

WHAT CHOICE? SUBCULTURE FILMS, NATURALIZATION,  
AND THE POSTMODERN CONDITION

By

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Abstract

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Over the last 25 years, a new genre of Hollywood films has emerged, each film focusing on one particular American subculture. During the course of each movie, the protagonist must come to terms with this subculture's opposition to "mainstream" American society, and in almost every case he must eventually make a decision as to which world he will belong to.

This thesis begins an examination of the genre, in the hope that further examination and discussion will follow. It identifies various primary and secondary characteristics of the genre, and from there it considers directly a few of the more apparent issues raised by these films, and by the existence of the genre itself. Representations of race/ethnicity, gender/sexuality, and class are examined, as are "naturalizing" influences within the genre. Finally, the thesis identifies aspects of the genre which are emblematic of the postmodern condition.

This thesis is available online at <http://134.121.50.155/subculture/>

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*The post-modern experience is that everyone has got to be marginal.  
That's where the goods are.*

Stuart Hall, "The Politics of Representation"

Since the mid-1980s, there have been a number of films which each focus on a particular subgroup within American society. The 80s saw, for instance, *The Color of Money* (focusing on pool hustlers), *Wall Street* (stock brokers) and *Top Gun* (fighter pilots).<sup>1</sup> The trend continued through the 90s with films like *Backdraft* (firefighters), *8 Seconds* (rodeo riders), and *Rounders* (poker players). More recently, we have had *The Fast & The Furious* (street racers), *Blue Crush* (surfers), and others. Almost thirty such films have come out of Hollywood in the last twenty years. While apparently unrelated, these movies actually share a large number of common elements. Character types, plot lines, themes, even particular uses of staging and lighting reappear again and again throughout the films. In short, these movies seem to make up a genre, or at least the beginnings of one. (For lack of a more imaginative term, I refer to films in the genre as *subculture films*.)

Several critics have argued for a particular definition of film genres—one which would only include films identified by both producers and audience members as belonging to a defined genre. Thomas Schatz, for example, mentions an implicit "contract"

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<sup>1</sup> For the sake of brevity, only a few films are listed here as examples. For a more complete list of such films, please see Appendix A.

between studios and film audiences (93). This “contract” concept is widely used throughout genre criticism. Thomas Sobchack states that “consciously or unconsciously, both the genre filmmaker and the genre audiences are aware of the prior films and the way in which each of these concrete examples is an attempt to embody once again the essence of a well-known story” (103). The subculture film genre is, of course, not widely recognized. But as Sobchack has pointed out, unconscious awareness is still a form of recognition. A viewer who has seen *Bonnie and Clyde*, *Easy Rider* and *Five Easy Pieces*, but who is unaware of the road-movie genre, will still have some (conscious or unconscious) generic awareness—and certain expectations—when watching *Thelma and Louise* for the first time. The same sort of recognition and expectations are at work, I believe, with movies in the subculture genre.

In calling these films *subculture* films, I am aware that I am using a particularly expansive definition of the word. *Subculture* is most often used to describe a particular kind of subgroup within society—a subgroup, that is, which is clearly set apart from the mainstream by fashion/style, language, music, etc. Members of subcultures typically define their identities in opposition to the culture of the mainstream, as well. The term carries a connotation, in other words, of *counterculture*. While those features may not seem to apply to the groups on which many of these films focus—firemen, Air Force pilots, stock brokers, and the like—I think that the term *subculture* is still the best one with which to refer to these groups. In any case, as I hope to show, the distinction between these

subgroups and those more traditionally referred to as “subcultures” may not be as clear as it seems. In the context of these films, at least, I don’t believe that it is.

*To parody a well-known saying, I shall say that a little formalism turns one away from History, but that a lot brings one back to it.*

Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*

### **Genre analysis**

Genre analysis can be problematical. What is called analysis or criticism is often little more than making note of superficial similarities or differences among films. This is true across film criticism in general, unfortunately, and especially true of much work with genre. (It is also true outside the medium, of course, and I suspect that in the criticism of other mediums as well, genre analysis is especially prone.) As Andrew Tudor puts it, “it becomes almost the end point of the critical process to fit a film into such a category. . . . To call a film a ‘Western’ is thought of as somehow saying something interesting or important about it” (16). Rick Altman calls this approach to genre criticism the *semantic* approach—a focus on the more superficial aspects of films that fit into a given genre. A semantic examination would point out the character types, aesthetics, plot lines, etc., which are common to the films. I will conduct just such an examination of the subculture genre in the next section. But this kind of examination falls far short of criticism or analysis.

The inevitable question that must arise from such an assessment is, “Why bother?” What good does it do to point out that *noir* films all make extensive use of light and shadow, for example, or that Westerns usually feature saloons? In this case genre analysis is no different from a similar analysis of a given individual film. The observation that science fiction films virtually all take place in the future is no more valuable than the observation



that *Good Will Hunting* has something green in virtually every scene. To be valuable, genre analysis must bring deeper issues to the surface.

This is where Altman's second type of examination becomes significant. He calls this the *syntactic* approach; it is an approach that takes into account the relationships among the semantic elements of the genre, or between those elements and aspects of society at large. This approach recalls the mythological theory of Claude Lévi-Strauss: "If there is a meaning to be found in mythology, this cannot reside in the isolated elements which enter into the composition of a myth, but only in the way those elements are combined" (174). Stuart Kaminsky, for example, finds that the heroes of early gangster films are all short in stature (a *semantic* observation). He then makes a syntactic inference, pointing out that

their smallness emphasized the affinity between the cocky gangster and the 'little' man in the audience who identified with the gangster on the screen. . . . We know part of his problem and tend to react by thinking: if that little guy on the screen can push his way to the top, why can't I? (16).

It may be interesting to realize that these movies' protagonists are often short. But examining *why* that is the case—or what effects it might have—is much more valuable.

In the context of this deeper, broader method of analysis, I think that genre criticism can be very useful. Qualities or incidences that seem insignificant in individual films can take on more meaning when connected with similar characteristics of other films in the genre—if we have shown the existence of the genre itself, of course. So while the semantic approach is necessary, it is a means to an end—the end being the syntactic analysis which

can then be taken up, and which can tell us something about the societies in which the films are produced and consumed.

The existence of particular genres themselves is significant as well. Given that a group of films share a common lot of significant characteristics, we can and should then ask why this is so. I believe, with Roland Barthes, that the things which are repeated are significant (12). Why are all of these films—from different studios, by different writers and directors, with different actors, etc.—created and consumed in our society? What do they say about the society that is producing and consuming them? What is it that we want or need, in other words, that these films provide? In essence, a film genre is a kind of myth system. The genre film contains mythic archetypes and essential principles, as well as the presentation and resolution of conflicts which are current in society. The Western, for example, very often revolves around a lone hero facing the question of when violence is acceptable, and struggling between individualism and social belonging—questions/struggles which were very much present and significant in post-World-War-II America (the time and place when the Western was most popular).

Such a myth system can be a profound indicator, and can have profound effects, as we will see. As Robert Ray has put it, “myths and artistic conventions, far from existing in some politically neutral realm of archetypes or aesthetics, are always socially produced and consumed, and thus always implicated in ideology” (14). The genre in question here, specifically, is strongly tied to issues of ethnicity and gender. Within the subculture genre are significant indicators, I think, of the contradictory identities that we—especially those

of us who are white and male—form around those nuclei. The genre itself also presents important images of whiteness and masculinity in our society.

Rick Altman proposes another pair of approaches to genre criticism, which he terms the *ritual* and the *ideological* approaches. Altman claims that the two are mutually exclusive, but I read that as a function of the use he puts them to: he looks at both approaches as tools for judging the “ultimate authorship” of a given film. So, in Altman’s description, the *ritual* approach “sees Hollywood as responding to societal pressure and thus expressing audience desires,” whereas the *ideological* approach defines genres as “simply the generalized, identifiable structures through which Hollywood’s rhetoric flows” (29). Taken away from this attempt to find the author, however, I think that Altman’s dichotomy disappears, and his terms become useful. Essentially, Altman’s *ritual* approach constitutes a focus on the consumption side: What do these common characteristics represent in society at large? Why is it that we, as audiences, feel compelled to return to these tropes, plots, characters, etc.? This is a focus on the receivers of myths—in our case, the films’ audience(s). The *ideological* approach, on the other hand, focuses on production: What does Hollywood stand to gain by reproducing these stories in these ways? But Altman’s terminology certainly suggests a broader (and more appropriate) field of inquiry.

Antonio Gramsci says that *ideology* is “a conception of the world that is implicitly manifest in art, in law, in economic activity and in all manifestations of individual and collective life” (“Notes” 330). Louis Althusser defines it as a system of representations

(images, myths, ideas, or concepts) given a historical existence and a role within a given society (“Marxism and Humanism” 231). Myth, in either case, is one element of the ideological system—a system which expresses the relationship between people and the world (“Marxism and Humanism” 235). Gramsci also points out ideology’s role as a *form*, a representation, of the historical bloc—the relations of power which exist within a given society at a given time. The material forces which we identify in a society, he points out, would be “inconceivable” without the form of ideology (“Hegemony” 200).

More specifically, Althusser examines the existence and functioning of what he calls *Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs)*. Hollywood is a powerful media force, and certainly falls easily into Althusser’s description of an ISA. Thinking of Hollywood in this sense allows us to stop focusing narrowly on the intent of—or perceived benefits for—Hollywood in this analysis. Rather, Althusser posits the ISA (Hollywood, in this case) as a sort of tool. Hollywood is important in its relation to other ISAs—churches, schools, political parties, families, etc. As he points out, “what unifies their diversity is precisely [their] functioning . . . *beneath the ruling ideology*, which is the ideology of ‘the ruling class’” (“Ideology” 139, emphasis his). As such, a more fruitful line of inquiry under Altman’s “ideological” rubric might be: How does this genre serve the purposes of the dominant ideology? How does it affect the ideology itself? I will take this form of “ideological” approach with this paper. Elsewhere, Althusser does explicitly indicate that “in a class society ideology is the relay whereby, and the element in which, the relation between men and their conditions of existence is settled to the profit of the ruling class”

(“Marxism and Humanism” 235–6). Any investigation of ideology is an investigation of power. As we examine the ideological forces and effects surrounding Hollywood—and surrounding this genre of films specifically—we are inevitably examining the power structure that permeates our society as a whole. As such, I intend this to be an examination of “the profit of the ruling class”—in whatever form—to which these films contribute.

