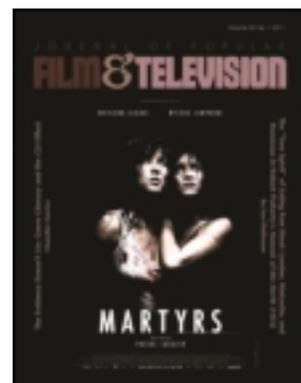


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### Man and Boy: Montgomery Clift as a Queer Star in Wild River

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# Man and Boy: MONTGOMERY CLIFT AS A Queer Star



in *Wild River*

By  
**Elisabetta  
Girelli**

Shown above: A queer wedding: Carol's passion marries Chuck's kinship (shown: Montgomery Clift and Lee Remick, *Wild River*, 1960). (color figure available online)

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*Abstract:* Montgomery Clift has been underexplored by film scholars, who have mostly focused on his early career. This article uses queer theory to examine Clift's later work, focusing on *Wild River* (dir. Elia Kazan, 1960); it argues that in this film Clift's narrative role, performance, and star persona radically challenge normative masculinity and heterosexuality.

*Keywords:* Montgomery Clift, queer, sexuality, star

A crucial scene of *Wild River* (dir. Elia Kazan, 1960) shows the protagonists Chuck (Montgomery Clift) and Carol (Lee Remick) laying in the muddy ground, after having been assaulted by a gang of thugs. Chuck has proved no match for the mob of hostile men and has been hopelessly beaten up; Carol, however, has aggressively and fearlessly attacked their enemies and has been knocked down as a result. After a pause in which the couple look uncertainly at each other, Chuck says quietly, "I wish someday I could win maybe one fight," quickly adding, his voice warming up, "You were wonderful out there." Carol replies, "I don't care if you never win a fight." Chuck's reaction to these words is to blurt out, "Marry me. I know, I'll probably regret it, and sure you'll regret it, but. . . ." Carol's face slowly relaxes into an expression of incredulous happiness. This scene is the culmination of the complex, unconventional relationship that has developed between the protagonists; it is also a moment in which key factors constituting Montgomery Clift as a star—his unorthodox masculinity, his sexual ambiguity on and off screen, his performative emphasis on unuttered feelings and thoughts—all come together in a narrative knot that can be aptly described as "queer."

Clift has been fairly neglected by film scholars, yet he occupies a crucial position in film history and in the development of screen representations that go against traditional gender and sexual identities. Most of the critical attention he has received focuses on his early films, which catapulted him to stardom,

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**Clift continued to make films into the 1960s, and most of those films amply reward the scrutiny for textual and subtextual disruptions of dominant cultural codes.**

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and on his performance and star image at the peak of his career. In practice, this has meant a focus on Clift as a young and exceptionally beautiful man, which in turn, with reference to his biography, has helped to critically frame him within notions of homoeroticism, spectacle, and sexual ambivalence.<sup>1</sup> Steven Cohan has provided a notable contribution, assessing Clift as the first and archetypal "boy-who-is-not-a-man," an unsettling figure in the landscape of postwar Hollywood, which was dominated by "real men," but contextualized by a society in which traditional masculinity was already in a crisis (Cohan 301–421). Cohan articulates his concept of the "boy-who-is-not-a-man" by closely linking it to notions of bisexual desire, to Clift's passive offering of himself to both the male and the female gaze, and to the resulting denaturalization of established gender and sexual roles. Like most scholars discussing Clift as a subversive figure, Cohan concentrates on the actor's first film, *Red River* (dir. Howard Hawks, 1948), in which Clift was memorably cast against John Wayne, and on the iconic *A Place in the Sun* (dir. George Stevens, 1951), the film that matched Clift with the young and beautiful Elizabeth Taylor. Interestingly, Cohan's account of Clift as a subversive "boy" is consistent with Richard Dyer's description of the "rebel" type of star, under which Clift is included, a type characterized by youth and therefore by the equation of subversion with a certain age: "[Y]outh is the ideal material term on which to displace social discontent, since young people always get older (and 'grow up')" (Dyer, *Stars* 53). Indeed, academic discussions of Clift's unorthodox image have mostly followed his career up to and including *From*

*Here to Eternity* (dir. Fred Zinnemann, 1953); Clift, however, continued to make films into the 1960s, and most of those films amply reward the scrutiny for textual and subtextual disruptions of dominant cultural codes. One may hypothesize that the critical indifference to his later career owes little to the absence of subversive film material, depending instead on the dramatic change in Clift's physical image.

