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Film and its Influence on the Public Perception of Motorcycle Culture

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Literature and Film Studies

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Table of Contents

I. Introduction.....	2
II. Literature Review.....	3
III. Methodology.....	16
IV. Findings.....	17
V. Conclusion.....	30
VI. Works Cited.....	33
VII. Appendices.....	35
a. Interdisciplinary Reflection Essay	

Introduction

A deep rumble is the first indication that they are fast approaching. In the first scene of the film a long stretch of country road lies ahead. Lined on both sides with trees, almost ending in a dot in the middle of the screen, the road seems endless, as does that sound. Thunder, gentle at first, gradually increases to a vibration like submachine gun fire in the pit of the stomach, almost sickening. As the sound nearly becomes unbearable, dozens of leather jacketed kids fly by on their large v-twin motorcycles. Lined up in formation, they scream by with fury, two by two on their way to nowhere, and as the opening scene ends to “The Wild One,” your heart can’t help from racing. The image of big v-twin muscle and leather, with handlebars gripped by white knuckles is almost timeless, and it can be a very different kind of experience for each individual. The word biker conveys a long list of images that may not be the most positive or inspirational, as this facet of society has been greatly misunderstood. The negative image linked to the biker community has largely been processed and distributed by Hollywood producers, and is not representative of the majority of riders. The film industry has contributed significantly to the current negative image that plagues the biker community. This fabricated image has been honed through film for audiences over the course of sixty years, but it is not indicative of the today’s reality. Bikers are no more outlaws than any other social group. They are friends, neighbors, employees, and heroes. They make salaries, go to school and are hard working citizens. The motorcycle culture has long deserved the respect of an investigated history, and I aim to add to that history by looking at some of the significant film influences from the past, and comparing those representations to contemporary demographics.

Literature Review

Ever since the Hollister motorcycle riot took place on July 4, 1947, motorcyclists around the world have been given a bad wrap. William Welch of USA Today explains that news reports of bikers ‘taking over towns’ were common, and anyone on a bike was a no-good punk (Welch 1). After Hollister, “The Wild One” was filmed. Inspired by the outlaw biker event, the movie depicts two rival gangs who effectively take over the town whilst a young Marlon Brando battles over his angry, introverted nature, as well as his love for a small-town girl. Audiences were shocked, but at the same time they were warned of the impending danger that biker gangs may cause, and America heeded that warning. Throughout the fifties and sixties, biker B-movies that exaggerated and manipulated reality poured through the silver screen and out onto the streets, and bikers were branded forever with a bad rap. That rep continues into the new millennium, and there is not much that they can do about it. Recent events such as the 2002 Hell’s Angels/Mongols shoot-em-up in a Las Vegas casino don’t help either. What is important to consider, however, is the evolution of the motorcycle owner and rider. While there still remains the iconic motorcycle gang member, leather clad and helmet free, there are exponentially more friendly, family oriented, middle-aged riders who share with these outlaw bikers only their love for the open road.

Through my research I will attempt to answer three main questions: What role have past motorcycle films had on the public’s perception of motorcycle culture within the United State, how do the films “The Wild One” and “Easy Rider” contribute to film’s influence of this public perception, and what do current demographics of biker culture

say about the reality of the scene? Into my research thus far, I have discovered that most of the authors I have read only shed light on one of these aspects that relate to my overall question. Unique to my research, however, is the connection of motorcycle films to the fallacious beliefs of public opinion toward the culture, as well as an attempt to dispel these myths through my research of contemporary biker demographics.

Subsequent to Allied victory in WWII, California, like the rest of the country, had become home once again to those who had returned with their lives. These men, alive and lucky, were back to a normal life, but the anxiety of war hung on. The battles had left their mark, and with it, an empty place once filled with the fear of dying and the confusion of combat. Wrought with unrest and alienation toward the normalcy of society, it was extremely difficult for some of the vets to become accustomed once again to the daily grind of American Life. A need arose in some: the need to live life differently. To live without taking advantage of the freedoms they had just fought too long, too hard, and lost too many brothers for. They needed something different and exciting, and for a few, it was a compulsion for risk and daring that came only with owning a motorcycle. Bill Osgerby, author of the article “Sleazy Riders: Exploitation, ‘Otherness,’ and Transgression in the 1960s Biker Movie,” tells us that “during the 1940’s, fraternities of rootless bikers began to form among former servicemen searching for camaraderie and excitement as they struggled to adapt to civilian life” (Osgerby 2). Not wanting to return to their simple life in the country, California became a mecca for veterans looking to interrupt their angst in postwar America. “Like the drifters who rode west after Appomattox,” shares Hunter S. Thompson, in his book, Hell’s Angels, “there were thousands of veterans in 1945 who flatly rejected the idea of going back to their

prewar pattern [...] By 1947 the state (California) was alive with bikes” (Thompson 58-9). Barger also chimes in on the discussion, detailing this rapid growth in post-war motorcycle ownership: “California and its sunshine became the center of motorcycle culture, and for years there were more motorcycles registered in the state of California than in all the other states combined” (Barger, Zimmerman and Zimmerman 50). Barger, a perfect example of the iconic outlaw biker, outlines the draw of a motorcycle to a World War II vet: “A motorcycle was a cheap mode of transportation, kind of dangerous and perfect for racing and hanging out. Plus they could ride together, just like they were back in the service again” (Barger, Zimmerman and Zimmerman 50). John Wood, author of “Hell’s Angels and the Illusion of the Counterculture” also supports this historical change, explaining that “the veterans that joined these clubs felt alienated from the society they had left during the war, and were also unwilling to give up the adrenaline rush they had experienced in battle” (Wood 341). With such rapid growth in the demographics of angst-filled motorcycle riders, it seems inevitable that disagreement between them and the rest of society would transpire. But it was just one such group of vets, however, that has gone down in history as the group that started the outlaw biker image: the Boozefighters Motorcycle Club.