### **Primary characteristics of the genre**

There are several characteristics of the genre which seem to be definitive. That is, if I am correct about the audience's expectations and recognition of the genre—even without their awareness of the genre *per se*—then these are the characteristics which we might expect the audience to recognize. They are also the elements of a movie which might trigger recognition, and make the viewer more inclined to notice—or even expect—other (primary and secondary) characteristics of the genre. The primary characteristics of the genre which I have identified include the following, though of course they may not be limited to these:

- The protagonist is a member (or through the course of the film becomes a member) of a particular subgroup of American society.
- There is a clear distinction made between the subgroup and American mainstream culture at large.
- Characters in the film define themselves according to the subgroup.
- At some point in the movie, the protagonist is forced to choose between the subgroup and mainstream society (though “mainstream society” may be represented by a larger, less well-defined group).

It might help to see these elements in the context of one prototypical film from the genre:

*Days of Thunder.*

*Days* is one of several movies in the genre that feature a young Tom Cruise as the protagonist. In this case, Cruise's character (Cole Trickle) is a race-car driver. Early in the

movie, he begins driving in NASCAR (switching over from a smaller, “open wheels” circuit). As the movie progresses, we (along with the characters in the movie) find that Cole is one of the best drivers in NASCAR. Along the way, however, he must learn the rules of the NASCAR subculture itself. He does this through interactions with those who are already members: both friends, such as his pit chief Harry Hogge (Robert Duvall), and enemies such as his sometime rival racer Rowdy Burns (Michael Rooker).

From the very opening sequences, the movie focuses on the elements which distinguish the subculture: the exclusive space of the racetrack, the sounds of the cars and of the crowd, the particular dress of the racers and their crews, etc. The second scene of the movie reinforces the distinction, setting the subculture in clear opposition to a more mainstream way of life. We find that car builder and pit chief Harry Hogge has given up the world of racing to become a farmer. Tim Daland (Randy Quaid), who hopes to start up a racing team of his own, presses Harry on his decision. Harry responds, “I don’t mind spreading a little fertilizer around now and then. There’s worse things!” Throughout the film, farming is used as a counterpoint to the world of racing. Farming seems to represent the culture at large, and its opposition to racing is clear. This distinction is echoed later in the movie, for instance, by Rowdy Burns, who says that as he was growing up he hated farming. “All I wanted to do was work on race cars. Got to racing, now all I want to do is make enough money to work on a farm.”

Through Cole’s conversations with his love interest, Dr. Clair Lewicki (Nicole Kidman), we see the extent to which he defines himself as a member of the subculture.

When she asks him what he wants from life, he responds, “I want to know it’s not just dumb luck that gets me around that race track.” It is crucial for Cole not to simply win, but to show himself to be a great driver. As he says at another point in the movie (again to Claire), “It’s just like everything else in life—you have to be good at what you do before you can be happy with anything else.” Throughout the movie, Cole is always a racer. He and Rowdy race rental cars on the way to dinner, and even race wheelchairs through the hallways of a hospital.

During a race, Cole ends up in a massive accident, which puts both him and Rowdy into the hospital. As his body recovers, Cole must come to terms with his fear of getting back into a racecar. For a short period, he stays away from the track, but finally he agrees to drive Rowdy’s car at Daytona (he and Rowdy have, by this time, bonded). In the end, Cole is willing to risk his own life to be a part of the subculture. As he prepares to get into Rowdy’s car—his first time driving after the accident that almost killed him—Cole tells Claire, “I’m more afraid of being nothing than I am of being hurt.” To him, leaving the NASCAR circuit is the same as “being nothing”—a fate worse than death. Cole does get into the car, of course, and he goes on to win Daytona.

The characteristics of the genre should be easily identifiable in this synopsis. We are first introduced to the subculture itself, through the opening shots and the conversation between Tim and Harry. The subculture is clearly distinguished from a more typical life on a farm, which we may take to be representative of mainstream life in general. Next we are introduced to the protagonist, Cole, who quickly becomes a member of the subculture.



We see repeated instances of the way Cole defines his own identity through racecar driving (as do other drivers in the movie). This is reinforced when Cole finally chooses his identity in the subculture over life in the mainstream—and over the security of life itself.

I would like to point out a pair of implications which arise from the four primary characteristics identified above. The first follows from the distinction between the subculture and society at large. In *Days of Thunder*, farming and racing are depicted as mutually exclusive activities. Tim asks Harry to leave his farm in order to build a racecar, and Rowdy talks about leaving racing in order to farm. This mutual exclusivity is typical of the genre. There is therefore a kind of oppositional quality to this distinction. The choice to accept life within the subculture is a rejection of mainstream life (or any other options which may be presented), and vice-versa.

Consequently, and given that characters within the subculture define their identities according to membership therein, it seems that these characters are themselves defined in opposition to mainstream culture. The struggle for identification, after all, is most evident in the protagonist's effort to choose between the two worlds. This varies in degree across the genre, but is the case in virtually all of the movies.

### **Secondary characteristics of the genre**

The primary characteristics listed above are definitive of the genre, in that they are the characteristics which are most recognizable and most likely to trigger our awareness of

other films in the genre. In addition to those, there are quite a few characteristics which are recurrent among the movies in this genre, but which may not be as quickly recognized (even subconsciously) by audience members. A few of these characteristics may indeed be definitive to the genre, though I have not identified them as such. Some of these characteristics appear in virtually every movie within the genre, and others appear quite frequently. Still others appear in only a few of the movies, but are nevertheless helpful in attempting a definition and examination of the genre as a whole. What follows is an open list of these characteristics, with examples from various subculture films.

**The protagonist and most other members of the subculture are young, straight, white, and male.** This is the case in virtually all of the films in this genre—or at least it was, prior to 2001. Up until then, only two or three films were exceptions—*Punchline*, whose protagonist is a suburban housewife (Sally Field), *The Color of Money*, whose protagonist seems to be the aging stake-horse Eddie Felson (Paul Newman), and *Bull Durham*, whose protagonist is an aging minor-league baseball player (Kevin Costner). Even these exceptions, however, speak to the importance of this characteristic to the genre. *Punchline* is one of the few movies in the genre in which the protagonist's family plays a significant role—it is, in fact, one of very few in which we are even made aware that the protagonist *has* a family. The protagonist of this film, Lila Krytsick, is faced throughout the film with the crisis between her identity as a stand-up comedienne and her identity as a wife and

mother. This, eventually, is the choice she must make—and in another anomaly for the genre, she is able to choose both.

In the other two exceptions, *The Color of Money* and *Bull Durham*, the variance is simply the protagonist's age. And in both films, the protagonist's age is the central issue of the film—setting in gross relief the decision between life within the subculture and life without. This is what lends power to the closing line of *The Color of Money* (“I’m back!”). In addition, both of these films feature a young white male counterpart to the protagonist—Vincent (Tom Cruise) in *The Color of Money*, and “Nuke” LaLoosh (Tim Robbins) in *Bull Durham*. In *The Color of Money*, in fact, one could argue that Vincent is actually the protagonist.

The other exceptions to this rule, as mentioned above, have all been released since 2001. In fact, virtually all entries into the genre since 2001 have been exceptions to this rule. *The Fast & The Furious*, for example, features a white male protagonist in a subculture populated almost entirely by men (and a few women) of color. The protagonist in *Blue Crush* is a white female, but all of her friends (and most of the other surfers in the movie) are non-white. *Drumline* and *Biker Boyz*, meanwhile, are the first movies in the genre to have men of color as protagonists.

**The protagonist is the best, or one of the best, at what he does.** Cole Trickle wins Daytona in his first full season as a NASCAR driver. Lane Frost (Luke Perry) is a world-champion bull rider in *8 Seconds*. In *Pushing Tin*, air-traffic controller Nick Falzone (John

Cusack) is able to weave intricate paths through the sky—to the consistent amazement of his co-workers—while humming a tune. His rival in the film, Russell Bell (Billy Bob Thornton) is even better. As Nick tells Russell late in the film, “until you came along, I was the best.”

Certainly, at one level this extraordinariness of the main character is typical of a certain type of narrative—a narrative, one must note, that is common in Hollywood. Northrop Frye argues that fictional works “may be classified, not morally, but by the hero’s power of action” (33). Of his five “fictional modes,” three are marked by heroes who are more powerful or intelligent than either their environment, their companions, or both. Two of the three seem to characterize most genre films: the *romantic* mode, in which the hero is superior (in degree) to other people and his environment; and especially the *high mimetic* mode, in which the hero is superior to other people but not to the environment. With both modes, he argues, the audience allows a certain degree of distance from the real world which we inhabit in our everyday lives. As such, both modes allow the audience members themselves some distance from their everyday lives.

This exceptionalism of the protagonist is especially interesting, in any case, in the context of this genre, where the question of *distinction* is so significant in its own right. The subculture itself, in each of these movies, stands out. The main character, meanwhile, is made to stand out from a community (the subculture) which he is supposed to be

utterly a part of. What is the effect of this apparent contradiction? The effect is significant, as we will see.<sup>2</sup>

**There is a character in the movie whose role is to teach the protagonist about the subculture.** I call this character the Wise Old Man: though he is not always much older than the protagonist, he seems to have a historical kind of wisdom concerning what is and is not possible/acceptable/good within the boundaries of the subculture. The historic quality of the Wise Old Man character is significant, in that it lends history (and thus legitimacy) to the subculture itself. The existence of the Wise Old Man keeps the subculture from seeming frivolous, indulgent, or ephemeral.