In 1956 Clift suffered a devastating and well-publicized car accident, from which he was to emerge with a different look. Clift's face had been smashed in the crash, and it literally had to be put together again: as a result, the left side was wired and virtually paralyzed, while his nose and lips changed shape, losing their perfect proportions. It was a strangely static, off-kilter face; only his eyes remained expressive, now casting a pained and feverish gaze. Clift's body would never recover, immediately acquiring a frail and hunched look; back injuries and a problem with balance gave the actor an uncertain posture and gait. Overnight, Clift shifted from being a screamingly beautiful, boyish-looking man, to a plainer, older, somber version of himself; the most obvious consequence of this physical alteration was that the star's days as object of desire, as embodiment of male spectacle, were effectively over. The vast scholarly indifference toward Clift's subsequent work seems to link alternative sexual and gender configurations to youth, beauty, and open erotic display. A case study of *Wild River* shows instead how, in his screen roles after 1956, Clift radically challenges normative notions of masculinity and heterosexuality. In other words, despite being in his forties and having lost much of his beauty, Clift continues to function as a "boy" in opposition to "real men" on the screen; his entire career, therefore, can be seen as the continuous, though varied, articulation of the same disruptive function. To demonstrate the above, it is useful to shift the lines of inquiry away from fixed notions of bisexuality and homosexuality and to instead explore the usefulness of contemporary notions of "queer." Prior to 1956, Clift's queerness largely rested on the star's youthful, sexually ambigu-



Montgomery Clift at the peak of his beauty and fame in *A Place in the Sun* (dir. George Stevens, 1951).

ous image, and was informed by erotic self-display; after the accident, Clift still communicated sexual ambivalence, but his queer difference was increasingly expressed through social and physical deviancy and through on-screen relationships based on unorthodox or non-sexual contracts.

By November 1959, when the shooting of *Wild River* began, Clift was carrying a large baggage of cultural significations with him: he had been a star since 1948, and he was inevitably caught in what Dyer has called “the powerfully, inescapably present, always-already-signifying nature of star images” (Dyer, *Stars* 129). Clift’s image had been replete with ambiguity from the very start. *Red River* introduces the actor simply as Wayne’s young foil, but narrative subtext, camera shots, and Clift’s own mesmerizing presence establish the newcomer as a willing erotic object, un-

settlingly available to male and female scrutiny. Clift’s intense performative style, his “feminine” sensitivity, and his distinctive emphasis on nonverbal communication through foregrounding his body, created on screen “a desirable boy by revealing the ground of his masculinity in performativity and bisexuality” (Cohan 212). Subsequent film roles enhanced Clift’s ambiguous persona, even when plots centered on heterosexual romances: *A Place in the Sun*, *I Confess* (dir. Alfred Hitchcock, 1953), and *From Here to Eternity* offered alternative readings of Clift’s sexual identity<sup>2</sup>; this aura of ambiguity was informed by ever-increasing rumors about the star’s double life. Sensationalist articles tried to expose Clift’s closeted homosexual lifestyle, hinting that the star frequented gay bars and cruising areas; at the same time, the mainstream press amply documented his closeness to various women,

notably his costars Elizabeth Taylor and, later on, Marilyn Monroe. The publicity around heterosexual liaisons was not simply a result of the treatment Hollywood imposed on its stars (Waugh 99), it was also a reflection of the real intimacy and attraction between Clift and these two actresses. Indeed, news of Clift’s relationships with women would drift in and out of the press for the rest of his career, largely unexplained by Clift himself, even when the women in question remained his inseparable companions for years (notably the singer Libby Holman and the acting coach Mira Rostova). It is no wonder that the mostly coy journalists of the time labeled the star “an enigma.” After the dramatic 1956 car accident, Clift was increasingly described in tragic tones, and his “enigmatic” personality would be more and more framed by the notions of inner torment and self-destruction

