

Abstract This article suggests that because during the Second World War, legions of women, for the first time, could legitimately be employed, this economic freedom facilitated a freedom to create a new kind of masculinity – that of the butch. These butches dated femmes, a new kind of woman. This type of coupling was apparent in urban culture, but was not presented on film. This article explores the idea that James Dean, an admitted homosexual, acted in *Rebel Without a Cause*, as a butch woman, cloaked in the guise of his fictional heterosexuality. This gave heterosexual men the permission to learn the new masculinity that had been created during the war – by butch women. Dean is the perfect butch for Judy (played by Natalie Wood), except he is male – or is he? Is it a coincidence that Hilary Swank's Oscar-winning role in *Boys Don't Cry* was frequently compared to 'a young James Dean'? What are the implications of Dean's gender bending? Was Dean – a new kind of man – or woman?

Keywords butch–femme, gender studies, James Dean, masculinity, Queer Nation

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The Butch Woman Inside James Dean or 'What Kind of Person Do You Think a Girl Wants?'

James Dean made only three films in his short life, and yet he remains one of our most famous and durable stars. Why?

Thesis

It is my thesis that James Dean's masculinity was a filmic translation of a masculinity he saw created by butch women of the 1950s, and that he was involved in portraying roles that facilitated the creation of what we now call 'queer nation'.

Introduction

‘He was the first rebel’, Sal Mineo, co-star of *Rebel Without a Cause*, said. ‘He was the first guy to ask, Why?’ (Martinetti, 1995: 123). Through his ‘transgendered’ performance Dean was implicitly asking ‘why? Why is gender/sexuality scripted the way it is?’ I believe he presented the first glimpse to the general public of a new type of masculinity that was being created and lived by butch women in urban culture. He was perhaps the messenger of that masculinity to the culture at large. This message proved so attractive to heterosexual culture that it formed part of the basis for what we call the ‘New Man’ who appeared out of the 1950s – the man that could cry and have feelings. This article analyzes how Dean’s portrayal deconstructs his own life, and how, with the strict Production Code of the 1950s, the cast and crew of the 1955 *Rebel Without a Cause* pulled off the unique feat of filming many coded, but still very queer signs. This study is based entirely on primary research including interviews with the screenwriter, Stewart Stern, readings of the script and filmed script, together with a comparison based on the process of scriptwriting and the practice of method acting. As such my focus is the direct working process of actors and writers when making *Rebel*, and how I see James Dean and the cast and crew of the film actively creating the new queer model I discuss in this article.

1950s filmic gender

In a two-gender heteronormative system in which any gender trait deviation is suspect, a ‘queer nation’ is almost unimaginable. Traditionally, this has encouraged a focus on the individual, who is ‘having’ trouble or ‘being’ trouble. Stewart Stern, the writer of *Rebel*, said that while the movie was called *Rebel Without a Cause*, it was not the rebels who were without a cause. The misfit youths had an articulated cause, to find ‘a place’, even if as Dean stated in the movie, ‘just for one day’. Being such a misfit is perhaps a reason why Dean was and is so admired by butch women, and why I argue Dean himself admired butch women. Jenni Olsen, a butch woman, claimed, ‘on screen, tomboys were socially acceptable. As a young butch dyke coming out in 1986, I couldn’t find anything . . . I turned to Marlon Brando and James Dean as my role models of butchness’ (Olsen, 1994: 58). I think it is important to reinterpret Dean’s filmic presentation as a ‘slyly constructed butch’ because a traditional stereotype of butch women is that they are acting like men – I think the opposite is the case. It is the New Man, which emerged after the Second World War, who acts like a woman – a butch woman.

