

Film Review

The Place Beyond the Pines. Sidney Kimmel (Producer) & Derek Cianfrance (Director).
United States: Sidney Kimmel Entertainment, 2012.

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“I didn’t grow up around my dad, and look at the fuckin’ way I turned out”. - Handsome Luke

“The Place Beyond the Pines” spans 15 years in a three-generational plot mobilizing the intersection of three male lines of succession and dramatizing families of three classes positioned in alternative American dreams: freedom, dominance, integration. An establishment male line under the aegis of the superego is well off, though wounded. A marginal male line, drive-dominated, is recessive, and attached to a third family that is racially integrated and socially mobile. Considered from the point of view of the structural theory of psychoanalysis, the film can be seen to demonstrate how the superego (the law) derives its potency from the id, which is lawless. Driven by the superego, the word “killer” takes on its vernacular American meaning of “winner”. The nexus of mobility, money, and guns organizes the imagery of the film, with the anality of money articulated among male conspirators.

Numerous fatal police shootings in the United States recently witnessed in social media and on television give political significance to Derek Cianfrance’s 2012 film “The Place Beyond the Pines” for its representations of police conduct and law enforcement. The Washington Post tracked 385 killings by US law-enforcement officers as of 30 May 2015, estimating 937 for the year. The 8 April 2015 New York Times summarizes 43 at-best dubious and at-worst outrightly-murderous shootings by police officers in the USA since Darren Wilson killed Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri in August 2014. In this era of cascading reports of fatal shootings by police, “The Place Beyond the Pines” offers insightful representation of what goes into incidents of these sorts and shows their consequences down family lines.

Derek Cianfrance (born 1974) is best known for directing the film *Blue Valentine*, made with Ryan Gosling and Michelle Williams in 2010. His next collaboration with Gosling, “The Place Beyond the Pines”, expands Cianfrance’s scope from the intimacy of a couple to examination of the social fabric and political hierarchy of contemporary America and the long-range effects of its culture of mobility, money, and guns. In North America, a “killer” is a winner. Vernacular American speaks of “killer apps”, “lady killers”, “killer costumes”, and “killer scholars” as terms of approval. One can hear how Blue Jay Jose Bautista “murdered a baseball dead”. In this sense, Cianfrance’s presentation of the career of killer cop Avery Cross provides a key to an American dream of ambition as well as to the State of the Union in which killer cops putatively enforce the law and come out on top. This American dream means rising through the ranks and passing on one’s

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genes to one's son while paving the way for his success.

Three Family Lines

The temporal structure “The Place Beyond the Pines” spans 15 years in linear form. A three-generational plot, presented without flashbacks, mobilizes the intersection of male lines of succession and dramatizes families of three classes positioned in alternative American dreams. A dominating male line under the aegis of the superego is well-off, though wounded. A marginal male line, drive-dominated, is recessive, and attached to a third family that is racially integrated and socially mobile. The film shows a corrupt and cynical establishment, an integrated lower-middle class, and performing outsiders who are isolated, spectacular, lawless, and on the move. Rides, money, and guns comprise a thematic nexus in “The Place Beyond the Pines”, with the theme of justice as an overriding issue, dramatizing the interplay between lines of succession with alternate paternal legacies.

American dreams: Freedom, dominance, integration

The film dramatizes three American dreams: 1) dominance, with the power of enforcement under the aegis of justice; 2) freedom to move through space; 3) upwardly-mobile racial integration. Considered from the point of view of the structural theory of psychoanalysis, the film can be seen to demonstrate how the superego (the law) derives its potency from the id, which is lawless. Cianfrance's narrative alters classic tales defining American masculinity, for Cianfrance is interested in what makes a father, whereas the classic American hero before the 20th century is a buddy, and not a dad. Thus, taking James Fenimore Cooper's Natty Bumppo from the nineteenth-century *Leatherstocking Tales* as a prime example, D. H. Lawrence claimed in the 1920s that the classic hero of American literature is white, isolated, and a killer. Citing the friendships between Natty Bumppo and Chingachgook in upstate New York during the French and Indian War of the 18th century depicted by James Fenimore Cooper in the 1820s, and Mark Twain's Jim and Huckleberry Finn on the Mississippi River in the 1880s as prime examples, Leslie Fiedler in the 1950s identified the classic American plot as one of interracial bonding between men in the wilderness. If we see “The Place Beyond the Pines” against this tradition, we can say the film alters these classic American elements by splitting the loner from the killer, and by showing interracial bonds between man and woman as crucial social cohesion. The male bonding in this film occurs between white men; and it has a sinister edge marked by corruption, aggression, and betrayal.