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The growing visibility of Clift's alcoholism, assorted addictions, and deteriorating physical and mental condition contributed to the star's association with uncomfortable notions of deviancy.

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usually ascribed to gay men (Dyer, *The Culture of Queers* 113–35 and 162–63; Waugh 100). The growing visibility of Clift's alcoholism, assorted addictions, and deteriorating physical and mental condition contributed to the star's association with uncomfortable notions of deviancy. Still a bachelor as he approached his forties, Clift made news again in September 1959, two months before beginning to work in *Wild River*: unaware of a fire that had broken out at his home, he was surprised by firemen in bed with his male lover (Capua 122).

As Clift's private life continued to fascinate, puzzle, and often shock the public, the star's films after 1956 showed a steady drift toward characters who were also, in important ways, deviating from the established norm. Roles included the frail, outcast Jewish soldier in *The Young Lions* (dir. Edward Dmytryk, 1958), with Clift strikingly cast against the solid virilities of Marlon Brando and Dean Martin. In *Lonelyhearts* (dir. Vincent Donahue, 1958) Clift is an idealistic journalist who, despite being engaged to be married, gives himself for sex to a needy, unattractive woman who writes to his agony column. In *Suddenly, Last Summer* (dir. Joseph Mankiewicz, 1959) Clift plays an edgy neurosurgeon uncovering a patient's truth about experiences centered on homosexuality and cannibalism.

To assess Clift's presence in *Wild River*, it is thus necessary to consider the ready-made baggage the star brought to the film: a complex series of overlapping significations, held together by a consistent element of sexual and gender disruption. As explained by Dyer, a star's image "is a *complex totality* and

it does have a *chronological dimension*" (Dyer, *Stars* 63): in Montgomery Clift's case, this chronology is punctuated by the impossibility of placing the star in a neat sexual pigeonhole. In the words of his main biographer, Patricia Bosworth, Clift "seemed to represent a new kind of man—a man who refused to make judgements on sexual preference" (Bosworth 153–54). The constant slippage of signifiers and the denial of categorization form the core of contemporary queer theory, a critical approach ideally suited to a study of Clift. Crucially, a queer perspective is suspicious of monolithic "gay," "lesbian," or even "bisexual" identities, preferring instead to posit a continuum of noncanonical sexual and societal choices, orientations, and practices. The concept of "straight queerness" probably constitutes the most striking break from the previous assumptions of lesbian and gay theory, opening up multiple spaces of resistance and difference. Notions of queerness are also linked to developments in disability studies, as the cultural hegemony of able-bodied heteronormativity rests on specific definitions of beauty, desirabil-

Chuck: "I can't get enough of you" (shown: Montgomery Clift and Lee Remick, *Wild River*, 1960). (color figure available online)



ity, and physical and mental harmony. Lastly, as “queer” contests identities and lifestyles traditionally considered “abnormal,” the process of denaturalizing sexuality can and should be applied to configurations that problematize sexuality itself, such as asexuality, celibacy, and “sleepers” relationships, all of which disrupt prescriptive patterns of sexual needs and consumption.

