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Forging Divinity:
Warner Bros.' Role in the Creation of the James Dean Icon

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James Dean is an image known throughout the world. His icon has been a major influence on the construction of youth culture in America and elsewhere and has been a personal inspiration for countless teenagers, writers, directors, artists, etc. But no scholar has attempted to explain the origins of that icon, where it came from, or how it was created. In this thesis, I will seek to answer those very questions. In an investigation of the publicity material and advertisements surrounding James Dean and his films during the 1950s, I conclude that Warner Bros., a heretofore undocumented force in the construction of Dean as a star and icon, seems to have played a major role in the manufacturing of the Dean legend. Chapters One, Two, and Three will trace the rise of Dean's stardom through the late 1950s, analyzing specifically what Warner Bros. did to perpetuate the image of James Dean. And Chapter Five will take a closer look at the specific kind of image Warner's created for Dean and the broader implications that image has for society.

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Introduction

In his time, he was called “sophomoric,” “uncooperative,” “non-conformist,” “rude,” and a virtual “carbon copy of Brando.”¹ Now he is just the epitome of cool, the patron saint of American youth, and one of the most recognizable American icons. Posters of this long-lost 24-year-old man-boy, perpetually decked out in rebel wear—blue jeans, black boots, and, of course, that signature red windbreaker—still adorn the walls of teenagers the world over. His moody, sullen image is a kind of short hand for rebellious youth in all its coolness. And, of course, his name—James Dean—still manages to conjure up a whole host of ideas and emotions. Following his death on September 30, 1955, James Dean inexplicably became immortal, a person and an image forever ingrained into the American, and the world’s, consciousness.

Today, we take it for granted that Dean’s image is a standard staple of Americana. However, when one glances at the facts of his career, it suddenly becomes less logical and matter-of-fact that James Dean became such a ubiquitous image. At the time of his death, Dean had only acted in three feature films, only one of which, *East of Eden* (Warner Bros. 1954), had been released before his tragic fatal accident. James Dean was not at the top of his career when he died, as some have suggested, but rather only at the start of an auspicious beginning. And yet, the James Dean craze began immediately following his death and did not soon cease. Considering the extreme brevity of his career, how did anyone in 1955 know to mourn him? If the public had only seen Dean act

¹ Bosley Crowther, “The Screen: ‘East of Eden’ Has Debut,” *New York Times*, March 10, 1955; Don Allen, “James Dean: The Man Behind the Camera,” *Film Life*, September, 1955, 23; Laura Owen Miller and Anna Kendall, “James Dean: Smoldering Dynamite,” *Modern Screen*, June, 1955, 59; “New Faces: James Dean,” *Screen Album*, November, 1954, 42; Lawrence Boyd, “Danger, Hot Stuff!,” *Motion Picture*, July, 1955, 52.

in a single film, why the mass hysteria that followed his death? And why did the public not soon let go of him, allowing Dean to fade into oblivion? Why the craze? Why the legend and the icon?

The issue of Dean's icon status is more perplexing than most have acknowledged, and few scholars to date have genuinely attempted to explain the Dean phenomenon.

While many, many books have been written on the subject of James Dean, the academic literature on the subject of this young actor is quite sparse. Most books fall into one of two categories: coffee table books whose main purpose is to collect in one bound work every photo of James Dean in existence² and popular press biographies that tend to spend a disproportionate amount of their time attempting to deduce just how much of a homosexual Dean was.³ Academic articles have rarely ever been written on the man, and then they usually boil down to mere career retrospectives, such as the articles that ran in various journals upon the fiftieth anniversary of his death. And among all these books and articles, few offer any explanation of why or how James Dean became an icon.

Those who do make some vague attempt typically end up, like David Dalton in his 1974 biography, reducing it to a mysterious and inexplicable "phenomenon,"⁴ The author to best attempt a thorough explanation of the "why" and "how" behind the icon is Wes D. Gehring in his biography *James Dean: Rebel with a Cause*, one of the few works that could begin to be classified as scholarly. In his epilogue, Gehring lists nine potential

² George Perry, *James Dean* (New York: DK Publishing, 2005); Dennis Stock, *James Dean: Fifty Years Ago* (New York: HNW Books, 2005); Dennis Stock, *James Dean Revisited* (New York: Penguin Group, 1978); Lee Raskin and Tom Morgan, *James Dean: At Speed* (Phoenix: David Bull Publishing, 2005); Ron Cayen, *James Dean: An American Icon* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986).

³ Paul Alexander, *Boulevard of Broken Dreams: The Life, Times, and Legend of James Dean* (New York: Penguin Group, 1997); Val Holley, *James Dean: The Biography* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996); John Howlett, *James Dean: A Biography* (Medford: Plexus Publishing, Ltd., 2005); David Dalton, *James Dean: The Mutant King* (San Francisco: Straight Arrow Books, 1974).

⁴ David Dalton, *James Dean: The Mutant King* (San Francisco: Straight Arrow Books, 1974), 309-337.

reasons for the evolution of Dean to icon. However, several of these are speculative, only supported by weak or sparse evidence, or are wholly subjective, such as reason number one which is Dean's talent as an actor.⁵ While I would agree generally that James Dean was a fine acting talent, I would argue that that is not so important as audiences in 1955, and years after, believing he was gifted, a distinction that Gehring does not make or support. As well, in the making of an icon, talent often has very little to do with it, as can be seen by the myriad of acting and singing legends that quite arguably had little talent themselves. And for James Dean in particular, the status of his icon today has little to do with him as an actor (although people still recognize him as such) but with his status as a symbol of American youth. Gehring's other reasons for Dean's icon status, like his emphasis on Dean's acting abilities, do not adequately explain Dean as icon and tend to be more psychological than practical, and thus are mostly unsupportable by hard evidence, which is probably why his epilogue lacks a significant amount of references or support.⁶ And, in the end, although he does make some mostly valid points about Dean's career and the mindset of his fans, he falls back on the "wild card of chance"⁷ being a key factor which made Dean a legend.

But while "the wild card of chance" may very well have been on James Dean's side, so was a first rate publicist. Hollywood sold James Dean to the public, both before and after his death. And not only did they actively try to market him as a star and legend, but they purposefully attempted to mold him into a very specific kind of star, one obviously modeled after the Method prodigy of Marlon Brando, a screen star then known

⁵ Wes D. Gehring, *James Dean: Rebel with a Cause* (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society Press, 2005), 260.

⁶ For instance, he lists "the pity factor" as a key reason Dean is an icon; in other words, people are just sorry that he is dead. Gehring, 259-266.

⁷ Gehring, 262.

to be rebellious, uncooperative, and, of course, a very serious actor straight from the Broadway stage. Dean was also to be Broadway, New York, Method, nonconformist—anything that would transform him into cinematic gold. James Dean's stardom, and his legend, was, in essence, manufactured.

There are essentially two ways to view what has been printed in the press. One is as a window, albeit a somewhat flawed one, into the minds of society members, how they viewed a particular topic and how important they considered it to be. A second way is to consider it a window into the publicity machine of the Classical Hollywood system. It is generally accepted that Hollywood during the Classical era controlled its press, or, at any rate, held a considerable amount of sway over it. While critical reviews may be a different story, gossip columns, entertainment news, and fan magazines can be thought of as more a barometer of what Hollywood wanted people to think about its world rather than what they actually did think. This is the view I will take. While I cannot at this point state with any certainty where each story about James Dean in the 1950s originated—whether that be with Warner Bros., a publicist, or the writer themselves—I can say that an examination of the press from the 1950s makes it clear that the industry backed their boy with an intensity rarely seen. And while it may be true that the youth of America connected with the confused, temperamental teenagers Dean played, no one would have known to seek out his performances if his image had not been splashed on newspapers and magazines from the Atlantic to the Pacific. In the end, James Dean was sold as a star during his life and as a legend after his death, and this does, at least in part, illuminate an important part of the Dean phenomenon.

Chapters One, Two, and Three will trace the rise of Dean's stardom through the late 1950s, analyzing specifically what Warner Bros. did to perpetuate the image of James Dean. Chapter Five will take a closer look at the specific kind of image Warners created for Dean and the broader implications that image has for society. Richard Dyer's book *Stars* is, of course, the Bible for anyone attempting a star study. The first the three chapters will consider Dean according to his conception of "stars as a phenomenon of production," which Dyer passes over quickly and clearly has very little interest in himself, but has been expounded upon by other scholars such as Cathy Klaprat, who, in her piece "The Star as Market Strategy: Bette Davis is Another Light," has established a solid methodology for examining the creation of a star through period advertisement.⁸ But the final chapter will break down the Dean image as per Dyer's example of analyzing a star image using Jane Fonda.

Through a close reading of advertising and other publicity material of the time, one can see just how much a star, and a legend, like James Dean was a product of the Hollywood machine. Stars, while being essential laborers in the system, were also created texts, authored by the corporate entities that held them under contract. Warner Bros. was out to make a profit when they promoted James Dean both before and after his death, but, in the process, they ended up creating one of the world's most enduring icons.

⁸ Cathy Klaprat, "The Star as Market Strategy: Bette Davis is Another Light," in *The American Film Industry*, Rev. ed., ed. Tino Balio (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).

Chapter 1:
Manufactured:
The Making of James Dean

James Dean was born in Marion, Indiana, February 8, 1931, the only child of Winton and Mildred Dean. When Dean was five-years-old, his father, a dental technician, was transferred to the Sawtelle Veterans Administration in West Los Angeles. Dean lived in California with his parents until his mother died when he was only nine, after which he was sent to live with his aunt and uncle on their farm in Fairmount, Indiana.

In high school, Dean participated in both sports and theatre, and, after graduation, he moved back to California, enrolling at Santa Monica City College where he continued to study drama. He later transferred to UCLA, but dropped out after only a semester. Failing to break into the movies off the few bit parts he managed to land in films such as *Fixed Bayonets!* (Twentieth Century-Fox 1951) And *Has Anybody Seen My Gal?* (Universal International 1952), he moved to New York in October of 1951.

While in New York, Dean mostly worked in television, doing episodes for various anthology dramas, such as *Studio One* and *Campbell Soundstage*. In August of 1952, he auditioned for and was accepted into the famed Actor's Studio. And in December of that same year, he landed his first role in a Broadway play, *See the Jaguar*. But the play closed after only three performances, thanks in good part to a thorough critical panning that claimed the play was "verbose and [said] nothing."⁹ In December of 1953, Dean

⁹ Brook Atkinson, "At the Theatre: Arthur Kennedy Heads the Cast in Richard Nash's Symbolic Western Drama, 'See the Jaguar,'" *New York Times*, December 4, 1952.

landed another supporting role in a Broadway play called *The Immoralist*, based on Andre Gide's novel. However, Dean did not get along with the director, and while it was in rehearsals, he was already meeting with Elia Kazan about the lead in his new film *East of Eden*. Kazan was familiar with Dean from the Actor's Studio. The film's screenwriter, Paul Osborn, had seen Dean in a preview of *The Immoralist* and convinced Kazan to meet with the young actor. Although Kazan and Dean did not exactly hit it off, the veteran director felt that Dean simply *was* the character, the angry, angst-ridden youth Cal Trask. On the day *The Immoralist* opened James Dean submitted his two week resignation. And after a series of successful screen tests in New York, Dean was signed by Warner Bros. and flown out to Hollywood.

Thus began Dean's incredibly brief screen career. After *Eden*, James Dean played the lead, Jim Stark, in Nicholas Ray's *Rebel Without A Cause* (Warner Bros. 1955), and then moved straight into a supporting role as Jett Rink in George Stevens' *Giant* (Warner Bros. 1956). As soon as he had completed his part in *Giant*, Dean decided to enter a stock-car race in Salinas, California, having picked up the hobby the previous spring. On his way there driving his new Porsche 550 Spyder, at the intersection of US 466 and Highway 41, a car coming from the other direction swerved into Dean's lane to turn onto Highway 41. The two vehicles collided head-on, killing Dean almost instantly and seriously injuring his passenger and mechanic, Rolf Wutherich. The other driver received only a few scrapes and bruises. James Dean's death was ruled accidental.

Pre-East of Eden Ballyhoo

But prior to his death, Warner Bros. and the press had done a thorough job of making James Dean a huge star out of very little. In fact, even before he had been seen in a single picture, Hollywood was putting all its energy into making this young boy from Indiana the next big thing in town. On March 6, 1954, the *New York Times* reported, in their “Of Local Origin” column, that James Dean had been signed by Warner Bros. as the lead in Elia Kazan’s new motion picture, *East of Eden*.¹⁰ This piece was apparently printable and newsworthy for the *Times* because Dean originated, as the article mentions, the role of the Arab servant in the Broadway play *The Immoralist*. However, before this item appeared in the *New York Times*, newspapers had rarely mentioned Dean, even in reference to *The Immoralist*. The reviews of the play that appeared in both the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times* did not do much more than list Dean as another member of the cast, his part being so small.¹¹ Occasionally a review would list his performance as “well played”¹² or as having an “insidious charm,”¹³ but, overall, Dean was mostly overlooked in these reviews and other mentions of the play that appear in newspapers.¹⁴ So it is probably very unlikely that anyone reading the article would have known who James Dean was. The real celebrity mentioned in the piece was Elia Kazan, and it was Dean’s connection with him that really made him noteworthy. But in this small newspaper mention, the first time Dean was mentioned in print in connection with

¹⁰ Of Local Origin, *New York Times*, March 6, 1954.

¹¹ Brooks Atkinson, “‘The Immoralist’ by Ruth and Augustus Goetz, Made from Andre Gide’s Novel,” *New York Times*, February 9, 1954; Walter F. Kerr, “Thorny Moral Theme Gives an Exercise in Isolation,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 14, 1954; Brooks Atkinson, “‘The Immoralist’: Tragedy by Ruth and Augustus Goetz Made from Andre Gide’s Novel,” *New York Times*, February 14, 1954.

¹² Brooks Atkinson, “‘The Immoralist’ by Ruth and Augustus Goetz, Made from Andre Gide’s Novel,” *New York Times*, February 9, 1954

¹³ Brooks Atkinson, “‘The Immoralist’: Tragedy by Ruth and Augustus Goetz Made from Andre Gide’s Novel,” *New York Times*, February 14, 1954.

¹⁴ *The Immoralist*, advertisement, *New York Times*, January 17, 1954; J.P. Shanley, “Premiere Tonight for ‘The Immoralist,’” *New York Times*, February 8, 1954.

Hollywood or the movies, we see the start of an industry trend in handling the case of James Dean. From March 6, 1954 up until the premiere of his first film on March 10, 1955, Dean was continually mentioned in newspapers, popular magazines, and fan magazines. Hollywood and its press seems to have been intent on making James Dean known to the public before anyone got a chance to see him act.

It is important to remember that Dean had had very little known practical acting experience when he was chosen for the lead in *East of Eden*. As noted in the Introduction, *See the Jaguar*, his first Broadway play, had received dreadfully poor reviews and had closed after only three performances. And while the reviews did not blame the actors for the play's shortcomings (one even claiming James Dean himself had a "skill that can't be too highly praised"¹⁵), the play did not reach a wide audience, obviously since it closed so quickly, and, once again, Dean's role was only a supporting one, not the lead.¹⁶ And although *The Immoralist* was a far more successful play, Dean's role in it was even smaller than the one he had played in *See the Jaguar*. As well, Dean only appeared in the play for its first two weeks of its Broadway run. When Hollywood came knocking, he was, in fact, only starting to craft his New York stage career. Dean was *not* the Broadway star Hollywood would later try to make him out to be.

In fact, if any significant number of people had seen James Dean act, they most likely would have seen him act through the medium of television. Between 1950 and 1953, James Dean had appeared on television twenty-seven times, most of these as parts

¹⁵ " 'See the Jaguar' Called Unlikely but Exciting," *Los Angeles Times*, December 5, 1952;

¹⁶ Brooks Atkinson, "Arthur Kennedy Heads the Cast in Richard Nash's Symbolic Western Drama 'See the Jaguar'," *New York Times*, December 4, 1952; John Chapman, "Play Not as Good as Their Authors' Aim," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 14, 1952.

in playhouse anthologies, such as *Studio One* and *Kraft Television*.¹⁷ But again, these roles were rarely leading ones, and there is little evidence in the press that people knew him from his television work, which is understandable since these anthologies generally were not held over for syndication and thus were only shown once, allowing American audiences only a single shot at seeing James Dean in any one of the twenty-seven shows he did (not to mention the fact that the small size of the screen may have made facial recognition of new actors extremely difficult).

However, the fact that profiles both before and after the release of *East of Eden* generally ignored his television work could be explained away by the industry's desire to pass the young actor off as a Broadway star a la Marlon Brando. And, after people had seen *Eden* and James Dean's position in Hollywood was slightly more stable, more articles did tend to mention that James Dean's early career consisted of television work, even if they did continue to give those acting jobs short shrift. But then, at times it does not always seem to be a mere case of simple omission but of downright obliviousness.

For example, on November 13, 1954, Louella Parsons, the famed gossip columnist and a woman one would think would know the past work of a young Hollywood actor if anyone did, reported that James Dean was to make his "TV debut" that week.¹⁸ This not only ignores the twenty-seven television spots Dean did before signing his Warners contract, but also the three he did after. Apparently Parsons had not noticed him on television or, at the very least, had not connected his past television performances with the actor newly arrived on the Hollywood scene. While Parsons may just not have been one for television, the fact that her article was presumably fact-

¹⁷ George Perry, *James Dean* (New York: DK Publishing, 2005, 229-230).

¹⁸ Louella Parsons, "Art Lovers, Hope for the Best," *Washington Post*, 13 November, 1954.

checked and was then run without ever having to then print a retraction seems to suggest that Dean simply was not really known to industry columnists from television. Thus, one can conclude that James Dean was probably not known by the public writ large before he signed on with Warner Bros.

This did not, however, stop newspapers from mentioning James Dean on a regular basis throughout 1954. Now, obviously, any time *East of Eden* was mentioned, so was the name of James Dean. *Eden* was understandable fodder for entertainment news, being the new picture from Elia Kazan, a by-then well-established, multiple Academy Award-winning Hollywood director. Thus anytime a new cast member was signed on or Kazan did anything particularly interesting by way of direction, in went a mention of *East of Eden* and James Dean into gossip columns and entertainment articles.¹⁹ These mentions of James Dean are significant in that, not only did they continually keep his name in front of the public, but they also repeatedly claimed Dean was from the Broadway stage, which while being technically true, was somewhat misleading considering the rather short stints he did on the stage.