In the longer study on this topic of which this article is a part (Cartier, 1999),² I examine why lesbians distanced themselves from the butch

image in the 1970s, why they tentatively claim it today, and I conclude with an analysis of the butch persona occasionally presented on screen. In the 1950s, when we saw her at all, the butch had to be lawless and immoral, as in the 1958 film, *A Touch of Evil* with Mercedes McCambridge's uncredited role as a Mexican butch, who says, 'Lem-me stay. I wanna watch' when the gang of boys she runs with are raping a girl. Or she could be a squeaky-clean 'butch soldier' as long as she was 'outed' as straight by the end of the film, as in Doris Day's *Calamity Jane*. Nicholas Ray, *Rebel's* director, prior to directing *Rebel*, also directed *Johnny Guitar* infamous for its portrayals of masculine, i.e. butch cowgirl women, McCambridge opposite Joan Crawford. Many questions might be asked about this particular canon of 1950s films. For instance, if *Johnny Guitar* is unique in the role reversal of female to male roles, why have we never speculated that the same director who did both *Johnny* and *Rebel*, may be uniquely interested in gender role reversal, especially as it concerns the portrayal of butch and masculinity? If we believe that gender role playing means parody to learn something, not necessarily parody to mock, as is stated in current gender theory, most notably Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990), then we can ask, what can be learned about the male role from watching Crawford in *Johnny Guitar*, and what can be learned about the female role from watching Dean in *Rebel*?

Rebel Without a Cause, written by Stewart Stern, and directed by Nicholas Ray, starred Natalie Wood, Sal Mineo and James Dean, in what Leonard Maltin, and other critics agree was probably Dean's 'seminal performance'. Maltin capsulizes it as a 'portrait of youthful alienation (which) spoke to an entire generation' (Maltin, 1993). *Rebel* illustrates a new queer consciousness that was born and presented to the public through the gaze of this film. It has been noted often that *Rebel* was the first film to identify 'teen-hood' as a valid life phase. Perhaps however what Dean was suggesting was that the transition from child to adult, or teen, not only existed but that it was particularly challenging because the rigidity of gender roles were especially acute at the time this film was made. Dean himself challenged these gender roles, on and off screen, and it is this interplay between these two moments that I explore in this article.

Rebels and outlaws: homosexuality in the 1950s

It is my assumption that Dean was a 'rebel', a bisexual who lived, however, almost exclusively as a homosexual. All the evidence suggests this to be true, including the three biographies of Dean that are the most authoritative and comprehensive (Alexander, 1997; Gilmore, 1997; Martinetti, 1995). Dean created a new man on screen, one he did not necessarily embody in his own life. As a Method actor Dean would have to see this

persona modeled in order to invent a persona for himself to bring forth in his craft. Where was he exposed to this new man? Consider this excerpt from *Culture Clash: the Making of a Gay Sensibility*,

The 1950s was the decade of the ‘organizational man’. By organizing and defining themselves, homosexuals reassured straight people terrified by the Kinsey Report: they were visible . . . the majority of homosexuals who formed this visible subculture were effeminate men, butch women, obvious queens and the drags who gained a positive identity, but who were also the targets of disdain from mainstream culture. (Bronski, 1984: 79–80)

The need for these images to be constructed so that identification with them would not be obvious identification with homosexual elements is apparent when one remembers that in the 1950s one could be sent to jail if one was not wearing three gender-appropriate articles of clothing. Being transgressive in gender was against the law. That these gender outlaws risked being sent to jail, indeed were often sent to jail, and often continued their behavior after returning from jail announced a powerful subculture in urban mid-century America. The visible gay culture was publicly disdained by the mainstream. However, that attractive elements from this subculture – such as a new masculinity – might be mainstreamed into the culture at large through a messenger like James Dean, who was believed to be a straight male, would not have been deemed possible. I am suggesting that it was possible and that Dean’s portrayal is one way that the new masculinity created by butch women did in fact enter the mainstream.

Recent information has allowed us to factualize some of the gay elements of *Rebel* – notably the published admissions by both Dean and Mineo that they were both gay, and/or bisexual. However I am concerned here with the elements that we do not *see*. What homosexual elements are people usually responding to in *Rebel*? Stewart Stern, *Rebel*’s screenwriter, said, ‘if I were doing it today [writing *Rebel*] I would want to make Plato think he was gay, and deal with that relationship. Jim Stark was not that way. But one of the reasons Plato was an outsider in that school was because people called him “fag”.’ According to *Out of All Time* (Boughner, 1988), many gay analyses of the film have agreed with Bronski’s opinion that ‘The homosexual subtext is clear through the film – even though at the film’s end, Dean gets Natalie Wood and Sal Mineo (Plato) gets shot’ (Bronski, 1984, 105). This begs the question, *what* homosexual subtext is clear throughout this film?

