the tiny breakfast nook of their modest middle-class home. Jim's much harassed father, in

particular, is so squeezed into his place at the table that he barely has room to set his feet upon the floor. [Wilson, 114]

A particular role is played by the stairs: every member occupies a different step, which corresponds to a more or less powerful position in the family structure. When Jim tries to explain his feelings he stands up above his parents and for a moment he seems to have the situation under control. Immediately after, when he realizes his mom and dad are not truly listening to him, Jim loses his predominant spot to his mother and he ends up pressed between her stifling pettiness and his dad's impotence. The switch is highlighted by an efficient use of the Cinemascope, that films the scene from different perspectives where Jim is a shrinking, choking figure, and Jim's position is comparable to the one he occupies at first in the police station: sitting on a chair, dominating over his parents and then dragged down and compressed in one of the office-cubicles.

The prevalent sense of claustrophobia generates an outburst in the protagonists' conduct, and results in an attempt at creating personal places, in alternative to the ones dominated by adults. While these last are associated with closed spaces, *Rebel Without a Cause's* teenagers move outside, making themselves at ease in natural or dilapidated areas. Since they feel annihilated while at home, they look for challenges somewhere else, on the cliffs, in the case of the *chickie run*, and they find shelter in an abandoned mansion. In both cases, we see Jim taking control of his actions in a nocturnal setting, where adults' laws don't count; the cliffs of the car race are seen as "the edge", and the mansion in ruins offers the chance to dare and imagine a new life. If we consider these two elements as strictly interrelated, we can find in them a rather hopeful and independent resolution, that mirrors and at the same time enters in contrast with the end of the world as re-enacted at the planetarium. On one hand, there is a scientific representation of a disaster; in his essay, Wilson highlights

the reaction the boys have during the lecture: “infinity of space should be connected with an ideal of freedom or escape, but the lecture explicitly associates it with oblivion and death – the end of man on earth. What is more, the student viewers seem to be bound still more tightly together in the solidarity of fear.” [Wilson, 116]

Even if the planetarium shows the protagonists the open space, it still remains a closed building, and once again, we see the teenagers overwhelmed and under pressure. From their act of reuniting in fear, there comes the *chickie run* on the cliffs outside, an independent, tangible, immediate and alternative end of the world: “Visually, the black waters, marbled with white crests and reflected moonlight, resemble the planetarium depiction of the night sky.” [Wilson, 116]

If Jim faces his end of the world on the cliffs, the later scene at the abandoned mansion seems to happen in a post-apocalyptic environment, at nighttime, where adults built a house that is no longer theirs but in ruin. This decadence offers Jim and his friends a place where to imagine a more manageable life. As in *The Wild One*, night plays a key role, and it is in nocturnal scenes that the sense of revelation and spontaneity lays.

“Hey , teach, you're coming back here tomorrow?”

If *The Wild One* and *Rebel Without a Cause* offer a duality between urbanized and natural places, *Blackboard Jungle* introduces us to the predominance of the modern city landscape. The opening scene shows a slice of life in the streets of an inner city: Professor Dadier walks towards the school in a state of dismay and wonder, through a scenery made of clattering trains, thick smoke, towering buildings, speeding cars, hydrants, noisy quarrels between children and mothers. The school itself fits perfectly in with the surroundings, with its impressive complex and its high, threatening railings. In particular, the railings’ role can be

considered as quite ambiguous: were they built with the purpose of protecting the process of education by keeping out the dangers of the street, or, are the students so mischievous they have to be kept separated from the rest of society? Considering the place's appearance, it looks more like a prison rather than a school. The teenagers are seen committing several "reprehensible" actions while they gather in small groups: some of them are smoking cigarettes, dancing to rock and roll music and harassing girls. The boys' dance moves and flips contribute to the chaotic atmosphere, the school's courtyard resembles a cage, the whole situation gives meaning to the word in the film's title: "Jungle". All the external sounds get silenced when we enter the administrative office: they are replaced by the repetitive, ticking noise of a typewriter. The overload of energy we witness outside the school is channeled with difficulty through the corridors towards the classrooms, in spaces where boards on the wall say that "Courtesy is Contagious". The morning assembly in the school's theatre gives an example of how the disorder coming from the outside gets amplified: the room is filled with smoke, it is extremely crowded and everyone chats loudly, the students look like one single rumbling entity, which barely stays in such confinement. Once again, teenagers are kept in a situation that involves high rates of pressure, the theatre and the principal's office show sinister similarities with a police station, the order is kept with the help of a loudspeaker and boys are divided into sections and sent to classes.

As in *Rebel Without a Cause*, some scenes involve the element of the stairs, that in *Blackboard Jungle* once again display the distribution of roles: initially, we see Artie West and his gang standing at the top, while Professor Dadier and the bullied boy lay at the same level, at the bottom. This is an example of how the order will be subverted in the classroom, a space which emphasizes the sense of constraint for both the students and the teacher. There are no adequate resources, the boys are almost stuck in their desks which are too small, Professor Dadier instead, seems confined against the blackboard. Teacher and pupils

continually put each other back to the wall, the classroom represents what has always been the boys' turf, an extension of their authority in the city' streets.

The danger coming from outside threatens and occupies Dadier's private and work environment, no place seems to be safe, Jon Lewis underlines this aspect in his essay *The Road to Romance and Ruin, Teen Films and Youth Culture*:

*Blackboard Jungle* is primarily concerned with how teen deviance not only "boils over into our schools" (where, after all, it's just teen against teen), but how the criminality of discontented youth effects and invades the adult world. When, for example, a math teacher brings in his much treasured swing records to elaborate a mathematical principle, the students mock him and smash his collection. When Mr. Dadier gives a lecture on racism, the students deliberately misunderstand him (perhaps because they know better) and report him to the principal. The irrelevance or naivete of such lessons are juxtaposed to the absolute authority of the streets: of teen gangs, broken families, and the prevailing hopelessness of the inner city. [ Lewis, *The Road to Romance and Ruin, Teen Films and Youth Culture*, 47]

What could be once considered space for education makes way for disturbing scenes: an attempted rape in the library, Professor Edward's jazz records cruelly destroyed, a classroom that turns into a ring where a switchblade changes hands between Artie West and Dadier. The only place which is untouched by such events is the principal's office, that together with the teachers' meeting room constitutes a sort of parallel universe: a physical representation of the non-communication between adults and teenagers. The principal is completely detached from his school's reality, while the teachers believe they are in a total

war zone, which, at the beginning, seems to be under the control of Artie West and Gregory Miller. Both have a considerable influence on their classmates and ignore the rules, they are represented as leaders when in school, but at the same time they are seen as part of the above-mentioned “single rumbling entity” of bad eggs. Like West, Miller is involved in an encounter which takes place on the stairs. In the first case Artie was placed above Professor Dadier, but the scene is filled with silence and incommunicability: the exchange of information is given through threatening stares, power is established in a primordial process. Later on, Dadier and Miller have a discussion on the stairs: the professor occupies a higher step than the student, his position represents the power to educate the rebel, but the argument between the two soon takes the wrong way, and Miller seems to end up embodying inferiority, from a racial perspective. The misunderstanding concerning West and Miller takes place inside the school where, as aforesaid, they seem to be both part of a barbaric hoard, Dadier truly understands their nature when he meets them outside, in the streets: West has a gang, Miller has a job. Here, the city scenario stands out and there is no natural counterpart as we see in *The Wild One* and *Rebel Without a Cause* where the teenagers can discharge the pressure caused by living in an adult environment. In particular, New York from *Blackboard Jungle* openly contrasts with the suburban Los Angeles from *Rebel Without a Cause*. Amy Maria Kenyon offers a sociological point of view on how the big city was seen when these movies came out (both in 1955):

Postwar anti-urbanism was a determining factor in the suburbanization process and in the success or failure of the suburban dream. Even in its most positive portrayals, the move to suburbia was always tinged with anxiety about the city... In 1940s Hollywood cinema, crime films and film noir had already established the city as the locus of crime and corruption and a generalized

cultural unease. [Kenyon, *Dreaming Suburbia, Detroit and the Production of Postwar Space and Culture*, 47]

“And we’re gonna beat Ev’ry last buggin’ gang On the whole buggin’ street!”

New York, as *the city* par excellence, has been variously portrayed. The landscape that we see in *Blackboard Jungle* can be associated with what is shown in the cinematographic rendition of *West Side Story*. The opening scene offers a telescopic vision of Manhattan, the whole island seems to be framed in a beautiful postcard. From a bird’s eye perspective we see buildings rising from the ground, divided into geometrical sections: skyscrapers slowly turn into public housings, cars run frantically on the highway, everything seems permeated in a layer of grey. The camera zooms on a cemented yard surrounded by high wire nettings, where the Jets are hanging around. What should be a playground looks more like a big cage, similar to the schoolyard from the opening scene of *Blackboard Jungle*.

The prologue establishes for the audience the time, place, and mood of this piece – a New York City portrayed almost like a scene of ruins. Walls full of graffiti, industrial and urban landscapes form the backdrop to this struggle over who owns the streets. [Wells, *West Side Story: Cultural Perspectives on an American Musical*, 45]

The Jets appear on the scene showing off a bold and impudent self-confidence, their language is made of silent intimidating stares and nods at each other (already seen in Johnny Strabler and Artie West’s behavior); the snapping is meant to be a warning sign of their presence, their bright clothes gleam against the grey surroundings, they are small particles in a gigantic urban landscape, but they move at their ease.

The Sharks make a similar entrance, in a clash of colors between Bernardo and Riff. Their attitude is confident and threatening, the two gangs seem the only thing in speed motion in the city streets, an independent whirl, in contrast with the initial aerial image of cars tidily driving on the highway's fixed routes. Sharks and Jets chase each other going through a combination of narrow secret passages, through dark entrance halls, rusty railings, iron gratings, empty yards, building sites, basements, fire-escape stairs, blind alleys, lines of hanging clothes, piles of bricks, graffiti, wooden planks, cement and asphalt. The swift framing sequence highlights a gradual descent to the inner city, next to the "Vote Al Wood" posters stand out chalk-drawn gang murals: both Jets and Sharks feel like kings in their own estate; New York's real dimensions are squeezed into that grey wire-netted yard, in conflict with the towering buildings. This small space turns into a bubble which attenuates the sense of pressure given by such surroundings, but at the same time, the energy conveyed in there overflows in a matter of seconds: a rumble breaks out in that same yard, and the policemen find themselves almost incapable against a turbulent hoard.

In contrast with the open road, we have different common closed spaces: the bridal shop, Doc's emporium, the ballroom. The first one traces the line between Sharks and their girls, it's a relatively safe and protected environment, where Maria shares her dreams and feelings with her friends; the bridal shop turns into a confessional, and then into a church, where Maria and Tony feign their marriage in a scene that recalls how Judy and Jim pretend to be husband and wife in Plato's abandoned mansion, in "Rebel Without a Cause": here again, teenagers try to create a space where to build alternatives. The same principle is followed by Tony himself, in trying to get out of the street with a job at Doc's shop. Miller, in *Blackboard Jungle*, seems to have similar aspirations, but while he ends up with a concrete opportunity to leave a life of violence, Tony gets caught back by the Jets.

The ballroom offers an alternative location for the gangs' confrontation: Riff and the Jets show jazz dance moves, while Bernardo and the Sharks take over with a captivating mambo. The ball takes place among walls which are painted in red, an anticipation of the rumble scene, where the color reappears and the blood is spilled. After the initial challenge between the two gangs, Tony and Maria's point of view transfigures the room into a church; Maria's bedroom, the above-mentioned bridal shop and the fire-escape stairs where the two lovers meet are involved in the same process. Such changes take place at night, the climax of feelings and actions happens in the dark where the colors seem paradoxically more vivid. An example of such a transformation consists in the rumble scenes: we see both the gangs facing each other in the daylight at the film's beginning, they act arrogantly with each other, but they stop their brawl to confront the police as a common enemy. The fight in the underpass is much different: the situation soon degenerates in two deaths that nobody truly expected, and the switchblade-duel that we have already witnessed in *Rebel Without a Cause*, is no longer a rite of identification between equals. Bernardo's face after stabbing Riff shows fear and incredulity, and Baby John's traumatized weeping testifies an irreparable loss of conscience. Tony himself is seen losing his mind, in a background where the color red seems to fall down from the ceiling in a bloody shower. During the whole film, stairs play a key role in elevating and lowering characters: Tony is uplifted by his love for Maria, many of their scenes take place on the stairs, from where they have a view of their possible future together. The love scene between the two happens in Maria's room which is located on one of the top floors, as the Shakespearian tradition implies in *Romeo and Juliet* (scene of the balcony), together with classic tales of princesses waiting to be saved in an isolated tower. Maria herself is shown in elevation, because of her innocent traits and her love for Tony: she waits for him on the rooftop, while dreaming about going away with him to the country. Here again, the natural environment is endowed with redeeming connotations but unfortunately out of reach. In the

end, both the characters are tragically dragged down in that wire-netted yard, that cages them forever in what looks like a hopeless finale, with Tony's death and Maria's devastation, the bloody shower causes her irreparable damage, figuratively shown by her dress, now 'corrupted' in red.

"This is what we fought all along to get back to?"

