Mediated Deviance and Social Otherness
Mediated Deviance and Social Otherness
Interrogating Influential Representations

Edited by

Kylo-Patrick R. Hart

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INTRODUCTION

KYLO-PATRICK R. HART

This work offers a variety of eye-opening chapters that explore noteworthy representations of deviance in various media forms, including books, films, musical offerings, news accounts, television programs, and Internet sites. Its contents provide critical insight into the various ways that media representations continually influence and mold widely shared notions of deviance and social otherness, resulting in conditions that typically have real (often detrimental) effects on real people.

The term “media representation” is used to refer to the ways that members of various social groups (e.g., men, women, adolescents, senior citizens, African Americans, Asian Americans, Native Americans, Latinos, gay men, lesbians, etc.), and/or various social phenomena as experienced by individuals in a society (e.g., poverty, HIV/AIDS infection, etc.), are differentially portrayed in all sorts of media offerings, which in turn frequently influence the ways that audience members of those media offerings perceive and respond to members of the groups, or individuals experiencing the social phenomena, that are represented in them. Research in the media-representation tradition seeks answers to several related questions, including: (1) What sorts of media images are presented of specific groups, and what do they reveal about their position in a culture? (2) Who constructs these media images, and whose interests do they ultimately serve? (3) What are the potential social consequences of the typical strategies used to represent these groups? (4) What kinds of stereotypes are readily conveyed in such representations, and how can they be undermined or ultimately eliminated? (Erni 114-15; Harris 40-68).

As media scholar Larry Gross has emphasized, media representation matters because virtually every individual who encounters media images on a regular basis can readily identify components of his or her “knowledge” of the social world that derive either wholly or partially from fictional and/or nonfictional media representations (144). For example, although many city-dwellers have never personally met a farmer from the country and many individuals have never met a prostitute, almost anybody can explain, in surprisingly vivid detail, how farmers and prostitutes look, talk, and act, as well as what they do on a daily basis. Furthermore, Gross emphasizes that “the contributions of the mass
media are likely to be especially powerful in cultivating images of groups and phenomena about which there is little firsthand opportunity for learning, particularly when such images are not contradicted by other established beliefs and ideologies” (144). Psychologist Richard Harris echoes those important sentiments when he states:

One of the major perceived realities that media help create for us involves information about groups of people. Through TV and other media we are exposed to a much broader range of people than most of us would ever encounter in our own lives. Not only are media our introduction to these people, but often they are practically the only source of our information about them. Sometimes everything that we know about some kinds of people comes from [media representations]. (40)

Media representation also matters because representation is a form of social action, involving the production of meanings that ultimately have real effects. Certainly, although all media representations refer to some group or social phenomenon, the semiotic act of producing meaning through the use of verbal and visual signs is far from a simple, straightforward, objective process with negligible consequences. As film scholar Richard Dyer explains, the way that social groups are treated in media representations frequently influences the way they are treated in real life—poverty, harassment, self-hatred, discrimination, and other undesirable outcomes are instituted and solidified by representation (1). Dyer states:

How a group is represented, presented over [and over] again in cultural forms, how an image of a member of a group is taken as representative of that group, how that group is represented in the sense of spoken for and on behalf of (whether they represent, speak for themselves or not), these all have to do with how members of groups see themselves and others like themselves, how they see their place in society, their right to the rights a society claims to ensure its citizens… How we are seen determines in part how we are treated; how we treat others is based on how we see them; such seeing comes from representation. (1)

In other words, the cumulative messages communicated about members of various social groups, and social phenomena experienced by individuals in a society, through media representations frequently contribute substantially to the process of social constructionism. The social-construction perspective maintains that contemporary historical and social reality does not exist in any tangible form as a “truth” waiting to be discovered; rather, it is created through the actions of the most influential social actors—including various media professionals—in the same society who compete with each other over the ultimate construction of contemporary social conditions (Fee and Fox 9). This
means that influential human communication interactions, by media professionals and others, significantly serve to determine what constitutes “truth” or “social reality” in any society, but that the resulting social constructions do not necessarily correspond to “reality” in an objective sense (Elwood 6; Rushing 136). Despite these realities, social constructions influence the way that individuals perceive their world and behave within it, regardless of their (lack of) inherent validity (Rushing 163).

“The real is positioned both before and after its representation; and representation becomes a moment of the reproduction and consolidation of the real,” explains scholar Peggy Phelan (2), characterizing the complex interrelation of media representation and social constructionism as influential social phenomena. She further explains that because “the real is read through representation, and representation is read through the real, each representation relies on and reproduces a specific logic of the real; this logical real promotes its own representation” (2). These statements reveal that cumulative patterns of media representation, over time, contribute substantially to the process of social constructionism. As Paula Treichler has summarized this noteworthy state of affairs, current media representations appear to be both familiar and true primarily because they simultaneously reinforce earlier representations as they condition audience members for similar representations still to come (146).

Accordingly, the chapters in this collection are intended to enable their readers to more fully understand the regularity with which media representations contribute to the formation and perpetuation of influential social constructions of deviance and otherness as they pertain to individuals of various kinds, from delinquents and criminals to individuals of different ages, classes, genders, races, sexual orientations, and health/(dis)ability statuses. They reveal how the act of producing meaning in media offerings through the use of verbal and visual signs is one with substantial cultural, political, and social consequences for the lived realities of individuals of different backgrounds and lifestyles.