Other articles furthered this notion of Dean being from Broadway. Anytime the issue of New York actors came up in a piece, interestingly, so did James Dean. One article wrote that Hollywood had “*secured* [emphasis added] James Dean from ‘The Immoralist’,”²⁰ as if he was some great catch that Warner Bros. had ingeniously stolen from a hit Broadway play, as opposed to a little known actor that probably would have

¹⁹ Thomas M. Pryor, “Julie Harris Set in ‘East of Eden’,” *New York Times*, April 16, 1954; Louella Parsons, “Julie Harris Gets Assignment,” *Washington Post*, April 16, 1954; Edwin Schallert, “Drama: ‘Timbuktu’ Scheduled as African Epic, Large Jubilee will Proceed,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 22, 1954; Movieland Briefs, *Los Angeles Times*, June 11, 1954; Edwin Schallert, “‘Wind from Suva’ Latest Pacific Tale; New Find Pegged for McCormack,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 26, 1954.

²⁰ Edwin Schallert, “‘Picnic’ Actor Picked for Top Chalice Role; Marla English in Lead,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 27, 1954.

quit the play on his own anyway due to the friction between himself and the director. Another article even attested that James Dean was going to stay on Broadway after finishing *East of Eden*,²¹ a rather dubious claim since, despite whatever his personal feelings may have been toward the city of New York, he had rather weak ties to the stage life there (not to mention that it is a little difficult to “stay” where you no longer are). Even Hedda Hopper, the great gossip columnist herself, first mentioned James Dean in reference to New York actors. In her article on the new kind of “dirty shirt” actors that were taking over Hollywood, James Dean was the first name to come up, describing him as slouching, propping up his feet on chairs, and referring to his general “brooding . . . couldn’t-care-less” attitude.²² The fact that the great Hedda Hopper wrote about James Dean while *Eden* was still in production is astounding enough, but that she definitively pegged him as one of those “Kazan actors” also speaks volumes. Such articles helped to further the impression that James Dean was another one of those “New-York-type actors” that Hollywood was beginning to see more and more of in the Fifties, an impression only helped by his association with Kazan, who himself apparently claimed James Dean was “the best young actor to come along since Marlon Brando.”²³ Given how few performances Dean actually ever gave on a stage, for so many to label him as “Broadway” seems to suggest the influence of the heavy hand of Hollywood. Clearly not only was the industry intent on making James Dean a star, presenting news mentions of Dean to a public that was almost completely unaware of his existence, but they were also intent on making Dean a certain kind of star, one plainly modeled after Brando.

²¹ Edwin Schallert, “Leo Genn Purchases Old Mexico Story,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 4, 1954.

²² Hedda Hopper, “Looking at Hollywood: New Film Type, the Slouch, Gives Writer the Creeps,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 7, 1954.

²³ Philip K. Scheuer, “A Town Called Hollywood: Kazan Sure that ‘Eden’ Has Unity Despite Cuts in Story,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 11, 1954.

However, perhaps more interesting than the James Dean references in connection with *East of Eden* or his supposed deep connection with the New York stage are the multitude of times James Dean got mentioned when neither *Eden* nor Broadway was anywhere in sight. Before *Eden* was ever shown to the public, newspapers and magazines spoke about Dean as if the public should already know who he was, tossing out little anecdotes about Dean's personal life or his various aspirations. Newspapers reported that James Dean was going to direct a one-act opera "Cipolla, The Great" written by Leonard Rossenman, the composer for *East of Eden*,²⁴ and that he had backing in New York to direct an expressionistic film.²⁵ But the real story about James Dean that dominated the press during this time was the supposed romance kindling between himself and a young Italian actress named Pier Angeli.²⁶ Angeli herself was new to Hollywood. While she had appeared in several Italian films, her first American film, *Flame and the Flesh* (MGM 1954), had just opened that May. The public could not have cared much about the romantic exploits of someone they had never seen before and another they had only ever seen once, but Hollywood reported the romance as if the two young celebrities were old veterans.

Interestingly, *Eden* wrapped shooting in early August, just about the same time reports of James Dean and Pier Angeli began to hit the papers. So perhaps the industry just needed another story about Dean to keep his name in front of the press as stories of the *Eden* production very likely were no longer available. It is uncertain whether Dean

²⁴ Edwin Schallert, "Stellar Trio Selected for 'Prince'; Johnny Green Signs New Pact," *Los Angeles Times*, July 23, 1954.

²⁵ Edwin Schallert, "'To Hell and Back' Will Exploit Youth; James Dean to Go Expressionist," *Los Angeles Times*, August 3, 1954.

²⁶ Edwin Schallert, "Twin Stars, Pier and Marisa, Twinkling on Warner's Lot," *Los Angeles Times*, August 1, 1954; Louella Parsons, "Treasury Nix Key Scene in 'Night Hunter,'" *Washington Post*, August 31, 1954.

and Angeli were actually ever seriously dating. Although most maintain that Angeli was the great love of Dean's life, Angeli would later state that they were never anything more than just good friends, an assertion partly supported by the fact that she got herself engaged to another man when all the press were still claiming that Dean and her were dating (an event which, of course, resulted in numerous reports of Dean's broken heart).²⁷ Some biographers have noted that the studios often paired up their actors, especially when attending public functions.²⁸ But whether Angeli was just another casual date or a serious girlfriend is not as important as the fact that Hollywood spun her as the latter. The pairing of James Dean and Pier Angeli was just more grease for the industry press machine. And after that ship had sailed, Warner Bros. simply had to resort to straight interviews to keep his name in the paper.

The first full interview of James Dean appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* on November 7, 1954. Written by Philip Scheuer, the title of the article read "Jimmy Dean Says He Isn't Flattered by Being Labeled 'Another Brando'."²⁹ Hedda Hopper had earlier established Dean as a slouchy, moody type of New York Actor, and Elia Kazan had already reported that Dean was another Brando, but this piece takes huge strides in, not only establishing Dean as a Hollywood personality and star, but the kind of personality and star Hollywood considered to be the most bankable at this time. Most of the article dwells on Dean's own thoughts about acting, life, and his being compared to Marlon Brando. In fact, for being the first time the newspaper-reading public was

²⁷ Hedda Hopper, "Actress Pier Angeli Engaged to Vic Damone," *Los Angeles Times*, October 5, 1954; Hedda Hopper, "Vic Damone Will Wed Pier Angeli This Fall," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 9, 1954; "To Repair a Battered Heart—An Oil Filter," *Screen Album*, August, 1955; Louella Parsons, "Art Lovers, Hope for the Best," *Washington Post*, 13 November, 1954.

²⁸ George Perry, *James Dean* (New York: DK Publishing, 2005, 115-117).

²⁹ Philip Scheuer, "Jimmy Dean Says He Isn't Flattered by Being Labeled Another Brando," *Los Angeles Times*, November 7, 1954.

formally introduced to the young actor, the first time they were finally given the chance to see who on earth this young man was that all the papers were writing about, the article actually gave very little information about Dean himself, except that he owned a horse and drove an Italian racecar. The piece actually was little more than a compilation of quotations from Dean, everything from “I’m a serious-minded and intense little devil,” to “Geographical location means nothing to me, and neither did coming out here [Hollywood]! A man can produce no matter where the hell he is,” which is interesting since it allows the public a chance to, in a sense, hear Dean speak for the first time, when they had not yet seen him act. But, of course, only the quotations that would further the notion that James Dean was an incredibly serious actor and a rebellious individualist seemed to have been printed.³⁰ Even the fact that, as Scheuer states at the beginning of the article, Dean was—quite contrary to the reputation that he had already garnered in Hollywood—quite polite and willing to speak, does not manage to overshadow the kind of angst-ridden dialogue that Scheuer then prints. In fact, stating that Dean was a compliant interviewee only seems to reinforce his reputation as one given to sullen bad manners.

The article even went further in terms of Dean’s Broadway career. While previous pieces had simply mentioned him as an actor in *The Immoralist*, Scheuer’s piece goes back two more years and brings up the production of *See the Jaguar*. Here it actually specifically cited the Warner Bros.’ biography of Dean, which apparently read “In ‘See the Jaguar’ . . . James Dean won the highly dramatic role of a boy who has been

³⁰ Philip Scheuer, “Jimmy Dean Says He Isn’t Flattered by Being Labeled Another Brando,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 7, 1954.

shut in an icehouse for 10 years.”³¹ Beyond the fact that this statement conveniently left out the little part about the play closing after only three performances, it did much to beef up Dean’s résumé. Previously he was only known to have had a single play under his belt, now he had a whole two. But since no one mentioned that these were the *only* two plays he had ever done, one might assume that there were other unmentioned plays on his curriculum vitae. This simply reinforced everything everyone was printing about Dean. And interestingly, this is one of the few instances where it is clear that Dean’s reputation was being generated by Warner Bros. themselves and not just Hollywood writ large, Warners biography of the young actor being the one directly quoted. Thus, this first interview further promoted Dean’s growing status as a moody actor from Broadway, as well as allowed the readers to get further acquainted with the star-to-be, or perhaps a star-already-made-by-the-press, since that was exactly how Scheuer referred to him: as a “star.”³²

Previews and Buzz

Up to this point, no one had seen James Dean in a single picture. That all changed in early December of 1954. On December 6 and 8, Warner Bros. sneak previewed *East of Eden* in Los Angeles for industry personnel, and what resulted was an astounding cacophonous buzz around the young actor that has few equal comparisons.

Before this preview, both Hedda Hopper and Louella Parsons had written very little about Dean. He made it into their columns a couple of times on the strength of his romance with Pier Angeli, and Hopper had written about him that once in reference to

³¹ Scheuer, “Jimmy Dean Says.”

³² Philip Scheuer, “Jimmy Dean Says He Isn’t Flattered by Being Labeled Another Brando,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 7, 1954.

other New York actors, but after *East of Eden* had previewed, Dean became each one's new golden boy. On December 13, Parsons wrote "I'd like to say right out loud that Warners have themselves a new young star in James Dean."³³ That same day Hopper claimed that he was the "brightest new star in town" and even proclaimed him to be "more versatile and better looking than Marlon Brando."³⁴ From then on out, James Dean was news to the pair of columnists no matter what he did, or even if he did nothing.

Hopper, especially, could not get enough of Dean. She started drawing attention to the roles he was getting on television, pointing to his performances on the small screen as previews for what audiences would soon see in *East of Eden*. She called his performance of a gangster in "The Dark, Dark Hour" on the *General Electric Theater* "terrifying,"³⁵ and she reported that he was going to appear in *U.S. Steel Hour*'s "The Thief" with Paul Lukas and Diana Lynn a full three weeks before it was slated to hit the air.³⁶ She had not even bothered to turn her head when James Dean was signed on at Warner Bros. for *East of Eden*, but when he was confirmed in the role of Jim Stark for *Rebel Without a Cause*, that, of course, was now huge news making the top of her column.³⁷ When Dean was to be given 1956 off to go back to the Broadway stage, that made it into her column, and when he longed to play Hamlet, she wrote that "Personally,

³³ Louella Parsons, "Bob Hope Buys the Walker Story," *The Washington Post and Times Herald*, December 13, 1954.

³⁴ Hedda Hopper, "Helen Traubel Gets Role of Marie Dressler in Film," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 19, 1954.

³⁵ Hedda Hopper, "Jeff Chandler Wanted as Star for Movie of Hun Warfare," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 15, 1954.

³⁶ Hedda Hopper, "Life of Buddha to be Filmed, Warrior Prince and Teacher," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 24, 1954.

³⁷ Hedda Hopper, "James Dean to Make Story on Wayward Youth," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December, 16, 1954.

I think James Dean would make the most thrilling Hamlet since Jack Barrymore.”³⁸ Two months ago he was nothing more than a slouchy Kazan actor to her. Now he was her favorite moody little boy in all of Hollywood. Now James Dean was the big name to whom she attached people, as opposed to justifying his appearance in an article by connecting him with some bigger star. When Dennis Hopper was signed to Warner Bros., it was his connection with James Dean that made his name worthy of spilling ink.³⁹ And when Michael Wager, an unknown New York actor, was brought to Hollywood to test for a role, she immediately referenced the success of Dean, stating that even though he too had been a virtual unknown, “now every producer in Hollywood would give his chewing molars to borrow Dean.”⁴⁰ James Dean was now the “it” kid for her, and if for her, then for all of the movie-viewing world.

Louella Parsons was not quite the drooling school girl in knee socks that Hopper was over Dean, but she too pegged him as the new thing in town. She did not just let it go at one mention in December of his excellent performance in *Eden*. Throughout the months leading up to *Eden*'s popular release, she frequently restated her claim that he would be a star. On January 15, 1955, Parsons wrote that he was “a knockout in ‘East of Eden,’ which establishes him as a new top personality.”⁴¹ On February 23, she claimed that “before John Steinbeck’s best seller has run its movie course, a great new star will have been born in James Dean.”⁴² And in the March issue of *Modern Screen*, she devotes an entire piece to “nominat[ing] for stardom” the young actor, in which she “predict[s] a

³⁸ Hedda Hopper, “Elizabeth Taylor to Star in the Swordsmen of Siena,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 31, 1955.

³⁹ Hedda Hopper, “Hedda Finds Berle Tops in Show Business,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 13, 1955.

⁴⁰ Hedda Hopper, “Get Out Earmuffs, Danny’s Trying Trumpet,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 4, 1955.

⁴¹ Louella Parsons, “Broadway Hit Bought for Movies,” *The Washington Post and Times Herald*, January 15, 1955.

⁴² Louella Parsons, “More War than Peace in Sight,” *The Washington Post and Times Herald*, February 23, 1955.

long and brilliant career for [the] screen newcomer.”⁴³ By the time *Eden* was ready to be released, Parsons was referring to Dean as just another type, along with “the Marlon Brandos . . . and the Montgomery Clifts,” his name having become so ubiquitous in her articles.⁴⁴

Other newspapers, as well, continued to cover the story of James Dean during this time. His confirmation in both the roles of Jim Stark in *Rebel Without a Cause* and Jett Rink in *Giant* provided easy fodder for the presses, as did stories of each film’s preproduction.⁴⁵ But the main news continued to be Dean’s performance in *Eden*. Acutely aware of the buzz generated by the December previews, papers around the nation were already touting him and the film as a huge success. In December, the *New York Times* reported that Dean’s “performance in the unreleased ‘East of Eden,’ directed by Elia Kazan for Warners, has caused excitement in movie circles not matched since Marlon Brando came on the scene.”⁴⁶ That same month, the *Los Angeles Times* declared Dean an “immediate hit” and a “sensation in his first film.”⁴⁷ In February, the *New York Times* reported that Warners was already seeking to develop more new actors specifically because of the anticipated hit of *East of Eden* and James Dean.⁴⁸ Dean even managed to snag the cover of *The Washington Post* (see fig. 1.1). In the full-page photo that adorned the front of the D.C. newspaper, James Dean sits in *Eden* costume, script in hand, his

⁴³ Louella Parsons, “I Nominate for Stardom: James Dean,” *Modern Screen*, March, 1955, 43.

⁴⁴ Louella Parsons, “Martha Scott Signs with C.B.” *The Washington Post and Times Herald*, March 7, 1955.

⁴⁵ “Film Events: Crime Drama Has Heisler as Director,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 4, 1955; Thomas M. Pryor, “Film Assignment for Jane Russell,” *New York Times*, January 4, 1955; Louella Parsons, “Liz Taylor Snags Lead in Giant,” *The Washington Post and Times Herald Tribune*, January 28, 1955; “Film Events: Actor From Spain Gets Lead Role,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 25, 1955.

⁴⁶ Thomas M. Pryor, “Film Star Traffic to TV to Increase,” *New York Times*, December 25, 1954.

⁴⁷ Philip Scheuer, “Free Lance Players Now Rule Roost in Hollywood,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 26, 1954.

⁴⁸ Thomas M. Pryor, “Warners to Seek Fresh Film Faces,” *New York Times*, February 4, 1955.

head and arm resting on a movie light. His expression is sly, but serious. It is the look of the consummate actor caught in the middle of work, which of course was exactly how Hollywood wanted him portrayed, rebellious and nonconformist perhaps, but always the serious, New York actor.⁴⁹ And the buzz surrounding his performance up to the actual release of the film only abetted that image.



Figure 1.1. *Post Cover*. Source: *The Washington Post and Times Herald Tribune*, February 20, 1955.

Eden Advertising

On the strength of the enthusiasm produced by the December previews, as well as the publicity that had been generated around Dean since he was first signed, Warner Bros. was able to promote the film on the basis of James Dean alone. This was not a necessary move on their part. *East of Eden* has several good selling points without Dean. The novel of its name had been a best-seller when it was released in 1952, and its author, John Steinbeck, was a well known novelist whose works had often been adapted to film, most notably *The Grapes of Wrath* in 1940 (Twentieth Century-Fox). The film's director, Elia Kazan was a highly successful and hugely famous filmmaker at the time,

⁴⁹ The Cover, *The Washington Post and Times Herald Tribune*, February 20, 1955.

having made several successful films previous to *Eden*, including *Pinky* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*. In addition, Kazan was just coming off the success of *On the Waterfront* (Columbia), released in 1954 and starring Marlon Brando, for which he had garnered both critical and commercial success. Warner Bros. could have sold their film on either Steinbeck or Kazan, or both, but instead they decided to push James Dean.

Nearly all early advertising for *East of Eden* concerned itself with Warners young star. Possibly the most reproduced ad was one featuring director Elia Kazan coaching actor James Dean. Its tagline read “Discoverer—and Discovered . . .” (see fig. 1.2). This was about as close as Warners got to including Kazan in its early advertisements, as the man who discovered James Dean. Even though Kazan was present, the focus was clearly on Dean. The text claimed that he was “as fresh and sudden a breeze as ever whipped up stardust on the Hollywood scene.”⁵⁰ Most early ads, however, left out Kazan entirely. An ad that ran in the *Los Angeles Times* had a heading that read “You Will See James Dean,” and its bulk claimed that Dean “will make a lasting impression . . . and in his very first picture he becomes a new star” (see fig. 1.3).⁵¹ While Kazan’s, as well as Steinbeck’s, name was obviously listed on the ad, the promotion was wholly centered on Dean. Warners ran many other similar ads which kept James Dean as their main focus. At the very least, advertisements ran a caption under Dean’s picture which called him a “very special new star”⁵² or something comparable.⁵³ After the film’s release and as the film’s first run continued, other ads were released that sold the picture on the more

⁵⁰ *East of Eden* Ad, *New York Times*, February 28, 1955.

⁵¹ *East of Eden* Ad, *Los Angeles Times*, March 10, 1955.

⁵² *East of Eden* Ad, *New York Times*, February 27, 1955.

⁵³ *East of Eden* Ad, *New York Times*, March 9, 1955; *East of Eden* Ad, *New York Times*, March 10, 1955; *East of Eden* Ad, *Los Angeles Times*, March 15, 1955.

obvious selling points of Steinbeck and Kazan.⁵⁴ But throughout the run of the film, advertisements continued to surface that marketed Dean as the film's main attraction.