If in *West Side Story* the characters and the city itself are facing a progressive decline, *The Warriors* represents its worst resolution, a point of no return. Here, New York, the Bronx, Coney Island are the elements of a post-apocalyptic urban setting, where familiar places are disfigured and fragmented into some sort of wasteland. The cinematographic rendition projects the novel's events in the near future, that is, the Seventies. In both book and movie, the city's portrait is incisive, in its aim to describe the general atmosphere made of alienation, anarchy, fear, violence, desolation, a jungle where gangs threaten each other while wearing striking, recognizable colors, like poisonous animals. The gang and the turf are now the only things that matter. If the Jets agreed on the statement that "A gang that don't own the street is nothing", in *The Warriors* the concept is expanded in Cyrus' words:

The problem in the past has been the man turning us against one another. We have been unable to see the truth, because we have been fighting for ten square feet of ground, our turf, our little piece of turf. That's crap, brothers! The turf is ours by right, because it's our turn. All we have to do is keep up the general truce. We take over one borough at a time. Secure our territory... secure our turf... because it's all our turf! [Hill, *The Warriors*, 1979]

In spite of Cyrus' words, the protagonists are represented as feeling rather lost, confused and scattered outside their turf. In *How I came to Write The Warriors and What Happened After*, Sol Yurick talks about the research he made in order to build the realistic example of a gang and its habits, including the attitude towards the surroundings:

Gangs (of the time I was writing about) were quite different than the gangs of today. For one thing, automobiles were not available to them. For another, there were very few guns around. The gangs were neighborhood-bound and quite ignorant of the city outside their own territories; indeed, they were frightened of strange turf. [Yurick, *The Warriors*, 200]

The sense of displacement given by the gang's attitude in facing unknown territories is highlighted by the element of the subway, its unreadable maps and the prevailing atmosphere of mystery and danger conveyed by such a subterranean and artificial setting. The subway is, in fact, almost omnipresent: in the film version, even the love scene between Swan and Mercy is framed in lights, wind and noises produced by the metro.

Yurick's novel is most effective as a novel of the city, evocative of a dense, indecipherable place. As Hinton's journey dominates the latter part of the novel, the city's dark topography is revealed through his zeal to survive as he travels underground in subways, concealing himself in alleys and brothels to avoid apprehension. [Newhouse, *The Beat Generation and the Popular Novel in the United States, 1945 – 1970*, 46-47]

Thomas Newhouse extrapolates such considerations according to some of the novel's descriptions, which show in detail how much hostility can be found at every corner and in every object:

A lot of broken furniture was lying around in the street. It worried the family. Might mean an assembly and ammunition dump: tables with legs fixed to come off easily, couch springs for wire whips, guns stashed away in the fluffy arms of busted-down easy chairs, ash-can covers for shields and ash cans full of broken Coke bottles to fling, rocks, used light bulbs, pipe ends, loosened spikes in the iron fence, old-fashioned spear-headed cast-iron floor lamps, stacked bricks, and oiled excelsior bunches to fire and fling from the rooftops. [Yurick, 92]

From this point of view, Walter Hill's cinematographic rendition well presents the events, which happen in the course of a night: New York turns into a place where shadows are only broken by hallucinogenic neon lights, and once again nighttime shields how teenagers unleash pressure, trying to impose their rules independently from adults in places that they carve out for themselves. David Desser efficiently describes Walter Hill's attempt in recreating the urban setting:

In adapting Sol Yurick's then little-known 1965 novel *The Warriors*, which is loosely based on *Anabasis*, as we will see shortly, Walter Hill vastly underplayed the social problem elements of the book and moved it closer to Xenophon's tale of heroic grace and adventure. In retelling this story of a band of warriors making their way through gang-infested territories and inhospitable

terrain to return to their home by the sea, Hill transforms New York City in a mythic land of timeless beauty, terror, and fantasy. A breezy amalgamation of comic book art, punk aesthetics, and Hollywood-style action, *The Warriors* utilizes then-current images of New York as a city in decline – dangerous, dirty, decaying – to recast and re-imagine the city as a mythic realm of transcendent action and redemptive romance. [Desser, *City That Never Sleeps: New York and the Filmic Imagination*, 124]

According to this interpretation, the film's portrait of New York City shows more optimistic traits than the novel's, and there seems to be space for a positive resolution of the events. In the end, the gang reaches Coney Island's beach: the natural and in some way purifying element of the sea contrasts with the vision of the city we have witnessed through the movie. In spite of this point of view, the whole story is about returning home, or better, getting back to the turf: the cyclic nature of such a journey seems to obstruct a possible improvement in the characters' lives, in fact, they feel victorious in being still in the gang and back in their territory. Even if the journey allowed a certain broadening of the Warriors' view on some previously unknown urban areas, the traumatic experience of displacement and the feeling of being chased contribute in creating an even stronger attachment to Coney with the consequence of probable immobility, a condition which is even clearer in the novel's more pessimistic ending, where one of the protagonists cannot even spot the sea from his position:

Hinton's knees drew up tighter, tighter, till his whole body was pressed tightly together and he clasped his shins tightly and his head was pressed into his kneetops, and his eyes stared out over the trees and through the laundry lines

toward where the sea would be if it wasn't blocked off by a big hotel. [Yurick, 181]

In Hill's rendition there's no trace of closed familial spaces, a vision that both emphasizes the turf's role of home, and the definitive lack of traditional family bonds: the characters are scattered in such a dangerous reality and they are alone with their gang. The house is not mentioned in the film, but the Warriors' lifestyle can be a cause for reflection on the characters' hidden familial background; in Yurick's novel we can see that home is often called "the Prison", from a perspective which takes into consideration the gang's behavior as the ultimate, terrible outburst originated by a pressurized environment, a degeneration of the one experienced by the Starks in *Rebel Without a Cause*.

"I thought New York was the only place to end up in a murder rap, Jesus Christ!"

If the majority of the above-mentioned films finds its setting in a constantly mutating New York, Susan Hinton's novel *The Outsiders* and its cinematographic version (directed by Francis Ford Coppola) offer a new perspective placing the facts in Tulsa, Oklahoma. As we have already seen for New York, here the city is split in two parts, one for each gang: Hinton's novel came out right after the success of *West Side Story*, as some of *The Outsiders'* features show (in the book, Greasers and Socials are distributed in East Side and West Side).

From the very beginning of the film, we get a general idea of what kind of life the characters deal with, Ponyboy starts his narration with a flashback: he is immediately recognized as a Greaser, poor and dirty, chased by a car full of rich and overbearing Socials. He exits the city center and looks for shelter penetrating in what is shown as the Greasers' territory, made of desolate streets, piles of beat-up cars and shabby houses. The sense of

danger contrasts with the film's opening credits, where some of the same city views are represented at daybreak in a soothing and peaceful atmosphere. The way the Greasers are first portrayed implies a group picture set behind a huge wire-net: such an element can be linked to the previous observations related to the *cage* in *West Side Story* (and possibly, *Blackboard Jungle*).

Most of the scenes imply an external setting from a predominant Greaser-perspective: we get to know the lot where Johnny and Ponyboy confront the Socials, the drive-in where they first meet Cherry (a sort of neutral territory comparable to the ballroom from *West Side Story*), the field of the final rumble. Anyway, the element of familial home is presented once again as a pressure source: Johnny's house is only shown from the outside, his parents are two dark shadows fighting and screaming at each other. Such a disturbed polarity automatically rejects Johnny, who no longer perceives home as a welcome place. Ponyboy's house can be seen from the inside, but it is portrayed with all the problems of a dysfunctional family and the growing tension between the Curtis brothers, this last factor leads, in fact, to Pony's sudden escape after a quarrel with his elder brother Darrel.

Even if the story has a different city as setting, the influence of New York as a big and dangerous place is still present and embodied by the character of Dallas Winston. On several occasions, he mentions his past experience in jail and on the streets of New York, where crime seems to be on the agenda. In spite of his admonishments towards Pony and Johnny not to end up like him, he is still represented as the one corrupted by New York's negative influence, it was he who brought the 'virus' to Tulsa.

While in *The Warriors* the names of Coney Island and the Bronx are frequently repeated, and the idea of territory is, in general, a serious matter, in *The Outsiders* we have a few references to Tulsa itself. This point can lead to several speculations, one of them is proposed by Denis Wood in *Place, Power, Situation, and Spectacle: a Geography of Film*:

Supposedly set in 1966, coffee's pretty cheap and the cars aren't this year's models, but if the film isn't set in the galloping all-consuming present, it's not a costume picture either. The action does unfold in a real gritty and coherent place and time, but it's anyplace and anytime, any medium-sized contemporary town. It is America. Anonymous and limitless. [Wood, *Place, Power, Situation, and Spectacle: a Geography of Film*, 107]

If the urban environment is still considered as the cradle of violence and crime, the countryside instead progressively acquires sanctifying connotations. We have already seen how different characters project their feelings, hopes and reveries in natural and abandoned places, in *The Outsiders* we have a combination of both the elements. The country represents a concrete setting to Ponyboy's nostalgia of his life when his parents were still alive, he longs for detachment from the city, its troubles, rumbles, the murder. In the country, Johnny and Ponyboy witness a beautiful sunset: a mixture of nuances framed in gold. While the scenes concerning violent actions happen at night (the killing and later, the rumble), it's the sunset which gives us the sense of transience and anticipation, Ponyboy first recites Robert Frost's *Nothing Gold Can Stay* without truly knowing why. In *The Warriors*, resolution comes at dawn. It's a new day at Coney Island, but somehow, we get the feeling that it is going to be identical to the previous ones. The Warriors are on their turf, still a gang, still with enemies all around. They feel immortal. The sunset in *The Outsiders* says the opposite. If the day's ending means transience, the mixture of colors visually redefines the barrier between Greasers and Socials. In their *American Cultural Studies: An Introduction to American Culture*, Campbell and Kean offer an interpretation of this scene associating gold with the idea of something similar to Heaven, in which everything looks bright, clear, secure, but also static

and contrasting with life's dynamism and transformation, represented by sunset and its nuances:

Again the imagery of the 'seductive outside' is prominent, with the country representing a natural space beyond the confining world of the social institutions that mould and impose their values on the youthful characters. In "The Outsiders", this new imagined space permits the rebirth of the dead parents: 'I brought Mom and Dad back to life... Mom would bake some more chocolate cakes and Dad would drive the pick-up out early to feed the cattle... My mother was golden and beautiful' (Hinton. 39-40). A static, golden world without death and change is once again the ideal, as in Francis Ford Coppola's film of "The Outsiders" (1983), where the utopian country is rendered visually in golden and bright colours. [Campbell and Alasdair, *American Cultural Studies, an Introduction to American Culture*]

In *The Warriors* the protagonists find shelter in a deserted graveyard, here, we have a dilapidated church. In the first case, the cemetery evokes some of the most unmentionable fears, through which the gang members reveal their true identity as impressible teenagers. The church in *The Outsiders* offers Ponyboy and Johnny a chance for introspection, which is built once again where adults, life and even faith seem to be gone.

## CHAPTER II

## How the rebel perceives himself in presence of the Other

“I’ve seen hoodlums like this before.”

As already said in Chapter I, *The Wild One* presents the collision between the unruly members of the Black Rebel Motorcycle Club and Wrightsville’s inhabitants. Johnny and his gang enter a new and rather unknown territory, they are subsequently labeled as strangers and studied with curiosity. At the beginning, some of the civilians actually see the gang’s stay as an opportunity to make money:

When the local café owner sees the gang ride into town, he gleefully remarks to a coworker: “Better put some beer on ice.” But he soon learns the cost of doing business with outlaws when the gang trashes his establishment. [Lewis, 102]

After some trouble, Wrightsville’s citizens tag Johnny and his followers as hot-headed delinquents, and they manifest their intention to expel such intruders in order to restore the

town's usual calmness. One of the inhabitants, Charlie Thomas, acts as the official spokesman and proffers a rather simplistic opinion on what should be done to bring order back.

Charlie Thomas: I've seen hoodlums like this before. If you don't get tough with them the minute they get out of line you're sunk. You're the cop, aren't you? If you can't boot these jerks out there's plenty of us can, even if we have to bust a few heads. [Benedek, 1953]

It is curious though, how people in such a calm and rather isolated environment can draw such conclusions on how to deal with a gang. Solutions are taken into consideration on a basis made of prejudice, suspicion and underestimation of teenagers' capacity for dialogue. The only one that actually works to make contact with Johnny and the BRMC is the police officer, who is not taken seriously by his fellow citizens, and even less by the gang. The barrier between the groups is erected by Johnny himself:

Kathie: Why are you trying to be so rude?"

Johnny: I don't like cops!" [Benedek, 1953]

His instinctive refusal for being told what to do leads Johnny to avoid every form of constructive interaction with other characters; he uses his "otherness" as a shield, but in doing so he is automatically associated with his comrades' turbulent behavior, when it is clear that he is a loner in his own gang. In several scenes, we see him distancing himself from the group's activities: while the mass is rumbling around, he acts as an observer, making

interventions only to express his ultimate decisions. If at first he sees the stupidity in his comrades, then he gradually realizes how morally wrong their actions can be.