To apply notions of queerness to a star such as Clift implies, first of all, consideration of his image as a “complex totality” and seeing how sexual ambiguity and gender disruption constitute major traits within this image. Equally, a crucial aspect of Clift’s persona after the 1956 accident is a marked visible dissonance from his former beauty and from traditional notions of healthy masculinity, expressed through the visible effects of bodily and mental trauma. Second, the queering of Clift demands a close scrutiny of his film roles and performances to identify patterns of sexual and gender subversion and to highlight how Clift produced models of male identity that challenged canons of male normality. Given that, in most of his films, Clift was heterosexually paired, notions of “straight queerness” are particularly interesting; this does not at all deny readings of Clift’s image that identify homosexual or homoerotic subtexts in his films. On the contrary: multiple sexual directions overlap and coexist in Clift’s work, producing a range of meanings that, in their subversion of traditional standards and expectations, can be truly defined as “queer.”

*Wild River* is set in the 1930s in rural, racially segregated Tennessee. The narrative takes place in the context of the terrible river floods that at the time had caused widespread fatalities in the area. Clift plays Chuck Glover, an agent of the newly created Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), in charge of supervising the opening up of a dam that will prevent more flooding. Before the dam’s gates can be opened, however, the surrounding area must be cleared and people relocated; Chuck has been sent there with the specific task of persuading a stubborn old woman, Mrs. Ella Garth (Jo Van Fleet) to allow her house to be demolished and to move elsewhere.

Chuck immediately becomes the target of the locals’ hostility, as his pressing for the relocation of Mrs. Garth is accompanied by his decision of employing black workers at the same pay as whites. Harassed and repeatedly beaten up by the town’s thugs, Chuck still persists in his mission, while beginning an affair with Mrs. Garth’s young widowed granddaughter, Carol. As their relationship develops, Chuck meets Carol’s fiancée, Walter (Frank Overton), a timid and well-meaning figure, and the two become allies in the struggle against the brutal local rednecks. The relationship between Chuck and Carol provides much of the film’s focus: Carol is shown as being passionately in love with Chuck, soon asking him to marry her and take her away with him, with her two children. Chuck, however, takes a decidedly passive role, and although displaying a desire to bond with Carol emotionally and physically, he does not express sexual or romantic passion, nor does he try to take her away from Walter. The film’s climax sees Chuck violently attacked by the gang of thugs, and Carol, in a neat gender reversion, fearlessly fighting back on Chuck’s behalf. Only after this does Chuck make his odd marriage proposal, acknowledging doubts but following a strong impulse; the film ends on a sexually ambiguous, yet hopeful note, as the new family flies away to a life unknown, based on kinship and love.

Through its narrative and visual texts and rich subtexts, *Wild River* builds a complex discourse that belies the almost biblical clarity of its plot. If, on one hand, the film is ostensibly about good men fighting evil and harnessing nature’s power to bring safety and progress to all, on the other hand, this narrative is subordinated to another narrative, created by Clift’s problematic impersonation of Chuck. Bringing a deeply subversive quality to his role as government agent, man, and lover, Clift also builds a highly unorthodox relation with his female love interest: it is the close interplay of these two strands of meaning that carry the film’s structure of feeling.

The film begins with Chuck’s arrival at his new job in Tennessee and tak-

ing possession of his TVA office; he is met with the incredulous stares of his all-female staff who, when quizzed by Chuck, admit they had thought “they’d send an older man.” The protagonist is thus immediately presented as someone who confounds expectations and who may not fit conventional notions of authority and power associated with the U.S. government; this impression is soon confirmed by Chuck’s inept fiddling with his chair, which nearly causes him to fall on the floor, by his expressed belief that Mrs. Garth may be won over by a new approach based on dialogue, and by his reception by Mrs. Garth’s sons, which follows shortly. As he tries to quietly reason with the group of big burly men, explaining why the land needs to be vacated, one of them effortlessly picks him up and throws him into the river. Without showing anger or the desire to retaliate, Chuck finally walks off, frail-looking and soaking wet. The protagonist is thus singled out as a misfit in the masculine system he is meant to belong to: too young to be in charge, too physically weak to command respect, he is, however, presented to the audience as the locus of reason and moral authority, as well as of New Deal progress. A narrative of ambivalence is set in place, whereby Chuck will straddle boundaries between traditional manhood, with its connotations of maturity and of social and sexual power, and perceptions of boyhood, linked to innocence and inexperience, as much as to erotic ambiguity. This is striking if one considers that Clift was thirty-nine in *Wild River*, and surely not looking any younger with his pleasant but tired face, hunched body, and uncertain step; yet, his physical appearance, which ought to have denoted age, is invested with the tenderness and