In his book, The Original Wild Ones, Bill Hayes interviews the remaining founders of the Boozefighters in an attempt to detail the history of this infamous group. Formed in 1939, the Boozefighters MC (motorcycle club) started life as “The Characters” in Los Angeles (Hayes 30). Their purpose as a group, explains Hayes, was purely for fun, and to illustrate this, he outlines the club’s original initiation tests:

1. Get drunk at a race meet or cycle dance.

2. Throw lemon pie in each other's faces.
3. Bring out a douche bag where it would embarrass all the women (then drink wine from it, etc.).
4. Get down and lay on the dance floor.
5. Wash your socks in a coffee urn.
6. Eat live goldfish
7. Then, when blind drunk, trust me ("Kokomo") to shoot beer bottles off your head with my .22. (Hayes 27)

The mission of the Boozefighters was not to establish territories, cause physical harm to themselves or others, or to create terror under any circumstance, as is the case with other infamous clubs, such as the Hell's Angels. The Boozefighters were out to have fun, drink alcohol, and ride their bikes in an attempt to forget about the horrors of war. Nonetheless, as Hayes points out, "images are hard to shake, and once they've taken a media-driven stranglehold on your personality, all bets are off" (Hayes 33). Revered in bike circles around the globe, the Boozefighters are known as the original outlaws. Not because they were the first motorcycle gang, and not because of their especially lawless behavior, which seems like child's play when compared to younger groups, such as the Hell's Angels. No, the Boozefighters are known because of their image created by the media, and in 1947, just two years after the war had ended, the Boozefighters name was forever etched into the annals of motorcycle history.

In his article "A Hog is Still a Hog, but the 'Wild Ones' are Tamer," Jon Krakauer discloses the events that led to the Boozefighters infamy. Every Fourth of July, Hollister, California, a town of just 4000, hosted its annual motorcycle race as part of their yearly

celebration (Krakauer 3). The event, sanctioned by the American Motorcycle Association (AMA), was the first of its kind since the war. The AMA is known as the premier group of upstanding riders. They sponsored national racing events across the nation, known as “Gypsy tours,” and to this day are recognized for their law-abiding, outlaw-rejecting attitude. In an attempt to distinguish themselves from the tiny percent of outlaw riders, they pegged the term “One-Percenters,” in reference to the one percent of outlaws within the entire motorcycle community (Barger, Zimmerman & Zimmerman 41). During the Hollister event, it is estimated that somewhere between 3,000 (Thompson 65) and 4,000 (Krakauer 3) riders of all kinds showed up to the races. Some came to compete, but other groups, such as the Boozefighters and the Pissed Off Bastards, came for the sole purpose of drinking and having fun. In the words of Sonny Barger, this “typical” AMA sanctioned event “all went wrong as hell” (Barger, Zimmerman & Zimmerman 25).

For the three days the event was supposed to take place, biker groups essentially put the law aside and made their own fun. Drag races were held on Main Street, beer sales exploded, and riders were even recorded to have ridden their bikes right into the bars (Hayes 37). “What ensued,” describes Wood, “were a few nights of drag racing, public urination, and massive beer sales for local bars” (Wood 341). Few were injured and many more were arrested. The important thing to remember, however, is the difference between actual events and the media spin that was produced after the melee.

Reports of bikers “taking over the town” quickly followed the Hollister event of 1947. Perhaps most famous, however, is the *Life* magazine article that ran on July 21, 1947. On the cover was a picture of a supposed Boozefighter, beer bottles in both hands,

noticeably tipsy on the seat of his motorcycle, with a multitude of other empty bottles strewn around his bike. This picture, in fact, was staged completely, with bottles carefully arranged, and the rider, a non-Boozefighter, agreeing to pretend to almost fall off of his bike while trying to enjoy a few beers (Hayes 24). Newspaper headlines rang with the report of outlaw riders “taking over the town” of Hollister. Wood explains “the media blew the incident way out of proportion, telling tales of an invasion of an unsuspecting town by thousands of hoodlums” (Wood 341). Krakauer agrees that the media completely exaggerated the event, noting, “The press had a field day covering the story. Wire services spread breathless accounts of the riot from coast to coast [...] Hollister, with help from the media, had given the world a new, uniquely American archetype: the outlaw biker” (Krakauer 3). Perpetuated by the media, this model of outlaw biker lasted into the next millennium, revived by later groups such as the Hell’s Angels.

After the Hollister motorcycle riot of 1947, there were other examples of “town takeovers” by motorcycle gangs for the media to feed off of, but nothing could prepare the public for what the media, as well as law enforcement, would do with the Hell’s Angels. Founded in Fontana, California in 1948, the first Hell’s Angels were formed by WWII vets (Barger 30-1). What is interesting about the beginning of the Hell’s Angels, however, is how they spread across the state of California. “In the early 1950’s,” explains Wood, “motorcycle clubs all over California, from Gardena to Oakland, were independently taking on the name Hell’s Angels and sewing patches of a skull wearing a pilot’s cap on their jackets” (Wood 342). Created independently, yet oddly at the same time, Sonny Barger is the man responsible for banding the clubs together, creating what

could arguably be known as the most famous motorcycle club in the world. Barger was ex-military, but never saw any action. He enlisted at sixteen years old in 1955, and was given an honorable discharge fourteen months later when officials found out he was underage (Barger, Zimmerman & Zimmerman 22). Undraftable and disciplined, Barger turned what was once a loose-knit gang with alien members across the state, into a brotherhood of riders with officially sanctioned clubs around the world. Barger started his Hell's Angels club in Oakland in 1957, completely ignorant of the other Hell's Angels groups that had sprung up further south. Barger chose the skull and pilots cap because, in his own words, "I thought it was cool as hell" (Barger, Zimmerman & Zimmerman 30). He rode down to Gardena in Southern California late that summer and quickly found out that other groups had been down there for years. There had even been a Hell's Angels group across the bay in San Francisco; the second ever group to have been formed (Barger 30-1). In detailing the significance of Barger's influence on the club, Wood explains, "In a few short years, the Hell's Angels would be transformed into a group as organized and businesslike as any corporation operating within mainstream America" (Wood 342). For almost a decade, the Angels remained a local nuisance around the Bay Area and Southern California. Cops hated them because of noise violations, fighting and drugs, and the Angels hated the cops for ruining their good time. It was up until the mid-sixties that the Hell's Angels enjoyed the esoteric nature of being a headache for the local law enforcement, but it all changed during a run to the Monterey Pop Festival. Wood explains "the Angels moved beyond local notoriety when they surged into the national media spotlight in 1964 with an alleged gang rape of two Monterey teenagers, and the release of a 1965 report on the club by the California

