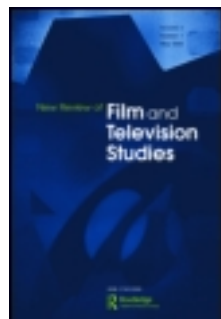


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### Intent to speed: cyclical production, topicality, and the 1950s hot rod movie

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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### Intent to speed: cyclical production, topicality, and the 1950s hot rod movie

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This paper tracks the emergence, consolidation, and dissolution of the short cycle of hot rod movies that was exhibited from 1956 to 1958. The aim is to explore this cycle's connection to topical issues and show how filmmakers used timely subjects. The paper examines the media frenzy that whirled around the subculture of hot-rodding and the sensationalist marketing strategies used to promote the films, which are linked to exhibition in drive-in theatres. There is an extraordinary mismatch between the thrills promised by the sales pitch for the films and the pedestrian action of the films themselves. While showing intent to speed, few examples of the cycle actually delivered on the promise to thrill. Finally, questions of turnover and the speed of production are considered. What draws these areas of interest together is a series of enquiries about what made hot rods and hot rod culture *useful* to film producers and audiences.

**Keywords:** hot rods; film cycles; drive-ins; cinema exhibition; sensationalism; thrills; subculture; topicality; B-movies

Studillac, Fuick, Chevrolash, Chrysoto:  
Burbank dreamed them just before he died.  
Hooded like gryphons, like the mermaid tailed,  
Sounding the centaur's educated neigh,  
They hit the town square, thirty-five in second,  
Then round and round, moths for brutal neon;  
Their headlights moons to Beeler's Cut-Rate Drugs.  
Then round, with tires baying at the curbs,  
And round again and out.  
Who hid the girls? (S.P. Zitner, 'The Hot-Rods Ride at Dusk', 1957, 352)

In 1949, the director of New York's Division of Safety identified the hot-rodder as an inherently lawless creature:

Possession of the 'hot rod' car is presumptive evidence of an intent to speed. Speed is Public Enemy No. 1 of the highways. It is obvious that a driver of a 'hot rod' car has an irresistible temptation to 'step on it' and accordingly operate the vehicle in a reckless manner endangering human life. It also shows a deliberate and premeditated idea to violate the law. (Balsley 1950, 353)

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The intent to speed was by no means restricted to hot-rodders, as film producers, distributors, and exhibitors also exploited hot rod culture with calculated premeditation, tempting audiences with the promise of irresistible sensation. A reporter for *Variety* defined the still novel hot rod movie for his readers: ‘These are low-budget films based on controversial and timely subjects that make newspaper headlines. In the main, these pictures appeal to “uncontrolled” juveniles and “undesirables”’ (Hollinger 1956, 20). Combining lawlessness and the reckless pursuit of speed, hot rod culture was new, timely, youthful, and essentially thrilling. It was therefore apparently ripe for movie exploitation.

This paper tracks the emergence, consolidation, and dissolution of the short cycle of hot rod movies that was exhibited from 1956 to 1958 – a run of films with such interchangeable titles as *Dragstrip Riot*, *Dragstrip Girl*, *Hot Car Girl*, *Hot Rod Girl*, *Hot Rod Rumble*, *Hot Rod Gang*, *Hot Cars*, and *The Hot Angel*. My aim is to explore this cycle’s connection to topical issues and through this analysis show how current concerns and timely subjects were exploited by the film industry. Topicality, as film historian Gregory Waller has noted,

is elusive and conjectural, but it cannot be ignored, especially when it comes to films designed for the commercial marketplace, where the topical is a significant attraction, a source of pleasure and a reminder of the ties that link the screen to the discourses that circulate in and comprise the public sphere. (Waller 2006, 65)

The following pages consider the media frenzy that whirled around the subculture of hot-rodding, where it was generally portrayed as an illicit, anti-social, and dangerous activity. Through isolated films on the topic and as a motif in films that otherwise have little interest in the subject, I follow the cycle’s emergence. I examine the sensationalist marketing strategies used to promote the films, which I connect to the contemporary expansion in the number of drive-in theatres. I also account for the extraordinary mismatch between the thrills promised in the sales pitch for these films and the dull action they actually provide. While showing intent to speed, few examples of the cycle actually delivered on the promise to thrill. Finally, I consider questions of turnover and the speed of production that marked the cycle. What draws these areas of interest together is a series of questions about what made hot rods and hot rod culture *useful* to film producers and audiences.

Like rock ‘n’ roll, or the moral panics inspired by the consumption of comic books, gang culture, and general delinquency per se, hot-rodding was one of numerous teenage activities that attracted the attention of the media across the 1950s. The media frenzy inspired by the subculture was certainly a significant factor in film producers’ exploitation of the subject, but it cannot adequately explain why the cycle appeared in 1956–57 rather than earlier or later. The primary reason for the cycle’s formation, I argue, derives from changes in the contexts of film production, distribution, and notably, exhibition. The hot rod cycle is peculiarly tied to the rise in the number of drive-in cinemas, which hit critical mass in 1956–57, running parallel with the cycle’s peak years.

Attendance at drive-ins thereafter dropped, as did the production of hot rod films. The cycle was related to events in the public sphere, as it was to the exploitation of the box-office success of films such as *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), which in turn were formed by those events – but these were contributory rather than causal factors. The exceptional shifts in exhibition practice were responsible for channelling into a discernible cycle what would otherwise have proved to be a series of disconnected cinematic instances of the exploitation of the hot rods as a timely topic. Drive-ins provided the essential catalyst for the formation of the cycle, maximizing and shaping its exploitable potential for film producers and distributors.

### Media frenzy and hot rod subculture

In a 1950 *Saturday Evening Post* article, a father describes the pleasures and pitfalls of his son's hot rod enthusiasm. It is a wholly positive depiction that emphasizes the skills learnt and the work involved in getting a car ready to race. The father's 'peaceful evenings ended when his son bought a beat-up jalopy. The neighborhood gang emptied the icebox, filled the night with hot music – and turned the old heap into one of those souped-up speedsters they call hot rods' (Pierce 1950, 28). The article locates hot-rodding as a legitimate and peculiarly American pursuit, a regulated activity that the police regarded as a 'healthy release for the teen-age "speed urge"' (28). Thus, when the son's hot rod is built it will run on a purpose-built racetrack, not on local streets. This upbeat view of hot-rodding was far from typical of contemporary media coverage, which generally characterized it as a lawless activity that recklessly endangered not only the enthusiast but also other road users. The hot rod, like rock 'n' roll, was an assault on those with more mature or refined sensibilities, a very visible (and aural) symptom of youth run wild.