In *Days of Thunder*, Harry Hogge is representative of the history of NASCAR racing, and his past is a frequent topic of conversation. Harry spends most of the movie teaching Cole how to control himself and his car, and Cole confesses to Claire that control is the one thing he most wants (and needs). Harry also helps Cole to learn the subculture's vocabulary, with which he can understand the prime mover of the subculture, the car itself. The issue of vocabulary is a common one throughout the genre. Terminology is one of the distinguishing traits of most subcultures, and it is used throughout the genre to reinforce the existence and distinction of the subcultures in question.

In *The Fast & The Furious*, Dominic Toretto (Vin Diesel) befriends the undercover cop Brian O'Conner (Paul Walker) after humiliating him in a race, and goes on to initiate

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<sup>2</sup> See the "Naturalization" section of this paper for more discussion of this issue.

him into the street-racing scene. Significantly, Dominic owns a classic Dodge Charger, which lends him a historical aspect not present in the other members of the subculture (all of whom exclusively drive late-model foreign cars—or racing motorcycles). Much the same pattern is apparent in another undercover-cop entry into the genre, *Point Break*. In that movie, Bodhi (Patrick Swayze) teaches FBI agent Johnny Utah (Keanu Reeves) the ins and outs of the California surfing scene. Interestingly, in each of these two movies there is another Wise Old Man—on the police side. Brian O’Conner’s commanding officer, Sergeant Tanner (Ted Levine) tries to keep him from succumbing to the street-racing scene, and consistently reminds him of his duties as a police officer. Johnny Utah’s partner, Agent Pappas (Gary Busey), tries the same thing in *Point Break*. Neither entirely succeeds.

The Wise Old Man is not always entirely wise (in *Hoosiers*, he is the town drunk), not always old (in *Punchline*, Tom Hanks plays a much-younger Wise Old Man to Sally Field’s protagonist), and not always a man (in *Blue Crush*, fittingly enough, it is Michelle Rodriguez’s character who keeps the protagonist focused on surfing). And in both *The Color of Money* and *Bull Durham* the protagonist himself is Wise Old Man to his younger counterpart—as we might expect. But the character is present in every movie in the genre, and plays a significant role in virtually every one as well.

**The leading female reinforces the distinction between the subculture and the mainstream.** The protagonist’s love interest generally holds a position firmly within or without the subculture. In *Days of Thunder*, Dr. Lewicki spends the majority of her time

questioning Cole as to *why* he is a racecar driver, though she apparently comes around when he wins Daytona (one can't be sure, since this is the end of the movie). In *City Hall*, Marybeth Cogan (Bridget Fonda) is a constant voice nagging in the ear of Deputy Mayor Kevin Calhoun (John Cusack), trying to get him to forget his political aspirations and his sense of loyalty, and to "do what is right." This is the most common type of female character in the genre—she stands outside the subculture, and looks on it with dismay or open disdain. She frequently challenges the protagonist, urging him to leave the subculture and lead a "normal" life. The role is also easily reversible, as evidenced in *Punchline*. Lila's husband (John Goodman) complains constantly about her devotion to comedy, which he sees simply as a conflict with her more traditional role of wife and mother.

This characteristic of the genre is reminiscent of Westerns, in a sense. As Will Wright has noted, "in the Western, the image of society [as opposed to individuality] is usually that of women and older men" (139). The major twist, of course, is that in the subculture genre older men (i.e., Wise Old Men) are actually representative of the subculture, as opposed to society. But women are typically representative of mainstream society, as they were in Westerns. I will explore this connection to the Western genre in considerably more detail in the next section of this paper.

There are also, we must note, women on the other side of the line—those who are actually within the subculture, and who help to compel the protagonist to choose it. Notable examples are in *Wall Street*, *Point Break*, and *The Fast & The Furious*. Even in

these movies, of course, she does serve to reinforce the distinction between the subculture and the mainstream.

**The subculture is racialized or ethnicized.** This is a relatively recent development for the genre, beginning primarily with *Boiler Room* in 2000. While the characters in *Boiler Room* are primarily white, they are ethnicized whites—the main character is Jewish, and several of the other characters are Jewish, Italian, and Irish. Ethnicity is consistently alluded to, with, for example, references to Hebrew School and Little Italy, not to mention the impersonation of the brogue that consistently reappears when Richie O’Flaherty (Scott Caan) is on screen. Beyond that, the entire subculture is racialized as black. Characters in the movie consistently speak a bastardized form of African American Vernacular English, for example, and the soundtrack to the movie is filled with rap. The very first feature of the movie—the New Line logo—is backed with a hip-hop-esque “scratched” version of the New Line theme music. The film itself then opens with Seth Davis (Giovanni Ribisi) reciting a kind of self-defining (and subculture-defining) epigraph from The Notorious B.I.G.: “Either you’re slinging crack rock or you got a wicked jump shot.” (Ironically, Seth follows this with the line “Nobody wants to work for it anymore,” in such a way that it sounds as though it’s the next line of the song. The actual next line from B.I.G. is “It’s hard being young from the slums.” It’s apparent where the racialization stops.) The movie ends with a reference to the same shortened quote.



Following *Boiler Room*, as I partially indicated above, there has been a tendency towards more ethnicization and/or racialization of depicted subcultures. In *The Fast & The Furious*, released a year after *Boiler Room*, all of the drivers (other than the small crew that O’Conner actually joins) are all strongly identified as racial minorities; Chicanos, Blacks, and Asians self-isolate into small cliques or “teams.” O’Conner is played by Paul Walker, an archetypical blond, blue-eyed white male. He joins the whitest team in the movie, but even this team is ethnicized/racialized by the presence of the swarthy team leader Dominic and his Chicana girlfriend (Michelle Rodriguez, who plays a Hawaiian surfer in *Blue Crush*). In the movies which have followed *The Fast & The Furious* (*Blue Crush*, *Drumline*, and *Biker Boyz*), this explicit racial quality is also present in either the protagonist or the subculture or both.

**The subculture and its members are identified with the poor and working classes.**

Stuart Hall, et al. note that (in Britain, at least) post-World-War-II subcultures are composed primarily of working-class youth. In that sense, cinematic depictions of subcultures as working class (and young, for that matter) are simply reflective of reality. It is difficult to imagine, for instance, an upper-class racecar driver. However, the subcultures in question here are, in fact, *not* entirely populated by the working-class, as Hall’s mods and punks were. Yet even in the case of stock brokers, for instance, these movies go to lengths to identify the protagonists as working class. In *Wall Street*, Bud Fox (Charlie Sheen) is the son of a struggling airplane mechanic with working-class values (who

happens to own the line of planes which he mechanics). In the same movie we see the following exchange:

**Bud Fox:** This is a really nice club, Mr. Gekko.

**Gordon Gekko** (Michael Douglas): Yeah, not bad for a City College boy. I bought my way in; now all these Ivy League schmucks are sucking my kneecaps.

Gekko, the Wise Old Man in this movie, is an extremely wealthy junk bonds speculator.

Later in the movie, we hear him refer to \$800,000 as “a day’s pay.” Yet he takes pains to portray himself as simply an upwardly mobile kid from the working class.

This characteristic can also, as one might expect, come in combination with the racialization/ethnicization of the subculture. In *Searching for Bobby Fischer*, for example, while most of the young chess prodigies are affluent white boys, the true Wise Old Man character (one of two in the movie) is a homeless black man (Laurence Fishburne) who hustles money playing chess in Washington Square Park.

As may be obvious from the characteristics mentioned above (and as I have made explicit in some cases), there are strong connections between the subculture genre and other genres of Hollywood film. In the next section, I will discuss two genres which I think bear strong relations to this one—namely, Westerns and gangster movies.

## The Western

Mythically, the subculture genre has its most significant precursor in the Western genre. As several critics have pointed out, the typical Western film sets up a dilemma for the hero: he must choose between his own individuality and the society with which he interacts. Will Wright identifies this distinction as one of the most important features—possibly the most important—of the classical Western. All of the other oppositions which are common to the genre (between good and bad, between weak and strong, and between civilization and wilderness, for instance) turn on the division between society and individuality (49). A very similar theme runs through the subculture genre, with the particular subcultures substituting for the idea of “individuality” on which the Western focuses. Membership in a subculture is represented in the genre as *being* a kind of individuality; certainly, as I have noted, it marks a rejection of the mainstream.

The individual/society dilemma has frequently been identified as a historically fundamental aspect of the American psyche. Leslie Fiedler, in *Love and Death in the American Novel*, discovers this rift throughout American literature—generally manifesting itself, as it does in the Western, along the lines of gender and age. He thus finds it “possible to regard the classic works [such as *Moby Dick*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *The Sun Also Rises*, etc.] . . . as ‘Westerns’” (355). Alexis de Tocqueville noted much earlier the American tendency toward individualism, “which disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows; . . . he gladly leaves the greater society to look after itself” (506). Such

individualism was, then, always in conflict with the possibility of being part of that “greater society.”

In the classical Western, society is easily identified: it is exemplified by life in town, and by the presence of responsibilities such as children, church, and a steady job. But as Robert Warshow points out, the typical Western hero “is *par excellence* a man of leisure. Even when he wears the badge of a marshal or, more rarely, owns a ranch, he appears to be unemployed” (“Westerner” 138). He appears, in fact, to be disconnected entirely—he has no children, he doesn’t go to church. And he is not married. Very often, of course, society is most simply and directly represented in the figure of a woman. Warshow notes that “in the American mind, refinement, virtue, civilization, Christianity itself, are seen as feminine” (“Westerner” 137).<sup>3</sup>

These same qualities are common to the protagonists of the subculture genre. Rarely do we see any evidence of families—even parents or siblings, which is significant given the protagonist’s young age in most of the movies. The subculture hero’s job, of course, is generally the subculture itself—he is a fireman, a pilot, or even a professional hustler. In this way his “job” does not tie him down or provide him with an anchor in mainstream society, and often he is still able to maintain the image of “a man of leisure.” There is an

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<sup>3</sup> There are, of course, exceptions within the genre—just as there are pure, schoolmarm types (who clearly fit Warshow’s depiction), there are also the women who frequent saloons. But these tend to be treated as exceptions even within the film itself: the hero rarely ends up with a prostitute or barroom entertainer, unless she too changes her ways and becomes a schoolmarm.

emblematic moment, I think, in *The Color of Money* when Eddie tells Vincent that “money won is twice as sweet as money earned.”