Figure 1.2. *Eden* Ad. Source: *New York Times*, February 28, 1955



Figure 1.3. *Eden* Ad. Source: *Los Angeles Times*, March 10, 1955.

Like *Eden*'s CinemaScope or Warnercolor, James Dean was being made into just another piece of the film's spectacle, a tool with which to bring in receipts. Dean was as much a reason to go see *East of Eden* as 3D was for *House of Wax* (Warner Bros. 1953) or Percepto would later be for *The Tingler* (Columbia 1959). In this decade where Hollywood saw a continuing decrease in its audience size, major studios were after any gimmick that would bring people back to the theaters. For Warner Bros. in 1954, one of those gimmicks was James Dean. Playing on the age-old device of star power to promote a film but pushed with more ferocity than was generally seen, Warners advertisement of *Eden* suggests desperation and a need to rediscover the formula for box office hits. To

⁵⁴ *East of Eden* Ad, *Los Angeles Times*, March 13, 1955; *East of Eden* Ad, *Los Angeles Times*, March 14, 1955; *East of Eden* Ad, *Los Angeles Times*, March 17, 1955.

them, a kind of Brando Jr. willing to place himself under contract as Warners property must have looked like a godsend, and they sold him as such, the reason to see their movies. Considering this, it is easy to see why Warner Bros. was probably so intent on selling James Dean to the public before *Eden* was released. He was their ace in the hole, both for *Eden* and for their studio. They needed him to be a star, to shine brighter than any other in Hollywood. Dean was to be their cash cow.

Released and Reviewed

East of Eden was released to the public on March 10, 1955. The reviews that followed place all previous publicity in sharp focus—it becomes even more glaringly obvious that all the previous media hype around James Dean had been totally manufactured when one notices that the reviews of *Eden* were overall mixed and almost universally negative of Dean's performance.

The great *New York Times* critic of the 1950s, Bosley Crowther himself, panned the film, not once, but twice. He claimed the film had “intensity . . . but little clarity” and was “imposing, but very cold.”⁵⁵ And of Dean's performance in particular, he called it “sophomoric,” a “clumsy display,” and stated that “Mr. Kazan should be spanked for permitting him” to so clearly ape Brando.⁵⁶ And that was just his first review. His second, a Sunday think piece, claimed that “Mr. Dean plays the fellow [Caleb Trask] as though he were permanently attached to a live wire and were going through all the queer gyrations that such an uncomfortable situation might inspire.”⁵⁷ Not all too surprisingly,

⁵⁵ Bosley Crowther, “The Screen: ‘East of Eden’ Has Debut,” *New York Times*, March 10, 1955.

⁵⁶ Crowther, “The Screen.”

⁵⁷ Bosley Crowther, “Right Direction: The ‘East of Eden’ of Elia Kazan Has That But Not Much More,” *New York Times*, March 20, 1955.

the ads promoting the film on James Dean were pulled from the *New York Times* for a week and a half after Crowther's first review.

Other reviews were not much better. Almost all claimed that Dean only seemed to have the ability to mimic Marlon Brando and not much more, or, at least, that was the only ability he displayed in *Eden*. Richard L. Coe of the *Washington Post* declared that he had "the same mumbling incoherence as Marlon Brando."⁵⁸ The *Christian Science Monitor* claimed that Dean's "portrayal of Cal . . . seems too often an imitation of Marlon Brando [and] incidentally there must be other ways of suggesting emotional disturbance and inarticulateness than by simulating a speech defect."⁵⁹ Mae Tinee of the *Chicago Tribune* accused his performance of being "marred by repetition and consistent overplaying which sometimes makes him seem like a maniacal brat having tantrums."⁶⁰ And Philip Scheuer of the *Los Angeles Times* wrote that he "combines the worst features of Marlon Brando."⁶¹ Scheuer even specifically pointed to "the extraordinary amount of nonsense"⁶² written about Dean that had proceeded the release of the film, plainly acknowledging the way the industry had shamelessly sold the boy and how all previous advertising of Dean had, in fact, been inconsistent with the actual product as he, and the other critics for that matter, saw it.

However, despite the unenthusiastic reviews, people still went to see the movie. Warner Bros. had done its job well. *East of Eden* played ten weeks in New York, seven weeks in *Los Angeles*, six weeks in D.C. and Boston, and four weeks in Chicago. Most

⁵⁸ Richard L. Coe, "Even in Eden, Life is Earnest," *The Washington Post and Times Herald Tribune*, April 13, 1955.

⁵⁹ "'East of Eden' from Kazan," *Christian Science Monitor*, April 11, 1955.

⁶⁰ Mae Tinee, "'East of Eden' Has Some Sins as Film Art," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, April 13, 1955.

⁶¹ Philip Scheuer, "Unique Spell Cast By 'East of Eden'," *Los Angeles Times*, March 17, 1955.

⁶² Scheuer, "Unique Spell."

other venues as well held over the film. And during those multi-week first runs, the movie brought in more than decent returns, rising to number one in the national box office during its fourth week out.⁶³ Of course, these heavy receipts were probably helped by the equally heavy advertising campaign. In New York alone, an ad for *East of Eden* ran every single day in the *Times* for the film's entire ten week run. Other areas experienced similar situations. Thus, Hollywood had, indeed, managed to make James Dean into a star.

Post-Eden Dean

After *Eden* had been released, newspapers continued to cover Dean in much the same manner as they had before. They covered the productions of both *Rebel* and *Giant* as well as potential roles that stood on the horizon for the young actor.⁶⁴ And, of course, any romantic exploits were regularly grist for the media mills.⁶⁵ The only difference was that now James Dean was an unquestionable star. Thus, the reports, articles, and mentions came much more frequently, as was to be expected. Dean was also mentioned by Hedda Hopper and Louella Parsons with much greater frequency.⁶⁶

⁶³ "National Box Office Survey," *Variety*, April 20, 1955.

⁶⁴ "Movieland Events: Law School Student Dean Adversary," *Los Angeles Times*, March 25, 1955; Edwin Schallert, "Fonda in 'Clown' to Go From TV to Movie; New 'Maracaibo' Purchased," *Los Angeles Times*, March 26, 1955; A.H. Weller, "Of People and Pictures," *New York Times*, March 27, 1955; Edwin Schallert, "Marquand Story, Likely for Bogart; New Italy Film Set for Crawford," *Los Angeles Times*, May 19, 1955; Richard L. Coe, "'Teahouse' is Tokyo Bound," *The Washington Post and Times Herald Tribune*, May 31, 1955.

⁶⁵ Richard Dyer MacCann, "James Dean Off the Screen," *Christian Science Monitor*, July 12, 1955; "New Routine," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 28, 1955; "Hollywood Parade," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 12, 1955.

⁶⁶ Louella Parsons, "James Dean to Play Rocky Graziano Story," *The Washington Post and Times Herald Tribune*, April 16, 1955; Louella Parsons, "Reminder From Her Youthful Days," *The Washington Post and Times Herald Tribune*, May 12, 1955; Louella Parsons, "Bing Holds Out His Helping Hand," *The Washington Post and Times Herald Tribune*, May 30, 1955; Hedda Hopper, "Keep Your Eye on James Dean," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 27, 1955; Hedda Hopper, "Kirk Douglass Wins 'Lust for Life' Lead," *Los Angeles Times*, March 26, 1955; Hedda Hopper, "Police Pair Credited with Saving of Actress,"

Mostly, however, the real difference in pre- and post- *Eden* James Dean publicity is that, after the release of *East of Eden*, Dean was picked up by the fan magazines. Prior to the release of his first film, Dean only earned brief mentions as a new face on the scene.⁶⁷ But afterward, Dean secured multi-page articles which gave him a more thorough introduction to the movie-viewing public. These mostly consisted of biographical pieces on James Dean, but occasionally they also covered his romances with actresses, such as Lilli Kardell (an actress who never rose far above general television work).⁶⁸ Universally, however, they facilitated the continuation of the reputation newspapers had given him before the release of *Eden*, that of a rebellious, moody individualist from the streets of New York.

Thus, from March to September of 1955, with newspapers consistently running articles and mentions of James Dean, fan magazines printing profiles, both *Rebel Without a Cause* and *Giant* in production, and *East of Eden* continuing to play at theaters in its second and third runs, Dean remained perpetually in the public eye. And, on September 25, the Hollywood Woman's Press Club voted him both the worst dressed star in Hollywood and the most likely to succeed.⁶⁹ Five days later, he was dead.

James Dean was once quoted as having said:

Los Angeles Times, May 17, 1955; Hedda Hopper, "Debbie Reynolds Set for Cagney Film Role," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, June 4, 1955.

⁶⁷ "New Faces: James Dean," *Screen Album*, November, 1954, 42.

⁶⁸ Laura Owen Miller and Anna Kendall, "James Dean: Smoldering Dynamite," *Modern Screen*, June, 1955, 58-61, 70, 72-73; Lawrence Boyd, "Danger, Hot Stuff!," *Motion Picture*, July, 1955, 52-53, 62-63; Richard Moore, "Lone Wolf," *Modern Screen*, August, 1955, 28-29, 75-76; "Confessions of a Successful Young Neurotic," *Modern Screen*, September, 1955, 83; Don Allen, "James Dean: The Man Behind the Camera," *Film Life*, September, 1955, 23-27, 62-64; Imogene Collins, "The Secret Love That Haunts Jimmy Dean," *Modern Screen*, October, 1955, 29, 78-80.

⁶⁹ "Hollywood Yearbook," *The Washington Post and Times Herald Tribune*, September 25, 1955.

I would like to be a star in my own sense. I mean to be a very consummate actor, to have more difficult roles and fill them to my satisfaction. But not to be a star on the basis of gold plating. Most actors here [Hollywood] come out all gold-plated and twinkly, studio manufactured. Their brilliance blinds them. A real star carries its own illumination, an inward brightness.⁷⁰

Apparently, James Dean could not see that he himself was plated in gold and served up to the public on a silver tray. While he may have been a consummate actor, his stardom little to do with his talent. He was made a star before anyone had even seen him act. This, perhaps, can account for why his icon has very little to do with the roles he played. While he is often featured in his costume from *Rebel Without a Cause*, no one remembers him as Jim Stark. Instead, they remember him as a moody, rebellious, nonconformist, which is not so puzzling when one realizes that that is exactly how the industry sold him.

And the question of how anyone knew to mourn James Dean when he died with a single film released is easily resolved with the same answer—he had been sold. From the day he signed with Warner Bros. until the day he died on the road to Salinas, Dean was sold by Hollywood to the public. He had been sculpted and chiseled to fit the mold of Hollywood stardom. And the public had become quite acquainted with the image and star of James Dean, with the name they read in newspapers and the face they saw in magazines. So when his death came in 1955, mass hysteria followed. Fan magazines actually wrote about him more after his death than they had during his lifetime. For three years following his fatal accident, Dean received more fan mail in Hollywood than any other celebrity. But without all the buildup he had received during his life, Dean would have vanished into the wind. So perhaps a part of the reason why James Dean is a legend and an icon today is that he was, in his own time, manufactured.

⁷⁰ “James Dean Not Star, Nor Is He ‘Brando’,” *Dayton Daily News*, April 9, 1955.

Chapter 2:

Image of a Dead Man:

The Post-Mortem Selling of James Dean in 1956

Considering the magnitude of James Dean's celebrity at the time of his death, the initial hysteria that swept the country is understandable (especially considering that James Dean had been specifically marketed to a particular demographic, one known for being wildly irrational, overly emotional, and highly melodramatic—the American teenager). However, what remains enigmatic is why this obsession with James Dean that began in October of 1955, this near morbid fascination with a dead man, has lasted for now over fifty years. Why does this dead twenty-four year-old man-boy still linger? What made James Dean into an icon, as opposed to just another dead movie star, and what can we learn about the forces that were responsible?

To gain a clearer understanding of the reasons behind the James Dean phenomenon's longevity, we must start where it began, with his death in 1955. From October of that year through October of the next year, 1956, Warner Bros. made particular choices with the handling of the image of the now late James Dean, choices which furthered the Dean craze and were directly responsible (at least in part) for continuing Dean's fandom through 1956, and perhaps beyond.

Rebel Without a Cause

The first film left standing after James Dean's death was, the now equally iconic, *Rebel Without a Cause* (Warner Bros. 1955). Directed by Nicholas Ray and starring,

along with Dean, Natalie Wood, Sal Mineo, and Jim Backus, the film tells the story a three young peoples' challenges connecting to parents who no longer understand them (or simply no longer care about them) and the resulting delinquent behavior that such a lack of connection clearly inspires. With teenage crime on the rise in the 1950s, it is easy to understand why Warner Bros. would have been keen on funding such relevant project. But the timeliness of the film's topic has often lead some scholars to injudiciously classify the film as primarily a teenpic, in other words cheap and common, a movie meant for exploitative purposes above anything else. But it is not so simple.

In *Teenagers and Teenpics*, Thomas Doherty defines the exploitation film, of which he feels the teenpic to be a subcategory, as having “three elements: (1) controversial, bizarre, or timely subject matter amenable to wild promotions (“exploitation” potential in its original sense); (2) a substandard budget; and (3) a teenage audience.”⁷¹ And while Doherty squarely places *Rebel* within the genre of the teenpic, albeit one of the first to kick off the genre along with *Blackboard Jungle* (which preceded *Rebel* in the marketplace by only a few months), *Rebel without a Cause* only partially fills two of the three elements, and actually does not completely fulfill any of them. *Rebel* is not a mere teenpic; more accurately, it is one of the films that caused the ensuing production of teenpics that plagued the film scene in the latter half of the decade.

Rebel did feature “timely subject matter,” but Warner Bros. used no “wild promotions,” as we will later see. *Rebel* also had a teenage audience, but not exclusively, and most likely not even as proportionally large as the real teenpics to follow it. While the topic of the film certainly spoke to teenagers of the era, it was also a topic that easily

⁷¹ Thomas Doherty, *Teenagers and Teenpics: The Juvenilization of American Movies in the 1950s* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1988), 8.

lent itself to the classification of social problem film, a genre that would have brought in a larger, adult demographic. But the element of the exploitation film, and therefore teenpic, that *Rebel* in no way fits is that of a substandard budget. The film cost Warner Bros. \$1,500,000, not a small sum for the 1950s, and certainly not for Jack Warner, one of the stingiest heads of all the Hollywood studios.⁷² *Rebel without a Cause* was shot in Cinemascope, a process that was then reserved at Warners for only the largest of productions, and in color. In fact, Warner Bros. switched the production to color *after* many of the scenes at the Griffith Observatory had already been shot in black-and-white, making the decision to film *Rebel* in color that much more of an additional expense.

No one knows exactly why Warners switched the film to color. But Jim Backus, the actor who played Dean's father in the film, has been quoted as having said that when "the reports started coming in on *East of Eden* . . . [Warner Bros.] knew they had a star on their hands [with James Dean]" thus resulting in the film's shift to color.⁷³ Now, *Rebel without a Cause* had not been originally conceived as a star vehicle for Dean. The project had actually been on Warners shelves since the mid-1940s, based on a book of youth psychology by the same name. In fact, Marlon Brando had initially been tested for the lead role in 1947. And it was Nicholas Ray who took it on as his pet project in 1954, morphing it from a story about slum kids (as the original text called for) to a film about well-to-do suburbanite teenagers, with no thought of James Dean in his mind for the picture. Nicholas Ray's reputation as a director, as well as the strength of the script, is undoubtedly what secured the film's Cinemascope status. But it appears to be the addition of the star power of James Dean, confirmed for Warner Bros. with the initial

⁷² Lawrence Fascella and Al Weisel, *Live Fast, Die Young: The Wild Ride of Making Rebel Without A Cause* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), 240.

⁷³ *Ibid*, 117.

returns for *East of Eden* (Warner Bros. 1955), James Dean's first film, that convinced Warner Bros. that *Rebel* was an important enough film to warrant color, transforming it into a sort of ad hoc star vehicle.

And beyond its aspect ratio and film stock, *Rebel's* cast and crew spoke to the film's stature. It was directed by Nicholas Ray, whose name might not have carried much weight at the time with audiences (at least not in comparison to Dean's other directors, Kazan and Stevens), but whose reputation was well-established by 1943, as the director of such projects as *In a Lonely Place* (Columbia Pictures 1950) and *The Flying Leathernecks* (RKO 1951). James Dean, of course, was an actor who Warner Bros. was consciously grooming for success. Considering the amount of time, energy, and money they had already put into Dean's stardom, it is unlikely they would have thrown him into any cheap, straight-of-the-conveyor-belt exploitation film, especially not, as stated before, after he had proved so successful in *East of Eden*. And the rest of the cast filled out the film nicely. Natalie Wood was a veteran of the movie industry, a known name, and a child star who was managing a smooth transition into adult stardom. Jim Backus, as well, was a known comedic actor attempting a switch to more serious roles with his part in *Rebel*. All in all, *Rebel Without a Cause* did not suffer from the low production values one would expect to see if it were nothing more than a "teenpic." Films such as *Teenage Rebel* (Twentieth Century-Fox 1956) and *The Blob* (Paramount 1958) fit Doherty's definition far better. *Rebel* was really only a teenpic in the sense that it was about teenagers. But that is where the relationship to the genre begins and ends. As Jack Warner himself put it, in all capital letters, in an April 2, 1955, memo to the film's

producer, David Weisbart, “THIS IS A VERY IMPORTANT PICTURE.”⁷⁴ Clearly, Jack Warner did not consider *Rebel* to be a cheap, exploitative teenpic. To Warner Bros., it was a film of much significance and stature, which is important to keep in mind when considering Warners handling of the film in the light of its star’s death.

Damage Control

Initially, it does not seem to appear that Warner Bros. marketing/advertising executives first viewed the death of James Dean as any sick sort of financial or marketing opportunity (which, they just might have if the film had been a run-of-the-mill teenpic). To be sure, they had just lost a huge investment with the Dean’s death. Dean had a nine picture/six year contract, of which he had only completed three pictures and eighteen months. And Warners still had two pictures of Dean’s left to be released. *Rebel Without a Cause* was slated to open in less than four weeks, and *Giant* (Warner Bros. 1956) was still in production. Historically, posthumously released films had actually enjoyed mixed success at the box office. The posthumous films of Will Rogers and Jean Harlow did well while Carole Lombard’s had flopped miserably.⁷⁵ But regardless, the accepted wisdom at Warner Bros. at the time seemed to be that a dead star meant a death sentence for the film as well. Jack Warner even reportedly had said “Nobody will come and see a corpse!”⁷⁶ Imminent catastrophe, not the potentials of the exploitation of young peoples’

⁷⁴ Lawrence Fascella and Al Weisel, *Live Fast, Die Young: The Wild Ride of Making Rebel Without A Cause* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), 117.