Three narrative strands

The film unrolls in three sections. The first strand centers on a stunt rider who becomes a bank robber in a thwarted attempt to support his baby; the second strand centers on the cop who kills him; the third strand dramatizes the clash between the son of the cop and the son of the robber.

Ryan Gosling, outlaw star, buff and tattooed, a marked man, plays a carnival stunt motorcycle rider named “Handsome Luke”, who, with two other riders, races around inside a metallic mesh spherical cage that looks too small for them to avoid crashing into each other. We see three riders enter the sphere, but only Luke is shown emerging. If we

imagine the sphere as analogous to an ovum, Luke's exit can be read retrospectively to symbolize the way some sperm make it into the future and some do not.

Luke lives and travels in a caravan that looks cramped. A year before the movie opens, Luke hooked up with a waitress in Schenectady, New York when his show traveled through town. When he returns the next year, this waitress, Romina (Eva Mendes) shows up at the fairground as Luke's motorcycling act ends. When he gives her a ride home, she doesn't invite him inside the house. The next day Luke rides back there and knocks on the door. Romina's mother opens it, holding a fair-haired baby. When Luke asks, "Who's this guy?", Romina's mother (Olga Merediz) replies, "He's yours. His name is Jason". (Luke, who is blond, has a golden fleece of sorts; as a teenager, Jason goes in quest of Luke's identity.)

Luke visits Romina at the diner where she works and asks her to join him on the road with their son, free to move from place to place. She asks him how he will support them, and dismisses his plan to move on as a dream. Luke goes to see Romina the next day, as she, her mother Malena, and a black man named Kofi (Mahershala Ali) are leaving home. When Luke tries to assert a claim on his son, Kofi brushes him off. Kofi's family gets into a SUV parked across the street and drives off. Luke follows them on his motorcycle to a church, where, upon entering and then sitting down alone in a rear pew, he observes his son being baptized, with Kofi in the role of the baby's father. As he sits in sorrow, shame, and frustration, tears roll down Luke's face in tracks that parallel a tattoo, near his left eye, of a dagger dripping blood. The ritual blessing of Jason in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and then recitation of the prayer to "Our Father", reverberate painfully off Luke's observation to Romina about his own fatherlessness when he tried to lay claim to paternal duty: "I didn't grow up around my dad, and look at the fuckin' way I turned out".

Luke goes riding in a wooded area at the edge of town, where Ben Mendelsohn's character, Robin, spots his skill as a motorcyclist. When Luke says he plans to stick around town instead of traveling on with the carnival, Robin invites Luke to live in a trailer on his property in exchange for helping with work in Robin's motor repair shop. Robin and Luke become partners in crime after Robin reports that he himself used to rob banks and describes how getaways can be managed by having a robber escape with loot on his motorcycle and ride up a ramp into a waiting cube truck, which will pull away while police search for a motorcyclist. At first incredulous, Luke rejects and then reconsiders the idea of becoming a bank robber. Robin says, "You wanna provide for that kid? You want to edge out your competition? You gotta do that using your skill set". Robin gives Luke a pistol. This pistol allows Luke the fantasy that he can provide for his son.

Luke proceeds to rob banks, which puts him in the wrong and gets him killed; but the subsequent confiscation of the stolen money by corrupt-crony cops as well as the reputation banks have nowadays for poor ethics, and Luke's motivation as a paternal provider contextualize his lawlessness with a certain irony.

The first robberies go successfully, with Luke's helmet providing anonymity, his motorcycle speeding efficiently away, the hookup with Robin working smoothly. Robin, with Luke and his motorcycle hidden in the back of his truck, pulls into traffic from the side of the road as a police car speeds in the other direction. Robin and Luke celebrate in

Robin's digs by dancing to Bruce Springsteen's "Dancing in the dark/ This gun's for hire", with Luke holding the front paws of Robin's dog, who dangles with her back pressed to Luke's front and her exposed underside stretched out facing Robin. This varies the sexual dimension of Luke pulling his motorcycle into the back of Robin's truck. Luke is dancing in the dark in so far as he is a marked man soon to be betrayed by his partner in crime, an example of how betrayal of trust undermines male-bonding in this film.