Will Wright points out, however, a significant shift within the Western genre. The classical Western, which he calls “the prototype of all Westerns, the one people think of when they say, ‘All Westerns are alike’” (32), was the dominant form from 1930 to 1955. The classical plot is the one in which a stranger rides into town, resists society (and is resisted by them), but eventually ends up saving the good townsfolk from some villainous threat—and subsequently accepts (and is accepted by) the society he has saved. Wright identifies variations on this theme as well. More significantly, however, he identifies a shift to an appreciably different form of the genre, which was dominant from 1958 to 1970. Wright calls this second form the Professional plot: it is the Western in which a group of heroes—or anti-heroes—(rather than an individual) fight for money (rather than for justice or some other ideal), exemplified by films such as *The Wild Bunch*, *The Professionals*, and *Butch Cassidy and The Sundance Kid*.

There are important distinctions between the classical Western and the Professional Western. Most significant to the subculture genre is the difference in the hero’s (or heroes’) relationship to society—especially the way the relationship ends up when the movie is finished. In the classical form, the hero almost invariably chooses to give up his freedom

and settle down.<sup>4</sup> In the Professional plot, on the other hand, the heroes have formed a bond among themselves throughout the course of the movie. “This group of strong men, formed as a fighting unit, comes to exist independently of and apart from society” (Wright 86). In a real sense, the professional plot is a compromise position: the heroes can choose to maintain their freedom by remaining separated from society, and at the same time they are able to experience the fulfillment of *belonging*.

It is the Professional plot, then, that most directly connects the Western genre to the subculture genre. While the main character of the subculture genre is an individual, rather than one of a group of protagonists, he nevertheless finds himself choosing between mainstream society and the smaller society of the subculture. And as with these later Westerns, we most often find him choosing the latter. The compromise position of the Professional Western is valorized throughout the subculture genre. Between the two genres, however, there is a subtle but profound shift in the societal parallel to the protagonist and storyline. I will examine this shift more fully in the section of this essay on the Postmodern Condition.

It is also significant that the heroes of the Professional Western are more frequently outlaws than are those of the classical plot. The title characters in *The Wild Bunch*, for example, are a group of train/bank robbers, as are the title characters in *Butch Cassidy and*

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<sup>4</sup> The most notable exception, of course, is *Shane*. But Shane’s decision to leave is a complicated one, and does not fundamentally contradict the pattern of the classical Western. Shane’s departure signifies his acceptance of social morality (he leaves to avoid the love that has developed between him and his friend’s wife), and we are aware that with his departure he is relinquishing his status as a feared gunfighter.

*the Sundance Kid*. “The values of society are rejected by the [Professional] heroes, who define themselves in opposition to them” (Wright 87). Robert Ray also finds this distinction throughout the Western genre, and points out that in the Western, “American culture’s traditional dichotomy of individual and community . . . had generated the most significant pair of competing myths: the outlaw hero [of the Professional plot] and the official hero [of the classical plot]” (58). The (anti-)heroes of the Professional plot dovetail with the (anti-)heroes of another genre, gangster films.

### **The Gangsters**

Thematically and stylistically, the subculture genre has its deepest roots in the gangster genre. As with the Western genre, however, there are significant shifts that have occurred within the gangster genre itself. Fredric Jameson points out the first of the two clear shifts in the genre, which took place near the end of World War II. In the movies up to that point, gangsters were anti-heroes, “dramatized as psychopaths, sick loners striking out against a society essentially made up of wholesome people” (31). Jameson suggests—convincingly, I think—that the protagonist in these movies is, in fact, symbolic for the capitalist system.

When indeed we reflect on an organized conspiracy against the public, one which reaches into every corner of our daily lives and our political structures to exercise a wanton ecocidal and genocidal violence at the behest of distant decision-makers and in the name of an abstract conception of profit—surely it is

not about the Mafia, but rather about American business itself that we are thinking, American capitalism in its most systematized and computerized, dehumanized, “multinational” and corporate form. (31)

Robert Warshow finds a similar symbolism in the genre, but hints at a less abstract parallel for the classic gangster. He points out that the gangster films put forward a peculiar definition of success—it is defined “not as accomplishment of specific gain, but simply as the unlimited possibility of aggression” (“Gangster” 132), or “as an increasing power to work injury” (“Westerner” 135). The gangster himself, in these movies, is emblematic of upward mobility. The gangster movie is the story of one man’s career; “we are always conscious that the whole meaning of this career is a drive for success: the typical gangster film presents a steady upward progress followed by a very precipitate fall” (Warshow, “Gangster” 132). In the 1931 classic of the genre, *Little Caesar*, for instance, Rico (Edward G. Robinson) moves to the city to find success. The language of the traditional success story is used throughout this film—Rico talks about making it big, and is described by a police detective as “a young man on his way up.” As he gets further and further up, of course, his life is in greater and greater danger—and he himself becomes a more dangerous person to be around. Fitting with both Jameson’s and Warshow’s definitions, success—upward mobility—is defined in the gangster movie as evil and dangerous (not to mention, as Warshow points out, ultimately impossible).



During World War II, the gangster movie changed significantly, becoming more individualist and introverted. Throughout the 1940s, 50s, and 60s, we rarely see a true Mafioso in a gangster film. I see a sort of split in the genre through this period. The films of the more common group focus on protagonists who are fighting *against* the gangsters. This group encompasses a broad range of films—typical examples are *Kiss of Death*, *The Big Heat*, *Key Largo*, and even *On the Waterfront*. The other, less common group of films (such as *High Sierra* or *Bonnie and Clyde*) continue to focus on crime, and have criminals as protagonists. In both groups, as Jameson points out, the gangsters (and often those fighting them as well) are “invested with tragic pathos in such a way as to express the confusion of veterans returning from World War II, struggling with the unsympathetic rigidity of institutions, and ultimately crushed by a petty and vindictive social order (31).<sup>5</sup> In 1972, however, the powerful Mafioso protagonist would return.

*The Godfather* reinvigorated the gangster genre, transforming it completely one more time. As with the Professional-plot Westerns, the traditional bad guys are now the heroes. The Corleone family are not—for the most part—presented as sociopaths who are doomed to death and failure for their transgressions of middle-class morality. Rather, Michael (Al Pacino) is presented as a sympathetic character, one with whom we are expected to identify. More importantly, the family itself is presented as a kind of ideal in this film. The camera is meticulous and caring, fetishizing the minute details of the

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<sup>5</sup> There is an evident parallel with the subculture genre, of course—the individual who cannot find happiness in “the rigidity of institutions”—but under examination this connection doesn’t hold up nearly as well as do the parallels with Western heroes.

Corleones' way of life. The Mafia itself is imbued with history (the Corleone name comes from an ancient town in the old country), tradition ("no Sicilian can refuse a request on his daughter's wedding day"), honor (Michael avenges the shooting of his father, at great peril and cost to himself—and through this vengeance he is accepted as a Mafioso), wisdom (when Kaye [Diane Keaton] tells Michael that "congressmen don't kill people," he quickly responds, "Now who's being naïve, Kaye?"), even a kind of harsh beauty (as in the introductory shot of Don Corleone sitting in a darkened room, stroking a cat as he receives requests to commit murder). Such treatment has since become the norm for Mafia films, and for gangster/crime films in general. By the 1990s, mafia films like *GoodFellas* and *Donnie Brasco* are actually quite similar to the subculture films, in their strong consistent focus on the culture at hand, and their juxtaposition of that culture with the culture of the mainstream (and the fact that the former generally comes out looking more attractive).

The protagonists of these gangster films have become more and more contemptuous of mainstream society. Enough so that in *Goodfellas*, we find Henry Hill (Ray Liotta) deriding those who don't live the life of a gangster:

For us, to live any other way was nuts. To us, those goody-good people who worked shitty jobs for bum paychecks and took the subway to work every day—and worried about their bills—were dead. I mean they were suckers; they had no balls.

Ironically, this description is meant to apply to virtually the entire audience of the movie itself. This disconnect between the audience's situational reality and their ability to identify with the protagonist is also prevalent in the subculture genre. In *Point Break*, for instance Bodhi refers to people in the mainstream as "those dead souls inching along the freeway in their metal coffins." I hope to show later, in fact, that this disconnect is indicative of the postmodern condition in which we find ourselves.

*The extent to which identities can be named seems to show an inverse relationship to power in the U.S. social structure.*

Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters*

By way of a segue into the more syntactic portion of this paper, we can now analyze the various types of representation which are at work throughout the genre. I will break this into three sections: representations of race & ethnicity, representations of gender & sexuality, and representations of class.

### **Representations of race and ethnicity**

The bulk of the subculture genre is comprised of films filled with whiteness, which, in and of itself, does not separate the genre from Hollywood films in general. Hollywood is often challenged on this point with regard to hiring practices and poor or non-representation of peoples of color, and rightly so. What is not as often questioned is the effect that this has on the representation of whiteness itself. Especially in the case of genres, such a line of questioning seems valid. As Richard Dyer has pointed out, part of the power inherent in whiteness is precisely its going-without-saying in our culture.

In the realm of categories, black is always marked as a colour (as the term “coloured” egregiously acknowledges), and is always particularizing; whereas white is not anything really, not an identity, not a particularizing quality, because it is everything. . . . White people “colonise the definition of normal.”(45)

He rightly adds that “power in contemporary society habitually passes itself off as embodied in the normal as opposed to the superior” (45). The same concept is echoed by

Ruth Frankenberg in the quote which opens this section. Thus the normalization of whiteness, the colonization of normality, serves to reify and re-entrench the power of whiteness.

At one level, this cultural trend is upheld throughout the subculture genre. Where there are depictions of the mainstream, it is virtually always represented by whites. What is more interesting, though, is the way in which these films colonize the *margins* for whiteness as well. The genre as a whole, after all, focuses on the margins. Its representation of those margins as being populated by whites is a fairly straightforward instance of the kind of colonization to which Dyer was referring.

