

"Where Dreams Are Found And Lost"

--Lies, Rebellion And The Power of The Working Class in
Springsteen's 'Darkness On the Edge of Town' and Three
Contemporaneous Films--

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Bruce Springsteen's *Darkness on the Edge of Town*: An
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INTRODUCTION

In his 2016 autobiography *Born to Run*, Bruce Springsteen says he had movies on the brain when drafting the lyrics of *Darkness*. "I'd take my date and we'd head to the last of the drive-ins... we'd drink beer and grill burgers, a late night double feature. Film became a great influence..." On *Darkness*, Springsteen sings about the filmic landscape of a small community "straight out of American noir..." (2016)

Movies and music are the two most accessible forms of popular culture. Author David Harvey says that consuming popular culture can be like looking through "a window into a house with a multi-faceted inner structure... [The view] from any one window... lacks perspective. When we move to another window we can see things that were formerly hidden from view, giving the structure greater depth..." (2006) The particular house examined here is the declining status of the American Dream in the late 1970s - a vastly complex subject. These two windows - music and film - signify and clarify that dream's reality.

Between Springsteen's *Darkness on the Edge of Town* in 1978 and his follow up album, *The River*, in 1980, three films were released that are of cultural importance. The films in this study are: *Norma Rae* (1978), *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980), and

Apocalypse Now (1979). A literature review was conducted of journal articles and critical reviews of the films, as well as of Springsteen's album. Springsteen's lyrics were also interrogated. This research will examine the theme of *Darkness on the Edge of Town* - the rebel vs. the myth of the American dream - and compare how that dream plays itself out in the context of these three films, as well as in some unexpected extra-textual ways.

Springsteen may not have trashed any hotel rooms or set any guitars on fire, but in his autobiography, he describes a revolt at the core of his rock and roll stories. His characters are always fighting *something*. He says of the *Darkness* album:

"Such were the circumstances that led the lovers I'd envisioned in *Born to Run*, so determined to head out and away, to turn their car around and head back to town. That's where the deal was going down, amongst the brethren." (2016)

Bruce Springsteen sings about them so, to begin, let us take a look at three iconic rebels. (IMAGES 1 - 2 - 3)

First, James Dean - from 1955's *Rebel Without A Cause*. The seminal image of the bomber jacket, the white t-shirt, the definition of anti-establishment "cool." Next, we all know this image of Bruce, taken by Frank Stefanko. Bruce has on a jacket

similar to Dean's, zipped at the bottom, a white cotton t-shirt, pompadour haircut and a glare of defiance on his face. Third - General Han Solo, leader of the Rebel Alliance in the *Star Wars* films. Bomber vest, white shirt. Handsome, relaxed, flies by his own rules.

Besides the right look, how does Bruce characterize a rebel?

REALIZATION - EVOLUTION - RESOLVE

The *Darkness* album writ large follows three basic story elements: *realization*, *evolution* and *resolve*. By examining these three story markers (akin to those in Joseph Campbell's Hero's Journey), Springsteen's working class struggle of rebellion emerges.

1) Springsteen's protagonists are introduced within the status quo where anything is possible if you work hard enough (*The Promised Land* - "Working all day in my daddy's garage/ Driving all night chasing some mirage/) - in the midst of that status quo comes THE REALIZATION that the working class American dream is a myth. (*Prove It All Night*: There's so much that you want, you deserve much more than this/ But if dreams came true, oh, wouldn't that be nice.) This cynicism fuels the rebel. In his review of *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, Dave Marsh says "perhaps Springsteen's greatest and most repeated image is the

lie." (1979) (From *Streets of Fire*: When you realize how they tricked you this time/ And it's all lies but I'm strung out on the wire/ In these streets of fire...) Realization of the lie is step 1.

2) The rebel's EVOLUTION occurs when he acknowledges the division of wealth and the chasm of opportunity in America.

(*Badlands*: "Poor man wanna be rich/ rich man wanna be king/ And a king ain't satisfied/ till he rules everything.") It dawns upon these characters that the established dream of success is harder, if not impossible, to attain than they once thought.

3) RESOLVE - Springsteen's rebels have surrendered to the fact that the American Dream *is a lie*; the dream is dead and something must take its place (*Darkness on the Edge of Town*: Some folks are born into a good life/ Other folks get it anyway, anyhow/ I lost my money and I lost my wife/ Those things don't seem to matter much to me now.) The rebellion falters and the hero gives up. What can Springsteen's rebels do now that they have been transformed by this journey? The resolve is not a complete downer!