Bronski in *Culture Clash* suggests that,

the war . . . changed the way Hollywood portrayed men. The three actors who most clearly represented this changed image were Marlon Brando, Montgomery Clift, and James Dean. It is no accident that both Dean and Clift were primarily

homosexual and that Brando was a self-proclaimed bisexual. What all three brought to the screen was . . . the promise of an eroticism that was pliant and engaging: the strong, silent, rugged American male would never be the same. (1984: 104)

And, of course Dean, who was admittedly gay, did not go to the war. In fact, according to *Out of All Time: A Gay and Lesbian History*, when asked by Hedda Hopper how he had avoided the draft, Dean responded 'I kissed the medic.' Dean avoided the draft allegedly by demonstrating (through his kiss) that he was gay.

Not only did conceptions of masculinity alter after/because of the war, but also during this time there were legions of women who, for the first time, were legitimately employed in plants and factories, and since they had gained economic freedom, they also gained the freedom to create a new type of 'masculinity' – embodied within a female biology – the 'butch'. For the most part butches dated femmes, a new type of woman, a woman who was proud of having sexual desire and able to construct a life in the repressed 1950s where that desire could be fulfilled. This construct was known as butch–femme. In urban areas this type of coupling was visible, but it had never been previously presented on screen. This type of gender arrangement was not accessible to heterosexual men to emulate, unless they had access to gay culture (which Dean did, by frequenting gay clubs). Straight men could however begin to emulate this new masculinity, which was encouraging a woman's desire, through Dean's performative example; through his delivery to the general population of a portrayal of masculinity in the cinema.

James Dean and butch women

In 1955, homosexuality was illegal. Homosexuality was not removed from the American Psychological Association's list of mental diseases until 1973. In 1955 butch lesbians and their femme girlfriends made up a large percentage of any criminally institutionalized youth (or adult) population. This condition can be seen in the best of the women's prison genre movies, for example, the 1950 award winning, *Caged*. Whether or not the lesbian portrayal is accurate, is another question, but that lesbians populated criminal institutions was well established. A large constituency of lesbian inmates were cross-dressing butches who 'crossed' the existing gender laws and then found themselves behind bars. We know that Ray visited Juvenile Hall and interviewed social workers, psychiatrists, and juvenile offenders. He did this to find out what teenagers in places like that wanted. If they had a voice, what would they say? It is clear that this had an impact on the director. Said Ray, 'This movie is about a kid who wants to have

one day that is not confused' (Martinetti, 1995: 120–1); it is a film that tries to understand them.

Part of the 'confusion' for Dean is, I argue, that he saw a masculinity in butch women that was outlawed in heterosexual men, and was not strongly portrayed in gay men. As gay women were more transgressive by being masculine, so too were gay men more transgressive by being feminine. The femme lesbian and the butch gay man were still iconoclasts. If, as I suggest, as a Method actor Dean modeled his performance on things he had seen, then where was he exposed to this butch identity? Very simply, Dean had access to butch women as friends, protectors of his space and others' space within the bar culture and since he was an actor, he had the freedom to act like a butch – a freedom straight men lacked without the implicit permission provided by his performance. As his biographers intimate, Dean had a history of attaching himself to strong, possibly butch women. As a youth in the 1940s Dean refused to play basketball in his home team in Indiana if his friend Melba was not allowed to play (Alexander, 1997: 38). One day in his agent's office, as a young adult, Dean met Chris White, a woman with whom he shared an audition scene for admission to the prestigious Actor's Studio. He noticed a young woman, wearing a red baseball cap, typing. Not many people wore a red baseball cap in an office in New York City. When he asked who she was, she snapped at him, 'Can't you see I'm busy?' This exchange commenced their fast friendship. According to reports, Jimmy wanted to walk out of the audition once the day arrived, but Chris said, 'Listen you little wretch, you're not going to louse up my audition. We're here, and we're going through with it. *Now get out there*' (Alexander, 1997: 107–9). They made the cut, and the rest is history.