The reverse is also true, in some sense: In depicting the margins directly and fully, and representing them as white, the genre creates a particular picture of whiteness as well—whiteness as a marginal space, a challenged and challenging state. Robert Ray points out that “the mass audience in this country likes to live dangerously, likes to see the most privileged elements of its ideology sorely challenged, if not defeated” (19). It is precisely this challenge, without defeat, that the subculture genre provides.<sup>6</sup> As bell hooks has pointed out, “in the United States, where our senses are daily assaulted and bombarded to such an extent that an emotional numbness sets in, it may take being ‘on the edge’ for individuals to feel intensely.” Thus American youth—especially those in the mainstream—“desire cultural spaces where boundaries can be transgressed, where new and alternative

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<sup>6</sup> Lyotard refers to a similar compulsion as a part of the postmodern condition: “we can hear the mutterings of the desire for a return of terror, for the realization of the fantasy to seize reality” (82). I will return to the postmodern condition in the section on the Postmodern Condition.

relations can be formed” (“Eating” 36). She further identifies this as a trait which is (at least somewhat) derivative of whiteness itself:

The commodification of Otherness has been so successful because it is offered as a new delight, more intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling. Within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture. (“Eating” 21)

Ruth Frankenberg finds strikingly similar notions in the narratives of white women about race and diversity:

At the risk of being crass, one might say that in this view, diversity is to [one woman’s Jamaican daughter-in-law] as ‘the works’ is to a hamburger—added on, adding color and flavor, but not exactly essential. Whiteness, seen by many of these women as boring, but nonetheless definitive, could also follow this analogy. (197)

It was perhaps inevitable, then, that the representation of the subcultural, marginal space would move from whiteness into ethnicity and racialization. In the last three years, there has been a significant change in the genre. As I pointed out in an earlier section, *Boiler Room* was the first film in the genre to begin shifting away from the typically white protagonist and subculture—though most of the characters in the film are white, they are ethnically Jewish, Italian and Irish, and their ethnicities are constantly restated throughout the film. Following that film, the genre has gradually but steadily moved toward more

“color”ful casts. *Groove*, *The Fast and the Furious*, and *Blue Crush* all featured white protagonists in subcultures comprised mainly (or entirely) of people of color. A borderline entry into the genre during this period, *Bring It On*, is perhaps the most indicative of what is happening with the increased representation of color in these films.

In *Bring It On*, the new head cheerleader (Kirsten Dunst) at Rancho Carne—a rich, white high school—discovers that her squad has been performing (and winning competitions with) stolen routines for years. Stolen, that is, from the cheerleaders at a high school in East Compton. Directly challenged by the East Compton squad, the Rancho Carne team develop their own routines and go to the national competition. This year the East Compton squad have managed to get the money together for the trip to nationals as well, and they end up defeating Rancho Carne there—which suffices for a happy ending, because the Rancho squad are proud of having done it themselves.

The East Compton cheerleaders are a hip-hop squad, and as such their routines stand out sharply from those of the schools at which the Rancho squad perform. It is clear, in any case, that the Rancho squad don’t have any progressive ideas on race or class. At a game against a school whose cheerleaders are girls of color, they are challenged by the rival squad and respond with, “That’s all right, that’s OK, you’re gonna pump our gas someday.” (Immediately thereafter, however, they are shown up by the East Compton squad, who arrive unannounced and outperform them with one of the stolen cheers.)

While it is ultimately a morality tale about overcoming obstacles (and, incidentally, race) through hard work and self-determination, *Bring It On* shows quite openly the

appropriation of black culture by whites. The type of appropriation carried out by the Rancho Carne squad is very similar to the appropriation at work in most of the recent subculture films themselves. Cultures and people of color are used to lend flavor, as hooks might say, to the subcultures.<sup>7</sup> In doing so, there is not necessarily any challenge posed to white dominance.

To make one's self vulnerable to the seduction of difference, to seek an encounter with the Other, does not require that one relinquish forever one's mainstream positionality. When race and ethnicity become commodified as resources for pleasure, the culture of specific groups, as well as the bodies of individuals, can be seen as constituting an alternate playground where members of dominating races, genders, sexual practices affirm their power-over in intimate relations with the Other. ("Eating" 23)

It should be noted that hooks' essay deals primarily with young white males' desire for sex with young women of color. However, the "encounter with the Other" that she describes can, I think, reasonably be expanded to include encounters of identification, rather than just sexual encounters. In any case, in the subculture films this encounter can take exactly the form she describes—in *Boiler Room*, for example, one of the primary conflicts is between two Jewish men who are competing for the firm's secretary, who just happens to be black. More often, however, it is the commodification of race and ethnicity in the more

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<sup>7</sup> Taking on identities of color also lends authenticity and a (rather ironic) sense of history to the subcultures, as I will discuss in the Naturalization section.



general sense that is taking place, as white protagonists racialize themselves and/or participate in racialized subcultures. It is perhaps not coincidental that these films often happen to be coming-of-age narratives, since as hooks points out, the encounter with the other can be “a way [for young white men] to make themselves over, to leave behind white ‘innocence’ and enter the world of ‘experience’” (“Eating” 23).

David Roediger suggests that in projecting onto, and identifying with, Othered persons, we reinforce our own position of dominance. Blackface minstrels, he points out, “were the first self-consciously *white* entertainers in the world. The simple physical disguise—and elaborate cultural disguise—of blacking up served to emphasize that those on stage were really white and that whiteness really mattered” (117).

Finally, the racialization of the subculture can ease the compromise position which I have argued is present in the genre. Membership in the subculture can be a midway point between individuality and belonging, a way of living the American fantasy on both sides. This compromise is acceptable/effective, I think, largely because it is transient. This is the power of myth: one can participate for a short time (two hours, say), taking in the experience of challenge and resolution, and then go back about one’s everyday life without direct consciousness of either the challenge or its resolution. Projecting this mythic fantasy onto Othered bodies may help to make the compromise more acceptable. As Renata Salecl has pointed out, our fantasies often posit an Other who can have enjoyments that we ourselves aren’t allowed—the Other steals, in some sense, our enjoyment.

This Other who steals our enjoyment is always the Other in our own interior. Our hatred of the Other is really the hatred of the part (the surplus) of our own enjoyment which we find unbearable and cannot acknowledge, and which we transpose (“project”) into the Other via a fantasy of the “Other’s enjoyment”. (212)

In the two most recent films of the genre, *Drumline* and *Biker Boyz*, the protagonists themselves are black. There may be several reasons for this trend, if in fact it becomes a trend. Perhaps it is further evolution along the lines of the representations in *Boiler Room*, *Groove*, *The Fast and the Furious*, *Blue Crush*, and *8 Mile*. Perhaps it represents niche marketing—black films constitute an identifiable market, and one which studios and distributors have been tapping for years. Perhaps, in any case, these last two films are simply an anomaly. After all, they were each released within three months of *8 Mile*, a film which fits into the more familiar white-protagonist/black-subculture mold. There is no reason to think, then, that *Drumline* and *Biker Boyz* mark an irreversible trend in the genre all by themselves. It may be interesting to see, however, if they mark the beginning of one.

### **Representations of gender and sexuality**

Representations of masculinity within the genre serve a very different purpose than do the representations of whiteness. The films in the genre are often masculinist in rather typical ways. In *Boiler Room*, for example, new employees are not allowed to actually sell stocks to

the people they are on the phone with. When they get someone who wants to buy stock, therefore, they are instructed to put the person on hold, stand up, and yell “RECO” at the top of their lungs. This indicates to the licensed brokers in the room that there is a potential “whale” on the phone, and the first broker to get to the phone gets the sale. The “RECO” concept does little to further the plot of the movie, nor even much to develop characters. What it does do is allow for a scene of unbridled masculine competitiveness. Subjects in the subcultures are frequently pitted against each other in similar ways. The entire plot of *Pushing Tin* revolves around a rather juvenile (but certainly masculine) competition between Nick Falzone (John Cusack) and Russell Bell (Billy Bob Thornton)—each tries to one-up the other by beating him at basketball, showing himself to be a more competent air-traffic controller, and ultimately by sleeping with the other’s wife.

Several of the films, of course, are explicitly built around such competitiveness. *Top Gun*, *8 Seconds*, *The Fast and the Furious*, and others focus on competitive subcultures such as rodeos and racing. Even *Blue Crush*, the first true subculture film centered on a group of women as the subculture in question, masculinizes the competition at the heart of their subculture. Anne Marie is the best of the female surfers because, as we are explicitly reminded again and again, she surfs “like a man.” (Professional surfer Keala Kennelly, who wins the surfing competition at the end of the film, is described in the film the same way.) The young women themselves are in many ways stereotypically feminine—they are hotel maids, for example. But the competitive aspect of surfing—which is celebrated in the movie—is kept distinctly masculine.

Beyond competitiveness, the subculture is clearly identified with male (hetero-)sexuality as well. In *The Color of Money*, we frequently find Vincent (Tom Cruise) strutting for the camera, the Balabushka pool cue dancing in his hand. The cue is often overtly sexualized, and of course the phallic imagery is never far from mind. In *8 Seconds*, Lane's (Luke Perry) crisis of identity is brought on with his being stomped *in the crotch* by a bull. In *Boiler Room*, Jim Young (Ben Affleck) tells the new recruits that they are the "future big swinging dicks of this firm." And in *Wall Street*, in the final confrontation between Bud Fox (Charlie Sheen) and Gordon Gekko (Michael Douglas), Gekko tells Bud, "I gave you Darien [Daryl Hannah]. I gave you your manhood. I gave you everything."

Masculinity, then, is portrayed in the films as an implicit aspect of power. As the young men in the majority of these films come of age, they also "come of" their identities as dominant, heterosexual males. When they are broken—whether temporarily or permanently, it is often reflected in their masculinity (as in *8 Seconds* and *Wall Street*).