Apart from the rest of BRMC and Wrightsville's inhabitants, every other character acts as Johnny's counterpart: Kathie, officer Bleeker, Chino, sheriff Singer. Each one of them seems to challenge Johnny's personality and behavior; Chino and Kathie respectively offer two visions of Johnny's possible future: in the first case, the destiny of a hopeless criminal, in the second one, the possibility of building a relationship.

The problem with Johnny's otherness lies in his stubborn conviction that everyone around him is trying to stitch him up, therefore, the best solution he came up with is to be constantly on the run and to refuse every human contact with suspicion, behind a barrier made of his BRMC faithful minions.

Johnny: You think you're too good for me. Nobody's too good for me.  
Anybody thinks they're too good for me, I make sure I knock 'em over  
sometime. Right now, I can slap you around to show you how good you are.  
And tomorrow, I'm someplace else and I don't even know you or nothing.  
[Benedek, 1953]

These few lines Johnny addresses to Kathie summarize his approach to life, the idea of stopping by somewhere is not contemplated, the idea of *home* seems absent from Johnny's mind, and so is family. The only hint we get sounds rather bitter:

Johnny: (*as Charlie and other townsmen beat him up*) My old man used to hit harder than that. [Benedek, 1953]

The sign of a past troubled father-son relationship can be retraced in Johnny's attitude towards male authority figures, like Sheriff Singer and Officer Bleeker. Apart from Johnny declaring he doesn't like cops, Harry Bleeker's attitude towards him conceals a fatherly undertone. If we consider the situation from this perspective, Johnny's refusal to have any contact with Officer Bleeker resembles his inability to deal with Kathie.

Kathie: I wanted to touch you. I wanted to try, anyway. [Benedek, 1953]

Sheriff Singer embodies the totalitarian authority Johnny rejects, he seems to be the situation-solver most of the townsmen were waiting for, his methods contrast with the ones chosen by Officer Bleeker: instead of putting himself at the teens' level to set a dialogue, he reinforces his position of superiority and his indisputable decisional power:

It takes a sheriff from out of town to tame the wild youth in the film. (institutional authority is necessary – remember). The sheriff arrests Johnny and interrogates him. “I don't get your act and I don't think you do either,” the sheriff says, but then shifts gears: “I don't know if there's good in you, but I'm willing to take a chance.” So long as Johnny understands the rules, understands the rationale for conventional male authority, he is free to go. [Lewis, 102]

“I’ll never get close to anybody.”

As was partly said in Subchapter 2.1, in *The Wild One* Johnny’s attitude towards other people leads him to leave Wrightsville before familiarizing with the responsibility to involve someone else in his decisions. In *Rebel Without Cause* we meet Jim not only as a young rebel, but as a son whose actions inevitably have an effect on his family.

While *The Wild One*’s Johnny Strabler came from a nebulous nowhere and disappeared back into it, the desperation of *Rebel*’s Jim Stark was amplified, and originated, at home. [Raha, *Hellions: Pop Culture’s Rebel Women*, 36]

In Chapter I, Jim is seen interacting mostly with the house as a physical space that, in a first moment, produces a centrifugal force in the protagonist’s mind, pushing him outside. Nevertheless, instead of refusing his adult models in disillusionment, he shows bravery in struggling against the traumatic realization of the fact that his parents are not able to fulfill his expectations. The Starks concretely represent whatever Jim doesn’t want to become as an adult, his father in particular. In the whole film, the most significant scene involving Mr Stark is probably the one in which he is wearing his wife’s yellow apron on his grey office-suit.

Jim: Mom?

The figure straightens and turns around, smiling. It is the FATHER. He is neatly dressed in his business suit but wears a Mary Petty apron.

Father: Hiya, Jimbo.

Jim leans against the wall, shaking his head and trying not to laugh. The FATHER laughs unhappily, trying to make it all seem a joke.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to the sense of embarrassment and confusion given by the physical appearance of his father, Jim's unease increases with the man's reluctance to take a stand. Murray Pomerance effectively describes the exchange of inexpressible feelings between father and son in his essay *Stark Performance*:

Jim's father pauses to look at that dinner spilled on the floor, not because his gaffe has paralyzed him but because Jim's clarion call to freedom, "Let her see it!", has engaged his own imagination profoundly, just as it has engaged ours. He knows exactly what his son's inner life is like, having had one, too; but he has forsaken that life. [Pomerance, 49]

From this perspective, both father and son follow a similar development throughout the whole film, as Lewis asserts: "What Jim does not understand when he begs his father to tell him what it takes to be a man is that his father is in the process of discovering the answer." [Lewis, 96]

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<sup>4</sup> The scene's description comes from [http://www.dailyscript.com/scripts/Rebel\\_Without\\_A\\_Cause.html](http://www.dailyscript.com/scripts/Rebel_Without_A_Cause.html)

We get the final resolution when both the characters visually change their “colors”. Until the final scene, Jim’s red jacket symbolizes his progressive self-affirmation, and it contrasts with Frank’s grey business-suit; in spite of all of Plato’s discourses about wishing Jim was his father, Jim’s own act of giving Plato his jacket is substantially more explicit: he understands how late he was in helping Plato, and he realizes how much he feels responsible for him and his damaged soul. At that very moment, sensing the tremendous failure, he embraces his father’s worst nightmare and comprehends it. Frank himself is awakened by the episode:

Father: For a minute... that jacket...I thought (*breaks off, then*) You couldn’t help it, son. (*reaches out, gently, but firmly*) You did everything a man could do.

He takes JIM by the elbow and starts to bring him to his feet. The boy suddenly resists, and remains kneeling.

Father: Stand up Jim. I’ll stand up with you. Let me try to be as strong as you want me to be. [see footnote 1]

This exchange of clothes has been seen sometimes as the equivalent of a rite of passage into adulthood, but Lewis offers another perspective, where it re-establishes order in Stark’s family by putting its members back in conventional categories:

Frank’s innate kindness – previously in evidence as a sign of his weakness – comes in handy as he asserts himself as the family patriarch. In doing so, Frank makes the return to more traditional family roles seem not only logical but also

easy. When Jim's mom tries to interject, Frank tells her firmly to "get back". The last shot of the film is of the cop cars leaving the scene, but the film's payoff is Frank's assertion of patriarchal control... The film ends not with Jim finding or establishing a rite of passage, but with a reprieve in which Jim gets to be a teenager a little longer while his parents finally learn to get along and take better care of him. Adolescence becomes in the end of the film a time for parents to grow up. [Lewis, 104]

According to this point of view, if Jim gets re-absorbed and accepted, Plato is the one who remains a hopeless outsider.

Jim is the new boy in town; but Plato is much more fundamentally a stranger to the world. And thus, it is the unassimilable stranger who is, in the end, eliminated. [Wilson, 125]

The film highlights the fact that he lacks a paternal figure, a trauma which Jim cannot truly understand; Frank, even if in the middle of his troubled personal growth as a parent, can still manifest his presence, Plato has been left alone. Jim longs for a place to belong, Judy says "This is not my home", but Plato doesn't even have a precise idea of "place", it is he who, when the lecturer speaks at the planetarium, comments: "What does he know about man alone?" Plato is the one who brings in himself what is displayed on the planetarium's ceiling.

Among the peers Jim interacts with, Buzz, Judy and Plato, Judy is the only one who survives, as the female character charged with redemptive love, and if Plato mirrors Jim's

somehow raw, frantic condition as a teenager, Buzz represents Jim's equal: he is the device which allows Jim's engagement in the process of self-affirmation; the scenes in which both the characters are present (the gang picking Judy up, the planetarium and the duel, the chickie run) imply a continuous confrontation.

Jim has already demonstrated a competence that easily matches Buzz's, and so for Buzz and for the viewer, his masculinity must already be seen as unquestionable. The manhood he is having difficulty achieving, and in search for which he goes to his father for advice, has less to do with the capability to physically dominate males – in this case, to outmatch Buzz – as with the spirit and savvy for socializing with them in terms that are not exclusively narcissistic and self-imposed. The chickie run is ultimately a kind of soireé to which he has been invited, attendance at which is a vital sign of membership... It is play, not killing, the boys have in mind. [Pomerance, 41]

Pomerance's point of view on the chickie run finds correspondence with the concept of such an event as the possibility for the teenagers to carve out some space for themselves with no adult interference. Jim does not look so inexperienced in front of such a challenge, and as aforesaid, the only unexpected thing is the advent of death. On the other hand, Buzz shows his sympathy for the newcomer once they are both distanced from the crowd; it is a private conversation in which they recognize each other as equals:

Just before the actual race, Jim and Buzz stand at the edge of the precipice and share a cigarette together. Suddenly, their macho swaggering slips away and we are able to glimpse briefly the potential bond that exists between these young men. It's a surprising moment that challenges our expectations. Essentially, the chickie run was a test of machismo, a way of proving who was really a man and who was a "sissy" or "chicken". But Stern subversively chose this moment to once again expand on the notion of masculinity, to let us glimpse their vulnerability. [Frascella and Weisel, *Live Fast, Die Young: The Wild Ride of Making Rebel Without a Cause*, 201]

In order to gain his sense of identity, Jim transfigures himself in different mirrors, represented by his father, Buzz, and Plato. Finally, these three male characters constitute different stages of self-knowledge, ironically animated by death: while Buzz and Plato pass away violently, Frank Stark goes through a process of resurrection together with his son.

"They can't be all bad kids."

Together with *The Wild One* and *Rebel Without a Cause*, *Blackboard Jungle* contains a series of warnings in order to tell the spectator about the rising social problem of juvenile delinquency. The Fifties' teenager is portrayed according to ideas and impressions coming from the adult world, even if the public tends to familiarize with the young rebel's perspective. In *Blackboard Jungle*, the different point of view is made explicit by the presence

of Professor Dadier, an adult protagonist. He is almost thrown to face a group of adolescents who are believed to be hopelessly lost and rejected by society. This time, identity-related discourses come from the confrontation between the teacher and his pupils, within the above-mentioned viewpoint.

“Blackboard Jungle” was made at MGM, but it has the “torn from the headlines” feel of a Warner Bros. crime film of 1930s. Juvenile delinquency was headline news in American newspapers in the mid-1950s and as covered extensively by prestigious magazines including the “Saturday Evening Post”, “Colliers”, “Life”, “Time”, “Newsweek”, “Harper’s” and “Atlantic Monthly”. Widely publicized hearing of the Juvenile Delinquency Subcommittee of the Senate Judiciary Committee were held in 1953, 1954 and 1955. MGM’s program booklet for “Blackboard Jungle” specifically refers to this national panic, clipping newspaper headlines, citing statistics, and, quoting from J. Edgar Hoover and President Eisenhower. Yet the film also seeks to contain the hysteria in two different ways: via a disclaimer at the beginning of the film, and, more importantly via a positive conclusion. The use of a black student (played by Sidney Poitier) as the leader of those who aid the teacher suggests that cooperation between races, classes and generations is possible in 1950s America. [Lev, *The Fifties: Transforming the Screen, 1950 – 1959*, 245]

As was said in Chapter 1, the general atmosphere of alarm is conveyed by the students seen as a horde which can be controlled only with a tyrannical attitude, the emphasis is initially put on what looks like a territorial conflict between the individual and the pack. Two

kinds of rebel take shape out of this contrast, and both are subjected to the teacher's influence. Once the group is deprived of its leaders, docility follows. On one side, we have Gregory Miller. He clearly represents a politically correct choice, where racial conflict is avoided. Anyway, some critics have seen in the Dadier/Miller relation a sense of submission given by the black student being re-educated and re-shaped by the white adult, while Artie West is irredeemable, though unmovable in his attitude. In this sense, Miller may seem 'weaker':

The presence of a black delinquent serves to underline white control, for it is Poitier's character who is most easily manipulated by the teacher into becoming a good and highly supervised teenager. Vic Morrow's white, working-class delinquent proves much more intransigent. [Kenyon, 48]

In *The Wild One* and *Rebel Without a Cause* we have already encountered problematic characters who are seen by society as 'bad eggs'. Johnny Strabler jumps back on his motorcycle avoiding the possibility of a clear and final redemption, Plato tragically dies after a life which resembles a big misunderstanding. According to Leerom Medovoi, Artie West is treated in the same way:

Gregory here stands in for the majority of Dadier's ethnically and racially diverse students, who will "grow up to join Gregory in finally rallying to his side against Artie and his one remaining crony, Belazi. As Peter Biskind has argued, this ending sacrifices the two genuine "bad apples" so that the film's other boys can be redeemed into a liberal intergenerational consensus on the need for

students to cooperate with an understanding school system. [Medovoi, *Rebels: Youth and the Cold War Origins of Identity*, 141]

Even if in *Blackboard Jungle* the whole sequence of events is related to a character which is usually associated with the concept of *otherness* in comparison to the main focus on the young rebels, we see again as in *Rebel Without a Cause* that the only solution for a rebel to survive is to surrender, and play according to the adults' rules.

“Gee Officer Krupke, krup you!”

