

THE ROCK STAR AS CONTEMPORARY COWBOY: FILM  
MYTHOLOGY AND IDEOLOGY

by

THOMAS J. BARRY

B.S., University of Kansas, 1989  
M.A., California State University, Fullerton, 1992  
M.S.W., University of Kansas, 1996

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

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Department of Sociology  
College of Arts and Sciences

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Manhattan, Kansas

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the mythology of rock and roll stars in film. To accomplish this the narrative structures and ideological components of films about rock stars were identified and analyzed. There were two reasons for choosing this film genre. First, these films are specifically produced for a youth-oriented audience, an age demographic making the transition to adulthood. Because of this, these films provide commentary about social institutions and cultural values about finding a place in a market-based economy that is not as clearly transparent in other genres. Second, these films deal with society across historical time periods, starting with the inception of rock and roll in the 1950s through the present time. Because they cross multiple decades it is possible to analyze how the narrative structure and content of the films change across time and how these changes reflect changes in social conditions. The narrative structure of these films were identified and analyzed following the methodology laid out by Will Wright in *Sixguns and Society* (1975). The five narrative structures that were identified included, in chronological order, the reconciliation plot, the personal revival plot, the personal revival plot tragedy variation, the self-destruction plot, and the rejection plot. The journey the heroes in each plot take, along with the obstacles they face and how they find their place in society, coincide with historically situated cultural values and social conditions. Film content was analyzed through assessing how binary oppositions were resolved and the core themes represented. Both components, the narrative structures and binary oppositions, changed in ways reflective of the historical context in which the films were produced and reinforced particular ideological positions about cultural values, the youth, and the marketplace. While the hero's journey took different direction within each of the identified plots, they all contained a common thread – the rock star always finds a place in society by conforming to structural conditions instead of working to alter them.

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Major Professor

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## **DEDICATION**

Completing this research required countless hours away from family. And even when together, I was often consumed by thoughts of the rock star in film. Always there for encouragement were my wife, Seana, and my two children, Zack and Matthew. Thanks for your patience, for leaving me alone when I needed it, and for being inquisitive.

# Chapter One

## Introduction: Rock and Roll Mythology and Ideology

Rock and roll has a fascinating history. It has been the target of censorship. It has added fuel to social movements. It has been a channel through which political statements have been made. On the flip side, rock and roll has done little more than reinforce the status quo, neither challenging nor offering any real alternative to the prevailing social structure. But regardless of what rock is or has done, it holds the attention of an interested public.

Like other celebrities, rock and roll stars are remembered in an incomplete fashion. Instead of accurately representing how they lived, stories about them are often tales of self-destruction or heroic accomplishments. As a consequence, these stories take on mythical qualities.

Myths are stories told within cultures about the origins of life, human struggles, and life in the afterworld. Even though they do not accurately portray historical events or people, they work to acculturate individuals into societal values, giving them direction for how to walk in this world. While the content of myths may be culture-specific, their general narrative structure spans geo-political boundaries. In his comprehensive cross-cultural analysis of ancient myths, Joseph Campbell (1949) determines that all myths are built upon a common sequence of events. This is perhaps most evident in hero stories. According to Campbell (1949), regardless of the cultural roots of the hero's journey, its narrative always contains three elements: separation from the world in which the hero was born, initiation into another world where new skills must be learned to overcome great obstacles, and the return to society. While the narrative structure of hero journeys remain relatively constant, Campbell does reason that the meanings attributed to them are as "amenable as life itself to the obsessions and requirements of the individual, the race, the age" (1949: 382).

As demonstrated by the narrative structure of Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the literary and cinematic versions of *The Lord of the Rings*, or the more recent *Harry Potter* series, the hero's journey has contemporary forms. If such journeys transcend time, culture and other story genres, they will also be found in films about rock stars.

The goal of this research project is to analyze stories about rock stars in film. Through studying films about these cultural heroes, it is possible to better understand both the structure of

their heroic journeys and the ideological content of films about them. The general questions asked in this study include the following:

- What is the narrative structure of these mythological stories?
- How do the narrative structures change across time?
- To what extent do changes in narrative structure reflect political and cultural change?
- What ideological positions are common in the films?
- How do these positions change across time?

As identified above, this is a study of narrative structure and ideological content of a particular film "genre." As often is the case for studies of culture products, multiple research methods are used. Among other approaches, I draw on structuralism and semiotics to analyze the narrative structure and mythological components of these films. Critical theory and methods are used in analyzing the interrelationships between the films and cultural, political, and economic conditions.

### **The Mythic Struggle: Artist, Audience, and Industry**

Although popular music celebrities existed before the 1950s, they were different in important ways from rock and roll's earliest stars. In the 1930s and 1940s crooners such as Bing Crosby, Frank Sinatra, and Nat "King" Cole, and the Big Band orchestras of Duke Ellington and Count Basie were national celebrities. Throughout his career spanning three decades, Duke Ellington and his orchestra alone held over 20,000 performances. He popularized swing music and the 1930s dance craze with records such as "It Don't Mean a Thing (If It Ain't Got That Swing)." And by the end of his career, Ellington's popularity had been firmly established, earning him 11 Grammy awards. Jazz, swing, and popular music produced a lengthy list of such cultural icons. Their achievements and success are undeniable; but these icons were of a different type than those of rock and roll.

Rock and roll was born in the 1950s. The reasons why are many, including the emergence of a youth market, innovations and technological advancements in recording, producing, and distributing music, structural changes within the culture industry, and musicians who started blending such diverse music forms as the blues, folk, and country and western. Regardless of his influence and reputation as the "King of Rock and Roll," many musicians preceded Elvis who could have been given this title had the circumstances been slightly different. Prior to Elvis recording "That's All Right" at Sun Records and rhythmically gyrating

his hips on the Ed Sullivan Show, various black rhythm and blues musicians sung sexually suggestive lyrics, used the term rock and roll in their songs, and danced in ways that shocked middle-class whites and blacks who believed it to be the devil's music.<sup>1</sup> For years prior to recording Elvis Presley, Sam Phillips, the founder of Sun Records, had recorded many musicians who were not acceptable to the major record companies. By crossing the racial line with blues musicians such as B.B. King and Howlin' Wolf and taking risks with rockabilly artists such as Carl Perkins, Jerry Lee Lewis, Johnny Cash and Elvis Presley, Sun Records captured markets the majors neglected. Of these musicians, it was probably Elvis Presley who did the most to undermine the racial line major labels had drawn. Presley shocked the sensibilities of many, but for Phillips, he had the perfect background to move Southern working class culture to the mainstream.

Despite the reticence of the majors, rock was popular. And when rock proved to be financially lucrative, the major labels jumped in. The result was that by the late 1950s the well of musicians with roots in southern, working-class, and black culture had run dry. To deal with this crisis of talent, major labels turned to middle-class white youth to find the next rock and roll stars. Whereas Elvis, Jerry Lee Lewis and others were tied to working class and black culture, these industry-groomed youth had no such ties. This lack of authenticity in what they produced is captured in the term "schlock rock" (Garofalo, 1997)<sup>2</sup>. Little time separated these two types of music, but they were different from start to finish. This pattern of movement from "authentic" to "manufactured" musicians and music continued as additional rock genres were created and eventually brought under the wings of the major labels. As this process occurred, an inevitable tension ensued between authenticity and fabrication.

As rock musicians gained cultural status in a newly developing youth market, many found themselves torn between retaining individual artistic freedom and conforming to the demands of the industry and their fans. This tension between freedom and constraint is as old as

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<sup>1</sup> In *Mystery Train*, Greil Marcus (1997) illustrates how the rhythms and lyricism of Robert Johnson web their way through rock 'n' roll. Marcus gives a detailed account of Elvis and his on-stage persona. Elvis was a performer extraordinaire, faithfully seeking stardom and in the process creating an iconic image of a rock star.

<sup>2</sup> Reebee Garofalo's (1997) book *Rockin' Out: Popular Music in the USA* gives a detailed historical overview of rock and roll. Garofalo traces rock and roll from popular music of the early 1900s through rap and heavy metal music. From reviewing each time period, the conclusion can be drawn that the relationship between musicians and the industry changes with the times and the musicians.

the music itself but it is often overshadowed by idealistic and mythical visions of free-spirited, authentic musicians who refuse to bend to institutional demands. In their "epic struggle" against the industry and conventional society, the "rock star" sometimes represents little more than hedonistic excess and unbridled freedom. But as cultural icons, their stories sometimes parallel the more timeless journeys taken by other mythical heroes. Whether falling into temptation, going up against the more powerful, or rising above personal weaknesses, their journeys contain moral lessons and function as an instructive guide to youth, an age demographic searching for authenticity in a world of late capitalism.

As with other facets of life, the place of myths in society is influenced by various factors including the size of the population, its political organization, and available technologies.<sup>3</sup> While myths were more clearly present in ancient cultures they have not disappeared from contemporary societies. As Armstrong (2005) discusses in *A Short History of Myth*, their place in present day life is as important as it was in previous civilizations. What has changed significantly, though, is how they are communicated, with mythologies in modern societies frequently told through such mass-mediated technologies as film.

Aside from how they are shared, narrative structures may also change across time. This position was well supported in Will Wright's (1975) study of cinematic Westerns. As Wright demonstrated in *Sixguns & Society* (1975), stories about the Western frontier reflect social currents. In Westerns from the 1940s and 1950s, the hero was frequently an outsider who entered society and worked to defend the community from the villains who threatened it. Because he was different and not a long-standing member of the community, he was initially feared. Eventually the hero, with his special talents, takes on and defeats the villain. By protecting society from the forces of evil, the hero proves his worth to the community and is accepted. But in the end, this hero relinquishes his new status. In a consolidated form, this is the basic structure of mid-century Westerns.

One of the more popular Westerns from the 1950s was *Shane* (1953). In the opening scene, a lone rider comes down off the mountains, rides across a valley, and has his first encounter with civilization, a traditional farming family. Initially Shane is feared because he is a stranger who knows the ways of the gun. But as he walks away from his former life and takes on

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<sup>3</sup> Daniel Chirot's (1994) *How Societies Change* gives a detailed account of how societies have been historically organized, the process of social change, and dilemmas facing contemporary industrial societies.

this community's values, he begins to gain their respect and trust. The antagonist in this story is a greedy cattle rancher who harasses the simpleton farmers in hopes of running them off the land. The farmers try to defend themselves but their morally responsible ways are no match for the evil ranch owner. Shane cannot stand by and be witness to the injustice and so he has no choice but to put on his gun, go to town, and take down the villainous cattle rancher. With his job done and his uncivilized nature revealed, Shane leaves the family he came to know and rides his horse back up the mountains and into the wilderness.

Narrative plots such as that found in *Shane* fit the historical context and its dominant ideology. As conservative and traditional values were challenged in the 1960s and 1970s, the Western narrative changed. No longer was the hero someone with high moral authority who worked to defend weak others. Instead the hero was an outsider who did not seek acceptance into society but vengeance for some past harm. Movies such as *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968) and *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (1976) clearly represent this shift. In the first movie, Harmonica (Charles Bronson) arrives at an empty train depot located in the barren desert. Calmly awaiting his arrival are three hired guns. After a brief exchange, Harmonica guns down all three men. As the plot unfolds, Harmonica kills others and in the end takes the life of the villain (Henry Fonda) he has searched and prepared for since he was a child. After getting his vengeance, Harmonica disappears back into the wilderness. In contrast to Shane, Harmonica only entered society to right a past wrong. While he was tempted to join civilization, he knew he was a man of the wilderness who could not leave his painful past and take on the conventional norms of marriage and work. This narrative and this characterization of the hero<sup>4</sup> was a shift from 1950s Westerns. This shift is reflective of a reaction, both inside Hollywood and in different pockets across the nation, against the dominant ideology of the 1940s and 1950s.

Even though Westerns have largely disappeared from the screen, the archetypal cowboy hero, and its associated role in myth making, has not. In the movie *Star Wars* (1977), Luke Skywalker embarks on the hero's journey. As outlined in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* by Joseph Campbell (1949), this journey consists of three stages: a separation of the hero from his

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<sup>4</sup> Rather than using the term "hero" it would perhaps be better to use "anti-hero." Starting in the 1960s with the development of a New Hollywood, the anti-hero became increasingly prominent. *Midnight Cowboy* (1969) and the two other films mentioned are just two of many Westerns that characterize the hero in starkly different positions compared to the staple Westerns from the 1930s through the 1950s found on the radio, television, or the picture screen.

or her common life, an initiation into rites, rituals, and skills necessary for the accomplishment of heroic deeds, and the hero's return to society. These stages parallel Luke Skywalker's movement from humble servant to victorious starfighter. After he receives a message that the Republic is in peril, he discovers his father was a Jedi Knight and that he also carries a Jedi's supernatural abilities. Luke leaves his adoptive family and begins his journey. As the plot unfolds, Obi-Wan Kenobi, a Jedi who left the order for some unknown reason, teaches Luke the ways of the Jedi force. After his initiation, Luke is ready to face the Empire. The Republic's forces, led by Luke, destroy the Death Star and, seemingly, the evil Empire. Mission accomplished, Luke completes the hero's journey and returns home.

*Star Wars* achieved immediate success. During its first year of release, from Memorial Day weekend until the end of 1977, *Star Wars* grossed approximately \$200 million dollars (imdb.com).<sup>5</sup> A significant factor in its success is the return of a politically conservative context in the late 1970s. Within this climate, a hero who is morally principled and saves society from the destructive forces of evil was for many a refreshing change from movies like *Dirty Harry* (1971) where the heroes use their own brand of vigilante justice to tear down corrupt establishments. Aside from ideological positions, the film was a blockbuster hit for various other reasons, including innovative visual effects, the sound score, advertising and promotion, the movie's appeal to diverse age groups – and because of its archetypal narrative. This narrative, in which the hero becomes enlightened and empowered to defend society and defeats villains, resonates with audiences. It is a narrative found in Westerns, science fiction action films like *Star Wars* – and even in films about rock stars.

*Shane* was released in 1953. Thirty-one years separate *Shane* and *Streets of Fire* (1984), a lesser-known movie about the abduction and eventual rescue of a female rock singer. Even though these two films center on starkly different characters, the cowboy versus a street lord, their narrative structure is remarkably similar.<sup>6</sup> In the opening scene of *Streets of Fire*, Tom

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<sup>5</sup> The first "blockbuster" film of the 1970s was Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* (1975). This film ended up grossing an unprecedented \$70 million (imdb.com). *Star Wars* box-office sales tripled that amount, with \$35 million generated during the opening weekend alone.

<sup>6</sup> As stated previously, Wright (1975) examined how narrative structures often change across time. This does not mean that all films from a particular time period necessarily follow the same narrative. For this reason, while the "classical plot" Western was predominately found in Westerns from the 1930s through the 1950s, it was a plot found into the early 1970s, the last years of films Wright (1975) examined. That *Shane* and *Streets of Fire* have similar narratives illustrates this as well. As a point of speculation, the significance of *Streets of Fire* "classical" narrative may be less about how it compares to Westerns than how it was reflective of Reaganism and conservatism in the 1980s.

Cody seeks civilization by returning home from some unknown sojourn. Soon after he arrives he is called on to find and rescue his former girlfriend, Ellen Aim, a renowned rock star, who was abducted by a gang of thugs. With the help of two others, Tom Cody enters The Battery. While one of the others goes into a club to find Ellen, Tom takes position across the street on a rooftop. The way he looks down on to the street plotting his attack is reminiscent of a cowboy and his posse looking over the crest of a hill and down upon an Indian war party. As the scene unfolds, Tom starts picking off the gang members with his rifle as they ride their iron horses down the street. After Ellen is rescued, they retreat to their side of the line. Raven, the lead gang member from The Battery, challenges Tom and the community to a showdown. When that fateful day arrives and Raven rides down the street, Tom is nowhere to be found. After the police tell Raven there will be no fight, Raven blows his air horn and his posse enters with the thundering roar of their motors. The frightened townspeople hide in the corners of buildings, looking on with fear. But when it appears the town will be lost, Tom Cody drives up, gets out of his car, and in classic Western repose says "Sorry I'm late." With the arrival of Tom, the townspeople find courage and enter the streets ready to take on The Battery villains. Tom leads the way, defeats Raven, rallies the troops to victory, and saves Ellen from harm and the community from defeat. Ellen wants them to get back together, but the civilized life is not one Tom can lead. After watching Ellen take the stage, representative of order being re-established, Tom Cody walks down the dark street with briefcase in hand. Just as he entered, Tom Cody leaves.

The opening and closing of *Shane* follows a similar narrative. Whereas Tom Cody arrives and departs on the subway to find his way in the city, Shane comes down off the hills on his horse to find himself and civilization while working as a farmer. In both movies, neither the townspeople nor the law can protect society. Thus the hero, who has entered civilization in an effort to leave behind his past, gets called to action. But by taking his role as a gunfighter and protector, the hero must leave society and return to the wilderness. As a final comparison, both movies depict the hero moving from outside of society to becoming a member of society. In *Shane*, the Starrett family eventually accepts the hero. This acceptance into society occurs for Tom Cody as well. And in the end, both characters leave behind their hero status and ride off into the sunset.

The above discussion about Westerns and other hero stories illustrates that narratives about rock stars likely have commonalities with subjects of other narratives. As already stated, a



central goal of this project is to identify the structure of these narratives, paying particular attention to when certain narratives arise and when they are most dominant. In addition to the form rock star stories take, their ideological content is examined. This includes an analysis of the ideological positions certain narratives support as well as the specific content within the films.

## **Research Questions and Procedures**

Studying how rock stars have been mythologized in film places this research project partially within the "cultural studies" tradition. Within this academic field mass-mediated cultural products are a central area of study. To analyze such products requires attending to three distinct but interrelated elements: the production of cultural products, the text, and audience reception. Studying management structures of institutions, divisions of labor, technologies, marketing, and the like are tied to the area of media production. Textual analyses consist of studying signs that are a part of culture products. This includes, but is not limited to, analyses of images, narrative structures, and the spoken word. Audience reception addresses who the audience is as well as the meanings they may give to the text. While it is beneficial to study all three areas, the primary focus of this project is the "text" itself. However, discussions about the production of rock music and films about it are provided because not only is the production process directly tied to who the rock star is, but it is also the subject matter within the films or texts themselves.

Various theories and methodologies are integrated into this study, including structuralism, semiotics, critical theory, and the production of culture perspective. Similar approaches have been used in other studies of films. In her analysis of *Ghost*, McRobbie (1992) refers to AIDS, race, gender, and politics to contextualize this film's characters, plot, and symbolism. Warner (1992) ties together the "Vietnam Debate," US international relations, and Reaganism to give a neo-Marxist account for the popularity of *Rambo* films in the late 1970s and 1980s. Ryan and Kellner (1988) analyze the narrative structure and symbolism found in films addressing various political topics ranging from feminism and patriarchy to the counterculture and the environment. One of the most useful studies of a particular film genre is that of Will Wright (1975), whose analysis of the Western informs the present work.

## **Narrative Analysis**

This study incorporates a structuralist assessment of how, or to what degree, narrative structures reflect historical conditions and cultural values. According to Wright, as "institutions change because of technology, war, migration, or depression, so the narrative structure of the myth must change" (1975: 186). For a narrative structure to work by resonating with an audience, it must reflect social undercurrents. Therefore, as the nation's political pulse moves from left to right, or vice-versa, narratives will change. What is less obvious, and can only be discerned through analysis, is how the form changes and why.

For Wright (1975; 2001), films illustrate social theories and philosophies. Films contain, indirectly and directly, commentaries about how the world operates. While scholarly texts provide abstract theories about reality, films work out such theories through their characters and stories. Wright makes this point when he states that when the "cowboy tells us about market society, he uses cultural images, not theoretical concepts. As a result, he often tells us things the theory does not, things the theory only assumes. The cowboy can serve as a cultural guide to the assumptions and concepts of individualism" (2001: 2). This statement is applicable to any genre of film and cast of characters: the rock star can replace the cowboy in this explanatory role. Wright (2001) also makes the point that the West is "fertile soil" for the development of myths, for it is in this open expanse that sentiments of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were projected. What the frontier was for the cowboy, the stage is for the musician, as it provides a "fertile soil" on which rock musician mythology is erected.

At the core of many structuralist analyses of media texts is the study of binary oppositions. Since detailed overviews of structuralism and binary oppositions are provided later in the text, at this point it is sufficient to state that the development of myths and their meanings occurs through opposing symbols. In Westerns, Wright (1975) identified the following oppositions: wilderness/civilization, good/bad, inside society/outside society, and strong/weak. While these oppositions were present regardless of time period, representations of them did change. For example, the "vengeance plot" Westerns common in the 1960s and 1970s addressed the oppositions differently than the early "classical plot" films from the 1930s throughout most of the 1950s.

This study examines the text of 'rock star' films for the presence of similar oppositions. As the movies were reviewed, these oppositions were evaluated for their applicability, and

additional themes not identified by Wright (1975) added. Of the four oppositional pairs noted by Wright, wilderness/civilization was the only one that appeared specifically characteristic of Westerns. For this reason, it was excluded from the analysis.

Identifying oppositional elements is one component of a narrative analysis. Another is identifying and analyzing the general narrative structure. To accomplish this, the narrative functions, or action sequences in the film that change the narrative, were delineated. The first step involved chronologically listing the functions<sup>7</sup> as they appeared in the narrative. The listed functions were one-sentence descriptions of character actions that significantly alter the story's direction. These were written without identifying particular characters by name. Instead, the descriptions only contained the attributes of characters or groups and their actions. There were two purposes for laying out the functions in this manner. First, this created a chronological catalogue of what happened in the story. And from this the narrative sequence was more easily identified. Second, by comparing narrative sequences and the functions they contain, it became possible to identify when significant breaks in the sequence occur and thus uncover regularities of narrative form across films. A significant break occurs when the narrative sequence is altered to the point where a different social action is required. When these shifts occurred, the next step involved labeling them. This process of breaking the stories down and labeling them is analogous to the creation of a Weberian ideal type.

Gerth and Mills (1958: 59-60) provide a good summary of Weber's ideal type and its utility.

By using this term, Weber did not mean to introduce a new conceptual tool. He merely intended to bring to full awareness what social scientists and historians had been doing when they used words like 'the economic man,' 'feudalism,' Gothic *versus* Romanesque architecture,' or 'kingship.' He felt that social scientists had the choice of using logically controlled and unambiguous conceptions, which are thus more removed from historical reality, or of using precise concepts, which are more closely geared to the empirical world. Weber's interests in world-wide comparisons led him to consider extreme and 'pure cases.' These cases became 'crucial instances' and controlled the level of abstraction that he used in connection with any particular problem.

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<sup>7</sup> When discussed in relationship to the narrative analysis, the term "functions" is defined as depictions of character traits and action sequences. Will Wright (1975), who developed his structuralist approach from the works of Vladimir Propp (1968), uses this word in the same fashion. The term does not imply any "functionalist" connotations.

An ideal type characterizes the "pure" form of a particular theoretical concept. For example, the principles of democracy as outlined by John Stuart Mill have never been, and never will be, fully put into practice. The principles of democracy are just that, principles. In different societies and in different historical time periods within a particular society, the principles of democracy move closer or further away from its pure form. By establishing an ideal type, it is then possible to analyze how a particular society practices it, how it changes across time, and how that society compares with others. This has important implications for the present analysis of films and their narrative structures. Through an empirical examination of action sequences, or narrative functions, within 'rock star' films, I distinguished five variations, or plots. Each of the identified plots is representative of an ideal type. As such, movies classified under a particular plot do not have to have identical narrative structures but neither can they move too far away from it. This provides justification and a logic for identifying distinct narrative plots for the films and at the same time allows for cross-plot comparisons. This approach will be elaborated more fully below.

### **Historical Context and Ideological Content**

After completing the steps identified above for each film to uncover its narrative structure, I consider their ideological content following the path advocated by Kellner (1995a). Kellner argues that studies examining ideologies in media culture should use "history to read texts and texts to read history" (1995a: 103). Relevant sources on US political, economic, social, and cultural history are brought into the data analysis to make sense of rock and roll mythology and how the films portray and resolve contradictions between society and rock stars.

As with all business enterprises, organizations producing cultural products have profit as their ultimate objective. As a result, the products or messages that are produced and become most visible are the ones that are most financially viable. This diminishes the ideological diversity that actually exists. It has been argued by social conservatives such as Daniel Bell (1990) that the contemporary mass media promotes democracy by presenting diverse political positions. On the other end of the continuum are critical mass culture theorists who connect the culture industry to class interests or dominant ideologies. Rather than viewing diverse representations in popular culture as an expression of multiple voices, theorists such as Theodor Adorno highlight the uniformity produced. For Adorno, "the advice to be gained from manifestations of the culture industry is vacuous, banal, or worse, and the behavior patterns are

shamelessly conformist" (1990: 279). Contemporary scholars such as Seidman (1990), Kellner (1995b), and Bennett (1991) bring a more nuanced understanding of the mass media. Their position is that a mass mediated culture *can* further the dominant ideology and serve as an "opiate of the people." But it can also express alternative perspectives used to support various political positions. And even when media messages are unequivocally hegemonic, the public can resist by giving their own alternative readings.

For many critical theorists, the mass media is an institution branded with a logic of capitalism that extends beyond the power on any particular individual. In an analysis of news media, Parenti (1986: 240) summarizes this position when he states that

what we have in the news media is not a consciously propagated *establishment* viewpoint but a socially shared *established* viewpoint, and that when radical critics complain of the elite manipulation they, in effect, really are bemoaning the unpopularity of their own views. Reporters and editors are products of the same political socialization as are media owners and political leaders; and therefore they are just reporting things as they see them – and as almost everyone else sees them (including their audiences) – without knowingly misrepresenting anything. To argue otherwise, it has been maintained, is to lapse into some kind of conspiracy theory about a consciously manipulative diabolic elite.

The mass media, like other institutions, encapsulate particular ideological positions for a variety of reasons, including the fact that they have to appease funding sources and that those involved in the production process, while by no means homogenous, come from particular positions in a stratified economy. As a result, certain worldviews become the dominant discourse, not because of devious manipulation but because it is either what media producers believe to be the truth or what they believe will capture market sentiments. This more nuanced position is the one taken here. What the mass media produces serves both pragmatic purposes and ideological functions. For example, music is entertainment and at the same time it can reinforce certain values, calm social undercurrents, and play a role in capital accumulation. This is true of all cultural institutions and their products, including Hollywood and film.

In 1915 D.W. Griffith's silent picture *The Birth of a Nation* was released. Rather than giving an accurate historical account of the Civil War and Reconstruction, this film launched a critique against the rising power of Southern Blacks. Griffith leads the audience to believe that without the Klansmen's white opposition the South would be forever lost to power hungry and

inept blacks seeking political control. The ideology of this film is now quite obvious, though it was likely not apparent to most audience-goers at the time.

Ideological components are quite visible in more recent films as well. The 1979 movie *Norma Rae* deals with the daily struggles of Norma Rae Webster (Sally Fields), a working class, single mother who tries to make ends meet as a laborer at a dehumanizing factory. Rather than passively accepting how workers are treated, she tries to bring about change by taking a leadership position in a labor union organization. She quickly finds herself at odds with many people in the community, not only because she takes a stand against the Henley mill but also because she's breaking away from gendered norms. In the end, Norma Rae triumphs, albeit with the leadership of a union-hired male lawyer, winning concessions for the factory workers and winning over their hearts at the same time. This film reflects the changing gender roles of the time. It also provided "counter-hegemonic" statements about corporate practices and anti-union sentiments.

Films and other forms of mass culture often reflect general social concerns and support particular historically situated ideological positions. For example, the various social movements of the 1960s challenged the conservative consensus views of race relations, gender roles, sexuality, and the government's role in creating order. These changes were reflected in public discourse, academia, and the mass media. In terms of the film industry, during this time a "new Hollywood" appeared where directors and actors were given unprecedented freedom to explore once forbidden themes.<sup>8</sup> Trumping such staple and conservative films – films that many hoped would save Hollywood from economic peril – as *Hello Dolly* (1969) were such counter-culture classics as *Easy Rider* (1969). As the political pendulum swung back to conservatism in the late 1970s and 1980s so did the content of many popular films. Sylvester Stallone movies like *Rocky* (1976) and *First Blood* (1982) and their sequels reflected a return, in different form, of the 1950s heroes who fought for justice with rugged masculine strength. Hollywood films, as with all other culture products, do not all contain consistent messages within any given time period. While more conservative films made a "comeback" during the late 1970s/early 1980s, some films took other directions, such as *Norma Rae* (1979), *The Deer Hunter* (1978) in its portrayal

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<sup>8</sup> See Peter Biskind's (1998) *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls: How the Sex-Drugs-and-Rock 'N' Roll Generation Saved Hollywood* for an overview of Hollywood's transition from the Old Studio system to the "New" Hollywood. 1969 represents a watershed time period in Hollywood. The different directions producers and directors were taking is noted by the often cited examples of *Hello Dolly* and *Easy Rider* provided here.

of the Vietnam War, and *Silkwood* (1983) in recounting the life of a nuclear power plant worker who blows the whistle on negligent practices that put herself and others in imminent danger.

The goal of this project is to bring to light how films do much more than entertain audiences. To accomplish this, the ideological content in the selected films will be described and analyzed. This content will be examined as it relates to the following five themes.

The *individual versus industry* theme deals with the fundamental contradiction that exists between the musician and the industry. To be a rock star, this cultural hero must work within organization structures. In a cultural context of late capitalism where individualism is highly valued but institutional pressures to conform are strong, the hero has torn allegiances. Part of the rock star mythology addresses how this tension is resolved. The following questions are asked about the films to clarify the rock hero narrative as related to this theme. How is the individual-industry relationship portrayed? How does this hero resolve the inherent contradictory tension between individual agency and industrial control? How is this relationship portrayed differently depending on the historical context of the film's production?

The second theme is about *temptation*. Whereas in the *individual versus industry* conflict the musician must reconcile the competing demands of authentic self-expression and institutional domination, with the temptation theme the musician wrestles with self-definition. As in the Ancient Greek myth of *Icarus*, what rock stars make of the powers they gain provides a message about temptation and self-destruction. How this theme is represented will reflect cultural values that distinguish right and wrong. Through examining how the film heroes respond to temptations it is also possible to identify what paths are supposed to be taken for those on a hero's journey. As a result, this theme expresses what must be done in life to rise above obstacles and become strong, successful, and heroic. As the musician gains star status, how is it dealt with? Does the musician lose sight of who they are in the process? What temptations do they confront? Do these temptations and how they deal with them change across time?

The *intergenerational* theme deals with youth and adulthood. This opposition expresses, in part, why rock is so attractive for some youth. Through popular culture, the young claim physical and psychological space away from the adult world. For the fans, the rock star functions as a cultural hero who wages war against the establishment while fighting for youthful freedom and idealism. Therefore, characterizations of rock stars reflect particular ideas about intergenerational value differences. What values do the responsible adults uphold? What values

do the heroes embrace? How do the heroes negotiate differences between these values? How do they respond when pressured to conform to the responsibilities of adulthood? At the completion of their heroic journey, how do they become involved in society?

The focus of the fourth theme is *gender*. In lyrics, persona, and performance, rock music has always been predominately masculine. As a result, both male and female rock musicians must deal with predetermined masculine scripts and the pressures of role conformity. How these cultural icons are represented will to some extent reflect particular cultural notions of gendered norms. To address these areas, the following questions were asked. How do rock stars project masculinity and femininity? To what extent do they conform to gendered norms despite their rebellious persona? Are female rock stars more conscious of issues of gender? Do they more actively resist gender conformity compared to male rock stars? How do the films reflect changes in cultural understandings of gender?

The final theme examined here is *race*. Rock and roll's history is intricately tied to race-related issues. With the initial development of rock came a backlash from concerned community members, especially from whites, about "race records." While such hysterical responses abated relatively quickly, rock maintained itself as a genre dominated by whites. Therefore, it is no surprise that most of these films are about white rock stars. Even though this is the case, questions related to race are still important, for not only do studies of cultural texts involve analyzing what is represented but also, and equally important, what is omitted. How are the racial majority and minority represented? When, if ever, does race become a focal point of the rock star's life? To what extent does the commentary provided in a film reflect changing racial relations in society?

## **Data and Research Procedures**

Wright's interpretive methods provide an approach for examining the meaning of myths and the effects historical factors have on narratives. While his study does not apply the methods of empirical verification common to quantitative studies, it does apply the "logic of probability." Wright substantiates his conclusions by drawing upon historical evidence to logically connect changes in the content and symbols found in Westerns. According to Ricoeur (1981), it is through this logic and supporting evidence that this type of qualitative work achieves scientific validity. The same approach is taken here in the present study of films about rock stars.



As Jameson (1977) points out in a review of Wright (1975) and Cawelti (1976), it is critical that examinations of texts avoid overly deterministic explanations and locate texts in the proper historical context. In evaluating their structuralist methods, Jameson (1977: 548) states that "the question is...how a type of narrative analysis may be devised which can be both structural and historical, thereby avoiding the two-fold dangers of some ahistorical appeal to psychological needs and faculties on the one hand, and the mythic and ultimately ethical approach on the other." Further on in this article, he supports Wright's (1975) methods for incorporating the structural (intrinsic interpretation) and the historical (extrinsic interpretation). As should be clear by now, this dualistic approach is the one taken in this study.

As indicated by various media analysts (see Hall, 1980; Fiske, 1992; Kellner, 1995a), texts are "polysemic" in nature. They defy uniform interpretations. As outlined by Hall (1980), the meanings given to texts depend on a reader's social position. While texts contain a *preferred reading* – one consistent with the dominant ideological message of the text – this may not be the message received. If the reader supports the preferred reading, they give what Hall (1980) refers to as a *dominant reading*. A *negotiated reading* occurs when the preferred reading is challenged and interpreted according to one's social position or experience. As a result, an alternative interpretation of the text is given. Finally, a person's social position may be at odds with a text's dominant ideological messages. When this occurs, the reader may give an *oppositional reading*. Because texts are open to various interpretations, it is critical that investigator biases are minimized when analyzing texts in order delineate dominant structural themes and ideological messages more objectively. The following procedures were taken to achieve these ends.

The steps taken to identify narrative structures followed Propp's (1968) structural analysis of Russian folktales and Wright's (1975) study of Westerns. Propp (1968) examined folktales by listing the functions, or the actions characters take, within each. On comparing the functions, the folktales were categorized as belonging to one of several types. In his analysis, Propp (1968) concluded that stories with similar narratives contain the same functions, all of which occur in the same sequence. Wright (1975) took a similar approach but added character attributes into his listing of functions. In addition, Wright (1975) allowed for greater variability in the sequence, arguing it is neither necessary that all functions be present nor that they appear in the same order. Instead, what is critical is whether sequences containing a common theme move in a similar direction. To apply Wright's (1975) methods, detailed empirical descriptions of each film's

narrative structure – the characters and action sequences in the films – were made. After these descriptions were made for each film, they were compared and patterns identified. Those with common sequences were labeled as belonging to a distinct narrative structure. Through this inductive process, analytic typologies – the plots – were created that appropriately described the narrative structures. With this accomplished, it was then possible to compare films across narrative structures more objectively without artificially imposing idiosyncratic interpretations. This process is described in more detail in Step 2 and Step 3 below, and in chapter three.

In addition to the text's structure, its content was also analyzed in detail. The content included the values, beliefs, attitudes of characters and their relationships to others and society. This was done in order to evaluate the applicability of the pre-selected binary oppositions (good/bad, inside society/outside society, and strong/weak). The presence of these oppositions and their resolution was not assumed. Rather, the oppositions were used as an analytic framework. While viewing each film, detailed notes were taken regarding the oppositions. This included identifying how they were represented and addressed. With each additional film viewed, the meanings of the oppositions were clarified. This ultimately led to the identification of two additional binary oppositions: authenticity/fabrication and rebellion/conformity. By approaching the content in this manner, an objective procedure was used for determining the principle "moral" evoked in the story and the process and outcome of the rock star hero's journey.

A similar process was involved in examining the pre-selected ideological themes (individual versus industry, temptation, intergenerational, gender, and race). As is the case with the oppositions, these themes were pre-determined but it was not assumed that particular messages would be present in the films. As the films were viewed, the presence – or lack thereof – of the themes and their representations were noted but not formally analyzed. This was done to minimize the potential for imposing particular messages on subsequent films. Formal analyses were made after all films were viewed.

It is important to note that with all interpretive studies of texts it is challenging to maintain objectivity. These procedures were taken to minimize investigator bias and more accurately represent the data. Furthermore, it is through describing the processes in such detail that the reader can assess how the text was read and why. As a result, the validity of this study's findings can be more thoroughly evaluated.

To substantiate particular interpretations of the text, historical documentation is provided. While this research does not provide an exhaustive historical background of the time period when each film was produced, sufficient documentation is provided to contextualize the ideological messages identified.

Analyzing narrative structures is quite different from analyzing ideological content. Wright's (1975) approach to understanding narrative structures involved identifying plots and explaining how the plots, and not just the content, changed across time. Because his work was primarily structuralist in orientation, he addressed how changes in narrative structure reflected particular ideological positions regarding the individual, society, and the marketplace. After he identified the various plots, he argued that certain plots are most likely to be found in specific time periods. To some extent this is true of all film genres, including films about rock stars. But while the narrative patterns may reflect historical changes, these are only rough associations. Because the films reposition ancient mythical elements to capture contemporary life, the themes arise not only out of a specific time period but are also influenced by such factors as the production process, industry organizational dynamics, and demographic shifts. And while they may fit better within certain contexts and may lend themselves to reinforcing certain ideological positions, they are not just by-products of the historical context.

The preceding paragraphs identified the general processes involved in identifying the narrative structure of the films and interpreting their content. The specific research procedures regarding how the films were selected and analyzed involved:

**Step 1: Selection of the Sample.** A comprehensive listing of all US movies dealing with rock and roll themes was obtained via Internet searches. Various sites were reviewed, with [www.sandlotshrink.com](http://www.sandlotshrink.com) being the most comprehensive. This website breaks down "Rock and Roll Movies" by decade starting in the 1950s and moving through 2001. The International Movie Database (IMDB) ([www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com)) was used for cross-reference purposes and to obtain more specific information regarding box-office sales, company credit, and casting credits.

To be included in the sampling population, the movies had to meet three criteria. First, the films had to be domestically produced. Domestic industries and culture are the principle focus of this study. Foreign films contain messages about rock, the marketplace, youth, and the like but the meanings are not as directly tied to US culture. Therefore, these were eliminated from the sample. Second, the narrative of the films had to center on rock musicians and their

careers. Therefore, films about stars from other music genres, such as rap (*8-mile*) or country (*Pure Country*) were excluded. To assist in making decisions about what movies should be included, short plot descriptions from [www.sandlotshrink.com](http://www.sandlotshrink.com) and IMDB were consulted. Movies that obviously did not deal with rock stardom were dropped. This is the reason films such as *Streets of Fire* were not formally analyzed. The resulting list, therefore, included many movies that upon further screening were eventually deleted from the sampling pool. The final selection requirement was that they had to be feature films, thus excluding made-for-television dramas. The reason for this omission is that movies and television-based shows differ, to some degree, in production processes and in target audience.<sup>9</sup> Since both fictional and non-fictional accounts of rock stars tell a story about a hero's journey, they were not treated separately.