Flush with funds, Luke delivers toys to his son and a new crib in its store packaging. Malena lets him in, he goes upstairs, and begins assembling the crib in the room where his son usually sleeps. Kofi and Romina arrive home and come upstairs angry that Luke is there. An argument turns into a scuffle in which Luke hits Kofi over the left eye with a metal tool he'd been using to assemble the crib. Blood gushes from Kofi's wound, an ambulance is called, as are the police, for whom Luke, exuding a conscious sense of doom, waits on the front steps of Kofi's house with Jason in his arms.

Luke, who already has a police record, is booked for assault. Robin bails him out of jail. When they get back to Robin's place, Luke reimburses Robin from his robbery stash hidden in the roof of his trailer, and declares his intention to carry out several bank robberies in a single day. Robin says that is a bad idea because the motorcycle bandit is already notorious in local newspapers and the only way to succeed in this line of work is to lay low for years after a successful heist, as Robin himself has done. Robin says he is not going to let Luke bring them both down. When Luke declares his intention to visit Romina while he is out on bail, Robin tells him to go by truck rather than on his motorcycle in order to be less conspicuous. Robin then tries to stop Luke from further bank jobs by dismantling Luke's bike with a blowtorch while Luke is trucking to Romina's place of work to give her a stash of (stolen) money for their child. This she refuses but he tosses it, wrapped in a black plastic garbage bag, behind the driver's seat of her car as she pulls away.

Discovering his destroyed motorcycle back at Robin's, Luke enters the room where Robin sleeps and shoves the robbery pistol into his mouth, demanding back the reimbursed bail money. This scene, suggesting a transformed fantasy of fellatio, presents a variation on the homoerotic imagery of two men dancing in the dark. It has a sinister physiological edge created by the sound of the gun clicking against Ben Mendelsohn's teeth (newly cosmeticized for this role), and picks up on a metallic sound that opens the film, where Luke toys with a switchblade knife, killing time as he waits to be called for his motorcycle stunt.

Bandit's Demise

With the reclaimed bail money, Luke buys another motorcycle and resumes his robbery routine without Robin to assist the getaway. Inside a bank, all goes as planned, but as Luke exits to get on the new motorcycle he has parked by the door but not left running, it delays him. By the time he gets on the road, a police car is behind him. Luke pulls into a cemetery, where his bike has a flat tire. A cop in close pursuit alerts cruising police in the area who track Luke's progress into a residential street where he smashes into a car that is backing out of driveway, drops his bike, and runs into the nearest house. This sequence, a marvel of photographic tracking, shows Luke passing through territory of the dead and crashing on the mundane world of middle-class residences—a car backing out of

someone's driveway. He takes temporary refuge in a middle-class house in a cul-de-sac.

Now a new set of characters appears in the film, as we see Bradley Cooper playing a rookie cop entering the pursuit upon receiving news of the runaway bandit's whereabouts. The policeman, Avery Cross, now the film's protagonist, calls for backup but does not wait for its arrival. Luke has sent the inhabitants of the house, a mother and her adolescent son, outside. With his gun drawn, Avery enters the house. Luke gets on the telephone upstairs, calls Romina, and tells her not to tell his son about him. He then opens the window and prepares to jump out as Avery enters the room and shoots Luke. Luke shoots back as he is falling out the window. Hit in the knee, Avery looks down from the window at Luke sprawled dead in a pool of blood, his legs folded behind him so that he looks cut off at the knees. Since Ryan Gosling was the biggest movie star in this film when it was made, having Handsome Luke die a third of the way through comes as a shock.

Killer Protagonist as Superego

The movie now centers on Bradley Cooper's character. In hospital for his bullet wound, Avery is regaled as a hero for killing the notorious motorcycle bandit and supposedly rescuing two hostages. District Attorney Bill Killcullan (Bruce Greenwood) arrives to ask about the shooting, which Avery reports as "by the book", claiming Luke shot first. When Avery goes home to recuperate, wearing a cast on his leg, it becomes clear that his wife Jennifer (Rose Byrne) does not appreciate her husband's job as a policeman and cannot understand why a man who has a law degree wants to work as a cop. As in the household of Kofi and Romina, Jennifer's mother lives with her daughter and grandson, who is the same age as the son of Luke and Romina. Jennifer finds it difficult to have her husband home all day during his recuperation. During a session with a police psychologist, it comes out that Avery has difficulty looking at his own son because he has learned from news reports that Luke had a son.