The essays in Part I explore influential media offerings pertaining to younger and older individuals. By examining the parallels between juvenile delinquency films of the 1950s and ghetto action films of the 1990s, Amanda Klein demonstrates how the representation and social construction of delinquent adolescents has changed in recent decades. By exploring continual representations of Lizzie Borden’s stepmother as both deviant and wicked, Annette Holba reveals why many individuals believe she deserved to die at the hands of her stepchild if, in fact, “Lizzie Borden took an axe and gave her [evil step]mother forty whacks.”

The essays in Part II investigate noteworthy representations of crime and criminals. In their analyses of the HBO television series Oz, David Sealy...
demonstrates how, from the opening minutes of its premiere episode, this series has reinforced and rearticulated hegemonic notions of prisons as places where only deserving individuals end up and should be left to suffer, and Georges-Claude Guilbert and Valentin Locoge reveal how *Oz* regularly challenges hegemonic gender roles and expectations through its radical representations of male promiscuity, sexual deprivation, and non-heterosexuality in relation to various communities of prisoners. In his analysis of Mike Leigh’s 2004 film *Vera Drake*, Robert Goff explores the representation of backstreet abortionists in 1950s London in relation to the social construction of the “crime” of abortion. In her analysis of contemporary news accounts, Barbara Barnett challenges superficial representations of women who murder their children by demonstrating how the continual emphasis by journalists on the myth of maternal perfection prohibits realistic discussions about infanticide and women who kill their own offspring.


The essays in Part IV offer insight into noteworthy media representations pertaining to deviance in relation to gender, race, and class. Analyzing popular musical offerings with regard to (non)traditional gender roles, Charles Wurl examines the rise of Outlaw country music during the 1970s as a mythopoetic male movement, and Lauren Gifford examines Brooke Valentine’s 2005 pop-rap song “Girlfight” as an intriguing example of contemporary female youth culture in a potentially post-feminist world. Important aspects of race and class are explored by Wendy Korwin in her discussion of early 1900s advice manuals targeted to white versus African-American audiences; Zoe Trodd in her analysis of representations of miscegenation as social- and self-cannibalism in the works of William Apess, Edgar Rice Burroughs, and Herman Melville, among other authors; and Thomas Grochowski in his analysis of media discourse pertaining to O. J. Simpson during the 1990s and beyond.

The essays in Part V explore influential media offerings pertaining to sexual orientation. William Van Watson demonstrates how hypermasculinity ultimately collapses into homosexuality in Italian cinematic representations of Fascism, with their emphasis on male exclusivity and paramilitary attributes. Sal Renshaw and Laura Robinson demonstrate how Showtime’s landmark television series *The L Word* innovatively depicts lesbian existence, which has
typically either been overlooked entirely or appropriated for male pleasure in preceding televisual representations of women-centered experiences. Christopher Pérez demonstrates why, as a result of their ubiquitous master/slave dynamics that regularly reinforce racist ideologies and abuse powerless subjectivities, Internet chat rooms are not safe spaces for vulnerable gay males who are in the process of coming out.

The essays in Part VI investigate “other” noteworthy forms of mediated deviance and social otherness. In her discussion of the invention of masochism and its cultural effects, Amber Musser reveals how masochism emerged as a fundamentally literary disease. In her historical analysis of electric-bulb sign spectaculums in Manhattan during the late 1800s and early 1900s, Margaret Weigel shows how members of the cultured upper class endeavored to contain or eliminate such advertising displays altogether, denouncing them as “freakish,” “monstrous,” and “perverse” and fearing that they encouraged debauchery and other forms of deviance. In his concluding analysis of Virginie Despentes’ Baise-Moi, Randall Clark explores a controversial novel filled with endless cruel (and frequently senseless) behavior that has been written in an entirely detached manner, with its author offering no hint at all about how she feels about her main characters or their extremely deviant actions.

Works Cited


Part I
Age
CHAPTER ONE
FROM GREASER TO GANGSTA: THE CHANGING FACE OF THE FILMIC JUVENILE DELINQUENT
AMANDA ANN KLEIN

This chapter examines the parallels between the juvenile-delinquent-themed teenpic of the 1950s and the 1990s ghetto action film (see S. Craig Watkins' “Ghetto Reelness: Hollywood Film Production, Black Popular Culture, and the Ghetto Action Film Cycle” for the origin of this term), two film cycles that focus on the lives of contemporary teenagers and their deviant behaviors, including hot-rod racing, premarital sex, drug abuse, and gangbanging. Both cycles exploit contemporary, sensational topics that snowballed into widespread “moral panics,” such as the newly emerging concepts of the “teenager,” “juvenile delinquency,” and rock ‘n’ roll in the mid-1950s, and concerns over (black) teenage “gangbangers,” inner-city crime, “the war on drugs,” and the escalating popularity of gangsta rap in the early 1990s. What is most fascinating about both film cycles is that while their primary appeal was the depiction of what was cutting edge and antiestablishment for the contemporary teenage market, these films were always already the products of the very establishment that their target market was supposedly “rebelling” against.