Moreover, Jimmy had many women friends who transcended the feminine gender codes of the period. Among these bold women was Eartha Kitt, the person in real life who called him 'Jamie', the name that the gay character Plato 'invents' for Jim in *Rebel*, with the stipulation that only the people Jim really likes are allowed to call him Jamie (Stern, 1955: 33, 56–62). Lili Kardell, one of Dean's favorite 'dates' and one who liked to 'ride like hell' with Dean on his motorcycle, once gave him a gift of a new oil filter for his Porsche (Gilmore, 1997: 134). In addition, one of Jimmy's movie star 'girlfriends' Ursula Andress was compared to Brando in terms of her transgressive nature. Andress appeared in a photo with Dean actually giving the finger to the press, a very un-ladylike gesture. For reportedly, they often appeared in public, dressed in similar outfits, Ursula apparently clad in some form of masculine attire (Alexander, 1997: 204, photo: 203). Jimmy explained his sexual dynamic to Jonathan Gilmore, one of his male lovers, saying, 'I'm not active . . . I'm passive.' Later Gilmore wrote, '. . . we shared a look, a look that said, "If one of

us were a girl, we would have been able to have a romance”’ (Alexander, 1997: 131–7).

The concept of a butch-type gay male that I am exploring was not common in the 1950s. (Dean would tangle later on the set of *Giant* with Rock Hudson, a more traditional gay male.) At this time the traditional gay male often appeared in drag, very unlike the traditional heterosexual male Hudson portrayed on screen. I believe that Dean’s persona, cloaked in the guise of his fictional heterosexuality, gave heterosexual men the permission to learn this ‘new masculinity’ – a transgressive combination of hetero and homosexuality. This is missed, I argue, in current interpretations of *Rebel*. Today’s readings of the film tend to attribute the only homoeroticism to the non-sexual protective alliance between Plato and Jim, Sal Mineo and James Dean, and totally ignore the strong butch–femme portrayal that Jim and Judy, James Dean and Natalie Wood, provide. Consider the scene in the opening of *Rebel* when Jim, upon entering the high school, mistakenly enters the women’s room and then backs up and uses the men’s room, checking the sign on the door first. Knowing that early scenes like that in films are meant to set up exposition regarding how we are to view this character’s history, how should we interpret this action? This action is intercut with this, quoted from *Masked Men: Masculinity and Men in the Movies of the Fifties*:

shots of Plato opening his locker to comb his hair, catching sight of Jim in a mirror fastened to the inside of the door . . . Jim’s image in the mirror . . . displaces a pin-up photo of Alan Ladd, which initially can be seen in Plato’s locker. Plato’s desiring look at Jim, establishes the homo-erotic ground of the friendship that will begin in the next scene at the planetarium . . . [and] sexualizes the boy’s masculinity crisis. (Cohen, 1997: 253–4)

However, what is the homoerotic ground here? What if we read Jim as butch? Is Jim in a masculinity crisis, or are we as the audience ‘in crisis’ – reading his confusion in the constrained gender world portrayed, as *his* problem? In reality Jim’s confusion is not his problem, it is our problem. The personality of Jim Stark reads as well rounded, not hot tempered, and trying to make sense of a nonsensical world. Dean created the life he was actually struggling to lead – a person who accepts himself, but longs for a sense of belonging – in a world where he need not check the restroom signs. Again from *Masked Men*,

Plato’s eroticizing viewpoint of Jim, comparable to Judy’s enables the film to dramatize the bisexuality underlying this rebel boy’s difference . . . Plato’s death . . . the final link that leads to Jim’s romance with Judy . . . disavows early implication of sexual rebellion; as far as the narrative closure is concerned, the desire of one boy for another literally amounts to a dead end. (Cohen, 1997: 253–4)

Because we cannot read Jim as queer, we cannot see what Dean is doing with Judy – enacting with the actor Natalie Wood the relationship he saw butch women enact with femmes in the urban subculture of the period, namely in the bars and streets of Greenwich Village, West Hollywood and so on. His relationship with Judy *is* queer in that time period, and their romance begins as soon as they meet, not after Plato's death. It is queer, different, in fact it is the most different relationship Judy has ever had with a boy – if Dean is playing 'a boy', for I believe, Dean is playing a butch.

Brandon Teena, Thelma and Louise and James Dean . . .