The sense of otherness given by factors as class and race can be found again in *West Side Story*: first of all, we have Jets and Sharks, who themselves tend to remark their differences in terms of race and territory. In front of the spectator's eyes, the plot develops around this conflict and “otherization” between the gangs:

The explicit conflict in the musical over turf and ethnicity – Puerto Ricans versus “whites” who, we are reminded carefully, are themselves second-generation immigrants. The police in it, represented by Officer Krupke, are careerist and racially prejudiced; Officer Krupke is part of the problem in driving apart racial groups. There is no hope for intellectual either: a sociological analysis of juvenile delinquency as a “social disease” is mocked. [Monkkonen, *Crime, Justice, History*, 14]

With these words, Monkkonen gives us hints at bigger issues than gang fights. The common enemy is once again represented by society and in particular by its henchmen: Jets and Sharks give up on their mutual antagonism to face the Other, who is, moreover, racially prejudiced (as Monkkonen says). One of the most meaningful acts in this sense happens at Doc's store, when Lt. Schrank and Krupke interrupt the gangs' war council: Riff stops Bernardo from reacting to Schrank's provocations, and later refuses the policeman's attempt to bring the Jets on his side.

The clearly biased detective Lt. Schrank (Simon Oakland) indicates the institutionalization of racism... Barely hiding his disgust at the immigrant invaders, Schrank, the representative of law and justice, treats the Jets and Sharks differently, ordering the Sharks out of the schoolyard or candy store and then trying to reason with the white boys. [Grant, *The Hollywood Film Musical*, 107]

Society's attitude in facing juvenile delinquency is quite similar to the approach in the previously mentioned films, *Blackboard Jungle* in particular: most of the school's teachers, apart from Professor Dacier, believe in being at war with the teenagers, as the police does in *West Side Story*. However, in the first case there is an attempt in re-educating the supposed "good ones" (Miller), while the hopeless are rejected and left to themselves (Artie West). In *West Side Story*, once death has entered the plot even the characters who have positive aspirations are dragged into a spiral of violence: Tony, due to his effort in looking beyond the gang somehow mirrors Gregory Miller's traits, but there seems to be no room for improvement, and he ends up dying as a street criminal would do. The general sense of

disillusionment and mistrust can be seen in the song “Gee, Officer Krupke”, which is often referred to as a form of satire; here, the Jets mock society and its approach towards youngsters, a cyclical ping pong between institutions looking for someone who can deal with the “bad apples”: an officer, a judge, a headshrinker and a social worker.

In the song, the boys recount the many times that Krupke has “run them in”, only to be released by soft-hearted judges, psychiatrists, and social workers who forgive the boys’ misbehaviors on the basis of their own pet theories of delinquency. The song reminds us that tough cops like Krupke had to work with an array of other professionals, and were often subordinate to them. Even though the Krupke of the song’s narrative keeps trying to discipline the boys, they always know that they could get away with anything. [Wolcott, *Cops and Kids: Policing Juvenile Delinquency in Urban America, 1890 – 1940*, 1]

Even if this excerpt supports the idea concerning the boys being perfectly aware of their condition, from the very first line it is possible to retrace a sense of frustration and angry resignation in front of the system’s failure. The opening line is spoken by Action and ratifies such reaction:

Action: They believe everything they read about us cruddy JDs. So that’s what we give ‘em, something to believe in. [Robbins and Wise, 1961]

Elizabeth A. Wells' comments on the song in her essay *A Boy Like That – The Gangs of West Side Story* with a striking sentence that strengthens this point of view:

In the final version<sup>5</sup>, the kids completely own their delinquency. [Wells, 200]

In this general refusal to agree to a compromise between teenagers and adults, a sympathetic figure is represented by Doc, who seems to be already too old and inoffensive to be involved in such disputes. His condition causes his shop to be considered as a neutral place, and he himself sees the Sharks and Jets as boys and not as rival gangs; he speak with common sense but he is rarely listened to.

The old man's view of the gangs as 'kids' is shown in his attempt to warn Tony, and in his intervention to save Anita from the Jets' aggression. Nevertheless, he cannot prevent the final disaster. For this reason, he ends up being "otherized" anyway, with the rest of the adult world.

The adults are barely there (the owner of the Bridal Shop), corrupted and bigoted (Schrank), not very bright (Krupke and Glad Hand), or a compassionate voice of doom (Doc). [Jowitt, *Jerome Robbins: His Life, His Theater, His Dance*, 281]

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<sup>5</sup> The one written by Bernstein, also used in the cinematographic rendition (Robbins and Wise, 1961).

In terms of generational conflict, *West Side Story* displays some features traceable in the previously discussed films: on one hand, the audience tends to be sympathetic towards the gangs (perceived as more genuine in their behaviors), and it is easy to take the film as a realistic portrait of gang-life and troubled teens; on the other hand, as Wells remarks, the whole production of the musical and its cinematographic version were made according to adult perspectives:

For all that *West Side Story* attempted to simulate a real youth culture, it ended up making an “other” of it as well. The world of the teenage gangs was not seen through the eyes and ears of the gang members, but through those of its creators: teenagers became the “other” onto which both the fantasies and fears of the predominant (adult) culture projected themselves. [Wells, 206]

“One gang could run this city!”

While in *West Side Story*, part of the characters who interact with the gangs are grown-up, in Walter Hill’s movie *The Warriors* adults are almost removed from the plot: this considering the Warriors are portrayed as being in their twenties (while in Yurick’s novel they are about fifteen, sixteen years old). As regards the police, there is not a specific delegate administering justice, instead, we have a bunch of policemen who act and move like members of a gang themselves. To stay in the group seems to be the only way to survive in a gang-dominated environment. In the novel, Yurick offers an officer’s point of view while confronting the Dominators (aka. Warriors in the movie version):

He'd bounce his stick off their skulls. They all had the same hostile face and he couldn't tell them apart except by size... It was not so much fear that disturbed him, but the barbaric anarchy of it. He had never seen such groups in this almost urban neighborhood. Law and order had failed; they never came up here. [Yurick, 23]

In both novel and film, great relevance is given to “uniforms”, but despite the colorful amalgamation we see at the meeting in the Bronx and Cyrus' discourse concerning gangs getting together to take over the city, everyone's idea of life remains dual: colors are not going to mix as Cyrus wants, everyone drowns in a black and white vision where apart from the comrades there's only a big *Other*, hostile (rival gangs, police) and unconcerned (civilians, the social system). While in the movie version Cyrus' speech seems more focused on numbers and give more emphasis to immediate action<sup>6</sup>, in the novel Ismael gives a precise definition of what kind of Other the gangs are facing. In a moment, we can see how this list of enemies includes different categories of people we have already met: Harry Bleeker, sheriff Singer, Mr and Mrs Stark, professor Dadier, officer Krupke, Lt. Schrank, Glad Hand, Doc.

He reminded them of the Enemy, the adults, the world of the Other, those who put them down. The courts and prisons and the school-prisons and the home-prisons; these put them down. The newspapers put them down. The big-gang men put them down because they would never take them into their rackets. The ones who charged them too much for everything put them down. The pushers

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<sup>6</sup> Actually, part of Cyrus' speech has been cut and put among the “Deleted Scenes” of the movie, here, he mentions society and how it has crushed all of them.

working to hook their people put them down. The ones who held all the good things of life and miserated it out... And the worst were the people who were supposed to be their friends: the social workers, the Youth Board men, teachers, all the guidance people who spoke words like community centers, organized dances, sports, outings, readings, the Mobilization for Youth, the Career, this Haryou shit, Peace Core fags; promises like church... He told them they were all lost, lost from the beginning and lost now, lost till their deaths. If they were lucky, they would make a quick end and if they were not, they would drag it on, child surrounded, like their parents, being nothing more or less than put-down and fit-in machine parts. Some of them would go junkie, or psycho; they knew what that meant. Sure, they could be pushers, or policy runners, but that fed the machine too. [Yurick, 36]

In both film and novel, the Warriors try to avoid any contact with people identifiable with the Other, be it part of society or another gang: in the movie version civilians are almost excluded from the plot, but the rumbles against the Baseball Furies and the Punks are characterized by an alienating silence which makes them the nightmarish products of a bad acid trip. The result of the above-mentioned approach consists in two parallel worlds where the first one is perpetually at war, and the other is the unreachable place where dreams and aspirations get strangled by society's big pack of lies. The only palpable reality for the Warriors can be faced thanks to the gang, where everybody can be useful, with a role and a common purpose, a militarized surrogate: "*this* Family freed them" [Yurick, 13]. Anyway, in spite of this definition, the "Family" is undeniably a dysfunctional one. More than once its members are seen quarrelling with each other and putting up competitions in order to see which one of them shows more machismo.

But Hector was ready for Lunkface; he proposed a game to see who was the most Man of the group. They would play chicken, and the way they would play it would be for them to stick their heads out of the window and the one that came the closest to the passing wall outside would be the winner and the Man With The Most Heart. [Yurick, 113]

Once again, we find a test to spot the chicken in the group, which is perceived differently, considering the example of already discussed *chickie run* in *Rebel Without a Cause*. Here, the test is not a matter of letting a member in, but the constant stress to prevail over others.

Yurick's focus on members of the Dominators – Junior, Lunkface, Dewey, Hector, Hinton, and Bimbo – does not in any way illustrate the heroic qualities of the gang. On the contrary, Yurick wants to expose in detail the cowardice, stupidity, and recklessness that characterize the large mass applies to every individual gang and gang member. The Dominators, in fact, demonstrate none of the qualities essential to warriors. [Newhouse, 45-46]

In Hill's film, the Warriors seem to be less eager to stand out and more interested in surviving through their journey back to Coney Island; nevertheless Swan finds his counterpart in Ajax, with his impulsiveness and his longing for fighting and power. Considering their attitude in dealing with survival in the city, Swan and Ajax can be associated with Yurick's

Hinton and Lunkface. Thomas Newhouse gives an appropriate description of Hinton, talking about him as “Sensitive and intelligent, a teenage Odysseus, more the clever survivor than the fearless warrior” [Newhouse, 46]. In the film version, Swan shows the characteristics of a natural leader, guided by common sense and wisdom; from this point of view, Newhouse’s definition of Hinton also fits Swan as his alter ego on screen. Lunkface’s physicality mirrors Ajax’s bickering attitude, he is the one who questions Swan’s authority in the first place. Linking Swan to the “modern Odysseus”, the description builds a bridge to epic – in fact, in Homer’s “Iliad”, after Achilles’ death the two warriors Odysseus and Ajax compete to inherit his weapons. Odysseus wins the controversy because of his skills in diplomacy and intelligence, while Ajax commits suicide, blinded by dishonor and rage. Hill’s Ajax is often in the grip of impetuosity, he does not refuse to use his fists and he ends up under arrest, driven by his sexual predatory instincts (the same thing happens to Lunkface in the book). Again, he is the one who seems mainly concerned about manhood and not showing any weak spot to the comrades.

Lunkface tried to look sleepy because it would show how cool *he* was. [Yurick, 5]

Ajax: (*to Swan*) Since when are you a fuckin’ diplomat?

Ajax: Maybe you’re all just goin’ faggot.

Ajax: He’s right! We’re acting like faggots! [Hill, 1979]

Due to these considerations, we have the proof of otherization inside the gang itself: none of the components is completely honest with the rest of the group. The gang becomes a device to silence one's uncertainties, and the fear of being alone and doomed is exorcised with the identification of an Other to detest. We see boys pretending to be men in their obstinate determination not to be afraid, while the process of growing up includes dealing with fear in order to face personal responsibilities.

[Hinton] He had to tell himself that his fear was a silly fear, not a man's fear. No fear of what there was, but a little boy's fear, a terror of what wasn't. A Junior fear. He had to be a hard man, like the others – Arnold, Hector, Bimbo, Lunkface, Dewey, Ismael. These were never afraid. [Yurick, 125]

The characters experience an exchange of violence which makes them numb and insensitive to homicide, death, rape: in the novel, the protagonists kill a man and gang-rape the girlfriend of one of the Borinquen Blazers, and in the film version two of the gang members die (Cleon and Fox), and they get erased from the story with little concern.

No wonder the others looked at him like he was a slave, like all the other slaves he had run across down here. He stared again, straightened himself till he saw a warrior in the mirror, a Dominator, a Family man, and he moved on. [Yurick, 159]

According to this passage, which once again underlines the importance given to the “Family” in Hinton’s thoughts, it is possible to detect the general sense of disillusionment and the bitter and more realistic portrait of gang life, far from the romanticized vision of *West Side Story*; watching *The Warriors*, the public may be enthusiastic because of spectacular rumbles, multi-colored uniforms, haunting settings and a thrilling plot, an initial sympathizing attitude can be felt towards the gang members because of their condition: they are alone against the world; while under the surface, the empathy we had for other rebel characters because of their articulation (Jim Stark, Johnny Strabler), gradually fades away.

“You guys know what Greasers are? White trash with long, greasy hair.”