Attorney General Thomas Lynch” (Wood 338). What was at first thought to have been rape, turned out to be consensual group sex by two local girls, but the national image was stuck forever. Headlines that read: “HELL’S ANGELS GANG RAPE,” rolled off the press the next day, long before any talk of a trial or investigation (Thompson 22). The Hell’s Angels were labeled as dangerous to American society in general, just as the Boozefighters were branded with the ‘taking over’ of towns. Krakauer adds, however, that even though the Hell’s Angels were outlaws by definition, the media hype was undeserved:

Thanks to the news media, the threat of the Hell’s Angels posed to society was grossly exaggerated, but there is no denying that the Angels of the 1960s and ‘70’s were responsible for a host of heinous crimes. They made a habit of abusing drugs and alcohol, they stole wantonly, committed countless physical assaults, and occasionally raped and murdered. (Krakauer 4)

The general consensus among historians and bike enthusiasts is that the Hollister event in 1947 was the pivotal event that quickly snowballed into all of the attention surrounding bikers thereafter. Because of Hollister we were given “The Wild One,” and consequently we were introduced to the outlaw biker. Bill Hayes, author of The Original Wild Ones, argues that the Boozefighters MC was the spark that caused the fire: “These young men, restless World War II veterans eager to exercise the freedom they had risked their lives to preserve, fueled by hootch and pretty girls, unconsciously established the archetype of “biker” (Hayes 21). Jon Krakauer of the Smithsonian Magazine agrees that “Hollister, with help from the media, had given the world a new, uniquely American

archetype: the outlaw biker” (Krakauer 3). Krakauer also connects *The Boozefighters* to the melee, stating that, “The main perpetrators of the Hollister riot belonged to a club that called itself the Booze Fighters [*sic*]” (Krakauer 4). The Boozefighters, a motorcycle club founded by servicemen whose main goals consisted of riding and drinking, inadvertently gave birth to a new genre of film: the outlaw biker movie.

Being the first of its kind, “*The Wild One*” caught the attention of not only America, but also the world. Mike Salisbury of *Forbes Magazine* explains that, “So worrisome was the prospect that the film might legitimize teenage rebellion that the British Board of Film Censors banned *The Wild One* for the next 14 years” (Salisbury 2). Krakauer notes this, and mentions that it was “Thanks to Brando, millions of filmgoers saw bikers in a romantic new light just as many others remained convinced that Johnny and his kind were vermin” (Krakauer 4). Bill Osgerby of the *Journal of Popular Film and Television* agrees that this ‘romantic light’ added to the attraction: “the film’s portrayal of swaggering delinquents courted controversy, and a mystique of alluring danger developed around both the film and the bikers it depicted” (Osgerby 2). Osgerby agrees that the film not only attracted and warned viewers at the same time, but that it also “established many of the codes that came to typify the archetypal biker movie: the volatile aura of the maverick bike gang; their gratuitous violation of social taboos; the parochial “squares” terrorized by subcultural Others; the fascination with polished chrome, black leather, and other markers of menacing machismo; and the brooding introspection of the biker gang leader” (Osgerby 2).

The exploitation of this movie, and so many others that follow it, has led the public to believe that this is the only biker around. Hayes carefully points out, however,

that, “the founding fathers of the original wild ones (Boozefighters) were really just big kids themselves, trying to recapture some of the youthful fun they had lost out on due to the innocence-destroying interruption of a very adult evil known as World War II” (Hayes 22). He makes clear as well that their image created by the news and film was much more powerful than the beliefs they stood by, and that it has been impossible to shake it. In a display of this inability to lay to rest the infamy of that movie, Krakauer describes Daytona Florida’s Main Street during bike week: “The line between order and explosive mayhem seems perilously thin here; the town feels poised for a reenactment of *The Wild One*, the 1954 Stanley Kramer movie in which a small California burg is terrorized by Marlon Brando’s motorcycle gang” (Krakauer 2).

Krakauer feels that the image is finally starting to wear off, however, as he states that, “Not so very long ago any shaggy guy on a Harley-Davidson was automatically assumed to be a rolling scourge, the archetypal American outlaw – “The Menace,” as Hunter Thompson described him in *Hell’s Angels*” (Krakauer 2). Osgerby agrees that this image has slowly been deteriorating, telling us, “the biker movie declined because the image of the maverick biker was steadily rehabilitated [...] The biker gangs themselves, were still linked with violent crime, but in popular culture the image of the outlaw biker was increasingly configured as a signifier for the sturdy independence and healthy egalitarianism of the “American Way” (Osgerby 10). Others feel, however, that the biker image still carries that simultaneous charm and fear, just as it did fifty years ago. Salisbury posits that, “Perhaps the poseur’s most famous patron saint is depicted in a once-nearly forgotten movie still for [...] *The Wild One*” (Salisbury 2). John Wood, author of “*Hell’s Angels and the Illusion of the Counterculture*,” feels that the image of

the Hell's Angels as the epitome of the counterculture has been falsely placed by movies such as "The Wild One." He explains, "The counterculture's view of the Hell's Angels was largely shaped by 1950's pop culture, which portrayed the biker as an individualist hero, and incorrectly linked bikers with the countercultural elements of the period" (Wood 337). Even after the Hell's Angels viciously attacked members of the Vietnam Day Committee (VDC) in Berkeley, Wood points out that, "Those in the counterculture could not shake the media-inspired image of the Angels being caretakers of American Individualism" (Wood 339).