Based on these sampling criteria, the following films were selected for analysis in this study:

Loving You (1957)  
Jailhouse Rock (1957)  
King Creole (1958)  
Buddy Holly Story (1978)  
The Rose (1979)  
The Jazz Singer (1980)  
Hard to Hold (1984)  
Purple Rain (1984)  
La Bamba (1987)  
Great Balls of Fire! (1989)  
The Doors (1991)  
What's Love Got To Do With It (1993)  
That Thing You Do! (1996)  
Selena (1997)  
Rock Star (2001)

**Step 2: Preliminary Analysis of Two Films.** To further develop the analytic categories and procedures used in this study, two films were analyzed to provide a preliminary framework for comparative analysis. These films were *Jailhouse Rock* (1957) and *Rock Star* (2001). While watching the films, detailed notes were taken on their structure and content. The actual character

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<sup>9</sup> In *Sixguns & Society*, Wright (1975) only selected high gross sales Westerns for analysis. He argued that box office ticket sales directly reflect a narrative structure's ability to resonate with an audience. His position is only speculative and may only be partially true. Wright (1975) does not account for such influences as technological changes, demographic shifts, and marketing campaigns on what becomes a top seller. For this study, no exclusions were made based on gross sales. It is argued here that all films about rock musicians mythologize them in some way regardless of what happens at the box office.

names were used in order to create a detailed log about the film for later reference. After the descriptions were compiled, the narrative functions, or major action sequences, were listed. These were used for comparative purposes throughout the study. The next step involved identifying and analyzing the binary oppositions. Wright's (1975) binary oppositions (good/bad, inside/outside society, and strong/weak) were applied and how each film addressed them were noted. Because of their importance to the rock star story, two additional oppositions were identified: authenticity/fabrication and rebellion/conformity. Finally, for each film the previously listed questions related to the five ideological themes (*individuality versus industry, temptation, intergenerational relations, gender, and race*) were used to analyze the substantive social themes and ideological content.

**Step 3: Analysis of all the Selected Films.** The procedures listed above were applied to each film. For heuristic purposes, the initial analyses of narrative structures and ideological content were examined as distinct data sets. This allowed for treating the form and content as separate areas of analysis prior to examining relationships between the two. In terms of the structural component, each film's particular storyline, consisting of major action/event sequences, was consolidated into a list of common narrative functions. This resulted in most, but not necessarily all, of the narrative functions for each film to be represented with some functions appearing in a different place in the sequence. Once this narrative structure was noted for all the movies, they were compared, starting from the oldest to most recently released film. When significant changes in the narrative sequence, the order and content of the narrative functions, occurred, it signified a fundamental alteration to the narrative structure. Each unique plot line that emerged was then titled. Five distinct plot variations on the 'rock star' narrative were identified: the reconciliation plot, the personal revival plot, the personal revival plot tragedy variation, the self-destruction plot, and the rejection plot. Starting with Chapter 4, a detailed discussion of these films and plots is given. But before proceeding it might be useful to provide a general overview of each plot.

The first plot revolves around the hero standing up for weak members of society, defending certain moral principles, and discovering how to be a professional without losing his working-class values. Ultimately, he finds a way to bridge the gap between the working-class order he was raised in and the professional world with which he desires to be associated. Since the central tension of this plot involved resolving tensions existing between these two different

ways of life, it was labeled the reconciliation plot. The second one, the revival plot, has the hero starting out as a common member of the community. The hero, usually endowed with some innate musical gift, becomes a star. But once this is achieved, problems develop as the pressures of being a star and unresolved personal problems from the past weigh on the hero. The hero eventually comes to a crossroad and desperately tries to figure out how to be both a star and person in control of life on and off the stage. Because in this plot the hero rises to fame, becomes disillusioned, and eventually succeeds in finding him or herself, it was labeled the personal revival plot. This plot also had a variation, one where the hero tragically dies at the end. In the fourth plot line the hero succumbs to various temptations and self-destructs. With this plot the hero never figures out how to establish a good working relationship with the industry. And neither does the hero ever walk away from it all. Rather the hero holds onto stardom despite the destructive consequences. The final plot is the rejection plot. Here the hero rises to fame, discovers the pressures are not worth the costs, and leaves the star position to return to a more authentic life.

Listed below are the selected films and their placement within each of these five plots.

Reconciliation Plot: C

Personal Revival Plot: R

Personal Revival Plot Tragedy Variation: RT

Self-Destruction Plot: SD

Rejection Plot: J

Loving You (1957) - C

Jailhouse Rock (1957) - C

King Creole (1958) - C

Buddy Holly Story (1978) - RT

The Rose (1979) – SD

The Jazz Singer (1980) - R

Hard to Hold (1984) - R

Purple Rain (1984) - R

La Bamba (1987) - RT

Great Balls of Fire! (1989) – R

The Doors (1991) - SD

What's Love Got to Do With It (1993) - R

That Thing You Do! (1996) – J

Selena (1997) - R

Rock Star (2001) - J

In addition to analysis and categorization of narrative structure, two further analyses were made: binary oppositions and ideological themes. For the binary oppositions, detailed descriptions of their presence and application in the films were made. Attention was directed at identifying how the hero and other characters mediate these oppositions and to what ends. After descriptions of each film were made, they were compared to other films having the same narrative structure. This was done to determine the relationship between binary oppositions and structure; in other words, whether a particular narrative structure also contains a consistent application of binary oppositions. As with binary oppositions, detailed descriptions of the representation of the ideological themes were made while viewing the films. While the ideological messages may coincide with narrative structure, this was not assumed to be the case. For this reason, these messages were viewed independently from film narratives. After listing the ideological messages for all of the films, they were compared to identify the point at which messages changed or new ones emerged. Documentation of the historical context in which the films were produced was then provided to clarify the meanings of these messages.

#### **Step 4: Presentation of Findings**

After identifying the narrative structures, binary oppositions, and ideological themes within and across the films, they were analyzed. The analysis involved identifying the meanings associated with each of these three elements and comparing them to the historical context in which the films were produced. Quotations and descriptions of sequences from the films were incorporated to clarify why certain interpretations were made.

#### **Step 5: Conclusions**

The final step involved explaining the significance of the findings. Much attention here is directed at what the 'rock star' hero represents, the core components of this hero's journey, and how it changes across time.

### **Summary and Organization of the Remaining Chapters**

This study analyzes the mythological and ideological components common to rock star films. In many ways the rock star acts as a contemporary cowboy hero for the young. Like the cowboy in Westerns, the rock star archetype is filled with meaning that correlates with events occurring in the broader historical context. The question remains, though, as to whether the rock star can be analyzed as a mythical hero. It is the charge of this study to find out by asking the following questions. What is the journey of the rock star? How does it change across time?

How does this journey fit within the historical context? In addition to the recurring mythological elements, also examined is the ideological content of the films. The binary oppositions and five themes previous listed provide an organizational strategy for such an analysis.

Prior to analyzing the films, a review of theories of cultural analysis relevant to this project is provided in Chapter 2. Chapter 3 presents a more detailed description of the research procedure utilized in this study. A separate chapter is devoted to the analysis of each plot. These comprise Chapters 4 through 7. The results and conclusions are discussed in Chapter 8. The final chapter also highlights the limitations of this study and directions for future work.



## **Chapter 2**

# **Approaches to the Study of Mass Culture**

Sociological analyses of mass culture address certain central themes. These include the interrelationship between cultural products, the institutions in which they are produced, and the public. In the first section of this chapter, the theoretical foundations of critical theory, one of the guiding frameworks for the present study, are reviewed. This includes the historical development of critical theory as applied to mass culture. The next section involves a more detailed review of structuralism than was provided in chapter one. Here, the theoretical background and methodological tools for conducting narrative analyses are provided. Particular attention is given to the significance of subjecting films, such as those of rock stars, to this type of analysis. The next area addresses the production of culture. This includes the production of music as well as film. While this is not a study of the production of the rock star, such issues are discussed in detail here because the subject of the films studied – rock stars – are created within this production process. In the final section, audience reception studies are briefly overviewed.

### **Critical Theories of Ideology and Mass Culture**

#### **The Frankfurt School and the Gramscian Tradition**

In 1923, the Institute for Social Research was founded at the University of Frankfurt in Germany. The initial members of the Institute, more commonly referred to as the Frankfurt School, included such Marxist social theorists as Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Herbert Marcuse, and Max Horkheimer. Having witnessed the rising powers of Communist Russia, totalitarian rule in Italy and Germany, and 'monopoly capitalism' in the United States, they developed new ideas about the interdependency between mass culture and political domination. The central position taken by these theorists was that mass culture worked to pacify the public and minimize political dissent. In their article "Dialectic of Enlightenment," Horkheimer and Adorno (1972) substantiated this position in discussing the elusive powers of the culture industry.<sup>1</sup> By blending "high" and "low" culture, industries producing cultural products made

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<sup>1</sup> These theorists coined the term 'culture industry.' It refers to how the public is made politically passive through the manufacturing of 'false needs' by advertising agents, the entertainment industry, and the mass media.

commodities out of everyday life experiences. According to Horkheimer (1972: 289-290) the effect was that

The so-called entertainments, which have taken over the heritage of art, are today nothing but popular tonics, like swimming and football. Popularity no longer has anything to do with the specific content or the truth of artistic productions. In the democratic countries, the final decision no longer rests with the educated but with the amusement industry.

These entertainments were more than products to amuse. Embedded within them were ideological positions or "frameworks of thinking and calculation about the world – the 'ideas' which people use to figure out how the social world works, what their place is in it and what they *ought to do*" (Hall, 1991: 97). To Frankfurt School theorists the integration of ideology in mass-produced cultural products had dire consequences, for they ultimately created a more direct and yet elusive link to dominant, ruling class ideology.

It was among the Frankfurt School theorists that media theory first developed. While their general position downplayed individual agency and gave too much power to the owners of media organizations, it forced closer inspection of the culture industry. They drew upon a Hegelian interpretation of Marx's notion of dialectics to address the complementary relationship between social forces and in doing so dismissed simple causal, linear relationships. Finally, through incorporating such diverse disciplines as psychoanalysis, economics, and philosophy, they provided broad-based analyses about the capacity to form a rational society that serves the interests of all — something adversely affected by industrialization.<sup>2</sup>

Early Frankfurt School theorists drew upon such influential figures as Kant, Freud, and Weber, but it was the ideas of Engels and Marx that were at the center. Following Marx, the ruling class and a repressive State were viewed as intricately bound. Through its control of the government, military, and major administrative institutions, the State reinforced the existing relations of production. With respect to the culture industry, because the ruling class owns these institutions they exert significant influence on what gets represented. By taking this approach, Frankfurt School theorists partly undervalued the multifaceted nature of ideological domination. Althusser (1971), among others, challenged and extended the Frankfurt School's Marxist approach by addressing more thoroughly the various forces involved in the construction and

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<sup>2</sup> For overviews of the early Frankfurt School see Wiggershaus (1998), Held (1980) and Jay (1973).

repression of human subjects.<sup>3</sup> He also countered critics of Marx's historical materialism by arguing how Marx's works have often been misinterpreted. This was accomplished, in part, by addressing how social relations are produced through various 'practices' in society. For example, the economic structure does not determine social relations directly but rather its structure is interrelated with various 'practices,' including cultural notions of the individual, the knowledge base, the State, religious institutions, and other organizations within and outside production processes. Althusser located power within and outside of a ruling class-dominated State by differentiating between a repressive State apparatus and an ideological State apparatus. A repressive state, which includes institutions such as the police, the army, and the government, applies coercion to gain compliance. Ideological State apparatuses, such as religion, family, schools, and the media, on the other hand exert a more indirect force but with similar outcomes in reproducing existing structural conditions. In making this distinction the culture industry and other ideological institutions were identified as neither overtly coercive nor an extension of a repressive State. And ultimately this makes them powerful, for their dominating force moves into the shadows. Althusser also disagreed that a singular dominant ideology exists around which the public develops a "false consciousness." To Althusser, ideologies within the state and superstructure are multi-faceted. While capitalists control institutional processes and cultural products, not all capitalists think alike nor do they control all facets of the production process. This does not mean Althusser viewed the public as active interpreters of cultural industry products and their messages. On the contrary, Althusser, like critical theorists before him, still largely viewed the public as unreflexive 'subjects' who are constituted through various 'practices.'

Predating Althusser's theorizing about ideological forces was Antonio Gramsci and his examination of the interrelationship between economic and political structures and individual domination. By taking a Hegelian Marxist perspective in privileging culture, Gramsci gave culture relative autonomy from the State and the economy. In doing so he moved the public into a more active role as creators and interpreters of culture. This position is reflected in his definition of *hegemony*:

the 'spontaneous' consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is 'historically' caused by the prestige (and

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<sup>3</sup> Curran, Gurevitch, and Woollacott (1982) and Laplsey and Westlake (1988) provide detailed discussions of Althusser's contributions to media theory.

consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production. (Jackson Lears, 1985: 568)

According to Gramsci, the ruling class dominates modern capitalist societies not primarily by military or physical coercion but through culture and its ability to legitimate social structure. As a result, existing power relations and ideological forces become more invisible. As with Althusser, Gramsci did not view this process as mechanistically determined. The elite do not simply impose ideology on passive actors. Rather, individuals are actively tied to the establishment of hegemony by accepting particular worldviews and participating in dominant institutions. Because individuals are active agents, they also have the ability to develop a counter-hegemony and, if powerful enough, subvert the ruling class. According to Gramsci (1990), for this to occur opposition must arise from traditional (professors, philosophers, and others shrouded with professional letters) and organic (individuals not ascribed with an elevated status but who are leaders in their own social groups) intellectuals. Gramsci's organic intellectuals can be more broadly defined to include artists and musicians. In incorporating such individuals into this category, recognition is given to those from below who indeed philosophize about social relations and through song work to minimize hegemony. Whether referring to Bob Marley, Fela Kuti, Caetano Veloso, Woody Guthrie or other politically charged musicians, it is evident that music has been and continues to be a vehicle of resistance. But there are limits, especially in a time when subversive music is often quickly co-opted into the culture industry. Rap music within the United States epitomizes this absorption. With strong oppositional lyrics and sounds, early rappers from the 1970s, including The Watts Prophets and Gil-Scott Heron, gave voice to inner-city youth. During rap's early years, artists had relative autonomy and freedom to say what they wanted. This was partially possible because this music was produced outside of major industry labels. By the mid 1980s, rap music was being increasingly produced by major labels and incorporated into the mainstream culture. As a consequence, any counter-hegemonic force it may have had initially was weakened.

Compared to advanced capitalist countries, political music in other countries often has greater counter-hegemonic potential because of its existence outside of systems of production. This is, in part, why governments of such countries have repressed popular music. In a 1965 Central Committee of the Communist Party meeting in the GDR, a committee member spoke out

for abolishing rock music (Wicke, 1992). This member and others who supported him feared that the introduction and development of "low culture" Western rock music would mobilize youth and disrupt social order. The 1970s and 1980s Argentinean dictatorship intervened to control community-based *Rock Nacional* gatherings (Vila, 1992). The 1960s Brazilian Tropicalia movement also met government resistance, resulting in the jailing and forced exile of musicians who wrote and performed pro-democracy songs. The Nigerian political activist and singer-songwriter Fela Kuti was repeatedly beaten and jailed for singing out against an oppressive and corrupt government and military. In the United States, repressive reactions against particular musicians often only occur with those who perform outside of institutional structures. This was the case for the People's Songs musicians and other Leftist singers who were scrutinized and pursued by government officials during the red scare of the 1940s and 1950s (Lieberman, 1989).

Whereas Marxian analyses of counter-hegemonic music, and by extension all culture products, highlight the regulatory control of "subversive" cultural elements, other theoretical analyses position the media in a significantly different way. Conservative researchers like Daniel Bell, Seymour Martin Lipset, and Talcott Parsons claimed that following World War II, national, international, and social conflicts declined and were replaced by local conflicts fought within mediating bureaucratic structures (Seidman, 1990). From this perspective, because the mass media aired various viewpoints, it was a relatively democratic institution. Furthermore, for them the public were not passive dupes but active interpreters of cultural messages who could resist any dominant ideology to which they were exposed.

Bell (1990) argued against materialist Marxist and Gramscian positions that the elite directly or indirectly control ideology. In his discussion of the "cultural contradictions of capitalism," he noted that (1) the superstructure produces both pro-capitalist and anti-capitalist messages and (2) the public, through their consumption patterns, influence what ideology is reproduced. According to this line of reasoning then, the "cultural apparatus" is not a tool wielded by and for the ruling class. Rather, it only produces ideological images and messages supported by the consuming public. If Frankfurt School theorists can be blamed for giving the economic base too much power, the post World War II "liberal consensus" theorists put too much faith in mass culture's ability to materialize democracy.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The history of the "liberal consensus" is detailed in Hodgson (1976) and Chafe (1999).

The "new social movements" of the 1960s and 1970s forced a more sophisticated approach to the mass media. Within these movements the media had a meaningful role in altering politics and culture. With the civil rights movement, the media brought blatant racial injustices and aggressive responses to non-violent civil disobedience to the attention of national and international audiences.<sup>5</sup> Through television and radio broadcasts and print journalism, the South's "race issue" could no longer be easily ignored. Coverage of student sit-ins, the Montgomery, Alabama bus boycott, and the treatment of black non-violent protestors by racist authoritarian figures such as Bull Connor moved civil rights to the national agenda. Injustices became visible and imprinted on the public's consciousness. Within this and the other social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, the media actively confronted the dominant ideology and offered an alternative worldview. It was also in the media that public awareness of regional, national, and international events changed community boundaries. In the words of Marshall McLuhan (1964), the world had become a "global village."

The media does not automatically represent diverse views nor create greater public discourse and rational thought (Gouldner, 1990). With the extensions offered by Althusser, Gramsci, and others, some of the more deterministic Marxist positions have been reevaluated. While many theorists and research projects have made such adjustments, it was Stuart Hall and Birmingham School theorists who did the most to extend Marxist principles into analyses of popular and mass culture.

## **Cultural Studies**

In 1964 the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in England was founded. One of its objectives was to address the shortcomings of Frankfurt School theorists but without abandoning a Marxist base. This was clearly the case for Stuart Hall, the School's director starting in 1969<sup>6</sup>. While his positions on the mass media have evolved over time, he has maintained a critical awareness of the interrelationship between capitalism and mass culture. His

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<sup>5</sup> Taylor Branch's (1988) *Parting the Waters* and Piven and Cloward's (1977) *Poor People's Movements* give two different and unique accounts of the Civil Rights Movement. Branch gives both detailed biographies of key movement leaders and a chronological history of how and why the movement developed. Piven and Cloward compare the Civil Rights Movement with other poor people movements. Instead of devoting space to the leaders and intricacies of events as they happened throughout the movement, they draw upon the movement to illustrate their theoretical positions regarding how social movements become successful and eventually fail.

<sup>6</sup> Before taking the post at Birmingham, Hall led a politically active life. Hall helped form the New Left in England and was the first editor of the *New Left Review*.

efforts to make Marx work for contemporary society is reflected in his statement that he has been devoted to "working within shouting distance of Marxism, working on Marxism, working against Marxism, working with it, working to try to develop Marxism" (Hall, 1992: 279).

Cultural studies took a multidisciplinary, multi-methodological, and multi-theoretical approach in examining the interaction between institutional structures, texts, audience reception, and history. But while cultural studies research is often multi-theoretical, particular theories frequently take center stage. According to McRobbie (1992), early cultural studies work, such as that of Hall, had two primary theoretical influences, Marxism and structuralism. Popular culture texts were seen to contain signs that required more sophisticated understandings of how language systems work. Structuralism provided a framework for such an analysis. Text analyses are vital to studying popular culture but texts do not exist in isolation from macro-level conditions. Marxism was thus incorporated to assess, among other things, economic and organizational structures and their influence on ideological representations. Rather than taking an economic determinist approach though, researchers identifying with the cultural studies tradition regard texts as containing multiple ideological positions, hegemonic as well as counter-hegemonic, all of which can be contested. The political objective of this eclectic yet Marxist-based academic field is well captured by Kellner (1995b: 15):

Cultural studies is part of a critical media pedagogy that enables individuals to resist media manipulation and to increase their freedom and individuality. It can empower people to gain sovereignty over their culture and enable them to struggle for alternative cultures and political change. Cultural studies is thus not just another academic fad but can be part of a struggle for a better society and a better life.

Cultural studies provides a path through which researchers representing various academic disciplines can legitimately examine popular culture. While this openness is one the strengths of this tradition, it has resulted in both a movement away from its critical roots and lack of clarity about what constitutes its subject matter. Hall (1991) and Kellner (1995b) both take issue with one of the central limitations of more recent work in this tradition. In their view, much current cultural studies work focuses too much on audience reception at the cost of neglecting political, organizational, and historical processes. Advocating for tying together critical theory and cultural studies, Kellner (1995a: 95) states that:

Critical social theory carries out a critique of existing systems of domination and points to forces of resistance and possibilities for radical

social transformation. It reads media culture texts in the context of how they relate to structures of domination and forces of resistance and which ideological positions they advance within the context of current debates and social struggles. Thus, a critical cultural studies is not merely interested in providing clever readings of cultural texts, but is also interested in advancing a critique of structures and practices of domination and advancing forces of resistance struggling for a more democratic and egalitarian society.

Kellner's approach is also incorporated into the present study. In analyzing films about rock stars, particular attention is given to the historical context when the films were produced and its relationship to ideological content.

## **Text and Narrative Analysis**

While there are inherent differences between film and literature, the most significant being visual and sound imagery, films are texts with story lines, characters, settings, symbols, and meanings and can be analyzed using techniques similar to those applied to written texts. Structuralism and semiotics are two theoretical frameworks used to make such analyses. In the discussion that follows, the ontological positions of both are addressed along with their implications for studying films about rock and roll.

### **Structuralism**

In the 1910s the development of structuralism initiated a "linguistic turn" that would affect philosophy and the study of society by shifting the focus from macro-level social structures to the study of language signs, symbols, and their underlying structures. Individuals such as the French structural linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and the American philosopher and semiotic theoretician Charles Sanders Peirce modified the rationalist assumption that an objective world exists that can be studied in a deductive, scientific manner and established how we understand the social and physical world through systems of signs.

To understand the role language systems play in constructing reality, structuralists examine the rules of language and signs, a combination of a signifier or word and a signified or referent, not its actual content. This focus on linguistic rules is apparent in Saussure's distinction between *la langue* and *parole*. *La Langue* is defined as rules and underlying structures of a linguistic system. *Parole*, only a partial component of this system, such as a word, centers on the spoken word or the use of language by speakers. Structuralists do not study *parole* but *la langue* for it is the language system itself, and not individuals, which shape and constrain reality.



Because "*la langue* does not 'inherit' properties from what it represents, but is an autonomous system of differential values that structures each language user's experience of reality" (Buckland, 1999: 86), it is the predominant shaper of reality. The study of parole, on the other hand, "is irrelevant for Saussure's science not only to the degree that it is always, and of necessity, incomplete, but also insofar as it is the locus of individual difference, of individual personality and style" (Jameson, 1972: 25). By bringing to the foreground the impact language structures have on how reality is understood, positivist conceptions of an objective reality were undermined and different lines of inquiry into how meaning is constructed were developed.

Structuralism has many applications, including providing a framework for analyses of narratives. This includes examining narratives synchronically and diachronically. Synchronic analyses separate out the text from the historical context in which it was created and interpreted. In doing this, attempts are made to determine the linguistic patterns and rules that govern the process of making meaning. Diachronic analyses bring history into the text by examining the relationship between the text, the historical context out of which it was created, and the positioning of the reader and/or researcher. Privileging one type of analysis over the other has been an issue since the beginnings of structuralism. In *The Prison-House of Language*, Jameson works to resolve this debate by arguing that critical literary theory and philosophies of language must "reconcile" the "demands of synchronic analysis and historical awareness, of structure and self-consciousness, language and history" (1972: 216). For Jameson (1977: 548) the question is "how a type of narrative analysis may be devised which can be both structural and historical, thereby avoiding the two-fold dangers of some ahistorical appeal to psychological needs and faculties on the one hand, and the mythic and ultimately ethical approach on the other." In his own work, such as with his analysis of the film *Dog Day Afternoon*, Jameson (1979) works on both, the synchronic and diachronic, levels. The same is true of Wright's (1975) study of Westerns.

## **Semiotics**

Since semiotics arose out of structuralism, it holds similar philosophical positions about language. But whereas structuralism separates the signifier and the signified, semiotics joins them by studying signs, their origins, referents, and meanings. Here the primary focus is not on governing linguistic rules but on content and meaning. This opens up the types of signs that can be studied, including films, songs, advertisement and the news media.

In his work *Mythologies*, Barthes (1972), a leading figure in the field of semiotics, takes cultural events, such as wrestling, and explores how they reflect value structures, especially those of the bourgeoisie. Within these "texts" semiotics can be used to examine two realities represented in and by signs: a latent, non-observable reality and a manifest, observable reality (Buckland, 1999). For example, wrestling – how it is staged and how it is played out – is observable. It can be descriptively charted. Underneath this reality though lie the latent cultural dynamics that give meanings to wrestling. By examining both, semiotic analyses reveal the particular significance of culture industry products. Jameson (1972: 146) clarifies this in stating:

It is Barthes, indeed, who pursues what is basically a sociological investigation of the imaginary objects and culture-institutions of a civilization saturated with advertising and ideology: in his *Mythologies*, that marvelous picture-book of the pinups from the news of the day (boxing matches, somebody's new *Phedre*, Billy Graham at the Vel d'hiver, the myth of the Guide bleu or of steak-fries, the strip tease, the new model cars); in his study, in *Systeme de la mode*, of the structure of fashion; in his reading, in *L'Empire des signes*, of that immense scroll or text which is written in characters of human flesh and formal gardens, of sliding screens and student helmets, tea ceremonies and transistorized radios, across the length and breadth of Japanese archipelago; in his theory, finally, of the literary sign and of literature as a social institution.

Signs contain latent and manifest components, both of which should be examined. According to Leeds-Hurwitz, "signs work through their ability as pointers; that is, they serve as a kind of shorthand, pointing or referring to something absent" (1993: 10). It is the study of this "something absent," or latent meaning, that allows semioticians to address culture and its underpinnings.

## **Structuralism and Myths**

Myths are vital for a culture, for they connect a community to the past, give it meaning in the present, and direction for the future. Myths also organize reality, giving meaning necessary to understand the world and the individual's place within it. Therefore, through studying myths, insight into shared beliefs, values, and attitudes can be gained. And for modern countries, where myths are often communicated in film and other forms of mass-mediated culture, this also includes insight into dominant ideology.

The French anthropologist and structuralist Claude Levi-Strauss analyzed the forms and functions of myths in societies with a simple division of labor. Through examining myths, he

uncovered the basic linguistic structures or the "universal, unconscious features of the mind which uniformly force a particular structure onto the world" (Baert, 1998: 23).<sup>7</sup> From his work, the following conclusions were drawn. First, meanings of myths are constructed from a series of binary oppositions. Each sign has an opposite, such as light and dark. As a sign, light cannot have meaning without its opposite, dark. Wright (1975: 20-21) summarizes what binary oppositions are and their functions:

An image of something (a man, say) is structurally opposed in a myth to an image of something else (a jaguar, say). In this way the sensible differences between things (like man/not like man) become symbols or conceptual differences (culture/nature). An image of a character (man) in a myth does not come to represent a concept (culture) because of any inherent properties of the image, but only because of the differences between it and the image or character (jaguar) it is opposed to. Moreover, every primitive society has a system of such oppositions, which give meaning to the images of important things in that society's existence. It is through this system of interrelated oppositions that the myths of a society are (unconsciously) understood by the members of the society.

Second, myths and the themes they contain, regardless of their particular content, span cultural and temporal boundaries. For example, the content of stories about how the earth was created, spiritual powers, and the forces of good and evil may vary from culture to culture but have common narrative forms. Finally, myths address the contradictions within, and anxieties about, the real world and guide the community in how to best resolve life problems.

Mythologies develop over time. What makes particular myths work is that they are believable; they are accepted as accurately representing reality (Barthes and Duisit, 1975). If not, the myth loses power. But just because a myth is believable does not mean that it reflects the true, objective historical reality. It is quite the opposite. Myths distort reality and conceal the ideology contained within them (Barthes and Duisit, 1975). This is true of any myth, including those about the rock and roll star and the cowboy.

In *Sixguns & Society* (1975) and *The Wild West* (2001), Will Wright draws on the works of Levi-Strauss but modifies his approach significantly. For Levi-Strauss myths arise out of universal mental structures. Whereas Levi-Strauss studied myths to get at these underlying mental structures, Wright used them to uncover (1) what meanings myths have for a society and

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<sup>7</sup> For a concise and general overview of Levi-Strauss and structuralism, see Baert (1998).

(2) how they reflect the economic conditions out of which they arose. With respect to Westerns, he argued that stories about the West provide vital information about contemporary society, including how the contradictions of capitalism are represented. After determining the narrative structure of Hollywood Westerns from the 1930s through the early 1970s, Wright (1975) identified distinct narratives, with the arrival of each new narrative reflecting broader patterns of historical change.

Wright's narrative analysis of Westerns ties together linguistic structuralism and critical theory. In doing so, Wright moves discussions of theory outside of the institutional walls of academia to the theatre. The value and purpose in doing this is well captured by Wright in *The Wild West* (2001: 2):

As the cowboy tells us about market society, he uses cultural images, not theoretical concepts. As a result, he often tells us things the theory does not, things the theory only assumes. The cowboy can serve as a cultural guide to the assumptions and concepts of individualism, to what the individualist theory asserts as well as to what it hides.

Through examining rock star mythology as represented in popular films, three important extensions of Wright's work are made. First, Wright's analysis illustrated how films reveal particular cultural notions about the marketplace. The heroes in Westerns relate to the marketplace differently than those found in rock and roll films. Even though the cowboy lived in a time of the West's growing interdependence on the marketplace, he was not a product of capitalism. The opposite is the case for rock and roll stars. This puts the rock star in a more centrally located position in marketplace structures. As a result, the present analysis extends Wright's work by analyzing films whose characters are more intricately bound to institutional processes. Another way Wright's work is extended has to do with actual film content. Wright examined how market relations were understood and projected onto films about the frontier. Whereas marketplace values and structures were still developing during the Westward expansion, they were firmly rooted at the time of rock and roll's birth. Because of this difference, the films studied here address how market relations are more recently represented and understood. Third, films about rock and roll often target a different audience demographic than Westerns. While not always the case, Westerns were largely for an adult audience. At the very least, the scripts were not written with the intent of targeting the youth. Likewise, movies about rock and roll are, by and large, for teenagers and young adults. Some films, such as *Buddy Holly*

*Story*, have intergenerational appeal. But even in this case, it is likely intended to attract youth. This difference is significant because each occupies a different spot in the marketplace. The messages contained in these films may therefore be different compared to Westerns not only because of the historical context in which they were produced but also because of differences in audience composition.

Aside from the narrative structures of these films, other factors must also be explored in order to understand film representations of the rock star. These include exploring the history of this music form and how it is produced.

## **Production of Culture Perspective**

Studies of popular culture address any combination of three interrelated components: the products or cultural "texts" themselves, production processes, and audience reception. The previous section outlined structuralism and its application to rock star film texts. This section focuses on the production of music and film. After describing the production of culture perspective, the development and changing structures of the music and film industries are detailed. This discussion of how and why rock and roll has changed is provided so that the mythology of rock and roll musicians in film can be better understood. This includes comparing the actual organizational and historical context of the music industry with how the industry is portrayed, a common topic in rock star films.

## **Production of Culture Perspective & the Music Industry**

The production of culture position addresses a multitude of influencing factors on how cultural goods are produced and consumed. Peterson (1976; 1990; 1994a; 1994b), who has devoted significant scholarship to this area, defines production as "the processes of creation, manufacture, marketing, distribution, exhibiting, inculcation, evaluation, and consumption" (Peterson, 1976: 672). This orientation towards production is more clear in Eyerman and Barreta's statement that "rather than discussing artistic works or other symbolic goods as the product of an isolated creator, or alternatively, as mirroring 'society,' this perspective explains them in terms of their location in a social and organizational context" (1996: 503-504). Two brief cases are discussed here to illustrate how the production process affects music.

The earliest songs of slaves were "sorrow songs." While working in the fields, these songs were sung to alleviate pain and suffering and resist domination."<sup>8</sup> Songs were used by such figures as Nat Turner during slave revolt meetings. They were used to communicate to slaves seeking freedom when the Underground Railroad was open. With the Great Awakening, slaves incorporated more Biblical references into their songs, the spirituals. Connecting to the suffering of Jesus, the Jews as a "chosen" people, and Moses who demanded from the Pharaoh to "let my people go" from bondage, spirituals functioned to give hope and, like sorrow songs, were a form of resistance. Following Emancipation, spirituals left the Deep South and were taken to a broader audience. In 1871 at Fisk University, the first black University, the Jubilee Singers, formally dressed and polished, brought together classical music styling and the spirituals, thus granting them greater exposure to upper class, educated, white patrons. In addition to these changes with singing and performing spirituals, a new form of music, gospel, developed. With its earthy tones and more dramatic physicality, gospel signaled a partial return to the earlier purposes music served in the black community. This brief overview from slave songs to gospel illustrates how the forms and meanings of music are influenced by the ways in which it was produced.

The history of folk music further clarifies the influence production processes have on music. As part of his response to the Depression, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt provided financial support for the Works Projects Administration (WPA). The Federal Writers, Theatre, and Arts Projects, an offshoot of the WPA, employed educated professionals to record, write, paint, and document common, folk culture. Through these agencies' efforts, more people were exposed to the history and plight of the common laborer. Charles Seeger and Alan and John Lomax, among others, were responsible for recording folk music and bringing it to the general public. This, in turn, helped ignite a folk music revival. Groups like the Almanac Singers (1941-1944) and People's Songs (1945-1949), both of which included Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie, drew the attention of individuals and groups fighting for political causes. Because their Socialist positions excluded them from radio play and, more importantly, because they believed commercialism would compromise their ability to strengthen the labor party, they stayed distant

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<sup>8</sup> Of the many texts addressing the place of black music in social protest, two in particular provide in-depth historical and cultural analyses. Pratt's (1990) *Rhythm and Resistance* and Ellison's (1989) *Lyrical protest: Black Music's Struggle Against Discrimination* provide the reader with the necessary background to understand how music has been used to subvert dominant power structures.

from major media companies.<sup>9</sup> But the resistance of such groups to becoming a part of the recording industry lasted only a brief time. By the late 1940s the opportunity structures had changed. A commercial market grew along with larger concert venues with a different and less political audience. Groups like The Weavers entered the mainstream. For the adherents to the folk tradition, the Weavers signaled the beginning of the end to the political power of Populist music. By the time of the second wave folk revival in the late 1950s, the audience and motivation behind the music had profoundly changed. Instead of labor party organizations and meetings, folk music was now performed mostly for middle-class constituents and college students at universities throughout the country. ABC's television production of the "Hootenany" from 1963-1964 illustrates this more popular appeal of folk music. But its political roots were not all lost. At about the same time, the singer-songwriter Bob Dylan reinterpreted folk music and brought back its protest roots and Leftist politics. But by the late 1960s, the radical music of the student-movement had once again become largely depoliticized and mass mediated.

These cases illustrate how entering the production process impacts authentic folk music. Regardless of how radical music is, once it becomes part of the culture industry it becomes, as Bennett (1991a) argues, "domesticated." In the words of Frith (1987: 54) mass-mediated music "is a classical case of what Marx called alienation: Something human is taken from us and returned in the form of a commodity. Songs and singers are fetishized, made magical, and we can only reclaim them through possession, via a cash transaction in the marketplace."

While the record industry has significant control over what is produced, marketed, and distributed, it is also affected by other institutions and processes. In the late 1800s, prior to the general availability of records, company-backed songwriters and publishers were central to the music industry. The hot spot for such activity was Tin Pan Alley in New York City. Here, composers and songwriters such as Irving Berlin wrote "popular songs" appealing to a broad-based audience. In the words of Frith (1981), it was during this time that music had become "entertainment." In the 1920s other forms of leisure came about, including "talkies" and the radio. With the popularity of radio programming established, record companies started

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<sup>9</sup> The folk music revival of the 1930s illustrates how social, political, technological, and organizational structures influence the production and reception of music. For detailed summaries of these movements, see Eyerman and Barretta (1996) and Dunway (1987). The revivals also illustrate how some folk musicians dealt with the contradiction between artist individualism and selling out to corporate controls. Lieberman's (1989) *"My Song Is My Weapon": People's Songs, American Communism, and the Politics of Culture 1930-1959* is a seminal work which traces the roots of this music, how dominant institutions attempted to control them, and how artists attempted to remain political and free in spite of attempts to subvert them.

collaborating with the stations. As time passed, radio-backed orchestras were replaced with the cheaper and easier to manage records. Soon record hit lists started. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s the record industry experienced significant growth. But it was not until the 1950s that a new form of music would take the industry over and turn its operations on its head.

Rock and roll was born in 1955. Individual artists, producers, and demographic shifts were undeniably underlying factors for why this time period and not another, but without certain changes affecting the production process this musical form would not have started. Peterson (1990) traces numerous production-related factors contributing to the emergence of rock and roll in 1955. These factors are used here to present an organized overview of the recording industry. Additional information is added to Peterson's (1990) discussion to extend it beyond the rock's formative years in the 1950s.

**Laws and Regulations.** In 1945 the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) assigned FM to a higher frequency band. This move made FM radio a more attractive option over AM. Following this decision, over 400 applications for FM licenses were filed (Garofalo, 1997). The FCC unfroze the bureaucratic red tape and approved most applications a few years later. As a result, the number of radio stations in most markets doubled by 1951 (Peterson, 1990). During this time, independent, local market radio stations made significant gains over major radio companies. Without the financial resources to put together their own orchestras like the majors, independent radio stations geared their programming towards records. This resulted in local and regional sounds finding a place alongside popular hits. Opening up the airwaves also exposed youth to music previously kept in the shadows. Class and race boundaries could be overridden, for "unlike dance halls, record stores, and jukeboxes, the airwaves could not be easily segregated" (Garofalo, 1997: 89).

In the 1960s two other rulings significantly altered FM radio. A 1961 FCC ruling required "multiplexing" in FM radio, thus allowing more than one signal on a single channel. This ruling created the FM stereo sound. With a cleaner and more real sound, FM radio became an even more attractive listening option over AM. Then in 1965 the FCC ruled that in areas with more than 100,000 people, FM programming had to be at least 50 percent different than AM programming. This further diversified music played on radios.

**Technology.** One of the many factors limiting the production and distribution of records was the cost and relative fragility of shellac. To overcome some of the limits this material posed,



Columbia Records and others turned to their research and development teams for a solution. And in the 1940s it was found as the vinyl record was introduced to the public. Because when compared to its shellac-based predecessor, vinyl records were cheaper to produce, more durable, easier to distribute, and held superior sound quality, it quickly became the industry standard. And because they were cheaper to produce, the opportunity opened up for independent record companies to get into the recording business.