Although early models of subcultural theory (most famously those articulated by the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham in the 1970s) often posited what Oliver Marchant has identified as the “incorporation myth” (85), which assumes that subcultures are intrinsically subversive or resistant to mainstream culture and that there is a definitive line between a subculture and the parent culture (or mainstream), this chapter demonstrates how the mainstream—composed of film studios, teen-targeted magazines, and the media—was integral to the formation and dissemination of these two “deviant” youth subcultures. I argue that both the juvenile delinquent and the gangsta were images of rebellion originating in teenage subcultures but also products generated by the media and film industry that were sold back to these subcultures as authentic and rebellious. As Karen Brooks has argued, “One of the ironies extant in the youth market and its associated products is that
while young people may think they are resisting the dominant culture by adopting a particular mien or lifestyle, they are, in effect, sustaining the commercial viability of the commodification of teen spirit" (5). And since teenagers are often (although not always) the target demographic for these products, this process essentially invites youths to “devour themselves” (Brooks 9).

In his seminal study of British working-class youths, Subculture: The Meaning of Style, Dick Hebdige suggests that subcultures represent a creative “solution” to specific problems and contradictions within the current hegemony (81). These “solutions” manifest themselves in an “identity” (the hot-rodder, the gangbanger, etc.) that enables individuals within the subculture to live with these contradictions. It has therefore been argued that when teenagers in the 1950s began listening to rock ’n’ roll or racing their souped-up hot rods down country roads, it was a method of asserting their newfound postwar independence as well as a desire for the danger denied them in the confines of their affluent postwar suburbs (Doherty 108). These subcultural activities were contesting an ideology which claimed, among other things, that teenagers must be asexual, docile, and racially segregated. The subcultural activities of 1990s teenagers—specifically listening to gangsta rap and taking on the persona of the gangsta—emerged from a very different set of socioeconomic circumstances, namely the economic devastation of certain neighborhoods of post-industrial Los Angeles, such as Carson, Compton, North Long Beach, Northwest Pasadena, and Watts. This process of ghettoization in Los Angeles, which began in the late 1960s as a result of a rise in the urban population coupled with economic displacement and factory closures (Kelley 192), represents one of the primary forces behind the production of the 1990s gangsta ethos.

Given their association with violence, mobility, and independence, it is not surprising that these two subcultures were labeled as deviant by contemporary public discourses. Daniel Dotter explains that “[ruling] social groups create deviance by making the rules whose infraction constitutes deviance, and by applying those rules to particular people and labeling them as outsiders” (89). Thus, moral policing groups such as the Estes Kefauver’s Senate Judiciary Subcommittee to investigate juvenile delinquency in the 1950s and Tipper Gore’s Parents’ Music Resource Center (PMRC) in the 1980s and 1990s made “social problems” out of juvenile deviance and gangsta culture, respectively, merely by stating that they were social problems. The criminal patina of these subcultures was further heightened through intense media scrutiny, resulting in what Stanley Cohen has labeled “deviation amplification,” or the process by which increased attempts—by the public, politicians and, most especially, the media—to understand a deviant act results in an increased awareness of said deviance (though not an actual increase in deviance) and the subsequent creation
of a moral panic. And it is precisely this increased scrutiny that helped to define the contours of both subcultures and expose them to a mass audience (Stahl 31).

**Defining a Social Problem**

In order to understand the similarities between the 1950s juvenile delinquency teenpic and the 1990s ghetto action cycle, it is necessary to further establish how and when the subcultures they purport to represent were transformed into catalysts of national social problems. If movies are an accurate reflection (or refraction) of contemporary belief systems, then throughout the 1930s, when social problem films such as *Dead End* (1937) and *Wild Boys of the Road* (1933) were being produced, juvenile delinquency was a social problem rooted in definable causes such as poverty, lack of good parenting, and the failure of government agencies. The troubled youths appearing in these films are the empathetic victims of their social backgrounds who, with the right intervention, can be successfully reformed or “saved.” Likewise, early exploitation films such as *Are These Our Children?* (1931) and *Reefer Madness* (1938) posit teenagers primarily as the innocent victims of insidious forces. Plots revolve around manipulative adults who want to turn teenagers, who are regarded as easy targets, into recurrent drug customers (Betrock 9). This view of adolescents began to change in the 1940s with the postwar baby boom, when they became a symbol of the fear and expectations the American public had about the impact of World War II on the nation’s children. Media-hyped events, such as the creation in 1942 of the Commission on Children in Wartime, the 1943 *March of Time* newsreel series “Youth in Crisis,” the 1943 “Zoot Suit Riots” in Los Angeles, and the 1946 national conference devoted to the prevention and control of juvenile delinquency (Gilbert 24-40), all contributed to a generalized sense of alarm and exaggerated concern over “the state of American youth.” J. Edgar Hoover, then head of the FBI, even went so far as to compare the wartime crime wave with the exploits of another media-generated social threat that the FBI had “conquered” in the 1930s: John Dillinger. Thus, most Americans were made aware of juvenile delinquency through mediated sources, such as politicians, moral pundits, the news media, and films, rather than through direct personal experience (Gilbert 27).