Dave Marsh rejoices in the album's ultimate sense of hope. "[The album] is a complete rejection of despair." (1979) It's right there in the final verse of the last song: "Tonight I'll be

on that hill, 'cause I can't stop/ I'll be on that hill with everything I've got/ Lives on the line where dreams are found and lost/"). Springsteen says "With the record's final verse... my characters stand unsure of their fate but dug in and committed," (2016) hinting at a newfound power of the working class.

Considering the rock and roll "window" through which we observe these dreams, follow me to the next "window" and step into a darkened movie theater where three iconic *cinematic* dreams are projected onto the silver screen.

(NORMA RAE - IMAGE 4)

The 1979 drama *Norma Rae*, starring Sally Field, is based on the true story of Crystal Lee Sutton, a rebellious textile plant worker in North Carolina. The film most directly depicts "the working life" of Springsteen's song *Factory*. Film critic Vince Canby says: "The film's principal appeal... is the natural resources of the characters – their grit, their emotional reserves and their complex feelings for one another." (1979) Canby highlights Norma Rae's status quo, "Workers are... born without sin. Bosses are devils. Salvation is not an abstract concept – it's a three-year contract..." (1979) Norma's rebellion, according to critic Pat Aufderheide, is of "a girl

growing into a woman, making mistakes and learning from them, turning irritation into action." (1979)

Norma's realization of the lie occurs when she meets a local union organizer, Reuben, played by Ron Leibman, who convinces her to rebel against the mill bosses. Furthermore, labor union scholars Robert Nathan and Jo-Ann Mort say that *Norma Rae* has "a profound and... disturbing message: The little guy may have a prayer of getting social justice, but he'll have to fight desperately to get it." (2007)

Norma's alliance with Reuben, the union organizer, shines a light on her evolution. Author Joyce Miller says "Where [Norma] is southern, Protestant, working-class, and uneducated, [Reuben] is northern, Jewish, upper-class, and intellectual... these differences hinder their attempts to work together." (1996) In the face of this divide of economic, social and educational wealth, Norma evolves and perseveres.

Later, Norma's resolve as a rebel is best illustrated by looking at her real-world inspiration, Crystal-Lee Sutton, who passed away in 2009. Sutton's obituary in *The New York Times* (Hevisi, 2009) details the inspiration for this iconic image. "After months trying to organize co-workers, Ms. Sutton was fired. When the police... came to take her away, she made one

last act of defiance. 'I took a piece of cardboard' she says 'and wrote the word 'union' on it in big letters, got up on my work table, and slowly turned it around...' Ms. Sutton's son, Jay Jordan, said - "his mother kept a photograph of Ms. Field, in the climactic scene from 'Norma Rae,' on her living room wall." Meta-textually, Norma's image continues to represent the rebel up on that hill, giving it everything she's got.

Norma Rae is a film grounded in the reality of the working class. Let us now compare Springsteen's thematic journey with a story from a galaxy far, far away.

(THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK - IMAGE 5)

Never has the story of the rebel been more relevant than in the first three mythic *Star Wars* films. Writer/producer George Lucas hewed as close as possible to Conrad's heroic arc, that of REALIZATION, EVOLUTION, and RESOLVE. Critic Lisa Schwarzbaum says that "the psychological underpinnings - all that hero's journey stuff, is what makes the 1980 film *The Empire Strikes Back* the best of the original trilogy" (1997). Roger Ebert says that in *Star Wars*,

"Like a lot of traditional science fiction... the characters are not themselves - they are us. We are looking out through their eyes, instead of into them,

as we would in more serious drama. We are on a quest, on a journey, on a mythological expedition... Elements in the *Star Wars* trilogy are as deep and universal as storytelling itself." (1997)

The hero, Luke Skywalker, a working class farm boy, joins an actual band of rebels who, like Springsteen's characters, yearn to "spit in the face" of the evil Empire. Author John Reider says "[Luke's] rebellion... represents the same yearning... for freedom from the over-administered, bureaucratic world of management" represented by Darth Vader, who Reider calls "a nightmarishly efficient, ruthless, and repressive boss." (1982)

In Luke's climactic lightsaber battle against Vader, the villain is revealed to be his father. Film critic Denis Wood declares that Luke's realization "thereby destroys Luke's dream of defeating evil by bringing [Vader] closer to his orbit."