Developments in recording technologies were many in the 1950s and continued in the 1960s with multi-channel and multi-track recording. With this ability, different tracks could be recorded at different times with different instruments on different channels. Technologies such as these allowed for innovative productions such as The Beach Boys' *Pet Sounds* (1966) and The Beatles *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967). Matching recording improvements were developments in sound systems. By the late 1960s hi-fidelity stereo records could be played back on home stereos with unprecedented sound quality. Outside of the home, innovations in amplification systems opened up the possibility of performing in larger concert venues.

What 45s did for the recording industry in the 1950s, compact discs have done since the 1980s. They are a medium that is easier store, more durable, and cheaper to produce and distribute than LPs or cassette tapes. For these reasons they are a greater value to the industry and its consumers. The Internet is yet another technology altering the shape of the recording industry, musicians, and the consuming public. With pirating programs, such as Napster and Kazaa, Pandora's box has been opened. Individual users can download music ranging from mainstream artists to artists recording music out of primitive home studios. The recording industry has mounted public and legal campaigns against these programs but whether industry decides to continue to fight the Internet or figure out ways to use it to further their profit margins, only time will tell.

**Industry and Organization Structure.** Prior to the late 1940s, radio stations were centralized and nationally affiliated to major broadcasting companies that would supply programming, such as newsreels, vaudeville acts, Westerns, and dramas, for a national audience. For the music, radio stations used their own in-house orchestras. Even with the availability of records, radio stations still favored the band because it was live music, not manufactured music. This way of programming radio was costly, reserving broadcasting to individuals and companies with considerable capital. Local and independent owners were, therefore, largely excluded. With the

FCC unfreezing licensing applications in 1947, independent radio stations popped up across the nation. The FCC regulations and the development of vinyl records and other technologies collided, forever altering radio broadcasting. Without a huge financial base to support an orchestra or the purchase of nationalized programming, independent radio station owners turned to 45-rpm records. Records soon became the industry standard, even for major radio stations.

On the record industry side, the mid-1950s was a watershed period. In the 1940s, independent record producers really started getting into the recording business. What they predominately recorded were not the crooning sounds of Bing Crosby and Frank Sinatra but rather musicians from the other side of the color line. Indies such as Sun Records, King, Chess, and Atlantic, tapped into the black market and exposed blues and "race music" to a white public. When Sam Phillips "discovered" Elvis, a white performer who could sing black music, rockabilly began. Because of racial prejudices, sexual conservatism, disregard of an emerging youth culture, and general resistance to change, major record companies not only ignored rock and roll, they denounced and ridiculed it. The effects of shunning this market soon became clear. In 1948, prior to rock, the top 4 record companies produced over 80 percent of popular music. By 1959 they only produced 34 percent (Peterson and Berger, 1990). Within the next ten years, rock music significantly changed, both in terms of major label involvement as well as its place in youth culture.

Rock music played an important role in the 1960s student movement. During peaceful protests, such as the Berkeley free speech movement, folk music created greater solidarity. With the Haight-Asbury district and its psychedelic counter-culture, music supported youth who in the words of Timothy Leary wanted to "turn on, tune in, and drop out." As rock became more popular among disenfranchised youth, the major records also tuned in and reaped financial gain. The profits of the rock and roll market became even more dramatic in the 1970s. Events such as the Monterey Pop Festival of 1967 and the Woodstock Festival in 1969 demonstrated the promise of big concerts. Starting in the 1970s, arena concerts became more commonplace and a vehicle to promote newly released albums. But concert tours were only a piece of the new marketing campaigns. These and other promotional strategies resulted in a ten-fold increase in album production costs by the close of the decade. In the early 1970s an expensive album promotion cost about \$50,000. By the end of the 1970s it was not uncommon for promotional costs to run between \$350,000 and \$500,000. With such a heavy and often risky investment,

album covers, liner notes, and posters became vital marketing tools. Because of the steep promotional and recording costs, the net effect was that it was much more difficult for an independent company to get into the business of making stars.

The organization of a rock industry had particularly detrimental consequences for women. Prior to rock, female singers and groups had a more central place. The masculine force of rock and roll removed them from it. This change is supported in women's appearance in the charts. In 1957 only two women made it on the "Cashbox" list of 25 best selling records for the year. In previous years, women held up to 1/3 of the top 25. Instead of taking stage front and center, most women who were included in rock often played the back-up singer support role. Women's exclusion from rock still holds largely true today.

In 1981, the year Music Television (MTV) formed, a significant change in marketing outlets occurred. Music videos brought around-the-clock marketing not only for bands but also for a host of youth-oriented products such as clothes, cars, and soft drinks. As concert tours were tagged onto record releases in the 1970s, so music videos were attached to releases in the 1980s. One of the most successful early videos, Michael Jackson's "Thriller," clearly demonstrated music video's ability to catapult a record to the top.

**Occupational careers.** Between the 1940s and the 1960s the musician's contribution to music underwent significant changes. In the 1940s, popular music icons sang songs mostly written by company-backed songwriters, many working out of The Brill Building in New York City. With the emergence of rock and roll this changed. No longer would Tin Pan Alley writers craft the popular songs. Instead, audiences increasingly sought the authenticity that goes along with the singer-songwriter.

With musicians as cultural stars with negotiating power, technological advances, national concert tours, and heavy marketing campaigns, rock became more professionalized. More was going on, in more places, and there was more to risk. As it became a multi-billion dollar, multi-national industry, additional professionals were required to increase earnings. Lawyers, accountants, promotional agents, and marketing and public relations personnel were added to organizational charts.

**Market.** Post World-War II United States experienced an economic boom and a cultural shift. The GI Bill gave soldiers the means to purchase homes and pursue a college education. As a result, community and vocational colleges saw record enrollments. The white middle-class left

the city for a haven in the uniform suburbs. Consumer goods promising to make life easier, more enjoyable, and more meaningful expanded. Magazines, television, billboards, and the radio brought the latest household and entertainment products out to the buying public. Not only were more leisure goods being sold than ever before, new markets were exposed. Of particular importance here is the emergence of a teenager market, a marketing category that is clearly visible in the new sounds of the day and the new images that glossed silver screens.

The production of culture perspective illustrates that the emergence and development of rock and roll and related music genres involve multiple factors. Instead of identifying particular individuals or musicians who make this happen, this perspective addresses the interrelationships between industries, technology, government, and demographic shifts.

The above overview of rock's history also illustrates that a 'rock star' does not emerge simply because of personal skills. But in a culture where rugged individualism is highly regarded this is how they are often remembered. While the production and organization of rock and roll are not analyzed in this study, it is discussed here to substantiate how structural forces play a significant role in the career of a rock star. Furthermore, this information provides the background necessary to assess the ways in which the rock star is mythologized in film. It is part of the story.

## **Production of Culture Perspective & the Film Industry**

In many ways the development of the music and film industries paralleled each other. Both emerged at approximately the same time. They both held a similar place in the newly formed leisure culture.<sup>10</sup> And they often changed for similar reasons. Rather than giving a detailed characterization of film production, only a few relevant issues are discussed.

Film has always been tied to modern production processes. Unlike actors who performed on stage for a live audience, actors before the camera performed for a mass-mediated audience. And unlike theatre, films were more deeply tied to institutional structures. It was thus "organized on an industrial model with a mass-produced output aimed at capturing a secure audience share and thus realizing a substantial profit" (Kellner, 1999: 205).

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<sup>10</sup> Intricately bound with this new leisure culture was advertising. Its rise to prominence coincided with, and was largely responsible for, a cultural value shift in what the public perceived as vital for survival. In *Captains of Consciousness*, Stuart Ewen (1976) provides many detailed examples of how the business of advertising altered what the public made of their own self-image. How the advertising of material goods worked to homogenize culture, acculturate immigrants, and build businesses, is analogous in many ways to what has happened with music.

Films have always done more than entertain. During the early 1900s as a great wave of immigration occurred, films acted as a means to acculturate working class immigrants into dominant cultural values and norms. Viewed from the lens of Frankfurt theorists, Hollywood was an industry with significant power to reify social order. While Hitler's political use of film to harness support for fascist policies was more blatantly propagandist, Hollywood's allegiance to capitalism and its values could be just as powerful in promoting compliance. But to claim that Hollywood movies only supported ruling class values would be to oversimplify. Even though most films were politically conservative, some films in the 1920s and 1930s portrayed characters that challenged authority and moral Puritanism. Such films caused concerns, especially in a time of communist fears, social disorganization, and economic depression. Those who did blame Hollywood for growing social unrest were happy when the 1930s Production Code was passed. This code, which lasted until the 1960s, regulated such areas as the representation of sexuality (the length of a kiss) and law enforcement (the bad guys always had to lose).

Following the 1950s attack on the Production Code and introduction of antitrust legislation, Hollywood became more innovative. The late 1950s and early 1960s was a watershed period for the film industry, hence the name "New Hollywood." With a breakdown of the studio system and with an industry in fiscal panic, major studios set out to capture the growing youth market. Directors such as Stanley Kubrick and Robert Altman were given relative autonomy to do their special projects and find the pulse of the youth. The anti-hero, as captured in such films as *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and *Easy Rider* (1969), took on the establishment rather than joining it. Rock musicians, and films about them, emerged during this transitional period. While this renaissance period in Hollywood brought liberal politics to the screen, it would be false to assume that even the more socially conscious movies were entirely critical.

## **Audience Reception**

As has previously been established, cultural products may be interpreted in various ways. But as Hall (1980) revealed, texts also contain dominant ideological messages. One focus of the present research is on identifying such messages. While the present study does not address different readings audiences may have given to the films analyzed, it is relevant to consider the issue briefly here.

Perhaps the earliest theorizing about audiences came out of the Frankfurt School. To many Frankfurt School theorists audiences were uncritical, unreflective dupes who were injected with media messages aligned with ruling class interests. This "hypodermic needle" theory about the media and audiences was largely rejected by the 1960s.

During the "liberal consensus" 1950s, conservative notions about the media gained support. While there were researchers who criticized corporatism and conservatism, such as C. Wright Mills in *The Power Elite*, a well-supported area within the growing field of media sociology centered on understanding audience interactions with the mass media rather than on how it served ruling class interests.

Major changes in critical theory and conservative media sociology have occurred since the 1950s. By the 1970s, audiences were viewed in more active and nuanced ways. For example, in her pioneering study titled *Reading the Romance*, Radway (1984) concluded that while romances stereotype men and women, women often read them "against the grain" by engaging in them to achieve some psychic space away from the day-to-day triviality of their marriages. The individual as reflective and active reader was taken a step further in Steiner's (1991) study. Steiner (1991) examined how readers interacted with the "No Comment" section of *Ms.* magazine. Steiner (1991) argued that it is from the social group, and not just the individual as was the case for Radway (1984), that meanings of cultural texts are derived. Whether it is the individual or the group, such studies support the position that texts are a "contested terrain" wherein audiences actively choose what to make of them.

Audience reception studies have also shown how films and other texts work towards aligning the audience with certain characters and positions. For feminist-based scholars, slasher and horror films are a good place to examine how this happens. In the slasher film, the cinematography and narrative structure have been said to project a male "gaze." Here, the male vantage point is taken as the psychotic killer pursues helpless victims struggling for their survival. But even here the text can be read in different ways. In her study *Gender in the Slasher Film*, Clover (1987) argues that audiences frequently align themselves with the female victim. But rather than viewing them as passive and weak, audiences embody them with heroic characteristics as they escape and defeat their nemesis.

No text has one universal meaning. Rather multiple messages may exist, with multiple readings possible.<sup>11</sup> However, neither are all messages multi-ideological nor are all audiences active readers. Edsforth made this point clearly in reviewing media coverage during the Reagan years. What happened during this conservative period "revalidated the critics' extremely pessimistic evaluation of popular culture and its impact on politics and individual expression" because corporate media was "ideologically motivated and powerful enough to manipulate their mass audiences to get desired political responses" (1991: 10).

The position taken here is that the mass media is both a "contested terrain" and a place where the ruling class maintains political and economic control.<sup>12</sup> Kellner (1995b) takes this same position; concluding that dominant readings may or may not be present and that audiences may or may not be active and critical.

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<sup>11</sup> Dines and Humez's (1995) edited book *Gender, Race and Class in Media* contains numerous articles on how the audience is actively involved in text reception.

<sup>12</sup> A balanced perspective of the audience, one that places significance on institutional structures and political processes, is vital. For a Marxist-based read of the mass media, see Lazare's (1987) *American Media and Mass Culture: Left Perspectives*. In this text, Lazare examines the organization of the mass media industries, their ideological content, how their texts are read in multiple directions, and ways groups use the mass media to criticize capitalist domination.

## Chapter 3

### Application of Methods

Chapter 1 described the steps taken to identify and analyze the narrative structure and ideological content of the selected films. The purpose of this chapter is to describe more thoroughly the procedures involved in generating the analytic categories – plots – and identifying ideological content. Instead of illustrating this process for each film, a detailed description for one film is provided to clarify the application of the methods.

#### Mapping Narrative Structure

The first film viewed in collecting the data is used here for illustrative purposes. The plot is briefly described to demonstrate the process used in developing the narrative functions. The development of the narrative functions for this film is shown to highlight how they were progressively re-worked with each iteration. After detailing the process for this film, discussion moves to how comparisons were made across films.

*Jailhouse Rock* (1957), starring Elvis Presley, is a film about a young working class guy, his removal from society, and his eventual self-empowerment as an acclaimed musician. The movie begins with the hero getting into a barroom fight with someone who was trying to get his way with a young, defenseless woman. After the bartender pleads with Vince Everett (Elvis Presley) to stop beating on this guy, he gives him one last, and this time fatal, punch. He is convicted of involuntary manslaughter and sentenced to prison. While in prison he picks up the guitar and figures out that playing music may be his ticket to a new life. After he is released and makes a few tries at being a musician, he becomes a star. But stardom is not all he thought it would be. After awhile, he gets caught up in the fame and fortune and forgets about what is really important in life: family, friends, and virtues like honesty and humility. Near the end of the film, he gets into a fistfight with the person who helped him get his start but who he has come to treat with utter disregard. He is hit in the throat and loses his voice, potentially for good. As he is laid up, he reflects on who he has become, and reconciles with the two people who love him for who, and not what, he is. When the film ends, he gets his voice back and in the process his life.

The initial identification of narrative functions involved working through the detailed notes taken while viewing the film and delineating the essential components that moved the



narrative in some direction. When choosing the words, careful attention was given to the procedure outlined by Wright (1975). This included writing narrative functions that did not identify specific people, settings, or images, but more generally described what occurred on the screen. The first draft of the identified narrative functions were written as follows:

- (1) Hero has low status in society.
- (2) Hero kills another person while standing up for injustice to a woman.
- (3) Hero is removed from society.
- (4) Hero learns that playing a guitar is a way to material success.
- (5) Hero plays in a televised show and starts his path to success.
- (6) When hero returns to society, he tries to prove his worth on stage.
- (7) Hero fails.
- (8) Hero told by record industry person how to be more successful.
- (9) Hero has first experiences of being exploited by the industry.
- (10) Hero confronts and takes on industry executive who exploited him.
- (11) Hero becomes determined to beat the industry at its game.
- (12) Hero performs on television and it's a success, leading to more stardom.
- (13) Hero wins over elusive, upper class girl with a passionate kiss.
- (14) Hero is reminded to not let stardom go to his head.
- (15) Hero becomes corrupted by the money and stardom.
- (16) A crisis reminds the hero of the importance of relationships over power and stardom.
- (17) Hero regains his voice after the crisis.

To be consistent with Wright (1975), the term "hero" refers to the film's protagonist, in this case the young construction worker turned musician. The word "society" refers both to society in a general sense and to the community in which the hero interacts. The reason separate terms were not used is because the hero's involvement with friends, associates, fans, and the community represents the interrelationship between the hero and society at a more intimate level. The villain in this film is someone associated with the music business. This is endemic to many of the other films as well. Whether this person is a record executive, distributor, promoter, or manager, all represent music's business side. Therefore, "industry executives" and "industry" both refer to the music business and those associated with it. As will be revealed in the following drafts, these terms were eventually changed to be more genre-neutral and thus more generalizable across films. The "crisis" referred to in *Jailhouse Rock* occurs when the hero is punched in the throat and potentially loses his voice for good.

After this first attempt at writing the narrative functions, they were evaluated for analytic clarity. At this point, the objective was to minimize the words used to describe the action

sequences and choose language that accurately represented them. Unnecessary references were eliminated or consolidated. In the second draft, the narrative functions were written as follows:

- (1) Hero has low status in society.
- (2) Hero fights against injustice in society.
- (3) Hero is removed from society.
- (4) Hero discovers the guitar and begins on a road to success.
- (5) Hero fails to prove his worth to audience (community).
- (6) The community leaders (industry personnel) attempt to mold the hero for their own gain.
- (7) Hero becomes aware that he is being exploited.
- (8) Hero confronts and takes on industry executives who exploited him.
- (9) Hero becomes increasingly successful (status) independent of community leaders.
- (10) Hero wins over elusive, upper-class girl with a passionate kiss.
- (11) Hero is reminded to not let stardom go to his head.
- (12) Hero becomes corrupted by the money and stardom.
- (13) A crisis reminds the hero of the importance of relationships over power and stardom.
- (14) Hero regains his voice after the crisis.

A close inspection of this draft reveals some significant changes. In the second narrative function the specific action of the hero and the sex of the victim were removed. While the "hero defends a woman" is relevant to a discussion of gender ideology, it is not essential for identifying narrative structure. For this reason, the essential action, fighting against injustice, was chosen as the best wording. Narrative function three was left unchanged. The fourth and fifth narrative functions from the first draft were condensed into narrative function four. The reason for eliminating the reference to his televised performance is because the central issue being addressed is really the hero's discovery of his guitar-playing skills. The sixth and seventh narrative functions from the first draft were also consolidated. This is reflected in the fifth narrative function listed for the second draft. At this point, it was unclear whether audience or community should be used. This is resolved in the next draft. Narrative function eight from the first draft coincides with narrative function six of the second draft. Two changes were made to this sixth function. One change was to indicate that it was for economic gain that the industry attempts to mold the hero. The second change reflects a question of word choice between community leaders and industry personnel. In the first draft, no reference was given to the hero recognizing how he is exploited. Since he must first be aware of this before he can react to it, narrative function seven was added. Narrative function ten from the first draft and narrative function eight are essentially the same. Narrative functions eleven and twelve from the first draft

were brought together in narrative function nine. Bringing together these narrative functions simplified them without removing critical steps. The remaining narrative functions in both drafts are the same.

The film was then viewed a second time, with the primary purpose of further refinement. The second draft of narrative functions was evaluated as the movie progressed. This led to a third and final draft.

- (1) Hero has low status in society.
- (2) Hero fights against injustice.
- (3) Hero is removed from society.
- (4) Hero discovers a special talent that will elevate his status in the community.
- (5) Hero shows his talent to the community.
- (6) The community rejects the hero.
- (7) The villain recognizes the hero's talents.
- (8) The villain manipulates the hero for personal gain.
- (9) Hero recognizes he is being exploited.
- (10) Hero confronts the villain.
- (11) Hero establishes independence from the villain.
- (12) Hero gains status in the community.
- (13) Hero distances himself from the community.
- (14) Hero potentially loses his talents for good.
- (15) Hero re-evaluates the hero's place in society.
- (16) Hero returns to society.

A quick glance at this draft shows an overall simplification from the previous versions. The first three narrative functions are the same. In order to utilize genre-neutral terms to allow comparisons with Westerns and other films, "special talent" replaced "guitar" in narrative function four. The other important change was to replace "success" with "elevate his status." This is a relatively minor change but one more clearly capturing the hero's move away from a low-status position. Because it involved two events, narrative function five from the second draft was divided out and put into narrative functions five and six. Also, the word "community" was selected because the audience, at a basic level, symbolizes the community. Narrative functions six and seven from the second draft are reflected in narrative functions seven, eight, and nine. All references to "industry personnel" were removed and "villain" put in their place. Narrative function seven was added because this recognition of the hero's talent happened prior to any exploitation. Narrative functions eight and nine from the second draft were reworded into narrative functions ten, eleven, and twelve. These changes were made to simplify the functions

and to highlight that the hero gains independence prior to gaining status in the community. Narrative function ten was dropped because it is largely irrelevant to the narrative structure. Narrative functions eleven and twelve from the second draft were reduced to narrative function thirteen. This newly stated function more clearly and simply reflects the consequence of stardom for the hero. Narrative function thirteen from the second draft is broken out into narrative functions fourteen and fifteen, with fourteen representing the crisis and fifteen how it causes the hero to reflect on how he has been negatively effected by stardom. Narrative function fourteen from the first draft was changed to "hero returns to society" because through getting his voice back the hero can now make it back into society wiser on how to be both a star and a person.

A similar process was followed in constructing the narrative functions for the remaining films. This included first taking detailed notes of the chronological development of the plot. Upon review of these notes, places of significant change in the action sequences were identified. Narrative functions were then written that accurately captured these distinct sections of the narrative. Language used in the final draft of *Jailhouse Rock* was referenced to maintain consistent wording. In watching the films, it was not assumed that a particular narrative structure would be followed simply because it occurred in a particular time period. To preserve the integrity of each film's written functions, each was initially treated as a unique data set before making comparisons.

After delineating the narrative functions for each film, they were examined with the purpose of identifying patterns. Films following a similar set of action sequences regarding the hero and his or hero journey in and out of stardom were labeled as belonging to a distinct data set. These data sets were then reviewed and a title that captured the meaning of the plot was selected. The following labels were chosen: reconciliation plot, personal revival plot, personal revival plot tragedy variation, self-destruction plot, and rejection plot. To clarify the distinctiveness of each plot, a brief description of the narrative structure for each is provided.

In the reconciliation plot, the primary task confronting the hero is resolving value differences between working-class and professional society. In the end, the hero indeed reconciles these differences and in doing so find a place in society. Personal revival plot heroes are born with a special gift, rise to stardom, but are held back from achieving personal happiness until they deal with either a difficult past or problem relationships. Instead of addressing value differences, these films provide introspective examinations of the personal struggles of rock stars

and not their struggles with stardom. The self-destruction plot heroes try living out the life of a rock star but give into temptations one too many times. They are torn between living out a normal existence and living the life of a star, but despite all of its consequences they choose the later over a life that conventional living might bring. Finally, the rejection plot starts with the young hero wanting to be a rock star. When an opportunity for this chance arises, the hero takes it. After ascending to stardom, the hero realizes that this is world of fabrication. These films end with the hero walking away from a rock star role.

As Wright (1975) argued, it is not necessary that each film with the same plot contains identical functions or that they follow the same order. Rather, what is essential is that the general narrative is structured along similar lines. For this reason, all films fitting a particular plot were compared. The critical functions were highlighted, resulting in a common list for each plot. The 'ideal type' for the reconciliation plot, the plot that *Jailhouse Rock* fits, that arose out of this process was as follows:

### **Reconciliation Plot Narrative Structure**

- (1) The hero has low status in society.
- (2) The hero stands up for injustice done to weak members of society.
- (3) The hero is removed from society.
- (4) The hero discovers a talent that will elevate his position in society.
- (5) The hero reveals his talent to the community.
- (6) The hero begins to gain status.
- (7) The hero conforms to the expectations others have of a hero.
- (8) Industry leaders manipulate the hero.
- (9) The hero increases his status.
- (10) The hero's quest for material success causes him and others pain.
- (11) The hero finds a balance between individual and industry goals and desires.
- (12) The hero establishes independence from industry representatives.
- (13) The hero returns to the role of a hero but on his own terms.
- (14) The hero is accepted by society.

### **Binary Oppositions and Ideological Themes**

Having established the process for identifying narrative functions, attention is now directed at how binary oppositions (inside society/outside society, good/bad, strong/weak, authenticity/fabrication, and rebellion/conformity) and ideological themes (individual v industry, intergenerational, gender, race, and temptation) were examined. As each film was viewed, detailed notes were taken on the oppositions and the presence of the pre-selected ideological

themes. It is not necessary to replicate these notes here; their essential elements are represented in the ensuing chapters for each plot. The process included the following steps. For the binary oppositions, character actions illustrating each opposition were noted. In order to produce a more exhaustive listing of the dilemmas faced by the characters, their attributes, the relationships among characters, and so on, the notes were initially descriptive without critique or evaluation. As with narrative structure, notes for each category were written in the order that they chronologically appeared. This allowed for inspecting the chronological manifestation of each opposition. After the notes were taken on a film, they were examined more closely for how each opposition developed, paying particular attention to both how it was framed as well as the hero's changing place within it. For example, with the good/bad opposition the key questions included: What is good/bad? What does good/bad signify? How is it signified? Where on a good-bad continuum are the hero and other important characters initially placed? How does their placement change throughout the film? Where on the continuum are they located at the film's ending? How is the opposition related to the narrative structure? In answering these questions, it was possible to identify more clearly the steps in the hero's journey in and out of stardom. After this was accomplished for each film, the notes were compared both to films with a similar plot and films with other plots. This allowed for identifying similarities and differences in film content across plots. The final step was the analysis. The substance of these analyses is discussed for each plot in the following chapters.

The same process was applied in examining ideological themes (individual versus industry, intergenerational, gender, race, and temptation). As with the oppositions, the presence of particular messages was not assumed. After all descriptions were recorded for each pre-selected theme represented in a film, they were evaluated for their dominant message. Once the dominant messages were identified, they were considered in the historical context of when the film was produced. This was done to provide a more grounded interpretation of what they represented and why. The specific content of these themes as well as historical references are incorporated into a discussion of each plot.

Each of the following four chapters is devoted to a specific plot. Each chapter is organized as follows. Introductory paragraphs give a historical overview of the time period when the films were produced. After the relevant history is reviewed, the films are summarized. The narrative structure is then described and its functions delineated. With this accomplished,

the binary oppositions and their resolutions in the films are analyzed. Specific passages from films are incorporated as needed for clarification. The final section addresses the ideological themes. More detailed historical content is then incorporated to substantiate interpretation of the text.

## Chapter 4

# The Reconciliation Plot: The Rock Star In a New Social Order

Depending on the decade, cinematic stars such as Roy Rogers<sup>1</sup> and John Wayne rode their horses on the silver screen and defended what was morally right. In many ways these heroes were popular because they characterized for the audience what a hero should be. This is easily demonstrated in examining the career of one particular hero, John Wayne. With a career spanning six decades, from *The Great K & A Train Robbery* (1926) to *The Shootist* (1976), he performed in almost one hundred Westerns. In 1935 and 1936 alone he starred in sixteen Westerns. In these films he played an Army captain who defends a military post from warring Indians in *Fort Apache* (1948), an Army dispatch rider who finds and protects a woman and her child from threatening Apaches in *Hondo* (1953), and the cantankerous United States Marshal Rooster Cogburn in *True Grit* (1969). Regardless of whether he was a military man, a peace officer, or rancher, John Wayne consistently played a morally principled hero who came to the aid of defenseless others, protecting them from unscrupulous villains. And when taking these actions he not only brought justice on screen, he also reaffirmed for the audience certain historically situated values and beliefs. For example, when *True Grit* (1969) was released, social turmoil was high in the United States with the war in Vietnam, the civil rights movement, women's liberation, and gay activism. With such uncertainty about the future and with 'traditional' values under fire, it was to heroes some looked for reassurance. In this film, John Wayne plays Rooster Cogburn, an older, overweight, and often inebriated marshal whose brand of justice brings order to society. His ways of achieving justice stand in stark contrast to the courts and a young up and coming Texas Ranger who might do things by the book but whose soft ways often leave society in eminent threat. Rooster represents for the audience a character who goes up against the politically liberal to make sure everyone is safe and society secure.

Unlike Westerns, films about rock stars are significantly fewer in number and have neither staple actors nor acclaimed directors like John Ford. But despite these differences, they both provide reflections on society.

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<sup>1</sup> From 1935 to 1955 Roy Rogers played roles in over one hundred Hollywood films.



Films about rock stars take place approximately one hundred year after the great movement West. When the rock star was born in the 1950s, the central issues of the day were not industrialization and manifest destiny but post-World War II economic development, suburbia, the expansion of the professional middle-class, and a reinvigoration of conservative values<sup>2</sup>. Fearing the expansion of Communism and its consequences, money flowed to build up the military-industrial complex and contain this threat<sup>3</sup>. On the domestic front, suburbanization and the rising middle-class altered the economy, gender roles, family structures, and the place of youth in society. With the growth of white-collar jobs, an increase in post secondary education, and middle-class economic prosperity, "traditional" family structures and patriarchal gender norms became the majority's reality. After working in factories building military equipment and working in various auxiliary roles to support the war efforts, most middle-class women returned home following the war's end. At the same time, returning veterans traded in their blue jeans for coats and ties and professional opportunities associated with an advanced education. For these reasons and more, the shape of middle-class marriages and family life dramatically shifted. During the 1950s, the age of first marriage was the lowest it had ever been in recorded US history. Along with early marriage came the highest total fertility rate this country had ever experienced. With larger families, more income, and an expansion of consumer goods, various new social and recreational activities developed, such as backyard barbequing, neighborhood swimming pools, fast food establishments, television programs, and drive-in movies. Aside from entertainment and consumerism, the middle-class turned to new sources for ideas about how to live properly and raise their children. Reading parenting books such as Dr. Spock's (1946) *The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care* and Haim Ginot's (1956) *Between Parent & Child*, middle-class parents increasingly replaced intergenerational wisdom with the ideas of celebrated "experts." What all of this created was an affirmation that all was good in America. But underneath this veneer of stability and suburban happiness were the reflexive concerns about what all this conformity and rationality represented and repressed. Launching a critique on the

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<sup>2</sup> Eric F. Goldman's (1960) *The Crucial Decade—And After: America, 1945-1960* and Godfrey Hodgson's (1976) *America In Our Time* give a detailed account of the political, economic, and social dynamics before and following World War II.

<sup>3</sup> In addition to the other sources mentioned, Stephen Ambrose's (1976) *Rise to Globalism: American Foreign Policy, 1938-1976* is a valuable text for understanding the Cold War and the increased involvement of the United States in foreign markets.

professional managerial class were the likes of David Riesman (1950) in *The Lonely Crowd* and William Whyte (1956) in *The Organization Man*.

On the culture front, the 1950s conservative politics were increasingly met with some resistance. The philosophical Beatniks provided an outlet for contemplative youth asking difficult questions about social order and political liberty. Poets such as Allen Ginsberg and authors such as Jack Kerouac provided youth with a different picture of the world than that provided by their middle-class professional parents. As in literature, so on the silver screen. In movies like Marlon Brando's *The Wild One* (1953) and James Dean's *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), the conservative social world was questioned. The tension between conservatism and a developing counter-culture was reflected in many Hollywood films produced during this time, especially those attempting to draw a new youth culture into the movie theatre. Films about the rock star that arose in this context reflected historically situated beliefs about what it takes to become accepted into a society where the individual increasingly struggles to maintain a sense of self independent from industrial and organizational pressures. This is the central crisis facing the rock star hero. Adhering to working-class values leaves the hero alienated from a new social order. To gain status and a more powerful agency, the hero moves away from the community and enters the industry. But the more the hero moves through the industry, the more its limits are recognized. This forces the hero to decide how far to move in either direction. And it's a particularly difficult decision because while both directions have their limits, there seems to be no way around the basic fact that community and industry values are inherently contradictory.

## **The Reconciliation Plot Films**

### **Loving You (1957)**

It didn't take long for Elvis Presley to move from the stage to the screen. First recorded by Sam Phillips in 1954, Elvis was already on the screen in 1956 with the release of his first movie, *Love Me Tender*. The first movie he made about a rock and roll performer, *Loving You*, was released the following year<sup>4</sup>. While not the first musician to find stardom in two popular culture mediums, he was the first for rock and roll and the first to make the crossover at such a supersonic speed.

In *Loving You*, Elvis plays a working class guy named Deke Rivers. The opening scene is a Norman Rockwell representation of life in a small town. Down on Main Street the

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<sup>4</sup> Elvis would go on to star in thirty-one feature films.

community, gathered for a Governor's election campaign, watches and listens as a country band performs. When the song finishes, the campaign's press agent, Glenda Markle (Lizabeth Scott), tells the lead singer Tex Warner (Wendell Corey) they need a "gimmick" if they're going to make it big. As if through some divine intervention, Deke appears delivering beer for the event. When Glenda notices him dancing to the music and discovers he can sing, she drags a hesitant Deke to the stage. After some clumsy and awkward moments he gains confidence and gets the crowd moving.

After the show, Glenda offers Deke the opportunity to join the band. He initially refuses because he doesn't want to give up his steady working class job. Not to be so easily rejected, Glenda calls his boss and gives him a fake story about being late for a delivery. Consequently, Deke loses his job and ends up joining the band.

At his first performance, Deke takes the stage wearing his working-class blue jeans while the other band members dress in country and western costume. After many concerts, Deke proves himself on stage and moves closer to the spotlight. As he becomes a more central part of the band, Deke puts his trust in Glenda and trades in his working-class self for the band's costumes and way of life.

Deke is attracted to one of the band members, Susan Jessup (Delores Hart), a good-ole country girl who represents conservative and traditional values. As such, she stands in opposition to the materialist and professional Glenda. As the movie progresses, Deke and the band become more successful. Soon Deke is all decked out in dazzling clothes and takes the stage front-and-center, pleasing the mostly young female fans. Never satisfied with any level of economic success and status, Glenda creates publicity stunts and works angles, all hidden from Deke, to further her agenda. Her heartlessness is ever so apparent in the following scene. As Glenda and Deke drive down the road, she tells him it is better to not have a home than to have a home like she did growing up. Deke tells her to turn around and directs her to a cemetery and headstone he stumbled upon when he ran away from his foster home. Carved on this headstone were the words "He was alone but for his friends who miss him." He found comfort in these words and decided to take this man's name and bury his own. Upon hearing his story of being lost in the world without a family, Glenda is moved to tears but still can't muster the courage to tell him the truth about it all.

At the next performance, Deke is strained. He now recognizes his life as a performer involves putting on an act, hiding who he is and being who others want him to be. Glenda provides Deke with reassurances but before a televised town meeting about whether rock and roll is good for the town, he disappears. Glenda tracks him down and ends up telling him the truth about how she manipulated the press and others so he would have a future. Deke rejects her plea and tells her how selfish she is. Deke's innocence and thirst for good friends and a strong family prevail as Glenda tells him that he is the only person he owes anything to.

While Susan is on the stage telling the audience Deke has left, he shows up. He walks up to the microphone and tells the audience the song he's about to sing, "Loving You," is for Susan. After the performance, Deke tells Tex and Glenda he wants them to continue to be involved with the band. Deke's forgiveness surprises Glenda and Tex but they agree to stay on. Deke and Susan then embrace.

### **Jailhouse Rock (1957)**

In this movie Elvis plays the role of a construction worker named Vince Everett. In the opening scene Vince and his co-workers finish a job and after getting paid head into some working class bar. When a woman starts flirting with Vince, her boyfriend gets between them and grabs and beats her. Vince defends her but goes too far when his final punch proves fatal. Vince's aggression lands him in prison on a manslaughter charge but not all hope is lost.

Hunk Houghton, Vince's prison cellmate, is a middle-age conman who runs the jail's underground market. When they first meet, Hunk gives Vince advice about survival in this environment, telling him the game chips in prison may be different but the rules of the game are the same whether trying to make it as a prisoner or some business entrepreneur. Soon after entering their cell, Vince learns that Hunk used to making a living as a musician. Something clicks for Vince and he decides being a musician could be his ticket to a better life. He picks up Hunk's guitar and with astonishing and absurd speed Vince quickly becomes skilled at fingering chords. Once his talent is discovered, the warden recruits him to perform on a nationally televised show. The big day arrives and his first performance is a smashing success.

After being released from prison, he persuades a local bar owner to give him a chance on stage. His first performance is a flop but a talent scout, Peggy Van Alden (Peg), tracks down Vince and encourages him to record a song. This is all the push he needs. With her help, Vince

makes some recordings, gets them played on a local radio station, and becomes an instant success. But before he can sit back and enjoy the fruits of his labor, Hunk turns up telling Vince he must fulfill a contract he signed in prison that gives Hunk a piece of the action. Without having the scruples of a business executive and therefore being unable to push Hunk away, Vince agrees.

During his next performance, Vince has the television audience moving to the beat in the signature "Jailhouse Rock" number. This performance puts his career on the fast track. He lands a movie contract with Climax Studios, gains new friends, and achieves the status he always hoped for. All of this comes at a price though, as his relationship with Peg becomes strained and he gets pressured to make more recordings. As a result, Vince becomes dissatisfied for the first time. Soon thereafter Peg gets upset at Vince because of his relationship with another woman and his secret dealings with the Geneva Records label. When she asks him why he kept the deal hidden from her, he tells her it's a great deal and questions why she is upset. Peg angrily responds, telling him "is there nothing left in you but the lust for money." After she walks out, Hunk, fed up also with Vince, comes to Peg's defense and tells Vince he's the reason she's upset. They get into a fistfight. Hunk hits Vince in the throat, leaving him out of breath and with a possible permanent vocal chord injury.

Vince is rushed to the hospital where an emergency tracheotomy is performed. After the surgery, Vince makes up with Hunk and Peggy. As a result of this crisis, Vince learns a valuable lesson about stardom, money, greed and the importance of love and friends. But it may be too late for it's uncertain whether Vince will ever be able to sing. After Peg and Hunk encourage Vince to try and sing, he does and starts singing a love song. He has completed his journey.

### **King Creole (1958)**

This film starts with a young Danny Fisher (Elvis Presley) poking his head out of his apartment window and taking in the sounds of street vendors singing the blues. He can identify with them because of his own difficult life. Since his mother passed away, his hard working, low-status, professional father (Dean Jagger) who has struggled to hold down jobs and provide for the family has raised Danny. To help make ends meet, Danny buses tables at a local club. While working one night, Danny gets coaxed into singing for the club's owner and one of the most powerful men in New Orleans, Maxie Fields (Walter Matthau). The owner of the failing

King Creole, Charlie LeGrand (Paul Stewart), listens to Danny's bluesy number about defiance and being evil and offers him a job. This is the chance he has long waited for, but it will put him at odds with his father. Charlie LeGrand and Danny try convincing his father but he doesn't budge. When his father refuses, Danny stands up to him, telling him he wants a life where he doesn't have to crawl to people for a living.

As Danny's performances prove popular and lucrative, Maxie tries to get him to perform at his club. Danny wants material success, but not if it means being associated with greed and selfish values. He rejects Maxie. When Danny leaves, Maxie plots how to corner Danny. Maxie gives his employee, Shark, the charge of finding something on Danny he can exploit. After Shark tells Maxie about Danny's anger towards his father's boss, they work to get Danny to agree on getting retribution. When the offer is made, Danny agrees. Then on a dark and rainy night, when a person they believe is the owner leaves the store for the bank they beat and rob him. But it turns out it wasn't the owner; it was Danny's father.

Mr. Fisher ends up hospitalized with a serious head trauma. With no other way to pay for a costly surgery to save his father's life, Danny is forced to accept an offer from Maxie. Later Maxie arranges a meeting with Danny and tells him he must sign a contract to perform at his club or else he will tell his father about the mugging. Begrudgingly, Danny signs.

When Mr. Fisher finds out Danny signed the contract, he goes to see Maxie. As Mr. Fisher tries to get Maxie to break the contract, one of the muggers walks in and Mr. Fisher quickly identifies him. When he threatens to go to the police, Maxie tells him about Danny's role in the incident. Mr. Fisher leaves. As he walks away from the apartment, he crosses paths with Danny. Danny tries to apologize but his father silently walks past. Enraged, Danny goes up to Maxie's room, beats him up, and then quickly leaves.