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**The perception of Clift as a “boy” is not only a reflection of his established star persona, but also a direct result of his performance in the film.**

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Man and boy. Montgomery Clift as Chuck Glover in *Wild River* (1960). (color figure available online)

ambiguity of youth. The perception of Clift as a “boy” is not only a reflection of his established star persona, but also a direct result of his performance in the film: his speech is inflected with pauses and hesitations, his eyes are alternately wide-open and elusive, and his movements show both anxiety and desire. Although these boyish connotations are best expressed in Clift’s love scenes with Remick, where they inform Chuck’s unsettling characterization as a grown man who is not a “real man,” they are also crucial in marking the TVA agent as an outsider, ill-fitted to the demands of conventional, straightforward masculinity. Clift’s construction of Chuck as different from the other men, by virtue of being more of a boy, is given expressed acknowledgment in the film, from its first scene at the TVA office to later on in the narrative, when a drunken Chuck has fallen asleep on the ground, Mrs. Garth observes him and comments on how small he looks. Indeed, Kazan (who was fifty years old when directing *Wild River*, thus, hardly a likely father figure for Clift) remarks on the problems he had with the actor

while shooting the film: “[D]espite all, I felt tender toward him. He was just a boy” (Kazan 600).

The queerness expressed by Chuck/Clift is, then, rooted in gender disruption: although very much an adult chronologically and by virtue of his job, he is strongly associated with notions of the “boy” and effectively feminized by his dysfunctional masculinity and narrative position. Physically vulnerable, repeatedly humiliated and hurt by other men, Chuck is also strictly aligned with the film’s female subjectivity: his sympathies lie firmly with the two women protagonists, Carol and Mrs. Garth, despite the latter’s antagonism to his plans. In a key exchange with the old woman, just before collapsing drunk at her feet, Chuck tells her emphatically: “I know *exactly* how you feel.” But Chuck’s boyishness goes much further than this: the condition of being not a man continues to imply an essential sexual ambiguity, as it did in Clift’s early films analyzed by Cohan. This time, however, the star’s ambiguous sexual identity is very differently articulated, shifting its subversion onto a new set of represen-

tations and functions. Without reveling in erotic self-display, indeed wrapping eroticism in a cover of affection and passive acceptance, Chuck/Clift nevertheless makes himself available to male and female desire through his relationships with Walter and Carol. Allied with Walter in a homosocial pact, which marks them both as different from the town’s normative masculinity, Chuck is able to relate to Carol in a nonpossessive, sexually ambivalent way. Indifferent to institutionalized coupling and open to modes of connection that defy the “norm” and that are powerfully felt but undetermined, Chuck is at the center of a deeply queer discourse.

In *Wild River*, Walter is clearly linked to Chuck as the only other male misfit: as Carol’s official “fellow” and one of the town’s resident males, he is patently, almost painfully failing to meet expectations. Although as physically robust as any of the locals, Walter is unwilling to fight, and his decision to side with Chuck against the thugs is an act of moral rather than physical courage. Scorned by the others for his acceptance of Chuck’s “theft” of his girlfriend,

Walter befriends the man who should be his rival, and on their first meeting the two go out drinking. The film's elliptical narration does not show what happens between them, but it presents them at the end of the night, obviously close and relaxed together. Later on, in the key scene of the fight between Chuck and the locals, Walter first intervenes as Chuck's protector; at the end of the fight, when Chuck and Carol are lying on the ground next to each other, Walter casts a desiring gaze toward the couple. This unspecified longing finds a practical expression in Walter's last gesture: he rescues the bag containing Chuck's belongings, which had been taken and thrown away by the thugs, and carefully places it by its owner, before leaving the scene with a last yearning look. A homoerotic subtext thus underpins Chuck's characterization as a deviant male and lover, which is the focus of Clift's performance in the film.