(1981) Luke is horrified by this lie. The revelation that Vader is his father is that dream/lie writ large for a whole generation to quote ad infinitum ("*Luke, I am your father.*") Skywalker's rebellion is a generational one, a generation that Springsteen belongs to. Luke's RESOLVE to retreat from the lie is in line with the end of Springsteen's album - survival is all that matters to him, to begin anew, though he does finish what

he started in *Return of the Jedi*, the final film in the original *Star Wars* trilogy.

In the late 1960s, a rebellion was brewing in Hollywood. Director George Lucas "decided he would build a deviant studio that would conceive and implement creative, unconventional approaches to filmmaking." (1993) Lucas partnered with director Francis Ford Coppola and they called this independent studio *American Zoetrope*. They operated in San Francisco, away from the Hollywood studio system.

Instead of providing you with a traditional conclusion to this talk, I'm going to relate how Francis Ford Coppola's journey as a rebel filmmaker while making *Apocalypse Now* mirrors Springsteen's journey as a rebel rocker.

(APOCALYPSE NOW - IMAGE 6)

Like Springsteen, who was crowned by critic John Landau as "the future of rock and roll," (1974) Author David Thompson recounts how Coppola was lauded with praise and awards for his films *The Godfather Parts I-II* and *The Conversation*. "[Coppola] had made it in every way, and he had become a kind of film god..." (2001) Anticipation for his new war film rose to near fever pitch by 1977-78 - just as Springsteen was putting the final touches on *Darkness on the Edge of Town* - and America was

grappling with recent defeat in Vietnam. This framework helps to explain Francis Ford Coppola's goal in making the film.

Coppola's realization came in the divide between his prowess as a director and the film he intended to make. Coppola says: "The way we made [*Apocalypse Now*] was very much like the way the Americans were in Vietnam. We were in the jungle, we had access to too much money, too much equipment, and little by little we went insane." (2001) Springsteen similarly "exhausted" himself and The E Street Band to produce *Darkness*, "We cut forty, fifty, sixty songs of all genres... weeks went by before a note of music was played... We failed until we didn't." (2016)

Coppola's personal resolve, his failed dream, was that he would never really finish *Apocalypse Now*. Roger Ebert says "Once Coppola assembled an early cut of the film, it terrified him... it was too long, too strange and didn't resolve itself in a kind of classic big battle at the end." (2001) Coppola would release a director's cut of the film in 2001, adding almost 40 minutes of footage. Springsteen's re-release of *Darkness on the Edge of Town* in 2010 also added volumes of new material.

Cultural critic Peter McInerney calls *Apocalypse Now* part of a cultural movement to grapple with the effects of Vietnam,

"mass therapies for industrial persons." He goes on to say that "Apocalypse Now holds to the pattern of emphasizing American perceptions of [the] American experience." Springsteen knew this was true of *Darkness on the Edge of Town* as well. He says "My protagonists in these songs had to divest themselves of all that was unnecessary to survive... The [personal and] political implications of the lives I was writing about began to come to the fore and I searched for a music that could contain them," (2016). Through author David Harvey's "windows" society now sees itself - going to the movies and listening to rock and roll can exorcise some kind of cultural ailment. Coppola and Springsteen: two rebel storytellers seeking new creative resolutions to the terrible lie.

Rock critic Dave Marsh claimed the promise of rock and roll music "was that it could shake men's souls and make them question the direction of their lives," (1979) just as film critic Roger Ebert says that "Movies are powerful empathy machine[s]... I can live somebody else's life for a while... It gives me a broader mind." (2005) Movies and rock and roll can be transformative, opening new, more creative ways to look at the world around us and to understand our future. This is a beautiful thing!

Finally, the research was wide-ranging and, while there is not enough time to share it all with you today, it is evident that a sense of rebellion and a turn toward a new creative power for the working class, runs deep within *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, as well as its cinematic contemporaries. There are many more examples. I am happy to report that Norma Rae was not the only female rebel... (IMAGE 7) Here is Ellen Ripley, played by Sigourney Weaver, in Ridley Scott's 1979 sci-fi horror film *Alien* - she rebelled against an evil corporation and the creature it wanted to own. (IMAGE 8) Here is Olivia Newton John's Sandy, from the 1978 film *Grease*. Her rebellion brings us full circle, to the 1950s era of James Dean - but Sandy can rock a leather jacket just as well as the best of the boys.