Most noticeable today, however, are the drastic changes in biker demographics that are adding to the numbers of mature and responsible riders within motorcycle culture. Welch pointed out in an April, 2006 article that the movie "The Wild One" "was followed by countless lesser films that have perpetuated the outlaw biker image – an image of freedom and romance of the highway that has been embraced over the years by a far broader, law-abiding segment of America" (Welch 1). The landscape of American motorcycle riders is changing, and it is important to realize this in order to escape the prejudices toward bikers. American Demographic magazine reports such changes in a 1998 Motorcycle Industry Council survey:

the average rider was 38 years old, up from 27 in 1980. The majority – 60 percent – were 35 or older, up 24 percent in 1980. Their median household income was \$44,250 in 1998, up from \$17,500 in 1980. And one-third had a household income of \$50,000 or more, compared with just 2 percent in 1980 (American Demographics 2).

Krakauer agrees, explaining, “The demographics of motorcycling have shifted over the past decade: ten years ago the median annual income of American motorcycle owners was \$17,500; today it’s more than \$33,000” (Krakauer 2). Kaori Yamamoto of American Demographics magazine also cites this increase in age of motorcycle riders, explaining that, “Since 1988, the median age of a purchaser of a new Harley Davidson has risen by ten years, to 44” (Yamamoto 2). Not only is age going up, but incomes for bikers are increasing as well. Citing a Mediamark Research study, Dan Frost of American Demographics tells us “nearly half of all motorcycle owners earn more than \$50,000 a year, and nearly 25 percent pull in annual salaries above \$75,000. Almost 60 percent are between the ages of 35 and 64” (Frost 2). Both Frost and Yamamoto attribute this increase in age and income to the baby boomer generation reaching an age of dispensable incomes, as well as time. Neal Karlen from the New York Times notes this change, and tell us that, “Now between a third and a half of the bikers at Sturgis are not rebels defying social mores with noisy engines, but professional or white-collar workers” (Karlen 2). Les Sillars from the Alberta Report informs us that they are educated as well: “the median age of all Harley owners is 38 (compared with an industry standard of 31), their median income is \$34,000 (U.S.), 44% attended college and 20% have done post-graduate studies” (Sillars 2). What is also surprising, however, is the notable increase in female riders. In her article *Move Aside, Easy Rider*, Julie Scelfo from Newsweek magazine underlines a significant growth in female bikers. She tells us “More than 4.3 million women operated motorcycles last year, up 34 percent from 1998,” and continues by saying that “One out of ever three new riders enrolling in training

school is female” (Scelfo 1). Clearly, our attitudes must change according to the new demographics of motorcycle riders.

Today the motorcycle culture is changing. Riders are getting older and richer, and yet motorcycle gangs continue to exist. The numbers of gangs on American roads doesn't come close to the hoards of responsible riders looking to break free for the weekend. Movies played a significant role in the latter half of the twentieth century, but as we enter into the next, rest assured that a new icon of the outlaw nature will be waiting to grab us at the theater.

Methodology

The methodology of my research can be divided between two equally important forms. The first method consists of a historical analysis on the movies “The Wild One” and “Easy Rider.” Movies, unlike the news media, have the capability to remain at the forefront of a culture’s impact on the society, and for the motorcycle culture, this is just what has happened. From the late fifties into the seventies it was common to hear news stories reporting on the most recent outlaw act from bikers in the U.S. Today, however, even though these groups still exist, the coverage has died down significantly. But in order to gain a historical perspective on the past, all one has to do is watch a movie. This “perspective” gained from such films causes just the problem I am researching: the public’s misinterpretation of historical accounts through film. The stereotypes of the past still exist today, and I believe it is due to films such as these.

The second form of methodology my research is taking is through critical cultural analysis. To show just how wrong some may be in their regard to the current scene of biker culture, I am researching contemporary demographics of motorcycle owners. Through this knowledge I can show the progression from biker culture, as well as dispel the myths of the ‘outlaw biker’ still run amok on highways across the U.S.

Findings

Today, the myths that surround motorcycle culture that were apparent fifty years ago continue to linger. While there are many different forms of influence in our culture that can be attributed to the generalizations applied to the biker crowd, film is primarily responsible for this lasting effect. The news media did initially play a significant role in the creation of the negative image that surrounds bikers, but it is film that has carried that image into the 21st century. This ability for film to influence the public's perception for such a considerable time lies in its inherent difference from the news media. Where news relies heavily on the need to stay on top of current stories, ever changing and dynamic in its response to the present, film is able to maintain permanence in our culture that contributes to its relevance in societal influence. With its durability in both a physical form (i.e.: VHS, DVD, etc.), as well as its nature to provide an immediate window into the past, film tells us not only the stories they hold within, but also the stories of our society behind the film. It can illustrate clearly through the writing, acting, and directorial techniques the apprehensions and fears that were most prevalent at that time, as well as how people loved, lived, and thought. Movies such as "Gone With the Wind," "Mr. Smith Goes To Washington," "Rebel Without A Cause," and "The Wild One" have been able to carry their significance up to today not necessarily because of their greatness as movies, but rather because of their ability to take us back in time, to remind us of those periods.

The beginning of the outlaw biker movie period goes back almost as early as the outlaw movement began. The idea of the outlaw biker was established after the Second World War. Previously, the scene of motorcycle riders was completely different. Outlaw

bikers were unheard of, and riders were friendly, respected members of society. Sonny Barger, former head of the Oakland Hell's Angels, as well as the original architect of their current organizational practices, explains in his book Hell's Angel: The Life and Times of Sonny Barger and the Hell's Angels Motorcycle Club, that, "before World War II, motorcycle clubs were like gentlemen's club's – riders actually wore coats and ties" (Barger, Zimmerman, and Zimmerman 29). Just like many other facets of life in the United States, however, the meaning of the motorcycle rider dramatically changed after World War II, and the link between the motorcycle and their menacing owners began to form. Bill Osgerby, author of the article "Sleazy Riders: Exploitation, 'Otherness,' and Transgression in the 1960s Biker Movie," explains that outlaw clubs in California began to take shape after World War II, their members consisting mostly of veterans looking to escape the restraints of society (Osgerby 2). It was one such group, the Boozefighters MC (Motorcycle Club) that is recognized as the spark that started the media and film frenzy around the outlaw biker.