In the reviews of *Boys Don't Cry*, the 1998 film about the real life 1993 murder of Brandon Teena, a cross-dressing butch who was passing as a man, the following comparisons were made: From the *Boston Phoenix*: 'a tremendous performance by Hilary Swank depicts Brandon as Thelma, Louise and James Dean rolled into one' (Heller, 1999: 51). Or, from *Variety*:

The poignant and candid *Boys Don't Cry* can be seen as a *Rebel Without a Cause* for these culturally diverse and complex times, with the two misfit girls enacting a version of the James Dean–Natalie Wood romance with utmost conviction, searching like their 50s counterparts, for love, self-worth, and a place to call home. (Levy, 1999)

It is precisely a *queer* world where 'deviants' like Plato, Thelma and Louise and Brandon Teena can be safe that is crucial to Jim and not, as is commonly held, that Jim desires Plato. It is also a world where he can have a relationship with a girl like Judy that is not based on 'chickie runs', and masculine performance. For instance, Jim desires Judy, and wants to liberate her from an incestuous home. This is commonly a butch fantasy – sometimes reality. This theme is not particularly common in heterosexual literature – the young man rescuing the daughter from an abusive, even incestuous father, but it is a common theme in lesbian literature, particularly in stories featuring a butch. For example, Chea Villanueva's 'The Bad Girl', from *Bulletproof Butches*, is a short story that describes a woman going to prison because she kills the father who molests her girlfriend (1997: 99–119). A strong lesbian saving another woman from male abuse, and in the process that woman discovering her own lesbianism is (when we have seen lesbians at all in recent movies) a common theme. Among these portrayals are: the aforementioned Brandon Teena saving Lana in *Boys Don't Cry*, Shug saving Celie in *The Colour Purple* and Idgie saving Ruth in *Fried Green Tomatoes*. In *Rebel*, this rescue 'fantasy' is played out not only in saving Judy from her father, but also in wanting to protect the

mansion – the ‘safe’ place – from a gang of straight, homophobic boys who are intent on roughing up Plato and Jim. What place is there for a ‘transgressive family’? On 24 February 1996, regular Norm McDonald appeared on *Saturday Night Live* in front of a blowup of *USA Today*’s cover story of the death of Brandon Teena, and said, ‘In Nebraska a man was sentenced for killing a female cross-dresser who had accused him of rape and two of her friends. Excuse me if this sounds harsh, but in my mind, they all deserved to die’ (GLAAD, n.d.).

Even though this show is a satire, these comments echoed those of a large percentage of the US population at the time – especially those of midwest America, where the murder took place, and many say was *allowed* to take place. The police of Lincoln, Nebraska did not arrest Brandon Teena’s accused rapists after Teena reported the rape; they were finally arrested only after they murdered Teena. Given this prejudice, is it surprising that Dean in 1955, wanted to create an alternative family – as many queer people have always done? The ability to create a new family is much more difficult than to love someone of the same sex, as difficult as that is, and more threatening – as evidenced by the recent American nationwide debates over gay marriage.

Rebel with a femme

When we de-eroticize the Jim/Judy relationship, in favor of seeing eroticism solely in the relationship with Plato, do we deny, in this film, the world of butch–femme, or are we simply ignorant of it? Do we solely read male homosexuality because it is the only thing we know *how* to read, because of the ‘real’ sexualities of the actors, Dean and Mineo? Might we not imagine that in the world of the film, what is being experimented with is the creation of a kind of queer nation, through a butch–femme portrayal?

Consider the following filmed screenplay excerpt from *Rebel*:

Judy (asking Jim): . . . is this what it’s like to love somebody?

Jim: I don’t know.

Judy: What kind of a *person* do you think a girl wants?

Jim: A *man*?

Judy: *Yes* . . . but . . . a man who can be gentle and sweet . . . like you are. And someone who doesn’t run away when you want them. Like being Plato’s friend when nobody else liked him. That’s being strong.

These lines, are lines that were created *on the set*, according to Stern, by James Dean and Natalie Wood. Rewriting is a fact of script-to-movie

creation and Stern was hired as a young writer specifically because he got along with James Dean. The original screenplay lines for the ‘what kind of person do you think a girl wants?’ scene are as follows (*note among other changes that this line is omitted*):

Judy: Is this what it’s like to love somebody?

Jim: You disappointed?

Judy: (mussing his hair) Funny, Jimmy. You’re so clean and you – this is silly.

Jim: What?

Judy: You smell like baby powder.