It was not just World War II and the media that changed America’s perception of the juvenile; the adolescents’ own self-perception of themselves was also changing at this time. In the 1940s, while government and social agencies were worried about juvenile crime, adolescents were gaining increasing autonomy by taking on part-time jobs. This newfound source of income gave them freedom, both financial and social, from adult society. The money they made, which was not necessary for the maintenance of their
(primarily middle-class) households, went toward the purchase of cars (so greatly needed in the isolated suburbs) as well as less expensive “leisure” products such as clothing items, magazines, records, and movie tickets. At the same time, marketers became highly aware of this new independent consumer and social group, an awareness both marked and generated by the release of several book-length studies and magazine articles describing this nascent social group. In fact, historian William Manchester has traced the term “teenager” to a 1945 article that appeared in The New York Times Magazine titled “A Teen-Age Bill of Rights,” written by Elliot E. Cohen (Doherty 67). And by December 1948, Life magazine had devoted its cover and feature story to the “teenager” and his leisure activities. The article, which covered topics such as music, clothing, haircuts, kissing, sock hops, and general teenage “do’s and don’ts,” treats American adolescents like a newly discovered tribe whose rituals are exotic and incomprehensible to adult society (Doherty 67-75). Thus, argues Thomas Doherty, the decisive element in the formation of the modern teenager was not just financial independence and baby-boom numbers, but “an acute sense of themselves as a special, like-minded community bound together by age and rank,” an awareness that was “carefully nurtured and vigorously reinforced by the adult institutions around them” (46).

For example, around this time magazines that catered specifically to the teenage market began to appear, including Dig!, Flip, Miss, 'TEEN, Teen Life, Teen World, and Youth (Gilbert 23). Although youth-oriented magazines had existed prior to the 1950s, these latter publications were different in that they recognized the teenager as a special subculture and spoke to him or her as a “friend” while also clearly exploiting this subculture for profit (Doherty 59). The editor’s letter in the first issue of 'TEEN from July 1957 claims to be “the first” to delve into all aspects of teen life; “'TEEN magazine, born into a generation that has finally come to recognize persons between the ages of thirteen and nineteen as a distinct cultural group, now opens its pages to the future” (1). And the April 1957 edition of Teen Life even attempts to exploit this very exploitation; the editor’s letter alerts its teen readers to the fact that the publishing world is taking advantage of their interests, such as the recent death of James Dean (which had greatly affected a large segment of the teenage population), in order to make a profit: “Myths and men have been vulgarly exploited and the temples of publishing have been deluged with money-changers” (5). But the editor then assures the reader that “This magazine, as are all magazines of this corporation, is dedicated to you. We never violate your ideals or your confidence” (5).

Given the heightened awareness of teenagers and contemporary fears about their independence throughout the 1940s, it is not surprising that, by the early 1950s, the concepts of teenagers and juvenile delinquents—groups representing
a deviant resistance to white middle-class values—would become almost interchangeable in the public imagination. Contemporary fears over teenagers were rooted primarily in the reality that they were a subculture that produced and defined their own social discourses, which were both resistant and incomprehensible to dominant society. This labeling of defiant behaviors is, according to Tim Lucas, necessary to the maintenance of a coherent social order because “when moral boundaries are transgressed and an established order disturbed, by labeling the deviant factor as filth, boundaries between the socially acceptable and intolerable are reestablished” (149).

A trio of the adult-targeted social problem films released in the mid-1950s—The Wild One (1953), Blackboard Jungle (1955), and Rebel Without a Cause (1955)—reflect these contemporary fears. However, these films, which serve primarily as a warning to mainstream adult society about the problem of juvenile crime, were also a hit with teenage audiences, leading to the creation of an entire cycle of juvenile-delinquent-themed films. Created for and marketed to the newly discovered “teenager” (a consuming force with extra money and leisure time), the films of the juvenile delinquency teenpic cycle make an exciting spectacle of delinquent behaviors, such as hot-rod racing (e.g., Hot Rod Girl, 1956), drinking and drug abuse (e.g., High School Confidential, 1958), and premarital sex (e.g., Date Bait, 1960). These films go to great lengths to present “authentic” depictions of teenage subcultural activities. In High School Confidential, for example, a young teacher, Mrs. Williams (played by Jan Sterling), teaches an English lesson on contemporary slang terms, offering definitions for words such as “square,” “chicken,” “doll,” and “scram.” When she leaves the classroom momentarily, a student, posited as the “hippest” member of the student body by virtue of his position as leader of the Wheelers and Dealers gang (played by John Drew Barrymore), provides the class with a “corrective lesson” about what he calls the teacher’s “old-school jive.” Of course, this moment of teenage “victory” was written, directed, and produced (as were all ’50s teenpics) by the very “squares” the film ridicules: adults. Rock Around the Clock (1956), the first teenpic to capitalize on rock ’n’ roll, works in a similar fashion, telling the story of two (adult) big-band promoters who are frustrated by the decreasing numbers in their dance halls. One night, they happen upon a town dance packed with grooving teenagers. The men, who are clearly baffled by the teenagers’ ecstasy over the featured band, Bill Haley and the Comets, are initially depicted as clueless squares, especially when the teens’ jive talk proves to be incomprehensible to them. For instance, when one of the adults, Steve (played by Johnny Johnston), asks the kids why they are clearing the floor for a pair of dancers, he is informed, “Dig. When the most is on the floor, we give them room.” Even though the adult promoters eventually catch on and, indeed, profit from this newly “discovered” rock ’n’ roll subculture, their
initial disorientation, along with the film’s use of supposedly up-to-date lingo, music, and dance steps, provides hip teens with a mirror of their contemporary activities and square teens with a model to emulate (or scorn, if the teen really is a square). Yet no matter how cutting edge, these images and sounds are nevertheless the products of an adult commercial culture, produced to exploit the teenage Zeitgeist. Despite having the patina of being hip, films such as *High School Confidential* and *Rock Around the Clock* are always already square.