⁷⁵ Lawrence Fascella and Al Weisel, *Live Fast, Die Young: The Wild Ride of Making Rebel Without A Cause* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), 237.

⁷⁶ Wes D. Gehring. “Hollywood’s Dilemma about Posthumous releases,” *USA Today Magazine*, May 2003, 64.

necrophilia, could have been the only thing on their minds that October when *Rebel* opened. And their actions support this

Rebel Without a Cause opened in New York October 26, 1955. Not surprisingly, no premiere was held for the film, in New York or any other city. Only a small mention ran in the *Times* declaring the start of its run.⁷⁷ The lack of a premiere in New York, while being understandable, is unique, and is indicative of Warner Bros.' desire to downplay the release of the film. Any premiere for the film would most likely still have been a big draw. As stated before, the rest of the cast was not completely lacking in star weight. Natalie Wood, in particular, was quite the rising starlet at the time. Warner Bros. had taken her under their wing, transforming her from child to young adult. At the time of *Rebel*'s release, Wood's star status was approximately what Dean's had been at the time of *Eden*'s release. In other words, the premiere of *Rebel* without Dean still would have had enough star power and pull, especially when one considers that Warners could have recruited any number of stars from Hollywood to attend, making it a star-studded event even without Dean. And even if James Dean had been alive, there was no way that Warner Bros. could have guaranteed his appearance at any premiere they planned anyway. He had failed to show for the New York premiere of *East of Eden* back in March of 1955. So the mere absence of the film's star would not have been enough for Warners to cancel the premiere. However, the star's death was. A premiere is a celebration, of the film and the people who made it. With James Dean so recently deceased, it would have been terribly crass and in poor taste to visibly celebrate the opening of *Rebel Without a Cause*. And Warner Bros. knew this. On October 5, 1955,

⁷⁷ "Of Local Origin," *New York Times*, October 26, 1955.

Variety reported that Warner Bros. would go ahead and release *Rebel Without a Cause*.⁷⁸ The fact that its release was even up for debate proves that Warners was attempting to handle the film with kid gloves. And the lack of a premiere for the film is further indicative of this attitude toward *Rebel*. All of Warner Bros. actions concerning *Rebel* seem to indicate that they wished to gently and quietly put the film on the market, attempting to stir up as little reference to their dead star as was possible, and hopefully recuperating the \$1.5 million they had sunk into the film. This does not mean that they did not do *anything* to promote the film, just that their campaign for *Rebel* was significantly quieter than one would normally expect for such a film, and the only logical reason for this is the death of its star. Los Angeles, however, did witness the most unusual display of Warners' attempt to quickly, and painlessly, relieve themselves of the film.

Rebel Without a Cause opened in Los Angeles on November 9, 1955, two weeks after it had opened in New York, and it was in this city that Warner Bros. forwent the run-zone-clearance model of distribution. They released the film everywhere all at once. On November 9, *Rebel* went into thirteen theatres, which included first-runs, neighborhood and suburban theatres, as well as drive-ins. And, to top it all off, it was released on a double-bill with *The Warriors* (also known as *The Dark Avenger*, Allied Artists 1955) starring Errol Flynn. While this proved to be a smart distribution pattern for *Rebel*, such a release strategy at this time, when studios were stubbornly sticking to the old model of distribution (despite how outdated it was becoming in this era of suburbanization), reads as if the distributor was trying to dump the film, something they would not have thought of doing if James Dean had been alive. Nothing ran in any of the

⁷⁸ "Death of James Dean, Promising Star of 24, Not Affecting 'Rebel,'" *Variety*, October 5, 1955.

trade papers suggesting that Warners was at all trying some new distribution pattern in Los Angeles for *Rebel Without a Cause*. The kind of release Warner Bros. gave *Rebel* in Los Angeles was something they would have done for a cheap, B-movie, which was exactly what followed *Rebel* in several of the theatres it opened in—*Texas Lady*, a low-budget Western produced by RKO and a fifty-two-year-old Claudette Colbert as its only star. Los Angeles, the city that seemed to feel the death of James Dean more than any other, was the only city that received this treatment. In other cities, Warners followed the old run-zone-clearance model. For instance, *Rebel* opened in Chicago November 17, 1955 at the State-Lake Theater on the Loop and ran until December 21, 1956, and then it began its second run in several second tier theatres Jan 13, 1956.⁷⁹

But beyond just gently getting the film into theatres, Warner Bros. also had to contend with the *Rebel* advertising that had already been set. The most peculiar and disturbing case was with their “Making Of” featurette for *Rebel Without a Cause* that had already been shot, edited, and slated to air on TV as part of Warners’ show *Warner Brothers Presents* (Warner Bros. 1955). The program comprised three alternating fictional series (“Cheyenne,” “Casablanca,” and “Kings Row”). The last fifteen minutes of the show, called “Behind the Cameras,” was reserved for promoting one of Warner Bros.’ films, and since it was a significant film for the studio, they had of course made a special for *Rebel*, featuring their star, James Dean. At the end of said featurette, Warners had put in an interview with Dean. In a particularly nice bit of foreshadowing, the interviewer, actor Gig Young, had spoken with James Dean about his racecar and asked for his thoughts about driving fast on the highway. But even more unsettling were the

⁷⁹ The lack of an end date for Chicago’s second run of *Rebel Without a Cause* is discussed in the section “Post-Mortem Promotion of James Dean.”

last lines of the interview. As Dean is walking out the door, Young asks him “Do you have any special advice for the young people who drive,” to which Dean answers “Take it easy driving. The life you save might be mine.”⁸⁰ Obviously, since Dean died in a car crash, the interview as a whole, but especially these last lines, were clearly problematic. Warner Bros. seems to have been torn over whether to cut the whole interview or just the last lines.⁸¹ But their final decision was to just toss the whole thing and replace it with an interview with Jim Backus, the actor who played Dean’s father in *Rebel*. In the interview he talks, in lieu of fast driving, about the problem of juvenile delinquency in America.⁸² Thus, except for the times when James Dean appears in the scenes included in the special (which post-James Dean’s death, did not include the “chickie” run scene), the *Rebel* pitch does not make mention of the star of the film, avoiding the whole issue of his recent death quite nicely. It is not clear when this *Rebel* featurette was originally slated to air, but the reedited version with Jim Backus aired on November 1, 1955, a week after *Rebel Without a Cause* premiered in New York.⁸³

Other than this odd and foreboding TV spot, however, the real issue for Warner Bros. was the print ads for *Rebel Without a Cause*. For *East of Eden* (Warner Bros. 1955), they had saturated national newspapers with large, lavish advertisements for the film which pointedly sold the movie on the basis of James Dean, Hollywood’s new find, and one would expect them to have planned to do a similar campaign with Dean’s second

⁸⁰ James Dean interview. 1955. *Rebel without a Cause* DVD. Directed by Nicholas Ray. Burbank, CA: Warner Bros.

⁸¹ Hedda Hopper, “Clift and Libby Holman to Make Movie in Italy,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 8, 1955.

⁸² Jim Backus interview. 1955. *Rebel without a Cause* DVD. Directed by Nicolas Ray. Burbank, CA: Warner Bros.

⁸³ “Cheyenne” Ad. *New York Times*, November 1, 1955.

film before his death. After his death, however, audiences saw a much different ad campaign from Warner Bros.

In the *New York Times*, for instance, the largest ads appeared before *Rebel* was released. These very much focused on Dean as the star and main attraction of the movie, calling him “the overnight sensation of *East of Eden*.”⁸⁴ These ads featured Dean prominently using either the famous publicity shots for the picture displaying the young actor in red jacket and blue jeans, multiples stills from the film which focused on Dean, or close ups of the actor (see fig. 2.1) . However, these larger ads only ran for the three days previous to and the day of its opening in New York. After that, a much smaller, more subtle ad ran. Now, on October 5, *Variety* did run a piece on *Rebel Without a Cause* which stated that

The company [Warner Bros.] does not contemplate making any big changes in the text of the bally matter . . . Warners decided to go ahead with the ads which prominently feature Dean in both art and copy. Only change in the ads will be the elimination of the line of copy which reads: ‘The overnight sensation of ‘East of Eden’ becomes the star of the year!’⁸⁵

So this would explain why a few large ads featuring Dean do run in the *New York Times*. However, the report in *Variety* only says that Warner Bros. had no plans to change the *text* of the ads; it says nothing about what they planned to do about the *frequency* with which they would run them, and no other report ran in *Variety* concerning the advertisement of *Rebel Without a Cause*.

It is somewhat up for debate whether the profuse lack of large print ads was the campaign Warners had set before Dean died, or if they had decided to significantly decrease their number after his tragic death. But the latter seems more probable. With

⁸⁴ *Rebel without a Cause* Ad, *New York Times*, October 24, 1955.

⁸⁵ “Death of James Dean, Promising Star of 24, Not Affecting ‘Rebel,’” *Variety*, October 5, 1955.

East of Eden, Warners had begun running ads in the *New York Times* over a week before its premiere and continued to run large spreads throughout the first run of the film. But for *Rebel*, with the film's lead newly deceased, Warner Bros. seems to have tried to quiet the waters. After October 26 (the day *Rebel* opened in New York), the *Times* printed the same small ad nearly every day of its five week run—"James Dean," "*Rebel without a Cause*," and a tiny picture of Dean all in a diminutive little rectangle (see fig. 2.2).⁸⁶ The last week of the film's run, they did change it up a bit—Dean's picture was placed on the other side of the box.⁸⁷ But never did they run ads that mentioned the film being held over, it being a hit, or even advertising that it was playing its last week in New York. In comparison to *Eden*, or any other film of similar size and importance being shown that year, this advertisement strategy was particularly restrained. And surprisingly, the *New York Times* saw the largest saturation of *Rebel* ads. Other cities actually managed to be even more low-key in their advertisements of *Rebel* than New York.

⁸⁶ *Rebel without a Cause* Ad, *New York Times*, October 31, 1955.

⁸⁷ *Rebel without a Cause* Ad, *New York Times*, November 28, 1955.



Figure 2.1. Example of First NY *Rebel* ad. Source: *New York Times*, October 24, 1955.

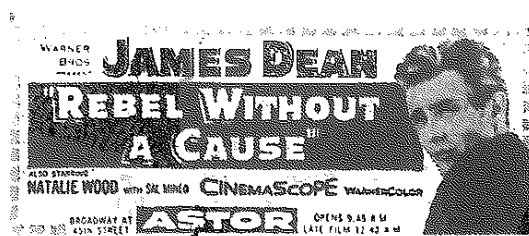


Figure 2.2: Common NY *Rebel* ad. Source: *New York Times*, October 31, 1955.

In Chicago, the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, in fact, only ran two ads. Both of them were fair sized, featured stills from the film containing James Dean, and had the best copy ever written for motion picture advertisements. One read “Look Ma, no handcuffs—yet!”⁸⁸ (see fig. 2.3) the other, to go along with a picture of Dean and Wood together, “Do you know why she just rubbed a little dirt in his hands?”⁸⁹ But other than those two fantastic, super spiffy ads, nothing else ran. Los Angeles, however, actually managed an even greater lackluster ad campaign. The *Los Angeles Times*, in fact, only ever ran a single real ad and that was for its opening weekend in LA. It did feature James Dean prominently, using the classic image of him in jeans and red jacket leaning against wall smoking a cigarette, as well as a still from the film with Natalie Wood. The ad calls

⁸⁸ *Rebel without a Cause* Ad, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 14, 1955.

⁸⁹ *Rebel without a Cause* Ad, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 2, 1955.

Dean “genius” and “the overnight sensation of ‘East of Eden.’”⁹⁰ But this is not only the largest ad that ran in the *LA Times*, but the *only* ad, of any size, that ran in the *LA Times*. Except for small topper ads for the drive-in listing column (which did often contain a very small, cartoon-like-figure of Dean (see fig. 2.4)), no other ads seemed to have run in Los Angeles, or at least not in the city’s largest newspaper. Thus, no locale saw the kind of ad saturation that they saw for *Eden* and nothing like what would normally be expected for a movie of *Rebel*’s stature, if the film had been released under different circumstances.

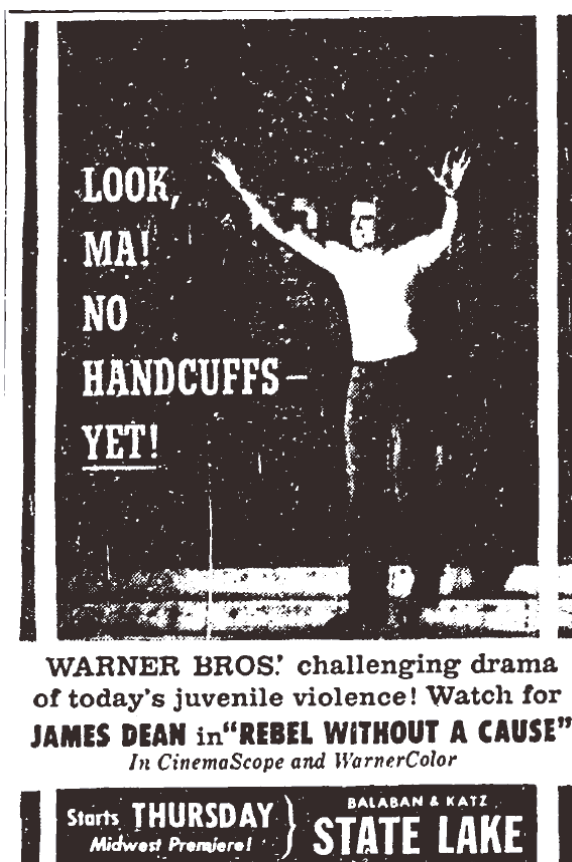


Figure 2.3. One of the two ads in the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 14, 1955.

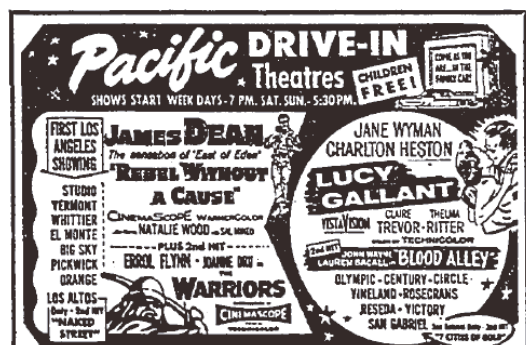


Figure 2.4. Drive-In Topper Ad, *Los Angeles Times* November 10, 1955.

⁹⁰ *Rebel without a Cause* Ad, *Los Angeles Times*, November 11, 1955.

However, despite all the languid advertising and the odd distribution seen in Los Angeles, *Rebel Without a Cause* did well at the box office. It played five weeks in New York, a month in Chicago, and three weeks in Washington, D.C. These runs are not nearly as long as those for *East of Eden*, but they are still respectable, and the receipts *Rebel* brought in had it ranked as one of the top box office earners nearly every week of its first run in each locale, especially in Los Angeles (not surprising considering its distribution there), and nationwide.⁹¹ In its first year of release, *Rebel Without a Cause* brought in \$4,500,000 Warner Bros., making it the eleventh highest-grossing film of 1956.⁹² Jack Warner's important picture had paid off.

Somewhere along the way, Warner Bros. seems to have picked up on the fact that, even dead, James Dean was still very bankable and the public's peculiar, morbid obsession with him could sell. So, with the unwitting success of *Rebel* under their belts, Warners turned to the problem of Dean's last film, *Giant*, an extravagant, multi-million dollar epic monstrosity that would not hit theatres until the fall of 1956. Anxious to keep themselves in the black, Warners moved in the latter part of 1955 and through 1956 to keep the James Dean craze rolling, at least until they could premiere *Giant* and see decent

⁹¹ "National Box Office Survey," *Variety*, November 2, 1955; "'Rebel' Balto Ace, 15G; 'Swing' 8G 2nd," *Variety*, November 2, 1955; "'Rebel' Wham \$30,000, Hub; 'Trial' Torrid 34G, '3 Stripes' 8G," *Variety*, November 2, 1955; "'Rebel' Ropes \$35,000, B'Way; 'Brunettes' Brisk 26G 'Illegal'-Vaude Fine 27G; 'Oklahoma' 541/2G, 'Men' 21G," *Variety*, November 2, 1955; "National Box Office Survey," *Variety*, November 9, 1955; "'Rebel' Bangup \$10,000, K.C." *Variety*, November 9, 1955; "'Rebel' Smash \$14,000, Port," *Variety*, November 9, 1955; 'Rebel' Robust \$19,000," *Variety*, November 9, 1955; "National Box Office Survey," *Variety*, November 16, 1955; "L.A. Biz Still Off Despite 6 New Films But 'Rebel' Rousing \$52,000," *Variety*, November 16, 1955; "'Rebel' Robust 12G," *Variety*, November 16, 1955; "National Box Office Survey," *Variety*, November 23, 1955; "Cold Sloughs Port Biz, 'Rebel' Fat 8G," *Variety*, November 23, 1955; "'Rebel' Sock 31G," *Variety*, November 23, 1955; "National Box Office Survey," *Variety*, November 30, 1955; "'Rebel' Lively 33G," *Variety*, November 30, 1955; "'Rebel' Mighty 18G Leads Mpl.s," *Variety*, November 30, 1955; "National Box Office Survey," *Variety*, December 7, 1955; "'Rebel' Big 27G," *Variety*, December 7, 1955; "National Box Office Survey," *Variety*, December 14, 1955.

⁹² Lawrence Fascella and Al Weisel, *Live Fast, Die Young: The Wild Ride of Making Rebel Without A Cause* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), 240.

returns on their considerable investment there. *Rebel* proved to them that a dead man could sell; *Giant* allowed them to put their new found knowledge into action.

Post-Mortem Promotion of James Dean

Warner Bros.' first method for keeping James Dean in the public eye was keeping both *Rebel Without a Cause* and *East of Eden* in theatres. However, along the way, they were helped by some outside organizations. On September 7, 1955, the Council of Motion Picture Organizations, Inc. announced that they would conduct a nationwide poll of American audiences' favorite actors and movies. James Dean had initially been nominated for Most Promising New Star and Best Actor for *East of Eden*.⁹³ Obviously, after his death, his name was crossed off the list for Most Promising New Star. However, perhaps because of his death, he won Best Actor in December of 1955.⁹⁴ Then, on February 19, 1956, James Dean was nominated for an Oscar for his work in *East of Eden*. *Eden* also received nominations for its direction (Elia Kazan), screenplay (Paul Osborn), and supporting actress (Jo Van Fleet). Although Dean was not nominated for his performance in it, *Rebel Without a Cause* also secured a few nominations for itself: writing of a motion picture story (Nicholas Ray), supporting actor (Sal Mineo), and supporting actress (Natalie Wood).⁹⁵ While James Dean did not win his Academy Award, Jo Van Fleet from *East of Eden* did, which would later give that film an added boost.⁹⁶

⁹³ "Nominate More Movie Stars for November Audience Poll," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 7, 1955.