Near the end, Maxie's goons corner Danny. Danny stabs Shark but gets wounded in the process. Seeking help, he goes home but the door is locked. He pleads to his father to open it but his dad turns him away. Ronnie (Carolyn Jones), a person who is trapped in a relationship with Maxie, drives up and they leave for her secret hideaway. While they're talking on the pier, Maxie shows up and shoots and kills Ronnie. Before Maxie can fire off another shot, a misfit Danny supported earlier in the movie shows up and takes Maxie down. With Maxie out of the picture, Danny ends up back at the King Creole. When he takes the stage at the film's end, he looks out into the audience and sees his dad. The father and son have made amends.

## Narrative Structure of the Reconciliation Plot

In the reconciliation plot movies, the hero starts out as a member of the working class. As a construction worker, busboy, or deliveryman, the hero is stuck in an occupation with little reward, opportunity, or recognition. This makes doing something different, such as performing music, that much more attractive. As he becomes a successful performer, he has to find his way in an alien world based on marketplace values. The hero's innocence about how the industry operates initially prevents him from realizing how he is being used by others or how his material success divides him from significant others. He struggles to work through his conflicting desires, not wanting to return to his working class life while at the same time not wanting stardom if it means a loss of traditional values. Eventually he realizes how the industry controls him and when he does, he takes on and ultimately wins the fight against the industry.

For this journey to be possible a second character, a villain, is needed. As in Westerns where the hero fights the villain to bring order and peace to society, so does the rock star. But whereas the Western hero directly saves the community from injustice and harm, the musician, through winning his fight against the corrupting pressures of the industry, gives the community a symbolic victory and hope that a person can be a part of industry structures and at the same time be virtuous. In Westerns, the villain is often some greedy businessman who seeks material success at any cost. For the rock star genre, the role title changes, for example manager replaces greedy banker, but the underlying positions remain the same. Just as villains in Westerns use their tools, such as the gun and coercive measures, to get their way, managers, promoters, distributors, or other industry executives use the tools of their trade to get their way.

By the end of the reconciliation plot films, the hero finds a way to make the system work without falling prey to its materialistic values. This is a long journey for the hero, a person who started out in a marginalized social position, whose initial place in society is represented by the first narrative function:

- (1) The hero has low status in society.

Whether being a construction worker in *Jailhouse Rock* or busing tables in some New Orleans club in *King Creole*, the hero is an average person making his way in the world doing what he knows best. The hero's working-class background is critical to these stories. Working class values give the hero certain honorable virtues, including generosity, dedication, and moral strength. But the problem for the hero is that these virtues do not give the hero recognition and

power. Whether out of status frustration or stereotypical working-class masculine scripts, the hero's low status moves him to some action.

- (2) The hero stands up for injustice done to weak members of society.
- (3) The hero is removed from society.

The hero's aggressive actions are the result of the personal frustration caused by his low status. Feeling trapped in his life and occupation, the hero lashes out against those whose abuse their authority. Because he does, and can, react in such a fashion he becomes strong. In *Jailhouse Rock* and *King Creole*, while at a local club the hero witnesses some man hitting a defenseless woman. Rather than taking a middle-class approach of verbally confronting the aggressor, the hero acts on his working-class impulses and comes to her defense. For *Jailhouse Rock*, the hero's actions land him in prison. In *King Creole*, he doesn't get locked up but his general "hoodlum" ways get him kicked out of high school. Therefore in both cases, the hero is removed from society.

*Loving You* does not contain these two narrative functions. In this film, the hero is a small-time deliveryman. This low status position could generate frustration but it doesn't appear to because he's not actively seeking a different way. But while he's not pursuing a different vocation, one with opportunities for joining the professional class, he quickly leaves his job as a deliveryman behind when he loses his job and a prospecting public relations manager puts his measly earnings into perspective. But regardless of whether the hero defends others and is removed from society, in each film:

- (4) The hero discovers a talent that will elevate his position in society.
- (5) The hero reveals his talent to the community.

Now that the hero has been removed from society, he must find a way of joining society. To make this happen, the hero must reconcile the competing demands and values of the industrious working-class and the individualist enterprising class. Because of their different focal points, it would stand to reason that Westerns and rock star films work through this function differently. In the Western *Shane*, the hero tries to become a member of society by taking on such shared values as familism and the Protestant work ethic. With rock star films, the direction at first glance appears to go the other way, with the hero seeking to become a cultural hero in order to be accepted by society. But upon closer inspection it becomes clear that *Shane* and the rock star hero are united in their attempts to be integrated into conventional society. The



only real difference between them lies not in their goals but in what 'conventional' represents – involvement in marketplace values for the rock star hero and sacred-ordered agrarian values for the cowboy.

After discovering and revealing a talent to the community:

- (6) The hero begins to gain status.
- (7) The hero conforms to the expectations others have of a hero.
- (8) Industry leaders manipulate the hero.
- (9) The hero increases his status.

In narrative function six through nine the hero's status increases and along with it so do the pressures to conform to role expectations and industry desires. The further he gets involved in this new role, the more the hero conforms to other's expectations, all the while failing to recognize the exploitive tactics of the industry. This innocence about how the business world operates becomes more difficult to maintain the more the rock star recognizes what being a star is really all about.

The most pronounced representation of these four functions occurs in *Loving You*. In this movie, the hero has no family. He is alone in the world with little prospect for a more financially secure future. The hero joins the band because of both a desire for more status and a desire to be a part of a family-like unit, something he never had. The hero's desire to be a part of a community, coupled with his innocence of how the business world operates, makes the hero an easy target. This is really well captured in a scene where Glenda and Tex give Deke a costume to wear on stage and then tell him he needs to change his name. Initially he is disgusted with doing either of these things, but after a brief hesitation and a few remarks, he concedes. Deke puts his trust in Glenda and Tex and believes they are looking out for his best interests. As a result of how Glenda and Tex have directed Deke, he gains in status and becomes even more of a star.

In *Jailhouse Rock*, the issues of conforming to other's expectations and industry exploitation get played out differently. Instead of being exploited by his manager or band members, as was the case in *Loving You*, here Vince is only occasionally manipulated by industry executives. In one of the few scenes dealing with exploitation, Vince goes to see a record company executive about getting his first record distributed. The executive turns him down but tells Vince he'll hold onto the demo and if something develops he'll let him know. Vince soon discovers he was taken advantage of when a short time later, he and Peg are in a

record store and notice a recently released record containing his song. Excited and thinking it's him singing on the record, he becomes enraged when he discovers it's someone else. Even though this is one of the few incidents in the movie where the industry directly exploits the hero, it is vital to the story because it forces the hero to take some action. When Vince realizes how the industry took advantage of him, he draws on the wisdom of his cellmate, Hunk, and decides he and Peg will make a go of it without the help of industry executives and their lawyers. But even though he moves to operate independently he still ends up getting caught in the temptations of stardom and becomes the selfish and greedy individualist he so adamantly opposes.

Collectively, these four functions are about what happens to the hero when the hero leaves the familiarity of his working-class life. As the hero gains status, problems develop and the hero is forced to reconcile the competing demands of the industry and stardom with those of authenticity and community. This leads to the next function:

(10) The hero's star status causes him and others pain.

Throughout *Jailhouse Rock* there are strong mutual feelings of affection between Peg and Vince, but neither of them makes the move to start a relationship. When Vince starts to make it as a performer, he becomes more consumed by wealth and stardom and loses sight of Peg. Eventually this leads to a confrontation between them, at which point she asks him "is there nothing left in you but the lust for money?" In *King Creole*, this function gets played out somewhat differently. Here, the hero (Danny) has no movie or record deals. But both Danny and Vince share a common mission, at least initially, and that is to move beyond the limits of their working class lives. Danny's desire to achieve more than his father causes tension between the two. Rather than pursuing his father's path of getting an education, following conservative values, and obtaining a professional job, Danny sets out to go his own way. In straying from the conventional path, Danny gets caught up in corruption and ultimately brings significant physical and emotional harm to his father.

The more problems that develop for the hero, the more the hero comes to a new understanding about the costs of being a star. But while the hero wants to retain his relationships to family and friends he doesn't want to give up all that he has achieved. This forces the hero into some resolution:

(11) The hero confronts the industry.

(12) The hero establishes independence from industry representatives.

At some point the hero finally realizes the detrimental consequences of being a star and when this happens, something must give. But it is not an easy choice for neither does the hero want to become greedy nor does the hero want to return to his previous low status existence. The only possible resolution is for him to confront the industry and find a balance between these two conflicting forces. In each film, the hero takes on the industry and corruption and ultimately establishes his independence from them. The result is that:

(13) The hero returns to the role of a hero but on his own terms.

In each of these movies, the hero has taken a journey to stardom. Along the way, the hero loses friends, family, and himself. After confronting the sources of evil, the hero becomes independent from the industry and then returns to the stage with a new understanding of what it means to be a successful person. Because the hero makes these moves and reclaims a truer sense of self:

(14) The hero is accepted by society.

In each of these three films, the hero's acceptance by society occurs when the hero makes amends with those he harmed and finds a balance between being a cultural star and a virtuous person. Danny's pursuits as a singer always pained his father. But even though Danny's involvement with Maxie ultimately harmed his father, by establishing independence from Maxie and finding a balance between who he was taught to be and who he wants to become, he gains his father's respect. In this movie's final scene, Danny returns to the King Creole stage with a happy audience and a father who is proud of his ambitious son. In one of the other films, when Hunk punches Vince in the throat and Peg walks out on him, Vince realizes how being a star changed him for the worse. When he regains his voice and makes good with Hunk and Peg it is clear that he has found a way to continue his pursuits as a musician without bringing harm to himself and others. And in *Loving You*, after he confronts and walks away from Glenda, Deke returns to the stage, stronger and wiser than ever.

To reiterate the functions for the Reconciliation Plot:

- (1) The hero has low status in society.
- (2) The hero stands up for injustice done to weak members of society.
- (3) The hero is removed from society.
- (4) The hero discovers a talent that will elevate his position in society.
- (5) The hero reveals his talent to the community.
- (6) The hero begins to gain status.

- (7) The hero conforms to the expectations others have of a hero.
- (8) Industry leaders manipulate the hero.
- (9) The hero increases his status.
- (10) The hero's quest for material success causes him and others pain.
- (11) The hero finds a balance between individual and industry goals and desires.
- (12) The hero establishes independence from industry representatives.
- (13) The hero returns to the role of a hero but on his own terms.
- (14) The hero is accepted by society.

## **Binary Oppositions: Reconciliation Plot**

The narrative functions highlight the hero's actions and how the plots develop. Having laid out the narrative functions for the reconciliation plot, we now turn to the binary oppositions. To clarify how these two areas - functions and oppositions - are different, this poignant statement from Wright (1975) is particularly useful. He states that "the oppositions reveal what the characters mean; the functions reveal what they do" (26). The binary oppositions Wright (1975) identified as central to Westerns (good/bad, inside society/outside of society, and strong/weak) and those identified in this study (authenticity/fabrication and rebellion/conformity) provided the framework for this evaluation.

The inside society/outside society binary opposition addresses how integrated the hero is into society. In many Westerns, the hero starts outside of society. As the plot unfolds, the hero proves his worth, stands up for the community and is eventually accepted. With films about rock musicians, the hero goes through a similar process. In the beginning the hero's desire for a different life puts him outside of society. As he becomes a cultural hero, he brings pain to himself and others. Eventually, the hero makes amends with those he harmed, comes to understand how to be a member of this society, and becomes accepted.

Acting on his low status position as a construction worker, the hero in *Jailhouse Rock* reacts violently to injustice. By using his fists, and ultimately, although unintentionally, killing someone, the hero gets removed from society. But not only is the removal the result of his physical nature, it is the reason he is there to begin with; it is a reflection of his working-class nature. With the hero in this position, he has two choices, either to stay there or journey toward a more conventional place in society. After discovering the opportunities available with his musical gifts, he chooses the later. But there is a fundamental problem: without the experience of the industry the hero lacks the knowledge necessary not to become corrupted by the industry,

money, and fame. Until the hero breaks free from this corruption and finds a way to make it work on his own terms, the hero remains outside of society.

In *Loving You* the kind hero is innocent to how he is being worked over by his manager. When he does become somewhat disenchanted with it all, the band's leader, and older gentleman, tries reassuring him. The following comment he makes reflects particular notions on how youth should act in the new social order but it is also yet another attempt to get Deke to continue with the status quo.

Tex: You know, I like you, Deke. You're not like these punks you see around...wise guys full of their own future, just ready to spit in the first eye that doesn't light up to them. No...you're a boy any man would be proud to have as a son. More than that, we're real pals...partners.

Deke does not realize the shallowness of Tex's statement but eventually he does become aware and embittered with how he has been treated by the press and certain members of the community. Before the start of a televised performance he takes off. While he is away, some younger members of the community get on stage and affirm why Deke should not be rejected. One younger teenager steps up to the microphone and tells the audience:

I think Deke Rivers should be allowed to sing anywhere that he pleases. I think it's pretty silly to say that this performance has any kind of influence on kids or anybody. You know, what grown ups mean is that they don't like the same things we like so we have no business liking them. Gosh, I've listened to some of the singers my folks are crazy about and...well I sure wish their folks would have a little talk with them.

The community coming to his defense accepts Deke. A similar process happens in *King Creole*. From the opening scenes, Danny is outside of society. Wanting to be integrated but not wanting to follow his father's conventional path, Danny strikes out on his own. His actions lead to harming his father. To make things right, he takes on the villain Maxie. With this accomplished, he goes back to singing at the King Creole. When he takes the stage, his father, who always disregarded his way of life, is in the audience, smiling and proud of his son. The support he receives from his father and the audience's enthusiastic response to his return on stage mark Danny's move to inside of society.

Whereas inside society/outside society focuses on where in society the hero is socially located, the binary opposition of good/bad addresses value differences between the hero and the

other characters. The following statement by Wright (1975: 52-53) describes how these two value systems are commonly represented in Westerns. In Westerns,

the explicit coding of good and bad is between the social, progressive values of the members of society versus the selfish, money values of the villains. The decent citizens are committed to taming the land, raising families, and bringing churches, schools, business and law to the West, a commitment repeated in virtually every classical Western. The villains, however, are committed to personal gain by any means and at any cost, usually at the cost of progress, decency, and law.

In Westerns, farmers, community members, and conventional others are oriented around collectivistic values and a divinely inspired moral authority. In contrast to these good values are the villains, pathologically corrupt individuals who are consumed by greed.

In all three of these reconciliation plot movies, the hero starts out good. While it is true that Vince and Danny's anti-authority posturing and use of physical force make them "bad," force is only used to bring justice and not for personal gain. In *King Creole*, Danny, frustrated with how his father passively accepts orders from others and fails to exert his will, seeks a different path. Danny does challenge the values his father upholds but in the end Danny returns to them, and when he does he finds his place in society. At various points in the movie Danny demonstrates a rough edge that puts him on the outside of society. But despite this position, he never strays far from the humanitarian values commonly accepted by the community. Early in the film, Danny gets summoned to the principal's office. While the principal comes down on Danny for his "hoodlum" ways, Danny responds respectfully and before he leaves tells him how his rough nature has been misunderstood.

Danny: Listen, Mr. Evans. We moved into this neighborhood three years ago. In that three years that I've been going to school here, I've shined shoes and dusted people off in a barbershop. I've done towel duty in four different men's rooms. I've stacked chairs and bottles and swept the floor up of every joint on Bourbon Street. It's gotten so I look longer at a dame with clothes on than one without. I'm not a hoodlum. But I am a hustler. I've had to be for a very simple reason – my old man. You see, sir, my mother was killed in an accident three years ago. Well, after that, it might as well have gotten the old man too, because he took himself right out of the lineup. He quit cold. He lost the drugstore that he owned, he lost the house, and then finally what few little jobs he's had since. You know, maybe I could've liked school, Mr. Evans. But every time I wanted to play ball, I had to go to work. Somebody had to. Anyway, now I'm through. I'm through.

Mr. Evans: I wasn't aware that you worked after school, Danny.  
Danny: It's not the working after school, Mr. Evans, it's the working before. It's been nice talking to you.

Through this interaction, it is revealed how "good" Danny really is, despite his straying from the straight and narrow path followed by his peers.

With *Loving You*, the hero always remains good and virtuous. Neither fame nor the pressures attending it cause the hero to lose his principled values. Even when he discovers how his manager exploited him, Deke does not verbally or physically strike back. He speaks his mind, establishes his independence from Glenda, returns to the stage, and then asks Glenda and Tex to stay with him despite how they treated him. In the end, Deke's "goodness" not only finds him a place in society but it also wins over the hearts and minds of the villains.

The good/bad opposition, and this is the case with the others as well, is not just about film representation but more generally about the audience's position in the changing social order. Wright (1975: 140) clarifies what this opposition is about in stating that it "does not separate people by their success at making money but rather by their *motivations* for trying to make money" (140). Those who are bad are self-serving and not to be bothered with questions about community well being. The good, in contrast, are those who use conventional means of achievement to advance personally, not to gain power at the sacrifice of community well being but to fulfill personal aspirations. The contrasting characterization of the heroes and villains is important not only to make the narratives work but also for supporting the position that the marketplace is not, in and of itself, corrupt and inhumane. Rather than being a system problem, the problem is particular individuals who have let money trump all other concerns. The films inform us then that the professional seeking individual might have to be on the guard for corruption but a way to maintain sacred values can ultimately be found.

The strong and weak binary opposition centers on self-assertion and self-determination, with the strong possessing such drives. Since it is not a reflection of personal values, any film character, including heroes and villains, can be either strong or weak. Therefore, despite the villain's evil ways and values, this character, like the hero, can be and often is strong.

In *King Creole*, Maxie and Danny both know what they want and work hard to get it. Danny does what is needed to bring justice to others and move himself forward. When he witnesses Ronnie being manhandled at the club, he stands up for her. And in the end, Danny is

there again helping her sort out a troubled past. Two other relationships illustrate Danny's strength. Unlike other young men who might be in similar circumstances, Danny decides to chart a different path than the one his father followed and advocated. Instead of conceding, Danny goes his own way. His strength is also seen in relationship to Ronnie. Ronnie and Danny come from similar backgrounds but whereas Ronnie gets trapped in a relationship with Maxie and never establishes her independence, Danny refuses to be coerced by this greedy villain.

By either blindly following the path of industry managers or failing to stand up for personal beliefs and virtues, the hero, until a certain point in the narrative, is weak. As time elapses, a crisis develops and the hero must decide whether it is time to be strong and stand up for what is right. And in the end, he always does.

The central crisis for the hero is over the reconciliation of two opposing value systems – that of the working-class and that of the managerial class. In the post-World War II economy, the economy increasingly shifted from a manufacturing to service industries. As production processes changed, so did the qualities needed to be successful. These included a higher education, a managerial code, economic rationalism, and perhaps most importantly, conformity to a new system of organization. Since it was a time of transition, many questions arose about what it all meant. While it was not until the 1960s where more extensive critiques of professional conformity were made, these films reveal the tensions involved in a post-industrial economy. And they get resolved quite simply and completely. By becoming aware about either being used as a pawn in the game of monetary gain or costs to community and family by becoming too materially focused, the hero gathers strength and finds a place in the industrial order without relinquishing the proven values of the past.

The remaining binary oppositions, authenticity/fabrication and rebellion/conformity, are specifically related to films about rock stars. The opposition between authenticity and fabrication addresses where on this continuum the rock star fits. In both *Loving You* and *Jailhouse Rock*, when the rock star hero gains status he loses part of himself. Throughout most of *Loving You*, Deke believes Glenda tells him what to do because she cares about him. When he realizes she only cares about becoming successful, Deke stands up to Glenda and returns to the stage as his authentic self. He retains his status and popularity, thus illustrating that he, and others, can be authentic and successful at the same time. In *Jailhouse Rock*, an industry representative does not control the hero; he does it to himself. His focus on fame and material



gain causes him to lose sight of relationships and things he viewed as important before he took the stage. When a crisis happens, Vince is forced to realize how he has become a fabricated star. But there is hope. As with *Loving You*, Vince finds a way to take the stage as an authentic, hard working, valued member of the community.

The final opposition is rebellion/conformity. Not bent on following tradition for tradition's sake, those who rebel buck conventional social order and chart their own course. The rock star epitomizes this position. And in fact, the rock star's success is in many ways closely linked to this rebellious persona, a persona with great appeal to a young audience. With reconciliation plot films, the rock star rebels in two distinct ways. First, the hero rebels against authority. If he were to concede to his father's wishes, and those more generally of the older generation, Danny would live out his existence confined to some professional job where he would cower to his boss and passively accept any mistreatment. Rather than going down this path, he rebels against his father's wishes. But more important than rebelling against authority, the hero rebels against a set of values. When the working class hero becomes a star and consequently accepts market-driven values, he initially loses sight of how material pursuits interfere with personal happiness. When a crisis occurs and he becomes aware of its effects, the hero rebels against the marketplace and its values and finds a way to have the best of both worlds, one where he can achieve group harmony without being corrupted by callous greed.

At the most general level, the binary oppositions are fundamentally about conflicting ideas about different ways of living. By the hero being strong, moving inside of society, and finding a place in the civilized order where personal integrity does not have to be sacrificed, the films become politically conservative. Because the films were produced by major Hollywood film companies (*King Creole* and *Loving You*: Paramount Pictures and *Jailhouse Rock*: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer), this should be no surprise. But to young audience-goers who watched the film in the 1950s, many likely viewed the film's heroes as rebellious to the core.

### **Reconciliation Plot: Historical Context and Ideological Content**

Throughout the history of film many politicians and citizens feared film's ability to not just mirror society but to create it. And among those who believed film can alter culture, some argued for its control. One of the first restrictions on the film industry was the 1933 Motion Picture Production Code. This code contained many requirements for what could be depicted on the screen, such as that any representation of criminal activity had to end with the criminal being

caught and justice served. From the private sector, groups such as the Catholic Legion of Decency fought fiercely for control over how certain moral positions were addressed. Adding to the regulation of film production was the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). Established in 1938, this organization was put in charge of identifying, investigating, and sanctioning subversives, many of who were associated with various social movements and labor organizations. Two years later this organization's powers were extended with the passage of the Smith Act. Under this act, the government gained the power to prosecute anyone supporting Communism or Socialism. During this same year, HUAC added the culture industry, including radio and Hollywood, to its list of potentially threatening organizations. With this new focus, HUAC moved outside of identifying those most clearly associated with Socialism and into a paranoid fear about anyone providing ideas that might be construed as undermining a free-market ideology. HUAC's growing power was at its zenith during the HUAC hearings from 1947 to 1952. During this time Hollywood actors, producers, and other industry personnel were pressured to blacklist those who challenged the conservative ideology. In the end, a group, commonly known as the Hollywood Ten, who did not concede to the committee's demands to reveal their political affiliations were excommunicated from Hollywood. Following the downfall of HUAC's most infamous leader, Senator McCarthy, and the industry's Supreme Court victory for the freedom of speech in the 1952 case of *Burstyn v Wilson*, Hollywood slowly moved in different directions both because they could and because they were losing their audience.

Hollywood experienced a long-lasting crisis during the war and post-war years. Between 1946 and 1960 the average weekly attendance at movie theatres declined from ninety million to forty million (Jowett, 1976)<sup>5</sup>. Jowett (1976: 333) identifies two primary reasons for this change. During this time the film industry "had to contend not only with an irreversible decline in audience due to shifting leisure patterns, but also with an unprecedented political attack, this time aimed more at the people who made the movies, and less at the actual films they produced." In regard to the first issue, the "television age" and increased access to sources of leisure, such as sports, fast foods, and automobiles, hit Hollywood hard. The staple middle-age movie audience members from the 1920s through the 1940s now found recreational outlets elsewhere. And while they stayed at home to watch the latest television shows or play card and board games with

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<sup>5</sup>Jowett's book provides a detailed social history of the film industry from its early years until the 1970s. Topic areas covered include government regulation of Hollywood, audience demographic patterns, the place of film in American culture, and general changing nature of the film industry.

their suburban neighbors, their adolescent children took off to the movies. Findings from a study done by the Opinion Research Corporation (1957) indicated that, among other things, over 70 percent of moviegoers were under thirty years of age.

### **Intergenerational Theme**

To capture the new audience demographic, Hollywood changed what they did. In films like *On the Waterfront* (1954) a new character in films, the anti-hero, emerged. In addressing the shifting age demographic of the audience, this anti-hero became a successful marketing strategy for capturing the youth crowd. The film that perhaps most clearly reveals this is *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955). In this film, James Dean plays the role of Jim Stark, "a brooding, suffering, isolated high school student who hates his apron-wearing father's (Jim Backus) flaccid amiability and weak submission to his self-involved, backbiting wife. Mumbling, slouching, hunching his shoulders, curling up in a fetal position, cigarette dangling from his mouth, the tormented Jim is like a coiled spring ready to cry and rage" (Quart and Auster, 1991: 60-61). A similar characterization of the anti-hero occurs in *King Creole*. In this film, the young and tense Danny reacts against the passivity of his father as he desperately tries to make his way through the world, independent, self-assured, and with an individualistic drive that eludes the older generation.

Adults in the 1950s were socialized into such collectivistic values as family obligation, respect for authority and elders, and self-responsibility. While these values were commonly accepted among the older generation, they became problematic for youth who encountered different occupational conditions. This is well represented in *King Creole*. Danny's father is a dedicated employee who values traditional notions about respecting authority and holds onto a Protestant conviction that links hard work and self-worth. Rather than admiring and accepting these values, Danny flat-out rejects them. When Mr. Fisher tells Danny he cannot take the singing job at LeGrand's King Creole, Danny stands up for himself.

Danny: You know, I remember once, Pop, when I was no more than three feet high you took me to the circus. You accidentally bumped into some guy and he turned around and punched you. He punched you right in the mouth, and you know what you did? Nothing! Nothing! When they swing at you, pop, it's not enough to duck, you gotta swing back! Maybe you can't anymore, but I'm not taking after you. You go to school, I'm going out to make a buck.

Because of their differences, the two become deeply divided, with Mr. Fisher seeing no merit in pursuing something so frivolous as playing music and Danny seeing weakness in traditional values. But after trying to do things his own way, Danny comes to recognize the importance of his father's values, for they provide some assurance that he will not get so focused on material gain that he becomes weak, corrupt, and destructive. And on the flip side, Mr. Fisher recognizes that sometimes a person has to challenge authority and be aggressive in order to survive.

Intergenerational conflicts also become part of the storyline through how the older generation responds to this new brand of music called rock and roll. In *Loving You* the hero gets scheduled to play in a rural Southern town. Before he arrives, some older women preach their morals to the town's mayor and try to block the performance of such corrupting music. To convince the City Council that she must go on, Glenda goes before them to remind them of how the youth culture and its music is not something to be feared.

Glenda: You cannot blame the behavior of young people or old people on music. Why you were the same people during the Charleston and the Black Bottom 20 years ago.

Mayor: 30.

Glenda: 30. Thirty years ago people were alarmed at what they thought jazz was doing to the country. Why some of our leading magazines were printing articles like, "Is jazz the plot of disaster?" "Unspeakable jazz must go" "Does jazz put the sin in syncopation?" Now you're adopting the same attitude toward rock and roll because your kids use it to let off steam. And it goes back beyond jazz. Well when Debussy's "Afternoon of a Fawn" and Stravinsky's "Rites of Spring" were first performed there were riots in the streets of France.

In this scene, the merit of rock is substantiated as traditionalist elders are reminded that what the youth are engaged in today is really not all that different from the past.

### **Individual versus Industry Theme**

Meanings about the business world are often made through contrasting characters and their decisions. Oftentimes, characters do one of two things – either do whatever it takes to be successful or walk away from materialist temptations if it harms others. When Tex tells Glenda in the excerpt below that he has rediscovered a "family heirloom" he draws attention to how he has forgotten about the world of humanitarian values while climbing his way to the top.

Tex: Well, ma'am he just ain't happy Ms. Glenda. Ain't happy at all. This ruckus down at City Hall, the kind of pictures they've been putting in the

papers, this talk that's going around. Deke figures he'd be happier jockeying a tractor at the Jessup place. He's about to quit, Glenda.

Glenda: He can't, I've...

Tex: We've already done that bit. Blew my top all over the place. Gave him all the lyrics – loyalty, gratitude...money (emphasized). You know I was really sailing when all of a sudden...

Glenda: All of a sudden what?

Tex: That kid's eyes snapped on, lit up a deep, dark cellar in a place called my soul. Huddled down there, way down in a corner, just barely alive, was an old conscience of mine. Family heirloom picked...

Glenda: So you packed his bag for him, I suppose. A fine time for you to hit the glory road. I just lined up a television shot to tell Deke's story coast to coast.

When money doesn't work in convincing Deke that the life of a performer is better than that of a farmer, Tex rethinks his own values and walks away from it all. But whereas Tex takes this different course, Glenda does not. And in her decision she underscores that businesswomen will do almost anything, including seduction, for money and power.

Whereas in all three films the industry is given some responsibility for the hero's demise, only in *Loving You* and *King Creole* are specific industry personnel represented as corrupt and greedy. In *Jailhouse Rock* the industry is relatively faceless. In this case, the industry is generalized beyond any particular individuals, thus representing at a more general level that managers do not corrupt individuals. Rather, they do it to themselves.

### **Gender Theme**

Despite the frequent characterization of the 1950s as being a time of glorious stability and opportunity, the reality is that it was a time of serious contradiction. Chafe (1999: 144) captures this spirit well in stating that "it is the theme of paradox that best describes the postwar era – diversity in the face of uniformity, the creation of close-knit communities despite massive mobility, changes in sex roles occurring in the face of the 'feminine mystique,' the emergence of cultural rebels in the midst of chilling conformity." Addressing the silent oppression of middle-class women who followed the dominant ideology of being a dutiful wife and nurturing mother was Betty Friedan. In her 1963 book *The Feminine Mystique*, Friedan brought to light the subordinate positioning of women both in home and in the workforce. While patriarchal gender norms were being critiqued, the reconciliation plot films reinforced conservative ideals.

On a few different occasions, the hero in these films takes on a protective role by coming to the defense of weak women being harassed by their lovers. But not only does he defend her,

he also defends a particular ideological position; weak women who fall prey to coercive others require the help of a male outsider. Related to the hero's defender role is his refusal to concede to the will of others. After graduating high school, the hero in *King Creole* takes a job to support his father and sister. His desire to become a musician puts him at odds with his father, but he stays strong and takes his future into his own hands. While he is out in the world trying to make it, his sister follows a different path. Instead of striking out on her own, she graduates and gets married to a traditional middle-aged businessman, the owner of the King Creole. For her, this is the next logical step in her life. Some female characters do appear strong but by exerting some independence they always get hurt and lose in the end. When deciding what to do with her future, one seemingly independent woman left a "normal" girl life and stepped out on her own. Weak and submissive, she ended up trapped in a relationship. Without a way out she is left wondering whether she would have been better off if she had followed culturally normative gender roles. In addition to female characters who either follow traditional roles or try to establish their independence, there are others who have joined the professional class. The businesswomen who appear in both *Loving You* and *Jailhouse Rock* are in positions of power and to some degree reflect the different ideologies of, and opportunity structures for, women in the 1950s. But just because they have these positions, it does not mean they are strong in them. In fact, it is just the opposite – through their taking on these roles it is revealed how out of place women are in a "man's" world. While Glenda has some enterprising backbone, it is her sexuality and female conditioned ability to manipulate others that allows her to achieve her goals. This comes out in the following conversation in *Loving You*.

Tex: Sure I want to get back on top, but not this way, baby. I've had it with you.

Glenda: Listen, Tex.

Tex: All right, all right. I'll play your show for you. Then I'm going tonight.

Glenda: No! Do you know what you're accusing me of? [Sleeping with Deke to get her way] I didn't, I swear to you.

Tex: You would have if you had to.

Glenda: I let him kiss me. Was that wrong? He needed some kind of reassurance that he's not alone in the world.

Tex: Reassurance? Is that what they're calling it now?

While her integrity is brought into question, she does demonstrate some strength when she persuades the City Council Members that Deke should be allowed to perform. When she

convinces them, she shakes the mayor's hand, she says: "Thank you gentlemen." Right before she exits, she turns around and tells the council members: "Do you realize something? I just fought City Hall. City Hall isn't so tough."

Women are also important in these films because it is through them that the hero gets drawn back into society. When materialism drives him to the point where it harms him and others, she's there to nurture him and remind him of the importance of family values. This reaffirms women's role in making sure men don't become amoral as they move through the industry.

Another way gender is coded has to do with the positioning of various peripheral female characters. Indicative of movies with a male rock star, the fans that stand out on the screen are mostly young pubescent females who scream and get moved to tears when in the presence of the hero. When one of the heroes opens up a fan letter it is a letter from such a female fan. In the letter, she gives him her body measurements and phone number. Because women desire him, he is that much more of a hero for the youth, both male and female.

Gendered norms are given additional meaning when including the characters' social class. The male hero always comes from the masculine-driven working class. When he becomes aggressive by taking on others who threaten him or defenseless women, his motives are explained by this class positioning. His background also makes him attractive to the more privileged women he meets. Whether it is his manager or some fallen woman, they are attracted to his strong sexual charisma. He is a man who knows what he wants, stands up for what he believes, and has not become so immersed in a professional position that he has lost his natural masculinity. In one scene of *Loving You*, the hero goes to a local club where college-aged middle-class youth are hanging out. The preppie boys are threatened by his appearance and one of them eggs him on to a fight. While this middle-class guy is physically dominating, he is no match for the hero who has a different kind of strength; one that comes from fighting daily in a struggle for his own existence.

### **Race Theme**

Not only were the 1950s a time of questioning ideas about gender, it was also a time where the fight for racial equality was waged. Addressing disparities in racial equality were organizations such as the NAACP, an organization that often fought the battle for equality in the courtroom. One such victory for this association came in the landmark case of *Brown v The*

*Board of Education of Topeka* (1954). Ever since the United States Supreme Court ruled in *Plessy v Ferguson* (1896) that public facilities could be separate as long as they were equal, educational equality was far from the reality<sup>6</sup>. With discrepant funding, dilapidated schools, poorly qualified teachers, and a lack of other general resources, African Americans were denied the fundamental prerequisites for economic and social advancement. After many years of building a case, Thurgood Marshall brought a case forward to the Kansas Supreme Court. In the *Brown* case, the notion of separate but equal was ruled unconstitutional. Although the Supreme Court declared that the desegregation of public schools was supposed to happen "with all deliberate speed," communities, especially in the South, were resistant to change. Shortly after the *Brown* decision, protesting over segregated public transportation in Montgomery, Alabama helped to galvanize the civil rights movement. To further raise the consciousness of the nation and get support for equal rights legislation, civil rights leaders planned the 1963 March on Washington. Approximately 250,000 people showed up for the event where they heard such musicians as Joan Baez, Mahalia Jackson, and Bob Dylan sing songs of peaceful protest and listened to the spoken words of movement leaders. The pinnacle of the event was Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream Speech" about the failed promises of the Bill of Rights and the American Constitution, the divisive nature of the radicalism of the Black Panthers, and the common values that unite all Americans. The March and the fever of King's consensus seeking approach added fuel to the cause and brought much optimism and hope.

Despite the changing racial mood in America and rock and roll's indebtedness to black culture, rarely do these movies provide any view of non-Whites. *King Creole* is the only movie of the three where Black characters, and only briefly and in stereotypical representations, make it to the screen. Aside from this brief moment, racial dynamics are not part of any of the film narratives, thus reinforcing conservative notions of the existing racial hierarchy. This omission is likely related to numerous factors, including the racial composition of film industry personnel and attempts to appeal to the racial background of most audience members. As a final point, it was mentioned that three black characters appear at the start of *King Creole*. They are placed in the roles of street vendors who walk down the street singing the blues while pushing their carts. In this opening scene, Danny sits perched on the balcony of his apartment and starts singing

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<sup>6</sup> For a detailed discussion of the brutal realities of post Civil War South see Leon F. Litwack's (1998) *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow*.



along with them. This signifies Danny's connection to an alternative and seemingly more "authentic" world than the one in which he lives. In addition, it highlights an existing racial divide, with blacks laboring on the street and whites living above it.

### **Temptation Theme**

The final ideological theme addressed is temptation, a theme with a long history tracing back to ancient mythologies through contemporary literature and film. For many stories, the hero is tempted, falls from grace, learns a valuable lesson, and returns stronger and wiser. While this general trajectory is common, the sources of temptation do change. In these three films, the hero is not tempted by sex, alcohol, drugs or other vices, but rather by materialism and cult status. With the working-class life not cutting it for the hero, he steps out in a different direction and is tempted by the values, virtues, and practices of the marketplace by pursuing material gains at the cost of friends and family. To achieve the power that eludes him as a laborer, the hero becomes a musician. He does not do this because he is an artist, but rather because it a means to an end. When he succumbs to the materialist temptations of the industry, he distances himself from his family and true friends and as a consequence must find a way back. And in the end, the hero always does.

### **Summary**

The journey for the reconciliation plot hero consists of starting out in a low status position, discovering music as a way out of the working class, becoming manipulated and/or corrupted by the industry, and then finding a way to be a part of a professional order without succumbing to its selfish values. It is important to restate that by the film's end the hero discovers a way to reconcile the competing values of the working-class and the managerial class. In doing so, the hero indicates that while someone must be on guard not to let power and materialism dictate one's life, it is possible to have both and be virtuous at the same time.

As will be substantiated in discussions of the remaining films, the working-class hero standing up for injustice done to weak members of society is unique to this plot. To a certain extent, this type of characterization of the young, male hero was common during the 1950s. The comparison made earlier between *Rebel Without a Cause* and *Jailhouse Rock* lends partial support to this similarity. But aside from how often repeated this role was, it is the gender and class of the hero that is perhaps of the most significance. The hero is frustrated with being trapped in his working-class life. His desperate attempts to escape it and join the professional

ranks are illustrative of the ambiguity about changing economic conditions felt by many 1950s youth, especially males. By making oppositional forces out of old versus new values of the marketplace, these films underscore the possibility for the inclusion of both in society.

Throughout much of each film's narrative, the hero is innocent to how the business world operates. Not only does this illustrate how out of place the working-class is in a new economic order but it also illustrates how harmful this order can be. This innocence, though, is not only due to social class position; it is also due to the hero's age. Here, youth are represented as good as they try to find their place in society. And while some of the older characters might be "good," such as Mr. Fisher, they are good to a fault. What gets reconciled in these films therefore is not only how to find a place in society but also how good is to be defined.

In the 1950s, various recreational outlets became more available to youth. These outlets were partially the result of various factors impacting the production of culture, including increased economic prosperity and resulting discretionary income, technologies, and music industry regulations. As rock and roll found its place in youth culture, so did film. During this time, more films were made with the specific intent of attracting youth. While these films portrayed events and people that would attract this market demographic, they were restrictive in what was represented. In terms of the reconciliation plot films, never does the musician-hero, or any of the other characters for that matter, smoke, drink, or engage in other moral improprieties. This is reflective both of the direct control Hollywood studios had over actors and directors as well as production codes and general community sentiments regarding what was considered appropriate content. Aside from positioning the rock star hero as relatively morally pure, this star is also of a different form when compared to films from later decades. As will be clear when compared to the other films, the 1950s rock musician might be a famous icon but in different ways than those from, for example, the 1970s. By this time, the 'rock star' had become more firmly established, wealthy, and pressured to record and perform. Changes in the economic and political context also altered what the rock star represented as well as what temptations they confronted. But while not a 'rock star' in the same form as their more contemporary counterparts, in either case their journeys in film represent more generally youth's changing role in the market economy.