If *The Warriors* suggested a bitter fate for its characters, the parallel track to such a story resides in *The Outsiders* and its more positive resolution. This time, gang life is not completely detached from society, and homes, schools and adults are taken back into the plot. Conflict assumes economic connotations, which were already present in *The Warriors* (together with racial divisions in Yurick’s novel). The situation between Socials and Greasers can be related to the one described by Pomerance and Gateward in *Where the Boys Are: Cinemas of Masculinity and Youth*:

Young people need to be told what objects are of most value (schools, churches, cars) in order to select their targets. Class is thus an integral issue to youth movie delinquency, with working-class characters often stereotyped as “typical” delinquents struggling to rise above their lowly status while wealthy brats turn to

delinquency out of boredom and in retaliation for their privilege. In both cases, teens must find ways to break free of their class expectations, and this parallels boys' efforts to both disrupt and conform to their gender expectations, as they resist following the cultural order and yet long to prove their prowess through traditional customs. [Pomerance and Gateward, *Where the Boys Are: Cinemas of Masculinity and Youth*, 21-22]

Part of the “lowly status” is once again represented by domestic situations. Ponyboy's point of view on life is also determined by what he sees in his friends' families. In Hinton's novel, he is the narrator, and we get to know his feelings about this matter:

“It ain't fair!” I cried passionately. “It ain't fair that we have all the rough breaks!” I didn't know exactly what I meant, but I was thinking about Johnny's father being a drunk and his mother a selfish slob, and Two-Bit's mother being a barmaid to support him and his kid sister after their father ran out on them, and Dally – wild, cunning Dally – turning into a hoodlum because he'd die if he didn't, and Steve – his hatred for his father coming out in his soft, bitter voice and the violence of his temper. Sodapop... a dropout so he could get a job and keep me in school, and Darry, getting old before his time trying to run a family and hang on two jobs and never having any fun – while the Socs had so much spare time and money that they jumped us and each other for kicks, had beer blasts and river-bottom parties because they didn't know what else to do. Things were rough all over, all right. All over the East Side. It just didn't seem right to me. [Hinton, 53]

In the Greasers' families, the absence of adult masculine figures is undeniable. As in other films previously discussed, they are just blurry and ghosts referred to as "My old man":

Johnny: I think I like it better when the old man's hittin' me. At least he knows I'm there.

Dallas: You think my old man gives a hang if I'm dead in a car wreck or drunk or in jail or something? He doesn't care but that doesn't bother me.

The two older members of the gang, the "fathers", are two polar opposites. On one side, Darrel, Ponyboy and Soda's brother. He is the one who still believes in society although he had to give up on college, he is the one who sees Ponyboy's opportunities in gaining a better future through school and education. Among the three Curtis orphans, he accepted a father's responsibilities, in combination with Sodapop's maternal attitude. Darry is also a character whose approach to life is filled with pragmatism. He insists on telling Ponyboy to "use his head", a sign of the wisdom he learned from the street.

On the other side, we have Dallas Winston, who also represents a father for his comrades in the way he deals with dangerous situations. He quickly builds up a plan in order to protect Johnny and Pony after the murder, even if it includes avoiding authorities and carrying a gun. As portrayed in the film version, he enjoys his life on the street and in the gang: "Don't you know a rumble ain't a rumble without me?" [Coppola, 1983], while in the novel his character assumes darker connotations:

Of all us, Dallas was the one I liked least. He didn't have Soda's understanding or dash, or Two-Bit's humor, or even Darry's superman qualities. But I realized these three appealed to me because they were like the heroes in the novels I read. Dally was real. I liked my books and clouds and sunsets. Dally was so real he scared me. [Hinton, 93]

Although Dallas' attitude may remind us of Ajax from *The Warriors*, more than once he shows concern towards his younger comrades. Conscious of his experience in New York, he seems to accept the fact of being hopeless, the only advice he can give Pony and Johnny is not to follow his path:

Dallas: Johnny, you don't know what a few months in jail can do to you, man. You get mean in jail, I just don't wanna see that happen to you like it happened to me, man. Understand? [Coppola, 1983]

While Ponyboy tries to stick with his brothers' teachings, Johnny is fascinated by Dallas and his provocative boldness, thinking about it as a way to gain respect and avoid further clashes with the Socials: his traumatizing experience can be associated somehow to the things Dallas went through in New York.

"Dally's okay", Johnny said defensively, and I nodded. You take up for your buddies, no matter what they do. When you're a gang, you stick up for the

members. If you don't stick up for them, stick together, make like brothers, it isn't a gang any more. It's a pack. A snarling, distrustful, bickering pack like the Socs in their social clubs or the street gangs in New York or the wolves in the timber. [Hinton, 33]

We have already seen that, even though the gangs from *The Warriors* display a militaristic division of roles, the members have individual, and sometimes disturbing, personalities. In Hill's film, another example can be found in The Rogues and in the instability of their chief, Luther. In comparison, the Greasers are portrayed more like a group of friends.

The Socials instead, represent everything a Greaser cannot have. In Ponyboy's mind, life is not fair and Socs are an undeniable proof of this fact. In Hill's *The Warriors*, Swan and Mercy meet two couples returning on the subway from a homecoming dance. They exchange some glances during their brief encounter, as if they were looking into a mirror, but the differences seem to be highlighted instead of fading away. Those high-class guys are the ones Yurick's Ismael portrays as someone to hate, no matter what<sup>7</sup>.

When the story begins, the relationship between Socs and Greasers can be summed up by the words Randy says to Ponyboy:

Randy: You can't win. You know that, don't you? it doesn't matter if you whip us, you'll still be where you were before, at the bottom. And we'll still be the

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<sup>7</sup> It is necessary to remember that in Yurick's novel, the difference between the gang and the "high-class guys" is also a matter of race, the Dominators/Warriors being an all-black group. Hill's *Warriors* contain mixed ethnicities, a sign of a wider discomfort which involves teenagers in general.

lucky ones at the top with all the breaks. It doesn't matter. Greasers will still be Greasers and Socs will still be Socs. It doesn't matter. [Coppola, 1983]

Thanks to the intervention of Cherry Valance, Ponyboy changes his point of view as the plot advances: a girl, and for this reason detached from male-gang dynamics, is charged with the role of the mediator and constitutes a bridge between the two rival groups. In any case, (as we have already seen in *West Side Story*) apart from a feminine intervention, it is the threat of death, as a matter of fact, which that differences and makes the groups equal. In the end, it is Randy in person who agrees to the establishment of a connection with Ponyboy.

Socs were just guys after all. Things were rough all over, but it was better that way. That way you could tell the other guy was human too. [Hinton, 144]

From this point of view, the final rumble turns into a collective rite of passage. Rain and mud predominate in the film version of *The Outsiders*, permeating Socs' shirts and Greasers' leather jackets in what can be considered a cathartic process.

## CHAPTER III

## The girls' role in confronting male rebels

“You’re afraid of me and I’m not afraid of you.”

When we first meet Kathie in *The Wild One*, she appears as the ultimate product of the surrounding environment, she is used to her daily routine at the bar, her father represents the law in Wrightsville: the arrival of Johnny and his gang represents a novelty for her small-town habits, when the two meet at the café for the first time, her suspicion gives way to curiosity.

In confrontation with Johnny's usual flings with girls who are orbiting around him and his comrades, Kathie is a complete stranger to gang-dynamics and codes; therefore, her attitude towards this new reality appears naïve to Johnny's eyes. On the other hand, she shows interest in the new boy but, in spite of having been raised in a quiet village where news is often seen as something troubling, she has no stereotypes in mind.

If, at the beginning, innocence can be considered Kathie's predominant feature, her encounter with Johnny wakes her up, as Johnny unconsciously foretells:

Kathie: Well, what do you do? I mean, do you just ride around or do you go on some sort of a picnic or something?

Johnny: A picnic? Man, you are too square. I'm... I... I'll have to straighten you out. Now, listen, you don't go any one special place. That's cornball style. You just go. [Benedek, 1953]

Kathie doesn't fully realize the range of her aspirations until Johnny takes her for a ride on his motorbike in the countryside. At first, it seems like a dream to her, but the concrete sounds and movements of the wheels, the engine, the road, offer her, for a moment, a glimpse of freedom.

At first, a new masculine figure stands opposite to her father's, whom she considers a loser for his inability to make decisions. To her, the idea of running away from Wrightsville sounds seductive, but she takes into consideration the fact that, if her father is indecisive, then Johnny is on the run trying to avoid responsibilities.

Kathie: He was afraid of making a mistake. He was afraid of losing his job. He's the town joke and I'm stuck with him. He hasn't got any business being a cop. No more than you have with that (*fake trophy*). He's a fake - like you. Well, you've impressed everybody now, big motorcycle racer. Why don't you take that back so they can give it to somebody who really won it? [Benedek, 1953]

From this perspective, none of the male figures in Kathie's life at this moment matches her dreams and aspirations. Nevertheless, for the first time she dares to express them and for a moment, her thoughts interlock with Johnny's, and a breakaway where worries are left behind gives her a glimpse of the possible "somewhere" she dares to dream about.

Kathie: I used to think about it a lot after my mother died - that somebody would come here and stop at Uncle Frank's place, and buy a cup of coffee or something, and he'd like me right away and take me with him. Johnny, you were going to give me that statue. Will you give it to me now? [Benedek, 1953]

Johnny: Why?

Kathie: I don't know. I just wondered if you still wanted to give it to me, that's all. It's crazy.

Johnny: Where did you want this guy to take you - this guy who had a cup of coffee?

Kathie: I don't know. Wherever he was going, I guess. I'm shaky. I wish I was going someplace. I wish you were going someplace. We could go together.  
[Benedek, 1953]

Even though Johnny thinks she needs to be “straightened up”, Kathie manages to get closer to her male counterpart by showing kindness and compassion in response to his rough behavior. Moreover, she reveals brave initiative in asking Johnny direct questions about his explosive reactions.

Kathie: Why do you hate everybody? [...] Why are you trying to be so rude?  
[Benedek, 1953]

At several moments in the film, Johnny is asked questions about his life targets, but he finds himself mute or incapable to answer in a coherent manner; Kathie is the one who most challenges his decisions, it is her frankness that destabilizes him. In *Hellions: Pop Culture's Rebel Women*, Maria Raha highlights what kind of hopes materialize in Kathie's mind through Johnny, the small-town girl and the outsider.

Familial distance makes the rebel more mysterious and confounding and helps construct the romanticized “free” masculine life, one without the middle-class responsibilities of employment, children, or a wife. In this universe, women are prevented from experiencing the same restlessness men do, and from enjoying the same amount of freedom. Kathie Bleeker, Johnny's love interest in “The Wild One”, begged Johnny to rescue her from the town and take her on the road with him – even after he tried to assault her. In the end, Kathie watched Johnny ride off without her. [Raha, *Hellions: Pop Culture's Rebel Women*, 37]

Although the gender discourse fits with Kathie's condition, she is more active than it seems in expressing her desire to move away from Wrightsville. It is not a matter of “begging” as Raha states, because Kathie builds and empowers her speeches in a crescendo of “I wish”, “I want”, “I am not afraid”. Meanwhile, she responds to Johnny's rough physicality by actually slapping him in the face.

The problem which leads to the separation of the two protagonists at the end of the film can then be related to what follows:

In most JD films, girls had often played the role of the reformer, usually for just one boy, and within a context suggesting that female domesticity was a salvation for men's problems yet also a threat to masculine progress. [Pomerance and Gateward, *Where the Boys Are: Cinemas of Masculinity and Youth*, 24]

Taking into consideration what Pomerance and Gateward say in these lines, we can see Kathie's double nature in front of Johnny's eyes. At the beginning, she embodies a perfect version of the female prototype called "angel of the earth". Later on, she abandons this standard becoming more enterprising, and she experiences her epiphany of aspirations; in this way "female domesticity" is called into question, and Kathie is pushed aside in her usual place with the same old duties while the rebel leaves, his masculinity untouched, and the road at his feet to his private "somewhere".

"He looks at me like I'm the ugliest thing in the world!"

If in *The Wild One* we witness a change in Kathie's mind, which takes her to turn from an "angel of the earth" characterization to a more self-motivated and proactive one, *Rebel Without a Cause* offers us an inverted path with the development of Judy, Jim's female counterpart.

When she appears in the film for the first time, she is at the police station, confiding her familial problems to the counsellor. In *The Wild One*, Kathie was aware of her father's

indecisiveness, and she was used to accepting it with a resigned attitude. Here, Judy deals with a more high pitched conflict; in the tension between her and her father several feelings and sensations are involved, but the only thing they lead to is incommunicability.

Judy: He calls me a dirty tramp – my own father!

Ray: Do you think he means that?

Judy: Yes! I don't know! I mean maybe he doesn't mean it but he acts like he does.

If Kathie preserved a rosebud's aura of pureness and delicacy, Judy is definitely blossoming, and from this point of view, the tension between father and daughter gains sexual undertones. Hints at such an interpretation can be seen from the very beginning, in the look she has in her first scenes: the red of her coat and lipstick is the predominant color.

Judy: ... He grabbed my face and he rubbed all my lipstick off – he rubbed till I thought I wouldn't have any lips left.