⁹⁴ James Dean and Jennifer Jones Win in Poll of Movie Audience," *New York Times*, December 7, 1955.

⁹⁵ "A Dead Actor is Nominated for Top Oscar," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, February 19, 1956.

⁹⁶ "Borgnine and Miss Magnani Win Movie-Acting Awards," *Christian Science Monitor*, March 22, 1956.

After *Rebel* finished its first run in cities in December, it started working its way through the subsequent runs. Then, after James Dean won the Audience Poll Award for best actor, and while Natalie Wood accepted the award on Dean's behalf, Warners decided that this was a perfect opportunity to rerelease *East of Eden*. So as *Rebel* played in second run theatres, *Eden* was booked into first run theatres in twelve cities (incidentally this also worked as a great plug for the Oscars that were, by then, just around the corner).⁹⁷ After *Eden* finished its limited engagements in first runs, it started working its way through the zones, right alongside *Rebel*. Both films continued to play in neighborhoods and drive-ins until March. After the Academy Awards, *Rebel Without a Cause*, having been nominated for three Oscars, found its way back into first run theatres in select cities.⁹⁸ It then subsequently worked its way back down the ladder to the suburbs. Both films then played practically continuously throughout the summer months. When September, the one year anniversary of Dean's death, rolled around, theatres began running tributes to James Dean with both *East of Eden* and *Rebel Without a Cause* playing on a double-bill. In short, neither of the films got a chance to cool their heels. They ran constantly from the time Dean died until *Giant* premiered in October. In any given area, from December of 1955 to October of 1956, one could find either *East of Eden* or *Rebel Without a Cause* or both in some theatre nearly every day. They would have short runs, usually consisting of a few days, in a given theatre, and then they would move to another theatre, however remaining in the same general geographic area. They mostly stayed in neighborhoods and drive-ins, which did not mean much to Hollywood in terms of revenue, but were significant in the number of people they reached. This kind of

⁹⁷ Thomas M. Pryor, "Film Awards Add Money to Glory," *New York Times*, December 14, 1955.

⁹⁸ *Rebel without a Cause* Ad, *Washington Post and Times Herald*, March 22, 1956.

hard push of Dean's films worked to saturate the public with images of Dean; they served as a constant reminder of his cinematic presence, in spite of his death.

Warner Bros. also tried other gimmicks, not only to promote the Dean phenomenon, but to cash in on it too. Most notably, in the summer of 1956, Warners started manufacturing and selling life-size replicas of James Dean's head. Produced at 300 a week, they sold for \$30 and were advertised in national newspapers and magazines. Most disturbingly, they covered the heads with a product called Miraclelesh which was reported to feel like real skin, a detail that demonstrates Warner Bros.' commitment to the promotion of the public's morbid fascination with the dead James Dean.⁹⁹

As well, Warners went to the presses. In a memo from the publicity department on prerelease campaign ideas for *Giant*, Warner Bros. personnel actually wrote that "columnists, fan magazines, all segments [of the] press and television [are] to be kept provided with all possible material on James Dean."¹⁰⁰ Accordingly, an increased number of articles in fan magazines were published during this period. James Dean had made it into fan magazines during his lifetime, but the fanzines spilled more ink on Dean after he died than they had while he was still alive. The stories they printed mostly breakdown into roughly four different categories: the last days/hours/moments of James Dean's life, who the real James Dean was, the Dean phenomenon and why people love him so much, and personal accounts of individuals' experiences with Dean. The last category is the most fascinating. If you had walked by James Dean on the street at some point, you just might have been called upon to write an article about him. With only twenty-four years to cover and not many unique stories to tell from those few years, the

⁹⁹ Ezra Goodman, "Delirium Over Dead Star," *Life*, September 24, 1956, 76-88.

¹⁰⁰ Campaign Ideas on *Giant* Memo. Warner Bros. Archives, School of Cinematic Arts, University of Southern California.

fan magazines had to get variety somewhere, and this is how they did it—by asking everyone to write about him. Various movie magazines printed accounts from Dean’s father, his grandmother, his old college roommate, and one man who could boast having spent a whole day with Dean.¹⁰¹ But particularly interesting is the number of Warner Bros. employees who felt moved to put their remembrances in writing. Fan magazines printed articles written by Nicholas Ray, George Stevens, Henry Ginsberg (the producer for *Giant*), Natalie Wood, Sal Mineo, Nick Adams, among others.¹⁰² Obviously Warners personnel would have been Dean’s coworkers and bosses, and thus would have been people who knew him, but Dean knew plenty of celebrities off the Warner lot (such as Sammy Davis, Jr., or Vampira), but none of these non-Warners people ever felt compelled to express their grief about James Dean through the fan magazines. The fact that it was people who were either contracted out to Warner Bros. or had a stake in the studio that were called to write is particularly telling as to who exactly was pulling the strings in the continued publication of Dean related material.

Few of these were small articles either. Many were publicized as “book-length” or “feature-length” articles. One-shot magazines of James Dean were also wildly popular; in fact, Dean was one of the most popular subjects for one-shot magazines in 1956, holding a spot at the top with Elvis Presley.¹⁰³ These kinds of fan-magazine-like articles also found their way into national newspapers, such as the *Washington Post* and *Chicago Tribune*, something not generally seen, but did allow the fandom to spread to a

¹⁰¹ Emma Woolen Dean, “The Boy I Loved,” *Photoplay*, March, 1956, www.jamesdeanarchives.com/articles; William Bast, “There was a Boy . . .,” *Photoplay*, September, 1956, 39-42, 98-100; Mike Connolly, “This Was My Friend Jimmy Dean,” *Modern Screen*, December, 1955, 50-52, 77-81.

¹⁰² Nick Adams, “Jimmy Dean—Why We Loved Him,” *Movie Life*, September, 1956, www.jamesdeanarchives.com/articles ; Sal Mineo, “The Dean I Knew,” *The Real James Dean Story*, 1956, www.jamesdeanarchives.com/articles;

¹⁰³ “News of the Advertising and Marketing Fields,” *New York Times*, October 8, 1955.

wider audience.¹⁰⁴ And of course, gossip columnists, Hedda Hopper in particular, continued to mention James Dean throughout 1956, in reference to his films, to him deserving an Oscar, to the spreading obsession, and sometimes just because someone looked like James Dean.¹⁰⁵

***Giant* Fodder and Release**

As its premiere date approached, *Giant* soon became a topic of discussion for both newspapers and magazines. What is revealing is *how* they wrote about *Giant*. When journalists wrote about the film, it was in reference to one of two things—first, that it had been “three years in preparation and making,”¹⁰⁶ and/or, second, James Dean. In discussing James Dean, people constantly referenced it as his final, greatest performance. That it “will give his numerous fans their final opportunity to see the late James Dean on the screen,”¹⁰⁷ that it “would have sealed his position, had he lived, as Hollywood’s top male star,”¹⁰⁸ that it was a “matchless performance”¹⁰⁹ which is “bound to cause a terrific

¹⁰⁴ Seymour Korman, “The Last Hours of James Dean,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, February 5, 1956; Jeanne Balch Capen, “The Strange Revival of James Dean,” *The Washington Post and Times Herald*, July 29, 1956; Evelyn Washburn Nielsen, “The Truth about James Dean,” *Chicago daily Tribune*, September 9, 1956;

¹⁰⁵ Hedda Hopper, “Ina Claire Sought by Bassler for Play,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 5, 1955; Hedda Hopper, “Clift to Make Film with Libby Holman,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 12, 1955; Hedda Hopper, “Bill Holden Gets Star Role in Picture, ‘The Rainmaker’,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 11, 1955; Hedda Hopper, “Tab Hunter Signed to Star in the ‘Burning Hills’ Film,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 1, 1955; Hedda Hopper, “Monty Clift Signs Contract with Metro for Three Films,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 10, 1955; Hedda Hopper, “Tamblyn will Costar in ‘Fastest Gun Alive,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 16, 1955; Hedda Hopper, “Tony Martin Named for ‘Bandit in Black,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 29, 1955; Hedda Hopper, “Marvin will Costar in ‘Raintree County,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 27, 1956; Hedda Hopper, “Mario Lanza Gets Salary but No Role in ‘Golden Boy’,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 24, 1956; Hedda Hopper, “Theatre Owners Fret About Films on TV,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, May 28, 1956; Louella Parsons, “Career Prospects for Jeff,” *Washington Post and Times Herald*, December 16, 1955; Louella Parsons, “Ann Sothorn Threatens to Walk Out,” *Washington Post and Times Herald*, February 14, 1956; Louella Parsons, “‘Billy the Kid Kept on the Books,” *Washington Post and Times Herald*, April 25, 1956.

¹⁰⁶ “Super Red Carpet Treatment Set Up for ‘Giant’ Guests,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 5, 1955.

¹⁰⁷ Mae Tinee, “In Retrospect ’55 was Good Movie Year,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 1, 1956.

¹⁰⁸ Louis Berg, “Hollywood’s Jolliest Year,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 8, 1956.

furor,”¹¹⁰ and that he steals the picture and you will walk out of the theatre saying “Thank God for Jimmy Dean.”¹¹¹ Some synopses of the movie even claimed that the film was primarily about Dean’s character Jett Rink, which is categorically untrue.¹¹² Dean is actually billed third in the movie, after Elizabeth Taylor and Rock Hudson, the true stars of the film. And although he was billed as one of the three stars of the film, in terms of screen time, Dean really only plays a supporting role. It is almost shocking how infrequently the other stars of the film are ever mentioned. The consistency in all these pieces’ focus on Dean as the primary pitch for the film seems to suggest the hand of Warner Bros. Other than the fact that, for the past ten months, Warners had clearly been at work promoting Dean, the fact that all the writers from the various publications that wrote on *Giant* found nearly the exact same things to say about the film seems to suggest a central source for the ideas. Even if it was all some great coincidence that all newspaper and magazine columnists found *Giant* fascinating for the exact same reasons, Warner Bros. certainly was not doing anything to redirect their attention away from Dean toward any other aspect of the film. Thus, in supporting the promotion of *Giant* based on the fact that it contained Dean’s final performances, and allowing for claims that the performance it contained was the greatest of this short life (a dubious assertion), Warner Bros. was clearly trying to harness the continuing popularity of James Dean, a popularity they had largely helped create.

¹⁰⁹ Dorothy Kilgallen, “Marlon Pines for Girl in Pittsburg,” *Washington Post and Times Herald*, December 2, 1955.

¹¹⁰ Edwin Schallert, “Martin Lewis Reunion Assured,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 29, 1956.

¹¹¹ Hedda Hopper, “Orson Welles is a Cowboy in his First Western,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 3, 1956.

¹¹² *James Dean Anniversary Book*, September, 1956, 38.

Giant premiered in New York October 10, 1956, just ten days after the anniversary of James Dean's death. The date could not have been a coincidence. Having promoted the film on the basis of Dean, this was the prime time to release it. At the time, anniversary articles and several one-shot issues of fan magazines were on stands in memory of Dean, tribute shows of *Rebel Without a Cause* and *East of Eden* were showing in suburban theatres, and TV personalities such as Steve Allen and Ed Sullivan were running tributes as well for James Dean (which just also happened to include showing scenes from *Giant*).¹¹³ James Dean was on everyone's mind. Not surprisingly, *Giant* turned out to be the biggest box office hit for Warner Bros., up until that time—made possible by James Dean. Warners had done their job well. They had proven that the image of a dead man could sell, and the Dean craze had survived for another year.

Warner Bros. made it near impossible for people to forget Dean because they found it essential that people remember him. With two films left to be sold to a public who was showing up less and less frequently to the movies, they ensured that James Dean remained as big of a draw in death as he had been in life. They needed a legend; so they created one. They started a ball rolling in 1956 that has yet to come to rest.

¹¹³ Val Adams, "Tribute to Actor Starts TV War," *New York Times*, October 4, 1956.

Chapter 3

Icon:

The James Dean Phenomenon with and without Warner Bros.

The year after the release of *Giant* saw the Dean craze go haywire. Dean exploitation seemed to hit all new highs. People were releasing record albums, making biopics and documentaries, publishing books, putting his sports cars on display, all unashamedly expecting to make money off the Dean name. However most of this seems almost wholly unconnected with the Warner Bros. machine. During *Giants'* release, Warner Bros. did not let up in its promotion of James Dean. But after they had filled their coffers, they dropped Dean, legend and all. And, after Warner Bros. had checked out, the Dean phenomenon noticeably started losing steam. While everyone was trying to cash in on the Dean craze, it was becoming increasingly clear that he lacked the bankability he had had when Warner Bros. was in the game. By the time *The James Dean Story* (Warner Bros. 1957), an independently produced documentary about the dead actor's life, was released a year after *Giant* it was obvious that, while a certain morbid underground Dean death cult still lingered on, the mainstream popularity of Dean was quickly fading. However, the successful release of *Giant* coupled with the not-so-brilliant release of *The James Dean Story* provides further evidence of the significant role Warner Bros. played in creating the James Dean phenomenon and turning a young star into a legend.

***Giant* Ads**

Unlike what Warner Bros. did for *Rebel Without a Cause* by way of advertising, which was pathetically little, for *Giant*, released a year after *Rebel*, they pulled out all the stops. Huge print ads swept the nation starting a week before its release on October 10 and ending only after it had finished its first run on Christmas Day, 1956. And other than printing ads in large quantities, Warner Bros. also used a greater variety of ads than they had used on their previously released Dean film *Rebel*. But on the whole, most ads gave equal weight to all three of the films' stars. The most common ad featured small headshots of Hudson, Taylor, and Dean, the title of the film and the list of credits occupying more of the ad space than any still from the film or any one photo of any star (see fig. 3.1). As per his contract and the billing required for the film, James Dean's name in ads, typically, was the same size as his other costars but third billed.¹¹⁴ The ads that ran in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* differed slightly. Ads appearing after October 29, 1956, billed James Dean second, and after November 4, 1956, Dean had moved up to top billing in Chicago.¹¹⁵ But most other cities kept Dean's name third on the list of acting credits.

¹¹⁴ James Dean's Contract, Warner Bros. Archives, School of Cinematic Arts, University of Southern California.

¹¹⁵ *Giant* Ad, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 21, 1956; *Giant* Ad, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 23, 1956; *Giant* Ad, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 27, 1956; *Giant* Ad, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 29, 1956; *Giant* Ad, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 30, 1956; *Giant* Ad, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 31, 1956; *Giant* Ad, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 4, 1956; *Giant* Ad, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 5, 1956; *Giant* Ad, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 7, 1956.

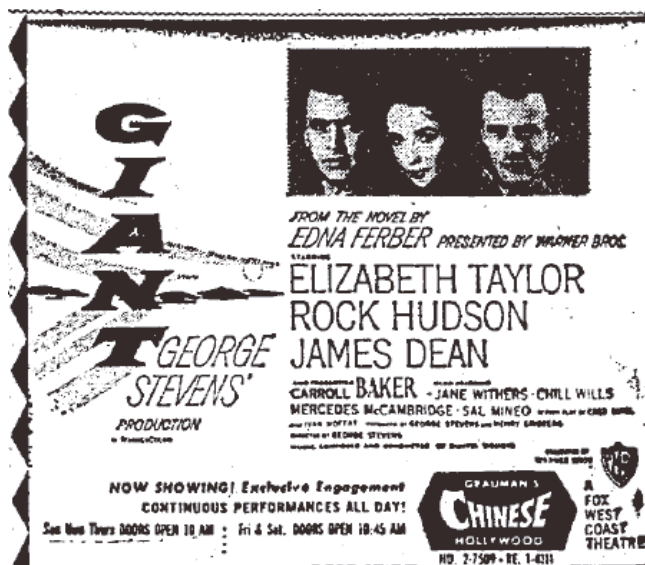


Figure 3.1. Typical *Giant* Ad. Source: *Los Angeles Times*, October 23, 1956.

However, while most print ads gave no more weight to James Dean than they did to the other stars, there were noticeable exceptions. A few featured Dean solely or at least to a greater degree than they featured Taylor or Hudson. One ad reserved half its space for Dean, including two photos of Dean and relegating a shot of Hudson and Taylor embracing to the corner of the ad (see fig. 3.2). Two ads that ran in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* featured Dean alone. They focused on the character of Jett Rink (the character Dean plays in the film) and featured either a close-up or a full length photo of Dean in Rink costume (see fig. 3.2).¹¹⁶ Warner Bros. had made a similar mock up for Elizabeth Taylor, highlighting her character of Leslie Benedict, but it ran less frequently than Dean's.¹¹⁷ Presumably they also made one for Rock Hudson as Bick Benedict, but, if they did, it must have run even more infrequently than even Taylor's did and in smaller newspapers. Similarly, the few ads that featured stills from the movie typically featured

¹¹⁶ *Giant* Ad, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 18, 1956; *Giant* ad. *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 22, 1956.

¹¹⁷ *Giant* Ad, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 29, 1956.

more scenes with Dean than with Hudson. Usually they would have a still with Hudson and Taylor and then two stills with Taylor and Dean.¹¹⁸

NOT IN THIS CENTURY WILL THERE BE ANYTHING TO COMPARE WITH

GIANT

THEATRE - STATE NEAR RANDOLPH

CHICAGO

2nd GIANT WEEK!

Today
Open 10 a.m.
9:00 to 11 a.m.
Last "Giant"
Starts 9:30 p.m.

FROM THE NOVEL BY
EDNA FERBER
PRESENTED BY
WARNER BROS. IN WARNERCOLOR

GEORGE STEVENS' PRODUCTION

Bick Benedict—
a man's man, a
woman's ideal.

Jett Rink was made of
laughs and lies and
loving locks; and he
was made to get to the
top—so he could have
the fun of falling
all the way down.

Leslie Lynnton—
strong-willed,
romantic.

JAMES DEAN · ELIZABETH TAYLOR · ROCK HUDSON AND PRESENTING
CARROLL BAKER

Jett Rink was made to get to the top--so he could have the fun of falling all the way down...

THE TIME HAS COME FOR

GIANT

GEORGE STEVENS' PRODUCTION

FROM THE NOVEL BY
EDNA FERBER
ELIZABETH TAYLOR IS LESLIE
LYNNTON · ROCK HUDSON IS
BICK BENEDICT · JAMES DEAN
IS JETT RINK · PRESENTED BY
WARNER BROS. IN WARNERCOLOR

Midwest Premiere
OCTOBER 25

CHICAGO
THEATRE - STATE NEAR RANDOLPH

Figure 3.2: *Giant* ads with Dean focus. Source: *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 1, 1956, and October 18, 1956.