More interesting, however, are the representations of femininity in the films of the genre. As I mentioned with regard to the secondary characteristics of the genre, the leading female character (that is, the protagonist's love interest) reinforces the distinction between the mainstream and the subculture. In over half the movies, what this means is that she is representative of the mainstream. She poses a challenge to his membership in the subculture, often directly asking him to give it up. This is, in fact, not necessarily exclusive to a leading *female* character. In the movie *Punchline*, where the protagonist is a woman,

her husband poses precisely the same challenge—he continually asks her to quit doing standup comedy and focus on her role as a wife and mother. It might seem, then, that romantic and/or familial responsibility are simply in conflict with a subcultural identity. There may be an element of truth to that—relationships are ways of “settling down,” and can tend to tie one to the mainstream. However, there is one crucial distinction between Lyla’s husband in *Punchline* and the typical female love interest in the genre.

When the typical female love interest challenges the protagonist’s subcultural identity, she often simultaneously challenges masculinist aspects of his personality. In *Days of Thunder*, for example, when Claire (Nicole Kidman) is chastising Cole (Tom Cruise), she tells him that the control he seeks in racing is unreal:

**Dr. Claire Lewicki:** Control is an illusion, you infantile egomaniac. Nobody knows what's gonna happen next: not on a freeway, not in an airplane, not inside our own bodies and certainly not on a racetrack with forty other infantile egomaniacs.

In several of the movies (*Backdraft*, *8 Seconds*, *City Hall*, *Rounders*), the female lead calls into question his loyalty to the other men in the subculture itself. However, when Lyla’s husband challenges her subcultural identity, he does so by asking her to *return* to typically feminine roles. In the movie *Blue Crush*, which focuses on female surfers, the protagonist’s boyfriend’s greatest challenge to her subcultural identity is to offer her a role as more mainstream woman—wearing dresses and makeup rather than cutoff shorts and T-shirts, socializing with his teammates’ wives while he hangs out with the guys. In both movies, as

in most of the rest of the genre, the mainstream is feminized and/or the subculture is masculinized.

Ironically, in that sense there seems to be little difference when the love interest is *not* critical—is, in fact, supportive—of the subculture. In these cases we often find her urging the protagonist further into his own masculinity, for both their sakes—often, in fact, it is simply a matter of economic advantage. In *The Color of Money*, for example, Vincent's braggartism and competitiveness are precisely what are needed to make serious money at pool. Carmen (Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio), therefore, pushes him to be ever more arrogant. In *Wall Street*, Darien (Darryl Hannah) encourages Bud (Charlie Sheen) to behave as a dominant, self-assured man, and to leave things like art and interior design to her. In virtually all of the films, then, and despite the divergent representations of women and of relationships, the subcultural space remains significantly masculine.

However, the representations of women themselves—beyond how they affect the representation of the subculture—are considerably different between the “inside” and “outside” female characters. Though not unexpected, the differences are nevertheless significant. Female love interests who are representative of society tend to be less independent characters. *Rounders* is a typical example. Mike's (Matt Damon) girlfriend Jo (Gretchen Mol) primarily spends her time in the movie chasing after Mike, getting upset about his participation in the subculture. The climax of their relationship comes when Mike tells her how important poker is to him, and she responds by getting upset that he is finding fulfillment outside their relationship. Female characters in these movies who live

outside of the subculture tend to be this way—petty, nagging, and without any real understanding of the protagonist.

Women within the subculture, however, are generally represented as knowledgeable and strong-willed. *Point Break* and *The Fast and the Furious* provide typical examples. In *Point Break*, Tyler (Lori Petty) is the one who teaches Johnny (Keanu Reeves) how to surf. In *The Fast and the Furious*, both Mia (Jordana Brewster) and Letty (Michelle Rodriguez) show themselves to be talented drivers. In both movies, then, the subculture is represented as a space for women to express themselves and to be strong and independent. That strength and independence extend beyond the subcultural identity as well. Both Tyler and Mia are very self-reliant, and make firm decisions about their lives and relationships. Even a character such as Darien in *Wall Street*, who is essentially a trophy for both Bud and Gordon (Michael Douglas), seems to have her autonomy intact—she makes her own decisions, as far as we can see, and she is in control of her own destiny. These traits are common to women who are within—or are at least understanding and supportive of—the subculture in question.

These representations are not without their real-life models. Maria Pini describes the (real-life) raving subculture as one which satisfies “dreams of an ‘elsewhere’”—a space which allows for “movement beyond the constraints, boundaries and regulations involved in everyday being” (1). This is true for both men and women within the subculture, of course, but Pini finds it to be particularly significant for the women who participate. They find an ironic kind of “home” in the raving scene—ironic because, as she points out, “if for

these [women], raving can feel like being ‘at home,’ then home is no longer a place of stability, familiarity or enclosure” (15). Rather, it is a space of freedom and transcendence. It is probably not coincidental that *Punchline* has a strong theme of transcendence. Lyla (Sally Field) turns to comedy as a way of getting beyond the familiar boundaries of home and family. For her the stage is a place of inspiration and magic. The choice between comedy and family life is not simply a choice between subculture and mainstream; it is also a choice between identity and conformity, between enchantment and tedium.

At the same time, there are real-world precedents for the masculinization of the subculture and feminization of society. In another book on rave cultures,<sup>8</sup> Sarah Thornton points out that subjects in both the club scene and the art world “criticize the mainstream/masses for being derivative, superficial and *femme*” (5, italics hers). She identifies this as a way in which young men reinterpret their position within the world. The powerlessness that many of them feel is turned around by such a criticism of the mainstream. The space of the subculture is one in which these young men *do* have some power, and so they construct the subculture itself as the space where masculinity and potency are to be found.

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<sup>8</sup> Why such reliance on the scholarship surrounding raves? There is a reason. The work on subcultures focuses largely on subcultures that coalesce around forms of music—the original work done by Stuart Hall, Dick Hebdige, and others at Birmingham, for instance. In the last 10 years or more, that has meant a significant focus on rave and house-music subcultures.



## Representations of class

On the whole, subcultures throughout the genre are firmly associated with the working class. Often, subcultural opposition to the mainstream takes the form of opposition to more white-collar identities. In *Backdraft*, for example, the precinct-level firemen have nothing but disdain for aldermen and arson investigators. Even when it is not so oppositional, the class distinction is present. In *Rounders*, for example, Knish (John Turturro)—the Wise Old Man character—refers to Mike’s law-school colleagues as “future magistrates and noblemen.” Mike learned to play cards, it turns out, when he and his friend Worm went to private school together. They were not trust-fund babies, however—Mike’s father was the custodian and Worm’s was the groundskeeper.

Several critics have noted the theme of class ascension in the mob-movie genre, especially in the early films, so there might seem to be some similarity here. But the theme of class *ascension* is not at work in most of the subculture films (*Wall Street* being one significant exception). This may explain why subculture protagonists are not doomed to the “precipitate fall” which characterizes the early gangster flicks. As Warshow points out, the gangster movies present an “intolerable dilemma: that failure is a kind of death and success is evil and dangerous” (“Gangster” 133). The gangster’s death is the only resolution, but in accepting it the audience acquiesces to ultimate failure. *Choosing* to fail, as Warshow puts it, is the only safe option presented by the gangster movie. Pierre Bourdieu calls this the process of “social aging”:

the slow renunciation or disinvestment (socially assisted and encouraged) which leads agents to adjust their aspirations to the objective chances, to espouse their condition, become what they are and make do with what they have, even if this entails deceiving themselves as to what they are and what they have. (110–111)

As Sarah Thornton points out, participation in a subculture is a way of putting off social aging (102). Subcultures, however, are virtually always associated with youth—in these films as, largely, in real life. Thus social aging seems as inevitable as the physical kind.

While the gangster's demise has the effect of reinforcing class hierarchies, then, it should be noted that the subculture protagonist's non-demise does not have an opposite effect. There is no real class ascension represented in the subculture film, as there is in the gangster. And the subculture's connection to the working class acts more as a sort of wedge between the subculture and mainstream society. Thus the protagonist's choice to stay in that group is essentially still a declaration *against* the idea of class ascension. The class hierarchy, therefore, is implicitly reinforced—though it is stripped of significance.

Thornton borrows another idea from Bourdieu, that of “cultural capital.” Cultural capital, as she relates it, is “the linchpin of a system of distinction in which cultural hierarchies correspond to social ones and people's tastes are predominantly a marker of class” (10). Thornton points out, extending Bourdieu's theory, that there is an alternative kind of value system at work in subcultures—a “subcultural capital.” The space of the subculture is one in which the rules of the young are significant. Subcultural capital consists of knowledge, attitudes, paraphernalia, etc., and possession of those things confers

a status on the owner in much the same way that the knowledge, tastes, and accoutrements of high culture confer status in the mainstream. Significantly, Thornton points out that “subcultural capitals fuel rebellion against, or rather escape from, the trappings of the parental class” (12). A subcultural identity is a means of avoiding class-based identity, in a sense. This is the primary means by which the class system is stripped of significance throughout the genre—what matters from the subcultural subject position is *subcultural* capital. Class is irrelevant. If anything, it may be worn as a symbol—white-collar youth take on the working-class character as yet another way to break away from “the trappings of parental class.”

## **The postmodern condition**

Jean-François Lyotard describes postmodernity as a time in which “the grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses” (37). Large social institutions—such as nation-states, political parties, and historical traditions—have lost their attraction and been replaced by “nodal points” which individuals move between and among.

It may even be said that the system can and must encourage such movement; . . . the novelty of an unexpected “move,” with its correlative displacement of a partner or group of partners, can supply the system with that increased performativity it forever demands and consumes. (15)

It is exactly those nodal points that the subcultures of this genre represent. Just as actors like Tom Cruise (and, we may predict, Vin Diesel and Michelle Rodriguez—each of whom have appeared in two so far) can appear in one subculture movie after another, so can audiences go to one after another and find something with which to identify. The individual in postmodern society finds himself in a state of flux with regard to the world around him. As a result, his own identity may indeed be more fluid—and more fractured.