By the mid-1950s strong patriotism, economic prosperity, technological advancements, and the rise of the managerial class, created a new social order. According to Godfrey Hodgson

(1976) it was "an age of consensus." This consensus was reflected in social life, business and industry, and even academia, an institution that rather than being reflexive about power relations often acted in ways that uncritically supported them. But while it may have been a time of consensus, there was also a rising tide of discontent over racial and gender inequality. In examining the narrative structure, binary oppositions, and ideological content of the reconciliation plot films, some things reinforced the consensus while other challenged it.

## Chapter 5

# The Personal Revival Plot: The Rock Star Overcomes the Past

Whereas in the previous plot value contradictions plague the hero, in the personal revival plot it is personal problems. The general narrative trajectory here is that the hero has prodigious musical talent and rises to stardom. But personal problems tear at the hero and he/she loses direction. Eventually, the hero confronts the past, overcomes adversity, and claims a star's position.

Of the plots identified in this study, this one spans the most time. This does not mean though, that the historical context is less relevant. As demonstrated by Wright (1975), plots frequently cross time periods but are also more common in certain contexts versus others. As will be substantiated in the discussion that follows, the same applies here.

From *King Creole* (1958) until *The Buddy Holly Story* (1978) there were no major Hollywood films about the life of a rock and roll star. However, various movies, such as *Bye Bye Birdie* (1963), *Roustabout* (1964), and *Spinout* (1966) did cover rock and youth culture themes. The form and content of such films were for the most part politically conservative. This is quite the opposite of the undercurrents happening during this time.

In June 1962 the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) was formed by university student activists when they met with Michael Harrington, the author of *The Other America* (1962), and drafted the "manifesto of the New Left." Coming of age in a post war period of conformity, prosperity, and increased corporate power, these college students became politically involved in various causes. They provided key leadership in such organized efforts as the 1963 Freedom Summer Project where students from the North went to the South to register voters. SDS was also a catalyst for change on college campuses. The Free Speech Movement (FSM) at the University of California at Berkeley that galvanized a "counterculture" student movement exemplifies this organization's influence as well as youth's increased interests in politics.<sup>1</sup>

Initially coinciding with the student movement, and then becoming a force of its own, was the feminist movement. During this time, the number of women enrolled in higher

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<sup>1</sup> For an overview of the SDS and the counter-culture movement see Todd Giltlin's (1983) *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* and Nicholas von Hoffman's (1968) *We Are the People Our Parents Warned Us Against*.

education significantly increased. And with more women in academia, both as students and as faculty, different questions were asked about society and related social roles. As a result, theory and research moved to encapsulate the perspectives of this long-silenced minority. In the popular press, Betty Friedan's *Feminist Mystique* (1963) brought to public light the dissatisfaction many women had in trying to live up to the traditionalist gender roles that *Leave It To Beaver's* June Cleaver and other women of television so clearly personified. Through "consciousness-raising" and the efforts of groups such as the National Organization for Women (NOW), more focused energies were given to addressing the relegation of women to inferior positions in society.

Addressing racial inequalities were spirited organizations such as Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and the Black Panther Party. Despite the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, racial tensions continued to rise. With the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., general economic woes, and the political majority's lack of leadership in breaking down institutional barriers preventing equal opportunity, the lid finally blew on cities across the nation. On August 11, 1965 the police suspected drunk driving and pulled over Marquette and Ronald Frye in South Central Los Angeles. A crowd formed, more police showed up. A few police officers hit the Frye brothers with their batons, arrested them, and left the scene. Afterwards a riot broke out. The Watts Riot of 1965 lasted six days and when it ended thirty-four had died and four thousand had been arrested. Hundreds of race riots occurred in various cities across the nation during the Long Hot Summers of the mid to late 1960s. By the early to mid 1970s this type of social unrest had all but disappeared as President Nixon and others sought a return to "law and order."<sup>2</sup>

With the various social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, a crisis in Indo-China, and general political instability, some Americans were seeking a return to order. By appealing to the "silent majority," those middle-class and hard-working Americans who felt ignored and increasingly at odds with the social activists, Richard Nixon won his bid for the White House. Following the June, 1972 break-in at the Democratic Headquarters and the ensuing Watergate

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<sup>2</sup> Howard Zinn's (1980) *The Twentieth Century: A People's History* and William H. Chafe's (1986) *The Unfinished Journey: American Since World War II* provide general discussions of the racial unrest of this time. For a more detailed description of the Watts Riot consult Spencer Crump's (1966) *Black Riot in Los Angeles: The Story of the Watts Tragedy*.

scandal, Nixon lost his legitimacy. After Ford completed Nixon's term, the Governor from Georgia, Jimmy Carter, was elected. This Southern, born-again Christian hit a chord with a confused public by putting moral issues and character on the front burner. While he promised he would take on abuses in Washington, he provided little leadership in passing reform measures. Carter's America also appeared weak by failing to gain the release of American hostages held by Iranian extremists. By the time of the next elections, Americans were getting tired of the government's inability to bring prosperity back and affirm our position as a great superpower. The turbulent 1970s weighed on the American psyche. This was a decade "marked by confusion, frustration, and an overwhelming feeling that America had lost its direction as if the very future of the 'American experiment' might be in question" (Chafe, 1999: 430).

If the 1970s was a time of confusion, the 1980s was about a renewal in patriotism and reclamation of morals that were supposedly undermined by liberals. When the former California Governor Ronald Reagan won the 1980 election, a new order took over the White House. With ties to Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority, the "Great Communicator" Reagan launched many conservative campaigns. Attempts were made to recapture a mythical sacred order by fighting for prayer in schools, "traditional" family values, and general moral responsibility. A backlash developed against affirmative action programs and agencies such as the Environmental Protection Agency that were acting as stewards for the commonwealth. Even the Presidential First Lady, Nancy Reagan, got into mood by fighting drug use among youth by launching her "Just Say No" campaign.

By the mid to late 1970s the counter-culture movement was largely gone. Rock musicians and the folk music revival, both important elements for the counter-culture solidarity, had by this time moved on. The festivals at Woodstock and the Almont Speedway started the move to mass concerts and the increased commodification of rock. In the 1970s rock stars truly became stars as they became multi-million dollar icons playing in large arena venues, meeting the hectic demands of concert dates, promotions, and album releases, and getting covered in such magazines as *Rolling Stone*<sup>3</sup> and *Cream*. Garofalo's (1997: 214) statement that "what had begun

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<sup>3</sup> Founders Jann Wenner and Ralph J. Gleason first published *Rolling Stone* in 1967. This magazine holds an important place in the history of rock or roll and the 1960s counter-culture movement. With the "gonzo journalism" of Hunter S. Thompson and other writers, radical politics, social commentaries, and reviews of contemporary artists attracted many anti-establishment youth. By the 1970s, it had become so well recognized and esteemed that the band Dr. Hook & The Medicine Show dedicated a song to the magazine entitled *Cover of the Rolling Stone*, a song

in the late 1960s as a period of political awakening with a cultural flourish for the rock 'n' roll audience was, for the music industry, a period of commercial expansion and corporate consolidation" partially captures this industry's unprecedented growth.

This general historical overview illustrates that the revolutionary spirit of the 1960s and 1970s ended with a return to conservative politics. During this time of unrest, some of the more popular films about youth culture, such as *Summer of '42* (1971), *The Last Picture Show* (1971), and *American Graffiti* (1973)<sup>4</sup>, turned the clock back to earlier times of innocence and playful rebellion of youth. Although few in number, some films better captured the spirit of the New Hollywood and its anti-hero. One such film was *Zacharia* (1971). In it the images of a peaceful town and traditional sensibilities are gone. In their place come more forceful representations of a youth counter-culture. In this film, two young males, Zachariah and Matthew, join a rebel rock band, become gunslingers, and try to bring order to the Wild West. After Zachariah gets his mail-order gun, they step into a saloon where a rock group called the Crackers is jamming out. They end up getting into a fight with one of the cowboys about this new brand of music.

Zachariah: This town has always needed some good music.

Matthew: Yeah, really.

Cowboy: Music? You call this dumb stupid noise music?

Matthew: Oh, come on. What are you talking about? They're good.

Cowboy: They're lousy. You weirdoes are all alike.

Matthew: Well, if you don't like it mister, why don't you leave?

Zachariah: Come on, cut it out Matthew. Let him be.

Cowboy: That's right Matthew. Let me be.

Zachariah: Mister, we're just listening to the music. We don't want any trouble.

Cowboy: So, you and your girlfriend are looking for trouble? Hey, I'm talking to you, boy. [He pulls Zachariah's hat down and the music stops.]

Zachariah: [Showing his gun.] Watch it, mister.

Cowboy: Well, well, well. Look what the tough little boy has in his pants. Clear the bar! We're gonna have a big-time gunfight. Make way here!

Zachariah: I don't have any quarrel with you, mister.

Cowboy: I'm gonna kill you, you little fag.

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written by Shel Silverstein, an author of children's poetry who also wrote a song covered by Johnny Cash – *A Boy Named Sue*.

<sup>4</sup> Similar nostalgic representations of the 1950s occurred in television. In 1971 ABC piloted Garry Marshall's "New Family in Town." This show did not make it but after the success of *American Graffiti*, ABC assembled many of the cast members and reassembled the show. In 1974 the show "Happy Days" was first aired and was not taken off the air until 1984.

Zachariah then steps out and they face each other in a classic gunfight position. He looks up, they draw their weapons, and Zachariah guns him down. This dual was a symbolic fight and victory for the youth with Zachariah defeating the older generation and declaring that there's a new law and order in town.

*Zachariah* reflected the counter-culture anti-hero of the early 1970s. By the end of the decade, Hollywood discovered a new model to lift the industry out of economic uncertainty: the "blockbuster" films. This return to conservatism and the morally principled hero was also reflected in films about rock stars who rise above personal troubles and successfully find their place in dominant culture.

Of the plots identified in this study, the personal revival plot has the most films with seven. This plot also spans the largest time frame, from 1978 to 1997. Each film is summarized below. These summaries highlight why these films were classified as belonging to this plot. In certain cases, such as *The Jazz Singer*, it initially appears that the hero's primary struggle is with reconciling competing value systems. While this is certainly an element of this film, it fails to follow the narrative structure common to films like *Jailhouse Rock*. As will be clarified in the ensuing discussion, the principal crisis facing the hero in the *The Jazz Singer* has to do with struggles in finding personal meaning, not how to retain working-class value while navigating a professional life.

## **The Personal Revival Plot Films**

### **The Jazz Singer (1980)**

This film is about Jess (Yussel) Rabinovitch, a thirty-something Jewish man from New York City who is caught between fulfilling his religious and family obligations and pursuing his dreams of being a musician. Jess is married to a conventional woman, Rivka (Catlin Adams), he has known since childhood. Like Jess's father, Cantor Rabinovitch (Laurence Olivier), she has no need for the hedonistic pleasures of the modern world. At first Jess follows the wishes of his father and wife. But when the opportunity to become involved in the recording business arises, he accepts it. This takes him away from the familiarity of New York to the West Coast music scene.

When he arrives in the Los Angeles airport, an assertive contemporary record company agent, Molly Bell (Lucie Arnaz), picks him up. She takes him to a recording studio where he is to offer advice on how the punk rocker Keith Lennox should sing his song "Love on the Rocks."



When Jess steps in to show Lennox how to sing a ballad, his signature voice captures Molly's attention. Even though he is fired by Lennox, Molly encourages Jess to push for a big break. With Molly's help, he does get his break and lands a deal opening for a well-known comic to a sold-out crowd. After an uncertain start, Jess gets the crowd clapping and ends the show with the audience wanting more. When he steps backstage Rivka, who is there to bring him back to New York, meets him. As they go back to his hotel room to celebrate with the band and record company executives, they get into an argument about what their future's hold. It ends with Rivka running away. Instead of retreating home, Jess stays to follow his dreams and in the process falls in love with Molly. When Cantor Rabinovitch makes a surprise visit to get Jess to come back home, he discovers Jess and Molly's sacrilegious affair and tears off his shirtsleeve, symbolizing that he no longer has a son. Jess loses his focus, falls into despair, and walks out on his band during a tense recording session. He retreats from the pressures of life and temporarily becomes a vagabond. After months of drifting, he steps into a small-town hillbilly bar and gets a job performing in a country band. A former band member tracks him down and tells him he has a son, the start of a new Rabinovitch generation. With a new purpose, Jess returns to Los Angeles and soon gets another chance to perform, this time in New York City.

As they are practicing for the concert, a friend of Cantor Rabinovitch shows up and talks to Jess about singing at Yom Kippur, a day of atonement. He refuses. But when Molly confronts him on how stubborn he is, just like his father, he agrees. The next day he goes to the synagogue and takes his role as cantor during the celebration. After the service, Jess tries to make amends with the stoic Cantor Rabinovitch. Initially, he does not budge. But when Jess tells him it is he who is walking away from his son and grandson and not the other way around, the Cantor forgives his son.

The next night Jess performs to a New York crowd. His nervousness gives way when the crowd starts clapping and cheering. The Cantor does not know what to make of all of this but eventually he warms up and gives Jess a standing ovation along with the rest of the thundering crowd. From his new altar, Jess looks over his congregation in peace.

### **Hard to Hold (1984)**

Of the revival plot films this is the only one where the hero is a star from the beginning. All the other films go from the hero's life prior to being a rock star to the trials and tribulations of

achieving this sought-out role and end with the hero becoming more self-empowered and stronger than ever before.

The film's opening scene takes place at a packed concert hall in San Francisco. The star performer, James Roberts, played by the real-life popular rock musician Rick Springfield, gives the audience an electrified performance, leaving him exhausted and the fans screaming for more. As he makes it back to his dressing room and sanctuary, screaming female fans chase after him. Before he gets a chance to relax, a band member, Nicky Nides, barges in enraged she was not properly introduced during the show. As she pounds on his bathroom door, Jamie leaves with a towel wrapped around his waist. He quickly realizes he is even more vulnerable here and decides to go back into the room. But when he does, he discovers he is locked out. At that moment, some wide-eyed female fans spot and make a run for him. He leads them on a run and eventually gets into and takes off in some roadie's car. As he is speeding down the road, Jamie crashes into another car. Diana, a classy and respectable professional woman who counsels bright kids with behavioral problems, steps out of the car frazzled and upset. When he is unable to produce insurance papers, he attempts to calm and reassure her by revealing who he is. But this tactic fails - she has no idea who Jamie Roberts is, and neither does she care. Her beauty, and the fact that she has never heard of him before, draws Jamie's attention.

After the opening scenes it is clear that Jamie seeks a more meaningful existence than he has as a successful pop performer. And what better person to show him the way than a girl from a working class family, where family bonds and personal integrity take precedence over fame and fortune? For these reasons he's attracted to her and they continue to develop their relationship. As time goes on, Jamie comes to know Diana's father, a man who commands respect but whose heavy drinking and rough blue-collar ways divide the father-daughter bond. This leaves Diana in search of her own path towards prosperity. And who better to show her how to make it all happen than Jamie?

At some point Jamie's changing interests conflict with those of Nicky, a band member who strives to ride the wave of success as long as she can. On a hotel balcony the two meet and discuss their different philosophies about music and the industry. When they were just getting started, they were both hungry for success and stardom. Now with all the fanfare and material gains, Jamie is no longer interested in it all. Instead he's seeking to find meaning in life, something he hopes to find in Diana.

As their relationship develops, Jamie and Diana have various conversations about their future. Jamie, attracted to the authentic life of a commoner, wants to settle down and have a family but also wants to remain a musician. Diana wants to be with someone who loves her and wants the better things in life, something she can have with Jamie. But she is scared of the change, his lifestyle, and this other world of material success and star status. When Jamie presses her to settle down, the fear is too much, she turns him down, and he leaves her.

As Jamie takes the stage near the film's ending, Diana's friends come up to him and tell him she is getting ready to board a plane for London. They urge him to go and stop her. The roar of the crowd is too much to refuse and he takes the stage. He gives a pleasing performance of "You Better Love Somebody," a new song he has been searching to cut since he lost his edge. After the song is over, the crowd goes crazy, chanting for more. Jamie walks off stage and his manager tells him the emotional escapade with Diana worked; it got him back on track. His manager's lack of concern for his or Diana's welfare prove the final straw for Jamie. This time instead of changing clothes and returning to the stage for an encore, Jamie takes off to stop Diana. He catches her just before she boards the plane and they walk out of the airport together, ready for the future and all that it holds.

### **Purple Rain (1984)**

*Purple Rain*<sup>5</sup>, starring Prince, Apollonia Kotero, and Morris Day of "The Time," opens up with Prince and The Revolution taking the stage and bringing the house down with "Let's Go Crazy." After the show, he walks up to Apollonia, a Southern belle who recently moved to the city in hopes of making it as a musician. Cocky as can be, Prince says a few words to her and then leaves.

Problems arise between Prince and the band when he refuses to play, or even listen to, a song written by two of the band members. And outside of the band, Prince's rough upbringing starts to haunt him. When Apollonia tells Prince she took a job performing in Morris's band, Prince hits her. And after Prince is told by the club owner that he must outmatch Morris's new

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<sup>5</sup> This film is illustrative of a new brand of cross marketing that worked to capture sales in various culture industries. These included the film (both in the theatre and on VHS-tape) and recording industry and the newly established Music Television (MTV). At the box office, *Purple Rain* took in over \$60 million in the first two months after its release – quite a gain for Warner Brothers considering it cost about \$8 million to make. The movie soundtrack ended up spending almost six consecutive months in the number one slot on *Billboard's* album chart and went on to sell over 13 million copies worldwide.

band called Apollonia 6 to keep his place in the nightly line-up, he heads back home only to find his mother sitting and crying on the front curb, desperately coping with her husband's latest abuse.

Frustrated and filled with rage, Prince takes the stage and does a sexually charged rendition of "When Doves Cry." This strange performance puts Prince and the club owner at odds. The next night, Prince goes to watch Apollonia 6 put on a fabulous show. Afterwards, Prince comes to Apollonia's defense as Morris tries to make his way with her. She hops on his motorcycle and they cruise the industrial streets looking for solitude. When they find it, they get off the bike and start to kiss. Before it goes any further though, she stops, hits him, takes off the earring he gave her, and leaves him. Abandoned by the one he loves, he goes home only to find more pain. He walks into the home to find his father has once again been drinking and abusing his mother. Now fed up with it all, he goes downstairs to find his father and confront him. When he turns on the basement light, a gun goes off. His father, filled with his own pain, tried to commit suicide. After the police and medical personnel arrive and take his father away, Prince reflects on his life. He decides to play the cassette tape of a song his band member recorded, a song he earlier flagrantly disregarded. As the song plays, Prince finds meaning in the words and regains his sense of purpose.

The following night, Prince arrives at the club while The Time is performing and rocking down the house. He goes backstage and finds the band quiet, divided, and deeply concerned whether they can outperform Apollonia 6. When Prince and The Revolution are introduced and take the stage, Prince somberly walks up to the microphone. He stands there speechless for a few moments and then tells the audience he wants to dedicate the next song, a song the members of his band wrote, to his family. Prince comes to terms with his painful past, puts his heart and soul into "Purple Rain," and redeems himself from those he has harmed. When the song is over, Prince makes his way outside to his bike. Before he gets on his bike, he hears the crowd's roar. Their applause and chants draw him back onstage and he gives them another song. As this song plays, the film flashes various scenes, all depicting Prince's successful victory in his battle with personal demons. He makes amends with his parents, Apollonia, and in the end, he even wins over the heart of his archenemy, Morris.

## **Great Balls of Fire! (1989)**

This movie is a biography of the colorful 1950s and 1960s rock star Jerry Lee Lewis. In the opening scene, Jerry Lee and his cousin, both perhaps nine years old, sneak off during the night to catch the scene at a local juke joint, one of the few, if not only, places a white kid from a segregated rural Louisiana town could experience black culture. As they are looking through a window, the other boy tells Jerry Lee he has to leave because "it's the devil's music." But Jerry Lee gets so caught up with the blues, the piano player, and feel of the people that he can't be drawn away.

The film fast-forwards to Jerry Lee's arrival in Memphis, Tennessee in 1956. After initially getting turned down at Sun Records, he returns the following day, impresses Sam Phillips and gets an offer. Without concern for the fine print and eager to be the next star, Jerry Lee neglects reading a word of it before he signs the deal.

After he cuts his first deal, Jerry Lee visits his hometown in Ferriday, Louisiana. There he meets up with his preacher cousin, the well-known Jimmy Swaggart (Alec Baldwin), who reminds Jerry Lee that music is to serve God and not the devil. In his characteristic joking manner, Jerry Lee says the following words before he leaves for the local juke joint: "Lord I just want to serve you and I want to preach your word. Just give me one hit record."

While hanging out at the juke joint, Jerry Lee picks up on "Whole Lotta Shakin." He takes this song back to Phillips, who initially turns it down, telling Jerry Lee he can't record such a sexually suggestive song. Eventually, they do record the song and it gets banned across the South. Before long Jerry Lee is a smashing success.

His lack of concern about his image and other's opinions cause serious public relations and family problems when Jerry Lee and his thirteen-year-old cousin sneak off to Mississippi and get married. Shortly after they come back, Sam Phillips tells Jerry Lee about a European tour he has put together along with a five-year contract. When Jerry Lee shows up with his wife Myra for the tour, Phillips, fearful about what would happen if the world discovered this incestuous relationship, tells Jerry Lee if he wants to be the number one star she can't go. Neither fame nor fortune can get in the way of true love and Jerry Lee defends his relationship with Myra and she goes.

Soon after they arrive in London the press discovers Jerry Lee's secret. After the press prints the story, the fans and general public come down on Jerry Lee and he is forced to leave the

country. Before leaving England, the press asks Jerry Lee what he thinks it will be like when he gets back to the States now that his relationship has been discovered. Confident in the loyalty of his fans, Jerry Lee tells the press they will understand. But when he does arrive back home, the reception is cold. To try to get him back into the limelight, Phillips comes up with a strategy where Jerry Lee will make a public apology. Jerry Lee, unwilling to give a false front just for fortune's sake, turns down the offer.

At this point in the movie, Jerry Lee spins out of control. The sparse audiences at his concerts fuel his anger and frustration, leading Jerry Lee to drink, use drugs, and become self-destructive. It all comes to a head when he shows up to his house drunk, gets into a fight with Myra, slaps her, and storms away. The next morning he returns, apologizes, and pours his heart out about the pressures of being a star. A few days later he confidently makes a decision about what to do with his life when he tells his preacher cousin that "if I'm going to hell, I'm going there playing the piano."

In the final scenes, Jerry Lee is playing concerts again, this time to chanting and lively crowds. Through it all, his rise to fame and his fall, Jerry Lee stayed true to who he was. By gathering strength during the hard times and being victorious over it all, Jerry Lee is immortalized.

### **What's Love Got to Do with It (1993)**

This film is a biographical account of the superstar Tina Turner. It starts out with Anna Mae Bullock as a young girl singing in a gospel choir. As the all Black choir moves through the song, Anna Mae, the only child in the group, really gets into it, adding some feverish call and response. The choir director comes down on her for getting carried away but she can't help it; she is destined to be a star.

After being abandoned by her mother, Anna Mae spends most of her youth under the love and care of her grandmother. Then as a young woman, her grandmother dies. Alone in the world and without a future, she leaves her childhood home for St. Louis, where she reunites with her long absent mother.

When she (Tina Turner) arrives, her mother, a fine-dressed, upscale woman, is initially cold. Not knowing what to do with her, she sends Anna Mae and her two sisters to a local club. Here, Anna Mae gets her first taste of big city life. With an Elvis-like voice and sound, Ike

Turner (Laurence Fishburne) and his band get the crowd rocking. When he invites women up to the microphone to sing with him, Anna Mae wants to but her shyness gets the best of her. But the next time she and her sisters come back to the club, Anna Mae is a new person, shedding her country clothes and demeanor for high fashion and self-confidence. This time when the opportunity presents itself to join Ike on stage, she does, delighting and shocking Ike, her sisters, and the crowd with her bold sultry sound.

Soon after the show, Tina joins Ike and his band and they start making recordings and playing in various clubs. Ike is clearly the band's leader; one who will get his way and who others dare not cross. His abusive tendencies and disregard for the welfare of others are first revealed when Anna Mae gives birth to their son. While lying in the hospital bed, a new song they recorded comes on the radio. At first Anna Mae is pleasantly surprised but then becomes confused when the deejay announces the song was from Ike and Tina, not Anna Mae, Turner. Adding to her concern, Ike does not allow her to follow the doctor's orders to stay in the hospital for a few weeks. With dates booked and money on the line, Ike refuses to concede to the doctor's concern over Tina's welfare and in the middle of the night abducts her and their child.

Ike and Tina's relationship goes back and forth; with Ike coming down on Tina and her offering initial resistance but always eventually giving in. Ike's abuse escalates as Tina ascends as an independent performer. Eventually, the exhausting schedule and emotional stress cause Tina's body to shut down and she is rushed to the hospital. With concert dates coming up, Ike gives Tina no time to recuperate. When she resists leaving the hospital, Ike tells her if she does not make her next engagement he will kill her. This proves to be too much for Tina and when she finally does leave the hospital she seeks comfort, direction, and strength from a former band member, a back-up singer who earlier stood up to Ike by walking out on him. With her friend's help and the Eastern mantras she learns, Tina finally gets enough strength to leave Ike.

After she divorces Ike, she strikes out on her own. Her first solo performance takes place in 1980 at San Francisco's Fairmont Hotel. The crowd is small, consisting mostly of people who just happen to walk by. But one person is in the audience for a purpose, a potential manager who wants to sign her. Just as she starts striking out on her own, Ike comes back, this time with a gun. Before her show at the Ritz, Ike shows up backstage and pulls a gun on her. She calls his bluff and for the first time directly confronts and turns her back on him. The movie ends with

Tina singing "What's Love Got To Do With It." Ike's watches her from the floor and when he realizes she is now a new person and will never again be able to control her, he leaves.

## **The Personal Revival Plot Films: Tragedy Variation**

### **The Buddy Holly Story (1978)**

In the film's opening sequence, Holly and his band perform at their hometown roller skating rink. Those gathered listen as Holly plays his acoustic guitar during a set of country songs. Tired of playing this passé music, Holly puts down the acoustic, picks up his electric, and tells the crowd he is now going to play one for "Bopper," an early rock and roll icon. While playing a rockin' tune, most of the parents freak out while the young bounce with the beat. When Holly lays into "That Will Be The Day," a screaming crowd gathers in front of the stage.

The following day, Holly attends church with his parents. There, an upset preacher informs the congregation that "un-Christian" and "un-American" music threatens the Lord and society. Following services, the Holly family sits down for their Sunday meal. During dinner, Holly and his parents dispute about Buddy's future, with his father wanting him to go to college and Buddy uncertain about what his next step will be.

Through his connections to a local radio station owner, Holly and the band get an opportunity to make a record. When at a Nashville studio, the producer comes down on the band for their up-tempo rendition of "That Will Be The Day." Holly stands his own ground and punches a record company executive after he is told to get his "nigger lovin' ass" back in the studio. This is first of many scenes in which Holly refuses to cower to industry pressures.

Holly's girlfriend, Cindy, attempts to reform him. Before she heads off to college and her sorority sisters, she directs Holly to leave the band and prepare for getting married and settling down. Maintaining his independent spirit, Holly walks away. In doing so, he turns down not only Cindy but also a life of quiet certitude.

Eventually Holly and the Crickets land a major recording contract and are booked to perform at the Apollo Theatre. When they arrive, the club owner is shocked that they are white. After some discussion, the owner gives them the go-ahead. After the stage curtains go up, the crowd is silent and worried. Holly overcomes the racial separation with his Chuck Berry flair and driving beat. By the third song of their set, the crowd is out of their seats and dancing in the aisles.



After going on the road with the soul master Sam Cooke and making additional recordings, the band becomes a success. The pace of this life of fame begins to take its toll on Holly and members of the band. After performing on the Ed Sullivan Show, the band separates. Holly continues recording, but something is now missing from his life. With his childhood friends and band members at home, Holly evaluates this life of stardom.

Eventually, Holly regains his drive and takes off to Iowa for a performance at Clearlake Auditorium. There he meets up with Big Bopper and Ritchie Valens. All three of these legends end up jamming together in the last song of the set. As they do the film ends with the following text:

Buddy Holly died later that night along with J.P. "the Big Bopper" Richardson and Ritchie Valens in the crash of a private airplane just outside of Clearlake...and the rest is rock 'n' roll.

### **La Bamba (1987)**

*La Bamba* is a biographical account of the 1950s Chicano rock star Ritchie Valens. The movie starts with Ritchie and his family, along with other Mexican laborers, working in the California fruit groves. As they de-pit fruit, Richie's rebel brother, Bob, rides up on his motorcycle. With electric guitar in hand Ritchie and Bob go to the nearest hilltop. When they get there, Ritchie reveals his dreams about being a rock and roll star.

The day after the film's opening scene, the family loads up their car and leaves the orchards for the suburbs. Soon after starting his new school, Ritchie forms a romantic relationship with Donna, a prim and proper middle-class girl, and joins a band, The Silhouette's. In this band, Ritchie never gets the chance to take the spotlight and do what he was destined to do – sing. Not being recognized for his talents leaves Ritchie let down. Concerned about her son, Ritchie's mom finds a club where he can perform and showcase his talent. But there is one problem – the club is a country and western bar. Despite his Mexican heritage and rock sound, he takes the stage and wins the crowd over. Following his next performance at the American Legion, Ritchie catches the attention of an important executive, Bob Keane, President of Del-Fi Records.

At his first major recording session the producer repeatedly stops Ritchie, giving him directives on how he should perform. Out of frustration Ritchie tells the producer nothing is wrong with the takes. The producer comes down on Ritchie, telling him America is different

than Mexico and they will do takes until he is satisfied. After sixty attempts, they finally get it right. Taking advantage of Ritchie's exhaustion, Keane steps in and hands him a contract. On the contract Ritchie's birth name, Ricardo Valenzuela, has been changed to Ritchie Valens.

When Ritchie loses some direction, Bob steps and takes Ritchie to Tijuana to get him laid and make him a man. While in a Mexican club where prostitutes are lined up for the taking, Ritchie hears the house band play "La Bamba." Any possible interest in sex is now forgotten as Ritchie fixates on the band and their powerful song. Back at home, Ritchie and his manager discuss upcoming concert dates and the need for another hit single. Ritchie brings up recording "La Bamba" and is quickly rejected by his manager, who believes a Hispanic folk song has no place in rock and roll. With renewed vigor and purpose, two qualities he attained while in Mexico, Ritchie tells the manager if Nat King Cole can sing in Spanish so can he.

Ritchie's career takes off with performances in various major cities and a spot on American Bandstand. When he returns home from the road, he surprises his mom with a new house in some middle-class Los Angeles neighborhood. Before he can relax, Ritchie is back out on the road. After a great show where he double-billed with Buddy Holly, they head off for Chicago. But with a broken down bus, Ritchie is forced to consider taking a small, chartered plane. Because it has a limited number of seats, Buddy Holly calls for a coin toss on who's going to ride and who's going to stay back. Valens calls the coin toss and, as fate has it, he wins a seat. Shortly after the plane departs, it crashes, killing all passengers, including Buddy Holly, The Big Bopper, and Ritchie Valens.

### **Selena (1997)**

Jennifer Lopez and Edward James Olmos star in this biographical account of pop superstar Selena Quintanilla-Perez's rise to stardom and her tragic death. After the opening scene of Selena performing at a fan packed Houston Astrodome on February 26, 1995, the film takes the viewer back to the days before Selena was born; days where her father and his band were struggling to make it as musicians. In Corpus Christi, Texas, in 1961, Abraham Quintanilla and his band The Dinos try to land various gigs only to find white society is not ready for a group of Mexican musicians. Rejected by the majority, the group retreats to an all-Mexican club where they have all the hopes of making it big. When they take the stage and start performing

doo-wop, the crowd revolts. Not white enough for dominant culture and yet not ethnic enough for their own racial group, The Dinos fade away.

The film moves to 1981. After playing with friends in her backyard, Selena goes inside to listen to her father play the guitar. When she starts humming and singing, Abraham is amazed at her innate musical aptitude. Energized, Abraham sets up all of the old equipment, calls his kids in, and tells them they are going to play rock and roll. At first they are simply awful but this doesn't stop Abraham from pushing them to do better through their umpteenth rendition of "Blue Moon." Excited about the possibilities for his children to realize his dreams, Abraham opens up a Mexican restaurant and in the process gives his children a place to perform. When "Selena and the Dinos" take the stage for the first time, Selena is perfectly comfortable with her role in the spotlight.

Back at home while her siblings are outside playing, Abraham tries to teach a tired Selena a Spanish song. With wisdom gained from years of reflection, he instructs Selena:

You gotta be who you are. You can't change it. Now, you're American. I'm an American. You like Donna Summer. I like doo-wop. But you're also Mexican, deep inside and that's a wonderful thing. You can't be anything if you don't know who you are, especially if you want to be a singer. If you want to be a singer you're going to have to sing to people from deep inside of here (point to his heart).

When the restaurant venture fails, Abraham takes the family on the road. Their first gig at some local fair is a flop. But determined to make it work, Abraham advises the band to pump it up by reaching down into their Chicano roots and incorporating dance moves into their performances. It works and the crowds start rocking.

When the band needs another guitar player, they audition and pick up an unlikely character: Chris, a heavy metal virtuoso guitarist. This becomes a classical narrative set-up, where the conservative and conventional Selena will fall in love with this rebellious young man from the other side of the tracks and in the process drive her parents into despair. The band continues to become increasingly successful and eventually they land their first number one song. Soon they are off to Monterrey, Mexico where Selena meets and wins over frenzied fans and eager reporters.

Chris and Selena's relationship comes to a head when Abraham catches them hugging on the bus. After he kicks everyone else off the bus, Abraham lays into Chris and Selena. Selena

tries to stand up to her dad but it is no use and Chris is fired. Away from Abraham's eyes, they continue to see each other and eventually they fall in love. Selena finally gets the courage to separate from her controlling father and convinces Chris to run off and get married. And much to their surprise, when Abraham finds out about the secret marriage he accepts Chris into the family.

After achieving her independence, Selena makes it to the top with a Grammy. Adored by fans around the world, Selena rises to be a successful international pop star. Just as her musical career is taking off, it comes to an abrupt end when her jealous business manager shoots and kills Selena. In the film's final scene fans pay their respects at a candlelight vigil and various retrospective shots of Selena and her life flash across the screen.

### **Narrative Structure of the Revival Plot and Its Tragedy Variation**

In the personal revival plot, the hero is frequently endowed with special talents. Whereas in the reconciliation plot these talents are somewhat incidental, here they provide a basis for the hero's mythical qualities. Whether the young Tina Turner displaying her innate gifts to the gospel choir or Ritchie Valens toting his guitar around wherever he goes, these characters are marked as different from everyone else in society. In comparison to the reconciliation plot hero who is not necessarily different but rather caught in a world he desperately seeks to escape, these heroes are only trapped by their own personal problems. While rising to stardom, personal relationships and fame haunt the hero. As we follow the hero progressing to an elevated cultural status, unresolved issues from the past hold the hero back from achieving personal happiness. Until the heroes independently stand on their own two feet they cannot complete their journey of personal triumph over adversity. At the start of this narrative:

(1) The hero is endowed with natural musical talent.

While the heroes in the reconciliation plot film are of the working-class, the class position of these heroes is incidental. This different characterization is, in part, related to changes in youth culture, occupations, and the political climate.

By the 1970s white-collar occupations were not emerging in society but were established. This is not to say that class tensions were resolved but rather the new professionalism of the 1950s was no longer new in the 1970s. In films like *Jailhouse Rock* (1957) much social commentary in the film addresses value differences between divergent ways of economic life.

Instead of critiquing social structures, these conservative personal revival plot films focus attention on intergenerational and personal conflicts and the individual triumph of the star.

For most of these films the audience knows the heroes will make it as musicians because they display an extraordinary gift for music. Whether walking the halls of his high school or climbing some hill, throughout most of *La Bamba* Richie Valens appears with guitar in hand. As a child Tina Turner (*What's Love Got to Do With It*) breaks the gospel choir norms by separating from the pack and doing soulful solos. When Selena (*Selena*) gets on stage for the first time at her parent's Mexican restaurant, she reveals her dynamic on-stage persona. Jerry Lee Lewis crosses to the other side of town, is entranced by the music scene at a juke joint, and can't leave despite the trouble he could get into. And finally, when Buddy Holly (*The Buddy Holly Story*) and his group change what they play from country and western to rock it reveals he is a musical genius ahead of his time.

This innate ability is showcased throughout the films as the hero time and again goes up against some barrier and proves why he or she is a star. These heroes realize they are gifted and eventually take a bold step. This occurs when:

- (2) The heroes' skills are revealed to the community.
- (3) The hero gets involved with the industry.
- (4) The hero achieves star status.

When the heroes take the stage or get their music played on the radio for the first time, they are an instant success. Omitted from the story are the struggles, self-doubt, and general process of becoming a star. The first time Tina Turner takes the stage her Southern shyness and self-consciousness give way to a sultry, masculine sound. Buddy Holly rocks the roller skating rink and brings the youth in off the streets when his band plays rock in public for the first time. Jerry Lee gets a hit record the first time one of his songs is played on the radio. It all happens for the hero because this is a person endowed with some incredible gift who is destined to be a star.

The hero's relationship to the industry is also characterized differently in comparison to the previous films. Unlike reconciliation plot films where the hero is easily manipulated by the industry, here the hero is aware of industry's motives. At Buddy Holly's first recording session, the producer gives him directives on what and how to play. When Holly refuses, a record company executive pushes him and tells him to get his "nigger-loving ass" back into the studio. Holly punches this bigwig and leaves. Like Holly, Jerry Lee purposefully sets out to be a rock star and never gives in to the industry's demands, regardless of the consequences.

By becoming involved with the industry and by doing what they do best, the heroes achieve star status. This is different from the reconciliation plot hero who only moved towards rock because it provided a way out of the working class and who remained almost until the end frustratingly innocent about the industry's ways. But even though the revival plot heroes are wiser they still have problems that have to be resolved. After they achieve the star position, they find it is more a land of broken promises than endless ecstasy. What makes this particularly difficult for the hero is that it comes as a surprise. They initially became involved with the industry to do what they did best: perform. They were not concerned about the status and stardom and because of this they are unprepared to deal with the organizational demands and the star system. This leads to the next function:

(5) The hero struggles with personal problems that threaten their star status.

This function is a primary reason for why certain films (*The Jazz Singer*; *Hard to Hold*), fit this narrative form and not that of the reconciliation plot. In the reconciliation plot the heroes have problems from the start. These problems are rooted in their working class existence. Problems that appear for the personal revival plot heroes transcend class backgrounds. Instead of trying to leave a way of economic life behind, the focus here is on how they cannot be true heroes until they address the past.