Chuck is clearly drawn to Carol by feelings of affinity and attraction, yet he does not think of claiming her for himself; instead, he builds with her a relationship counter to dominant gender, sexual, and societal structures, providing a striking example of "straight queerness." The two meet, become lovers, get married, and form a family: yet all this happens in opposition to established notions of heterosexual coupling and even of "normality." Most importantly, Chuck's sexual identity remains fluid and ambivalent, disrupting the equation between man-woman relationships and conventional heterosexuality.

The film's plot rushes the couple along, as they rapidly become very intimate; the exact nature and configuration of their intimacy, however, are constantly called into question by Clift's performance. Clift's behavior as Carol's lover is suitably amorous and tender, and, indeed, Judy White argues that much of the film's power rests on the credibility of this screen romance (White 229); if Carol is the one who initiates their affair, Chuck is soon turning up at her door again, taking her in his arms and kissing her. Afterward, however, although Chuck's behavior remains affectionate and very physical, the extent of its erotic motivation

is uncertain. In a scene where they are kissing in the car, Carol tries in vain to extract a declaration of passion from Chuck, eventually telling him exasperated: "[S]ay you can't get enough of me. Say it!" Chuck compliantly repeats her words, but in such muted tones as to leave unclear whether he is overcome with desire or simply basking in comfort. Throughout the film, Clift's behavior toward Remick is physically insistent, but oddly composed at the same time, resulting in a portrayal of strong yet undefined desire.

Clift's idiosyncratic love-making in *Wild River* clearly upsets conventional notions of the male lover; indeed, at the time of the film's release, the actor was berated for not being predatory and "virile" enough, and his impersonation of Chuck Glover was perceived as an unmitigated sexual failure. The first person to be unhappy with Clift's performance was Kazan. The director had initially hoped to get Brando to play the part and felt that Clift's dreamy, passive approach to the love story was expressing sexual inadequacy: "[I]n their love scenes she [Remick] was dominant and Monty seemed sexually uncertain. . . . [I]n one scene Monty, at the instant of arousal, slumped to the floor. I cursed him under my breath as a limp lover" (Kazan 599). There is no doubt that Kazan saw Clift's behavior as resulting from the "wrong" sexual orientation: "[H]e was terribly uncertain with girls—like a homosexual is" (Ciment 134). Reviewers were hardly kinder to Clift's style as a lover, seemingly expressing indignation on behalf of "real men": "[Clift's] incapacities are almost indecently flagrant in the scenes in

which the full-bloodied Remick tells him she loves him (*Films in Review*, 356). The *New York Herald Tribune*, specifically commenting on the film's love scenes, also points to shortcomings in Clift's heterosexual performance: "Clift always seems to me a bit pained, even under circumstances that would leave most people happy" (Beckley 101). The *Hollywood Reporter* wrote, "[T]he film comes undone with Clift's performance. . . . His diffident, tentative style is the antithesis of the character he should be playing" (3). Remick, however, saw that Clift's interpretation of Chuck had resulted in a radically alternative model of relationship: "[I]nsofar as Monty was incapable of being the dominant partner in a male-female relationship . . . the film showed a very different kind of relationship than what one usually sees" (Kass 80). In light of Clift's deeply ambiguous, unorthodox performance as Carol's lover, Chuck's bizarre marriage proposal becomes especially suggestive: it reads as the statement of intention of a queer man. Whether Chuck is ultimately a "gay" or a "straight queer" man or anything between the two is never established and not important. Obviously concerned by the impossibility of fulfilling normative expectations of "the husband," Chuck is, however, ready to marry someone he has come to cherish: it is a relationship where nothing is guaranteed, apart from the desire of being together. The scene of their impulsive wedding is fittingly unusual: as they are pronounced man and wife, Carol looks in front of her, with a beatific expression on her face, while Chuck gazes intently at Carol, at once loving and bemused. Once they are married, the new couple do not exchange a kiss: instead, Chuck takes his wife by the hand and quietly leads her outside. A close friend of Clift once said: "[I]f Monty really liked you—man or woman—you ultimately went to bed with him" (Bosworth 282). A notion of sexual bonding not based on gender preferences or on traditional romance and passion, but on whether people "like" each other, is profoundly queer; it is also key in understanding Chuck's physical and emotional commitment to Carol.