In his analysis of postmodern political economy, David Harvey expands on this idea of the fractured society. Harvey identifies a “sea-change” in the manifestations of capitalism since 1973 (189). The economic boom which followed World War II was based on a set of practices commonly referred to as Fordist (or Fordist- Keynesianist, or Taylorist-Fordist, etc.). One characteristic of that system, among others, was an approach

to the marketplace as a sort of coherent monolith which demanded (or more appropriately, could be induced to demand) a set of standardized, efficiently produced commodities. The Fordist labor market, likewise, was standardized and rational. As the three “major actors”—large corporations, the nation-state, and organized labor—controlled the mechanisms, the American economy seemed quite stable (133). After the first major recession of the postwar period (in 1973), however, a new approach was called for.

The post-Fordist markets (both labor and consumption) are recognized as diverse and volatile. After 1973, “on the consumer side, there was more than a little criticism of the blandness of the quality of life under a regime of standardized mass consumption” (Harvey 139). On the production side, meanwhile, there was also unrest. “Denied access to privileged work in mass production, large segments of the workforce were equally denied access to the much-touted joys of mass consumption. This was a sure formula for discontent” (138). The new system which arose in response to these circumstances is what Harvey refers to as *flexible accumulation*. Essentially, capitalists began to count on “flexibility with respect to labour processes, labour markets, products, and patterns of consumption” (147). Niche marketing, the outsourcing of labor, and production abroad characterize post-Fordist capitalism.

The post-Fordist consumer has also taken a new position. Under Fordism, individuals sought commodities which largely resembled each other. In purchases, utility was a more significant factor than the expression of the buyer’s identity. Taste was standardized to

some degree, over time and space, throughout mainstream culture. But with post-Fordism, “the relatively stable aesthetic of Fordist modernism has given way to all the ferment, instability, and fleeting qualities of a postmodernist aesthetic that celebrates difference, ephemerality, spectacle, fashion, and the commodification of cultural forms” (Harvey 156). It is this postmodern condition of fracturing that is most evident in the subculture genre.

The cultural effects (and, to some extent, *evidence*) of this change have been widely noted. Television, in particular, has reflected it. Certainly, post-Fordist television offers a multitude of choices which might be taken as symbolic of the postmodern condition. But more significant to our analysis here is the change in what is expected of the television audience itself. “Whereas the ‘lowest common denominator’ philosophy had defined popularity in terms of brute ratings, the emergent philosophy reshaped popularity in terms of the quest for ‘quality demographics’—a giant step toward the ‘niche audience’ strategies of the 1980s and 1990s” (Reeves, Rodgers, and Epstein 271).

The post-Fordist focus on niche marketing, in particular, has been significant. Consumers are no longer compelled to identify (commercially) with the market at large. Rather, corporations have capitalized on the flexible identity in order to sell an ever-changing image to the individual consumer. The “difference, ephemerality, spectacle, [and] fashion” to which Harvey refers have become pinions of the overconsumption which characterizes the last three decades. As Jean Baudrillard describes it, the postmodern market is spread throughout a “consumption society.” The postmodern market, as he describes it, is based on *models*, pre-packaged sets of tastes and desires with which

consumers identify. “As a result, to differentiate oneself is precisely to affiliate to a model, to label oneself by reference to an abstract model, to a combinatorial pattern of fashion” (88). This affiliation is not strictly conformity—individuals do not model themselves after other individuals, or even after the group to which they belong. Rather, individuals subscribe to *codes*—the “combinatorial patterns of fashion” to which he refers above—and, in doing so, find that they share common identities with others who subscribe to the same code.

There is an obvious parallel with subculture films. This entire genre of films center on niches spread throughout society. Each individual movie, on its own, is a celebration of a particular subculture, a strong, clear focus on its members, its language, its arcana, its fetishes. Each movie provides a new code for its audience to identify with, however temporarily. The genre as a whole, of course, is a celebration of the subculture itself—the niche, the codified identity—in American society. Whether the codes are created by market capitalists themselves, or spontaneously arise from society at large, the end effect is the same: these codes can be (and are) commodified, packaged and sold. Sarah Thornton refers to club cultures as “taste cultures.” Club-goers, she says, “generally congregate on the basis of their shared taste in music, their consumption of common media and, most importantly, their preference for people with similar tastes to themselves” (3). For the most part, participation in the club culture (as Thornton describes it) is in line with Baudrillard’s description of the consumption society.

Given such a description of society, references to “the mainstream” may seem contradictory. If society is simply composed of multiple “nodal points,” how can one make references to a broad entity—the mainstream—against which any particular nodal point is contrasted? The concept of the mainstream, however, *does* remain a significant factor—even if its base in reality is shaken. As Thornton has pointed out:

Dichotomies like mainstream/subculture and commercial/alternative do not relate to the way dance crowds are objectively organized as much as to the means by which many youth cultures imagine their social world, measure their cultural worth and claim the subcultural capital. (96)

The same is true, I think, of most of the movies within the subculture genre. Whether or not there is an identifiable mainstream to which any particular subculture is opposed, the *concept* of the mainstream is widely held, and is a firm enough station to allow subcultural subjectivity to be based upon it. “While there are many *other* scenes, most clubbers and ravers see themselves in opposition to the ‘mainstream’” (Thornton 99, emphasis hers). It may even be possible to view the mainstream as “a cluster of subcultures” (Thornton 109) and yet still treat it as a monolith against which to contrast a *particular* subculture. In *Rounders*, for example, Mike and Worm move in and out of many diverse subcultures—judges, law school, the ivy leagues, prison, country clubs, Atlantic City tourists, cigar shops, policemen, etc.—but none of these is well defined, and most are defined primarily by the fact that Mike and Worm are clearly opposed to them.



## Naturalization

Roland Barthes has identified what he finds to be “the very principle of myth: it transforms history into nature” (129). Barthes notes a particular dilemma raised by the presence of a myth: either the subject of the myth (for instance, French imperialism) is obscured to the point that the myth is not effective in reinforcing it, or else the myth lays the subject so bare that no observer would believe it as reality. How, then, can the myth have any power (as the mythologist certainly will claim that it does)? The answer lies in myth’s particular power to make the subject matter seem completely normal. As Barthes points out, when myth is inevitably “driven to having either to unveil or to liquidate the concept, it will *naturalize* it” (Barthes 129, emphasis his).

The most significant “concept” of this myth system (the subculture genre) seems to be the fractured, marginalized state of post-modern society. As a genre, these films work to naturalize subcultural stances of marginalization, and even resistance. Dick Hebdige argues that in the media’s treatment of youth subcultures, there is a “process of recuperation” continuously at work, whereby the subcultures are “simultaneously returned, as they are represented on T.V. and in the newspapers, to the place where common sense would have them fit” (94). Members of the subculture can be trivialized, and their rejection of the mainstream can simply be denied. As Barthes has described it, “the spectacle or the tribunal, which are both places where the Other threatens to appear in full view, become mirrors” (151). Alternatively, according to Barthes, the Other can be reduced

to “a pure object, a spectacle, a clown” (152). Either is an effective manner of neutralizing the anger, discontent, or outright rebellion inherent in a subculture.

Both methods are apparent in the subculture genre. Here the “spectacles and tribunals” of subcultures are filled with young, white males.<sup>9</sup> There is no threat of upending the power structure in terms of race or gender. And yet the subculture itself is spectacularized and removed from everyday life. It is so clearly distinguished, in fact, that it too becomes innocuous. Throughout this genre, the margins of society are not only made to appear safe and unthreatening, but eventually glamorous and inviting. The concept is neither unveiled nor liquidated, but finally naturalized.

Beyond the general capacity of the myth system to naturalize, we can locate particular features of the genre that have a naturalizing effect as well. Ironically, one of the most powerful naturalizing tropes is the exceptionalism of the protagonist himself. As I noted earlier, in the majority of these films the protagonist is one of the best at what he does. The effect of this, however, is to make his membership in the subculture all the more natural an occurrence. It is as though he had no *choice* in the matter.

This is further reinforced by the presence and actions of the Wise Old Man, who makes frequent references to the protagonist’s “talent.” Eddie Felson tells Vincent in *The*

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<sup>9</sup> If these protagonists are distinguished from the dominant subject at all, it is on the basis of class. The American myth, however, consistently reminds us that this is a classless society. In the context of these films, in fact, class becomes little more than a distinguishing feature—the cultural equivalent of a birthmark or tattoo. Members of subcultures, while they are often portrayed as working class, never seem to be without economic agency.

*Color of Money*, “you’re a natural flake” (which he means as a compliment). In *Days of Thunder*, Cole Trickle learns to race stock cars by watching on ESPN, and a little over a year later, he wins Daytona. Perhaps the clearest example of this type of naturalization comes in *Rounders*. As Abe Petrovsky (Martin Landau) sits with Mike McDermott (Matt Damon), Mike asks if he regrets his choice to live in the subculture he has chosen (in Petrovsky’s case, that of judges). Petrovsky responds, “What choice?” At a crucial moment later in the film, Mike quotes Petrovsky again: “We can’t run from who we are.” Mike *is a rounder*, and the course of the movie is entirely focused on his realization of that fact. In the end, there is indeed no choice to be made.

I suspect that the racialization which occurs in these movies is, among other things, also a naturalizing influence. Hebdige notes the tendency of certain white youth subcultures to identify with their black counterparts. He notes that early skinheads in Britain, for example, found a source of conviction in the culture of West Indian immigrants. “Here [in West Indian culture] was a culture armoured against contaminating influences, protected against the more frontal assaults of the dominant ideology, denied access to the ‘good life’ by the colour of its skin” (57). Class may be transcended, and so it is too ephemeral a foundation for true subcultural identity. But race is a clearer distinguisher in EuroAmerican society, and thus a firmer basis for rebellion. Such an identification might seem ironic, either in the context of post-World-War-II British youth subcultures or in the context of (for instance) the rich, young, straight, white male stock brokers in *Boiler Room*.