The emergence of the ghetto action cycle is also strongly tied to the identification of a newly discovered deviant subculture, namely hip hop and the figure of the (black) urban juvenile delinquent, often labeled (in films and by the media) as a gangbanger or a gangsta. This cycle appeared at a moment in U.S. history when moral entrepreneurs turned their eyes upon a newly perceived threat to America’s safety: the ghetto residents of South Central Los Angeles (Cohen 127). As I mentioned previously, the primary catalyst for a moral panic are the media, which have historically devoted an inordinate amount of energy to reporting on incidents of deviance. In the 1980s, discourses about the ghetto, crime, and the figure of the gangbanger were being widely circulated in politics, popular music, television, films, and newspapers. In *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film*, Ed Guerrero argues that at this time the media were offering America two vastly different images of the black population: the “opulent, soothing image of a black professional class” exemplified by texts such as *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992) and the “stark, real-time, genocidal slaughter of urban blacks” replayed on the ten o’clock news (163). “It is little wonder,” he continues, “that by the beginning of the 1990s, blacks felt that they existed in the dominant social imagination as media-constructed ‘stars’ and fantasy figures or as criminals, while according to almost every social-material index, the quality of black life in this country steadily declined” (163). The high rates of crime and violence in Los Angeles neighborhoods can be attributed to many related factors: widespread poverty, unemployment, severe funding cuts for inner-city youth programs and, by the mid-1980s, a new, inexpensive, yet highly addictive drug known as crack cocaine. Much as the teenager in general was the object of intense fear, adulation, and media scrutiny in the 1950s, the black urban (usually male) teenager became a subculture worthy of media exploitation in the 1980s and early 1990s; both were ciphers for wider social problems that did not, in reality, have such simple, locatable sources.

One major source of deviant imagery of the black inner-city teen was the Reagan administration. According to Herman Gray’s *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness*, a study of the circulation of “signs of blackness” on television in the 1980s, the Reagan administration enlisted specific discourses about blackness in order to mobilize support for the administration’s neoconservative goals of dismantling “big government,” the welfare state, and
affirmative action; reinstating a strong military; creating an “unfettered free market”; and returning to a utopian vision of America signified by the Eisenhower-era ideals of family, tradition, and religion (23). As Gray explains, “Discursively, then, the conservative Republican strategy to ‘get America moving’ relied heavily on dramatic and racialized media images of an isolated and pathological underclass trapped in a culture of poverty” (23). Specifically, in the 1980s the Reagan administration declared a “war on drugs” which, though admirable in concept, was misguided in practice. Rather than addressing and correcting the problems that led inner-city residents to sell or use drugs, the administration treated Los Angeles as if it were a literal war zone, subjecting its residents to intense monitoring by police helicopters, high-tech electronic surveillance, and even small tanks armed with battering rams ( Kelley 193). This troubling imagery, which circulated in nightly newscasts, helped to further criminalize the nation’s inner-city communities, creating a massive inner-city “crisis” that the Reagan administration could then “solve” for the American public.

Furthermore, much as book-length studies and magazine articles devoted to discussions of the “teenager” in the 1940s and 1950s led members of this group to view themselves as a distinct subculture, the demonization of ghetto residents by government agencies, politicians, and the media led young black males to view themselves as a criminalized “other,” separate and marginalized from mainstream culture. This othering of the inner-city community continued into the 1990s with the Clinton administration’s policies. Although this administration at first appeared to take a more liberal approach to America’s “war on drugs” with its emphasis on drug treatment, it nevertheless resorted to the familiar discourse of individual morality, “with its stress on personal responsibility as the principal solution to society’s ills” ( Gordon 34). This move allowed politicians to “slide easily from drug speak to more general perorations against violence and gangs” ( Gordon 36). Here again, drugs, violence, and crime—all part of America’s presumed “moral decay”—are coded as pressing social problems that are containable because they emanate from a “relatively small, hard-core group in our midst whose evil personal and social characteristics account for crime” ( Poveda 79). This “small, hard-core” group is more often than not aligned with the black underclass.