An example of the sensational documenting of hot rod culture was published four years earlier, in 1946, in the same magazine, which ran a short fiction piece detailing the battles between the police and 'those wild kids with their souped-up cars' (White 1946, 15). Even more dramatically, in 1949 *Life* magazine had published 'The "Hot-Rod" Problem – Teen-Agers Organize to Experiment with Mechanized Suicide'. The photo-story 're-enacts' the stunts teenagers pulled in their customized jalopies, including a game of 'chicken' in which participants see who will be the first to grab the steering wheel as they hurtle along at speeds in excess of 60 mph. In another game, 'rotation', the driver, having reached 50–60 mph, opens his door and 'walks along the running board and gets into the back seat. Meanwhile friend at right takes the wheel and another in back gets into the front. This continues until everybody has had a turn or there is an accident' (*Life* 1949, 122–4). Ten years after its first story on the subculture, the *Saturday Evening Post* was still publishing tales on the perils of hot-rodding: 'They were looking for excitement, and if they hurt someone, so what?' ran the tag line for '52 Miles to Terror' (Gaby 1956, 80).<sup>1</sup> The magazines' coverage, which

documented and explained the phenomenon while also exploiting its more sensational aspects, was echoed in news items. A 1958 article in *Time*, for example, reported that:

Main Street in tiny Boyd, Texas (pop. 550) is two-lane, string-straight, smooth-paved – and ideal as a drag strip for the rambunctious local hot-rodders, who went roaring through town at night, leaving empty beer cans and angry citizens in their wild wake. (*Time* 1958, n.p.)<sup>2</sup>

Stories such as these, which identify hot-rodding as a delinquent pursuit rather than a legitimate leisure activity, dominated reportage of the topic.

Although there is a long history of car customization to improve the performance of factory-built automobiles, hot rods were essentially a post-war phenomenon.<sup>3</sup> According to H.R. Moorhouse, a cultural historian of hot rods, the technical and aesthetic modification of Detroit's products in this period created a culture with 'definite values, interests, a special vocabulary and a variety of formal and informal institutions: used car lots, races, clubs, speedshops, roads, magazines, local and national associations' (1991, 17). The media readily exploited this culture, but the hot rod fraternity also capitalized on the growth of interest in its activities. *Hot Rod* magazine, produced by enthusiasts, was first published in January 1948, with a print run of 5000 copies. Circulation rose to 40,000 copies by issue 10 (36–7). Having helped form the National Hot Rod Association (NHRA), by September 1952 the magazine claimed 15,000 members, and two years later bragged of there being over 2700 hot rod clubs in America (48). By 1956 *Hot Rod* was the largest selling automobile magazine in the country, with a circulation of around 500,000 and a readership of four times that amount (73). The magazine had to contend with a significant number of competing titles, as well as spin-offs in mass-market fiction, both paperback originals and comic books (85–6).<sup>4</sup> Hot rod themed pinball machines and popular music also exploited the subculture throughout the 1950s.<sup>5</sup>

The synergy between the various media exploitations of the phenomenon is caught in a 1952 news item from *Time* magazine:

Nobody knows how many hot-rod racing fans there are in the U.S., but Robert ('Pete') Petersen of Los Angeles knows their lingo. At 25, he has already made a small fortune publishing *Hot Rod* and other 'hogbear' (real thing) magazines for them. Early last fall Publisher Petersen and his top staff cartoonist, Tom Medley, 31, got an idea: since rodders seem to like their music as hot as their hopped-up engines, why not give them some with real 'lowdown, George-gone-all-the-way' hot-rod lyrics? (*Time* 1952)

The idea soon materialized as a couple of discs released in 1952, 'Saturday Night Drag Race' (parts 1 and 2) and 'Hot Rod Harry (The Coolest Cat in Town)' backed with 'Hot Rod Cowboy', recorded by jazz clarinettist Joe Darensbourg and released on the independent label Hot Rod/Colossal. The hot rod theme added novelty to what are otherwise fairly run-of-the-mill rhythm and blues numbers. While hot rod culture constituted a theme in popular music genres across the 1950s, these country, rockabilly, doo-wop, and rhythm and blues songs

were not marketed as belonging to a distinct cycle.<sup>6</sup> A self-identified cycle of hot rod music occurred much later, between 1961 and 1965. These hot rod discs – Ronnie and the Daytonas’ ‘Bucket T’, for example – appeared as part of the wider music industry exploitation of West Coast car and beach culture, such as The Rip Chords’ ‘Hey Little Cobra’ and The Hondells’ ‘Little Honda’. The musicians and producers (Gary Usher, Terry Melcher, Bruce Johnston, et al.) who were responsible for surf music were also behind the cycle of discs with hot rod/car themes. In this cycle, hot rods were part of a leisure culture and had become as mainstream as surfing and as unthreatening as beach party movies (Chidester and Priore 2008).

Hot rod subculture was sufficiently in the public eye in 1950 for it to be analysed in a leading scholarly journal and, by the end of the decade, was firmly established as both leisure pursuit and professional activity, with all the attendant regulations, associations, organizations, and commercial agents necessary to support and exploit its popularity (Balsley 1950, 353–8; Moorhouse 1991, 122–43). Tom Wolfe defined the subculture in his celebrated 1964 essay for *Esquire*, ‘There Goes [Varoom! Varoom!] that Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby’ (Wolfe 1981, 67–90). And avant-garde filmmaker Kenneth Anger gave it a camp twist in *Kustom Kar Kommandos* (1965), which featured a hot-rodder in skin-tight jeans and shirt polishing his rod with a large powder puff. Some hot-rodders still ran illegal road races, as fictionalized in *Two-Lane Blacktop* (1971), but the mainstream media showed little interest in these activities. By the early 1970s, the image of hot-rodding as an outlaw culture was almost wholly seen as a nostalgic turn, particularly after the box-office success of *American Graffiti* (1973).