From the description we get from Judy, the father not only wants to remove the outrageous lipstick, but his action seems to be finalized in the cancellation of Judy's lips, a symbol of femininity, lips that could now kiss someone else apart from a relative. In refusing this possibility, Judy's father commits something similar to an act of violence, increasing his daughter's sense of displacement: she cannot show her affection in ways which are considered infantile, and at the same time she is not seen as a blossoming woman. For this reason, her

role as Jim's female counterpart also involves a discourse of de-sexualization: Jim's paternal figure is initially a failure as a male role-model, in Judy's family, the mother has basically no function, while authority is aggressively held by the opposite gender (Jim's mother and Judy's father). Although both the teenagers face a similar kind of crisis, Jim's father finally gets his role back, nothing is said about a possible resolution in Judy's family. Rachel Devlin in *Relative Intimacy: Fathers, Adolescent Daughters and Postwar American Culture* expresses how Judy's familial problems seem underrated in confront with Jim's situation:

The indeterminacy of Judy's problem with her father is only enhanced by the relative clarity of Jim's struggle with his. Jim (James Dean) has one demand of his father: that he stand up to his shrewish wife, that he behave "like a man". The movie closes with a tragic scene: Plato, Jim and Judy's orphaned and needy friend, has been killed by police officers who mistakenly believe him to be armed. The adults have rushed to the scene. Jim's father, clad in bathrobe and slippers, promises to change, to be as "strong" as Jim needs him to be. Gathered around are Plato's black caretaker and the perceptive police detective from the first night at the juvenile detention center. Missing are Judy's parents. What, one is left to wonder, would Judy's father offer her? [Devlin, *Relative Intimacy: Fathers, Adolescent Daughters and Postwar American Culture*, 76]

Judy's unstable condition is reflected in the way she behaves with her peers. She hangs around with Buzz because she sees in him the opportunity to find security, a place where she can be recognized as what she thinks a woman is, Buzz's girlfriend. In the first part of the film, Judy assumes a daring, sometimes euphoric attitude while going out with Buzz's

gang, this behavior can be read as passive though, considering the rejection (and, as already said, de-sexualization) Judy faces coming from her father, and her consequent search for self-definition in other boys' eyes. Jon Lewis describes the feelings of euphoria and satisfaction evoked in the *chickie run* scene:

At the chickie run Judy gets caught up in the excitement, lets down her guard, and finally expresses the sexual longing that's been weighing on her all film. The look on her face as she drops the flag to start the contest (the headlights lightning her face for an instant), the way the wind rushes by, the way her skirt swirls up is all teenage sexual anticipation, sexual excitement. It is the one moment in the film where Judy seems to feel alive. [Lewis, 103]

The turning point in Judy's life happens when Jim succeeds as Buzz's "improved" substitute: he offers Judy the chance to assume an active role in the construction of a relationship where the two components are at the same level in facing a similar condition of crisis. In this case, Judy accepts the role of mother as an act of self-determination in their reconstructed family (which includes Plato, as a child). In this sense, the traditional element of the redemptive feminine works for both Jim and Judy herself. However, from a male-centric perspective and considering what has been previously said by Devlin, the female character can be seen as a mere device for the male character's development. Such an interpretation can be linked to Andrew Caine's description of Judy's position:

For much of the movie, Judy functions as a girlfriend/mother symbol to Buzz, Jim and Plato. In the concluding scene at the deserted mansion, she adopts a traditional maternal role upon Jim and Plato, serving as a moderating influence. Judy provides the catalyst for Jim to realise his destiny as a man, enabling him to mature and accept responsibility. [Caine, *Interpreting Rock Movies: the Pop Film and Its Critics in Britain*, 31]

“I have a love and it’s all that I have, Right or wrong what else can I do?”

The theme of the ‘redemptive feminine’ developed in *The Wild One* and *Rebel Without a Cause* can be retraced in the female protagonists of *West Side Story* – that is to say, in the dichotomy represented by Anita and Maria.

We meet both in the bridal shop, discussing Maria’s dress: the setting suggests the idea of a gynaeceum, where the two girls exchange secrets far from the Sharks’ ears. on this occasion, showing her concerns together with her complicity, Anita behaves like an elder sister to Maria. She is later portrayed as a charismatic, determined and strong character, well aware of her condition as immigrant, but also confident in her idea of America as a land of opportunities, where you are “free to be anything you choose”. In the “America” sequence, she shows strength, hope and optimism, and we get an idea of her relationship with Bernardo, which seems balanced by an undeniable chemistry, passion and energy. The difference between the two lovers consists in their approach towards a new life in New York: while Anita expresses more hopes than fears, Bernardo has a rather skeptical and disillusioned attitude, he thinks finding a place in this new reality will be successful only “If you can fight in America” – that is, if you are a man.

Anita does not simply fool around with her female friends, she has to lock horns with Bernardo in a male-female showdown. To her credit, Anita ends up having the last word: the final stanzas of the song present her final triumphant conclusion on Puerto Rico, that despite the “better” things in her homeland, “Everyone there will have moved here.” For the moment, Anita seems to have won. However, she is not able to, in the ensuing dialogue, stop Bernardo from attending the war council meeting. Despite her new status as “American,” Bernardo reminds her that he is charge of the domestic sphere. [Wells, 146]

Although Anita is confident in her new life in America, some of the girls’ desires concerning freedom are questionable, being related to the traditional association between women and household:

Anita: Buying on credit is so nice.

Rosalia: I’ll have my own washing machine.

Anita: Lots of new housing with more space.

Anita: I’ll get a terrace apartment.

[*America*, lyrics by Leonard Bernstein, 1957]

The above lines, Bernardo's role as leader and head of the family, the aforementioned presence of spaces reserved for women, these are all references to the female condition Anita and the Puerto Rican girls have to deal with. They are expected to turn into exemplary "angels of the earth" for their men, even if they show much more personality than the Jets' women. In her desire to find out what freedom means, Anita tries to escape from such conventions by challenging the male protagonists, but her try tragically fails when she risks being raped by the Jets at Doc's store.

Anita's attempts to break out of her role have serious consequences, as we can see, and it is her bitterness over the attack that causes her to lie to the Jets and tell them Maria is in fact dead; this in turn precipitates the tragedy. It is not just her disillusionment with the Jets, but with "America". [Wells, 161]

Men's violence steps in and crushes Anita's dreams, and her redemptive love gets traumatically corrupted; moreover, the act is committed by Jets, who seem to consider Anita not even as one of their white girls, but as a stereotyped, exotic Latina, an object to overpower. Although her character faces a tragic fall, the spectators are driven to reset the empathy felt for Anita in the moment she tells that lie, blinded by sorrow and hate. At this point, it seems easier to blame her for that, instead of seeing her as a victim.

If Anita is portrayed as a resolute kind of female character, Maria contains other features which contribute to the formation of a two-faced female portrait.

Maria is, in this case, a significant name. We often see her character surrounded by religious objects, concentrating in prayer, dressed in virginal white. Her name is invoked by

Tony as a prayer, she assumes the connotations of a Madonna and later on, of the perfect bride. She has dreams and hopes for the future too, but they mainly revolve around love: in opposition to Anita's *America*, she sings *I Feel Pretty*.

Maria's song is pure, unadulterated fluff, summing up her character's image of herself in visual terms: she is pretty. Although clearly meant to be lighthearted relief for the audience, the song still presents this character as somewhat vacuous – there is no action associated with her expression, simply unexamined reflection on *her* reflection in a proverbial mirror, a mirror created and held up by others. [Wells, 150]

A proof of this last assertion can be found precisely in the song's lyrics:

Maria: I feel stunning and entrancing,  
Feel like running and dancing for joy,  
For I'm loved by a pretty, wonderful boy.

[*I Feel Pretty*, original lyrics by Leonard Bernstein, 1957]

In this case, even love appears as received in a passive way, or rather, from this point of view Maria does not shine in her own light, but she reflects Tony's. Her redemptive love is

useful for her male counterpart's decisive life change, she acts as a catalyzer, as was the case with Judy in *Rebel Without a Cause*:

The fact that Maria is pure allows her to become what Riccio calls the “good girl”, who can save Tony. [Wells, 179]

Maria keeps faith in a “Somewhere” where to she can fulfill her romantic dreams, but it seems that none of the female roles is destined to survive in a male's world.

In *A Boy Like That*, after Tony has killed Bernardo, the two girls confront each other and express their visions on love; Anita's recommendations are filled with hatred and disillusionment, while Maria appears at the mercy of her own feelings. According to the lyrics, once again love resembles a passive weakness where “There's nothing to be done”. Anita agrees in the end, and in the final duet both girls declare their surrender:

Anita and Maria: When love comes so strong,

There is no right or wrong,

Your love is your life.

[*A Boy Like That*, original lyrics by Leonard Bernstein, 1957]

In the end, Maria and Anita find themselves deprived of their dreams of independence and love, Maria's innocence drowns in corruption when she faces Tony's death: “I can kill now, because I hate, too”.

Her love can't save Tony, any more than Anita's attempt at reconciliation can. This is no longer the Anita of "America" – this is no longer the Maria of "I Feel Pretty". They both died in the violent world of the male. [Wells, 155]

Even if the dichotomy of Anita and Maria presents two different female portraits and both carry a potential redemptive role, they respond to two ideals created in a male's perspective. Since neither works as a way to fulfill feminine aspirations, the logical conclusion is that the only way to survive in a men's world is, in fact, to be a man.

The character of Anybodys underlines this condition: she appears as a genderless individual, the name itself is another appropriate name which defines, or rather, non-defines her identity. Her main aim is to be accepted into the Jets' gang, to be treated like a man, to take part in rumbles and other activities that she considers valuable in the boys' eyes, but she is not taken seriously and rejected by Jets and also by their girlfriends. Both groups consider Anybodys a defective female, and this leads us to the theory of the "mirror held up by others" that we have already seen for Maria: a woman is considered as such on the basis of her physical appearance and her sexual desirability.

Anybody is a "tomboy" white girl who seeks acceptance and integration into the Jets through her affirmation of whiteness. Like Maria, Anybodys can only conceive of subjectivity in relation to white men. The Jets, however, are a constant reminder of her abject femininity: "I want to fight", announces Anybodys to the gang, only to have a Jet sarcastically respond, "How else is she

going to get a guy to touch her?” Anita is almost raped when she transgresses white male territory, yet the hostility that *Anybodys* attracts and projects is unparalleled in the film. [Negròn-Muntaner, *Boricua Pop. Puerto Ricans and the Latinization of American Culture*, 71]

*Anybodys'* alienation shows the lack of any opportunity for the girls in *West Side Story* to live a life detached from male's dominion; as Negròn-Muntaner outlines, *Anybodys'* dilemma can be summarized by her reaction to the rape scene in Doc's store: to be what she considers a man would mean embracing every aspect of the Jets' behaviors, violence included. When the gang assaults Anita, *Anybodys* stays frozen and mute in a corner, incapable of taking part in the action. She is witnessing something that could have happened to her as any other girl, she instinctively feels empathic towards Anita, and finds herself unable to deal with such a sensation: the possibility of a redemptive love in her has been aborted.

“I want something now. This is the life I got left.”

In *West Side Story*, Anita and Maria express and nurture their dreams in isolated, protected spaces, while the gangs fight each other in the city; hopes get annihilated when the two female characters meet the unbridled violence outside. In Walter Hill's *The Warriors* we have Mercy, who spends her life on the street. She is portrayed as disenchanted as regard men and love, but still determined to survive one day at a time. Mercy knows the world she lives in is ruled by men, for this reason she looks for protection giving in exchange the only thing she

owns: her body. Maria's romantic hopes clash against Mercy's struggle for existence: it is sex, not love, that makes the difference. Playing by men's rules seems to Mercy the only way to gain some power and control over her life: she passes from one gang to another as suits her, she is not afraid to speak up for herself and has enough experience to know which words and subjects are the most relevant, like pride, manhood and their related symbols.

Mercy: Yeah, that's right, Warriors. Just keep walkin'. Real tough muthas, ain't ya? You guys don't show me much. Why don't you dickheads just walk all the way back home, huh? [Hill, 1979]

It is not only Mercy that puts her femininity to use: a policewoman traps Ajax by acting as an easy pickup, and the same device is applied by the Lizzies, who seduce and then try to eliminate Rembrandt, Cochise and Vermin.

In Yurick's novel Mercy is not present, but we have a few female figures that make brief appearances, every time brutalization marks their actions and the ones perpetrated by male characters. The encounter between the Dominators and the Puerto Rican gang of the Borinquen Blazers clearly inspired the face-to-face meeting of the Warriors with the Orphans. The girl's thoughts, which are described in the novel, could perfectly fit with Mercy's insolent attitude in the cinematographic version.

But the girl was bored. She had been hanging around all day and nothing interesting had happened. Sure, some of the boys had brought a little wine for her. She had gone off and had a little fun with some of them. But the whole day

had been dragging and now she was a little headachy because the wine as wearing off. She yawned – it was much too early to go home – was there any fun in shooting off firecrackers? Mankid stuff. The invaders looked interesting, almost men. Now, if she could promote a little excitement for herself, things might look up. She could boast about what her powers were; armies fought over her. [Yurick, 85]

In a short time, both in the novel and in the film version, the girls' behavior challenges and threatens the gangs' reputation: women are nothing more than property, they have no say in any matter, and whatever comes from them may represent trouble.

Sully: I should've slapped your mouth the moment you opened it!

Mercy: So, who stopped you? [Hill, 1979]

Disturbing similarities are to be found between Mercy, her Borinquen alter ego in the novel and Anita from *West Side Story*. The three of them are not scared to express their opinion and stand up for themselves, but they are put back in their place under the threat of a sexual assault as an act of submission. Anita faces an aggression which, had it not been interrupted, could have led to a gang rape. The Borinquen girl experiences such a trauma after witnessing a murder, and Mercy is warned by Swan:

Swan: We ought to pull a train on you. You look like you might like it. [Hill, 1979]

Moreover, Walter Hill initially wanted Mercy to be Puerto Rican.<sup>8</sup> However, she seems to represent a degenerated, disillusioned, falling apart version of Anita, and her name, Mercy, ironically recalls Maria. The dualism angel of the earth/whore reappears in Swan's low consideration of Mercy's lifestyle.