¹¹⁸ *Giant* Ad, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 1, 1956; *Giant* Ad, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 8, 1956; *Giant* Ad, *Los Angeles Times*, November 16, 1956.

And on top of the print ads, the movie stills from *Giant* that newspapers ran to announce its opening or some other news about the film, more often than not, featured James Dean more frequently and more prominently than the films' other two stars. For example, the picture of that ran with Bosley Crowther's review in the *New York Times* was of a scene with Dean and Taylor (see fig. 3.3), and the picture that ran in the *Los Angeles Times* announcing the film's premiere in Los Angeles featured Dean alone in front of the Benedict ranch home (see fig. 3.4).

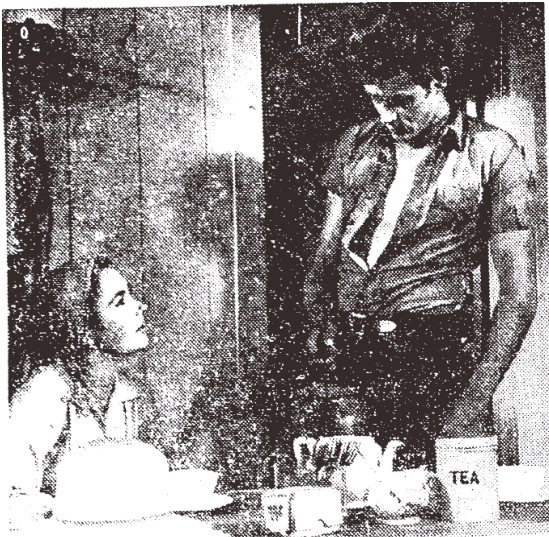


Figure 3.3: Still from *Giant* that ran in NYT. Source: *New York Times*, October 11, 1956.



Figure 3.4: Still from *Giant* that ran in LAT. Source: *Los Angeles Times*, October 14, 1956.

Giant's 1956 trailer, as well, continued the trend of emphasizing Dean over the other stars. The two scenes the trailer included just happen to be ones featuring James Dean, and considering Dean's limited screen time, and the peripheral nature of his character, these scenes were not the most obvious choices. It would have been just as easy, if not easier, to make a trailer without him, or at least with him less emphasized. The film is, after all, primarily about the relationship between Bick and Leslie Benedict, Rock Hudson and Elizabeth Taylor's characters. But in making the trailer, Warner Bros. clearly decided that Dean, and not Taylor or Hudson, was the bigger draw.

Given this trend in *Giant*'s advertising, as well as the Dean-centric publicity campaign that had preceded the film, one could have easily gotten the impression that Dean, and not Hudson, was the leading man and main protagonist of the film. Hedda Hopper wondered in print about the advertising of the film what others probably were wondering on their own after seeing the picture for the first time—"What about Liz Taylor and Rock Hudson?—They're in it [too]."¹¹⁹ Considering that, if Warner Bros. had indeed felt squeamish about promoting a dead man, they could have easily just removed him from the ad campaign all-together, the fact that Dean is not only included but emphasized is that much more striking. In fact, in their 1963 campaign for the re-release of *Giant*, Warner Bros. did pull James Dean from all their ads, stating in a letter that the "younger section of the population . . . interestingly enough is only vaguely aware that a young actor named James Dean was such a great sensation only a few years ago."¹²⁰

¹¹⁹ Hedda Hopper, "Adler Sees Kendall Scott on TV, Signs Him for Film," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 13, 1956.

¹²⁰ Letter to Gordon McLendon, February 2, 1963, Warner Bros. Archives, School of Cinematic Arts, University of Southern California.

Instead, their campaign seven years after the film's original release focused solely on Hudson and Taylor, a much more obvious move than emphasizing Dean, considering the plot of the film, in 1963 or 1956.¹²¹ But in '56, Warner Bros. was obviously determined to squeeze every last ounce of money-making capability out of their dead star, leading to a noticeably Dean-centric approach to promoting *Giant*.

Giant Success

The massive scale of Warners advertising for *Giant*, as well as the Dean emphasis, turned *Giant* into a huge commercial success. Its first run lasted from mid-October until December 24, 1956, when it was finally replaced by Elia Kazan's infamous *Baby Doll* (Warner Bros. 1956). That was over a two month first run, far longer than either the first runs of *East of Eden* or *Rebel Without a Cause*. A good thing too—the film cost Warner Bros. \$5.4 million but managed to bring in more than \$35 million in its first release.¹²² Obviously, this film was epic in scale, was directed by George Stevens, had a much larger budget than either of Dean's two previous films, was shot on location, and had three major stars (as opposed to one up-and-comer in *Eden* or one dead star and one former child star in *Rebel*). So it had many reasons to be successful and to warrant a big ad campaign from Warners other than Dean. But Dean's partial role in the success of *Giant* cannot be denied. And just to ensure the Dean fans, the moment *Giant* premiered in any given area, Warner Bros. pulled both *Rebel Without a Cause* and *East of Eden* from distribution, both of which had been playing nearly continuously for a year, a

¹²¹ Of course, in 1963, Hudson and Taylor were also huge stars, even larger than in 1956. But it is Warner Bros. complete disinterest with promoting the film on Dean that is significant. Clearly, he was an expendable part of any campaign for the film.

¹²² David Dalton, *James Dean: The Mutant King*, San Francisco: Straight Arrow Books 1974, 293.

strategy which undoubtedly must have funneled all Dean-obsessed teens towards *Giant*. Hedda Hopper herself was “horrified” by the blatant exploitation of a dead man that she observed in Warner Bros. dealings with *Giant*.¹²³ She guessed that America’s film audience would be equally appalled by Warner Bros. advertising moves. If box office receipts are any judge, she was wrong.

The critics, as well, ignored Hedda Hopper’s admonishments. Despite being a massive mess of a motion picture, *Giant* managed to fare well amongst reviewers. Much as the spiffy advertising was able to sway the general populace into spending their hard earned cash on a three-hour-plus ill-conceived monstrosity, the critical community seemed equally swayed by the mere fact that it had been directed by the “great” George Stevens. At that point in his career, Stevens had directed some fifty films, among them screen classics such as *Gunga Din* (RKO 1939), *A Place in the Sun* (Paramount 1951), and *Shane* (Paramount 1953). Apparently most critics were more influenced by Stevens’ giant reputation than by the actual quality of *Giant*. While most reviewers made note of the films’ “rambling and overwrought” qualities—one critic calling it “much bigger than impressive, better in the parts than in the whole”—it was George Stevens’ “handling of the images” that most impressed them.¹²⁴ Bosley Crowther called it “visual in staggering scenes of the great Texas plains and of passion-charged human relations that hold the hardness of the land and atmosphere.”¹²⁵ And under the “brilliant” direction of George Stevens, even James Dean finally managed to find favor with the critics, Bosley

¹²³ Hedda Hopper, “Adler Sees Kendall Scott on TV, Signs Him for Film,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 13, 1956.

¹²⁴ Bosley Crowther, “Screen: Large Subject,” *New York Times*, October 11, 1956; Richard Griffith, “‘Giant’ Called Better In Parts Than In Whole,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 23, 1956; Bosley Crowther, “Screen: Large Subject,” *New York Times*, October 11, 1956.

¹²⁵ Bosley Crowther, “Screen: Large Subject,” *New York Times*, October 11, 1956.

Crowther not excluded. He called Dean's performance "the most tangy and corrosive of the film . . . a haunting capstone to [his] brief career."¹²⁶ While some critics did comment that Dean was more impressive as the young Jett Rink than the old (Richard L. Coe stated that "the middle years go against a young actor"), most agreed that his performance was "original and moving . . . [his] portrait [being] that of a real performer."¹²⁷

When the 1956 Academy Awards rolled around in early 1957, the industry saw fit to reward the huge ticket sales and more or less positive reviews of *Giant* with nine Oscar nominations, among them James Dean's second posthumous nod. However, not so surprisingly considering the reviews, the only statuette *Giant* took home was for George Stevens in the category of best direction.

Warner Bros. Bows Out

Having more than recouped their costs on *Giant*, not to mention having garnered considerable critical acclaim, and having no more immediate Dean products to sell, Warner Bros. found no more need for James Dean or his fans. So Warner Bros. bowed out of the ring and left the field to everyone else. But in the wake of the success of *Giant* and Dean's other films, everyone else still saw huge financial opportunities left in the dead star; out came the claws and in swept the vultures. Throughout the release of *Giant* and following it in 1957, many found ways to further exploit the Dean image.

First came the release of albums for or of James Dean. These were all separate from Warner Bros. ventures. The only Dean-related albums Warner Bros. ever released were the soundtracks from his films. During the release of *Giant*, several tribute albums

¹²⁶ Bosley Crowther, "Screen: Large Subject," *New York Times*, October 11, 1956.

¹²⁷ Richard L. Coe, "On the Aisle: Giant Size Tale of Texas," *The Washington Post and Times Herald*, November 3, 1956.

were dropped, the first one recorded by Steve Allen called “The James Dean Story.”¹²⁸ Others to follow were “The Ballad of James Dean,” songs inspired by the actor; “Music James Dean Lived By,” apparently a compilation of music “that suggests the man himself”; and “A Tribute to James Dean,” music from all three of his films.¹²⁹

But even after *Giant*’s first run, some still wanted to cash in on Dean, most notably flutist Bob Romeo. Evidently, when Dean was alive, the two had had a jam session together, Dean playing his much beloved conga drums. Romeo had recorded the session on his tape recorder, and in December of 1956, he got the bright idea to cut an album of Dean using that tape. The big draw was apparently the fact that, in the background, one could hear Dean carrying on a conversation with Romeo. When it was released in early 1957, according to columnists, Romeo “expect[ed] to make a fortune on their new James Dean album.”¹³⁰ And how could he not, when *Giant* had made so much money off the Dean phenomenon and he was able to tout the album as “the *only* record James Dean ever made”?¹³¹

Next came the books on James Dean. On the first anniversary of his death, Walter Winchell reported that at least a dozen books were in production.¹³² The first to hit the bookshelves was *James Dean: A Biography*. Released toward the end of *Giant*’s first run, Dean’s first biography was written by William Bast, self-proclaimed best friend

¹²⁸ The album, by the way, was released a year before the film by the same title, and had no relation to the movie; Val Adams, “Tribute to Actor Starts War,” *New York Times*, October 4, 1956.

¹²⁹ Hudson-Ross Album Ad, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 29, 1956; “A Tribute to James Dean” Ad, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 3, 1956.

¹³⁰ Dorothy Kilgallen, “New James Dean Album to be Released,” *The Washington Post and Times Herald*, February 5, 1957.

¹³¹ “James Dean on Conga Drums” Ad, *Los Angeles Times*, March 31, 1957.

¹³² Walter Winchell, “Walter Winchell’s Time Square,” *The Washington Post and Times Herald*, September 30, 1956.

of Dean.¹³³ Bast, a writer who had found little success before the death of Dean, now found a significant amount of recognition for his knowledge of the late movie star. Just prior to his book being released, and concurrently with *Giant*'s first run, Bast also had published a lengthy, three-part series of articles on Dean in *Photoplay* magazine entitled "There Was a Boy"¹³⁴ With these publishing triumphs, Bast finally found steady work as a writer and continued to publish pieces either directly about or inspired by Dean throughout his career. But apparently, even in the 1950s, one biography on Dean simply was not enough. So Popular Library published a second in April, 1957, entitled *I, James Dean*, written by T.T. Thomas.¹³⁵

The period after *Giant*'s first run also saw Dean's mangled death car put on display in California. Being advertised in the *Los Angeles Times* as Dean's "last sports car," the exhibition was ostensibly intended to dissuade reckless driving, but, of course, what it really did was attract morbid Dean fans willing to pay a fee just to catch a glimpse of the automobile in which James Dean died.¹³⁶ The car travelled throughout California in 1957, being shown at car shows and county fairs, until it finally mysteriously disappeared.¹³⁷

Next, of course, came films, or at least one film, about James Dean. Beginning in September of 1956, independent producer Abner Greshler was circulating the idea of a biopic of James Dean. He had taken out an option on reporter Joe Hyams' account of the late actor published in *Redbook*, and, throughout the end of 1956 and the beginning of

¹³³ "Books Today," *New York Times*, November 29, 1956.

¹³⁴ William Bast, "There Was a Boy . . ." *Photoplay*, September, 1956, 39-41, 98-100; William Bast, "There Was a Boy . . ." *Photoplay*, October, 1956, 49-51, 103-106; William Bast, "There Was a Boy . . ." *Photoplay*, November, 1956, 52-53, 107-112.

¹³⁵ "Books Today," *New York Times*, April 4, 1956.

¹³⁶ "Motor Sports" Ad. *Los Angeles Times*, December 24, 1956.

¹³⁷ George Perry, *James Dean* (New York: DK Publishing, 2005), 202.

1957, he attempted to drum up money and support for the project.¹³⁸ This project, however, for whatever reason, never materialized, possibly because it was beat to the box office in August, 1957, by the documentary *The James Dean Story*, directed by George W. George and Robert Altman.

However, despite the continued exploitation of James Dean, throughout 1957, it seemed clear to most following the Dean phenomenon that the widespread popularity of the dead idol was diminishing. Without Warner Bros. fueling the fire, fewer stories about him appeared in newspapers and fan magazines. Only a few brief mentions of Dean fandom hitting other nations, such as France, Japan, and Indonesia, ran in newspaper columns, and only a few basic articles were published in magazines.¹³⁹ The publications that ran the Dean articles also got far less creditable, such as *Hush-Hush Magazine*.¹⁴⁰ Granted, he was dead, but that didn't stop anyone the previous year. In addition, even though television stations continued to rerun Dean's old TV shows, they apparently did not garner good ratings after *Giant*.¹⁴¹ Dorothy Kilgallen reported that magazine shops were now selling his previously in-demand one-shotters for half price; she called it the "end of an era."¹⁴² Other columnists, Louella Parsons and Hedda Hopper included, noted the dwindling Dean hysteria.¹⁴³ Hopper herself seemed to have cooled from her former

¹³⁸ Thomas M. Pryor, "Symbolic Drama Will be a Movie," *New York Times*, September 24, 1956; Herb Lyon, "Tower Ticker," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 6, 1956; Herb Lyon, "Tower Ticker," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, February 6, 1957.

¹³⁹ Dorothy Kilgallen, "Jimmy Cagney Scores on Lon Chaney," *The Washington Post and Times Herald*, April 26, 1957; "Films at Top of Postwar Japan Boom," *Los Angeles Times*, January 6, 1957; Thomas M. Pryor, "Busy Hollywood," *New York Times*, September 15, 1957; "James Dean: The Passion for a Lonelyheart," *The Idols*, 1957, 8-12; Rolf Wutherich, "The Last Story About Jimmy," *Modern Screen*, October, 1957, 29-31, 76-77.

¹⁴⁰ Mike Gotram, "Did James dean Commit Suicide?" *Hush-Hush Magazine*, January, 1957, 13-16, 41-42.

¹⁴¹ Larry Wolters, "TV Ticker," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 22, 1956.

¹⁴² Dorothy Kilgallen, "Mickey Jelke Slated for a Trip Out West," *The Washington Post and Times Herald*, March 26, 1957.

¹⁴³ Louella Parsons, "Liz is Only Under Care of 'Doctor' Mike Todd," *The Washington Post and Times Herald*, December 31, 1956.

ravings about Dean in previous years. In October of 1956, before *Giant* was released to the public, she stated that Dean “steals the picture,” but by February of the next year she was claiming that Dean “wasn’t suited to his role” in the film.¹⁴⁴ For whatever inexplicable reason, Hopper had finally gotten over her Dean crush, and his name began to appear far less frequently in her column from 1957 onward. But perhaps the best evidence of a dwindling Dean mania is the debacle of *The James Dean Story*.

The James Dean Story

The James Dean Story was independently produced by Altman and George, but Warner Bros. picked it up for distribution, lending to the documentary footage from the films he had made there.¹⁴⁵ However, although Warner Bros. was willing to distribute it, it was clear from the outset that they were not willing to put too much time, effort, or money into the marketing and distribution of the film. There was little to no publicity build up for the film. Only a few columns made mention of Tommy Sands, the young singer who crooned the theme song for the film, which was more publicity for Sands than for the film.¹⁴⁶ The movie premiered in Fairmount, Indiana, James Dean’s hometown, August 13, 1957, and, other than an extremely brief mention in the *Chicago Tribune*, no significant write-up of the event reached major urban newspapers until September 29.¹⁴⁷

The James Dean Story opened in New York on the same date as the premiere in Fairmount, but it only played a week. It next opened in Chicago on August 28, and

¹⁴⁴ Hedda Hopper, “Looking at Hollywood,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 3, 1956; Hedda Hopper, “‘Twilight for Gods’ to Star Rock Hudson,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 6, 1957.

¹⁴⁵ “Movieland Events,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 5, 1957.

¹⁴⁶ “Movies Exploit Recording Field,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 7, 1957; Steve Schickel, “The Disk Derby,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 10, 1957.

¹⁴⁷ Herb Lyon, “Tower Ticker,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 15, 1957; William Leonard, “Hoosier Home Town’s Re-live James Dean’s Story,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 29, 1957.

managed to play a whole two weeks before being pulled. Boston got the film at around the same time as Chicago, but it only played a week there. Los Angeles and Washington, D.C., did not see *The James Dean Story* play within its city limits until October. In D.C., again the film only played a week, and in Los Angeles, the film never received a first run distribution. Instead, it was released into ten theatres all at once, similar to the release pattern Warner Bros. had used for *Rebel Without a Cause*. As well, *The James Dean Story* never played on its own—it was always released on a double bill, often being considered the lesser of the two films. Initially, in Chicago and New York, the film was paired with *Trooper Hook* (United Artists 1957), an independently produced Western starring an aged Barbara Stanwyck. By October, the Dean documentary was on a bill with *The Black Scorpion* (Warner Bros. 1957), another independent production which needs no explanation. Pairing it with *The Black Scorpion* in October, however, did mean the film ran a second time in New York City. But suffice it to say that *The James Dean Story* was not a commercial success.

This is a small wonder since the film received pathetically little advertising. Warner Bros.' advertising campaign for *Rebel Without a Cause* looks like a hurricane of ads in comparison to what they did for *The James Dean Story*. Advertisements hardly ever preceded the film in any area. The first ads would usually arrive the day the film opened, possibly, a day or two before. After an initially decent sized ad on the day of the film's opening, the ads would diminish quickly in size and frequency. In Chicago, for instance, the run began with a respectable, although not terribly distinguished, ad with a headshot of Dean and the tagline, "Was he a rebel? Was he a giant?" (see fig. 3.5). But the very next ad to appear, and all subsequent ads in the *Chicago Tribune*, could hardly

even be called an advertisement—it was no more than a box with the title of the films on the bill (see fig. 3.6). These, however, at least, emphasized Dean more than the other film on the bill, *Trooper Hook*. By the time *The James Dean Story* was paired with *The Black Scorpion*, it was the lesser of the two, featured on the bottom of the ad with less space allotted to it.