In 1947, Hollister California was holding its annual Fourth of July celebration. They hosted a bike race during the three-day weekend, and the small town of just 4,000 almost doubled in size. Many of the attending were not bike racers at all, but simply motorcycle clubs looking for a good time. For the entire weekend, explains Bill Hayes, author of the book The Original Wild Ones, the outlaw clubs such as the Boozefighters, held drag races up and down main street, beer sales exploded, and some of the riders were even reported to have ridden their bikes into the bars (Hayes 37). "What ensued," describes John Wood, author of "Hell's Angels and the Illusion of the Counterculture," "were a few nights of drag racing, public urination, and massive beer sales for local bars"

(Wood 341). Few were injured and many more were arrested. Pivotal to the creation of the outlaw image, however, is the difference between actual events and the media spin that was produced after the melee. Following the Hollister incident, dozens of reports of bikers “taking over the town” flooded the headlines of national papers. The outlaw biker image had been born, but it was a movie that carried it into maturation.

After the Boozefighter event had taken place in Hollister in 1947, Stanley Kramer, a Hollywood producer, took notice of the media reports and was determined to make a movie based loosely on the events, as well as the Boozefighters MC. Later known as “The Wild One,” his film would single-handedly spark unrest across the nation toward motorcycle culture. Directed by Laslo Benedek, this film followed a mold of movie, as Osgerby explains, that was becoming extremely popular in the 1950s. He tells us that, as the numbers of adult moviegoers declined, Hollywood aimed its products to the growing baby-boom market of teenagers:

Films such as *Shake Rattle and Rock!* and *Rock around the Clock* (both 1956) capitalized on the rock ‘n’ roll boom, while the latest teenage fads were exploited in *Hot Rod Gang* (1958) and *Ghost of Dragstrip Hollow* (1959). Juvenile delinquency was also a recurring theme, with a flood of ‘J.D. flicks’ [...] that purported to preach against the ‘evils’ of juvenile crime, yet simultaneously provided young audiences with the vicarious thrills of delinquent rebellion. (Osgerby 2)

“The Wild One” was an early example of the influx of ‘J.D.’ films, capitalizing on recent stories of the outlaw motorcycle gang. “The film’s portrayal of swaggering delinquents courted controversy,” details Osgerby, “and a mystique of alluring danger developed

around both the film and the bikers it depicted” (Osgerby 2). The significant influence in this movie, created through the means of exploitation, was the cogent element that has evolved into the current image of the “outlaw biker.”

Perhaps the most persuasive element of influence that Benedek uses in “The Wild One” is his ability to split his audience between those who hate his characters, and those who might want to be them. From the beginning of the film it becomes clear that “The Wild One” was marketed directly at the younger crowd through its use of highly controversial contemporary imagery. All of the bikers in the film are in their early 20’s; they use the latest slang, wear the newest style of clothing, and most importantly, ride cool motorcycles. Young, dangerous, and hip, the characters could easily scare most parents, while at the same time giving the kids in the audience tips on how to be cool. The main character, played by Marlon Brando, stays cool and nearly silent throughout his role as Johnny, and it was his style of aimless rebellion that was meant to send chills to the responsible side of society. In a line still famous today, a local girl asks him, “Hey Johnny, what are you rebelling against.” He simply replies, “What do you got?” He represents the most mysterious and unstable form of outlaw: the introspective and brooding hoodlum who demands respect from all who are around him. Johnny is smug, powerful, persuasive, and hip; just the right ingredients needed to send young girls swooning, young boys racing to buy a leather jacket, and parents locking their shudders. Johnny and his gang created the iconic image of the outlaw biker not only through their looks, but also their attitudes, language, and lifestyle. It was the image of rebellion and carelessness that both shocked and amazed audiences, and it was also the unifying link between the gang members. But while Johnny found his rebellious nature through his

quiet leadership and disrespect for the law, the rest of the bikers found power in their numbers. Leather clad and wild from alcohol, both gangs are portrayed in the film as carefree troublemakers. Constantly in tight formation, they did exactly what they wanted and got away with it simply because of their overwhelming presence. Both clubs found happiness in the film through downtown drag races, knocking back large amounts of alcohol, and picking up on the innocent local girls. Viewed as freedom by the younger crowd, a lifestyle of riding, drinking, and picking up girls must have been very attractive to them. At the same time, however, the more mature audiences could have interpreted these activities in the other direction, as selfish and anti-establishmentarian. What Benedek wanted both parties in the audience to know, however, is that the problem of the outlaw biker gang was a civic responsibility.

From the very beginning of the film, Benedek has the audience convinced that the motorcycle gang was only going to cause trouble wherever they went, and it was the duty of the citizens to stand up against them. During the opening title, shot over that long country road, the audience is addressed with his intimidatory reminder: “This is a shocking story. It could never take place in most American towns - but it did in this one. It is a public challenge not to let it happen again.” With this warning, Benedek is telling us that bikers are a problem too big for law enforcement. This theme of civic action against the bikers is carried on throughout the film, expressing the bleak reality that biker gangs are above the law.

During a fight between Johnny’s gang, the Black Rebel Motorcycle Club, and their rivals, the Beatles, the local townspeople take notice, as well as the town’s sheriff. While standing and watching, not knowing how to control the situation, a local named

Charlie Thomas asks sheriff Bleeker why he won't do anything about the gangs: "Let's stop this. I've seen hoodlums like this before. If you don't get tough with them the minute they get out of line, you're sunk. (To Bleeker) You are the cop, aren't ya? If you can't boot these jerks out, there's plenty of us that can, even if we have to bust a few heads." At this point, no civil action is taken. Later in the film, however, after both of the motorcycle gangs take over the town by cutting off the main telephone switchboard, as well as trashing several businesses, a local lynch mob forms. They capture Johnny and find justice in beating him up, but as he escapes, another mob set up a trap, and one of them throws a tire iron into his front spokes. Johnny flies off, and his bike careens out of control, killing a local passerby, an elderly man named Jimmy. By the end of the film, the message of civil responsibility for the actions of the motorcycle gangs is clear. What the audience is to take away from this film is the idea of an imaginary threat of no-good punks on motorcycles, aimed at reckless abandon and selfish fulfillment. Osgerby agrees that this movie not only attracted and warned viewers at the same time, but that it was also the beginning of the generic biker film:

"The Wild One" established many of the codes that came to typify the archetypal biker movie: the volatile aura of the maverick bike gang; their gratuitous violation of social taboos; the parochial 'squares' terrorized by subcultural Others; the fascination with polished chrome, black leather, and other markers of menacing machismo; and the brooding introspection of the biker gang leader." (Osgerby 2)

Important to remember, however, is the innocence of the group from whom this movie was based. Hayes carefully points out that, "the founding fathers of the original wild

ones (Boozefighters) were really just big kids themselves, trying to recapture some of the youthful fun they had lost out on due to the innocence-destroying interruption of a very adult evil known as World War II” (Hayes 22). To exploit the idea of veterans recapturing youth, turning it into an alarm for American towns to heed its warning is a deceitful act, and it is important to know that the gap between the Boozefighters and the Black Rebel Motorcycle Club is formed in Hollywood screenplays. It is sad, however, that people took the threat to be something very tangible, and actions were made to stop the influence, not only in America, but also around the world. Mike Salisbury of Forbes Magazine points out; “So worrisome was the prospect that the film might legitimize teenage rebellion that the British Board of Film Censors banned *The Wild One* for the next 14 years” (Salisbury 2). Postwar motorcycle groups were forming across the Atlantic, just as they were here in the States, and they weren’t willing to accept that risk of influence, so powerful was the film’s image of the rebellious motorcycle rider. Sonny Barger was greatly influenced by the film, as he was only sixteen years old when it was released (Barger, Zimmerman & Zimmerman 25). But rather than identifying with the main character Johnny, he saw more of himself in the Beetle’s leader, Chino, played by Lee Marvin. He says, “Lee’s attitude was ‘If you fuck with me, I’ll hit back.’ Lee and his boys were riding fucked-up Harleys and Indians. I certainly saw more of Chino in me than Johnny. I still do” (Barger, Zimmerman & Zimmerman 26). But the charm of Brando is what perpetuated the mysterious duality of the motorcycle rider. Krakauer notes this, and mentions that it was “Thanks to Brando, millions of filmgoers saw bikers in a romantic new light, just as many others remained convinced that Johnny and his kind were vermin” (Krakauer 4). Across the board, authors agree that it was “*The Wild One*”

that brought the outlaw biker into the spotlight. From then into the seventies, the biker flick turned its cheek away from the 'J.D.' scene, and pointed its looking glass toward the Hell's Angels after the Monterey rape incident. *The Wild Angels* (1966) was the first of a plethora of exploitation films aimed directly at the Hell's Angels. The director, Roger Corman, even hung out with Hell's Angels and hired them as extras to capture some authenticity (Osgerby 4). After that, dozen of other films displaying graphic violence, sex and drug use common to the group was portrayed. William Welch of USA Today explains, "The B-movie [*The Wild One*] was followed by countless lesser films that have perpetuated the outlaw biker image – an image of freedom and romance of the highway that has been embraced over the years by a far broader, law-abiding segment of America" (Welch 1). One film, however, steps away from the crowd of graphic exploitation flicks, and displays the softer, more romantic, yet at the same time tragic, side of the lone biker.

Easy Rider, filmed in 1969, tells the story of Wyatt (Peter Fonda) and Billy (Dennis Hopper). After scoring big on a drug deal, the two purchase large American motorcycles and head from California toward New Orleans for Mardi Gras. They camp and smoke a lot of weed on the way, and hang out at a hippie commune for several days. When they arrive in New Orleans, they meet two hookers and drop acid with them in a cemetery, and quickly after their drug-induced celebration they head toward Florida. On their way through a stretch of country road, they are shot and killed by two rednecks that drive past in a truck. "*Easy Rider*" was a huge success, grossing over \$50 million, and as Osgerby points out, it "took the characteristic themes and conventions of the biker flick into a mainstream arena" (Osgerby 7). Radiating 'cool' from every scene, the movie was attractive to the counterculture, and it enforced their ideals of individuality, as well as the

anti-establishment beliefs. An obvious connection to the counterculture that is made during the movie is the image of drug use in the film. At nearly every stop on their trip, Wyatt and Billy are smoking weed. They even turn George on to marijuana, the small town lawyer played by Jack Nicholson who initially condemned the drug for its mythical ability to “lead to harder stuff.” Aside from marijuana, there are instances of harder drugs in the film. In the opening scene, Wyatt and Billy fund their entire cross-country trip by smuggling cocaine out of Mexico and selling it to a dealer in Los Angeles. Although the two don’t use the drug, it supports the lasting notion that bikers make a living through drug trade. Then, in a scene that can be visually compared to the actual experience, Wyatt and Billy drop acid with their escorts in a New Orleans cemetery. Sending the message of promiscuous drug use, “Easy Rider” clearly falls into the canon of the countercultural motorcycle flick.

Although “Easy Rider” does not portray motorcycle riders as outlaw thugs looking to create terror for the citizens of small towns, the film is significant in that it expresses what it meant at that time to be a motorcycle rider. Wyatt and Billy were truly free from the confines of society while on their bikes, and this movie captures that unattractive characteristic. In a significant scene, as Wyatt and Billy are about to head out on the first leg of their journey, Wyatt takes off his wrist watch and throws it on the ground, a literal message used to define his newfound freedom from the constraints of society. It was during one of his campfire discussions with Bill, however, that George explains exactly why this image of freedom was so fearful to the mainstream:

George: Oh no. What you represent to them is freedom.

Billy: What the hell's wrong with freedom, man? That's what it's all about.