After achieving a star status, the hero must contend with its pressures. But not only is the problem one of pressures from others and the industry, it is often one of battling personal demons the hero thought would go away after reaching stardom. Some films address this dilemma by contrasting the hero before and after his or her ascent to stardom. Throughout most of the film, Buddy Holly refuses to concede to industry demands. It is he who tells the industry reps how things are going to be and not the other way around. But eventually personal problems and problems within the band develop. These problems are not caused by some oppressive and manipulative industry executives, but are rather the unintended consequences of being a star. As the band drifts apart and Holly becomes more reclusive, he steps back from it all and desperately tries to recapture what it is really all about. He is left with trying to figure out how to be Buddy Holly the person and not Buddy Holly the star. The same is true for Jerry Lee Lewis. He left his hometown for Memphis with the singular purpose of becoming a star. Initially he appears the buffoon, getting railroaded by Sam Phillips as he signs contracts at a blink of an eye. But Jerry Lee is not a stupid Southern boy; rather he is simply not interested in material gains. Eventually

he loses direction and begins to self-destruct when he loses fans due to his controversial marriage. And until he can figure out whether to give in to industry pressures by signing a public apology and forego his personal integrity, he cannot reclaim his position as a star.

For Selena, Jess Robbins, Tina Turner, and Prince, they have to separate themselves from their past and the controls others have on them before they claim their title as heroes. Selena and Jess Robbins are at a crossroads, wanting to pursue their dreams but yet not wanting to anger their protective and traditionalist parents. Whereas for them it is intergenerational conflicts that are the central crises, for Tina Turner and Prince it is abusive others.

In *Purple Rain*, Prince comes from a troubled family life with an abusive father who drowns his sorrows in booze. Through music and performing at the club, Prince becomes strong. But while music is a way of working out his problems and a way to make more out of his life than his abusive father, it cannot be used to overcome them. To be a hero he must eventually confront these personal demons. The same is true for Tina Turner in *What's Love Got To Do With It*. With her prodigious talent, she rises to the top. But on the way she gets entangled with the abusive Ike. For her to emerge as a hero off the stage, she has to rise above this adversity and become self-empowered. Initially, she doesn't realize this, and like Prince, believes that by taking the stage and achieving more fame these problems will somehow magically disappear. But at some point both characters realize that rising to the top is of little importance if they can't take command over their own lives.

For these and the other films, the heroes are not battling the industry as much as they are battling some personal demons. How they accomplish this is captured in the following narrative functions:

- (6) With the help of a community member, the hero learns how to be both a person and a star.
- (7) The hero confronts the past.

After ascending to fame, personal problems can no longer be ignored and the hero must find some way to become more self-empowered. This task is one the hero cannot accomplish alone. It is also a task requiring the wisdom from someone who understands the hero's problems and who has found life outside of the star system. When the abuse gets to be too much, Tina Turner seeks the advice and support of a former back-up singer who earlier stood up to Ike and left the band. Her friend redirects her, giving her the strength she needs to separate herself from Ike and become a star on and off the stage. When she takes the stage in the end, her life, and not

just her role as a rock star, is revived. Like Tina, Prince has his own demons to battle. For him, the moment of crisis comes when he hits Apollonia and she leaves him. As a consequence, he realizes for the first time how he is falling into his father's destructive footsteps. This event, coupled with his father's attempted suicide, forces Prince to evaluate his life. When he does, he realizes he can no longer make it without the help, guidance, and assistance of others. In the closing scene, he takes the stage, connects to his band, reconciles with Apollonia, and recaptures his top position at the club. While Selena does not struggle with physical abuse, she has her own problems. From an early age, Selena's father took control over her life. On her road to stardom, her father treats the adult Selena as if she were a mere child needing a protective parent. As with the other heroes, Selena finds strength in someone with a greater understanding about life and who is self-assured and not afraid to stand up for what is right. With her relationship with the band's guitar player, Selena becomes strong enough to stand up to her father. With this accomplished, Selena retakes the stage with more purpose than ever. For Selena and all of these other heroes, once the past is confronted:

(8) Society accepts the hero.

With this step, the hero's journey is complete. After learning about life and how to be strong from someone who understands adversity, the hero confronts his or her difficult past or nemesis and becomes a true star for the first time. Having accomplished this feat, society accepts the hero.

Perhaps two of the most dramatic examples of these functions are found in *What's Love Got To Do With It* and *Great Balls of Fire!* In the first movie, it takes a long time but eventually Tina breaks from Ike. Seconds after she finally stands up to him, she takes the stage as a solo-artist. She wins the audience over and by applauding her they reveal their acceptance of who she is and all she has become. Unlike Tina, Jerry Lee Lewis may not have to contend with an abusive spouse but he had his own obstacles to overcome. After a period of self-destructing when the problems weigh too heavily on his shoulders, Jerry Lee comes back more determined than ever to prove to others he's a genius and not some immoral Southern twit. It takes a while, but eventually he wins back the crowds and in the process establishes himself as a real hero.

In a few of the movies, the film ends in tragedy. For those films, the following narrative function is necessary.

(9) The hero dies.



What makes the lives of characters like Richie Valens and Selena so tragic is that just when they have overcome adversity and become strong, they lose it all.

Before addressing the binary oppositions, it might be useful to restate the revival plot functions:

- (1) The hero is endowed with natural musical talent.
- (2) The heroes' skills are revealed to the community.
- (3) The hero gets involved with the industry.
- (4) The hero achieves star status.
- (5) The hero struggles with personal problems that threaten their star status.
- (6) With the help of a community member, the hero learns how to be both a person and a star.
- (7) The hero confronts the past.
- (8) Society accepts the hero.
- (9) The hero dies. (In the Tragedy Variation)

### **Binary Oppositions: Personal Revival Plot**

For personal revival plot films, the working class positioning of the hero common in the reconciliation plot may be largely gone but they are initially still outside of society. But while the heroes in this and the preceding plot follow similar paths *inside society/outside society*, it is coded differently here. In the beginning of *The Buddy Holly Story*, Holly is a teenager with a passionate drive to be a rock and roll musician. This non-conventional pursuit puts him at odds with his parents and other concerned members of the community. In the days following Holly and his band playing rock and roll at the skating rink, likely the first time many people from the community had ever even heard these strange sounds, Holly gets pressured to lead a conventional life. At church, Buddy and his parents listen as the preacher gives a fire and brimstone sermon about the dangers of the new music hitting the town, telling the congregation: "Friends, there is a new form of music, if you can call it music, that is as un-Christian and un-American as anything we have had to face in the past fifty years" and then striking a racial note by calling this music "jungle rhythm." Following church services, Buddy's father questions him about his occupational ambitions. Buddy remains passive while his father comes down on him for his senseless teenage antics. In a separate sequence of events, Holly and his girlfriend begin to go separate ways as he becomes further immersed in his music and she in a conventional life. Their relationship comes to a breaking point when she tells Holly she was glad his trip to Nashville failed and then urges him to settle down by going to college with her so he can meet her sorority sisters. It proves too much for the ambitious Holly and he drops the relationship. As

the film progresses, Holly becomes more accepted by society but he never gets there until he is forced to find a way to be a rock star and a person at the same time. When he realizes this, he is accepted. Like Holly, Jess Robbins (*The Jazz Singer*) is caught between the conflicting forces of ambition and conservative community values. Involvement in either the industry or the ways of his father leave him incomplete until he finds his place in society by neither denouncing traditional values nor getting caught in the pressures of being a star.

As already identified in narrative function six, it is through the assistance of others that the hero finds a way back to society. What unfolds in *Hard to Hold* is characteristic of many of the other films. From the film's beginning Jamie is outside of society; neither integrated into the community nor satisfied with being a rock star. To help him on his path of rediscovery, Jamie connects with a young woman from a working class background who has found meaning in helping struggling youth. Through his involvement with her, Jamie experiences a sense of family, community, and conventional values and in the process finds himself.

Compared to reconciliation plot heroes, personal revival heroes move inside society when they have resolved personal problems and as a result revive their own lives. Whether they are initially outside of society because of their age or because they are internally conflicted by personal problems, in each case they are not outside of society because of a low status associated with their occupational role. As will be later discussed in more detail, this coding of the inside/outside opposition represents a shift to psychological approaches to understanding individual problems.

As previously stated, the *good/bad* opposition deals with the values of the hero, villains, and the other characters. With this opposition another significant difference between reconciliation plot and revival plot films surfaces. The villains in former films are professional others who are clearly interested in economic gain and have little regard for other's welfare. This "bad" characterization of industry representatives significantly shifts in revival plot films. In these films, when the industry representatives briefly appear, they are put in various positions, sometimes callous and greedy and other times helpful and humanitarian. For example, in *What's Love Got To Do With It* the industry has virtually no presence. When a record producer does appear near the end of the film, he is there to help Tina Turner make it as a solo rock performer. Not all films position industry personnel positively like this, but even when they are portrayed in the typical fashion as greedy their roles are most often taken for granted, resulting in little screen

time to play out the interrelationship between the rock star and the stakeholders. In those cases where they do go up against the music industry, it is always about personal and artistic control. And in all cases they win.

Aside from this peripheral villain of a generalized industry, there is another and more central villain in most of the films. This villain is not found in the industry but rather as a friend or family member. This change in position of the villain captures the conservative logic of human-interest stories. By focusing on the daily personal struggles with intimate others, the audience takes on the perspective of the hero, empathizing with how others are pushing them back and holding them down. When the hero finally confronts the nemesis and becomes empowered, he or she becomes a hero who embodies the spirit of rugged individualism, rising out of despair and onto fame through pulling themselves up by the proverbial bootstraps. Using the terms of C. Wright Mills, while this "private troubles" storyline may captivate audiences, it fails to provide any analysis of such pressing "public issues" as patriarchy (*What's Love Got To Do With It*), racism (*La Bamba*, *What's Love*, and *Selena*), despair associated with rash materialism (*Hard to Hold*), the logic of the culture industry (*The Buddy Holly Story* and *Great Balls of Fire!*), or the costs and consequences of rugged individualism (*The Jazz Singer*). This shift to the personal is representative of the conservative shift in films during Hollywood's "blockbuster" era. They also represent a move away from New Hollywood's anti-hero to the reclamation of the traditional hero, a person who works hard, stays dedicated, and triumphs over adversity.

The *strong/weak* binary opposition is about self-assertion and determination. Whereas in reconciliation plot films the hero becomes strong when industry-related materialism and corruption is rejected, here the hero's strength is tied to overcoming personal and private struggles. This is usually represented in these films when the hero has a moment of self-discovery and goes on to confront the past and/or the detrimental consequences of becoming famous. Jamie in *Hard to Hold* seeks a balance between life as a star and life as a common, hard-working, conventional citizen. This quest takes the hero through stages of personal development but he does not really become strong until his manager makes an underhanded comment about his girlfriend and Jamie comes to her defense and in the process reveals how far he has come. Prince struggles to find purpose throughout most of the movie. Unable to either reach out for help or be emotionally intimate in a relationship with Apollonia, he is weak. When

he hits Apollonia and goes into a tailspin after his father's attempted suicide, Prince steps back from it all, knows who he has to become, and becomes strong. When he takes the stage again, it is with a new purpose and meaning. As he sings "Purple Rain," he proves to himself and others the completion of his journey from a narcissistic performer to an enlightened individual who will not have his future determined by his past. This proving one's strength by finding oneself and making some inner discovery is illustrated in *The Buddy Holly Story* as well. In this film, Holly never falls into temptation and never concedes to industry demands. This makes him strong, but not strong enough to deal with the pressures of stardom. After the band becomes more and more successful, a rift develops in the band, Holly distances himself from his wife, and he falls into despair. When he comes out of this confused state he is refocused and remembers what is really important – working hard and being the best you can be despite the material gains and acclaimed rock star status. In *La Bamba* Ritchie Valens appears strong by following conventional norms, never giving into temptation, and being there for his family in times of need. But these qualities do not make him strong; they just make him responsible. When he goes down to Mexico, hears Mexican folk music and gets in touch with his ethnic heritage, he returns home a different person. Soon after he demonstrates his strength when he goes from conceding to the industry's directive to change his name to standing up to the producer and getting his way with recording "La Bamba."

These heroes become strong once they discover and stand up for who they were destined to be. This is quite a turn from the reconciliation plot's focus on rising above the manipulative tactics of ruthless owners and managers. What this difference in the plots possibly points to is a shift in cultural values and ideas related to how people express "strength." Rather than focusing on achieving some class-consciousness, the heroes here go on a path of personal self-discovery. And this journey ties in well with the general cultural climate of the times. During the 1980s materialism reached new heights. Young middle-class professionals engaged in conspicuous consumption and in doing so separated themselves from those on whose shoulders they stood. Pop psychology in books and television programs drew the middle-class into the self and away from critiques of structural conditions. Self-esteem and self-help movements were ubiquitous. And the "me generation" turned inward to create a happier and better tomorrow.

The *authenticity/fabrication* opposition has the greatest presence in four of the films: *The Buddy Holly Story*, *Great Balls of Fire!*, *Hard to Hold*, and *La Bamba*. For the most part, only a

few selected occasions does it enter the storyline, but it is enough to illustrate the rock star's successful struggle in maintaining a sense of personal integrity. And in each case, the stars buck fabrication as they chart their own courses by exerting their independence from recording industry controls.

Associated with this drive for authenticity is the hero's *rebellion* against social order. Not willing to *conform* to tradition for tradition's sake, a few of these rock stars rebel against authority figures and the industry. For those who do rebel, one question then is where does the motivation come from? Here is another difference between this plot and the reconciliation plot. The reconciliation plot heroes who rebel do so in order to separate themselves from the normative order of the older generation. For the revival plot hero, rebellion has much more to do with a fight to preserve self-expression. Jerry Lee Lewis blowing bubble gum like a teenager, setting a piano on fire, and declaring he would rather play the devil's music and go to hell than follow a prescribed social order, is not about reacting against anything. It is simply who he is. The same holds true of Tina Turner as she breaks from the feminine scripts by bringing a masculine positioning to the female rock persona and Buddy Holly as he pulls away from his college-bound girlfriend and sets off on his own and brings a fresh sound to rock and roll.

The binary oppositions reveal, in part, underlying cultural dynamics. How the hero moves inside of society, becomes strong, or finds a way out of the wilderness highlights at a more general level contemporary personal struggles with self-discovery and personal empowerment. This turn inward is representative of the general decline in social activism of the 1960s and an invigoration of the individualistic self.

### **Personal Revival Plot: Historical Context and Ideological Content**

Twenty years passed between *King Creole* (1958) and the next film about a rock star, *The Buddy Holly Story* (1978). While many factors influenced a renewed interest in this type of film, two seem particularly influential. First, after two decades enough time had passed to give biographical accounts of early rockers. Part of this is likely reflective of collective desires to break from the angst of the 1970s and materialism of the 1980s and retreat into a selective remembrance of the clean "golden" fifties. The second factor is related to shifts in movie audience demographics and related sentiments. As previously stated, starting in the 1960s youth replaced adults as the largest age segment going to the movies. The retrospective films, such as *The Buddy Holly Story* and *La Bamba*, may have been an attempt by Hollywood producers to

capture a greater market share by appealing to both adults who grew up with these rockers and youth interested in this element of popular culture. For the other films that spotlighted contemporary pop stars (Rick Springfield, Prince, and Selena) the intended audience was predominately the young. But regardless of the heroes' location in history, all of these films capture the sentiments of the 1970s and 1980s "me" generation quite well by focusing on individual rock and roll stars who through dealing with a painful past, discover their full potential, and become reborn on stage.

In addition to these factors, changes in Hollywood itself likely influenced the choice of films produced and their content. Starting in the 1950s Hollywood was losing ground in ticket sales. Between 1946 and 1957 alone movie attendance rates dropped in half from around ninety million to forty-five million. This trend, which continued into the 1960s, was partially the result of television ownership and the growing independence of youth from family oversight.<sup>6</sup> Such changes resulted in the breakdown of the old studio system where studios exerted great control over directors, actors, and producers. The result was the creation of a "New Hollywood." During this Hollywood renaissance more independence was given to directors such as Brian De Palma, Robert Altman, Steven Spielberg, and Martin Scorsese. Films like Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider* (1969) were representative of this shift. In films like these the anti-hero took the stage.

By the mid to late 1970s, Hollywood had discovered a new formula for success, one that was as much a response to the general climate of the times as a cause of it. Hollywood heavily invested in fewer projects and mass and cross-marketed them. The movies at the front of this "blockbuster" era represented Hollywood's return to conservative values. Capturing this spirit were films like *Jaws* (1975), *Rocky* (1976), and *Star Wars* (1977). Their success at the box-office is undeniable. *Jaws* became the highest grossing film in history. George Lucas's *Star Wars* would trump it only two years later. In discussing how *Jaws* represented the conservative position, Quart and Auster (1991: 124) comment that protagonist of the film is

a middle-class family man, police chief Martin Brody (Roy Scheider), who battles against the cover-ups of the town's corrupt mayor and ultimately kills the shark. He only does that after the upper-class technologists of ichthyologist Matt Hooper (Richard Dryfuss) and the working-class machismo of the Ahab-like sailor Quint (Robert Shaw)

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<sup>6</sup> In 1950 approximately nine percent of US homes had television set. By the 1960s ownership rates increased to eighty-seven percent (Loss, 1999).

have failed. By turning Brody into the film's hero, *Jaws* implicitly celebrated the virtues of fidelity and family instead of glorifying the heroic loner.

This conservative brand of film extended beyond action and science fiction to those that brought back to life pre-enlightenment demonic theories of deviance. Such films included *The Exorcist* (1973), *Carrie* (1976), *The Omen* (1976), and *The Amityville Horror* (1979).

As the United States entered the Reagan years, so did Hollywood. Perhaps the series of films that best captured the right wing sentiments were those starring Sylvester Stallone as the decorated Vietnam war-hero John Rambo. These included *First Blood* (1982), *Rambo: First Blood II* (1985) and *Rambo III* (1988). In an analysis of these films, Quart and Auster (1991: 157) state that "for Reagan, Rambo was a symbol of American machismo and patriotism, and the film's crude Russophobia and narcissistic camera worship of its star Sylvester Stallone's glistening, nautilus-crafted body provided perfect fodder for Reagan's Hollywood brand of populism." The values affirmed by Rambo were found in many others, including Spielberg's *E.T.* (1982).

In its affirmation of innocence, its simple optimism, and its distrust of authority, particularly the state, it consciously mirrored some of the certainties and pieties offered to the American public by Ronald Reagan. Indeed both *E.T.* and Ronald Reagan were eminently lovable, and just as Spielberg's Elliot found solace from his problems in a fantastic creature, Reagan mouthed platitudes of traditional values and fled the complexities inherent in bringing about social change or reshaping the economy (Quart and Auster, 1991: 146).

Following the turbulent 1970s, the war in Vietnam, an economic recession, and serious critiques of the social contract, Americans witnessed a return of a conservative order where individuals who maintain moral virtues can rise above personal adversity. This is reflected in films about rock stars as who struggle not because of structural conditions but because of individual problems. And when they become strong, they symbolize that what holds individuals back from personal success is nothing more than an inability to resolve trying pasts.

### **Intergenerational Theme**

In the films from the 1950s, especially *King Creole*, intergenerational conflicts are a central theme. This tension is visible in some of the personal revival plot films as well, but only one in particular devotes significant time to it. In *The Jazz Singer*, Jess Robbins must sneak

behind his father's back to sing in local clubs. After he gets into a jam and his late night antics are revealed, Jess comes clean with what he's been doing. The dialogue that follows captures the fundamental conflict between the contemporary individualist Jess and the traditionalist Cantor Rabinovich.

Jess: Pop, look I have to be honest with you. I have been sneaking around and doing these kinds of shows now for a long time. We need the extra money. What is so terrible?

Cantor Rabinovitch: If it's not so terrible why all the sneaking around?

Jess: Because you think it's terrible.

Cantor Rabinovitch: And it is. You're a cantor.

Jess: I'm an assistant cantor Pop.

Cantor Rabinovitch: For five generations a cantor Rabinovich has been singing in the synagogue.

Jess: I sing in the synagogue Pop, for what?

Cantor: For God!

Jess: God doesn't pay so good Pop. This is a poor synagogue, they pay what they can but I can't live on that.

Cantor Rabinovitch: God doesn't pay so good?!

This scene ends with Jess apologizing for upsetting his father. Three times during the film Jess and his father get into verbal disputes about the sacred traditional order versus mainstream secular society. During the second confrontation, Jess doesn't apologize but rather tries to convince his father why he must perform.

Jess: Stop, Pop. Please, for once in your life would you listen to me? I know what you believe. I've tried to live up to it Pop, I swear, I tried to live up to it but I can't do it anymore. I can't do it anymore. Pop, I have things inside of me I have to express them. I have my music. I have my life...my feelings. Maybe they come from God too. I don't know. I do know I have to do it my own way.

Cantor Rabinovitch: Does finding your own way include leaving your wife?

The elder Rabinovich is portrayed as a dogmatic and emotionally stoic traditionalist. He follows the code of the Jewish community because it is expected from God and others. Jess tries to follow such a life but he comes to a point where he can no longer repress who he is. These two worlds, the sacred and secular, are pitted against one another and it is clear that Jess's way is portrayed as the only true path to becoming fully human. Jess epitomizes the sentiments of the younger generation seeking individualistic self-expression. In telling his father that his congregation is the fans and that through his music he offers them comfort and guidance he



updates traditional religious codes. And in the end, Jess, like Danny, wins over his father. *The Buddy Holly Story* is the only other film in this group that addresses this theme. It is fitting for this film because of its nostalgic look back to a time where parents, and especially fathers, held more power and youth were gaining their rebellious independence. After arriving home after hearing a church sermon on the satanic qualities of rock and roll, Buddy sits down to dinner with his parents.

Mrs. Holly: You've got to admit Buddy, we've been mighty patient. We never said a word when you decided not to go on to the seminary and we let you sew your wild oats playing your music. I think its time you told your father and me just what your plans for the future are.

Buddy: I haven't even thought about it. I don't even know.

Mr. Holly: You put off college for over a year. What for? To play this jungle music?

Buddy: Well how could it be jungle music if I wrote it?

Mr. Holly: Well you got the whole town down around our ears. Seems like everybody hates the stuff.

Buddy: Well what about those people that were there last night?

Mr. Holly: Just a bunch of kids.

Buddy: Well they won't always be kids.

Mrs. Holly: We just want you to have something to fall back on in case things don't work out for you.

Buddy: Well mom I'm not going to fall back.

Mr. Holly: You had best give your future some serious thought right now.

Mr. and Mrs. Holly exemplify the all-American family ideal. The father is the decision-maker, leader, and breadwinner. Mom is the domestic caregiver and the peacemaker between father and son. Buddy offers his own ideas about what the music represents, but he never goes toe to toe with his father. Instead he listens, makes a few comments, and then leaves. Rather than fighting the old man, he just goes his own way.

### **Individual versus Industry Theme**

In reconciliation plot films, the industry is personalized through the central role some characters play on the screen. For example, in *Loving You* Glenda plays a prominent role in the story as well as in the life of the hero. For the films here, the industry is coded more generally; industry personnel are included in the story but their characters are incompletely developed. In doing so, more focus is placed on how the hero navigates life and the pressures of stardom, a dilemma most movie audiences likely knew stars faced.

For the films that devote more time to this theme, industry executives are almost always signified as mean, selfish, and greedy. And in all cases, the good hero establishes independence from such an inhumane industry. Holly frequently fights with industry personnel for artistic control. When either physically or professionally threatened, he always exerts his will and wins concessions. Jerry Lee Lewis appears innocent of industry controls. Instead of fighting for what the record company produces, he follows Phillips' plans. But when it comes to his personal life, Lewis takes a stand. In doing so, the film illustrates how Lewis bucked industry pressures to conform when it counted most – preserving his authentic self.

While this theme is partially addressed in some of the films, for most others it is either non-existent or industry personnel are placed in more supportive roles. For example, in *What's Love* the industry's involvement in Turner's life is largely not part of the story. Although near this film's end an industry executive comes to her aid, giving her an opportunity to make it as a singer on her own, the narrative primarily focuses on her personal life. Such films are illustrative of interests in the personal problems of stars and not how the industry takes advantage of them.

By the 1970s, rock stars had become wealthier and more famous and pressured to perform when compared to their 1950s counterparts. Details regarding changes in the recording industry and rock musicians were discussed in chapter 3. For the revival plot films where the rock star is from the 1970s or after, much film content could be devoted to the interrelationship between, and sometimes competing interests of, the industry and the individual musician. While some of this type of content is present, it is significantly less than what it could be. Rather than giving much time to such production processes, the films focus on personal problems. Even in the case of *Hard to Hold* where the rock star becomes lost in stardom, attention is not on the industry as much as it is on the individual who searches to find himself – a journey of the youth and not endemic to the industry-regulated rock star.

### **Gender Theme**

In regard to the representation of gender in these films, some things have changed and others remained the same. Compared to the films from the 1950s, women in many of these films have greater strength and independence. At the same time, women are also positioned in gender stereotypic and sexualized ways. In films like *Great Balls of Fire!* and *Buddy Holly Story*, the spouses of the rock and roll heroes are bound to concerns of family, marital stability, and as a consequence have little, if any, personal ambitions. Characterizing these women in this way is

partly done to not take the focus off of the film's main star. But it also represents the position that male heroes survive by having a place to retreat from the hard realities of making it in an industrial order.

The male heroes in *The Buddy Holly Story*, *Great Balls of Fire!*, and *La Bamba* are all, at least initially, involved with women who epitomize 1950s middle-class notions of gender. At the start of the film, and until he makes his break into the world of rock and roll, Buddy Holly is involved with a prim and proper young woman who wants nothing more than Buddy to join her at college, visit her sorority girlfriends, and settle into middle-class gender scripts. This framing of her as a good old traditional girl makes Buddy's rebellious image stand out that much more. Through his music he not only challenges adult sensibilities about how to have a secure future but he reveals the shallowness of conventional codes. Like Holly, Ritchie Valens is involved with a conservative-minded middle-class girl. But unlike Holly, Ritchie embraces these class-based gendered ideals. Rather than symbolizing the rebellious rocker, Ritchie is characterized as a relatively conservative, hard-working young man whose main focus is not on his music but on his deep devotion to his mother and girlfriend. Ritchie's image is made all the more clear in contrasting him with his out of control, selfish brother who abuses women, deals drugs, and generally runs with the wrong crowds.

The above films give retrospective biographical accounts. As such, they project particular ideas about how this time is remembered. Between the 1950s and the 1980s feminists questioned gender norms and patriarchal structures. As a result, by the 1970s the profile of the workingwoman had dramatically changed from the 1950s. During the 1950s most women in the workforce were relatively older, most often only leaving their domestic roles after their children graduated from high school. By the 1970s, working women were younger, more educated, and likely had children in primary or secondary schools. But while women became more financially and economically independent, the types of jobs they often took were in the lower paying service-oriented industries. Changes such as these influenced various aspects of daily life for women, men, and families. Adding to the independence of women were changes on the legal front. For example, with the 1969 California Family Law Act, no longer did a spouse who desired a divorce have to go through lengthy court proceedings to determine a guilty party. This "no-fault" divorce legislation opened up the opportunity for women, especially because they often had fewer economic resources than their husbands to get fair representation in the

courtroom, to leave marriages. As divorce rates dramatically increased and fertility rates declined, women were often blamed for undermining traditional values and causing various social problems. This time of dynamic tension was the subject of various films, including *Kramer vs. Kramer* (1979). In this film, a progressive professional woman (Meryl Streep) who is unfulfilled in her marriage with a distant husband (Dustin Hoffman) decides to get a divorce and leave him to raise their child. The film can be read as either a sympathetic treatment of middle-class and forward moving women or fathers who exercise little power over how custodial arrangements are made. Whatever side the audience takes, this film is representative of anxieties about family structure and women's new roles in society. Such overt discussions of gender politics are, for the most part, omitted in rock star films.

The film *What's Love Got To Do With It* starts with a young Tina Turner leaving Tennessee as a young adult in the 1950s and moving to St. Louis to be with her mother. Soon after arriving, she goes to a local club where she watches Ike perform. After getting the courage to overcome her Southern female docility, she takes the stage and brings down the house. Ike realizes that because of her masculine voice and posturing she will be a success and he makes her part of the band. Throughout the film, she comes into her own but is always personally held back by trying to remain loyal to Ike and looking out for the welfare of their children. By the 1970s, she moves into full-stride and finally leaves Ike for good. Aside from her vocal skills, what made Tina so successful was her onstage sexual demeanor where she both challenged conservative ideals and became a spokesperson in her own way for women's liberation. The film bypasses the time between the mid-1970s when she left Ike and her revival as a rock star in the mid-1980s. Instead of capturing what happened during this time, the narrative goes seamlessly from her standing up to Ike and her rise as a popular music icon. While the film captures to some degree what happened throughout the course of Tina Turner's professional and personal life, it primarily focuses on how she only becomes strong when she separates herself from her abusive husband. By finally standing up for herself, she underscores how her own personal weakness kept her in a subservient position. This film is also the first one that focuses on the triumph of a female rock star. Much could be made as to why Tina Turner was the subject of the first movie about a successful pop star. But two reasons in particular appear to be the most salient. First, Tina was both sexually strong, something likely to resonate well with more independent women and curious male audience members, and embodied the characteristics of a

liberated modern woman. The second is that this film appealed to a broad racial audience demographic, capturing the attention of both African Americans and Whites interested in stories of the racial "other."

The film *Purple Rain* follows the fictional struggles of the 1980s pop culture star Prince. His focus on fashion and use of make-up gives him an androgynous spirit. But in the movie this side of him is spoiled by his inability to come to grips with his drinking and spouse-abusing father. In regard to Apollonia, she is in many ways characterized as a modern Jezebel. Her sexualized performance while in lingerie and her steamy sex-scene with Prince, parts of which had to be cut from the film to prevent an X-rating, puts her physical nature above her musical talents. In the film, she is the subject of various sexual comments, including the following statement from Prince's rival Morris: "Your lips would make a lollipop too happy."

### **Race Theme**

By the 1980s, representations of race on the screen had significantly changed from the 1960s Hollywood renaissance. *In the Heat of the Night* (1967), starring Sidney Poitier as Virgil Tibbs and Rod Steiger as Sheriff Gillespie, the bigotry of the South met the racially progressive North. It pointed to how much had changed by this time and yet how much remained to be changed. This is captured well in one scene where Gillespie says to Tibbs: "Well, you're pretty sure of yourself, ain't you, Virgil. Virgil, that's a funny name for a nigger boy to come from Philadelphia. What do they call you up there?" Virgil responds by saying "They call me Mister Tibbs." By the 1980s Hollywood's biracial buddy teams gave much more shallow commentaries about race relations. Films like *48 Hrs* (1982) and *Lethal Weapon* (1987) provided little, if any, reflection on real racial inequities and instead affirmed that through working together blacks and whites can be a part of the integrated whole. Outside of Hollywood, there was a growth of independent films produced and directed by African Americans. Spike Lee's *She's Gotta Have It* (1986), *School Daze* (1988), and *Do the Right Thing* (1989) gave a voice to African Americans that Hollywood all but denied.

During the 1980s the first film about a non-White pop star, *Purple Rain* (1984), was produced. Aside from its cinematic merits, or lack thereof, this film moved to capitalize on Prince's popularity by cross-marketing his film with a movie soundtrack. *La Bamba*, *What's Love* (1993), and *Selena* (1997) are the only other films where the main character is a racial minority. This is not because there's a lack of subject matter to draw upon. That the lives of

Chuck Berry (the first person inducted into Rock and Roll Hall of Fame 1986 in Cleveland, Ohio), Little Richard, or James Brown, to name just a few of rock's giants, have not been captured in major production films speaks a lot about middle-class film audience sentiments as well as internal biases within Hollywood.

Racial minority rock stars do become the subject matter of these films starting in the 1980s, but not until *Selena* (1997) are issues of race overtly discussed. *Purple Rain*, *La Bamba*, and *What's Love* give little to no mention to particular racial struggles. Because these films fail to address race, in the end they give support to the idea that race is not the real issue in preventing triumphant accomplishments; it's personal failures. In contrast to these three films, *Selena* does make various comments about the difficulties facing Mexican-Americans. This is particularly interesting when compared to another female rocker, albeit one from an older generation – Tina Turner. In *What's Love*, race-related issues are never discussed. The reasons for this difference are most likely not due to their different production dates because only four years separate these two films (1993 and 1997). And it is unrealistic that it is because of the sheer number of Hispanic moviegoers. In 2000, Hispanic Americans made up 12.5% of the population, African Americans 12.3%, and Whites 75.1% (US Census Bureau, 2000). While these numbers do not reflect a racial breakdown on movie attendance rates, they do indicate that most moviegoers at this time were White. This would be even truer if social class was factored in. With major production films trying to capture the broadest market segment, it is uncertain why there were differences in how race was addressed in *Selena* and *What's Love*.

*Selena* is a film with much overt discussion of, and reflection upon, race relations. From the opening scenes where Abraham Quintanilla and his band The Dinos are discriminated against by not being allowed to play at a white club to Selena's rise to fame, the film highlights the various struggles facing contemporary Mexican-Americans. Like Ritchie Valens, Selena must learn to embrace her ethnic heritage before she becomes personally and professionally accomplished. Abraham helps her become proud of her ethnic heritage in telling her "You gotta be who you are. You can't change it. Now, you're an American. I'm an American. You like Donna Summer. I like doo-wop. But you're also Mexican, deep inside and that's a wonderful thing." Being proud of being both Mexican and American is not an easy road. The following comments made by Abraham also bring to light some of the challenges facing Mexican Americans in the 1990s.

Abraham: Listen, being Mexican American is tough. Anglos jump all over you if you don't speak English perfectly. Mexicans jump all over you if you don't speak Spanish perfectly. We got to be twice as perfect as anybody else.

Abraham: And we gotta prove to the Mexicans how Mexican we are and we gotta to prove to the Americans how American we are. We gotta be more Mexican than the Mexicans and more American than the Americans both at the same time. It's exhausting. Damn. Nobody knows how tough it is to be a Mexican American.

Between 1990 and 2000 the Hispanic population in the US significantly increased, moving from 22 million to 35 million, a 58% increase (US Census Bureau, 2000). Of the Hispanic ethnic groups, persons of Mexican heritage are the largest, accounting for almost 60% of the total Hispanic population. With the population demographics shifting the way they did in the 1990s, some things changed quickly. Rather than acknowledging the impact such elements as outsourcing, globalization, a decline in labor unions, or further movement to a service-based economy had on the loss of some middle-class privileges, ethnic groups, especially Hispanics and African Americans became scapegoats. Affirmative Action programs, initiated back in the 1960s by President Kennedy, became a target of much white hostility. In November 1996, Californians passed Proposition 209, a measure that eliminated affirmative action in college admissions, employment, and government contracting. In 2003, Proposition 54, known as the Racial Privacy Initiative, was put before California voters. According to this proposition, "The state shall not classify any individual by race, ethnicity, color or national origin in the operation of public education, public contracting or public employment." While it was defeated by a margin of 64% to 36%, that it was even constructed and placed on the ballots represented an underlying racial strain not just in California but also across the nation. These court cases are mentioned here to put a context around the film *Selena*. In a state where approximately one-third of the population is of Hispanic or Latino origin (US Census Bureau, 2000), California was a hotbed of political activity, from both the political left and right. But aside from the various initiatives brought before voters, many more general questions remained about racial identities. Starting with the Black Power movement, and later Red Power and Brown Power movements, in the 1960s, more focus was placed on being proud of one's racial identity. When soul master James Brown recorded "Say It Loud – I'm Black and I'm Proud" in 1968, he captured this new spirit of racial pride. In academia, various disciplines, such as African American studies, were

created and brought much needed scholarship to the unique histories and contemporary problems facing various groups. By the 1980s, Americans were more comfortable discussing issues of racial identity. But just because this was the case, did not mean it was easy. The conflicting perspectives of racial identities and politics were well captured in the above statements Abraham made to Selena. And in them Abraham becomes a spokesperson for Mexican-Americans caught between assimilating into dominant Anglo-culture and all the while maintaining connections to one's past.

### **Temptation Theme**

Regardless of the time period in which the film was produced or whether it was a fictionalized account of a rock musician, alcohol, drugs, or other hedonistic pleasures do not tempt the personal revival plot hero. For reconciliation plot films such vices were not present due, in part, to the effects of production codes. Since such restrictions were lifted by the time these films were produced, it must be the result of other factors. Possible reasons include the following. The first is the target audience for certain films. For films providing a fictionalized account of a 1950s/1960s rock musician, the target audience was most likely baby-boomers. This audience would have been less interested in struggles with alcohol, drugs, and the like and more partial to nostalgia stories where the central characters from this "golden" time are relatively morally principled. The second reason is more directly tied to the historical context out of which these films were produced. Whether from the 1980s or 1990s, the films focus attention primarily on personal and not moral problems. As stated previously, this partly reflects a return to conservative values in culture and film.

### **Summary**

When compared to reconciliation plot heroes, the heroes in these films are not innocent of how the industry operates. Instead of blindly conceding to the will of the industry, they stand up for themselves and tell producers how things will be done. This drive, in combination with the hero having prodigious musical talents, foreshadows how the hero is destined for greatness. What gets in the way of achieving heroic strength is the hero's personal life. Depending on the film, personal problems may have to do with parent-child relations (*The Jazz Singer*; *Selena*), abusive relationship partners (*What's Love*), or divisions between friends (*The Buddy Holly Story*). This focus on the private life of the hero is yet another distinction from reconciliation plot heroes and their search for status.



Personal revival plot films fit well with the search for traditional heroes in the 1970s and the materialist desires of the 1980s "me" generation. Each of the rock stars heroes overcome personal problems and rise to the top. Keeping with the spirit of Joseph Campbell's heroes' journey, these rockers separate from their families and when initiated into industry pressures, demands of the fans, and materialism only find pain. Whereas they believed that such fame and fortune would erase the past and present personal problems they become even more distraught. But like Rocky Balboa, they finally realize their personal power, a power that they have because they are true, dedicated, and honorable, and they come back in the 10<sup>th</sup> and final round to defeat their personal demons and get declared the winner.

## **Chapter 6**

### **The Self-Destruction Plot: The Lost Hero**

Unlike personal revival plot films where the hero eventually figures out how to be a complete person on and off stage, or the reconciliation plot where he/she finds a place in the professional order, the self-destruction plot is one of despair. In these films, the heroes may claim some power when they get on stage, but they eventually test fate one too many times and die tragically. And unlike the other plots, in this one the industry is not portrayed as greedy. The industry is not the villain; rather the heroes become their own villain, never strong enough to make good use of their star position and always too weak to resist the temptations associated with it.

Of all the plots identified here, this one contains the fewest films, two. In addition, a fairly significant time gap spans these two films, with *The Rose* (1979) being released some twelve years before *The Doors* (1991). That such a narrative structure is not more common is particularly interesting since rock stars, like other celebrities, frequently succumb to the pressures and self-destruct. This issue will be explored later in this chapter when discussing film ideology.