Jim: So do you.

Judy: I never felt so clean before.

Stern related strongly to Plato, ‘I was Plato in many ways, and my wish was to find a Jim Stark who would protect me and teach me’ (Nocenti, n.d.: 57). Perhaps this is why James Dean liked Stern.

In *Masked Men*, Cohen claims Judy provides Jim with ‘direction for his masculinity’, and that she is ‘the containing structure for his maturation into a “strong” man himself’, and therefore Jim’s acceptance of her ‘containing structure’ erases the ‘bisexuality brought out in his undisguised affection for Plato’ (1997: 253). I strongly disagree. I think this analysis is only accurate if we cannot see masculinity as an option in women, in other words we cannot see the butch in Jim Stark. What Cohen describes is the very foundation of the butch–femme relationship. Because it is a relational construct – a butch is most butch next to a femme, and vice versa, they each provide the container for the other’s identity.

In their portrayal of Jim and Judy, James Dean and Natalie Wood are the 1950s invisible embodiment of the 1990s visible butch–femme couple, as is evidenced in the *Boys Don’t Cry* reviews. Judy and Jim are, in their construct of gender, even though it is embodied in a biological male and a female, still queer, because it is gendered butch and femme. I think this was conscious on their part. When asked if Natalie Wood participated in the improvisational work, Stern replied:

Natalie and Jim . . . did a lot of investigating – let’s try this, let’s try that. It shook Hollywood up terribly in the 50s when all the Actors Studio people came out. Their imaginations had been trained to experience their own truth and communicate it to an audience in a surprising way. That’s what made Brando so spectacular, and Jimmy too; the choices they made. (Nocenti, ND: 61)

Both script versions of the kiss scene comply fairly closely to the written lines, as in the following:

Jim: (*Original line*) It's not going to be lonely Judy . . . Not for you and not for me.

Jim: (*Filmed line, note revisions*) Oh . . . wow . . . we're not going to be lonely anymore. Ever. Ever. Not you or me.

Judy: I love somebody. All this time I've been looking for someone to love me and now I love somebody. And it's so easy. Why is it so easy now?

Jim: I don't know. It is for me, too.

Judy: I love you, Jim. I really mean it. (Stern, 1955: 48/97–104)

In order to envisage different combinations of sexuality/gender qualities – butch women/butch men, female women/female men – it is necessary to rattle limiting paradigms to include and appreciate the suggested role nuances of characters like Jim and Judy. For example we have locked butch with female lesbian, and strongly effeminate/feminine drag queen with gay men and so it is hard to visualize the strong femme woman, Judy in *Rebel*, or the butch man, Jim Stark.

After this offering of love, Jim leaves to try to save his friend (Sal Mineo) Plato. An officer in the movie, (coincidentally named Ray), asks Dean, 'Things pretty rough for you at home?' As Jim, Dean possibly speaks for all homosexuals when he says, 'If I had one day when I didn't have to be all confused . . . if I felt that I belonged some place . . . you know?' (Stern, 1955: 17, 12–18). That need to belong, for the butch, the drag queen, the obvious effeminate, or the femme was such an enormous need in the 1950s that this blatant subculture claimed the only public space available, the gay clubs. Jim says of Plato's need for himself and Judy, again in a line improvised by Dean, 'He tried to make us his family . . . I guess he wanted us to be . . . his.'³

In *Rebel* Plato represents the effeminate man – loyal in his portrayal to the extent of keeping a male movie star picture taped in his high school locker. To be his friend requires, as Judy states, a certain bravery. One would have to be brave to be friends with a possibly gay youth in the world of a 1950s US high school. Dean, in being Plato's friend, exemplifies the butch woman's strength to fight for the protection of her community. In fact, the castle that Plato shows Jim and Judy, can be symbolic of a gay bar that eventually gets 'raided' by homophobic males – as they often actually were in the 1950s.