### The emergence of a hot rod movie cycle

As a high-profile media phenomenon with obvious exploitation angles – and as a subculture based on the West Coast, which offered easy access to customized cars – hot-rodding inspired film productions early on, with *The Devil on Wheels* (1947) and *Hot Rod* (1950), produced by low-budget specialists PRC and Monogram, respectively. *Variety* reported that *Devil* was made to profit from ‘the current hot-rod car craze among juv America which is causing so many thousands of deaths annually ... the film accomplishes its goal – namely, to make audiences conscious of the peril of such hopped up autos’ (*Daily Variety* 1947, n.p.). Hot rods also featured in other films, such as the Mickey Rooney vehicle *The Big Wheel* (1949), which included them as part of its depiction of the culture of automobile racing. Rooney progresses from driving self-built hot rods to appearing as a professional driver at the Indie 500. These were all self-conscious attempts to cash in on the automobile customization fad. More peripheral use of hot rods can be seen in *The Reckless Moment* (1949), *The Lawless* aka *The Dividing Line* (1950), *Appointment With Danger* (1951), *Crime Wave* aka *The City is Dark* (1954), *Tiger in the Sky* aka *The McConnell Story* (1955), and

*Blackboard Jungle* (1955). Hot rods appear in these films because they have use value, aiding story development and adding to their topical attractions by providing what American International Pictures (AIP) producer James H. Nicholson describes as a film's 'modern expression' (Davis, 2012, 108).

The use of hot rods in such films helps to concentrate viewers' attention on issues relating to crime, class, and youth, which are linked to a reckless pursuit of speed-enhanced thrills, as well as locating these factors within the sphere of the topical. In *Appointment With Danger* a speeding hot rod distracts a motorcycle cop just as he is about to confront two murderers disposing of a body. In *The Lawless*, the hot rods are unfinished, driven by teenage Latinos whose lack of wherewithal is contrasted with the Anglos' gleaming new convertibles. The Latinos' hot rod is only one step up from the clunker the young son is seen working on in the family yard throughout *The Reckless Moment*. *Crime Wave* features a beautiful chrome and lacquered hot rod, which is used to underscore the protagonist's skills as a mechanic and one-time getaway driver. *Tiger in the Sky* uses a hot rod to emphasize the unruliness of the protagonist, who later realizes and legitimizes his need for speed as a jet pilot. A hot rod appears early in *Blackboard Jungle*, accentuating the film's topic of juvenile delinquency as it careers dangerously round a corner in a street race.<sup>7</sup>

The 1950 film *Hot Rod* deployed a trope that can be found in just about all the automobile-centric films that followed: the tussle between illegal drag racing on public highways and its containment within an officially sanctioned and organized club. Like much of the teenpix trend, hot rod movies dealt with (self) policing and regulation of leisure activity. Teenpic historian Thomas Doherty provides a capsule description of the cycle's formula:

The narrative of the dragstrip cycle . . . both validates and domesticates a controversial teenage activity. A . . . mediating agent, often a sympathetic cop, is the buffer between worry-wart town elders and grease monkey kids. Complicating matters is a chicken race for honor and/or an accidental automotive death, often instigated by a speed-crazy female hellcat. Inevitably resolution means the containment of teenage energies within a limited, supervised arena. (Doherty 1988, 110)

More than just another example of Hollywood's simultaneous exploitation and neutering of teenage culture, this narrative of regulation was also central to the rhetoric employed by hot rod journals and associations. Moorhouse reports that the NHRA was always keen to collaborate with the Highway Patrol and other agencies:

It liked to proclaim that its 'safety program' was 'endorsed by law enforcement agencies' and the good cop, the hot rodding cop, became a regular feature of hot rod magazines and in hot rod novels in which the hero was weaned away from wild street racing, usually after the death of many teenage friends, to a steadier world of rodeos, reliability runs and organised drag strips. (Moorhouse 1991, 57)

For those involved in organizing and directly exploiting the sport, the economic imperative behind this pursuit of safety and respectability is self-evident, but it was the reckless stunts hot-rodders performed on public highways that primarily attracted the purveyors of entertainment to the topic. Filmmakers took up a dual

role, setting themselves up as responsible guardians and as shameless exploiters of teenage fads and customs (Moorhouse 1991, 85).

Neither *The Devil on Wheels* nor *Hot Rod* had enough impact on producers or audiences to help initiate a cycle, and further productions remained isolated until interest in the topic of hot rods and speed-addicted juveniles was ignited, it has been said, with the 1955 release of *Rebel Without a Cause* and James Dean's death in a car crash. Doherty argues that *Rebel's* chicken scene, with Jim Stark (Dean) and Buzz Gunderson (Corey Allen) racing each other toward a cliff edge,

inspired a souped-up series of teenage drag racing films . . . American International Pictures set the pace for automotive exploitation, but all the usual suppliers of low-budget programmers launched vehicular vehicles in the spirit of *Rebel's* dramatic chicken run and Dean's poetic end. (Doherty 1988, 108)

Given all the media excitement around teenagers and hot rods, *Rebel*, however, was following a trend as much as setting one. The cycle proper did not gain traction until well over a year after *Rebel's* October 1955 New York premier, which does not suggest a direct correlation between it and that film's box-office success.

### Consolidation of the hot rod cycle

The hot rod cycle began with the AIP distributed *Hot Rod Girl*, released in July 1956, with Lori Nelson as the girl of the title and Chuck Connors as the good cop. A month later United Artists began distribution of *Hot Cars* and in April 1957 AIP released the Golden Gate production *Dragstrip Girl*. Nacirema Productions, responsible for *Hot Rod Girl*, had the follow-up, *Hot Rod Rumble*, distributed by Allied Artists in May. Howco International began distribution of Marquette Productions' *Teen Age Thunder* in September. A month later, AIP released a further Golden Gate production, *The Motorcycle Gang*, a virtual remake of *Dragstrip Girl* that swapped hot rods for motorbikes. Cast and crew for both movies were much the same, as were the Griffith Park locations for the race scenes. In 1958, AIP distributed both the Trans-World production *Dragstrip Riot* (in May) and their own production *Hot Rod Gang* (in August). That same month, Allied Artists released *Hot Car Girl*, and at the end of the year Paramount distributed *The Hot Angel*, produced by Paragon Productions in the late summer of the previous year. The fad for the juvenile-delinquent-speed-crazy-automobile-movie faded by the middle of the following year. The cycle slowed down to a crawl in 1959 with AIP's *Ghost of Dragstrip Hollow* in July, before dying a death with the Filmgroup's *The Wild Ride* in June 1960 and the ultra-low budget Arch Hall production *The Choppers* (released November 1961 but produced two years earlier). Running alongside the hot rod cycle were other car-centric films produced by the same set of companies, such as *The Fast and the Furious* (1954), *Running Wild* (1955), *Party Crashers* (1958), and sports car dramas such as *Joy Ride*, *Young and Wild*, both 1958, and *Roadracers*, *Daddy-O*, *Speed Crazy* all 1959. The



hot rod was also a regularly used prop throughout the juvenile delinquency trend and featured, for example, in *The Delinquents* (1957), *High School Confidential* and *Live Fast, Die Young* (both 1958). This glut of youth-centric films had intent to speed and the promise of sensations and thrills-a-plenty.