Around dinnertime one night, three cops arrive to take Avery, still in his leg cast, out for some unofficial police work. The visitors are invited to share the family's meal, Jennifer showing reluctance to have these cops in her house. She evidently disapproves of the ringleader's remark that Avery deserves special reward for killing a *white* bad guy. In this scene, putative representatives of the law occupy a family space organized around food. If placed in the context of the idyll created when Luke and Romina take Jason to taste his first ice cream, and a scene later in the film where Kofi, Romina, their daughter, and adolescent Jason are shown having dinner, the guests-for-dinner scene at Avery's house suggests a pattern of family togetherness disrupted by male-bonded intruders. When the three police intruders leave Avery's house with him in tow, Ray Liotta's character, DeLuca, who evidently disapproves of what he thinks is Jennifer's bossiness, asks Avery as a joke whether his wife tucks her balls up at night, hinting that DeLuca thinks Avery's masculinity is in question.

Avery is surprised to find himself driven to Romina's house, where the cops enter without a warrant. DeLuca takes charge, telling Romina to pretend he has a warrant and he will pretend her mother has legal immigration papers. DeLuca stays downstairs with one of his minions, talking to Kofi, Romina, and her mother; a second minion, Scott (Gabe Fazio), goes upstairs. Avery, bewildered, stands in the front hall, and then goes

upstairs, where he finds Scott searching the baby's room. Scott tells Avery to pick up the baby from his crib (the crib Luke brought the day he was arrested for assaulting Kofi). When Avery has Jason in his arms, Scott raises the crib mattress, and removes a black plastic bag, which he carries downstairs wrapped in his jacket with Avery following along. In the police car, Scott counts up the bagged money as \$14,000. Avery is given half of it as hazardous duty pay, which he does not want. The cops call the stolen money they steal "shit", enunciating the fantasy that being powerful is being part of a corrupt conspiracy for getting your hands on other people's "shit". When DeLuca urges Scott to hurry up counting the stolen money in the police car, Scott retorts, "Got a money counter in your asshole?" After Scott tries to involve Avery further in compromising police business, Avery goes to the parking lot of the diner where Romina works and waits for her to come out to her car. He tries to give her back \$7000, but she refuses it. He takes it home, where his wife watches from upstairs in their house while he hides it in their garage. He then takes the money to his supervisor, Police Chief Weirzbowski (Robert Clohessy). Upon returning to work after his injury, Avery had asked Weirzbowski for a promotion and been refused. Instead, Avery had been assigned to work in the wire cage where evidence is stored. Weirzbowski, who does not want to hear about the money Avery tries to report, grabs a tissue from a box on his desk so he can pick up the dirty money without touching it, tosses it at Avery, and tells him to take it and get back to his cage. Avery puts the \$7000 into Luke's backpack, stored in the evidence cage, where Avery had previously put the pack on his own shoulder and then unzipped a compartment and found a folded photograph of Luke, Romina, and Jason from the day they had together as a family when Jason first tasted ice cream. Guilty and protective toward Jason, Avery keeps this photo in his own wallet.

Scott, now promoted to the Vice Squad, where he works with DeLuca, asks Avery discreetly to hand over a stash of cocaine from an evidence locker inside the cage. Scott explains this as a fair exchange for having given Avery half of Luke's stolen money. Avery indicates that he plans to cooperate with Scott's request, implicating himself as one of the boys.

Leaving work on his way home, Avery sees that DeLuca knows about his report to the Police Chief. DeLuca stages a traffic stop in his police cruiser and says he needs to discuss the plan to hand over the cocaine from the police cage. DeLuca has Avery follow him into a woodland. This woods is the source of the name of the town Schenectady, a Mohawk word meaning "The Place Beyond the Pines". Avery cocks his pistol, drives part way into the grove, then takes off when he sees where DeLuca has parked. This traffic stop as an occasion for potential murder by a police officer resonates with videos that as of 2015 were flooding the Internet.