Disenchanted with their own families and removed from the real world, the three teenagers act the part of their own warm, peaceful, idealized family. The young Romeo and Juliet couple wishes to explore the mansion further. Before they leave Plato, they put a coat over him . . . They notice . . . red and blue mismatched socks and laugh, 'Must have been a nervous day', but instead of judging . . . Plato, they identify with his confusion. Jim asks Judy, 'I've done that, though, haven't you?' and she nods. (Dirks, n.d.: 15)

Complicating masculinity/queer

Color in film was relatively new in 1955. While Jim Stark's red jacket has been recognized and I have personally known at least one butch woman who wore a red jacket in imitation of Dean, analysis of this has not previously tied Jim's jacket with Judy's opening costume of red coat, bow tie and lipstick and then tied those with Plato's red sock. Dean on learning the film was to be shot in the new technology technicolor switched his black leather jacket costume for a red windbreaker, and so created a filmic color to symbolize queerness – and community. In initiating the use of red for this purpose in the film, and aligning the three principals together in this way, Dean created what, in the world of *Rebel*, actually looked like the beginning of queer nation.

Plato is roughed up for being queer – one blue sock, one red. Judy is abused by her father; he rubs her red lipsticked lips so hard she says he 'almost rubbed them off', and we see him slap her. Dean chose the red jacket for his costume. These three instances of obvious red are the only examples of characters wearing red in the film. In connecting red to Plato's mismatched bright red sock, it also shows allegiance to all three being 'queer', admitting that all three have had, 'nervous days'. This was Dean and Ray's intent.

Jim risks death to enter the planetarium where Plato is locked up. In entering the planetarium with him, Judy embodies the femme lesbian who learns from the butch that she can be strong – a new kind of feminine. A 1950s femme was expected to look demure, yet sexy but, if her butch, were beaten and raped by the cops, she was also prepared to be 'the strong one'.

Images of gay youth were embodied in the actual student body of *Rebel's* Hollywood High. The butch, the femme, and the effeminate teenager were the real rebels at the school that the fictional Judy, Jim and Plato attended. Judy represented the femme lesbian in love with Jim, the 'as if' butch, and both were friends with the obvious but complex gay boy, Plato. Mineo created this complex masculinity. In his portrayal of Plato, he utilizes his history (by age eight, was a member of a street gang in a tough Bronx neighborhood),⁴ especially in the fight scene with the toughs in the mansion. Deviating from the original script, he creates the part very differently than the 'traditional' gay male code of the 1950s would suggest. He fights back. He swings a hose at one of the toughs and knocks him into the pool, and shoots and wounds another. He has the gun (Jeffers, 2000). If it were known that he was a gay male in the film, would he have been allowed to fight back? He died in the end, the ultimate result of the Production Code rule as necessary punishment for homosexuality. However, the portrayal of an angry dangerous gay male fighting back

would not be seen again by the public at large until televised footage of the Stonewall Inn Riots in 1969.

The Production Code made any reference to homosexuality at all a feat in itself. Stern, said any overt reference to homosexuality had to be cut from footage, even the word 'punk' was edited, as it was slang for gay. This reflects the different codes imposed on TV versus movies. The Stonewall Inn Riots were news and televised. Feature films had the burden of how to manipulate the medium so that it would allow what had not been allowed. If we read the signs, such as Mineo's transgressive masculine gay youth, or the color red to symbolize queerness we cannot help but speculate as to how the *Rebel* crew used the feature medium to transmit 'news' that was happening, but not yet televised.

The James Dean canon

Dean's other portrayals in *East of Eden* and *Giant*, were also a commentary on masculine women, played by Mercedes McCambridge and Jo Van Fleet. These films include some of the only 'trans' gendered images in the 1950s. In all Dean played the butch persona that he had trouble playing in real life. One of Dean's lovers describes a night Dean wanted him to dress up as a woman, wearing lace underpants and a biker jacket. In the scene Jimmy lit candles and put Edith Piaf on the record player. When the mood was set, Dean orgasmed quickly 'just kissing the legs' of his lover. Later in the night Dean went out, got in a fight, came back, and spent a couple hours in the bathroom alone, and then lay in bed sobbing (Gilmore, 1997: 131-2).

Dean was trying to create a world where even the usual 'traditional' transgressive roles, recognizable homosexual roles, such as those lived by known homosexuals (known in the world of Hollywood) Rock Hudson and Mercedes McCambridge, did not work for him. He wanted the freedom to be, I believe the word today would be, 'queer', and from all accounts he was very lonely in that desire. Eartha Kitt apparently commented, 'he had nobody'.