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Clift, thus, brings a strong subversive quality to *Wild River*, disrupting established notions of masculinity and heterosexuality. Clift's interpretation of Chuck posits a fluid gender identity and an ambiguous sexual orientation; the fluidity and ambiguity are also informed by other elements, inseparable from Clift's persona and performance, which expand and reinforce the film's queer discourse.

The relationship between the two protagonists is complex, presenting "a mesh of gaps, lapses, dissonances and excesses of meaning," as in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's definition of queerness (8). As already discussed, a significant lapse or dissonance is the suggestion that Chuck's desire for Carol may not be intensely or primarily sexual. But Clift's physical behavior toward Remick, which is constantly affectionate yet cool at the same time, contains at least a hint of another possibility: that sex, understood as erotic need and pleasure based on genital satisfaction, may scarcely be present in Chuck's life, or even not present at all. In the arrangement shared by the couple, symbolically ratified by their low-key wedding, a full-blown sex life may not be included, or it may be subordinated to other needs; conversely, Carol's sexual attraction for Chuck may perhaps be fulfilled, but not reciprocated. A crucial factor, here, is again Clift's performance: as Chuck, the star's physical ambivalence toward Carol is not countered by open erotic desire for Walter or for any other person. A reasonable implication of Clift's overall behavior in the film is that Chuck (and/or Clift himself) may simply not be interested in sex. Notions of asexuality or of a "dormant" sexual drive are, of course, radically incompatible with dominant representations of masculinity. Likewise, orthodox views of loving, intimate commitments between two people, let alone a married heterosexual couple, are indissoluble from the presence of sexual activity. From a queer perspective, compulsory sex appears as prescriptive and oppressive as compulsory heterosexuality, being the function of an idea of "normality" imbedded in patriarchy and heteronormativity. Comment-

ing on her own nonsexual lesbian relationship, Leslie Raymer argues: "I now refuse to allow myself to measure the value of any of my relationships by such male values as how often I 'get some'" (108). If, as Adrienne Rich claims, heterosexuality is the instrument of patriarchy (632–60), *Wild River* constructs a strongly antipatriarchal discourse: it denaturalizes the hetero "norm," yet it recuperates relationships between the sexes by subverting mandatory sexual patterns. One of the ways in which those patterns are disrupted is by constructing a male subject whose sex life may be absent, scarce, or irrelevant. As in all queer configurations, the suggestion that Chuck may have renounced sex, or be essentially uninterested in it, remains highly ambiguous: a feasible but unuttered intimation, it may denote a temporary or life-long situation; it may be partial or total; but the crucial element is its nonabsolute value. Lack of sexual action does not automatically turn a person into a nonsexual being; Chuck's possible distance from notions of sexual prowess, of whatever orientation, coexists with the presence of desire. It is the nature of male desire that, in *Wild River*, is ultimately queered and queer, being undetermined and unclassifiable.