George: Oh yeah, that's right, that's what it's all about, all right. But talkin' about it and bein' it - that's two different things. I mean, it's real hard to be free when you are bought and sold in the marketplace. 'Course, don't ever tell anybody that they're not free 'cause then they're gonna get real busy killin' and maimin' to prove to you that they are. Oh yeah, they're gonna talk to you, and talk to you, and talk to you about individual freedom, but they see a free individual, it's gonna scare 'em.

Billy: Mmmm, well, that don't make 'em runnin' scared.

George: No, it makes 'em dangerous.

This danger that George talks about becomes quite evident twice during the movie. In the first instance, several locals beat Wyatt, Billy, and George with baseball bats in the middle of the night as they lie sleeping in the woods. George, the only member who actually had more in common with the locals than his counterculture friends, was beaten to death, and Wyatt and Billy were left bloody and bruised. The next development of violence toward Wyatt and Billy is of course at the end, when the two are murdered in an abrupt and shocking conclusion, intended to mark the death of not only the main characters, but freedom in America as well. This message of violence toward the bikers runs parallel to that of the message of civil action, as portrayed in "The Wild One." We are to believe that these riders are so hated by the mainstream that the bourgeois class are willing to take the matter of justice in their own hands, and it is because of what they represent: freedom. Today, this image of freedom as portrayed by bikers may seem almost deserved and just, as there is a feeling of freedom that can be obtained by riding in the open air. During the late sixties, however, in a society where the counterculture and

the mainstream were pitted against each other at every sociopolitical turn, this freedom was interpreted as an escape from American beliefs and values. Through “Easy Rider,” the culture of motorcycle riders was grouped into the counterculture scene. Hated by the mainstream for their beliefs both politically and spiritually, as well as their use of drugs and practice of free sex, riders as members of the counterculture were looked at as everything that America was not, and this image has been carried on into today.

As of now, the landscape of motorcycle culture has been painted through film. News reports of outlaw bikers threatening towns no longer exist, and neither do the films. The message has lingered, but that too is slowly dying as the demographics create a recognizable change in the culture. Krakauer also feels that the image of outlaw biker is finally starting to wear off, stating that, “Not so very long ago any shaggy guy on a Harley-Davidson was automatically assumed to be a rolling scourge, the archetypal American outlaw – “The Menace,” as Hunter Thompson described him in *Hell’s Angels*” (Krakauer 2). Osgerby agrees that the image has slowly been deteriorating, attributing this change to the need for film companies to continue to find ways of grabbing their audiences:

Crucially, the biker movie declined because the image of the maverick biker was steadily rehabilitated. Where once the outlaw motorcyclist had been an avatar of loathsome outrage, by the mid-1970s his image was being reworked as an icon of wholesome Americana. The biker gangs themselves, were still linked with violent crime, but in popular culture the image of the outlaw biker was increasingly configured as a signifier for

the sturdy independence and healthy egalitarianism of the “American Way.” (Osgerby 10)

Others feel, however, that the biker image still carries that simultaneous charm and fear, just as it did fifty years ago. Salisbury posits that, “Perhaps the poseur’s most famous patron saint is depicted in a once-nearly forgotten movie still for [...] “The Wild One” (Salisbury 2). In order to lay to rest forever the media-driven image of the outlaw biker, one must only look at the contemporary demographics of the culture.

Today, there are drastic changes in the structure of motorcycle culture. The age of motorcycle rider is increasing along with their income and education, and researchers are unified in this marked change in the culture. American Demographic magazine reported that in a 1998 Motorcycle Industry Council survey,

The average rider was 38 years old, up from 27 in 1980. The majority – 60 percent – were 35 or older, up 24 percent in 1980. Their median household income was \$44,250 in 1998, up from \$17,500 in 1980. And one-third had a household income of \$50,000 or more, compared with just 2 percent in 1980. (American Demographics 2)

Krakauer also notes this change. He explains that, “The demographics of motorcycling have shifted over the past decade: ten years ago the median annual income of American motorcycle owners was \$17,500; today it’s more than \$33,000” (Krakauer 2). Kaori Yamamoto of American Demographics magazine cites this increase in age of motorcycle riders, telling us that, “Since 1988, the median age of a purchaser of a new Harley Davidson has risen by ten years, to 44” (Yamamoto 2). Naturally, as the age of the rider increases, so do their incomes. In citing a Mediamark Research study, Dan Frost informs

us that almost half of the riders in the U.S. today are making over \$50,000 a year, and nearly one fourth make above \$75,000 a year. The report also confirms the rise in age, with almost 60 percent of riders falling between the ages of 35 and 64. (Frost 2). Both Frost and Yamamoto attribute this increase in age and income to the baby boomer generation reaching an age of dispensable incomes, as well as time. Neal Karlen from the New York Times notes this change, and tell us that, “Now between a third and a half of the bikers at Sturgis are not rebels defying social mores with noisy engines, but professional or white-collar workers” (Karlen 2). Along with age and income, the education of riders has seen a steady increase. Les Sillars from the Alberta Report informs us that, “the median age of all Harley owners is 38 (compared with an industry standard of 31), their median income is \$34,000 (U.S.), 44% attended college and 20% have done post-graduate studies” (Sillars 2). What is also surprising, however, is the notable increase in female riders. In her 2004 article *Move Aside, Easy Rider*, Julie Scelfo from Newsweek magazine underlines a significant growth in female bikers. She tells us “more than 4.3 million women operated motorcycles last year, up 34 percent from 1998,” and that “One out of every three new riders enrolling in training school is female” (Scelfo 1).

Conclusion

Unlike the news media, film is able to carry its message on for generations, and for “The Wild One,” and “Easy Rider,” that message is one of negativity and alienation. As a burgeoning sector of postwar culture, the motorcycle culture had been given its initial recrimination through the news. After the film industry picked up on it, however, that tie to chaos, violence, and anything anti-American was connected for decades. But as the culture continues to grow, the overwhelming numbers of middle-aged, upper-middle class riders disconnects those assumptions, and exposes the reality behind the culture.