Swan: I don't like the way you live.

Mercy: The way I live?

Swan: Yeah, I keep hoping I'm gonna run into something a little better.

Mercy: What kind of crap is this? Who are you? You ain't any better than me.

Swan: I guess you like the way everything's going for you huh?

Mercy: Well maybe I do. Friday nights are pretty good, Saturday nights are better.

Swan: I don't think you can remember who you get on Friday and Saturday nights. I don't think you can remember what they look like.

Mercy: Sometimes I can and sometimes I can't. Who gives a damn? [Hill, 1979]

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<sup>8</sup>As it is said in the original website <http://www.warriorsmovie.co.uk/production>

Swan expresses his purpose of finding someone better than Mercy, and such an aspiration reveals his belief in some type of girl who can probably save him with her redemptive love. In Yurick's novel, such idealizations are present in Hinton's mind:

Hinton looked at the girls from under almost closed lids. They were clean looking, innocent, ideal teen-ager types about to be pretty young women, the kind you saw on television all the time and dreamed about... it would be nice to have a girl. It would be nice to cut out from the Family, to retire from bopping. Hinton felt wearier. Maybe he could get a girl, not exactly like this one – blonde, yet not really blonde; white, but not white – light colored, long-haired. She would be innocent, sweet, from some other part of town, dressed clean, beautiful, slender – go steady – marry – a family. He would have a job, a chance. Having someone like her to marry would give him ambition. [Yurick, 168]

It is clear that such a portrait of the perfect girlfriend mirrors a stereotype spread by the media, unattainable in the Warriors' reality. In any case, in the cinematographic version we can mostly speculate about Swan's ideas on his future, while Mercy fearlessly expresses her point of view on what kind of life she is looking for: to her, it is better to live one day at a time than ending up like the Other, the quintessential proletarian housewife, imprisoned in a grey routine.

Mercy: I see what's happening next door and down the block. Belly hanging down, five kids, cockroaches in the cupboard. I'll tell you what I want. I want

something now. This is the life I got left. You know what I mean? You get it  
Warrior, huh? Get it?

As the film continues, Swan's character faces conflicting feelings towards Mercy and her raw, but also honest, approach to life: at first he seems to refuse her, even the kiss in the underground looks like a battle between the two characters and somehow, this scene's dynamics recall Johnny and Kathie's situation in *The Wild One*; the male character cannot fully handle the female one, who subverts his expectations. While in Yurick's novel redemptive love remains a fantasy, Walter Hill offers hints at a romantic development between the two characters. A decisive scene concerning Swan's change of perspective on Mercy is set on the train, while the gang is going back to Coney.

After a long and difficult night, the Warriors get some rest in a wagon, and suddenly two couples sit in front of them. The newcomers are nicely dressed, they flirt and laugh until they spot Swan and Mercy. The camera focuses on Mercy's nude and dirty hands, legs and feet, her shabby and creased clothes, her disheveled hair and tired expression. Nevertheless, she proudly stares back at the rich couples, and her subsequent attempt to adjust her hair has its own complexity. On the one hand, for a moment, Mercy projects herself in the nice girl's shoes, but her speculations clash against the couples' judgmental stares and she feels filthy and ashamed, as if she is forcing others to bear her revolting presence. On the other hand, she keeps in mind how many things happened to her in the past night, and she realizes she has much more life-awareness than such 'preppies'. From this point of view, her attempt in tidying her hair up stands for a proof of dignity and nonchalance.

However, it is Swan's reaction that redefines the scene. His act of stopping Mercy's hand corresponds to a declaration of love, identity and self-consciousness in front of the

Others, as they are described by Yurick: “they didn’t know what the world was really like.” [Yurick, 18] The difference lies in the novel being far less optimistic; redemptive love is nowhere to be found, while the film offers a possible positive resolution for Swan and Mercy, once they recognize each other as parts of the same reality. Even if no idyllic “Somewhere” is mentioned, mercy can still blossom from such wasteland.

“You want to know something? Things are rough all over.”

While Swan and Mercy from *The Warriors* meet each other on a common ground where each of them had faced violence and hard times in general, in *The Outsiders* the female character, Cherry, comes from a reality which clearly enters in contrast with the one Greasers are familiar with. She, a girl member of the Socials, represents the ultimate otherness to Ponyboy and his gang. Hanging out with her boisterous boyfriend Bob, she may remind us of the Judy we met at the beginning of *Rebel Without a Cause*, even if the encounter between her and the Greasers, Dallas in particular, tends to show resemblances with the one between Kathie and Johnny from *The Wild One* for its involvement of individuals coming from different backgrounds. In any case, in both Hinton’s novel and its cinematographic version she is referred to as out of reach for any Greaser boy.

Like the other female characters we have already seen, Cherry bears within herself the potential for redemptive love. She herself explains to Ponyboy she had feelings towards Bob because she recognized a spark of good in him:

You only knew his bad side. He could be sweet sometimes, and friendly. But when he got drunk... it was that part of him that beat up Johnny... I know I'm too young to be in love and all that, but Bob was something special. He wasn't just any boy. He had something that made people follow him, something that marked him different, maybe a little better, than the crowd. Do you know what I mean? [Hinton, 157]

Cherry lightly bonds with Johnny and Ponyboy, considering them harmless and sensible enough, but she shows a tendency to fall for the most damned:

Cherry: I hope I never see Dallas Winston again. If I do, I'd probably fall in love with him. [Coppola, 1983]

In any case, after Bob's murder, Cherry proves to be brave enough to face the conflict just with her strength, even if her male counterpart has disappeared. She assumes an active role, putting her efforts in building a bridge between Socials and Greasers; she finds an ally in Ponyboy, who seems to be the best-disposed towards a confrontation.

It's not just money. Part of it is, but not all. You greasers have a different set of values. You're more emotional. We're sophisticated – cool to the point of not feeling anything. Nothing is for real with us... We're always going and going and going, and never asking where. Did you ever hear of having more than you

wanted? So that you couldn't want anything else and then started looking for something else to want? It seems like we're always searching for something to satisfy us, and never finding it. Maybe if we could lose our cool we would.

[Hinton, 47]

For the first time, Pony truly considers the existence of another perspective on the conflict metaphorically represented by the natural element of the sunset, as an event in which both 'sides', Greasers and Socials, can participate.

It seemed funny to me that the sunset she saw from her patio and the one I saw from the back steps was the same one. Maybe the two different worlds we lived in weren't so different. We saw the same sunset. [Hinton, 50]

The element of the sunset returns in the plot, and it is linked to Cherry's character; when she meets Pony and Two-Bit on the hill, before the rumble, the setting recalls Ponyboy's initial flashback: the protagonists are portrayed as shadows against the light of the sunset, his mother's figure is somehow replaced by Cherry's. Indeed, after her boyfriend's death, Cherry undergoes a change which carries more maternal connotations than romantic ones.

Cherry: Ponyboy! I wasn't trying to give you charity. I only wanted to help. I liked you from the start... the way we talked. Wouldn't you try to help me if you thought you could?

Ponyboy: Can you see the sunset from the South Side very good?

Cherry: Yeah, real good.

Ponyboy: You see it from the North Side, too.

Cherry: Thanks Ponyboy, you dig okay. [Coppola, 1983]

The scene of the meeting between Cherry and Ponyboy at sunset gives meaning to the female figure, she appears as a sort of pacifying angel that appears and announces the night to Ponyboy. Even if she carries a message of peace, being a woman, she does not possess enough power to prevent the rumble (something similar happens to Anita in *West Side Story*, when she tries to divert Bernardo's attention from the war council).

Colors play an important part in the characterization of Cherry. Both the novel and the film version particularly insist on her red hair, which is commonly associated with love, but also with fire, underlining Cherry's redemptive and cathartic action. Again, red, together with gold, is one of the nuances one can spot in a sunset, the moment in which the protagonists confess their aspirations and dreams: the intention of preserving them is at the basis of Ponyboy and Cherry's mutual understanding.

So Cherry Valance, the cheerleader, Bob's girl, the Soc, was trying to help us. No, it wasn't Cherry the Soc who was helping us, it was Cherry the dreamer who watched sunsets and couldn't stand fights. [Hinton, 105]

In Robert Frost's *Nothing Gold Can Stay*, the first line says:

"Nature's first green is gold."

Ponyboy meditates on the meaning of such lines, but towards the end of Hinton's novel we gain a significant clue after his dialogue with Cherry at sunset:

"Thanks Ponyboy." She smiled through her tears. "You dig okay."

She had green eyes. I went on, walking home slowly. [Hinton, 158]

That physical detail appears here for the first time, and it looks like a revelation. Ponyboy unconsciously unlocks the poem's reference to where to find a trace of gold: in the green eyes of Cherry, the dreamer.

## CHAPTER IV

### Grasping goldness

“Nature’s first green is gold,

Her hardest hue to hold.

Her early leaf’s a flower;

But only so an hour.

Then leaf subsides to leaf.

So Eden sank to grief,

So dawn goes down to day.

Nothing gold can stay.”

Robert Frost, 1923.

In *The Outsiders*, it is this poem that Ponyboy recites, while he and Johnny witness a beautiful sunset in Windrixville's countryside. The natural event evokes this piece of poetry in Ponyboy's mind, even if he cannot truly say why.

At first sight, an immediate association comes between blossoming nature and youth, where both the statuses are considered as caduceus, soon subjected to outward corruptive agents. From this point of view, alongside with corruption, the fall from Eden to grief can represent the arrival of adulthood and then death, which adds a sense of urgency and resignation together. In the various films we have examined so far, the protagonists deal with similar events even if they come from different backgrounds; they experience the coming of age, and their attitude, which marked them as rebels in our collective imagination, puts them through substantial stages, one of which is entering in contact with death.

Many characters encounter death in form of accident, or murder. If we associate goldness only to "Nature's first green", that is to say, the innocence of youth, every plot we have considered so far would carry an inevitable sense of regret, since, as it has been said in Chapter I and II, due to different factors including setting and the interaction with other characters, every protagonist at some point is exposed to episodes of violence, and, as aforesaid, to corruption. What does exactly mean to "stay gold" in a world as it is represented in such tales of rebellion, and what happens when death steps in?

If we look at Johnny Strabler in "The Wild One", we see a tormented boy whose life takes a turn when he reaches Wrightsville. His rebellion gets questioned, and even though his attitude seems unperturbed, his reply "Whaddaya got?" shows a basis of reluctance and

insecurity in taking a position and makes his revolt look like an excuse. His encounter with Kathie represents a novelty, but he does not know how to treat her: while she sees the good in him, Johnny seems to identify gold in her, and finds himself amazed and frightened. In his mind, Kathie's goldness can be associated to innocence, but it is also connected to her way of considering future, she has aspirations for herself and dreams of her own. Anyway, since Johnny feels only capable of spoiling her, he gives up on a possible relationship. His attitude towards Wrightsville's inhabitants is characterized by a general hostility during the whole plot, and he refuses the only one who could actually help him because he is a cop. The accidental death of Jimmy, the old barman, reinforces Johnny's rejection of the idea of settling somewhere: he sees himself as a cause of disgrace, even if the whole thing was in fact an accident. When the crowd is following him through the town, he is portrayed in a series of scenes as running on his own feet like a hare chased by hounds, completely defenseless, once lost the emblem of what he believes to be his identity. In the end in fact, the only element which seems to him still familiar and reassuring is his motorbike. In getting back on the saddle, Johnny realizes he is a lonely person, but he does not see anything else for him in the world but going on with the life he is used to. By doing so, he condemns himself to be on the road, which assumes the connotations of a non-place. Johnny is on the run again, where he can live with no rules, but all his possible aspirations and plans for future are left behind. His own trace of goldness has died, and the road becomes a vicious circle.

Johnny: Maybe I could have stopped it early, but once the trouble was on its way, I was just goin' with it. [Benedek, 1953]

In *Rebel Without a Cause*, Jim Stark is portrayed as longing for a place to be, together with its responsibilities. His rebellion starts at breaking out from his domestic reality, which is too pressured and painful for him: in growing up, his feelings are amplified and he cultivates the resolution of reshaping his life as he chooses. He complains about his father's inability to be a reliable mentor, but in fact the decisional process he faces cannot be attributed to anybody else. Jim's character does not display a clear range of propositions, but he takes the chance to experiment and consequently to make his own conclusions. In his loneliness, Jim enters in contact with death and redemptive love without any form of conditioning or preconception coming from his parents. For instance, Buzz's death occurs as an omen: playing at your own rules may imply risks, and to be young does not mean to be untouchable – even the *chickie run*, considered a game, can have unexpected consequences. Moreover, Jim gets to know Buzz a few moments before the accident, and as it was mentioned in the previous chapters, both the characters sympathize with each other, Buzz is not represented as someone “deserving” such an ending.

Buzz: This is the edge. That's the end.

Jim: Yeah. It certainly is.

Buzz: You know something? I like you. You know that?

Jim: Why do we do this?