It is tempting to link Chuck's hypothetical lack of sex to Montgomery Clift's life at the time the film was made. During the three years after his car accident, Clift was still having to cope with a vast amount of chronic pain and was now in the grip of a serious addiction to prescription drugs. Combined with a long history of alcoholism and a plethora of physical ailments, the legacy of the accident meant that Clift found sex increasingly difficult: "Monty was often impotent, and sex became less important to him. His deepest commitments were emotional rather than sexual anyway" (Bosworth 342). In the last ten years of his life, Clift became less and less involved in sex: it is notable that his screen performances also turned less sexual, to a very significant degree, finally acquiring a clear asexual quality in his last films. *Wild River* belongs to a dynamic moment in Clift's career, when new facets in the star's persona were

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**[Clift's] subversion is validated through Chuck, not only as the film's protagonist, but also as the lover, the object of the heroine's passion and devotion, and the bearer of moral and practical progress.**

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jostling and combining with images, still very powerful, from his pre-accident phase. The suspicion that Chuck may have been uninterested in sex adds an extra layer of ambiguity to the film, placing its protagonist even deeper at odds with monolithic concepts of the male lover; just as importantly, Chuck's possible chastity goes against accepted notions of "normal" adult development. Clift's established status as a "boy," which was mostly replete with ambiguous sexuality, is retained but also twisted in *Wild River*. Clift/Chuck is constantly hovering between grown-up desire and hints of physical innocence, an especially unsettling combination for a character meant to exude sexual and social authority. Indeed, Clift's "enigmatic" persona was acquiring, by 1959–60, a distinct aura of abnormality, and where once he was perceived as the epitome of youthful eroticism, there was now a strong connotation of unhealthy deviancy. If Clift's ambivalent performance was judged unmanly by film critics, the ever-sententious Kazan went even further in his assessment: "Monty's sexuality was that of a child waiting for his mother to put her arms around him" (Kazan 597). It is difficult not to relate Clift's projection of a deviant masculinity and public perceptions of it to the multiple alterations in the actor's appearance and to the publicized notion that he was becoming physically and psychologically impaired. Clift's face had not simply changed and aged after the accident, it had also acquired a look often described as "glazed" by reviewers. A rare metabolic disorder, *spontaneous*

*hypothyroidism*, now caused Clift's eyes to bulge out, while a massive intake of pills and alcohol made his gaze often seem vacant. The thyroid condition gave Clift a precarious balance when he walked, and back and leg pains affected his posture: "[H]is body took the shape of a question mark: pelvis pushed out, shoulders crouched and slouching" (LaGuardia 181). The difference in appearance between the older Clift and his former image seemed staggering, as stated by Kazan: "[H]e was no longer handsome, and there was strain everywhere in him—even, it seemed, in his effort to stand erect" (597). Likewise, Clift was becoming increasingly distant from the standards of Hollywood leading men or, indeed, from established ideas of male desirability; if physical "abnormality" played a vast part in this process, the mental anguish that went with it greatly contributed to it. A 1959 article, penned by Roderick Mann for *The Express*, painted a typical representation of Montgomery Clift, post-accident: defined as "talented and tortured," the star was described as a frighteningly messed-up individual, who during the interview alternated between crying, swearing, talking randomly, and even pretending to be deaf (12–14). Similar accounts of Clift's psychological distress abounded, aiding the construction of an unhealthy, excessive, almost repulsive persona. There may have been many film stars who got drunk at parties, but Clift's descent into despair was well beyond the accepted limits of masculine dignity: as a story editor at MGM put it, "Monty's ordeal was so naked it disgusted and frightened a lot of people" (Bosworth 340).

On screen, the uneasy combination of Clift's unhealthy reputation and undisputed star status generated ambiguity; it was matched by his appearance, which uncomfortably twisted his familiar good looks, and by the strongly ambivalent quality of his performance. The resulting image suggested social, gender, sexual, and physical deviancy, challenging and subverting established notions of normality. In *Wild River*, Clift brings these connotations to the fore: his subversion is validated through Chuck, not only as the film's protagonist, but also as the lover, the object of the heroine's passion and devotion, and the bearer of moral and practical progress. Both "man" and "boy," Montgomery Clift is the master of a powerfully queer discourse, confirming and deepening his earlier disruptive function and emerging as a truly subversive figure.

#### NOTES

1. A notable and fascinating exception is *The Passion of Montgomery Clift*, by Lawrence, which approaches Clift from the point of view of the cult grown around the star.
2. See for example, Cohan 229–37; Hart 69–82.

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