For the most part these films were the product of new independent companies that exploited the gap in the market left by the major studios, which were abandoning the production of genre films or programmes to concentrate their resources on fewer, more expensive features (see Davis 2012). The lack of films designed for double billing was partly filled by the move of distributors (and a few exhibitors) into production. In his study of horror films and the movie business of the 1950s and 1960s, Kevin Heffernan highlights the difficulties faced by independent exhibitors who were starved of product in the post-studio era. He notes that production dropped from '479 features in 1940 to 379 in 1950 to 271 in 1955, finally reaching an all-time low of 224 in 1959' (Heffernan 2004, 65). The shortage of product was compounded by falling attendance and by the recognition that the teenager was the primary habitual cinemagoer in neighbourhood, second, and subsequent run theatres. As film economist John Sedgwick writes: 'With the decline in attendances the proportion of young people in the audience increased, so that by 1957 three-quarter of audiences were under thirty and half under twenty years of age' (2005, 192). Film production and marketing strategies made strenuous efforts to cultivate and retain this audience, utilizing sensationalist advertising as a key ploy.

The films and the advertising both depended on a schizophrenic conception of the teenager as not only a valued consumer but also a figure to be held in some dread. Heffernan writes:

These two trends, the courting of the teenage dollar and America's fear of its own children, would have an incalculable and irreversible effect on the horror film as the figure of the monstrous adolescent and the demonic child became staples of the genre ... (Heffernan 2004, 67)

This is true not only of the horror film but also of other films within the juvenile delinquency trend, especially the hot rod pix. Dispensing with subtlety or concealed coercion, marketing to juveniles exemplifies a strategy that one industry insider described as 'pure punch, with no dilution' – a policy encouraged by the lack of star names, who would ordinarily provide the advertisement's focus (89). This kind of advertising addressed what Heffernan defines as the carnival-like attractions of low-budget films, horror or otherwise. In explaining the lure, he quotes AIP producer Herman Cohen:

I always think of the title first. The story comes last. After the title come the advertising ideas – the gimmick, the illustrations, for these are what get the kids into the theatre. Then comes the story – and every drop of blood and graveyard shudder must be as advertised. (70)

In reality, however, the films were seldom as advertised.

### **A lust for speed: promoting and exhibiting hot rod movies**

Movie sensations were sold in the inimical style of the carnival barker. The hot rod movie promised the spectacle of 'Revved-up youth on a thrill rampage', as the ad copy for *Teen Age Thunder* boldly declared. The film was promoted via an image of an accelerating culture, with young people, untamed and running wild, in a parade of thrilling scenes. Posters for the double-billed *Dragstrip Riot* and *Cool and the Crazy* presented the seductive entreaty of a 'TWIN ROCK 'N RIOT SHOW!' offering the vicarious thrills of witnessing 'Murder at 120 miles per hour!' and 'Seven savage punks on a weekend binge of violence!' 'See Hot Rods Vs Motorcycles', screamed the ad copy. 'See The "Train Drag." See The "Beach Party Rumble"' (McGee and Robertson 1982, 56). The petition is to 'see' – to bear witness to violent scenes, to give oneself over to sensation, to be alive to thrilling situations. The promotion of the double bill, however, exceeds what the films are able to deliver. The discrepancy between the marketing and the films' actual attractions is particularly transparent in the selling of *I Was a Teenage Werewolf* – 'The Most Amazing Picture of Our Time!' – and *Dragstrip Girl* – 'Car Crazy! Boy Crazy! That was Dragstrip Girl' which, in combination, were sold as 'This is it! The Double Thrill Sensation of the Century!' In such instances, the marketing hyperbole becomes as much a part of the attraction as the film itself.

Just as the lurid covers of pulp magazines and paperbacks promised all sorts of wonders, thrills, sensations, and curiosities but mostly provided a seductive covering for prosaic and formulaic stories, the hot rod films similarly failed to deliver on the sensational claims of their posters. The road races limp along Los Angeles' suburban streets, violence is innocuous, and suspense and thrills are in short supply. Contrary to the excesses of the marketing hype, the films are remarkably reticent in detailing the pleasures and dangers of teenage escapades. They also counterbalance any perceived acts of transgression by emphasizing the punitive measures sanctioned by a sympathetic figure of authority.

The discrepancy between the sensational promise of the advertising and the rather affectless films needs, however, further clarification. As film theorist Peter Wollen shows, cinematic thrills often rely on representations of speed, which 'enables us to enter exposed and unfamiliar situations, far removed from the zones of safety and normality' (2002, 265). For the cinematic representation of speed to be thrilling, Wollen insists, it must be connected to various forms of struggle or contest – such as a race or chase sequence. However, as we can see from the hot rod movies, the mere presence of such narrative elements is not sufficient to render a film exhilarating. There are plenty of races and chase sequences in these films but few, if any, could be judged 'thrilling'. Using Hitchcock movies as his example, Wollen suggests that the cinema audience does more than merely witness a thrilling event, as in the theatre or the circus, but is invited to participate vicariously in the action. The 'effective experience of participation', as Wollen puts it, is achieved by formal means, such as the

provision of multiple viewpoints on (and within) the action, as well as a rhythmic coordination of shots to build excitement. Hitchcock himself illustrated this process by evoking a scene from *Hell's Angels* (1930) in which a pilot crashes into a Zeppelin:

We see his face – grim, tense, even horror-stricken – as his plane swoops down. Then we are transferred to the pilot's seat, and it is we who are hurtling to death at ninety miles an hour; and at the moment of impact – and blackout – a palpable shuddering runs through the audience. That is good cinema. (as quoted in Wollen 2002, 266)

Two complementary but differently rendered 'chicken' scenes from *Rebel Without a Cause* and *Dragstrip Riot* provide a clear indication of how vital such cinematic articulation is to realizing the dramatic potential of a thrilling event. In *Rebel*, the leader of a teenage gang dares a newcomer to a car race in which a cliff edge forms the finishing line. The first one to bailout will be the chicken. In *Dragstrip*, two rivals for a girl's attention dare each other to perform a train drag. They must park their cars across the railroad tracks and the first one to pull away as a train bears down on them will be the chicken. Two similar scenarios, but articulated in distinct ways.