The Way Out

Frightened, Avery decides to tell his father, a New York State Supreme Court Judge, about Schenectady police corruption. The judge (Harris Yulin) tells his son there is a way out but he won't like it. He asks Avery whether there is anyone in the police force who trusts him. Avery thinks of Scott, and decides to surreptitiously record him discussing the plan to remove cocaine from the police cage. Avery, on the right side of the law, now undermines his partners in crime.

Next we see Avery in the office of the District Attorney, who does not want to hear about

corruption any more than the Police Chief did. Avery says that if Bill Killcullen won't take the case, follow it through, grant Avery full immunity, and appoint him Assistant District Attorney, Avery will go to the newspapers with his evidence and his story. Avery shows that he is now following a path his father had recommended after Avery claimed that he wanted no other "line of work" than being a cop. The phrase "line of work" that Avery uses in his rousing speech accepting his hero award echoes Robin's use of the phrase, suggesting that cops and robbers are counterpart ways of making a living.

Because Avery has a sense of responsibility and loyalty to the law, he serves as a guilty mediator between the American drive for freedom and the American wish to be on the right side. Avery wants to escape his cage and he also wants to be a good guy. In a scene set in the swimming pool at Judge Cross's upper-middle class house, the judge tells his son, still recovering from his gunshot wound and basking in his glorious speech as a police hero, that he should go into politics, where his newly acquired wound would be an asset. The judge says, "A limp can go a long way in politics. Look what it did for Roosevelt!"

The Next Generation

The final sequence of this film unfolds 15 years later with yet another set of characters. Avery, now District Attorney and running for the position of New York State Attorney General, delivers the eulogy at his father's funeral, demonstrating once again that he is an effective speaker. Jennifer, now estranged from her husband, tells Avery at the cemetery that their son, who is going off the rails, wants to move in with his father. Avery Junior, called AJ, has been living with his mother in Troy, another small, upstate city not far from Schenectady, though AJ strives to appear metropolitan and speaks with what Jason hears as a Long Island accent. Played by Emory Cohen, Avery Jr. is a liar, a dominator, and a voluble wannabe-Hip Hop dude who looks and acts like a young but flabby Marlon Brando. (Cohen was originally called to read the part of Jason, but did not want that role and was not a team player; by default, he was cast as AJ.)

Entering his Senior year at Schenectady public high school as an outsider looking to become leader of a pack, AJ spots the recessive Jason (Dane DeHaan looking and acting like a young James Dean). Seeing Jason as a loner stoner, AJ, wearing a black hoodie and spouting rap rhymes, asks Jason for help in obtaining the drug Ecstasy. Jason takes him to a neighborhood where we see a black teenager wearing an orange hoodie open a house door. When Jason emerges from the house with dope, police arrive in a cruiser to arrest Jason and AJ, who has been waiting in the street. One wonders whether Schenectady cops have been keeping an eye on AJ as the son of the man who exposed police corruption or on Jason as the son of the notorious motorbike bandit.

Called back from his political campaign, Avery is appalled to see his son under arrest and to recognize Jason as the son of the man he killed. He gets AJ released immediately and aggressively orders him to stay away from Jason. Jason goes to jail and then court but the District Attorney's office has his drug charge reduced from a felony to a misdemeanor. Jason returns to school, having been told that somebody is looking out for him and curious about the source of the legal intervention. AJ, now a nascent big shot at school, takes in with interest Jason's arrival there in a car driven by Kofi.

Puzzled to hear that someone in the legal establishment has been looking out for him, Jason asks Kofi, “Who was my dad?”. Kofi answers in a mock Darth Vader voice, “I’m your father”. Jason says he knows that, but had heard from his mother that his dad died in an accident, and from his grandmother that his dad was an outlaw. Jason learns his father’s name, and looking it up online, finds an account of Luke that names Robin Van Der Hook as an acquaintance.

Jason rides his bicycle to Robin’s address, where Robin has saved a newspaper reporting Luke’s death. This he digs out to show to Jason. “That guy’s your dad”, he says, pointing to a photo. Pointing to another photo, he says, “And that’s the pig ... that bagged him”. Robin shows Jason the trailer where Luke had lived, and gives him the pair of sunglasses Luke had left there. These have Hollywood-style, reflective lenses and a lime-green strap. When Jason puts them on, Robin says, “You’re callin’ him back”. He tells Jason that Luke was “the best motorcycle rider I’ve ever seen in my life”.