Like the 1950s juvenile delinquency teepics, the 1990s ghetto action cycle claimed to deliver a spectacle of the black urban teenager’s contemporary experience of the world, a spectacle that appealed to the (black and white) suburban teenager’s fantasies of rebellion. Menace II Society (1993), Fresh (1994), and Clockers (1995) all detail the world of teenage (and preteen) drug dealers; New Jersey Drive (1995) is about joyriding carjackers; Strapped (1993) is about teenage pregnancy and gun dealers; South Central (1992) and Original
Gangstas (1996) are about the perils of gang life; and films such as Boyz N the Hood (1991) and Juice (1992) attempt to portray the previously hidden social worlds of working-class and lower-middle-class black youth. For example, the opening sequence of Boyz N the Hood, which is set in the 1980s during the protagonists’ childhoods, echoes the aforementioned “corrective history” lesson found in High School Confidential. A young Tre (played by Desi Arnez Heinz II) disrupts his teacher’s lecture about Thanksgiving (he calls Pilgrims “Penguins”), causing the class to erupt in laughter. When the teacher sarcastically asks if Tre would like to teach the class, he confidently responds, “Yeah, I can do that.” With pointer in hand and a map of the world, Tre explains to his classmates that the entire world’s people originated from Africa. One boy retorts, “I ain’t from Africa; I’m from Crenshaw Mafia!” Here are both the origins of the 1990s gangsta ethos (the defiance of authority; the reference to neighborhood gangs) and the depiction of inner-city childhoods (the classroom has crayon-drawn pictures of surveillance helicopters, police cars, and coffins hanging on the walls), something that had yet to appear on the big screen. In other words, like the juvenile delinquency teenpic, the ghetto action cycle makes visible a youth culture that was previously invisible. And like Rock Around the Clock, Krush Groove (1985) attempts to define a new musical subculture—rap—and depicts the mainstream adult world as either confused by or hostile toward this new genre. Of course, whereas the rock ’n’ roll-themed teenpics of the 1950s appeared in tandem with 1950s juvenile delinquency teenpics, Krush Groove and other films depicting the emerging hip-hop subculture (specifically, films about rapping and breakdancing)—including Breakin’ (1984), Breakin’ 2: Electric Boogaloo (1984), Beat Street (1984), and Rappin’ (1985)—appeared prior to the advent of the 1990s ghetto action film, all coinciding with the mainstream’s initial recognition of the rap phenomenon in the 1980s. However, the theme of the gap between youth culture and the mainstream adult culture is found in both the rock ’n’ roll and rap films.

**Defining Deviant Music**

Both the teenpics of the 1950s and the ghetto action films of the 1990s can attribute part of their success to the exploitation of a controversial new musical genre that appealed to teens but disturbed and baffled adults. In the 1950s this music was, of course, rock ’n’ roll. While rock ’n’ roll as we know it today first emerged in 1955, coinciding “with the demographic and sociocultural development of a white middle-class youth subculture” (Dotter 91), the basis for rock ’n’ roll, known then as rhythm and blues, had been on the “black charts” since at least 1947. The music of black performers such Chuck Berry, Ray Charles, and Fats Domino, with its emphasis on the “backbeat” (the second and
fourth beats of the measure) and use of vaguely sexual lyrics, was “perceived [by the white adult population] as being overtly sexual in both lyrics and performance—and this bordered on immorality” (Friedlander 18-23). In contrast, the music targeted at white teenagers at the time was characterized by sugary, beatless, romantic ballads performed by “song stylists” such as Rosemary Clooney, Nat “King” Cole, Perry Como, and Frank Sinatra. Because this music was meant to appeal to both teenagers and their parents (Friedlander 26), it is perhaps unsurprising that teens desiring to break away from their parents as well as the restrictive Cold War environment of the 1950s would eventually gravitate toward the danceable beat of rhythm and blues. In 1954, The Chords’ hit “Sh-Boom” pulled in a large white teen following, prompting Billboard to list it on its “white” pop charts and thereby cementing the taste-making ability of the youth population, who were now gravitating toward what would eventually come to be known as rock ‘n’ roll (a euphemism for rowdy sex) (Doherty 55). Music executives, who correctly anticipated a negative reaction from parents, initially promoted “white” covers of black rock ‘n’ roll songs, such as The Crew Cuts’ cover of “Sh-Boom.” Regardless of whether this music was performed by blacks or whites, however, parents nevertheless regarded rock ‘n’ roll as “deviant” music, primarily because of its roots in the black community. In fact, James Gilbert points out that much of what was labeled “delinquent” in the 1950s was behavior associated with the “lower” classes: “Delinquency…had become a word applied to culture and behavior that many Americans were anxious to shed as they embraced middle-class values” (137).

By 1956, white Southern “rockabilly” artists such as Buddy Holly, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Elvis Presley all had successful careers, but parents of (white, middle-class) teenagers were nevertheless extremely disturbed by their music, both because its roots lay in the black community and because of its ability to get teens to dance in what was deemed to be a sexually provocative manner. In other words, “it would not be considered wholly proper for a ‘cultured,’ urban, middle-class white teenager to listen to…Hank Williams or Muddy Waters, no more so than it would have been for him or her to hang out on the street corner, fornicate, shoot pool, or read Tales from the Crypt” (Hill 44). Thus, rock ‘n’ roll was generally perceived to be the beginning of a vast social decline into immorality, juvenile crime, drug abuse, and even widespread rioting. One tactic used to demonize rock ‘n’ roll was to compare the music with “primitive” tribal rituals that put their followers into a trance, a trance inspiring deviant behaviors. The November 1956 issue of Dig! reprinted one particularly egregious newspaper article on this very subject. Under the headline “Has ‘Rhythm of Death’ Invaded America? ‘Voodoo Beat’ Blamed for Teen Age Riots Coast to Coast as Music-Maddened Manics Maul Many!,” the article attributes the
success of rock ‘n’ roll to the “deadly rhythm of the jungles which sets off a hidden charge within the brain of its hearers and incites them to acts of violence, murder, rape” (39). Rock ‘n’ roll, the article reasons, “can make a murderer out of the nice kid next door” (39).