Dean's friend, the 'butch' Mercedes McCambridge, said, 'I can't tell you how he needed . . . You could feel the loneliness beating out of him, and it hit you like a wave' (Martinetti, 1995: 147). In spite of his loneliness, Dean had a gang called 'The Night Watch'. The gang included his male lover(s), the actress Vampira and others who hung out together at a local coffee shop, Googie's. They were 'Jimmy's people', a collection of people who didn't quite fit. Contemporarily, we might call them part of queer nation.

What Dean did and how he did it, cannot be separated from, and was commensurate with, the time period in which he lived. During this period

details like the mistaken bathroom entry, Plato's male movie star picture, even Plato's wearing of two different color socks were all daring signs of 'queerness', and very transgressive for the period.

Conclusion

Unpacking the portrayal of Jim Stark in *Rebel* gives us insight into thorny contemporary questions. What is . . . the role of patriarchal ideology in constructing gender? . . . the meaning of liberation in the context of constructed gender? James Dean can be claimed by homosexual heritage. The 'new man' he personified in *Rebel*, can also be claimed in a lineage of butch women. Reducing the film to the individual male sexual identity misses the very real issues of community, or queer nation, which the crew struggled to bring forth despite the strict production code. I argue that the 1950s 'new man' is based partly on butch identity, and that the butch-femme construct had a strong impact on contemporary culture as a whole. Dean said, 'I think the prime reason for existence, for living in this world, is discovery' (Martinetti, 1995: 71). Perhaps it is now time for us to discover exactly what he was exploring.

Notes

1. This line of dialogue is spoken by Judy (Natalie Wood) to Jimmy (James Dean) in *Rebel Without a Cause* (directed by Nicholas Ray, original screenplay by Stewart Stern). This line was added during the filming, written by Natalie Wood, James Dean or Nicholas Ray, and is not in the original script (Stern, 1955). According to Stern himself, Nicholas Ray allowed the actors to improvise. Since there was no other writer, it is likely that the rewritten material was the invention of the actors themselves.
2. This study is based entirely on primary research including interview with the screenwriter (Stern), readings of the script and filmed script, together with a comparison based on the process of scriptwriting and the practice of method acting. As such my focus is the direct working process of actors and writers when making *Rebel*, and how I see James Dean and the cast and crew of the film actively creating the new queer model I discuss in this article.
3. In the filmed screenplay, Judy starts with Jim, does not leave him, goes into the Planetarium with him, supports his need to go after Plato and in the end *will leave her family of origin* to be with Jim. In the screenplay as written, Judy is against Jim going after Plato, finds her father and reconciles with him while Jim is in the planetarium and is with her parents and only *tentatively* with Jim at the end.
4. Information taken from the Sal Mineo website, at <http://www.geocities.com/Hollywood/Movie/7192/bio.html>

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Boys Don't Cry, director: Kimberly Pierce, 1999.

Caged, director: John Cromwell, 1950.

Calamity Jane, director: David Butler, 1953.

East of Eden, director: Elia Kazan, 1955.*

Giant, director: George Stevens, 1956.*

Johnny Guitar, director: Nicholas Ray, 1954.

Rebel Without a Cause, director: Nicholas Ray, 1955.*

Touch of Evil, director: Orson Welles, 1958.

20/20 Downtown, 'The True Story of Brandon Teena', with Jami Lynch, 10 February, 2000.

(*filmography of James Dean).

Biographical Note

Marie Cartier is the author and performer of two full-length, one-woman shows – *Ballistic Femme* and *Blessed Virgin*, both premiered in Los Angeles, CA. She is the author of the poetry book, *I Am Your Daughter, Not Your Lover*, five published plays, and a chapbook *Gold: Greatest Hits*. Currently she teaches Women's Studies at Cal State Northridge, screenwriting at UC Irvine, and is a dual degree student at Claremont Graduate University, working on her PhD in Religion, specializing in Women and Religion. She recently completed her MFA in Art, with creation and installation of MORGASM: The Museum of Radical Gender and Sex Matrix. She is active in Queer Studies in Religion activism for the American Academy of Religion. Her dissertation is tentatively titled, *Butch Femme 101: Baby You Are My Religion* – a theory and theology of corporeality embodied within the butch-femme bar culture of the 1950s.

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