*Rebel* sets up its chicken scene by showing what will befall the driver who does not escape in time. A carefully elaborated series of shots provide the respective viewpoints of Buzz, Jim, and Judy (Corey Allen, James Dean, and Natalie Wood), as well as establishing the great drop between the cliff edge and the sea and rocks below. The chicken scenario in *Dragstrip* does not provide an equivalent visualization of the scene, and presents the event in a blunt and prosaic manner. The threat of imminent death is primarily communicated to the film's audience through dialogue; its visual representation impoverished and limited. Few resources are given over to establishing the stunt's location and the spatial coordinates, particularly those that connect witnesses to the unfolding event with the preparations undertaken by the two drivers. A crowd of teenagers gather to watch the stunt in *Rebel*, surrogates for the cinema audience, but in *Dragstrip* there are only two spectators – acting like seconds in a duel – who are used to provide a cursory visual reaction to the unfolding events. In *Rebel* the large audience, gathered to witness the stunt, help to generate a sense of expectation, excitement, and fear.

In *Dragstrip* the set-up involves cutting back and forth between the drivers readying their cars on the railroad track and their friends back at a diner, a scenario that takes up less than two minutes of screen time. Diegetic time is indicated by shots of a clock on the diner wall. As the minute hand moves toward 7 o'clock the scene shifts back to the track as the locomotive rushes toward a collision with one or both of the cars. The rising volume of the cars' revving engines is mixed in with the train's blaring horn, and the increasing size of its headlights indicates proximity to the potential moment of impact. Just as the crash appears to be imminent one boy pulls his car off the track to the left, the other waits a moment longer and pulls to the right. Before we know if that car has

safely cleared the line, there is a cut to the front of the locomotive and then a quick cut to a shot from below that shows it moving past the camera. The scene then shifts to the diner. The two witnesses to the escapade arrive and tell the expectant teenagers (and the film's audience) what has happened. Suspense, of a limited kind, is created as they momentarily withhold their news, but is then quickly dissipated as they reveal that both drivers escaped unharmed.

The editing strategy of the sequence presents a series of alternating close-ups of the two drivers (the lights of the locomotive reflecting off their faces) and cross-cuts back to the diner. Information is withheld from the cinema audience, as it is for the waiting friends in the diner, so that suspense hangs on whether or not one of the drivers has been killed – a question that is very rapidly answered. In contrast, *Rebel* stays with the events as they unfold and shows the tragic consequences of the stunt. Whatever tension there is in *Dragstrip* is built up by cutting between the drivers, the diner (and wall clock), and the locomotive. In *Rebel* it is ratcheted-up from the moment Judy stands arms aloft in the glare of the car headlights, acting as a master of ceremonies. The action is held in suspended animation until Judy leaps into the air and brings down her arms. As the cars race past her toward the cliff edge, she spins around, racing after them, her skirt blooming up behind her. Side on, we see both cars with Buzz's just in the lead, then a cut to the front, the cars lurching toward the camera. There follows a series of alternating shots of Buzz and Jim, and a cutaway to Jim's devotee, Plato (Sal Mineo), with his eyes clamped tight and fingers crossed. The film then cuts back to the alternating shots of the drivers, and the revelation that Buzz's sleeve is snagged in the door handle. Jim bails, but Buzz goes over the top. Before the car explodes in a ball of fire on the rocks below, the film offers a shot that is angled from the rear seat of the car, looking over Buzz's shoulder. It is followed by a reverse shot of Buzz's agonized face, his scream carrying over to the following long shot of the two cars falling. The sequence adheres to Hitchcock's blueprint for achieving effective audience participation in a film's action, with the audience granted intimate proximity as Buzz rides to his death.

*Dragstrip Riot*'s editing, on the other hand, rarely puts the audience 'into' the action, so that we seldom share the participants' point of view. Arguably, this is a formal ploy that enables a thrilling situation to be evoked but not enacted. The strategy, if it is such, is a tease. The suggestion is that the filmmakers are tantalizing their audience with the promise of thrills, but withholding that which is most desired. The strategy guards against censorship, ensuring that potentially transgressive aspects of the film are alluded to but not shown. The movie is thus rendered as a harmless and uncontroversial entertainment. The film's lack of affect, however, was more certainly a consequence of the fact that the filmmakers did not have the resources to produce the kind of finely honed cinematic rendering of danger, suspense, and thrills that was achieved in *Rebel*. The rapid speed and short turnaround time of *Dragstrip*'s production militated against an effective scenario of speeding. Where *Rebel*'s careful orchestration of the

chicken scene crafts a dramatic and interactive experience, *Dragstrip* makes only a minimal gesture toward such a dynamic.

Whatever the filmmakers' intentions and budget limitations, the unresolved tension between the sensational promise of the marketing and the more sedentary and pedestrian attributes of the films needs to be placed within the context of the movie's exhibition, where the car culture on the screen mirrored the car culture of the drive-in audience. In *The Delinquents*, for example, teenage gang members ride around in cars, rumble in a drive-in theatre, and hang out at a drive-in restaurant. Though drive-in movie theatres had been around since 1933, they were essentially a post-war phenomenon. There were 25 drive-ins in 1945, 800 three years later, a further 1200 were built in the next two years, and there were 4000 in 1956. The venues' capacity and their audiences, as Richard Maltby notes, 'more than made up for the number of seats lost through other closures' (2003, 164). The major studios, however, systematically refused drive-ins first run releases, which was a major factor in why AIP and other independent producers were able to become such prodigious suppliers for this market.