#### **The Self-Destruction Plot Films**

##### **The Rose (1979)**

This Mark Rydell film provides a fictionalized account of one of rock and roll's earliest independent female stars, Janis Joplin. After the initial introduction, the film starts with Rose already a star. An airplane taxis down the tarmac and in bold letters on its front nose are painted the words "The Rose." Rose (Bette Midler) is the last band member to depart the plane and she comes stumbling down the steps. This altered state is contrasted with the next scene where Rose confidently takes the stage and gives the audience an emotional and sexually driven performance.

The day after the concert Rose tells her manager she "can't dredge up the sincerity anymore" and wants a break from it all. The manager reminds her that "this is a fucking business" and dismisses her request. This sets the stage for the movie as Rose painstakingly vacillates between giving it all up to find herself and wallowing in her celebrity status.

The contrast between Rose as a person and Rose as a rock star clearly comes through when before a show she feels powerless and gets high on booze and drugs. When the show starts, she staggers onto the stage. But as she gets in front of the crowd she comes alive. When she steps off stage at the end of the show, her personal power is gone once again.

Rose begins connecting to Houston, a limousine driver she connected to earlier, and with his help she begins finding herself. Just when things start shaping up for Rose, they get into another fight and once again he leaves. Without Houston by her side, she takes off for her hometown in Texas where she is scheduled to perform her final concert of the tour. As she drives down the street and in front of her childhood home, she ducks when she sees her parents in the front yard. She goes inside a small mom and pop convenience store, walks up to the owner, and becomes infuriated when he calls her by her real name, giving no mention to her status as Rose, the rock star. Ashamed, infuriated, and exhausted, she makes the decision to take a break from a life on road. When she tells her manager she is taking the year off after the show, he lays into her about how managing her is no picnic either and fires her. As Rose breaks down, out of nowhere Houston appears. Rose rushes into his arms and they decide to run off to Mexico together. But just when it appears Rose finally has the courage to leave it all behind, she tells Houston to pull over and stop at a bar where she performed when she was younger. She gets called onto the stage and because she loves being in the spotlight, she jumps at the chance. After she starts singing, a guy in the bar starts ridiculing her, asking her if she remembers getting gang-banged back in high school. Coming to her defense, Houston hits him and then removes Rose from the stage and the club. Rather than thanking him for protecting her, Rose goes off on him. He quietly gets out of the car and leaves her, never to return.

Lost and confused, Rose makes the decision to retreat back to her role as a rock star and go to the concert. After shooting up heroin, she calls her manager and tells him she needs to be picked up. A helicopter comes and takes her to the show. As she stumbles away from the helicopter, the audience is left wondering whether she has the capacity to even make it to the stage. With the fans going crazy for their hero, Rose takes the stages and like she always did before starts pulling her self together. But this time she has gone too far. After telling the audience they are her family, she starts singing a song she learned as a child. After the first few notes, she collapses on the stage and dies.

## **The Doors (1991)**

Oliver Stone's *The Doors* is a biographical account of the tragic life of Jim Morrison (Val Kilmer). The film begins near the end of Morrison's life. As the tape recorder runs in some dark room, he drinks heavily, recites poetry, and reflects on this life. The film then flashes back to a family trip he took as a child in 1949. While crossing the New Mexico desert they come across a car accident where a white couple hit and killed an Indian chief. As they drive away, the young Jim looks out the back window, the images of the chief forever imprinted on his mind. His childhood days are left behind and the next scenes follow Morrison's initial years at Venice Beach, California. At this point Morrison's poetic and spiritual side are highlighted, providing a stark contrast to the upcoming years when he tragically gets lost in the pressures of being a rock star. With his dark philosophical positions and artistic propensities, Morrison finds a place where he can explore and communicate ancient ideas and modern politics – the UCLA Film School. Disenchanted with the conformist mentality of UCLA, Morrison quits. Shortly thereafter he hooks up with Ray Manzerek and is invited to join a band and "make the myths" for the youth.

Morrison is initially timid when he takes the stage. But the next time he appears in front of a crowd, this time at the popular Whiskey A-Go-Go, he confidently faces the audience and goes on to connect his poetry and ancient myths to the beat of the music. Without a concern for how it will be received, Morrison gives a lewd performance of the Oedipus-based *The End*. After getting permanently banned from the club, Morrison is propositioned by the owner of Electra Records to become a rock and roll star.

After getting their big break, the band is initially carefree, enjoying the new opportunities and the pleasures that go along with stardom. But as quickly as they rose to fame, Morrison begins his fall. Struggling with it all, he tells his long-time girlfriend Pam about his disgust in being a rock star. Before all the fame and fortune started, he believed the stage to be a spiritual place where the audience would gather to feast upon his consciousness raising poetic verses. He now recognizes that all the fans want is his body and rebellious image and not his soul or music.

He continues to lose himself in alcohol and drugs and eventually reaches the point of no return. This is symbolized by images of his fattening body, his continued substance abuse, showing up late to concerts in all kinds of altered states, and, perhaps most importantly, when rock is no longer something sacred. While flying to a Miami show in 1969 Morrison laughs at

the thought that fans want something sacred. Instead, for Morrison, "Rock is Death." At this concert, Morrison takes the stage and is simply awful. And not only has he fallen apart, so have the fans who fight amongst themselves, no longer there to worship this poetic god but only to be witness to the circus act. To get the audience, and himself as well, out of this shallow state, Morrison incites them. Eventually his critical comments shock the audience enough where they can finally get into the music and understand its significance. But at this point it is too little and too late. After having a nervous breakdown, he takes off for Paris with Pam. Shortly thereafter Pam finds him dead in a bathtub. He is buried in a Paris cemetery. And there erected next to the gravestones of such great thinkers and literary greats as Georges Bize, Oscar Wilde, Sarah Bernhardt, Honore de Balzac, Marcel Proust, and Rossini, rests the immortalized Jim Morrison.

### **Narrative Structure of the Self-Destruction Plot**

In both *The Rose* and *The Doors*, the heroes follow similar paths. Their common narrative functions are represented from functions six through thirteen. The first five elements are only reflective of *The Doors*, a film that goes back to the early days of Morrison and follows his climb to rock stardom. Starting with narrative function one:

(1) The hero seeks to join society.

At the start of the film, before Morrison discovers music's ability to alter consciousness and becomes a rock star, he lives a simple and peaceful existence in Southern California. Mindfully walking the streets and Los Angeles' Venice Beach in 1965, he takes in the mood of the place and becomes enchanted with an attractive redheaded woman. A romantic pulled by his heart, Morrison goes to see her later that night and with a canopy of stars overhead, he reveals his gifts as a poet. These scenes are what make Morrison's later life so tragic as his promising gifts and natural abilities get lost when he becomes a rock star. In these opening scenes Morrison is not lining up to be the next technocrat but rather pursuing insights into the mysteries of humankind. Wanting to a part of society in some fashion, he goes to one conventional place where he can pursue his interest – the University of California, Los Angeles Film School. As a student in this program, Morrison puts his politics, philosophy, and poetry on screen. Believing his production will find acceptance among fellow artists, Morrison is left deeply shaken when his peers and professor fail to appreciate the deeper meaning hidden behind the film's dark veneer. Now without a place in the conventional world, he is lost. This leads to the next narrative function:

- (2) The hero discovers a valuable talent.
- (3) The hero reveals this talent to the community.

While talking to fellow film school student Ray Manzerek, Morrison discovers another medium where he can open up the doors of perception. When Manzerek asks Morrison to join his band, he jumps at the chance not for the monetary gain but because he realizes music's potential for bringing fundamental change to the social order. After a few practice sessions, the band gets their first gig. Lacking confidence, Morrison begins the set with his back mostly to the audience. Eventually, he turns around and goes on to give an inspiring performance, one not only pleasing to the audience but also one capturing the attention of an established talent scout. As they leave the club, a record executive tells Morrison it is not the band but his image and voice that will make millions. From this early stage of the band's career, Morrison's position as the band's leader is clear. He's the one taking risks and enthraling audiences. Before too long:

- (4) The hero achieves star status.

The band quickly makes it to the top. They go from playing in local L.A. clubs to big arena and stadium concerts. They get a spot on the Ed Sullivan show and despite the show's producer warning Morrison not to say "higher" when performing "Light My Fire," Morrison does just that. The fans go crazy for Morrison's defiant posturing and the band's sound. Rapidly rising to stardom gives Morrison little time to understand what it all means and he loses touch with what he originally thought it would all be about. This is reflected in the next narrative function:

- (5) The hero becomes disillusioned or conflicted about being a star.
- (6) The hero engages in self-destructive behavior.

Both Rose and Morrison succumb to the pressures associated with being a rock star. For Rose, the schedule and her ambivalence about whether she should be a star or join conventional life takes its toll. Lacking any command over her personal life and unable to shed her star persona, Rose turns to alcohol and drugs. Morrison does the same, but for different reasons. For him, when he first becomes a star he wallows in it. Being told by a photographer he is the "God of Rock" adds to his feelings of invincibility. When the band attends an Andy Warhol party, the stoned and drunk Morrison refuses to leave with the band members, who are on their way home to rest up before their big concert the following night. But regardless of why they self-destruct, the heroes eventually try to reconnect to a life they had before becoming famous. To do this:

- (7) The hero seeks comfort in someone who sees the hero as a person and not a star.

As Morrison and Rose try to regain their lives, they connect with someone who has no interest in them as star but as a person struggling to make it the world. Rose establishes a relationship with Houston, a limousine driver gone AWOL from the Army. Through him, Rose feels alive once again and has all the hopes of a peaceful future. Like Rose, Morrison struggles with what to make of his star status and finds comfort in those who appreciate him simply for what he is. On various occasions throughout the film, Morrison retreats from the stage and his star role by connecting with his long-time girlfriend Pam. And when this relationship is not enough for him, he takes a mind trip with a spiritual mystic who exposes him to altered states of consciousness where the depths of humanity are found.

Connecting to a community member to figure how to navigate the world of stardom parallels the previous plots as well. In all cases, it is someone outside of the industry that the hero turns to for guidance. This is significant for while these rock stars may have achieved fame, they have not figured out how to take control of their own lives. For this reason, the hero is weak.

While they find temporary respite in these relationships and are presented the chance for redemption:

(8) The hero rejects this person.

Instead of following the wisdom of the community members, something the heroes in the previous plots did, the heroes here reject it. This makes the hero that much more isolated from others and society. Because they cannot figure out how to be strong and join society:

(9) The hero engages in more self-destructive behavior.

The hero becomes increasingly wary of being a rock star, now fully recognizing its limits but yet continuing to depend on it. Morrison's awareness of rock and roll as a cultural production versus some spiritual avenue is well captured when he talks about the shallowness of fans and the consequences of keeping pace with the industry's requirements for performing and recording. Even though he feels this way and therefore has every reason to leave it behind, he continues to return to the stage. This is true of Rose as well, a falling rock star who gets direction only by stepping into her rock star role. When she takes the stage, often in a frazzled and confused state, she forgets about her personal demons and comes alive. But when she leaves the stage, the problems return.

After rejecting the person who can show the hero a way back to a somewhat normal existence, the conflicted hero returns to self-destructive behavior, this time with dire consequences. Morrison makes an attempt, albeit brief, to get back to conventionality. He reconnects with Pam, reassuring her he has left various vices behind. But later that night at a party Pam throws, Morrison spirals out of control. While she talks about how he can make new attempts in publishing his poetry, he gets drunk and pulls a carving knife on Pam, challenging her to kill him with it. With Pam in tears, Morrison leaves. In the ensuing weeks and months this rock star falls deep into booze and drugs, getting fat, lazy, and gains a comical disposition about rock's potential to be liberating force. Like Morrison, Rose seeks comfort in someone who knows her as a person and not a star. This she finds in Houston. When feeling pressured and out of sorts, she turns to Houston. In addition to this relationship, Rose returns to her hometown. Her hopes of retreating home and being honored by the community are shattered when a storeowner fails in recognizing who she is and a guy at a bar ridicules her for getting intimate with the high school football team years back. When Houston rescues her from these cruel comments by pulling her off the stage, she gets enraged. Houston leaves her by the roadside and Rose becomes lost.

Neither Morrison nor Rose can find a way back into society without being a rock star. Morrison has a nervous breakdown and takes off with Pam for Europe to get away from it all. Rose no longer has Houston and remains estranged from her parents. This leaves her alone and alienated in the world. For both heroes, the rock star life is all they now know but this life where there is nothing but hardships, self-destruction, and no real purpose for living can be found. Out of desperation, the hero indirectly takes his or her own life and:

(10) The hero dies.

(11) The hero is remembered.

In both films the hero self-destructs and then is remembered with some reverence by loved ones and fans. Compared to the revival plot: tragedy version, these heroes never overcome personal obstacles. Instead, their struggles over the competing demands of stardom and personal desire never get resolved.

To reiterate the narrative functions of the self-destruction plot.

(1) The hero seeks to join society.

(2) The hero discovers a valuable talent.



- (3) The hero reveals this talent to the community.
- (4) The hero achieves star status.
- (5) The hero becomes disillusioned or conflicted about being a hero.
- (6) The hero engages in self-destructive behavior.
- (7) The hero seeks comfort in someone who sees the hero as a person and not a star.
- (8) The hero rejects this person.
- (9) The hero engages in more self-destructive behavior.
- (10) The hero dies.
- (11) The hero is remembered.

### **Binary Oppositions: Self-Destruction Plot**

The question regarding the *inside society/outside society* opposition is how well integrated is the hero with society. With reconciliation and personal revival plot films, the hero completes the journey by finding a place inside of society. This is not true of the self-destructive hero who, while alive, always remains outside of society.

Morrison tries to be conventional by pursuing a film degree but his dark philosophical nature puts him outside of even this community where diversity of thought is usually applauded. Although there's no coverage of Rose's early years, her distanced relationship with her parents and her sexually promiscuous high school days leave her outside of society, regardless of her rock star status. Without a place in the conventional order, both characters turn to music to have a place where they fit in and have some personal power. But while they may believe becoming a cultural icon will give them notoriety and provide a way to be a functional member of a society, when they get there they realize its shortcomings. The pressures of concert dates, recording contracts, and the demands of the fans weigh on the hero, forcing the hero to reevaluate being a rock star. Neither hero gains the courage to enter conventional society. And ultimately this position outside of society proves too much for even the hero. While they remain outside of society throughout the films, both heroes are posthumously immortalized and as a consequence are accepted by society.

Because of this plot's narrative structure, the *good/bad* opposition is coded in distinct ways. When the industry is represented in the two previous plots, it is generally characterized as bad. The executives' and managers' exploitative tactics take the hero for a ride until eventually the hero recognizes it and fights for a way to make stardom work. With the self-destruction plot, the hero is to blame for personal problems resulting from being a rock star. This comes through in both films where the managers eventually get fed up with the hero's escapades and threaten to

walk away. This is the first time in these films where the industry personnel are put into roles which force the audience to recognize the job of managing out of control rock stars is filled with its own set of problems. This leaves the "bad" character as the heroes themselves, or at least one part of them. But they are not bad because they are greedy. Instead they are bad because they trade personal relationships and their own talents as gifted musician in for stardom.

In relationship to the *strong/weak* opposition, the previous plots' heroes were always strong by the completion of their journey. Here, despite their abilities to enthrall the fans, Morrison and Rose are fundamentally weak. Once Morrison reaches his "God of Rock" position, he quickly gets lost in a triangle of vice – sex, drugs, and booze. Whether the vices or his inability to work within the record industry bring Morrison down, he only rarely tries to do something about it. When the drugs, alcohol, and performance schedule get to be too much for Morrison, he retreats back to Pam, promising himself and others he is turning over a new leaf. Momentarily he makes the break but he is too weak to find his way in the conventional world and quickly puts himself back into despair. His weakness is contrasted with his band members. At one point the band members get tired of it all and confront the tattered Morrison, telling him they used drugs to expand their minds and not escape, and that while Morrison talks about loving pain he runs from it every chance he gets. This leaves Morrison weak, unable to face either his own fears or rise above the pressures of being a cultural god. This is characteristic of Rose as well, who like Morrison is neither strong enough to battle personal demons nor wise enough to know how to make the rock star role work. Rose frequently talks about giving it all up but in the end she is never strong enough to join conventional society. Her weaknesses eventually gets the better of her as she loses herself further and further in heroin, booze, and her lonely self.

In the previous plots, the hero resolves the *authenticity/fabrication* opposition in favor of authenticity. Neither Rose nor Morrison wins this struggle. Instead, they continue their involvement with the industry despite their protests about it all. Tired from the road and the draining performances, Rose asks her manager for a break but it is no use. With a contract to fulfill and a star position to maintain, Rose is forced either give it up or concede. With no direction and without the strength to exert her star power, Rose does the later. *The Doors* works through this struggle more dynamically. Here, Morrison starts out as truly authentic. Walking the streets and beaches of Los Angeles, Morrison is filled with a poetic drive. Whether it is with his soon-to-be girlfriend Pam or at the UCLA Film School, he asserts who he is and not who

others want him to be. Initially, this same drive is present when he takes the stage as a contemporary shaman. As he becomes revered as a god, Morrison begins to feel the draining power of the industrialization and commodification of rock. Where he once resisted the pressures to conform, such as when he forcefully violated the request to not say "higher" on national television, Morrison loses his strength to fight it. Like Rose, he becomes trapped in the role of rock star, not wanting to leave it behind and yet dissatisfied with what it's all about.

Of the oppositions, it is perhaps *rebellion/conformity* that has the most significance. Morrison and Rose are rebellious to a fault. Because they buck authority when they can, they lose personal relationships and the support of their managers. This leaves them alone and isolated. And ultimately it is one factor in their tragic deaths. But a question that must be answered is: what were they rebelling against? In the case of reconciliation plot films, the hero goes up against traditional values. For revival plot films, it is for self-preservation. Here, both heroes rebel, in part, because that is what fans expect. They then become trapped by the expectations of others and do what they so adamantly opposed – conform.

They were endowed with great gifts. Yet they ended up paying the ultimate price for their rebellion. These fictionalized accounts of 1960s/1970s rock stars who lived tragic lives are the first and only 'rock star' films with a self-destruction narrative. Morrison and Rose made excellent subjects for film because through their stories the rebelliousness of the 1960s, including its consequences, could be used as an object lesson for a morality tale.

### **Self-Destruction Plot: Historical Context and Ideological Content**

Jim Morrison's life, as retold in book form<sup>7</sup> and on the screen, is about an individual seeking enlightenment while living in a conformist and materialistic culture. In the beginning of the film, Morrison is the most personable and strong. After telling Manzarek that "we gotta make the myths" they create a band. The Dionysian Morrison firmly believes that through music he can draw upon ancient themes, take his place at the alter-stage, and as in the title of Aldous Huxley's (1954) book, open "The Doors of Perception." As the band gains cult status, it all comes at Morrison too fast. Unable to deal with the pressures, he ends up in a downward spiral of drugs, heaving boozing, and festering anger. He becomes disenchanted with it all, now recognizing that being a rock star is death.

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<sup>7</sup> For a detailed biographical account of Morrison, read *No One Here Gets Out Alive* by Danny Sugerman and Jerry Hopkins (1980). For a history of The Doors, John Densmore's *Riders on the Storm: My Life with Jim Morrison and The Doors* (1990) is a good source.

For this analysis, and as in the previous biographical films, the issue is not the film's historical accuracy. It is true that Morrison believed he was a "lizard king" who "could do anything" and that to some extent he regarded himself as a high priest who could help his followers find a way to a higher state of consciousness. It is also true that he became fixed on drugs and dove deep into the bottle. But what is of greater concern here is how these events are framed and why certain events are either privileged or omitted. Unlike the other biographical films, this one tries to situate the audience in the time period by flashing staple images from key events of the period and contrasting the optimistic early 1960s with its turbulent late 1960s/early 1970s counterpart. If anything, this film communicates that what destroyed Morrison defies simple causal explanations; it was a combination of strained family relations, self-indulgence in alcohol, drugs, and women, personal existential angst, the pressures of being a cultural icon, and a disillusionment with society and its institutions.

### **Intergenerational Theme**

In contrast to reconciliation and personal revival plot films, neither of the self-destruction films include much commentary on intergenerational conflicts. Differences in the age of the targeted audience are perhaps one explanation for this absence. This is especially true of *The Doors*, a film more specifically geared to "baby-boomers." For films more specific to the youth, the absence of intergenerational conflict possibly signifies that either (1) the contemporary problems facing youth are other things besides parents or (2) youth have achieved enough independence from parental controls that such a theme is of minimal significance.

### **Individual versus Industry Theme**

The problems associated with stardom are a central theme in these films. As they rise to fame, the industry and fans directly and indirectly pressure the rock star to be void of individual agency by only representing it. Initially Morrison believes rock and its fans is a gateway to a better, more introspective world. Because of his idealistic notions about what being a rock and roll star entails, he set himself up for personal anguish.

As both Morrison and Rose get to the top, they cause serious problems for those trying to manage them. In both films, at a certain point industry representative threaten to walk away from it all. This underscores that while stardom strains the rock and roll star it creates a different set of problems for those who have to clean up after them.

As symbolized in Neil Young's lyrics "it's better to burn out than to fade away," rock and roll stars are to live life on the edge. And this heightened individualistic spirit where there is no tomorrow only today, is exactly what the heroes in these two films personified. Like Morrison, what makes Rose popular among fans is her defiance of authority and conservative norms. When on stage she is in command, as signified by her ability to work the crowd, take control of the stage, and go up against anyone who tells her she cannot do something. But backstage, she is weak and lost. Released in 1979, this film stands in stark contrast to another film about a seminal rocker, *The Buddy Holly Story* (1978). Undoubtedly this is in part due to the starkly different lives of Janis Joplin and Buddy Holly and the times in which they lived. While there are other factors, that *The Rose* did markedly better at the box-office (\$29.2 million in sales) compared to *The Buddy Holly Story* (\$12.8 million in sales) is perhaps because audiences in the 1970s were more intrigued by the story of 1960s rebellious female rock star who rises to the top only to self-destruct versus the polished images of the 1950s All-American boy.

### **Gender Theme**

Morrison and Rose stand as two representative images of 1960s gendered norms revered by counter-culture youth. Morrison is a continuation of the 1950s youth culture and its anti-heroes such as Marlon Brando, James Dean, and Elvis Presley. When Brando replies in *The Wild One* (1953) to the question about what he is rebelling against with "Whatdya got?," it is a statement as relevant to him as it is to Morrison. As with these heroes, Morrison captures the anti-authority posture, male bravado and forceful rejection of middle-class materialism. But whereas the former characters end up successfully revolting, Morrison gets lost in various sinful pleasures and falls. As a male cultural hero of the 1960s, Morrison's masculine self isolated him from fans, friends, and family. His decadent lifestyle of sex and drugs, in the final analysis, make him impotent and take him down. In contrast to Morrison, Janis Joplin challenged, rather than tried to live up to, traditional gender norms. During the 1960s liberated women role models were difficult to find in the political and business arenas. But in the realm of popular culture, such women existed. Whereas the likes of Gloria Steinem and Betty Freidan challenged gender codes in literature and academia, Joplin did so on stage despite limitations of working within organizational constraints. While she was not acting as a spokesperson for women's rights, it could be argued that she challenged and changed women's roles in society as much as the more

politically organized feminists. The difference between Joplin and recording artists who proceeded her is well captured in the following statement.

Female singers of the 1950s and 1960s such as Connie Francis and Brenda Lee were stereotypically cute and sexy. The 1960s girl rock groups, such as the Shirelles and Ronettes, had beehive hair and high heels but projected a similar, if updated, cute sexiness. They often sang lyrics because record producers thought dumb was cute. Women folksingers of the 1960s, such as Joan Baez and Judy Collins, were not self-consciously cute and often spoke out on political issues. But they had a saintly image and were not particularly sexual or involved in gender issues. Joplin was a new kind of aggressive female singer who became a unique rock superstar and inadvertently a feminist heroine by crossing gender lines and raising gender issue. (Rodnitzky, 2002: 8)

On and off stage, Joplin "personified the new woman – blunt, straightforward, honest, unfettered, impatient, and brave" (Roxon, 1971: 96). Joplin's 1967 Monterey Pop Festival performance as the lead singer for Big Brother and the Holding Company, revealed the identity politics of the new woman. But while male rockers could get raunchy and sexually explicit, females such as Joplin who did the same were often demonized as lesbians or sluts. While this rock icon represents these changes, virtually none of what she stood for made it in Rydell's *The Rose*. Only one scene in the movie does Midler take a strong stance against patriarchal values. Before she lights into a spirited rendition of "When a Man Loves a Woman," Midler tells an eager crowd that because she was born a woman she has always been drawn to the blues. She tells them about how society tells women how they should act – stay at home, look good, allow your boyfriend or husband to cheat on you, and always be ready to perform. To these norms, she says "fuck this shit." But when she steps off the stage at the end of the show, she becomes a weak woman. Throughout the film she makes desperate efforts to connect to a man. This inability to be independent and strong fails to capture Joplin's life and instead removes from the screen any discussion about the gendered politics of the times and her cultural influences.

### **Race Theme**

Discussions about race relations are totally absent from these films. The rock world of the 1960s counter-culture was largely one dominated by whites, but it was not one without other racial influences. Joplin's influences included Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, Henry Ledbetter, Odetta and other quintessential blues artists. Aside from these sources of inspiration, the cultural climate of the 1960s was one where racial politics were at the forefront. The March on

Washington, race riots, and the rise of black nationalism, as exemplified in soul man James Brown's *Say It Loud (I'm Black and I'm Proud)*, were defining moments of the decade that altered the course of history. Whether intentional or not, this exclusion to a certain extent marginalizes minorities who followed these artists and those who watched films about their lives.

### **Temptation Theme**

Compared to the previous plots, *The Rose* and *The Doors* give significant attention to the consequences of overindulgence in alcohol, drugs, and promiscuous sex. This is partially because both films reflected on 1960s/1970s rock stars who indeed lived life on the edge. It is also reflective of the youth culture and historical context in which rock stars from this time lived. Aside from biographical explanations, that these films deal so blatantly with the alcohol, drugs, and sex is also a statement of the times in which the films were produced. Instead of remembering the 1950s rock musicians as relatively clean-cut, as in *Great Balls of Fire!* or *Buddy Holly Story*, these icons from the counter-culture age are remembered for their entrenchment in alcohol and illicit substances.

The temptations Rose and Morrison faced were a consequence of their star status. As they gained the attention of fans and rose to fulfill the obligations of being a rock star, they became lost in drugs. Unable and unwilling to retreat from this role, they fall further into temptation. Eventually they hit rock bottom. When they do, a friend is there to show them a way out. But instead of heeding the friend's advice, the hero rejects this person – the temptation to be a star was too great to overcome.

### **Summary**

Compared to the previous plots, these two films pose the greatest challenge in drawing substantive conclusions. This is in part due to the fact that only two films fit this narrative structure, the imprint different directors have on film content, and differences in the times they were produced. Because other rock and roll stars lived equally as tragic lives, it is of interest why these narratives are not more commonplace. It is reasoned here that plots where the heroes have little redemptive value do not fit well with American Dream cultural values. Narratives of personal triumph over adversity or where the hero finds a place in society despite personal anti-conformist inclinations give hope, solace, and capture the feel-good desires of audiences. Perhaps the optimistic spirit engrained in the cultural consciousness leaves little room for stories of tragic despair. That both of these films are situated in the 1960s provides a general statement

that it is through this lens of self-destruction that this time period is sometimes viewed. As a final and divergent point, what these films, especially *The Doors*, illustrate is the influence director's have over film content. With *Platoon* (1986), *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989), *JFK* (1991), and *The Doors* (1991), Stone provides a critical look at Vietnam, politics, and popular culture of the 1960s and 1970s. While these films may be somewhat more historically accurate compared to other major Hollywood films, they are not without mythical elements. In a review of *The Doors*, Brown (1991) states that

Continuing his reputation, cemented in "Platoon" and "Fourth of July" (both of which prominently featured Doors music), as the celebrator of '60s sensations and cinematic overload, Stone sets out to mythologize the seminal late-'60s rock band and its charismatic, self-destructive lead singer Jim Morrison, in whose arc the director sees the essence of that decade.

Brown's summary highlights that onto the canvas of Morrison's life were painted the trials and tribulations of the decadent decade.



## Chapter 7

### **The Rejection Plot: The Hero Hangs Up the Saddle**

The final, and most recent, variation in the 'rock star' story is the rejection plot. Unlike the previous plots, the hero in these movies does not find some way to make the system work nor does the hero get lost in the world to the point of self-destruction. Instead, this hero makes it to the top, comes to realize the costs of being a rock star, and consequently rejects the spotlight for a more simple position in society as some nameless yet satisfied musician. As with the self-destruction plot, this narrative structure is only found in two movies. But regardless of the number of films, what makes them striking is how they exemplify some of the social and cultural dynamics of the 1990s. This will become increasingly clear following an overview of the films, their narrative structure, and the dominant ideological positions they contain.

#### **The Rejection Plot Films**

##### **That Thing You Do! (1996)**

This Tom Hanks film gives a retrospective look at the rise and eventual fall of a 1950s/1960s schlock rock band. The beginning of the movie takes place in a Norman Rockwell all-American town where gendered norms are clear, children respect authority, and the citizens kneel before the altar on Sundays. Guy Patterson, the film's central character, works selling goods at his father's store – Patterson's Appliances. After he closes the store at night, he steals away to his basement apartment to play drums to the beats on a jazz record. Day after day Guy goes through this routine and appears quite satisfied. Then one day some local band members come and recruit him to perform at a local talent show. When they show up to the venue, an all female band playing folk music with cellos and guitars is getting booed off the stage. They are followed by a brass band playing some much outdated polka music. Then The Oneders, a four-person band with a Beatles sound and look, take the stage. After their first song starts, Guy gets the band playing at a speedy rock tempo. The band and crowd really get into it. The set ends with the band getting the highest score they can on the applause meter – "Wicked."

The band gets a big break when their song "Do That Thing You Do!" gets played on the radio and draws the attention of a promoter. After naively signing a contract, they head out on the road. Nervous throughout the performance and ill at ease with the equipment, their show flops. But then after the show they meet Mr. White (Tom Hanks), a manager for the big label

PlayTone Records who wants to take them to the top. Under the direction of White, the band changes their name to the "Wonders," gets outfitted in snazzy suits and dark sunglasses, and learns how to properly enter and exit the stage. All these changes work because the next time they perform the audience is all screams. When they reach the top ten on the charts they leave behind the fairs to go to the home of celebrities and rock stars – California.

White arranges for the band to appear and perform in the beach movie *Weekend at Party Pier*. Dressed in Navy uniforms and surrounded by girls dancing in swimsuits, the band, Captain Geech and the Shrimp Shack Shooters, lip sync a song. Uneasy with being paraded around like puppets, Jimmie, the lead singer, questions White and the band on what this all about. Jimmie and Guy become even more enlightened to how they are being used when they cross paths with Sully, the top executive from PlayTone records, and he does not even know who they are.

Taking a break from it all, Guy goes out alone one night to a local jazz club. There he gets the chance to watch Del Paxton, a seasoned jazz icon and one of Guy's heroes, play the drums. After the set, Guy sits down with this accomplished drummer and gets a real life lesson about the business when Paxton tells him "sooner or later something makes you crazy. Money, women, the road, hell man, just time." A little wiser about his celebrity status and the industry, Guy leaves. The next morning when White calls the band together the bass player is nowhere to be found. Pressed for time to rehearse before a performance on national television, White calls in a session musician. The band seriously doubts if someone can just step in and play bass but when this musician starts playing, he blows the band away and drives it home that the Wonders are really out of their league.

After the televised performance, the band breaks apart back stage. Jimmie quits and walks out. Lenny leaves for Las Vegas to marry a blonde bombshell. The only band member left is Guy. After White says to Guy "One hit wonders. It's a very common tale," he lets Guy hang out in the recording studio for a while. As Guy jams out on the drums, a producer walks into the studio and likes what he hears. Del Paxton then walks in, they start to jam and then they record a song. When it is over, Paxton gives Guy a job as a session drummer. Now with a place to be a musician without all the pressures of the industry and stardom, Guy decides to stay in California.

## **Rock Star (2001)**

This movie is about Chris Cole (Mark Wahlberg), a young guy from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania who comes of age in the 1980s and wants to make it as a heavy metal superstar. To make money, Chris works a regular job repairing photocopiers. In his off hours, he plays Steel Dragon songs in a "tribute" band. He takes this role seriously, quickly correcting people who call his group a "cover" band. With the help of his girlfriend Emily Poole (Jennifer Aniston), he goes on a turbulent ride as he rises to fame and discovers being a rock star is not at all the life he often fantasized about.

The movie starts with Chris going to a Steel Dragon concert where he screams along with the lead singer to the group's anthem "Stand Up and Shout." In the parking lot after the show, a member of the rival band the Black Babylon and Chris get into a squabble about what it takes to be a heavy metal star. Chris goes off on this guy from the privileged class who pretends he knows how to be heavy metal. Heavy metal is working class music and not for the wealthy.

Chris's tribute band breaks up after a tiff regarding how the songs should be performed. When depressed about it all, Chris gets a call from Steel Dragon to come to Los Angeles and become the new lead singer. After changing his name to Izzy and changing his public persona, he is ready for the fans. When Izzy takes the stage at his first performance, he is incredibly nervous, falls down the stairs, and is booed by the fans. Rising to the challenge, Izzy gets rowdy, flips off the fans, and then takes a hose out and in an ejaculating posture sprays the crowd. After the song is over, he really wins the audience over when he tells them that "You know, I'm just a regular guy who grew up with the posters of these guys on my wall...and now I'm one of them! That's right, I'm standing here, living proof that if you work hard enough, and you want it bad enough...dreams do come true. So follow your dreams."

After a while the stardom, unbridled sex, and drugs take their toll on Chris and Emily's relationship. As she walks away after a squabble, the road manager, Mats, consoles Chris, telling him that it would never work because he has to live up to the fan's expectation for a sexually uninhibited star. Believing he must either project of certain image or relinquish his star status, he lets Emily go.

Izzy really gets into his role, flaunting his money by buying a Batmobile and becoming reckless by tearing up hotel rooms and driving a motorcycle down a hallway. Feeling confident in his abilities and searching for something more meaningful, Chris writes some new songs.

When he brings them to Kirk, the band's manager, he is rejected. Unsatisfied with this response, Chris steps into the recording booth and sings a new Steel Dragon song the way he wants to. The recording quickly stops. Chris is reprimanded and then concedes. This proves to be Chris's turning point. He now realizes being a rock star is all about an image and not about creative musicianship.

Chris is now disillusioned. Helping him find his way, Mats tells him about how he got started in the business. Prior to being a roadie, he attended a university and married a nice "sweet" girl. Then one day he was going to the bathroom and he became fear struck that his life was all preplanned. Not wanting a conventional life, he left it behind and never turned back. Now his former wife is happily married to a doctor and together they have a wonderful family. After hearing this story, Chris decides to leave his life as a rock star. At the band's next concert, Izzy is physically and emotionally drained. He goes into his mantra about dreams coming true and lets into "Stand Up and Shout." Just like it all started, some young kid out in the audience is wailing along with Chris through the verses. Chris pulls this guy, whose name is Mike but whose friends call him Thor, onto the stage and they sing together. After the song is over, they walk to the side of the stage, Chris hands him the microphone and tells him "It's all yours." Chris walks off the stage and ascends the stair as if walking up towards heaven.

The film ends with Chris taking his place back in society. With his hair cut shorter and wearing regular clothes, Chris performs at a small local club to patrons who want to hear a real musician. The leaflets advertising the show read not Izzy but "Chris Cole." After his show, Emily appears. He tells her he missed her, they kiss, and the film ends.

### **Narrative Structure of the Rejection Plot**

Regardless of plot type, almost all of the rock star heroes start out initially in a low-status position. As they get involved with the recording industry and try to meet the expectations of their fans, the hero struggles to find some personal meaning. And it is here where the rejection plot strikes out along a different trajectory. Instead of successfully mediating the demands of their professional role with their personal life and ambitions, these heroes give it up when they realize their efforts for changing the industry are futile. They could continue in their star role and reap all the benefits it provides, but this is too shallow a life for the hero who wants to be recognized as an artist and not idolized as some pop culture icon. When these heroes leave the

stage, they return to society to live out a peaceful existence and do what they have always been inspired to do – play music.

This plot begins with:

(1) The hero has a low status.

After graduating from high school, Guy Patterson goes to work at his father's appliance store and starts to take on the responsibilities of work and his father's conventional expectations. Not able to display his talent to his father because he would not understand its importance, Guy sneaks away nightly to play his drums. These actions illustrate Guys' general conciliatory nature and passivity. While Chris Cole maintains a more rebellious image, like Guy he has little status. His job as a photocopy repair technician gives him no power over others. The status he attains by playing in a "tribute" band is minimal as the only person who understands its importance is his girlfriend. Finally, he is kicked out of the band he formed. Regardless of their different circumstances, both are trapped in certain roles and seek a way out. In contrast to the reconciliation plot heroes, these heroes are not seeking a way out of any particular economic world. What they seek is the ability to materialize their artistic ambitions. Eventually the moment arises and the hero seizes an opportunity to mark a different course. This happens when:

(2) The hero reveals special skills to the community.

(3) The hero is recruited by the industry.

After graduating from high school, Guy settles down, goes to work for his father, and pushes his musical passions aside. Unlike Guy, Chris continues to pursue being a musician while he works a stable, working class job as a photocopy repairer. Different circumstances put these two heroes on the stage but when they get there they are instantly revered. Guy and his group the Oneders go from performing in a local talent show, to a local club, and then finally to their big break working with a major record label. Pumped up at the Steel Dragon concert, Chris impresses the lead singer with his ability to scream along to the song. Soon after when the band needs to replace this singer, they call upon Chris, invite him to Los Angeles for an audition, and he scores the role as a rock star. For these and many of the previous films, once the heroes reveal their talent they are quickly brought into the fold of the industry.

(4) The hero attains high status.

(5) The hero is exploited by the industry.

When these heroes become major rock stars they initially relish all the fanfare. Still innocent to the industry's ways and not yet feeling the pressures associated with their roles, they simply enjoy it all. After the Wonders sign a major record label contract, they are given, and willingly follow, directives regarding how to dress, perform, and enter and exit the stage. As they move to the top, the manager tightens the screws on the band. At times, one of the band members, the one most dedicated to being a musician and not just a performer, resists their manager's ongoing demands. But that resistance quickly subsides when the manager reminds the band that this is what is required to make the top of the pop charts. This is also true for Chris, a die-hard heavy metal fan who overnight finds himself in a position he dreamed about all through his youth. From the moment he initially takes to the stage, he eagerly conforms to the heavy metal rock star role. While he may not like some aspects of this job, such as the fact his girlfriend is excluded from traveling with the band or that he has to lie to the public about who he is, he concedes. Caught in the moment:

(6) The hero engages in self-destructive behavior.