Buzz: You got to do something, now don't you? [Ray, 1955]

If we consider this dialogue between Jim and Buzz from a particular point of view, it seems to echo the questions Johnny Strabler faces in *The Wild One*, and some of his replies too:

Johnny: (*to Kathie*) You got to put something down. You got to make some jive. Don't you know what I'm talking about?

As Johnny Strabler gets back on his motorcycle and races in disillusionment, Buzz Gunderson's road ends in oblivion and death. Jim's questions are less naïve than Kathie's, but on one side there is the "Whaddaya got?", the "Why do we do this?" discourse, which is directed to the general situation of rebellion and its inconclusive condition, on the other we have links to the specific individual's attitude – that is to say, Kathie and Jim's opinion on Johnny and Buzz's outer and 'tough' appearance: a mask, a fake.

Apart from witnessing Buzz's faith, Jim faces the death of his friend Plato, which represents a more significant turning point in Jim's life. In the attempt to create his existential space, in his lack of reference models, he does not completely realize he has become one for his friend. Even if Jim Stark is popularly considered to be the film's main character and rebel, Plato is its true tragic hero. When we first meet him, he is at the police department and he is said to have killed a brood of puppies. During the film, his characterization swings between psychological instability and submissiveness, between a grown up man's dreary wisdom and a child's candid enthusiasm. If we consider Jim and Plato's outward appearance, we identify the former one with jeans, t-shirt, a red jacket, while the latter one dresses up as a child in his father's clothes, with coat and tie.

While Jim comes to terms with his coming of age, Plato is deprived of such experience. He seems forced to stay in a place where he is always the outsider, unwanted and excluded by his own family and his peers. Even if Jim cannot really relate to his parents, he has the possibility to make a choice and decide whether or not to consider them in shaping his identity. Plato has no terms of comparison, and his self-affirmation process gets stuck. He participates in the creation of his own family, but he does not put himself up for a paternal role, he remains the child as in his real life, incapable of taking responsibilities, and also, as already happened in his past, he is betrayed again by his 'fake' parents, Judy and Jim.

From the very beginning of the plot, we get several hints at Plato's inner struggle and suicidal tendencies. He identifies with the puppies and kills them in a distorted attempt to save them from being unwanted in a hostile world. Even his secret refuge mirrors his psychological state: an abandoned mansion where fantasies can take shape with no limits, but in the end, they all drown like dead leaves in the 'sunken nursery'.

Ultimately, Plato's tragic fate in the grand finale gains the characteristics of a suicide. To face death so openly means to him the liberation from a life that apparently gave him only painful misunderstandings: Plato is taking a stand, and he is experiencing a form of rebellion; to support this reading of the finale, it should be taken into consideration that Jim folds Plato's body with his red jacket, the main symbol of his rebellious phase.

The mechanisms that assimilate Jim and Judy reject Plato and toss him aside.

From this point of view, it is Plato who is, in a sense, the truly intransigent rebel. [Wilson, 126]

In any case, if his 'coming of age' corresponds to his heading towards death, it is questionable whether or not goldness is to be found in Plato's character. His childish and sometimes naïve behaviors may point to innocence, but more than once his inner pains come to the surface, revealing his tormented past and making him a child who grew up too quickly. If goldness instead is to be sought in one's actions and choices, this character's suicide would be considered as a spark of goldness in its extreme definiteness. On the other hand, it can be seen as Plato's ultimate attempt to bail himself out of the world with its responsibilities, but also chances of redemption; this is, in fact, an act of surrender, where goldness sinks in grief and "you will disappear into the blackness of the space from which we came – destroyed, as we began, in a burst of gas and fire!" that is to say, in ashes.

In witnessing Plato's downfall, Jim acquires several moral lessons which lead him to reconsider his ideas on family, relationships and future. Plato's sacrifice helps Jim in facing his own coming of age, his raging anxieties get catalyzed through a cathartic process which empowers his choices and plans for the future, together with the effect of Judy's redemptive love. In confronting Plato's decline to ashes, Jim regains his goldness.

If we consider the idea of goldness as a sum of intentions, *Blackboard Jungle* offers an example in the duality of purposes related to Gregory Miller and Artie West. None of them can be considered innocent, due to the experiences they acquired in such an urban environment. The gangs' lifestyle has already touched their existence, together with the 'survival of the fittest' philosophy reigning inside and outside school. To Miller, this does not mean giving up on his potential: he focuses on his job and cultivates his musical talent, he invests his energies constructively from a disadvantaged position. On the other side, Artie West has a different plan, according to which he finds in gang life his only chance of survival. He does not want others to take decisions for him and rebels against every form of authority, Professor Dadier included, but at the same time he proves incapable of making his own

choices; he manipulates his gang and classmates as long as he can, but he is somehow aware of what kind of fate he will meet after his schoolyears.

Artie: A year from now, when the Army comes and says: "Okay Artie West, you get in a uniform, be a soldier, save the world, and you get your lousy head blown right off." Well, maybe I'll get a year in jail, and when I come out, the Army, they don't want Artie West to be a soldier no more. Maybe what I get is out. [Brooks, 1955]

This fills Artie up with destructive anger, especially while seeing Gregory Miller passing over him. Nevertheless, he believes he is smarter than other kids, electing the street as the only true place where he can gain 'useful' life experience, made of brawls, heavy drinking, thievery, negative devices that lead to the neighbor's disadvantage. His attitude seems to be conceived to trick society, but in fact Artie makes a desperate attempt to fool life itself, seeing his goldness hopelessly slipping away.

As has already been said in Chapter II, the gang's presence highly influences individual choices, which are often made in the group's interest. In *West Side Story*, for example, one of the things that obstruct Tony's personal intentions is his association with the Jets.

Riff: When you're a Jet,

You're a Jet all the way

From your first cigarette

To your last dyin' day.

[*Jet Song*, lyrics by Leonard Bernstein]

What is said in the *Jet Song* turns into a death sentence: following Shakespeare's path, several young lives are destroyed due to rivalry and revenge. Initially, goldness emerges in several characters: Anita, with her purposes of a new life, Tony, who tries to separate from the gang's activities and has a decent job, and shares with Maria the dream of a romantic love story. Everybody has his/her own "Somewhere" to look towards, and from this point of view, the three aforementioned characters can be identified as rebels: Tony for making a try against the gang's rules, Anita for her resolution in contrasting male authority and Maria for having faith in her own dreams. The "Somewhere", the *locus amoenus*, finds its end in grief when death steps in. The first ones to pass away are the gangs' leaders, Riff and Bernardo. Riff gets killed by accident: nobody expects the situation to get this serious, but Tony ends up losing his mind and systematically murdering Bernardo.

In being blinded by vengeance, the characters lose sight of the things that truly give meaning to their lives. This happens to both Tony and Anita: the former forgets about his plans and his love for Maria in the very moment in which all he wants is to kill Bernardo in Riff's (and Jets') name. The latter is overwhelmed by hate and resentment after the Jets' aggression in Doc's store, and tells a lie which causes further grief and more death. In this way, both Tony and Anita lose their goldness. Maria is the last victim, she sees her "Somewhere" destroyed, she believes she is consumed by hate and grief, nevertheless she saves one last spark of goldness in being the one who shows Jets and Sharks the awful reality the two gangs have caused by their useless conflict.

In *The Warriors* the protagonists show a different kind of approach towards life, death and personal aspirations. In both novel and film version, everything comes after the gang's profit; in very few cases can we find traces of personal aspirations, and most of them are progressively forgotten. In Yurick's novel, the gang is described as used to a life shaped by rumbles, war-councils, newspapers' articles in which the Dominators are portrayed as the protagonists of several crime acts, while in their lives murder and rape are normalized. Of course, the disturbing trait of the gang consists in the age of its members, who are approximately between fourteen and seventeen years old. To our eyes, this detail aggravates the circumstances, and the author strategically places some reminders along the plot: the boys deal with violence every day, but they still have rather childish fears of cemeteries, ghosts, monsters. Apart from such terrors, some space is given to fantasies: Hinton cultivates hopes and dreams that he keeps in his own mind, but they often look 'fake' and stereotyped, in fact, products of the system the Dominators are rebelling against. The only moment in which Hinton dares to question his affinity with the other comrades comes when he is separated from the others, alone in a tunnel, but in the end, the power of the gang tames and suffocates his reflections. In Walter Hill's film version, the Warriors are in their twenties, and they can easily represent what the future holds for Yurick's Dominators. In an atmosphere of perpetual war, the protagonists' aim is to survive, and there is little space for lifelong ambitions when you live day-by-day. Coney Island's amusement park becomes the symbol of the Warriors' situation as a gang: a Ferris wheel which turns over and over again, in a dazing atmosphere which mirrors once again the characters' status of immobility, where sunsets are replaced by a misleading, fake carnival of neon lights. The thing that makes a difference is represented by Swan and Mercy's love story: they both believe in the existence of something better than that kind of life, and in the act of sharing hopes with each other they demonstrate personal initiative, independently from the gang's influence.

In *The Outsiders*, Johnny Cade and Dallas Winston are represented as antipodal. Johnny is the most good-natured and gentle among the Greasers, but he is also the kid who has faced the most terrible experiences, which include a disastrous family situation and the shock of a brutal aggression perpetrated by the Socials. Battered and traumatized, he develops a desperate longing for peace, while his psychological condition causes him to consider even the idea of committing suicide in order to end his exasperation. To Johnny, the only alternative consists in becoming 'tougher', and that is why he admires Dallas so much: he is the one who faced prison, New York gangs, a dysfunctional family, and in the act of dealing with such troubles he has toughened himself up to the point of not being able to feel compassion or sympathy anymore: Johnny and Dallas' souls are already worn out at the beginning of the story and they call to mind Plato on one side, and Ajax from *The Warriors* on the other. Ponyboy stands halfway between his two friends: he and his brothers Darrel and Sodapop faced the tragic loss of their parents, but as a reaction, the family unit has been redesigned in an effort for survival. Witnessing Johnny's exasperated revolt in murdering Bob, Dallas' reckless lifestyle, his brothers' difficulties in getting by and the general situation his friends live in, lead Ponyboy to the bitter realization that life in fact is unfair. More than once his sensibility gets challenged by reality, and from this perspective, the episode of the church on fire in Windrixville represents an important turning point. Johnny, Dallas and Ponyboy deal with the unexpected emergency and put themselves in danger to save some children trapped in the burning building. The whole act has a cathartic function with meaningful consequences for the three characters as individuals. Johnny passes away in consequence of his bad burns: in death he finds rest for his tormented soul and pays his debt for having killed Bob; at the same time this event unleashes a critical reaction in Dallas, who, for the first time, realizes how much he cared for Johnny. In the novel, Ponyboy sees Dallas' death as somehow destined to happen, but also liberating in its harshness.

I knew he would be dead, because Dally Winston wanted to be dead and he always got what he wanted. Nobody would write editorials praising Dally. Two friends of mine had died that night: one a hero, the other a hoodlum. But I remembered Dally pulling Johnny through the window of the burning church; Dally giving us his gun, although it could mean jail for him; Dally risking his life for us, trying to keep Johnny out of trouble. And now he was a dead juvenile delinquent and there wouldn't be any editorials in his favor. Dally didn't die a hero. He died violent and young and desperate, just like we all knew he'd die someday... but Johnny was right. He died gallant. [Hinton, 187]

Ponyboy's belief in a future resolution sways after the loss of his two friends, but his sensibility surfaces again and helps him to recognize the things which remind him he still has goldness: Darrel and Sodapop's enormous sacrifices just for him to have a better future, Cherry Valance's strength in testifying against her own world in order to do the right thing, Randy's willingness in opening a dialogue, Johnny's letter.

Like the way you dig sunsets, Pony. That's gold. Keep that way, it's a good way to be... you still have a lot of time to make yourself be what you want. There's still a lot of good in the world. [Hinton, 216]

In tales of rebellion like the ones analyzed in the previous chapters, the protagonists experience pressure, traumas, disillusionment, death. They react by dodging the rules, they

bite back, they look for reassurance reorganizing themselves in groups, but in most cases we see their attempts crumbling passively into ashes. The true act of rebellion lies in keeping dreams and aspirations of personal growth: adolescence represents the stage of life where a kid's innocence gets phased out, but it is also the period of time which is richest in choices. To find one's place in the world is not an easy goal to reach, and even if, at first, Robert Frost's poem *Nothing Gold Can Stay* may have a prophetic shade in depicting gold as something precarious, it also lends itself to an optimistic interpretation. In Frost's poem, gold is associated to dawn, a new beginning which is full of promises, that is, youth. The bright light of the day is then associated with adulthood. Anyway, Ponyboy recites the poem while looking at a colorful sunset: after that, night falls with all its burden of violence and gravity. Sunset is where goldness really resides: it represents the rebel's chance to collect his energies, it is the moment in which dreams and hopes look most vivid, and the protagonist has to keep them in mind in order to face the night and its challenges. If he manages not to forget about them, he will be able to resurrect at dawn, and then to confidently step out in the light of the day. The real act of rebellion consists in not giving up the fight, since the sunset comes with the promise of a new dawn, that is, another chance to get closer to personal aspirations and the possibility to be the creator of one's own goldness, in the name of "Hundreds of boys who maybe watched sunsets and looked at stars and ached for something better." [Hinton, 217]

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