The drive-ins were frequently demonized in the same terms as the teenpix designed to play in such arenas. Described by *Variety* as the 'stepchild' of exhibition circuits, their location, audience, and film fare marked such outdoor theatres with the taint of the marginal and the illicit (*Variety*, 1950a, 1). Similarly, *The Hollywood Reporter* described *The Delinquents* (Robert Altman's debut) as a 'sordid and depressing "study" of what is commonly called juvenile delinquency, although depravity would be a more accurate designation in this case' (1957, 3). Film historian Mary Morley Cohen notes that the drive-ins were blamed for fostering juvenile delinquency and had a reputation for being 'passion pits', but they also appealed to an audience 'forgotten' by covered theatres (1994, 475). 'To the amazement of even the drive-in theatre owners, in came a type of patronage rarely seen at indoor theatres', writes a trade reporter in 1950, 'the physically handicapped, invalids, convalescents, the aged, deaf people, expectant mothers, parents with infants and small children – whole families, dressed as they pleased in the privacy and comfort of their domain on wheels' (478). While drive-ins were disreputable in their appeal to juveniles, the marginal, and the infirm, they were also accused of being a danger to non-users. *Variety* reported that drive-ins could prove a traffic hazard; as drivers on the highways that passed them often slowed down to gawp at the illuminated screens (*Variety*, 1950b, 1). These distracted drivers on the highway mirrored the distracted viewer in the drive-in who, apart from the film, had many calls on his or her attention. With all the attractions on offer – playgrounds for children, shopping, eating, tournaments, contests, parades, and laundrettes – the drive-in was more akin to an amusement park than a cinema.

The drive-in's unique attraction was it offered a part-public part-private experience that had the film as its main, though not sole draw. Just as the cry of the fairground barker promised intensely thrilling spectacles that the show could never adequately deliver, the marketing of these films similarly promised the

impossible. The carnival atmosphere of the drive-in and the rapid turnover of movies in the cycle, which were often double-billed for double impact, served to compensate for the hot rod movie's failure to measure up to its marketing hype. The pace at which the hot rod cycle burnt itself out and consumed all the various permutations on 'hot', 'car', and 'gang' (*Hot Car Girl* had the alternative titles *Gang Girl*, *Hot Rod Girl*, and *Hot Rod Queen*) was a remarkable act of an accelerated culture. The cycle expended minor variations with giddy velocity while holding true to a formula. This unfolding of slight modulations, or the promotion of regular novelties, is particularly apparent in the posters for four films in the cycle, *Dragstrip Girl*, *Hot Rod Gang*, *Dragstrip Riot*, and *Hot Rod Rumble* (see Figures 1–4).

All four posters present sensational scenes of speeding hot rods, alongside highly sexualized images of women and of young men in violent situations. Red and yellow, hot colours, predominant. The poster for *Dragstrip Girl* is split into four panels. The lowest panel carries the credits; the panel above holds the film's title, the panel above that has an illustration of a youth stepping between two speeding hot rods. A girl and a boy are driving the cars; to their rear is a line of hot rods racing on a circular track. The top panel is the largest of the four. Under the text 'Car Crazy! Speed Crazy! Boy Crazy!' a teenager in black t-shirt, sporting sideburns and a quiff, holds a near prone and very buxom young lady in his arms. They are about to kiss. This insinuation of torrid desire suggests a sexual yearning that is unchecked and unfettered, like the careening hot rods straddled by the long-limbed youth. With its ostentatious flaunting of sensation, the poster promises a sexual ride that will match the helter-skelter thrills of speeding automobiles.

The poster for *Hot Rod Gang* is formed of three panels with a white central panel separating the credit bar and the main panel. The upper section carries the film's title over an image of a jiving teenage girl. With her head flung back, her mouth agape, and a bullet shaped bra straining her sweater to its outer limits, she offers a spectacle of unbridled ecstasy. The bearded singer and ducktailed guitarist who occupy the bottom right-hand side of the panel suggest the source of her rapture. Ripping across the top and central panels, and heading in a diagonal toward the bottom left-hand corner, is an illustration of two speeding hot rods. In the leading car, a girl in a yellow sweater stands on the passenger side, with one hand holding the windscreen and the other held high. She echoes the jiving girl's ecstasy. Pulling up hard behind her is a yellow hot rod whose male passenger is likewise out of his seat, though he is leaning forward and waving a fist. The poster's address is importunate, and no less subtle than that used in *Dragstrip Girl*. 'Crazy Kids ... Living to a Wild Rock 'N Roll Beat!' runs the tag line.

*Hot Rod Rumble* has a credit bar over the main illustration. Beneath the title, two cars have crashed together, their front wheels spinning high above the road. Towering over the automobiles is a strawberry blonde, her torso contorted so that she is twisting toward the viewer, providing both a sidelong glance at her chest and a view of her backside. She wears a tight-fitting white sweater, with a leather



Figure 1. *Dragstrip Girl* (A Golden State Production, 1957).

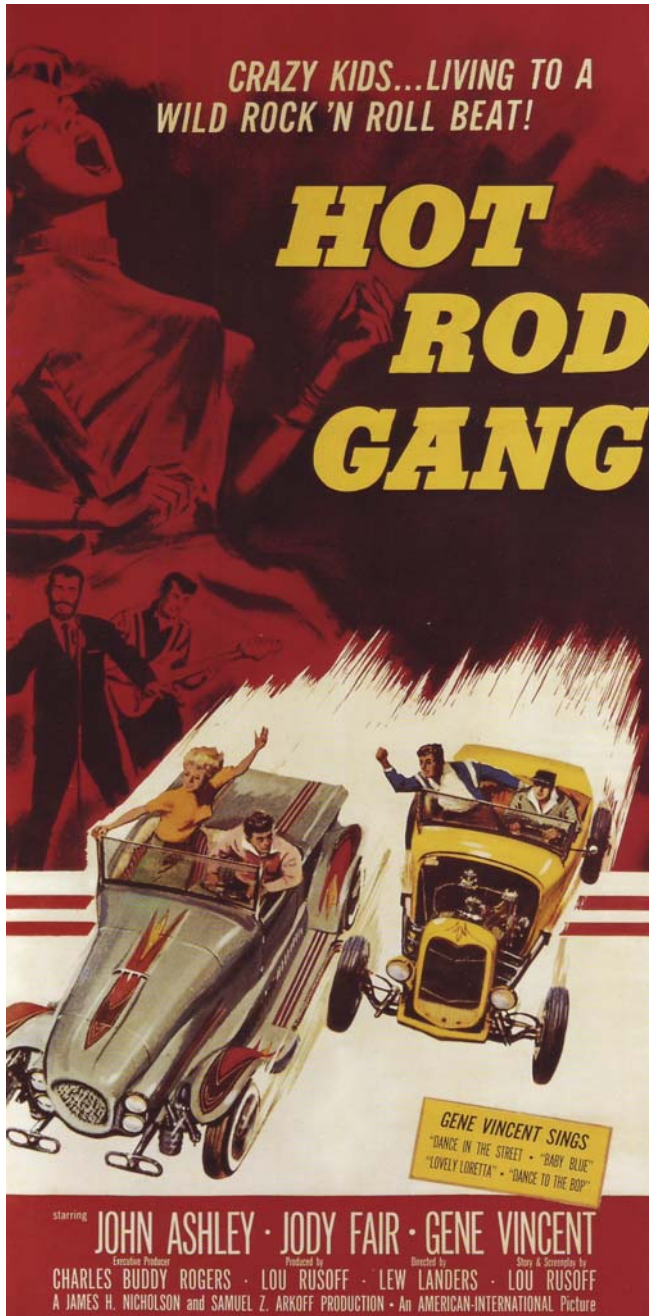


Figure 2. *Hot Rod Gang* (Indio Productions, 1958).



