The Rebel Mystique

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ABSTRACT

Our argument is that, at the level of cultural ideology/representation, the rebel is a privileged figure because he dialectically resolves the tensions between two competing cultural models of masculinity: the Patriarch and the Outlaw. The Patriarch carries connotations of authority and respect but also those of conformity and impotence (in the sense of the Organizational Man). The Outlaw carries meanings of autonomy, adventuresomeness, risk taking but he is also stigmatized for being irresponsible, immature, self-centered, and threatening. The rebel is the mythic figure who can move to the top of whatever social hierarchy is in play, and earn status/respect while maintaining autonomy and vitality; he can flaunt the system owing to great skill, charisma, and potency. Some examples of famous rebel types include certain representations of the cowboy (like the brave and strong town sheriff), adventurer, bohemian artist, action hero, the entrepreneur, the “bad boy” (think Tom Cruise in Top Gun) and the countercultural hero (pick your favorite hip-hop artist). [We have a pretty cool quasi-semiotic model of these relationships].

Our question then becomes how do men enact the rebel mystique when their lives are institutionally constrained -- they can't really be the bad boys in their organization or afford to buck the system without (in reality) getting fired. Thus, we have a previously ignored disjuncture between the cultural ideal and the everyday experiences of men who are situated in middle-class positions. Rather than creating anxiety or identity crises, these men use consumption and leisure activities to construct their self-identities in terms which align with the rebel mystique.

So, we show that a variety of consumption contexts offers greater opportunity for symbolic enactments of the rebel mystique than their professional lives where bureaucratic hierarchies are more rigid. The rebel mystique enables these guys to negotiate a very complicated semiotic hand that contemporary culture has dealt them. Authority/respect carries the specter of conformity and enervation. Pure rebellion carries the specter of immaturity. By incorporating these little rebellions into their dominant, respectable and mature patriarch identity projects, they can assuage both these negative dialectics. So they skirt the crisis of masculinity that is supposedly a result of the cultural feminization of masculinity (à la Susan Faludi and Michael Kimmel). Conversely, we show that feminine significations are easily incorporated into this identity project as a tool of rebellion.