With Avery back out on the campaign trail, AJ throws a party at the grand house owned by the Cross family. AJ tells Jason he had better be there and he had better arrive with plenty of drugs, pointing out that he never got back his \$500 or the dope he bought with it that got them arrested. Reluctant, but manipulated by complicity in the drug deal and its aftermath, Jason decides to go to the party, stopping at a pharmacy on the way. Having parked his bicycle around the corner, Jason slips into the store, sneaks behind a counter while the druggist is busy elsewhere, and grabs a package of Oxytocin. Wearing a long-sleeved white undershirt, he has a short-sleeved Boy Scout uniform shirt on top of it and a backpack with a prominent Marijuana-plant icon. The theft sequence is shot from behind so that we see how Jason wears his pants--prison style, beltless and half way down his backside with his boxer shorts showing. Running out of the pharmacy with the druggist in pursuit, Jason hops on his bike and pedals to AJ’s house with the Oxycontin. The tracking of DeHaan from behind in this sequence puts him in the same position vis-à-vis the camera as Ryan Gosling’s in the first third of the film.

The use of drugs by the teenagers can possibly be grouped with the ice cream scene of Jason’s infancy and the two dinner scenes as fantasies of oneness. Both the Ecstasy and the Oxycontin scenes end badly—the Ecstasy leads to arrest by police, the Oxycontin party ends with Jason’s beating.

AJ’s party is crowded and rowdy. The teenagers, dancing to hip hop, are pleased by the Oxycontin delivery. A girl takes Jason’s hand and leads him upstairs. On the way up, the Boy Scout-shirted thief sees a framed portrait of Avery in his police uniform that he recognizes from Robin’s old newspaper. Furious, he starts a scene that disrupts the party and ends with AJ beating Jason to the point that he has to be hospitalized, with AJ shouting, “Fuck him up!” AJ’s role in this beating suggests the kind of leader AJ aspires to be.

At the hospital, Jason, his face cut and swollen, tells his mother she’s a liar, and then leaves her there waiting for him while he slips off to neighborhood of the drug dealer’s house and asks for a gun. Armed, he goes to the Cross house, finds AJ upstairs, shoots him in the leg, and leaves him incapacitated in his room. When Avery arrives home, Jason confronts him at gunpoint and orders him to “just drive”. Avery drives to the same woodland where DeLuca had frightened him 15 years ago. When they walk into the forest, Jason, nervously holding the gun and unsure what to do, tells Avery to get down

on his knees and clasp his hands behind his head. Avery bows his head, cries, and apologizes. Like Luke and unlike Avery, Jason doesn't kill anyone. He takes Avery's jacket and wallet, finds the Dairy Circus photo of Luke's one day of family intimacy, and drives away in Avery's BMW, leaving the District Attorney kneeling in the woods, without his wallet or dark-blue jacket of authority.

As the movie ends, we see Jason walking to an isolated house in an open landscape. A man comes to the door and leads him to a barn to look at a Honda motorcycle that has been advertised for sale. Jason buys it and rides away down an empty road, taking on his father's image as a motorcyclist. Jason rides through open space rather than being contained as Luke had been in his carnival sphere. Here he can be imagined to be a version of Luke as the one rider we see having emerged from the caged three in the movie's opening sequence.

If we take the "Pines" of this film's title to symbolize family trees, we can see that Jason looks to have gone beyond them, with no one (so far) in pursuit, though there is a faint sound of a police siren on the soundtrack. But this "on the road" ideal of American freedom has an uneasy undercurrent if we think of the resemblance between De Haan's Jason and James Dean (1931-1955), who died in a crash.

Conclusion

The social fabric of characters in this film shows three classes in alternative American dreams. The Cross line is socially well positioned, dominating, twice wounded, with established resources of law enforcement on its side. Luke's line is spectacular and exciting, skilled, socially marginal, recessive, sacrificial, capable of stealing and wounding, but not killers. Fatherless himself, Luke is an outsider whose name has not passed down to his son. Being without a father, in other words, means being without resources and on the wrong side of the law.