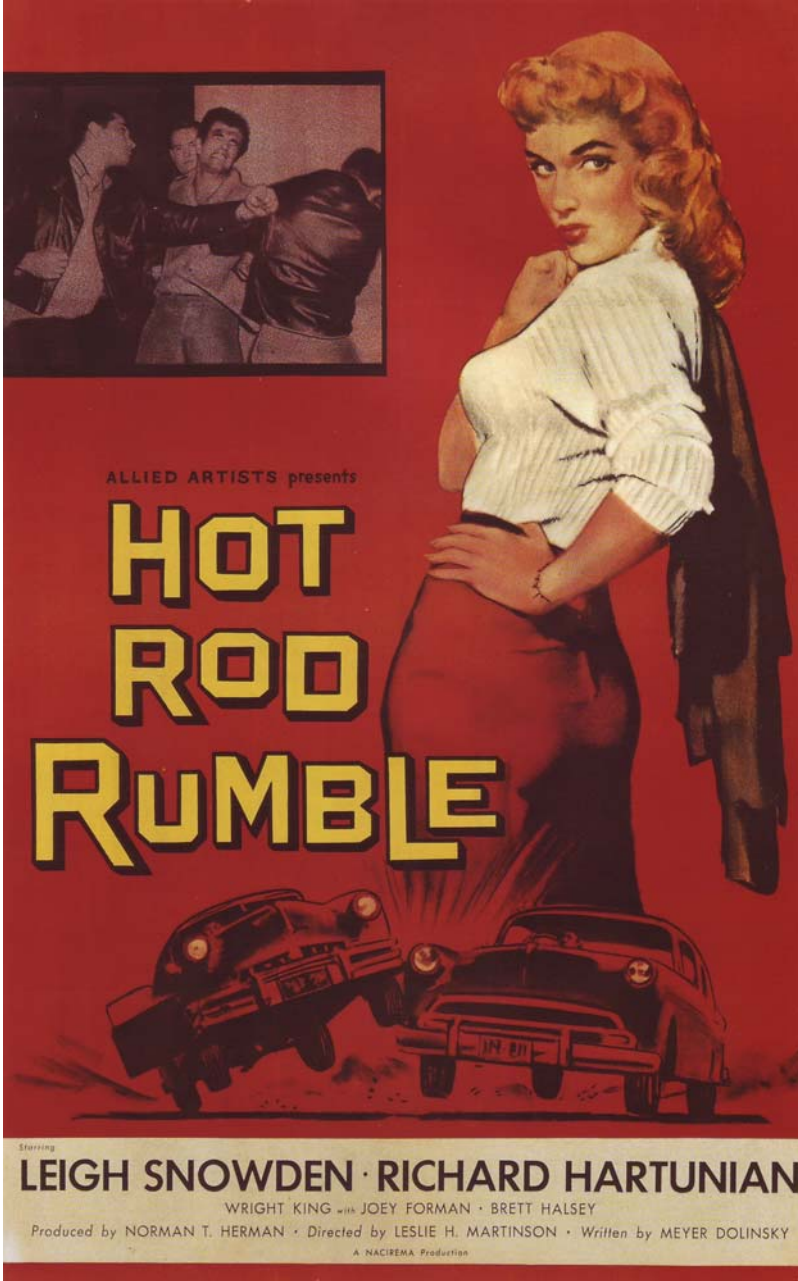


Figure 3. *Hot Rod Rumble* (A Nacirema Production, 1957).



Figure 4. *Dragstrip Riot* (Trans World Productions, 1958).

jacket draped over her shoulder. Her chin rests on her left shoulder as she looks seductively to the viewer's right. In line with her chest and head is a photographic insert with a scene from the movie of leather-jacketed youths in a punch up. There is no tagline, but the sexual frenzy that is evoked by the images of male violence, female pulchritude, and runaway automobiles does not require textual explication.

Text, however, does help to amplify a poster's message: 'MURDER ... At 120 Miles Per Hour!!' runs the tagline for *Dragstrip Riot*, another three-panel poster, which depicts a motorcyclist wielding a monkey wrench as he races alongside a sports car. As their vehicles hurtle forward, two boys are depicted in a seemingly mortal struggle. A girl in the passenger seat of the car is witness to this madness. She is wearing a red jacket, which visually rhymes with the red Triumph ridden by the boy intent on striking the driver of the car she is in. The car and bike break out of the panel, their wheels crossing into the title bar. The title's text is red and yellow, with 'RIOT' at twice the font size of 'DRAGSTRIP'. As precise as the illustration is in its rendering of facets – for example, the pinstriping around the car's headlight and the presentation of the cyclist's iconic wardrobe of leather jacket, somewhat incongruously matched with chinos, white socks, and penny loafers – the overall impression is of delirium, disorientation, a loss of bearing, and a race to the other side of rationality – the poster summoning up a phantasmagoria of transgressive teenage culture.

The posters all work on a gendered demarcation of the promised thrills, articulating a link between the curved bodies of women and cars. The women function as props for the speed thrills offered to the young men, but they are not in themselves the subjects of such transgressive fantasies. The acts of transgression are conservatively codified, both in generic and gendered terms – with men acting out violent impulses in front of women. The posters address a male audience and are symptomatic of a shift from the studio era, when films were geared toward a female audience, to the post-studio era, when young men became the principal target of film producers. This shift has been identified as the 'Peter Pan Syndrome', a term used by an AIP executive in 1968 who, to quote Richard Maltby, 'proposed that younger children would watch anything older children would watch, and girls would watch anything boys would watch, but not vice versa. Therefore, "to catch your greatest audience you zero in on the 19-year-old male"' (2003, 22). In support of this observation, B-movie historian Blair Davis quotes from a 1969 issue of *Seventeen*, which reminded filmmakers 'the movie Teena wants to see is the movie her boyfriend takes her to see' (2012, 109).