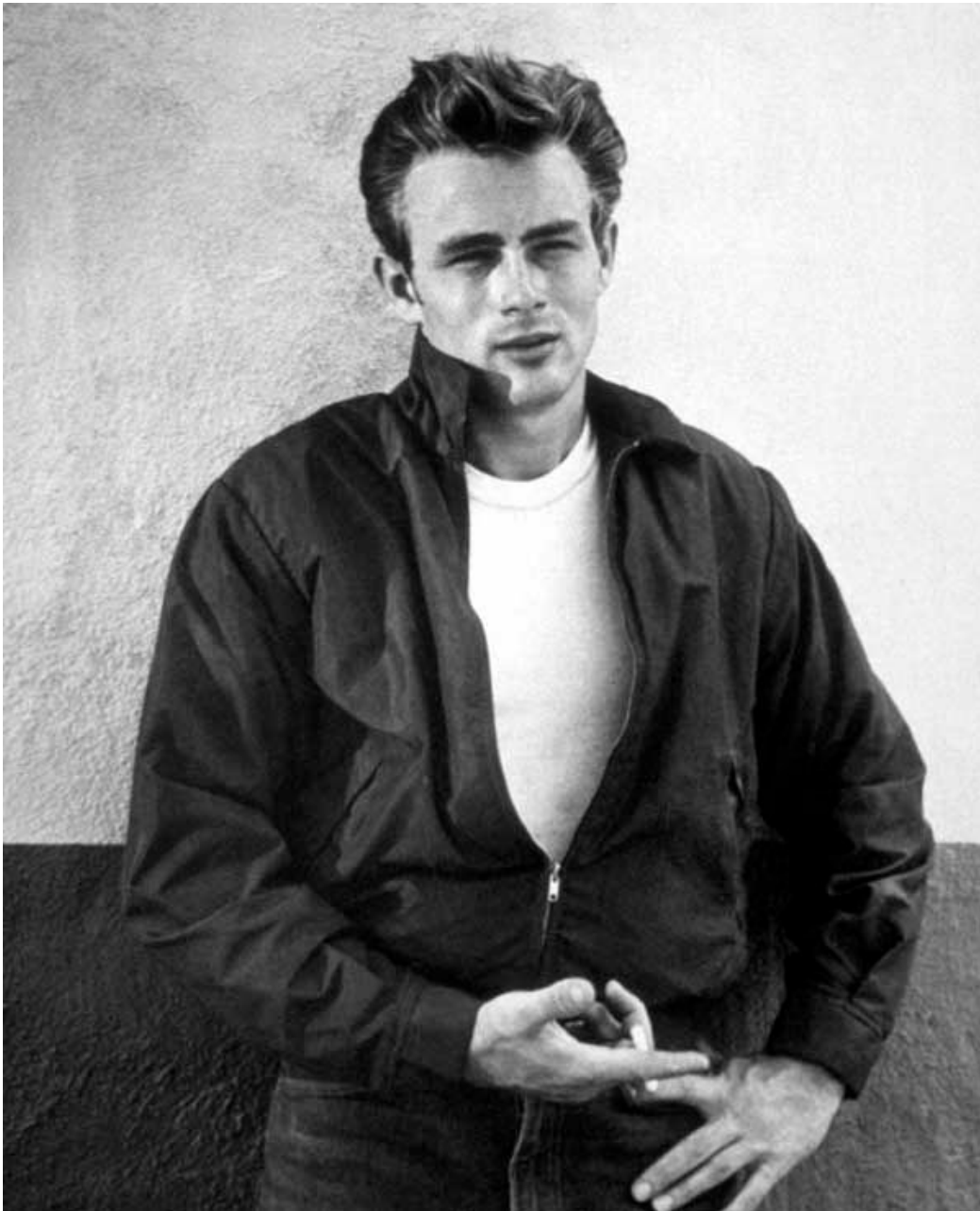
Rebels will always exist - without them, society would stagnate and civilization die. Springsteen's characters, along with their cinematic counterparts, are reshaped and transformed in their rebellion - as are we. Through them, the very idea of the American dream-myth itself is reconstituted to live another day - the rebel's dream spirals into new possibilities, new stories, new hopes, (and new albums).

So, here's to the mill workers, the X-wing pilots, the film directors, the rock and rollers - their dreams found and lost.

For a copy of the paper and bibliography, please visit my website, adamaresty.com. Thanks for listening.