During the 15 years following Luke's death, Kofi's family achieves a middle-class American dream. They move to a larger house in a better neighborhood than the one of Jason's infancy. Jason goes by Kofi's last name. When Romina opens her suburban mailbox and finds that Jason has sent her the old photo of Luke's family the day they went to the dairy bar, we see a shiny, new-looking red Chevrolet parked in her driveway. This family represents the part of the American psyche, the ego, which integrates and makes peace with reality.

Romina, who speaks Spanish with her immigrant mother, and whose name suggests Romany or gypsy folk as well as roaming, moves between the migratory and the rooted. She has a son with a carnival performer who suddenly quits his job in an ill-fated attempt to act the role of provider. Their son's name evokes the Greek myth of Jason, who quested for the Golden Fleece. Romina has a daughter with a middle-class black man who is stable and peaceable. After she moved into Kofi's house, Romina had sex again with Luke, who is apparently the love of her youth if not of her life. When Luke invites her to go on the road, she tells him it is a nice dream and continues to live with Kofi. She is without her mother, her son and Handsome Luke by the end of the film, but she has her new car, her middle-class house, a mate, and a daughter. Whatever attracted her to Handsome Luke has passed into Jason.

Visibly a white boy, Jason has a Latina grandmother and a black-Hispanic sister. He is evidently known and accepted in the neighborhood where he buys drugs and gets a gun. He rides west alone on his new motorcycle but maintains his bond with home by sending his mother the photo. He is headed for the unknown. Not only does he penetrate space by traveling west, traditionally the American frontier, he penetrates the unknown by finding out the truth about his father and then assuming his image.

AJ, a spoiled, rich, white boy, grew up with a single mom, and now lives with a single dad who has very little authority as far as his son is concerned, though Avery does get elected State Attorney General. AJ, who is Avery Jr., bears his father's name. AJ, like his dad, has been shot in the leg in act of revenge for a prior aggression. Whereas Jason's only grandfather figure is the Scorpio Rising-style grease monkey who made Luke famous as the Moto Bandit, AJ had a judge for a grandfather and a lawyer-politician of dubious heroics for a dad. One imagines AJ limping his way after his dad into political office, with fewer scruples, while Jason rides free as an outsider.

Like Romina, Robin mediates between outlaw freedom and lower middle-class rootedness. When Robin meets Luke, he is riding a 4-wheeled dirt bike that he hauls around in a pick-up truck. His attraction for Luke's riding skills shows both an economic and an erotic motive. Formerly a bank robber, Robin has staked himself, now owns property where he lives and works, rooted to a place where he keeps files of records, and grows old. He has a new partner 15 years after Luke has been killed.

Ben Mendelsohn, born in Australia, brings an outsider aura to his Hollywood film roles, as does Ryan Gosling, born in Canada. In this regard, they can be linked to Australia-born Rose Byrne, who plays Avery's estranged wife; and to the two Cuban-American performers who play Romina and Malena, who speak Spanish to each other in the film. The international cast plays in an American context with American-born actors in the majority, in a film directed by an American who is examining ideals of freedom, justice, and family.

Avery as a character is a mediator because he is a guilty cop and a liar who receives immunity as he uses his complicity and his law degree to get into political office. He identifies with the law of his father the judge, but uses his position as District Attorney to get his son out of trouble. Because he has a conscience, Avery lets Jason go free, reporting AJ's wound as caused by an unknown intruder. Shot by Luke but still walking, Avery is a wounded father, as is Kofi. Kofi was bloodied by Luke but continued to act as a father to Luke's son. When Avery kills Luke we see the dead man splayed in blood with his legs twisted so that he looks looks truncated. Judge Cross's remark about President Franklin Roosevelt declares that a wounded man can be a powerful man. In the role of wounded hero, Avery becomes politically influential. As a dead father, Luke proves to have a powerful effect on Avery's career and family as well as on Jason's fate as a motorcyclist.

Luke did not grow up around his dad, but Jason has had a trinity of fathers looking out for him: Luke, Kofi, and Avery. Collectively, they give Jason freedom to ride away. Jason ends the film on the wrong side of the law, but he has shown that he acts on what is fair. Called an "aimless youth" by the Police Chief, Jason has a better sense of justice than AJ has. The logo of "The Place Beyond the Pines" shows three pointed trees of differing heights. If Avery apparently stands the tallest, AJ is morally the smallest of the three.

Biographical Note

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