It may be ironic, but it is not coincidental: as bell hooks has pointed out, “it is a sign of white privilege to be able to ‘see’ blackness and black culture from a standpoint where only the rich culture of opposition black people have created in resistance marks and defines us” (158). This is precisely what is taking place in real-life subcultures, to some degree, and certainly in subculture movies. Seth’s quoting of The Notorious B.I.G. in *Boiler Room* is an apt example. “Either you’re slinging crack rock or you’ve got a wicked jump shot.” For Biggie, this is true enough—there are very few legit opportunities for success offered to young black men. (“It’s hard being young and from the slums.”) For Seth, however, it’s simply an easy way out: he is from a family which offered him great opportunity; he dropped out of college. His identification with a black superstar like B.I.G. is only as deep as he wants it to be. The issue of race, then, is reified and turned into a sort of badge, which can be worn to show the truth and depth of one’s opposition/resistance to mainstream culture—a badge which is especially necessary when one’s opposition is neither true nor deep.

## Conclusion: Subversion and Utopia

Fredric Jameson argues that there is a Utopian element in all works of popular culture—“that dimension of even the most degraded type of mass culture which remains implicitly, and no matter how faintly, negative and critical of the social order from which, as a product and a commodity, it springs” (29). Clearly, there is a potential for social criticism within the subculture genre. Subversion of the mainstream social order is, in some sense, built into the genre as a whole. Characters throughout the genre echo Bodhi’s comments from *Point Break*, describing those in the mainstream as “dead souls . . . in metal coffins.” Often, people in the mainstream are represented simply as (to quote *GoodFellas*) “suckers [with] no balls.” In films like *Rounders*, *Boiler Room*, *The Color of Money* and *The Grifters*, for example, the mainstream is personified in the mark—the person on the other end of the phone, or sitting across the card table, who’s about to be taken for everything he’s worth and has no idea what’s even happening. In other films the opposition is less antagonistic, but no less real. Subcultural subjects in *Groove*, *Punchline*, *Blue Crush* and *City Hall*, for example, always carry the knowledge that what they do is not accepted by society at large—and they form their identities around that oppositional status. The opposition may even be, to some extent, fabricated—as with the entire rodeo circuit’s disdain for bullriders in *8 Seconds*, or the “shame” of becoming a judge in *Rounders*.<sup>10</sup> At

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<sup>10</sup> Judges are not the subculture in question in *Rounders*, of course, but they are treated as a parallel. It is Professor Petrovsky’s story about finding the law, in fact, that inspires Mike to pursue his life as a card player.

the very least, in any case, films within the genre—and the genre as a whole—express some criticism of mainstream society.

These criticisms, however, seem to stop at a fairly shallow level. In context, the represented opposition to the mainstream is more symbolic than real. It is ascribed to members of these subcultures as evidence that the subculture itself is real, and that its members are committed. The narrative purpose of this opposition, after all, is to tell us something more about the protagonist and his subculture, not to tell us something about society at large. Other than these moments of opposition, in fact, mainstream society receives very little screen time, positive or negative. In essence, an oppositional stance is simply a narrative element tying these subcultures together. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in an article on Ethnic Studies, points out that “the threat to the margin comes not from assimilation or dissolution—from any attempt to denude it of its defiant alterity—but, on the contrary, from the center’s attempts to preserve that alterity, which result in the homogenization of the other as, simply, other” (298). A similar homogenization is at work in the subculture genre, I think.

This is not necessarily in contradiction to Jameson’s thesis of the “Utopian element” in works of popular culture. As he points out:

The works of mass culture, even if their function lies in the legitimation of the existing order—or some worse one—cannot do their job without deflecting in the latter’s service the deepest and most fundamental hopes and fantasies of the

collectivity, to which they can therefore, no matter in how distorted a fashion, be found to have given voice. (30)

Lévi-Strauss argues that “mythical thought always works from the awareness of oppositions towards their progressive mediations” (188). Barthes, along with other contemporary theorists of myth, suggests that myth works by *creating* oppositions, and then resolving the dilemma (153). Robert Ray and Will Wright, among others, have shown that the same tendency is common in film. Genre films, especially, seem to operate by presenting—and then resolving—binary conflicts. As I have previously pointed out, the subculture film works in this same way, using essentially the same conflict that is at work in the classical Western. The compromise position of the subculture film represents, I think, just the deflection that Jameson refers to above. The marginalization of subcultural subjects give voice to our “deepest and most fundamental hopes and fantasies,” as well as to our deepest fears and reservations. And the protagonist’s ability to choose *both* social belonging and individual freedom is just the sort of “fantasy bribe” that Jameson says all works of mass culture must offer (29).

## **Appendix:**

### **A partial list of Subculture Films and their respective subcultures**

Quicksilver (1986)	bicycle messengers
Top Gun (1986)	fighter-jet pilots
The Color of Money (1986)	pool hustling
Hoosiers (1986)	Indiana high school basketball
Wall Street (1987)	insider trading/stock brokerage
Bull Durham (1988)	minor-league baseball
Cocktail (1988)	bartending
Punchline (1988)	stand-up comedy
Days of Thunder (1990)	stock-car racing
The Grifters (1990)	confidence artists
Backdraft (1991)	firefighting
Point Break (1991)	surfing/extreme sports
Searching for Bobby Fischer (1993)	chess prodigies
8 Seconds (1994)	rodeos
City Hall (1996)	city-level politics
Rounders (1998)	professional poker
Pushing Tin (1999)	air-traffic control
Boiler Room (2000)	stock brokerage (of a sort)
Groove (2000)	raves
The Fast & The Furious (2001)	street racing
Blue Crush (2002)	surfing
8 Mile (2002)	battle rap
Drumline (2002)	marching bands
Biker Boyz (2003)	street bike racing



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- The Color of Money*. Dir. Martin Scorsese. Perf. Tom Cruise, Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio, Paul Newman, Helen Shaver, John Turturro. Buena Vista Pictures, 1986.
- Days of Thunder*. Dir. Tony Scott. Perf. Tom Cruise, Robert Duvall, Nicole Kidman, Randy Quaid, Michael Rooker. Paramount Pictures, 1990.
- 8 Mile*. Dir. Curtis Hanson. Perf. Kim Basinger, Eminem, Evan Jones, Anthony Mackie, Brittany Murphy, Mekhi Phifer. Imagine Entertainment/Universal, 2002.
- 8 Seconds*. Dir. John G. Avildsen. Perf. Stephen Baldwin, Cynthia Geary, Red Mitchell, Luke Perry, James Rebhorn. New Line Cinema, 1994.
- The Fast and the Furious*. Dir. Rob Cohen. Perf. Jordana Brewster, Vin Diesel, Ted Levine, Michelle Rodriguez, Paul Walker. MCA/Universal Pictures, 2001.
- The Godfather*. Dir. Francis Ford Coppola. Perf. Marlon Brando, James Caan, Robert Duvall, Diane Keaton, Al Lettieri, John Marley, Al Pacino. Paramount Pictures, 1972.
- Goodfellas*. Dir. Martin Scorsese. Perf. Lorraine Bracco, Robert DeNiro, Samuel L. Jackson, Ray Liotta, Joe Pesci, Paul Sorvino. Warner Brothers, 1990.
- Groove*. Dir. Greg Harrison. Perf. Bing Ching, Mackenzie Fergens, Lola Glaudini, Denny Kirkwood, Hamish Linklater. 415 Productions/Sony Pictures, 2000.
- High Sierra*. Dir. Raoul Walsh. Perf. Humphrey Bogart, Alan Curtis, Arthur Kennedy, Joan Leslie, Ida Lupino, Donald MacBride. Warner Brothers, 1941.
- Hoosiers*. Dir. David Anspaugh. Perf. Gene Hackman, Barbara Hershey, Dennis Hopper. Orion Pictures, 1986.
- Key Largo*. Dir. John Huston. Perf. Lauren Bacall, Lionel Barrymore, Humphrey Bogart, Edward G. Robinson. Warner Brothers, 1948.

*Kiss of Death*. Dir. Henry Hathaway. Perf. Brian Donlevy, Coleen Gray, Victor Mature, Richard Widmark. 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 1947.

*Little Caesar*. Dir. Mervyn LeRoy. Perf. Sidney Blackmer, Douglas Fairbanks Jr., Glenda Farrell, Stanley Fields, Ralph Ince, Edward G. Robinson. MGM/United Artists, 1931.

*On the Waterfront*. Dir. Elia Kazan. Perf. Marlon Brando, Lee J. Cobb, Karl Malden, Rod Steiger. Columbia Pictures, 1954.

*Point Break*. Dir. Kathryn Bigelow. Perf. Gary Busey, Lori Petty, Keanu Reeves, Patrick Swayze. 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox Film Corporation, 1991.

*The Professionals*. Dir. Richard Brooks. Perf. Claudia Cardinale, Burt Lancaster, Lee Marvin, Robert Ryan. Columbia Pictures. 1966.

*Punchline*. Dir. David Seltzer. Perf. Sally Field, John Goodman, Tom Hanks. Columbia Pictures, 1988.

*Pushing Tin*. Dir. Mike Newell. Perf. Cate Blanchett, John Cusack, Angelina Jolie, Billy Bob Thornton. 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 1999.

*Rounders*. Dir. John Dahl. Perf. Matt Damon, Martin Landau, John Malkovich, Gretchen Mol, Edward Norton, John Turturro. Miramax Films, 1998.

*Searching for Bobby Fischer*. Screenplay/Dir. Steven Zaillian. Joan Allen, Laurence Fishburne, Ben Kingsley, Joe Mantegna, Max Pomeranc. Paramount Pictures, 1993.

*Top Gun*. Dir. Tony Scott. Perf. Tom Cruise, Val Kilmer, Kelly McGillis. Paramount Pictures, 1986.

*Wall Street*. Dir. Oliver Stone. Perf. Michael Douglas, Daryl Hannah, Charlie Sheen, Martin Sheen. CBS/20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox Films, 1987.

*The Wild Bunch*. Dir. Sam Peckinpah. Perf. Ernest Borgnine, William Holden, Robert Ryan, Jaime Sánchez. 1969. DVD. Warner Home Video, 1995.