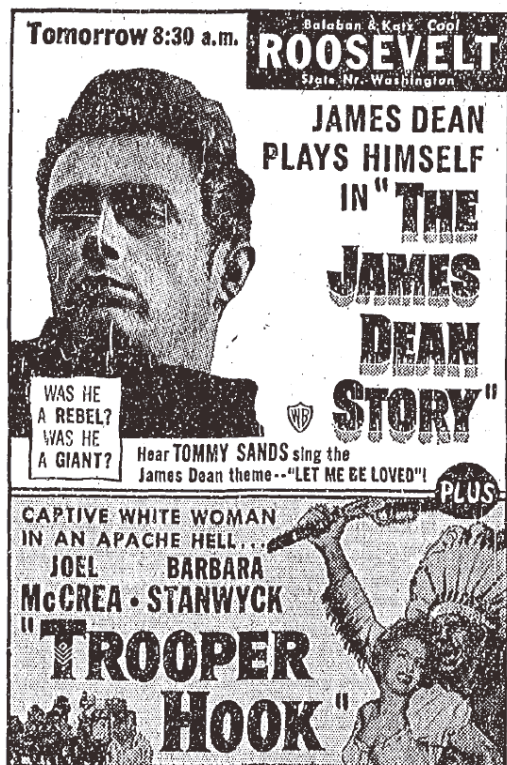


Figure 3.5: JD Story Ad. Source: *Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 27, 1957.

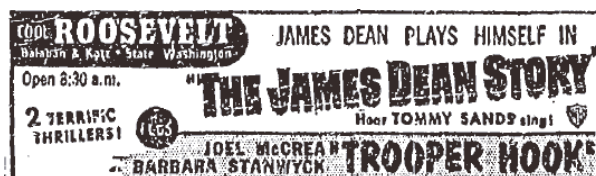


Figure 3.6: JD Story Ad. Source: *Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 29, 1957.

The reviews that were written about the film did not give the documentary much credit for being anything else other than “contrived . . . commercialism” aimed at exploiting the “curious necrophilia” of teenagers.¹⁴⁸ And while that is basically true (the film is not much more than a fan magazine article in motion), one cannot help but wonder

¹⁴⁸ Mae Tinee, “Doubts Dean Would Have Liked Film,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 6, 1957; Melville Maddocks, “Actor’s Career Recounted in Documentary at Twins,” *Christian Science Monitor*, August 30, 1957; John L. Scott, “‘Black Scorpion’ Brings Thrills, Laughs,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 10, 1957; Richard L. Coe, “Dean Seen by Half Light,” *The Washington Post and Times Herald*, October 18, 1957; Bosley Crowther, “Screen: Elegy for Actor,” *New York Times*, October 19, 1957.

how American audiences would have received the film had Warner Bros. put any effort into its distribution. *Giant*, after all, had many faults, but no one (besides Hedda Hopper) seemed to recognize either the flaws in the film or Warner Bros.' blatant exploitation of James Dean. *The James Dean Story* should have been an easy money-maker given peoples' response to Dean the previous year, but clearly, without Warner Bros. fully promoting him, James Dean flops.

Admittedly, many factors played into the declining popularity of James Dean in 1957. Obviously, time was an issue. By the time *The James Dean Story* was released, Dean had been dead for nearly two years. And the first year of post-mortem publicity alone had more than exhausted the issue of James Dean. Furthermore, after *Giant*, the public was not awaiting any more films from him. Plus, other momentous events had taken place in Hollywood. Humphrey Bogart had died, for instance, in January of 1957, meaning that James Dean was not the most recent, significant loss to Hollywood. As well, the movie audience had been quickly diverted toward other screen idols, among them Tab Hunter, Anthony Perkins, Tony Curtis, and, oddly enough, Yul Brynner. Thus, James Dean was let go.

But Warner Bros. lack of participation in generating a continued craze for Dean after the release of *Giant* was also a factor. Dean's popularity, while it had previously been steadily rising due to the efforts of Warners, despite the fact that he was dead, dropped the moment Warner Bros. no longer felt he was necessary to their financial stability, proving that that were a vital part of making the Dean phenomenon in the first place.

Furthermore, while the mainstream popularity of Dean continued to diminish, Warner Bros. had already given Dean legend status. So, while few news items about Dean continued to appear in 1957, his name did frequently appear as a cultural reference point. By 1957, every brooding young individual was apparently a James Dean, from actors like Anthony Perkins and Carroll Baker, to writers such as Françoise Sagan, to college athletes, and of course your run-of-the-mill teenagers. The style of acting that had been previously known as Brando's was passed on to Dean, and now young actors were accused of mimicking him, of having a "Dean titter."¹⁴⁹ His laidback style of dress, the t-shirt and jeans look, also became classified as the Dean style. By 1957, the name James Dean, the image of James Dean meant something, it stood for something. In short, Warner Bros. had taken a star, turned him into a legend, and the world made him an icon.

¹⁴⁹ Mae Tinee, "'Young' Film Creditable Production," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, May 14, 1957.

Chapter 4

A God in Blue Jeans:

Dissecting the Image of James Dean

Society generally holds that the image we have of Dean is one that actually represents who he was as a person. But the material that was released by Warner Bros. in the 1950s tells a different story. Not only did they make him a star and a legend, but they also made him into a certain kind of star and legend. Nearly every idea we have of James Dean can be traced back to the publicity surrounding the young actor in the 1950s. From that publicity material he has developed into the sexy, cool, rebellious icon we know today.

In his chapter “Stars as Specific Images,” Richard Dyer provides a map using Jane Fonda for breaking down a star’s image based on the media texts surrounding that star. As Dyer is the premier authority on star studies, and his map for dissecting a star’s image is without parallel, that will be my model for this chapter. The image that was created for James Dean, both then and now, can be broken down into roughly four categories: actor, rebel, man-boy, and sex-symbol. These areas make up the bulk of the ideas associated with his image, and a closer look at how they came to be may provide us with a deeper understanding of this American icon and the ways in which it interacts with larger ideas of Hollywood, society, and the world.

Actor

Perhaps less thought about than other ideas, but nevertheless integral to his image, is the idea of James Dean as actor. This may seem somewhat inane to point out. In the 1950s, when he was actually employed and his films were circulating in theatres, of course he was thought of as an actor because he was an actor. But what is interesting here is *how* he was thought of as an actor and how those ideas affect what we consider his image to be today. When he first came on the scene in 1954, at the death knell of Classical Hollywood, James Dean was not considered an actor in the same way Clark Gable or Rita Hayworth or any of the stars of Old Hollywood were considered actors. He was not thought to be a mere celebrity of the movie world, a person who simply possessed a great deal of charisma, but a star because of his immense talent derived from a very specific acting tradition. In fact, no one in the 1950s seemed to think he had any charisma at all, and the greatness of his acting ability and his ties to the new acting style of the Fifties, was established long before most people had even seen him act. As we saw in Chapter One, this was the work of Warner Bros' publicity department. It is important here, however, to stress that this was one of the crucial facets of Dean's star image.

James Dean, again, had been trained as a Method actor and had ties, however flimsy, to the great Actor's Studio in New York. This theory/style of acting, which first started to rise in prominence in America in the late 1940s, focused on connecting emotionally with the character being portrayed, using an actor's own memory and experiences to create a realistic portrayal of the character. Method acting also emphasized naturalism through movement and voice. Film acting in Hollywood, previous to the introduction of the Method, was very stiff and rigid. Actors were expected to stand with perfect posture, not move unless it was blocked, and speak with

flawless elocution. By comparison, the Method, when put on screen, could often come across as not much more than mumbled lines and flailing gestures.¹⁵⁰ But its aim was realism, which was the gold standard in 1950s filmmaking. Thus it was usually taken seriously, and elevated film acting to high art, the actors to artists. It was in this vein that Dean was sold.

Remember that the point of emphasizing his work on Broadway and the endless comparisons to Marlon Brando was that it made James Dean out to be a very serious young actor, not a person who was seeking stardom, but one who was looking for an outlet of expression. But this had curious results. Because Dean was seen as actor he was not confused, in the same way as other stars experience, with the characters he played. Many Hollywood stars experience a blurring of the lines in their public image between themselves and their roles, but the line between Dean and his roles are not blurred in quite the same way. He was clearly demarcated as James Dean the actor, not as Cal Trask, which was undoubtedly helped by the fact that the public was introduced to Dean long before they were introduced to the film character of Cal. Recall the photo of Dean that had adorned the cover of the *The Washington Post* on February 20, 1955. Although he is in his Cal costume, he is not Cal Trask, but James Dean preparing to portray Cal Trask.¹⁵¹

However, further complicating the relationship between Dean and his characters are the exposés that were printed on Dean in the latter part of the decade, following his death. During his brief eighteen months alive in Hollywood, the press stuck with the idea of Dean as serious actor. Even the harsh condemnation of his performance in *Eden* by

¹⁵⁰ Cf. Bosley Crowther's first reviews of *East of Eden* in Chapter 1.

¹⁵¹ Cf. Chapter 1: Manufactured: The Making of James Dean

film critics did not deter the popular perception of Dean as a great actor.¹⁵² However, after he died (as well as after the release of *Rebel Without a Cause*), a notion appeared in the press that Dean had essentially been playing himself in all his roles. On September 24, 1956, *Life Magazine*, reporting on the Dean craze that was sweeping the nation, wrote that “in both *East of Eden* and *Rebel Without a Cause* Dean was pretty much playing himself: a moody, insecure youth in search of understanding and love.”¹⁵³ Another fan magazine wrote that “he played the lost rebel in his films . . . and in his life.”¹⁵⁴ Of course, it was common practice at the time for Hollywood studios to sell their stars to the public as having similar personalities as the characters they played, but, because this, now people remember Dean as himself (or, at any rate, what Hollywood had claimed his self was), not as Stark or Trask.

Oddly, although the idea of Dean essentially playing himself seems to contradict the notion that he was a great actor, it actually does not replace or even eclipse the idea that Dean was a talented young actor—his performance in *Giant* has almost universally praised by critics at the time. And even the pieces that claim he was playing himself do not oppose the idea that Dean was also a great actor. The idea of Dean playing himself merely adds a new dimension to his image. Whereas many other actors get replaced by the characters they play, Dean replaces the characters in his films. Vivien Leigh will always be Scarlet O’Hara, no matter how many other terrific performances she gave; Anthony Perkins will always be the psychotic Norman Bates; Rita Hayworth, perpetually

¹⁵² Bosley Crowther, “Right Direction: The ‘East of Eden’ of Elia Kazan Has That But Not Much More,” *New York Times*, March 20, 1955; Richard L. Coe, “Even in Eden, Life is Earnest,” *The Washington Post and Times Herald Tribune*, April 13, 1955; “‘East of Eden’ from Kazan,” *Christian Science Monitor*, April 11, 1955; Mae Tinee, “‘East of Eden’ Has Some Sins as Film Art,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, April 13, 1955; Philip Scheuer, “Unique Spell Cast By ‘East of Eden’,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 17, 1955.

¹⁵³ Ezra Goodman, “Delirium Over Dead Star,” *Life*, September 24, 1956, 76.

¹⁵⁴ “James Dean: The Passion for a Lonelyheart,” *The Idols*, 1957, 8-12.

Gilda; but with James Dean, it goes the other way—Cal Trask is really just James Dean; Jim Stark, Dean also; and there is no Jett Rink, only Dean. The lines between the star and the characters are thus blurred, but in a unique way. This would help to explain further why, despite how often Dean is pictured in the costumes of his characters, the images do not conjure up memories of the characters, but only of the ideas the image of James Dean suggests. Although many today could tell you that James Dean was an actor, far fewer have ever seen him act (coincidentally similar to the American public before the release of *Eden*). Thus, both by promoting Dean as a serious actor during his lifetime and then later suggesting that the roles he played were strikingly similar to his own person, the image of James Dean now stands for an actor without standing for any particular character played.

Rebel

Beyond being seen as actor, James Dean was, and is, also seen, most predominantly, as rebel. This image of James Dean as rebel got its start, not surprisingly, back in the 1950s, along with everything else about Dean. The image of rebel started with the words “nonconformist” and “individualist,” possibly the two most well-worn adjectives to describe Dean in the Fifties. The *Los Angeles Times* reported that Dean “has the reputation of being . . . a nonconformist” a full four months before *Eden* appeared in theatres.¹⁵⁵ And then even after Dean died, while reporting on his death, the *LA Times* again wrote that he was “an extreme individualist—a non-conformist who

¹⁵⁵ Philip Scheuer, “Opera’s Cesare Kiepi May Be ‘Kismet’ Star; Dean Up for ‘Cobweb,’” *Los Angeles Times*, November 6, 1954.

believed in acting and living as he pleased.”¹⁵⁶ Dean as nonconformist was also usually the lead off for any fan magazine article written during his lifetime. *Modern Screen* reported that he was “the most individual young man . . . a non-conformist.”¹⁵⁷ *Film Life* wrote that “he’s an individualist. He has his own ideas about what he wants to do.”¹⁵⁸ And, for these reasons, *Motion Picture* called him “controversial,” as did *Movieland*.¹⁵⁹ Even *Life* magazine referred to his “militantly independent offstage behavior.”¹⁶⁰ Later, after his death and after audiences had seen him play a “rebel” onscreen in *Rebel Without a Cause*, these words morphed into the actual word of “rebel,” as in “he played the lost rebel in his films . . . and in his life,” as quoted before, or as in “he died the eternal rebel—laughing at a world he could not accept.”¹⁶¹

The rebel image has stuck with James Dean throughout the decades, but, interestingly, the reasons why he was initially considered a rebel do not fit the modern definition of what a social rebel is. The 1970s was the decade that saw Dean cemented as a cultural icon and one of rebellion. His image was held up as one of the quintessential symbols of the counterculture revolution that swept the nation in that decade. However the actions of rebelliousness of that generation do not reflect the actions of James Dean in the 1950s. In a 1970s documentary on James Dean, entitled *James Dean Remembered* (Jack Haley, Jr. Productions 1974), Natalie Wood spoke about how Dean did not fit the Seventies definition of rebel, saying that “at the time [in the Fifties] he seemed like a

¹⁵⁶ “Death Premonition by Dean Recalled,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 2, 1955.

¹⁵⁷ “James Dean: Smoldering Dynamite,” *Modern Screen*, June 1955, 59.

¹⁵⁸ Don Allen, “James Dean: The Man Behind the Camera,” *Film Life*, 1955, 23.

¹⁵⁹ Lawrence Boyd, “Danger, Hot Stuff,” *Motion Picture*, July 1955, 52; “Man of Many Moods,” *Movieland*, 1955, 55.

¹⁶⁰ “Moody New Star,” *Life*, March 7, 1955, 125.

¹⁶¹ “James Dean: The Passion for a Lonelyheart,” *The Idols*, 1957, 8-12; “James Dean,” *Motion Picture*, December 1955, 29.

great nonconformist, a great rebel, and an eccentric . . . but really he was only eccentric by the day's standards, [but today] he wouldn't be eccentric at all."

It is important to note *why* people initially called him a nonconformist, an individualist, and a rebel. The reasons, by contemporary standards, are no longer all that shocking. For instance, one of the main reasons Dean was called a nonconformist in the 1950s was that he refused to wear a suit and tie every day. One of the key reasons *Motion Picture* had labeled Dean controversial was "his clothes."¹⁶² *Modern Screen* had declared he was a "lone wolf" for simply being clad in "blue jeans and an old red flannel shirt."¹⁶³ *Screen Album* called him "a character" merely because he "[ran] around in a beat-up leather jacket and blue jeans."¹⁶⁴ Now, obviously, refusing to wear a tie in the Fifties was a serious bucking of the strict social conventions of the times, tantamount to high social subversion, but it is no longer what anyone today would consider terribly offensive.

Another key reason why Dean was considered a rebel—he slouched. The main reason why Hedda Hopper initially accused him of being a rebel was that she spotted him in the Warner Bros.' commissary slouching in a chair, his feet propped up on another.¹⁶⁵ Scandalous fifty years ago, perhaps, but not now. In fact, the most convincing reasons the press of the Fifties had to call Dean a rebel was that he rode a motorcycle, drove sport cars, and had the reputation for being rude to interviewers. The first two reasons, the motorcycles and racecars, or fast vehicles of any kind, were not only accurate

¹⁶² ¹⁶² Lawrence Boyd, "Danger, Hot Stuff," *Motion Picture*, July 1955, 52; "Man of Many Moods," *Movieland*, 1955, 55.

¹⁶³ "Lone Wolf," *Modern Screen*, August 1955, 28.

¹⁶⁴ "New Faces," *Screen Album*, November 1954, np.

¹⁶⁵ Hedda Hopper, "New Film Type, the Slouch, Gives Writer the Creeps," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 7, 1954.

representations of James Dean, but they have long been symbols of the rebel, and, now or then, it is certainly hard not to read rebel into an image of James Dean sitting astride a Triumph TR5 Trophy motorbike, the collar of his leather jacket defiantly cocked up (see fig. 4.1). Of course, Dean's interest in motorcycles had begun as a teenager, not as an act of rebellion, but as a part of a general interest in mechanics, not to mention an interest in cheap transportation. But the image reads rebel either way. However, the third reason he was viewed as a rebel by the press, his supposed bad manners, seems to have been nothing more than publicity and an ill deserved reputation. The interviewer for his first published interview actually matter-of-factly states that Dean had a reputation for rudeness but that he himself found Dean to be quite polite and willing to speak.¹⁶⁶ In fact, for all the pages printed on how often Dean refused to give interviews, magazines and newspapers seemed to have no trouble securing them.



Figure 4.1. Classic photo of James Dean on motorcycle.
<http://www.pulpexplosion.com/tv/sirius/jdbike.jpg> December 14, 2008.

¹⁶⁶ Philip Scheuer, "Jimmy Dean Says He Isn't Flattered by Being Labeled Another Brando," *Los Angeles Times*, November 7, 1954.