Kramer’s vision of the outlaw biker presented an out of control band of youthful miscreants. Hip and popular, they represented everything that the mature audience would hate and the kids would love, furthering the divide between youth and their elders. Kramer’s film introduced the world to the image of the outlaw biker: leather jacket, greased-back hair, swaggering demeanor, and most importantly, an almost intrinsic disrespect and hatred for the law. Warning audiences the world over, this band of outlaw bikers was presented as a civil problem waiting to happen in the next small town. “The Wild One” was aimed directly at adolescents, snaring them with the good looks of Brando and Marvin, all the while holding them with a cheesy love story. A powerful and influential film, the implications of this genre of movie would set into motion a genre of film lasting more than twenty years.

“Easy Rider,” filmed sixteen years after “The Wild One,” was subtler in its tone toward the outlaw biker, but its influences are no less significant. “Easy Rider” reached out to an older crowd, yet maintained the standard of immaturity of the motorcycle rider,

as portrayed in “The Wild One.” The main characters, Wyatt and Billy, struck a chord with the counterculture audience, reaching to drugs and spiritual, sexual, and personal independence as a sort of key to the association. Spreading the message that bikers are no-good hippie punks, “Easy Rider,” just as with “The Wild One,” shed light on a significant cultural divide between the counterculture and everyone else. Ending with the sudden deaths of Wyatt and Billy, “Easy Rider” sends a strong message about public opinion in regards to the motorcycle rider.

Supported by the images and myths presented in film, public opinion can easily become misdirected from reality. We must consider the evidence that researchers are discovering today, however, in order to remove the myths that surround biker culture. Factors such as age, lifestyle and beliefs are all much different than what these movies of the past would have you believe. We are currently in the middle of a strong change that is taking over the cultural norms of the biker crowd, as riders continue to increase in age, wealth, and education. To own a motorcycle has gone from the stuff of movies and outlaws to a hobby that can include family and friends. These new riders hold nine to five jobs, have 2.5 kids, stand anywhere between poor and rich, and are acquiring college degrees, and in a once male-dominated culture, more and more women are getting off of the back seat and opting for the handlebars.

In an effort to continue this search for the uniqueness of motorcycle culture, I encourage those with an interest to continue this research into the biker film, as I have only looked at two specific films. There are thousands of instances in which bikers have been portrayed in Hollywood, and to continue to study how they are portrayed is pivotal in drawing a more clear and strong image of the Hollywood biker.

As I write this, the film “Wild Hogs” is playing in theaters. It presents the idea of four middle-aged men who take a road trip on their large American motorcycles. Analysis of this transforming image of the biker would add significantly to the support in my research. To have that kind of information is ammunition against the continuing fear and trepidation that surrounds their community, as it is my wish for a common understanding to evolve, one that exercises the positive images that should surround the community of bikers.

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Interdisciplinary Reflection Essay

Before entering into the HCOM program here at CSUMB, I was very unsure as to what major I wanted to be in. I wanted to be in TAT and Music, but those typically shoehorn its students into too specific an area of study. Not knowing exactly where I wanted to go after college, I needed a degree to use as a stepping-stone to an ultimate goal that I would find later in life. I spoke to some friends who were HCOM students at the time, and they said I'd be perfect for the program. I was looking for something that could prepare me for the professional world, without narrowing my potential, and my friends suggested that I look into HCOM. My understanding of the major then is very similar to what it is now.

Aside from the standard English aspects of reading, writing and comprehension, I understand that HCOM was designed to help students graduate with a greater understanding of interpersonal communication, as well as an awareness of the self within our world. Through classes such as California at the Crossroads, and Asian American Literature, I learned about historical struggles for separate social groups, and problems encountered with differences in class and power. The constant exposure to group work in and out of most of the classes helped me to enhance my verbal communication skills, as well as my ability to lead when needed. The sense of community in my classes made problem solving much less intimidating, as well as the coursework. Most importantly, however, I feel that classes such as Philosophy, News Writing, and Capstone helped me to attain a sense of personal voice. These classes allowed me to express myself, whether it was through a class discussion of identity, an article I wrote about an interview with my brother, or simply being allowed to explore an area of study unique in its attractiveness to

myself, as well as the general depth of understanding. I feel more confident and inspired because of my ability to express myself through language, and I also feel more aware of my social surroundings. I am able to acknowledge communication gaps more proactively, and I am confident that this growth in communication skills will give me a strong advantage as I head toward a career. Social justice has also been a big part of my HCOM experience, and I am very happy to have been given so much insight into the challenges that surround our communities both locally and globally. I am fortunate to have been given such a well-rounded education that has covered not only the details of writing and comprehension, but also how to generally be a better person.

For my Capstone, I do think that some, but not all, of my HCOM education was helpful. Nevertheless, after having written handfuls of research papers, I was well prepared for the endeavor. My understanding of the process of writing a research paper was absolutely the most helpful insight into completing my capstone paper. Because I was well practiced in the art of research and writing, my capstone felt as simple and painless as climbing a set of stairs. From the beginning, when we figured out our topics, and then the research process, onto the outline and writing stage, I never encountered serious difficulties. I simply followed the steps that were clearly outlined, and was able to complete each task, ending with the final product.

A significant advantage that I had in the process of research and writing, however, was my interest in the subject. I am very familiar with what it is like to write a paper in which I have no interest invested, and, as most people know, it can be a painstaking process. But, performing my research was more fun and interesting than it was draining and tedious. Writing the paper was equally exciting because I felt like I was able to teach

people something they had never been aware of. Even though the process did seem rather easy and pain-free because of my preparation and interest, it had its challenges due to the scale of the project. The research I performed took longer than normal, and it was difficult to sort through the sources, as there were so many. The analysis stage was also difficult for me because, in the past, that type of research was never expected or required of me. I did enjoy it, however, after getting over the unfamiliar feeling of putting down my personal thoughts into a research paper. This brings me back to the personal voice that I discovered through several HCOM classes, as they certainly played an important role for my capstone. Another significant impact from HCOM that I used for my capstone was the awareness I had attained regarding power struggles within social classes. In my paper I write of the prejudices placed on the entire motorcycle culture, and it was those in power (the film industry) who initiated those myths. But I also learned that through education, certain myths and beliefs can be overcome, and that was my hope in writing my capstone.