### **The dissolution of the hot rod cycle**

In the same year that the hot rod cycle peaked, British pop artist Richard Hamilton re-imagined the conflation of the curves of a pinup model with automobile styling in his painting *Hommage à Chrysler Corporation* (1957). Hamilton's abstract, punning play on an advertising cliché is rich in its allusion to

consumer culture, highlighting the constructed nature of both the car and the pinup. A key theme in his work of the period was the idea of a popular culture that was resolutely defined through its topicality. The immediacy of the appeal of popular culture was part of its attraction for the artists and critics who formed the Independent Group (IG) that Hamilton belonged to, and which also included Lawrence Alloway, Rayner Banham, Eduardo Paolozzi, and John McHale. As theorized by the IG, popular culture was, in counterpoint to the fine arts, defined as transient and evanescent (Stanfield 2008, 179–93). Writing in 1959 McHale notes:

Almost as soon as a trend becomes recognizable, and can be labelled, the image series has become obsolete . . . in such a process, the mass media, where the only real content is change, classification is permanently tentative. Expendability is built in and so furnishes an initial criteria. Rapid turnover in iconography in any sector varies strictly according to acceptance, to success which is its own accelerator. (McHale 2011, 51)

McHale's observation on expendability as a defining aspect of popular culture can also be read across the cycle of hot rod movies that, with its intent to speed, had all the immediacy of the moment in which it appeared, drawing upon news headlines and moral panics, exploiting subcultural fads, filling a gap in the market vacated by the big studios, and taking advantage of the growth in new exhibition outlets – the drive-in. The expendable nature of the movies was part of their appeal and like seasonal fashion changes, the film cycle contains within it its own demise; it is dying in the very process of being born. In this context, the title of Universal Pictures' 1958 exploitation film *Live Fast, Die Young*, in which hot rods feature heavily, is especially apt.

In July 1961, the *New York Times* reported that the juvenile delinquency film cycle had come to an end: 'The disappearance of the inexpensively made pictures filled with youthful crime and sex has been the result of a campaign by the movie industry that begun in 1958' (Schumach 1961, 25). The paper cited as the principal reasons for its timely demise both the PCA's (Production Code Administration) move to demand that the ages of the protagonists be raised and the recognition that there had been a glut of such pictures in the market. This industry-led rationale for the cycle's termination also coincided with a more general falling off of interest in juvenile delinquency. This does not mean, however, that delinquency among the young decreased. The cultural historian James Gilbert notes that media reporting on the phenomenon peaked between 1953 and 1956 and thereafter dissipated, even though juvenile delinquency as a criminal problem actually increased after 1960. 'By then', he writes, 'the styles and behaviour of young people were less frequently denounced than they were emulated' (Gilbert 1986, 14). Gilbert's observation draws our attention to the fact that the exploitation of a particular social problem is not necessarily governed by the scale of its impact on the commonwealth, but is instead determined by other factors that have no particular relationship with the topical concern the media is representing. In the case of the cycle of hot rod movies, exploitation of the

subculture was formed and shaped by the developing exhibition needs of the drive-in. Production of this cycle peaked at the height of attendance at drive-ins in 1956–57 and then declined as patronage dropped thereafter, filmmakers only exploited the subculture when it had value to them that extended beyond its timeliness.

In 1956–58 the hot rod movie filled a need for a product that was no longer being provided by the big studios, a product that was now being supplied by independent distributors and exhibitors who were moving into film production to satisfy a gap in the market. The cycle appropriated the values, interests, vocabulary, and gestures of young Americans as it also played to that self same youth culture. Teenagers were now one of films' most habitual consumers, fickle in their tastes, easily distracted and with short attention spans. Within the context of the drive-in, the cycle's redundant repetition of motifs tied to automobile cultures and aimed at teenagers, alongside an acceptance of its own obsolescence and expendability, made it perfectly suitable or, more precisely, *useful* to producers and audiences alike.

As Waller noted at the start of this paper, it is difficult to account in general terms for topicality in films, but being responsive to the range of possibilities that govern the multiple ways that films are contingent on the topical (and are themselves emanations of the topical) ameliorates the problems historians face in explaining the life of films within the public sphere. By being attentive to a range of factors that can be evaluated and judged with due regard to the historical evidence and its varied contexts we can better understand a timely topic's *usefulness*, its value, for film producers, distributors, exhibitors, and audiences alike.

## Notes

1. The film rights to the story were bought by MGM who were looking for another juvenile delinquency feature to follow up on their success with *Blackboard Jungle*, as reported in the *Saturday Evening Post* (1956, 140).
2. For earlier examples of the journal's attempts to explain the phenomenon, see *Time* (1949, 1950).
3. An earlier film depiction of hot rods can be seen in *Wings* (William Wellman, 1927), which links youthful enthusiasm for car customization with flying.
4. In 1951, Charlton publishers issued the comic book *Hot Rods and Racing Cars*, a bi-monthly, which ran for at least 12 issues.
5. On hot rod themed pinball machines, see Krutnik in this issue.
6. This musical exploitation of hot rods was part a wider fascination with speed and automotive thrills – e.g. Jackie Brenston and Ike Turner's 'Rocket 88' (1951), The Medallions' 'Buick 59' (1954), 'Speedin' (1955), and '59 Volvo' (1959), The Cadillacs' 'Speedo' (1955), Bo Diddley's 'Cadillac' (1959), and, of course, Chuck Berry's 'Maybellene', 'No Money Down', and 'You Can't Catch Me' (all 1955).
7. Hot rods also feature in similar ways in the period's literature, for example, in Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* ([1957] 2000):

Two rides took me to Bakersfield, four hundred miles south. The first was the mad one, with a burly blond kid in a souped-up rod. 'See that toe?' he said as he

gunned the heap to eighty and passed everybody on the road. 'Look at it.' It was swathed in bandages. 'I just had it amputated this morning.' (72)

We were already almost out of America and yet definitely in it and in the middle of where it's maddest. Hot rods blew by. San Antonio, ah-haa! (247)

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