Adult anxiety over the emerging teenage “mania” for rock ‘n’ roll is most clearly articulated in Blackboard Jungle, a social problem film about a school for delinquent boys. In one of the film’s most famous scenes, a skittish teacher (played by Richard Kiley) attempts to “connect” with his students by bringing in his prized collection of jazz 78s, believing, as one boy reminds him, that “music calms the savage beast.” But rather than listen to the records, the boys destroy them. This scene, which escalates to a terrifying, riot-like atmosphere, represents a direct rejection of the previous generation’s musical tastes and the adult generation in general. Furthermore, the use of the then-minor hit “Rock Around the Clock,” by Bill Haley and the Comets, over the film’s opening credits marked the first appearance of a rock ‘n’ roll song in a major motion picture and the first significant rock ‘n’ roll hit (Doherty 76). The successes of both the film and Haley’s song with teen audiences (a 1956 survey found that Blackboard Jungle was the favorite film of high school students) indicated that teenagers wanted to differentiate themselves from their parents’ generation (Doherty 76). Controversy surrounded the film, both because of its content and reports of teenagers “rioting” through movie-theater aisles when “Rock Around the Clock” played over the credits. The implication of these reports is that, under the influence of deviant music, teenagers, like the boys in Blackboard Jungle, will become wild and destructive.

In 1991, Boyz N the Hood and New Jack City also made media headlines when multiple shootings and fistfights broke out in and around theaters where the films were playing, culminating in at least two reported deaths. These headlines became national news and created a generalized panic about young black males (Baker 3), much as the reports surrounding Blackboard Jungle linked up concerns over teenagers, juvenile delinquency, and rock ‘n’ roll. And, like Blackboard Jungle, several of the early ghetto action films comment upon the state of adolescent-adult relationships via their differing tastes in music. For example, in the opening sequence of Boyz N the Hood, which takes place in 1984, Furious (played by Lawrence Fishburne) and his son, Tre, are driving back to their home in South Central Los Angeles following a father-son outing. When the Five Stairsteps’ 1970 hit “Oooh Child” comes on the radio, Furious turns it up and sings along. As they pull up to their house, this music becomes the nondiegetic accompaniment for the very public arrest of Tre’s ten-year-old friend Doughboy (played by Baha Jackson), who was caught stealing. This scene ends with shots of a police car, which is taking Doughboy from his home to a reform school, disappearing over the horizon. The very next scene, which
takes place in the present day (1991), is a lively backyard cookout celebrating the release of (the now-adult) Doughboy (played by Ice Cube) from prison. The music playing in this scene—danceable, bass-heavy rap—stands in pointed contrast to the soothing sounds of the Five Stairsteps. The teenagers at the party are decked out in early 1990s urban fashion: biker shorts, overalls, baggy pants, Starter caps, bandanas, and gold jewelry. Here *Boyz N the Hood* equates the soul music of the 1960s and 1970s with an idealistic, irretreivable past and the baby-boomer generation, while rap music is associated with the loss of innocence (marked by Doughboy’s arrest), the end of 1960s politics, and the dominance of the contemporary, urban youth subculture.

Just as entertainment executives were caught off guard when white middle-class teens fell in love with rock ’n’ roll, which was believed initially to be primitive, bestial, and low class, they were likewise surprised when, in the early 1990s, gangsta rap became extremely popular among white suburbanites, the least likely market for a musical idiom rooted in the angst of black males railing against the injustices of a white hegemony. In fact, many critics have argued that it is precisely this anti-authoritarian attitude that made gangsta rap so popular: “The menacing specter of ghetto youth culture became the exploitative hook that made the production of this particular film cycle timely, sensational and, oddly enough, more easily marketable” (Watkins 238). By the mid-1990s, the once-marginal “hard-core lifestyle” characterized by gangsta rap became such an important part of the white teen experience that “it has now become a music-industry maxim that for a rap record to go platinum, it must sell strongly among white youths” (Spiegler n. pag.). In other words, 1990s music executives, like their predecessors in the 1950s, understood that since they could not divert the white teen market from gangsta rap they might as well exploit it.

Despite its creeping acceptance among teenagers of all races and backgrounds, the adult, primarily white, mainstream community was extremely disapproving of rap music. While these objections are certainly rooted in the fact that rap lyrics can be alternately violent, misogynistic, homophobic, and nihilistic (a statement that could be made about most subcultural music, including rock ’n’ roll, punk, and heavy metal), white mainstream society was also reacting to the explicitly political content of rap and its origins within the black community. In the 1980s and 1990s, rap emerged as one of the few commercially successful art forms to engage in a frank discussion about urban living conditions, racism, police brutality, and government hypocrisy. As a result, rap music (and particularly gangsta rap) became the subject of intense scrutiny, with several high-profile news stories devoted to its content, its presumed effects on its fans, and the antics of the rappers themselves. For example, in 1988 an eighteen-year-old was stabbed to death during a rap concert at Nassau Coliseum; in 1989 NWA’s record label, Priority Records, received a
well-publicized letter from Milt Ahlerich, an FBI assistant director, objecting to the content of the popular song “Fuck tha Police”; in 1990 the Florida obscenity case over the lyrics to 2 Live Crew’s As Nasty as They Wanna Be made national headlines; in 1991 nine youths were trampled to death at a charity basketball game with rappers; and in 1992 a Texas state trooper, Bill Davidson, was shot by a nineteen-year-old who claimed that the Tupac Shakur album 2Pacalypse Now influenced him to commit the murder.