This narrative function is reflected only in *Rock Star*. For *That Thing You Do!*, Guy never really self-destructs. He does start to question what being a rock star is all about and briefly retreats from it when he seeks comfort by going to an authentic, down-to-the-earth, jazz club, but he does not lose himself in moral improprieties. Rather, he witnesses this self-destructive behavior in his fellow bandmates – each of whom represents a particular "type" of adaptation to stardom. When Chris becomes Steel Dragon's lead singer he starts this process of self-destruction. Unlike some of the other previous films, such as *Great Balls of Fire!*, where it takes a while for stardom to take its toll on the hero, with *Rock Star* stardom and self-destruction are one and the same. The night following his first performance, Chris gets stoned, drunk, and breaks his monogamous relationship by engaging in promiscuous sexual activities. When he awakens, he is confused about the previous night's exploits. But rather than retreating from such behavior he goes on to fall deeper into this abyss. Soon he's not only carrying on with various women and getting tanked on all sorts of substances, he shows no remorse. Enjoying this new lifestyle, he buys glamorous cars, vandalizes property, destroys his body, and pushes away the person who has stood by his side from the moment it all began. At some point, Chris awakens to how his antics are getting in the way of becoming a musician, a person who he really wanted to

be when it all started, and he decides to stop playing this hedonistic rock star role. When this happens:

(7) The hero confronts the industry and fails to gain concessions.

After deciding he wants more out of being a rock star than being a grand imitator, Chris goes to a recording session and talks to the band's manager about performing some new songs he has written. Chris is turned down. Just as Mr. White reminded and reassured dissenting Wonders, Kirk tells Chris the fans only want a certain sound and style, something he must conform to if he wants to be a rock star. Chris is then given a new song written by industry personnel and he steps into the recording booth. When he tries to exert a different voice, one more characteristic of his true self, the recording stops and he is reprimanded for not sticking to the game plan. Rather than putting up a fight, Chris concedes. In making this move of self-assertion and being denied, Chris, for the first time, achieves consciousness about the industry's dogmatic imprint on the artist.

Friends and family are no solace to these heroes as they try to sort out their internal conflict. And neither are industry personnel, whose economic drive prevents any humanistic impulses to surface in order to help the hero. Instead, the hero achieves clarity through connecting with someone experienced and wise to the ways of stardom. This movement and what happens as a result is reflected in the following narrative functions:

(8) The hero seeks comfort in someone with personal experience in the industry.

(9) The hero is taught valuable lessons about the industry and life.

In the previous plots, the heroes often seek comfort in a friend outside of the recording industry who is not a fan. Here, the hero connects with someone who has intimate knowledge of stardom, either because he has been there himself or because he has witnessed it first hand while working as a roadie.

When Guy takes a night off from the Wonders and goes by himself to the jazz club he sits down and talks with the jazz great Del Paxton. Experienced in how being a star can wreak havoc on one's personal life, Paxton the elder gives Guy advice about how to maintain sanity in a system that contradicts its existence. Guy walks away from this encounter and his innocence to it all disappears. A similar course of actions happens for Chris. Put off by his manager's disregard for his creative endeavors as a songwriter, Chris heads to the bar. There he encounters the band's long-time road manager, someone who has stood by and watched various performers

get lost in stardom. He is also a person who once had a nice life laid out all in front of him but gave it up for some false promise that a life on the road with rock stars would bring eternal happiness. As they start to talk, the manager helps Chris realize that conformity and conventionality are not the evil many people may make them out to be. Now aware of what they have become and why, these heroes decide to take a different course. Instead of fighting the system and trying to get it to work for them:

(10) The hero walks away from the industry and stardom.

(11) Society accepts the hero.

Just as it all started for Chris so it ends. After giving the audience his mantra about making all of your dreams come true through hard work and dedication, he lays into Steel Dragon's number one hit "Stand Up and Shout." As he sings this song, a young fan screams along with him. Chris invites him onto the stage and they finish the song as a duo. Chris then hands over the microphone to this eager fan and leaves his star role by walking off the stage. There are no boos from the audience and there is no attempt from the band to pull Chris back into the spotlight. This underscores the fact that it was never Chris on stage but Izzy, a character who dutifully fulfilled the heavy metal rock star persona. The next scene takes place at a small-time coffee shop. Groomed and dressed in conventional clothes, Chris plays his guitar and sings to an intimate group of patrons who want to listen to music and not some fabricated performer. Having found himself and now doing what he really always wanted to do, even if he didn't know it at the time, Chris rejoins society. Helping mark this transition is his reunification with Emily, the girl he always loved but temporarily rejected when he became Izzy. Like Chris, Guy finds his place in the music world by leaving the Wonders and joining a group of jazz session musicians. And like Chris, once he finds his place in society he connects with Faye, a girl who followed the Wonders from their humble beginnings all the way to the top.

To reiterate the narrative functions for the rejection plot:

- (1) The hero has a low status.
- (2) The hero reveals special skills to the community.
- (3) The hero is recruited by the industry.
- (4) The hero attains high status.
- (5) The hero is exploited by the industry.
- (6) The hero engages in self-destructive behavior.
- (7) The hero confronts the industry and fails to gain concessions.
- (8) The hero seeks comfort in someone with personal experience in the industry.



- (9) The hero is taught valuable lessons about the industry and life.
- (10) The hero walks away from the industry and stardom.
- (11) Society accepts the hero.

## **Binary Oppositions: Rejection Plot**

Not until the end of these films is the *inside society/outside* society opposition fully resolved. In *Rock Star* and *That Thing You Do!* the heroes live a conventional existence and yet part of them is outside of society. Guy is conventional for various reasons, including pushing aside his drive to be a musician because it carries no utilitarian value, having a prim and proper girlfriend, and his general good-boy demeanor. But because he does not follow his own ambitions, he fails to fully join society. This is similar to the position Chris finds himself in. His day job repairing copiers marks his place in conventional society but he cannot be truly inside of society until he goes on his epic Odyssey to self-discovery.

These heroes start outside of society because they cannot find their place in the world. Even when they do become stars, despite what they may have thought, this still does not change. Neither Guy nor Chris are satisfied with their daily lives and strive for something different. People try to pull them into conventional society, such as Guy's girlfriend telling him that if he leaves behind his future in the appliance business he will lose her in the process, but their attempts fail. When they get their chance as a performer, they soon find themselves immersed in a world of industry pressures to be someone they are not. Eventually both heroes realize how being a rock star has destroyed their lives and they walk away from it. Not only do they return to society but also they return enlightened and with a true sense of place where they can be who they are and at the same time fit within the social order. This understanding of industry pressures is particularly reflective of the historical conditions in which the films were produced.

Along with the oil embargo, energy crisis, and stagflation of the 1970s, another change was underway that would dramatically impact society – corporate restructuring. Various industries, including airlines, gas and oil, and telecommunications, were deregulated starting in the late 1970s and early 1980s. As a result of deregulation, corporate mergers began as corporate conglomerates sought to increase their profit margins by minimizing their competitors and gaining leverage through the logic of economies of scale. Where once the slogan "What's good for General Motors is good for America" may have fit, by the 1980s it was no longer about America but about the corporation. With globalization and the parallel development of

disorganized capitalism (Lash and Urry, 1987), the average worker lived in an anxious state wondering not if, but when, the next downsizing was coming. While the worker was being squeezed and left neck stretched on the cutting board, top executives experienced significant gains in income and wealth. The gap between the rich and poor that started in the 1970s would continue to grow throughout the remaining years of the century. By the year 2000 the wage ratio between the average CEO and the average worker in the United States would grow to over four hundred to one, by far the largest discrepancy of any country in the modern world. Despite a decline in real wages for the average worker, conspicuous consumption was on the rise. Fed by the proliferation of box stores and factory outlet malls that started in the 1990s, Americans turned to marking their class position through what they owned and publicly displayed. Out of this schizophrenic climate came both a rising consciousness of the dehumanizing aspects of transnational corporations and a turn away from the greedy business world. Culture, especially youth culture, was shifting to a rediscovery of the authentic in this time of the computer-simulated and market-driven world. The heroes in the rejection plot symbolize this move. No longer do they search for a place within the industrial order but rather a place in society more removed from materialistic values and systems of rationality.

Coding of the *good/bad* opposition is also reflective of the above changes in culture. Regardless of whether he sells appliances or performs on stage, Guy is good to the core. When he rejects his father's ideas about his future, the audience can forgive him for trying to make a life that is his own. Furthermore, as he takes the ride to the top, he never goes against Mr. White and never succumbs to the material and hedonistic pleasures associated with being a star. And in the end he returns to society fully embracing conventional values. Like Guy, Chris is good. Neither concerned about money nor engaging in destructive vices, Chris is a hard working, driven and committed young man. While Chris loses his way in temptations, it's due to his innocence, not some pathological character flaw. After he awakens to what the industry really wants from him, he leaves this life behind. Therefore, for these heroes what is good is the non-material world, one where they engage in their trade not for monetary gain and status but because of its authenticity.

In terms of industry representatives, they are also not bad. In *Rock Star* the band's manager refuses Chris's attempts to bring in his own sound. But this does not necessarily make him bad. This is true of the Wonders' manager as well. While it is true that Mr. White is truly

only concerned about taking the band to the top, he is only doing his job. In characterizing him in this way, the business side of making records and producing stars gets depersonalized and taken-for-granted. If neither industry personnel nor the rock star are bad, then who is? As was the case for the previous plot, bad is represented at a more general level – stardom.

In relationship to the *strong/weak* opposition, the heroes begin and end their journeys in different places. Initially, both Guy and Chris are strong – Guy for stepping out on his own and Chris for standing up to his "tribute" band and others who do not take his driving passion seriously. After their strength pays off and they become stars, they become weak. Guy concedes to White's directives even though he increasingly questions what being a pop star is really all about. Chris becomes more clearly weak as he forgets who he really is and becomes who the industry wants him to be. In the end, they reclaim their strength. After leaving the Wonders and Steel Dragon, Chris and Guy return to society with a new direction. By finding a way to play music and not get lost in the fanfare, these heroes are stronger than ever.

While all the previous plots wrestle with the vacillating oppositions of *authenticity/fabrication*, this is the only plot where it is the narrative structure's centerpiece. Both heroes start out faithful that the industry unquestionably rewards those with creative music genius. Idealistic about it all, the hero is slow to realize the industry's true purpose. At some point and only after they attempt to assert their will, these heroes realize that it has been about fabrication from the very start. When Steel Dragon's lead singer gets fired and comically reveals that he is bald, overweight, and gay, Chris should become aware that is all about the image. On various occasions he is given this message but shuffles it aside believing that for him it will be different. After he writes his own songs and is reminded that he must follow the dictates of the industry and fans, he finally accepts it. And just like Guy, when this occurs he is left really with only one choice – to leave the fabricated world of stardom and return to the authentic world as a creative, independent musician.

The final opposition is *rebellion/conformity*. While Guy "rebels" against his father and associated ways of life, it would be inaccurate to code this as rebellion. Guy neither confronts nor distances himself from his father; rather he simply follows his personal ambitions. In no other relationship or way does Guy rebel. In general the same holds true for Chris. Although he becomes entrenched in the various vices associated with rock stardom, his intent is not to rebel. Rather, he conforms to the norms of the situation he finds himself in. In the end, both heroes

walk away from their star status. But because they do not forcefully declare their independence, it is a quiet form of rebelling against industrial constraints. This action by these heroes is significant for it signifies for others as well that rather than rebelling against prevailing social structures it is better to leave it alone and find a different place in the world where individuals are accepted for who, and not what, they are.

### **Rejection Plot: Historical Context and Ideological Content**

In both *That Thing You Do!* (1996) and *Rock Star* (2001) the heroes reject the industry to find a place where they can play their music on their own terms. As stated above, this turning away from big corporations and seeking involvement in local culture is representative of some of the things that were changing in the 1990s. Anti-consumerism was growing. While it started in the 1960s, culture jamming and advertisement parodies came back into the spotlight. Naomi Klein's *No Logo* (2000) added fuel to this fire. Outside of popular culture, some took to the streets to make their voices heard regarding globalism, consumerism, and the abuses of Western powers. In 1999, between 50,000 and 100,000 protested in Seattle, Washington about the World Trade Organization and its oppressive policies. This activism was also found in the fair trade movement, a heightened concern about genetically modified foods (Frankenfood), and a host of other issues seeking to reclaim a seemingly more pure way of life. For youth not engaging in political struggles, some found a place in the house of the lord. Christian youth culture was rejuvenated in ways reminiscent of the 1970s and the productions of *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Godspell*. While Contemporary Christian Music (CCM) never disappeared following the 1970s, it was fairly quiet until the late 1980 and 1990s. The Christian pop music icon Amy Grant helped to catapult Christian music to the mainstream. Her 1985 song "Find a Way" became the first Christian song to make it onto Billboard's Top 40. By the early 1990s, Christian pop had crossed over to rock. Alternative Christian rock bands such as *Lost Dogs*, *Starflyer 59* and *Joy Electric* became a part of the youth Christian counter-culture scene. What these events indicate is that culture was moving away, to some degree, from materialism to politics and religion. And like the heroes of these two movies, the move was to local culture where authenticity could be found.

### **Intergenerational Theme**

Likely because the film addresses rock and roll of the 1950s/1960s, *That Thing You Do!* provides various commentary on intergenerational tensions. Mr. Patterson, an appliance store

proprietor, embodies the spirit of the Protestant work ethic. Morally principled, hard working, and god-fearing, Mr. Peterson is appalled when he reads an advertisement for a shoe polisher kit. For him this represents how lazy the American people have become, for they need a kit to do something as basic as giving up a little elbow grease to make the shoes shine. Further into the paper, he reads an ad for a big box store competitor. When finished, he says: "Open Saturday ten to ten. Open Sunday twelve to six... open on Sunday from twelve to six! You know, I don't believe I want to live in a country where you stay open on Sunday to do business. You shouldn't have to work on Sunday to support your family." Because Mr. Patterson looks to the past, he dismisses Guy's drive to go on tour with the "Wonders." Unlike Guy, Chris gets no flack from his parents about performing in a rock band. In fact, the parents support him by passing out fliers for the band and helping to recruit people for their shows. Rather than getting the third degree from his parents, Chris gets it from his older brother, a straight and narrow security guard. The brother misunderstands Chris, ridicules his pursuit of living out a "rock star fantasy," and comes down on him for being gay, doing drugs, and engaging in general delinquency.

### **Individual versus Industry Theme**

Of all the plots, this one deals the most with the fabricated world of the recording industry. This is possibly a reflection of the issues introduced earlier as well as changes in the production of music. With computer technologies, globalism, and increased marketing towards youth, various boy and girl bands became smashing successes. Under the leadership of Maurice Star, New Kids on the Block transformed pop culture overnight. (As a side note, one member of this boy group [Donnie Wahlberg] was the brother of the hero in *Rock Star*). Where the New Kids, Debbie Gibson, and Tiffany left off in the late 1990s, Britney Spears, Jessica Simpson, NSYNC, and the Backstreet Boys picked up. Despite their bubble-gum pop sounds, they left their impact on the global culture. The mass commodification of such bands produced its counterpart – those in search of the real, the authentic.

Of all of the plots, this is the only one where the tension between authenticity and fabrication is the central issue. It is dealt with in various ways but almost always in ways that catch the hero off guard. When Chris Cole and Emily make it to Los Angeles, they are picked up in a limousine by a one of Steel Dragon's hospitality staff. As they drive to the mansion, this staff member turns to Emily and asks her whether her breasts are real. This statement is not only about how the West Coast symbolizes Baudrillard's postmodern simulated reality but it is also a

statement of how image drives the culture industry. A few moments later in the film, Chris meets the band's lead singer, Bobby Bears. Bears gives him the third degree about being a rock star, that it is not just about the presentation but authenticity. Not a second later, Bears takes off his wig, shows his balding head, and reveals his gay identity. So it is about image after all. This world of fabrication is the same one that Guy ends up in. From getting directives on how to dress and perform to how their names get changed when they appear on a television show, this film is centrally one about the production of notorious "one-hit" wonders, those bands that people look back on with nostalgic guffaws.

In *Rock Star* Chris wants nothing more than to be the next heavy metal star. He dresses and acts out the part. Before going to the concert, he gets dressed and stands next to a life size cardboard cut-out of his Steel Dragon hero to make sure he's got the look. He has the routine down so well that during the show the lead singer is shocked by what appears to be an echo from the lively crowd. Of course it is no echo, just Chris yelling and screaming along. When Chris does take to the stage for the first time, he tells the audience the following:

You know, I'm just a regular guy who grew up with the posters of these guys on my wall...and now I'm one of them! That's right, I'm standing here, living proof that if you work hard enough, and you want it bad enough...dreams do come true. So follow your dreams.

By the end of the film he realizes the flaws in this mantra. After he decides to give up being a rock star, he passes the torch onto another young kid who was just like he once was.

### **Gender Theme**

In all of these films, someone on the outside helps anchor the hero to the conventional world. When all of the movies for the all the plots are compared, only on one occasion, *The Rose*, is this person a man. Undoubtedly this is due to the fact that most of the heroes are male. But when compared to the role these support characters fulfill, a clear distinction arises. In the case of *The Rose*, Rose's boyfriend Houston is there to help her become strong, independent. For the male rock stars, girlfriends and spouses are most often the person who nurtures the hero when he is down and tries to move him towards a more conventional existence. The weak and fallen woman more common to movies from the 1950s and before (such as in *King Creole*) are no longer present.

With the exception of three films (*Loving You*, *Jailhouse Rock*, and *The Jazz Singer*), women are never in management positions. This is partially reflective of a relatively high

proportion of men working in the industry. And this would be even truer of the recording industry in the 1950s and 1960s.

In comparing *That Thing You Do* and *Rock Star*, differences in how the male rock star is characterized are apparent. Guy represents the clean-cut 1950s/1960s young male growing up along Mainstreet, USA. He is neither interested in sex nor consumed by alcohol and drugs. While illicit substances were not as present in the 1950s as they were in the late 1960s and after, they were still around. By not incorporating substance use into the story, the 1950s and Guy are preserved as a wholesome time. The opposite is true of Chris who is surrounded by forbidden fruit the moment he enters the rock world. This world was indeed different from the one 1950s rock stars experienced but it is a significant focus of *Rock Star*, providing a statement that either this is how the rock star life is often remembered and/or what people want this world to represent.

### **Race Theme**

Like many of the previous films, these provide no direct commentary about either racial minorities or interracial dynamics. As previously stated, this is in part due to the demographic profile of the rock star and rock audience. Since general conclusions about the representation of race in the rock star film are made in the following chapter, no other comments are made here.

### **Temptation Theme**

Whereas the heroes in both of these films are tempted by stardom, only in *Rock Star* do alcohol, drugs, and sex tempt the hero. Like the other films depicting the lives of 1950s/early 1960s rock musicians, *That Thing You Do!* leaves out such vices. As previously stated, representing rock stars from that time in this manner reflects the fact that (1) such vices were present during that time but not to the degree that they were starting in late 1960s and (2) films about musicians from this time are often from a nostalgic viewpoint. In *Rock Star*, it is clear that the world of the rock star is one of "sex, drugs, and rock and roll." This is also a world of the male youth fantasy and its associated temptations. But instead of giving in to these temptations to the point of no return, the *Rock Star* hero eventually recognizes their limitations. While both of the revival plot films are distinct in what temptations confront the hero and where there hero is historically located in the production of music, both have a common underpinning – they realize that the world of the rock star is a fabricated one. And for Chris Cole in *Rock Star* this includes

becoming aware that engaging in promiscuous sex and drugs are indeed not about rebellion but conformity to industry standards and fan desires.

## Summary

Whatever term is used – late capitalism, post-industrialism, postmodernism, they all address in different ways the 1970s and a cultural climate of escalating consumerism and corporate disenchantment. If the 1950s institutional order provided direction and was a sign of prosperity and progress<sup>8</sup>, by the 1980s corporate downsizing, buyouts, and an awareness of the myth of technological progress caused a move in the opposite direction. Some turned to alternative healing methods, organic foods, and eclectic places of worship for meaning and purpose. As evidenced by these rejection plot heroes, climbing the status ladder is recognized as inadequate for finding meaning and purpose. Rather than joining the industry, the hero walks away from it and finds purpose and meaning in the simple things in life. It's as if the hero, like others in society at the time, is walking in the shadows of Richard Carlson and Marianne Williamson<sup>9</sup> when they sit down to play music for the simple joy of it.

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<sup>8</sup> For a good discussion of how Disneyland and the fast food industry in their early days embodied the spirit of the times, read Eric Schlosser's (2001) *Fast Food Nation*.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Carlson is the author of the popular press book *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff...and It's All Small Stuff* (1997). Writing about similar spiritual matters was Marianne Williamson in her book titled *Mirianne Williamson on Simplicity* (1997).



## **Chapter 8**

### **Results and Conclusions**

In the present study, structural analysis and critical theory were used to analyze films about rock stars. The overall focus was on identifying and analyzing their narrative structures and ideological positions. Will Wright's structural study of Westerns (1975) provided the orienting framework for understanding how films reflect social currents and marketplace values. The general questions asked in this study included the following:

- What is the narrative structure of these mythological stories?
- How does the narrative structure change across time?
- To what extent do changes in narrative structure reflect political and cultural change?
- What ideological positions are common in the films?
- How do these positions change across time?

The conclusion is organized by first going through each of the identified plots and discussing their narrative structure and ideological components. This includes comparing commonalities and differences across the identified plots. After summarizing my findings regarding narrative structure and ideology, limitations and directions for future research are provided.

#### **Conclusions Regarding Narrative Structure**

Film narratives contain valuable information for sociologists. In an article titled "Narrative Analysis – Or Why (And How) Sociologists Should Be Interested in Narrative," Franzosi (1998) defends the value of such research. In this article, Franzosi analyzes a brief narrative about Neville, a man who becomes homeless after being kicked out of the house by his wife. In commenting on this narrative, Franzosi (1998: 547) states:

Narrative analysis has brought out relationships between people – texts do not just index a relation between words and between texts, but between a text and social reality. Sociology has crept in behind linguistics. Neville's simple (and perhaps, fictitious) narrative has sparked our sociological imagination; it has allowed us to get a glimpse of the broad social relations (especially of gender and class) of British society at the turn of the second millennium.

Narratives contain 'data' regarding the relationship between individuals and society. In conducting narrative analyses of texts, attending to the historical context in which a film was produced is essential. The methods utilized in this study worked to achieve this objective.

In each of the identified plots, the hero starts off with little status and in the end is immortalized. But the process of the hero's journey is unique to each narrative structure. Of the plots identified here, four are particularly reflective of the historical context in which the films were produced. The one not clearly fitting a time period is the self-destruction plot. A twelve-year span separates these two films (*The Rose* in 1979 and *The Doors* in 1991). The remaining plots are more clearly reflective of specific time periods. The two plots with the greatest contrast are the reconciliation plot and rejection plot. In the former, the hero ends up mediating the competing demands of working class and professional values. The rejection plot hero discovers the fabricated world of the culture industry, leaves it, and returns to society as an authentic musician. It should also be noted that films fitting these two plots were produced in relatively close historical proximity to each other. While narrative structures may span long time periods, as Wright (1975) discovered for Westerns, that these narratives were common to a particular time provides supporting evidence for a connection between these narratives and the historical context. Personal revival plot films cross time periods. The first appeared in 1978 (*The Buddy Holly Story*) and the last in 1997 (*Selena*). It was argued that this revival theme reflects a shift in cultural interest from the political to the psychological that gained momentum in the 1970s and 1980s. Instead of speaking to changing cultural conditions of a specific time period, as was the case for reconciliation plot and rejection plot films, this narrative represents a shift in values that continues to this day.

### **The Reconciliation Plot**

Of all the plots identified here, this is the only one where the hero's class background is important to the story. In these films, the working class hero starts outside of society. When he discovers music, it is used not as a means to achieve stardom, but rather to leave behind a working class life. When he initially becomes involved with the industry, he is innocent of how it operates and as a consequence is easily manipulated. This portrayal of the youth as innocent and organizations as having little regard for the welfare of others is found in various other films from the same time period, including *The Wild One* (1954), *Blackboard Jungle* (1955), *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), and *High School Confidential* (1958). They reflect both the rise in youth culture and Hollywood's anti-hero of the 1950s.

Following the end of World War II in 1945, the United States emerged as the new global superpower. The end of the war also signaled the beginnings of a long period of economic

growth. With economic prosperity, suburbanization, increased matriculation in higher education, technological advancements, and new management strategies into the business arena, many areas of social life changed. Of particular relevance to these films were the changes going on in youth culture. During this time a youth culture gained prominence and Hollywood moved to capture it. The culture industry capitalized on youth and their newly discovered purchasing power. In addition to providing partial explanations for the 'youth as hero' films that started during this time, these changes also provide a basis for understanding the form and content of the films themselves. As this new order developed, youth were left in a transitory position between the values of the industrial past and those of the managerial future. Just as some of the beatnik youth were rebelling against the conformity and conservatism of the times, so were Hollywood's youth heroes. But rather than leaving society, these heroes find a way to fit into the new structural demands.

As the post-WWII economy changed to one more dominated by a managerial professional class, working class youth were required to develop new skills. While the working class world is portrayed as a jungle in the films, so too is the professional order. The professionalized adults in this world are often either pathologically passive or greedy. To survive, the working class hero has to find a way to be neither selfish nor submissive. Of course, the hero does find a way to be humane and righteous in the marketplace and as a result shows for others how this can be accomplished.

### **The Personal Revival Plot**

Almost two decades passed between the Elvis films and those of the personal revival plot. By this time the youth culture had moved past its 1960s counter-culture politicization. Marches for the civil rights of racial minorities, women, and gay and lesbians were abating, and debates over the Vietnam War were cooling down.

What distinguishes the personal revival plot from the reconciliation plot is that the hero does not turn to music as vehicle for status. Instead, the hero is born with natural abilities. But despite this prodigious talent, the hero must overcome various personal struggles in order to take the stage. And because this is accomplished in all cases, the hero is immortalized. On their road to stardom personal problems such as abusive relationships, struggles in coping with industry pressures, bad family history, and general existential angst haunt them. While these heroes initially hope their star status will erase the past, they soon discover that such hope is constantly

elusive. Eventually they confront the past, become self-actualized, and are immortalized as a cultural hero.

This narrative structure fits well with the "me" generation and its fascination with pop psychology. Following the 1960s counter-culture movement and the liberal politics of the times came a return of conservatism. Starting with Nixon, the "law and order" President, and continuing with Reagan and his Moral Majority, more attention shifted from liberal critiques of structural inequities to an affirmation of rugged individualism. The worried "silent majority" wanted to forget the great social movements of the 1960s and the social upheavals they evoked. The recession of the 1970s gave way to greater economic stability and along with Reagan's trickle-down economics an increasing divide between the have and the have-nots. Such societal changes are reflected in the journey of the revival plot hero.

These films affirm that what prevents any of us from achieving our destiny is our inability to deal with our troubled personal pasts and moral improprieties. By the 1980s the self-esteem movement and associated psychobabble became part of the dominant discourse about how to make one's way in the world. David G. Myers, in a *Psychology Today* article (1992: 38), stated that "during the 1980s, no topic in psychology was more researched than the self." In *Culture of Complaint – The Fraying of America* (1993: 107), Robert Hughes made the point that "America in the late 1980s and early 1990s is a polity obsessed with therapies and filled with distrust of formal politics." What these authors and others indicate is that during this time the struggles moved away from addressing societal structures to personal ones. The pop psychology movement, so aptly illustrated by the phenomenal success of the modern day confessional found on *The Phil Donahue Show* and other similar programs, also underscores a cultural move from questions about political power to psychiatry and the miracles of psychotropic medications.

In the reconciliation plot films the heroes' struggles are not psychological in nature. For reconciliation plot films there are two central conflicts, one generational and the other concerning struggles with industry pressures. The differences between *King Creole* and *The Jazz Singer* provide a good comparative example of what separates these two plots. In both films, the hero and his father represent opposing sets of values, with the traditionalist parent trapped by the past and the progressive hero searching to find his way in the modern world. While in both cases the hero and his father butt heads, it is framed differently in each case. Danny and Mr. Fisher's relationship is strained but the film does not focus on what is wrong with their relationship.

Rather, it is about Danny exerting his independence and discovering how to be a strong man in a professional order. In contrast, *Jazz Singer* gives the audience an introspective look into Jess Rabinovich and his separation from his father.

The representation of race and gender are two other issues meriting discussion. The feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s raised consciousness about patriarchal domination. Through activist efforts women challenged the simple gendered division of labor and as a result gained stronger footholds in higher education and the workforce. Despite these changes, women in most of these films are neither independent nor strong. One reason for this may have to do with the subject of the films themselves. For the films that give a retrospective look at 1950s rockers, both women and men are represented according to the gendered norms of the times. But it would be shortsighted to claim that such representations are historically accurate. Rather, they are about nostalgia for a time when women "knew their place." Two of the personal revival plot films are about female rockers. In both cases, women are given more agency. But in both cases the films focus not on the drive for masculine independence but rather on coming to terms with difficult relationships. Tina Turner does become strong and eventually takes on the abusive Ike, thus illustrating women's ability to be strong, but the structure of the film itself underscores that women's problems are primarily relational. The same is true of Selena as she works through her father-daughter and boyfriend-girlfriend problems. Of these films, *What's Love* and *Selena* are about female minority pop stars. These are also two of the four films where the hero is a racial minority. In the first film, no commentary is given in the film about racial relations inside the industry or in society. Tina's racial status is thus removed from the historical context as she becomes racially homogenized. In contrast, *Selena* does address various challenges facing Mexican Americans. Commentary in the film is made about marginalization, racial identity, discriminatory practices, and white privilege. While it still focuses on the individual struggle instead of structural constraints, *Selena* does give some attention to racial marginalization.

### **The Self-Destruction Plot**

This plot's narrative is fairly self-explanatory – the hero has great gifts but squanders them away while falling prey to temptations. When the self-destruction plot heroes die they are mythologized not for rising above cultural and institutional demands but because their lives were short-circuited. The real rockers behind *The Rose* and *The Doors* – Janis Joplin and Jim Morrison – lived life on the edge. Neil Young's lyrics about Johnny Rotten, the lead singer of

the Sex Pistols, that "it's better to burn out than fade away," is a mantra about how this earthly life should be led. Because of this image of the rock star and because the lives of various musicians tragically ended, including those who fell too far from grace to recover, it was a surprise more films did not follow this narrative structure. This is perhaps due to United States cultural values that emphasize how structural conditions have little relevance to the strong individual who can rise above them.

If *The Rose* is supposed to be loosely based on the real life of gender norm breaking Janis Joplin, it fails to capture any of the spirit Joplin had on and off stage. Instead of representing Rose as a person with a revolutionary spirit, despite her recklessness with drugs, Rose is submissive, dependent on males for her own self-definition, and is weak. Released in 1979, this movie provides neither historical references to the times nor attempts to situate the viewer in the context of the time period. The content of *The Doors* is significantly different. Here the 1960s are neither demonized nor romanticized. The faces of comedy and tragedy encapsulating Jim Morrison are revealed. Rather than glossing over his improprieties, Oliver Stone highlights them for a 1990s audience who had become more interested in the complexities of Morrison and the 1960s.

### **The Rejection Plot**

In this final plot, the hero rejects stardom and finds a place in society away from the demands of the industry. Initially fascinated by the trappings of stardom – the status, girls, and the promise of getting a once-in-a-lifetime chance to demonstrate their unique talents to the masses – these heroes eventually recognize the fabricated world of the music industry. When their attempts to get the industry to listen to what they have to offer as musicians fall on deaf ears, they leave this world behind. This rejection by the hero goes beyond the rock star on stage and reflects youth culture disengagement from the corporate world. During the 1990s and at the turn of the century new critiques in the mass media were made about the dehumanizing effects of transnational corporations and a cultural emphasis on rationality and consumption. Michael Moore's film *Roger and Me* (1989), George Ritzer's *The McDonaldization of Society* (1993), Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation* (2001), are a few examples of such critiques. It was also a time where more people actively rejected mass-manufactured corporate products in favor of locally produced and/or sustainable goods. The anti-sweatshop movement, free trade organizations, fighting for living wages, community gardens, and other related practices are indicative of a

rejection of globalization and mass production. Given the climate then, it is not surprising that these heroes end up finding their place in local communities not as a cultural star but as a commoner.

### **Conclusions Regarding Ideological Content.**

As with other culture products, films contain ideological positions that are open for examination. These positions are not just inserted into the text with the explicit intent of prejudicing the reader but rather are reflections of production processes, industry personnel, audience demographics, and the historical context. As a consequence, ideology in film is often inadvertent. While all analyses of ideology contained in culture products are open to questions of verifiability, the steps identified in chapters 1 and 3 were taken to minimize investigator biases. The following conclusions were drawn after the detailed notes of the films were compared, paying particular attention to changes in the representation of film characters, the resolution of binary oppositions, and explicit and implicit statements made about the pre-selected ideological themes.

For the films analyzed in this study, the particular identity of the rock star has little importance. This is true even for the more biographical films. What is important is their signification. What do they represent? How does their representation change across time? In answering these questions, the meaning of the rock star becomes clearer. This includes understanding the ideological positions the star upholds.

The rock star journey for the various heroes in these films is compared through addressing the following questions: Where does the journey start? How does the journey end? What obstacles and temptations confronted the hero on this journey? What is the moral lesson of the journey?

In reconciliation plot films, the heroes seek status that can only be attained by joining the professional middle-class. The heroes become corrupted by the promises of a higher status. This brings pain to the hero and his family and friends. Wanting to leave their former life but not if it means sacrificing their working class values, these heroes have three choices in reconciling the competing interests of two divergent ways of life – leave the professional order, change it, or find a way to work within it without becoming corrupt. These heroes take the third path. This significantly contrasts with the journey of the rejection plot heroes. These heroes start in low status position but seek status instead of a position in professional society. They are tempted by

fame and sacrifice their dignity and morals for it. Eventually they realize that this is a fabricated world. Instead of trying to change or find a place in the industry, these heroes leave it. In both cases the hero does not seek to change the industry or society. They either join it or reject it. The hero's decision signifies particular ideas about how to join society. For reconciliation plot films, a working class existence is a marginal one. Something must be done to leave this life behind without become greedy and corrupt. The hero accomplishes this and in doing so illustrates for others as well that it is both possible and beneficial to embrace a professional way of life. By the time of the rejection plot hero, young audience members were confronted with a different set of questions about how to join society. Office cubicles were the place low-level, educated professionals worked. Transnational corporations were commonplace. Big box stores dotted suburbia. Fewer corporations managed more of the media. The music industry experienced an economic rejuvenation with manufactured pop stars such as Britney Spears. In this context, youth sought authenticity. And so did the rock star who rejects the industry.

While on their journey, the heroes are confronted with temptation. Through identifying and comparing the heroes' temptations within each plot, differences become visible. The reconciliation plot heroes are tempted by status and power. For the personal revival plot hero, the temptation is to become a star in order to either gain status or forget a painful past. Self-destruction and rejection plot heroes are both tempted by fame, but the former are too weak to overcome it while the later recognize that even temptations are fabricated and rises above them. With the exception of the self-destruction plot, all the heroes learn how not to succumb to temptations. But what is different is what tempts them. During the 1950s, the economy was increasingly shifting away from manufacturing and labor to management. Discretionary income increased. The "white flight" from the city to the suburbs started. And the youth culture significantly expanded. Hollywood tapped into this growing youth market with young heroes fighting for their way in the industrial order. The reconciliation plot hero is tempted by the status this order offers but learns that higher status is not worth it if the result is corruption. Rather than giving up the status however, these heroes manage to retain their virtues and at the same time join the professional world. Most of the personal revival plot heroes are tempted by fame. But what is more important here is that these heroes do not seek fame. Rather, they have no choice because they were destined for greatness. As prodigal musicians who make their way to stardom, they must learn that a star status does not erase personal problems. Eventually they do



become strong, confront the past, and in the process become a true hero. This form of temptation and its resolution reflects a cultural interest in the personal and psychological that became increasingly prevalent starting in the 1970s. These heroes do not battle the older generation or the industry, but rather themselves. They seek clarity, purpose, and personal meaning. Like the other heroes, the rejection plot heroes are tempted by fame. But in this plot, it is coded differently. Here, giving in to temptation is a requirement for anyone wanting to make it in the industry. Unlike the hero in *Rock Star*, the hero in *That Thing You Do!* is not confronted with sex and drugs. Despite this difference, they both are tempted to follow the will of the industry in exchange for fame. Therefore, it is not an individual who tempts the hero, such as was the case in *King Creole*, but *the institution*.

Narrative and ideological analyses of media texts provide information about historical conditions and societal values. As demonstrated above and in the previous chapters, it is possible to read the rock star journey to gain insight into the interrelationships between film, society, and dominant beliefs. Aside from the conclusions already stated, the journey of the rock star hero contains a common thread reflective of the conservative nature of mass-produced films and the cultural values that embody dominant US culture. Regardless of the plot, all heroes eventually find their place in society by conforming to it instead of transforming it. While some more forcefully go up against dominant institutions, never do these heroes work towards altering the existing structural arrangements.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

As a preliminary project in generating narrative functions, it was important to narrow the sample to include only domestically produced films about rock stars. While the entire population of these films was studied, narrowing the sample in this way resulted in a relatively small sample size. Since patterns and themes were identified by comparing films with the same narrative structure, in some cases, such as the self-destruction and rejection plot, conclusions were made through comparing two films. The inclusion of additional films would work towards further substantiating the conclusions, and thus making the findings more generalizable. To increase the sample size, films representing stars from other music genres should be studied as well. This would serve a dual function. First, it would increase the number of films analyzed, provide more data, and thus allow for more grounded conclusions. Second, additional comparisons between narrative structures and ideological content could be made. This would

allow for determining the extent to which the mythic story of the rock star transcends particular music genres. If this were the case, more evidence would support how the story of the rock star is an ancient one with contemporary adjustments.

To further clarify the connection between structure, ideology, and cultural context, films about rock stars and/or other music genres produced in different countries could be analyzed. This might include films produced in countries with similar economic structures to the US as well as those that are distinctly different.

In addition to examining films about stars from other music traditions, it would prove valuable to do a comparative analysis of other film genres or topics, such as sports (*Jackie Robinson Story, Rocky, Rudy, Radio*) or films about teachers (*Stand and Deliver, Lean on Me, Teachers, Pay it Forward*). If these films have similar narrative structures and/or ideological content compared to rock star films produced in the same time period, further support would be given to the connection between narrative structure, ideology, and the historical context.

To examine the effects the production of films has on narrative structure and ideological content, independent films and/or documentaries can be compared to studio films. This would also entail a comparative examination of the audience, both in terms of demographics and reception.

This was an interpretive study of media texts. As with any of these types of studies, there are always questions regarding the validity of the conclusions. A detailed discussion of the methods applied in this analysis was provided to inform the reader of the processes involved in collecting and analyzing the data. The steps taken to minimize investigator biases were also delineated. This allows for other researchers to better evaluate this study.

Additional research is needed to further refine the narrative functions in each of the plots. The personal revival plot posed the greatest challenge, in part because some of the films were semi-biographical and others fictional accounts of rock stars. Regardless of the subject of the film, they all had similar structures and meanings, but it was also the plot with the most variability in terms of whether all the functions were present or whether they appeared in the same order.

Because some of the films were semi-biographical, an opportunity arises to compare written biographies with film depictions. In doing so, it would be valuable to determine what is

distorted and for what purposes. This would be an additional approach to identifying film ideology.

Finally, it is important to recognize that texts are read differently depending on a person's social position. The intent of this study was to identify the dominant ideology, not different readings of audience members. Future research may be directed at determining how various groups read these films and why.

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