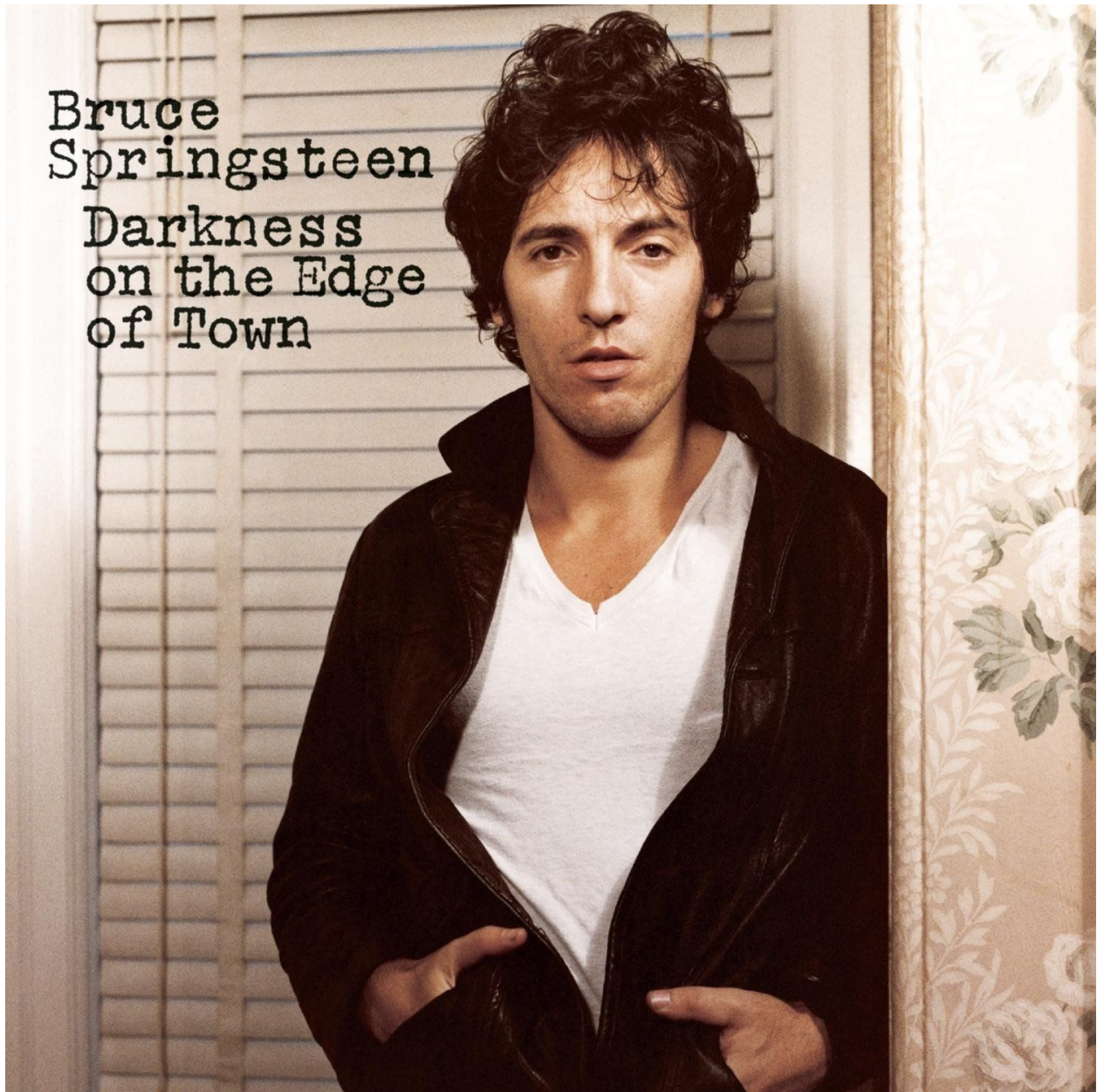
IMAGE INDEX

IMAGE 1:



James Dean in *Rebel Without A Cause* (1955)

IMAGE 2:



Darkness on the Edge of Town album cover, Frank Stefanko.

IMAGE 3:



Harrison Ford as Han Solo in *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980)

IMAGE 4:



Sally Field in *Norma Rae* (1978)

IMAGE 5:



Darth Vader, *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980)

IMAGE 6:



Director Francis Ford Coppola on the set of *Apocalypse Now* (1979)

IMAGE 7:



Sigourney Weaver in *Alien* (1979)

IMAGE 8:



Olivia Newton John in *Grease!* (1978)

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