Perhaps the most damning stain on rap music at this time, however, was Tipper Gore’s PMRC. Although the PMRC’s original target was rock and heavy metal music in the 1980s, its focus shifted to rap in the late 1980s and early 1990s once the latter began to increase its mainstream fan base (Pollack 20). As part of her anti-rap crusade, Gore even published a now-famous editorial entitled “Hate, Rape, and Rap” in The Washington Post in 1990, which compared 2 Live Crew’s sexual lyrics to the rape of a Central Park jogger (Berry 175). This rape was widely believed to have been inspired by the lyrics of Tone Loc’s highly sexual single “Wild Thing” because one of the accused sang lyrics to the song just after he was arrested. Tipper Gore, as a moral entrepreneur, successfully mobilized the moral panic surrounding urban crime (e.g., the rape of the Central Park jogger), black male teenagers, and rap music (despite the fact that Tone Loc’s “Wild Thing” was hardly considered “rap” to hard-core fans in the late 1980s) to suit her own agenda of censoring what she believed to be morally offensive music. One anti-rap and anti-rock lobbying group, Missouri Project Rock, which was working in cooperation with the PMRC, even resorted to 1950s-era metaphors when denouncing rap in their mailings: “Rap music…is a hypnotic chant that is all rhythm with a demonic power…. According to one ex-high Satanist, it is identical with the voodoo chants and rituals used within Satanism to summon up demons of lust and violence” (qtd. in Pollack 20). The PMRC campaign was successful primarily because Gore was able to associate such disparate phenomena as urban crime and urban music.

**Defining Deviant Behaviors**

Another parallel between the 1950s juvenile delinquency teenpic and the 1990s ghetto action film is their celebration and eventual containment of activities that society deems to be “deviant.” For example, hot-rodging or drag racing, first popularized in Rebel Without a Cause, is an affront to adult-sanctioned traffic laws and also a dangerous symbol of the 1950s teenagers’ new freedom of mobility. Furthermore, by regularly participating in this potentially fatal activity, 1950s teenagers were making a paradoxical statement about their belief in their own immortality and a nihilistic disregard for their
lives. When Jim (played by James Dean) asks Buzz (played by Corey Allen), just before their fatal “chickee run,” “Why do we do this?,” Buzz responds, “You gotta do something, don’t you?” This exchange crystallized the contemporary postwar suburban teen malaise. Although Rebel Without a Cause concludes with a visual reconciliation between Jim and his father, there is no explicit rejection of hot-rod driving or chickee runs within the film’s narrative. The behavior is allowed to remain uncontained and therefore deviant (hence its popularity). However, with the formation of a cycle of teen-targeted hot-rod films, including such imaginatively titled entries as Hot Rod Rumble (1957) and Hot Rod Gang (1958), this once-rebellious activity was now labeled and contained by the adults against whom such activities were aimed. For example, the plot of Hot Rod Girl (1956) focuses on the struggles of a group of local teens to keep their drag strip from being shut down by their “square” community. The drag strip is a monitored space that renders a formerly dangerous and rebellious activity—drag racing in the streets—safe and nonthreatening (Doherty 110). Before cars can race, they must be inspected and classified using regulations established by the adult community. However, even this monitored activity becomes controversial when a boy is killed on his way home from the strip. As a result, the kids must work even harder to race “by the rules” in order to keep their drag strip open. As such, Hot Rod Girl, in the guise of a teenpic “hip” to the teenager’s “need for speed,” works to contain and control that very behavior by having its protagonists concede to the prohibitions of adult society. Even the taglines to these hot-rod films work to tame the teenager’s nihilistic impulses; Teenage Thunder (1957), for example, warns that “‘Chicken’ is not just a word…it’s murder!”

Just as perplexing to adults was the juvenile-delinquent gang, a group of toughs who wear matching jackets and engage in disruptive activities such as loitering, necking in public, harassing teachers, and bullying meek-looking classmates. As I mentioned earlier, prior to the 1950s most juvenile delinquency films employed the thematics of 1930s social problem films; that is, they imply that juvenile delinquency is the result of socioeconomic circumstances rather than the innate criminality of the dangerous adolescent. These fears were crystallized with the 1953 release of The Wild One, a film based on a true story of a marauding motorcycle gang that terrorized a small town. Although the age of Johnny’s gang, the Black Rebels, is never specified within the narrative, it is safe to assume that with their taste for bebop, slang, and their unifying distrust of authority they are, at least in style and mentality, part of the contemporary teenage subculture. Whereas the juvenile delinquents of the 1930s and 1940s were almost always rooted in a defined social context, the delinquents in The Wild One first appear on the screen riding down the road in a large pack, wearing black leather jackets, T-shirts, and tight jeans, as if they emerged, fully