It is important to note why people initially considered Dean a rebel because the reasons people have considered him thus have actually managed to change over the years. This is quite a feat considering James Dean has not changed over the last five decades. With each new biography published, writers seem intent on fitting Dean's image of 1950s rebellion into the definition of contemporary rebellion. Most notably, people have added the tendency for heavy partying and the use of drugs and alcohol to his image of rebel, even though, by all accounts, Dean hated parties and social functions, could not hold his liquor and thus avoided it, and there is absolutely no evidence of him using drugs.¹⁶⁷ Dean was raised a Quaker, after all. He was not really all that rebellious by today's standard. But writers of today seem desperate to make Dean fit the modern definition of what a rebel is. Many have interpreted the label, given to him in the Fifties, of "the human ash tray," so given because he smoked like a chimney, as representative of his sexual proclivities toward sadomasochism, once again, without any evidence supporting such an interpretation. One writer went so far as to take a completely innocent comment by Dean's cousin Marcus Winslow, Jr., and twisted it into a story about how Dean skinned cats alive as a child.¹⁶⁸ Because Dean's image so instantaneously reads rebel to us, people seem to have the need to find their own concept of rebel within his biography, even where it does not exist. But such reinventions of Dean over the years are, perhaps, responsible, in part, for the continuing image of Dean as rebel.

Arguably, the characters Dean played in his three films are aiding and abetting this reinterpretation of his bio. All three of his characters are seen drunk at some point in

¹⁶⁷ William Bast, *Surviving James Dean*, New York: Barricade, 2006; Donald Spoto, *Rebel: The Life and Legend of James Dean*, New York: Harper Collins, 1996; Paul Alexander, *Boulevard of Broken Dreams: The Life, Times, and Legend of James Dean*, New York: Viking, 1994.

¹⁶⁸ Wes D. Gerhing, *James Dean: Rebel with a Cause*, Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society Press, 2005, 19.

their films. Cal Trask hangs out at whorehouses drinking beer, Jim Stark is introduced in an inebriated state, and Dean actually finished his career as the aged, fall-down drunkard Jett Rink. His characters are also surely, uncooperative, disrespectful, and disobedient. Thus the rebelliousness of his characters is rubbed off on Dean. This goes back to the same blurring of the lines between character and actor previously discussed, and if Jim Stark, the iconic rebel without a cause, is really just James Dean, then it is Dean who is the rebel.¹⁶⁹

A final note on Dean as rebel—both in the 1950s and today Dean’s rebel image contains a certain delicacy that is intriguing for such a masculine category as rebel. Claudia Springer notes in her book *James Dean Transfigured* that the rebel is traditionally a men’s only club.¹⁷⁰ This rings especially true when one observes the gender roles in Dean’s films where he plays the rebel, particularly in *East of Eden* and *Rebel Without a Cause*. While Dean is allowed to run against the system, to be genuinely “bad,” the rebel girls in the film, Abra (Julie Harris) in *Eden* and Judy (Natalie Wood) in *Rebel*, are never allowed complete roles as rebels. Instead, as the boy (Dean) rebels, they are forced into mothering roles, comforting him and supporting him as he rebels. Thus to be a rebel requires one to be male, to be masculine. But Dean’s representation of masculinity has always carried with it a level of sensitivity and gentleness that is contrary to the traditional ideas of masculinity, especially those that held true in the 1950s. Recall the speech Judy has in *Rebel Without a Cause* about what girls want:

Judy: What kind of a person do you think a girl wants?

¹⁶⁹ For the record, none of Dean’s guardians ever reported that he was anything but the model nephew and son, always obedient and polite, with none of the behavioral problems displayed by any of the characters he played.

¹⁷⁰ Claudia Springer, *James Dean Transfigured: The Many Faces of Rebel Iconography* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007).

Jim: A man.

Judy: Well yes, but a man who can be gentle and sweet . . . like you.

This gentleness was not only assigned to Dean's characters, but also to Dean himself. Dean was often described at the time as being "sensitive" and "moody."¹⁷¹ The very fact that Dean seemed to have an emotional element at all seems to be contrary to ideas of the 1950s tough manly-man concept of masculinity, but Dean's sensitivity seems to be essential to his brand of masculinity. A former girlfriend of Dean's from his college days was quoted by *Modern Screen* as having called Dean "gentle, sensitive, and masculine."¹⁷² Thus Dean's rebel, while being masculine in some sense, was a sensitive one, as opposed to the more brutal, harsh representation of rebel that figures such as Marlon Brando gave to the word. Dean's particular kind of rebel seems to have been opening the doors on conventional ideas of masculinity. The 1950s, however, would deal with this discursive form of masculinity by giving Dean a new label of man.

Man-Boy

Much is made of James Dean's youth. He was, after all, a mere twenty-four years-old when he died. Being so young, many have found it difficult to call him "man." The fact that two of the three characters he played onscreen are, in fact, teenagers, seems to make the task that much more difficult. Many, indeed, have called James Dean America's first teenager. But that is blurring the lines between Dean and his characters once again, substituting Dean for the characters in his films. Dean, himself, was never a

¹⁷¹ Imogene Collins, "The Secret Love that Haunts Jimmy Dean," *Modern Screen*, October 1955; "Many of Many Moods," *Movieland*, 1955; "Lone Wolf," *Modern Screen*, August 1955; "Moody New Star," *Life*, March 7, 1955, 125.

¹⁷² "James Dean: Smoldering Dynamite," *Modern Screen*, June 1955, 59.

teenager onscreen; he was always in his early twenties. Jim Stark may have been America's first teenager, but James Dean was not. Rejecting the term "man" for Dean, in fact, is preventing his image from commenting on traditional ideas of masculinity. And that is precisely why the press in the 1950s consistently focused on Dean's youth.

According to Steven Cohan in *Masked Men: Masculinity and the Movies in the Fifties*, the press of the 1950s saw a sharp distinction between "hard men" and "soft boys." Thus, the sensitivity and unconventional behavior of males received the label of "boy" to indicate their noncompliance with the hegemonic masculinity of the times, a failure to live up to the expectations of society about what it meant to be a "man." The idea behind this labeling of males thus was to represent them to the public as men not yet fully formed. To a Fifties society, these males were "either not fully adult or not fully masculine," and the hope was that it was the former.¹⁷³ By labeling them boys, no one had to confront the subversive masculinity they actually represented.

This helps considerably in understanding the image of James Dean, especially in how it was first formed by the 1950s society from which it came. His youth was frequent fodder for the presses then. The words "kid" and "boy" repeatedly popped up.¹⁷⁴ Articles ran with such titles as "Battling Boy," "The Boy Who'd Like to be Brando," "The Boy I Loved," and "There Was a Boy . . ." ¹⁷⁵ They proclaimed "Jimmy was youth."¹⁷⁶ Even calling him "Jimmy," as opposed to "James" or even "Jim," suggests a

¹⁷³ Steven Cohan, *Masked Men: Masculinity and the Movies in the Fifties* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 201-263.

¹⁷⁴ "The Hottest Kids in Hollywood," *Modern Screen*, September, 1955, 82; James Dean: Smoldering Dynamite," *Modern Screen*, June 1955, 59.

¹⁷⁵ "Battling Boy," *Movie Life*, October, 1955; Merry Lewis, "The Boy Who'd Like to Be Brando," *Modern Screen*, January, 1955; Emma Woolen Dean, "The Boy I Loved," *Photoplay*, March 1956; William Bast, "There Was a Boy . . .," *Photoplay*, September, 1956.

¹⁷⁶ George Stevens, "A Tenderness Lost," *Modern Screen*, January, 1956.

certain juvenilization of Dean. One writer actually labeled Dean a “man-boy.”¹⁷⁷ And, if nothing else, the adjective “young” was regularly used: “young man,” “young star,” “young neurotic.”¹⁷⁸ All in all, his youth, his boyhood, his undeveloped manhood, was a large part of Dean’s persona in the Fifties. It is no wonder that youth from every generation connect with his image. He was, from the very beginning, painted as youth personified. One article sums it up best. In 1955, *Film Life* ran an article on Dean entitled “But He’s So Young.” The basic idea behind the article was that for all of Dean’s inappropriate behavior, his lack of manners, his sensitivity, his slouching and his refusal to wear ties, Dean is yet young, and he will, eventually, “grow-up.”¹⁷⁹ Thus, Dean does not represent any alternative form of masculinity; he merely is not yet a man.

This idea of Dean as man-boy has stayed with him over the decades. Despite America’s slowly expanding views on masculinity, Dean still stands for youth, not manhood, perhaps for the simple reason that he never did have the chance to “grow-up,” as *Film Life* hoped he would. Instead, his image is perpetually frozen in youth. And while having Dean as a representation of youth is not, in and of itself, undesirable, and not that one should short change how intensely and personally Dean’s image speaks to youth, it does prevent his image from commenting on masculinity. If James Dean is never called a man, never recognized as one, how can we speak of his masculinity? If Dean were viewed as man, and not man-boy, both his sensitivity and his overall rebel image could be more easily seen as a subversive form of masculinity, one that challenges the hegemonic masculinity of the 1950s and traditional ideas of maleness that still

¹⁷⁷ Philip Scheuer, “Dean Cheats Car Death in Bit of Film Irony,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 30, 1955.

¹⁷⁸ James Dean: Smoldering Dynamite,” *Modern Screen*, June 1955, 59; Don Allen, “The Man Behind the Camera,” *Film Life*, 1955, 23; “Confessions of a successful young neurotic,” *Modern Screen*, September, 1955, 83.

¹⁷⁹ John Maynard, “But He’s So Young,” *Film Life*, October 1955.

continue today. Men and boys throughout the decades have, in fact, idolized Dean and imitated his particular brand of masculinity. But James Dean continues to be seen as boy and not man.

In saying this, however, I do not wish to belittle Dean's role as a symbol of youth. His moody, alienated image has served as a beacon for many young people throughout the decades. Andre Bazin claimed that photography "embalms time, rescuing it simply from its proper corruption."¹⁸⁰ For James Dean, this seems doubly true. Having died at such a young age, his photographs and films seem not only to hold him mummified as a twenty-four-year-old man-boy because that was when they were taken, but because they were the *only* ones taken. There are no other photographic artifacts to prove those young images wrong, to show that he grew old, because, of course, he did not. The preservation of Dean as a symbol of youth is undoubtedly helped by the sheer amount of photographs that exist of him during that brief window of stardom from 1954 to 1955. Dean had an odd habit of having one photographer friend or another follow him around snapping pictures. Thus, we now have several large series of photographs of him in Indiana, in New York, in California, doing anything from reading, to dancing, to sleeping. Although Dean only starred in three motion pictures, there are thousands upon thousands of photographs of the dead actor. It is no wonder that so many photograph coffee-table books have been published on him. There is a wealth of material to use. These photographs have certainly helped sustain his popularity, providing an alternative access to his image other than films. But they have also helped to freeze him in time, as an extremely young man.

¹⁸⁰ Andre Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," *What is Cinema?* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 14.

Sex Symbol?

Few would disagree that James Dean was very attractive. And in the 1950s, he was recognized as the latest bobby-soxer idol, Hollywood's "new heart-throb," but his physical appearance is actually rarely remarked upon, except to reference his "shock of blond hair" and "piercing blue eyes."¹⁸¹ But perhaps this was because Dean was not the traditional male beauty of the time. Steven Cohan calls this era "the age of the chest."¹⁸² This was the time in Hollywood (if there has never been any other) where men were expected to have perfectly waxed, beautifully photogenic broad chests as symbols of their virile masculinity (think William Holden in *Picnic* (Columbia 1955) or Marlon Brando in *A Streetcar Named Desire* (Warner Bros. 1951)). However, Dean simply did not fit. Like all men of the time, he was expected to be photographed with his shirt off, and Dean obliged, but his slight five foot eight inch, 132 pound frame does not do much to present him as a symbol of virile masculinity, at least not by the standards of the time (see fig. 4.2). In fact, in most ways, Dean did not conform to the definition of Hollywood's attractive leading man of the era: tall, dark, and classically handsome. Dean was short, blond, and had features that have since been frequently described as androgynous. He simply did not fit the conventional ideals of masculine beauty, but yet, he was considered attractive nonetheless. In reference to this, since Warner Bros. needed a leading man for *East of Eden*, and Dean was it, it probably did not hurt the public perception of Dean's beauty that Warners swamped fan magazines in 1954 and 1955 with pictures of the

¹⁸¹ Caption on James Dean Photo, *Dayton Daily*, March 26, 1955; Philip Scheuer, "Jimmy Dean Says He Isn't Flattered by Being Labeled Another Brando," *Los Angeles Times*, November 7, 1954.

¹⁸² Steven Cohan, *Masked Men: Masculinity and the Movies in the Fifties*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997.

incredibly photogenic James Dean, calling him the new teen idol. Moreover, the Dean people saw then and the one we know now is, at least partially, manufactured. Dean was blind as a bat and always wore glasses. As well, due to a baseball accident as a kid, his front teeth were actually fake. But Dean was always photographed by his studio with glasses off and teeth in, making him at least a little closer to the society's beauty ideals.



Figure 4.2. James Dean shirtless. http://artofmanliness.com/wp-content/uploads/2008/04/james_dean_shirtless.jpg. December 14, 2008.

But billing James Dean as a teen idol, glasses off or not, had its consequences. An article in the September 1955 issue of *Movie Stars Parade* tackles the issue head on. This may be just another fan magazine article, but it is interesting in how directly it addresses the issue of male beauty standards of the Fifties. In the piece entitled “What Jimmy Dean Did to Hollywood,” Ruth C. Rowland frankly states that Dean was “not the Hollywood type of leading man,” in other words “tall, dark, and photographs like a million bucks,” but his success as an actor in Hollywood opened the door to other

nonconventional looking actors, such as Perry Lopez (*The Young Guns* (Allied Artists 1956), *The Steel Jungle* (Warner Bros. 1956)) and John Kerr (*Tea and Sympathy* (MGM 1956), *South Pacific* (Twentieth Century-Fox 1958)).¹⁸³ In essence, James Dean (or Warner Bros. through James Dean) changed the standards for male beauty, both for Hollywood and, perhaps, society writ large.

Furthermore, because his kind of beauty is more androgynous than it is masculine, his image again confronts traditional standards of masculinity and gender. Dean's physical look sits in between feminine and masculine, challenging gender norms. In fact, many have pointed to Dean's androgyny as the reason for his continued popularity—he is one of the few men both men and women find attractive. But whether or not this is actually true is not as important as the fact that the world holds as one of its most recognizable icons the image of a man that does not conform to what society has typically thought a man should look like or be. Dean challenges our notions of gender and masculinity and thus is noteworthy far beyond being just another sex symbol in our world.

The fact that the image of James Dean is a manufactured one makes it no less significant. His image is still able to challenge both views of gender and of Hollywood movie stars. It makes us question the appearance of masculinity in our world, and the bodies that carry it out. It is able to participate in discourses on the way society interacts with stars. But it is still nonetheless provocative that the Dean icon was given to us by a major Hollywood studio, further complicating how we interpret the image we see. Warner Bros. at least had a hand in each aspect of the Dean image. This icon which

¹⁸³ Ruth C. Rowland, "What Jimmy Dean Did to Hollywood," *Movie Stars Parade*, September, 1955.

stands for so much did not just appear out of thin air. It was handed to us, perhaps forced upon us. The god in blue jeans that millions have worshipped over the years is, in essence, a man-made deity.

Conclusion

So why is James Dean an icon? Why is a man who had such a short career over fifty years ago still remembered today? Traditionally, most people have thought that Dean's icon status developed naturally out of a spontaneous audience response, that audiences everywhere loved him so much and were so distraught over his death that they decided to give him a second life in their memory, and thus he naturally developed into a cultural icon recognized the world over. And as lovely as that sounds, the actions of Warner Bros. in the 1950s seem to suggest a very different story. The story of James Dean shows the traditional power of the classical era Hollywood studio. By the time James Dean landed in their lap, the studios were experts at creating stars. Warner Bros. took that knowledge and created an icon instead.

There were, of course, other factors at play. One cannot ignore the fact that, for whatever myriad of reasons, people have connected with the image of James Dean, both now and then. He was sold, of course, by Warner Bros., and sold well. But the public did choose to buy his image, as well. Hollywood puts out countless images for society to consume, and not all of them find success and acceptance. The fact that James Dean did suggests that there was a brief synchronization of desires between Hollywood and their audience in the Fifties, and that he has continued to find approval with people. Whether it is because girls swoon over his oh-so-sexy image, or teenagers find solace in his representation of alienated youth, or guys just cannot resist emulating his rebel-look, James Dean has lived on. Perhaps it is because of all of the above. Dean died at such a young age, having said so little for himself, that he left behind an innumerable amount of

question marks about him and his life. Thus he is an extremely amorphous figure. He can be anything you want him to be, anything you need him to be—gay or straight, shy or charismatic, true rebel or just misunderstood. While his image has certain constants to it, it is still wide open to interpretation.

Furthermore, what Warner Bros. did to promote the Dean image in the 1950s is not the entire story. Dean, after all, was not firmly ensconced as a cultural icon until the 1970s. Thus what happened in the interim, from the end of the 1950s up to the early 1970s, to aid the preservation of his image has yet to be investigated, and needs to be in order to fully understand how Dean has lasted for over fifty years.

However, what Warner Bros. did in the 1950s is, at least, part of the puzzle, and one that has not previously been illuminated. Furthermore, the fact that a Hollywood studio had such a heavy hand in creating a cultural icon seems extremely noteworthy. The image of James Dean can be found almost anywhere. He's a reference point for songwriters, artists, authors, actors, directors, fashion designers, not to mention just your everyday person. Considering the ubiquity of Dean's image, how integrated he is in our culture, how integral he can often be for some person's sense of self, and how much he has influenced both individuals and the world, the fact that his image was created by a commercial industry seems like a fact worthy of consideration and reflection. While James Dean might be pop culture, he is far from trivial. And he was made, packaged, and delivered to the American public by an industry whose primary concern is making money; they only inadvertently make culture. They made James Dean for their own financial gain; the icon was just bonus. The story of James Dean seems to suggest that, while an icon requires an industrial apparatus to gain a foothold in society, once well

crafted, the icon has the ability to outlive the apparatus that created it. Dean speaks to the mechanisms of that apparatus, how they craft their product and the role they play in manufacturing the world we live in.

In manufacturing Dean, Warner Bros. may well have been responsible for creating a significant measure of youth culture. Every rebellious youth, every image of defiant adolescence, from 1955 onward seems to hearken back to Dean, to his legend. From Elvis Presely to the Beatles, from leather jackets to punk haircuts, from the disillusionment of the 1950s to the counterculture of the 1960s and '70s, it all seems to come back to Dean, to his image, to that point in history where the teenager was finally plotted on the cultural map. Dean has often been called the first teenager, and he does seem to be the first widespread image and popular representation of that demographic. If nothing else, he has served as a banner for young people the world over since the time of his death, and he continues to represent all the angst of youth. But that youth culture, its patron saint and demigod, seems to have been, at least partly, forged in the fires of the Hollywood publicity machine, created for the sake of profit. James Dean—forged by Warner Bros, appropriated by the world's youth.

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