

Introduction

Nicholas Ray and the Potential of Cinema Culture

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THE DIRECTOR OF CLASSIC FILMS SUCH AS *They Live by Night*, *In a Lonely Place*, *Johnny Guitar*, *Rebel Without a Cause*, and *Bigger Than Life*, among others, Nicholas Ray was the “*cause célèbre* of the *auteur* theory,” as critic Andrew Sarris once put it (107).¹ But unlike his senior colleagues in Hollywood such as Alfred Hitchcock or Howard Hawks, he remained a director at the margins of the American studio system. So too has he remained at the margins of academic film scholarship. Many fine scholarly works on Ray, of course, have been published, ranging from Geoff Andrew’s important *auteur* study *The Films of Nicholas Ray: The Poet of Nightfall* and Bernard Eisenschitz’s authoritative biography *Nicholas Ray: An American Journey* (both first published in English in 1991 and 1993, respectively) to books on individual films by Ray, such as Dana Polan’s 1993 monograph on *In a Lonely Place* and J. David Slocum’s 2005 collection of essays on *Rebel Without a Cause*. In 2011, the year of his centennial, the restoration of his final film, *We Can’t Go Home Again*, by his widow and collaborator Susan Ray, signaled renewed interest in the director, as did the publication of a new biography, *Nicholas Ray: The Glorious Failure of an American Director*, by Patrick McGilligan. Yet what Nicholas Ray’s films tell us about Classical Hollywood cinema, what it was and will continue to be, is far from certain.

After all, what most powerfully characterizes Ray's films is not only what they *are*—products both of Hollywood's studio and genre systems—but also what they *might be*. When viewed through the eyes of those who love them, Ray's films reveal themselves as fascinating visions of the world and alternative systems of seeing and feeling. Ray is a great director not because his films arrive to us as fully realized masterworks; as Jacques Rivette once suggested, even Ray's best films do not have the polish of a privileged master (Hitchcock, for example). These films instead call for us to bestow on them, in Rivette's words, "not indulgence, but a little love" ("Imagination" 104). Ray is a great filmmaker, in part, because of the way his works reward the close attention of viewers ready to see in them, and ready to imagine alongside them, the possibilities at work in the margins of the Hollywood studio film. As Rivette's colleague François Truffaut proposed, in an especially polemical moment, if one proved unable to provide this "little love" to Ray's at times unwieldy films, at the same time one proved oneself unworthy of cinema ("Certainty" 108).

This is not to say that Ray's films constitute a sloppy and undisciplined body of work. Nevertheless, it is telling that even his great films are about the search for a different or better home and world, an alternative system of loving and thinking. In *They Live by Night*, it is the search for an ideal romance against the rural backdrop of the open road pockmarked by the vestiges of the Great Depression; in *Rebel Without a Cause*, the search by a trio of suburbanite teenagers for a home more in line with the affective and existential challenges posed to them by late adolescence; and in *Bigger Than Life*, a sensitive intellectual's exhaustion with the static suburban environment in which he lives. And, in the only film Ray made that was explicitly about Hollywood and one that to a great extent functions as an allegory for his own career in the industry, *In a Lonely Place*, it is the search for a different cinema in which a screenwriter imagines a practice of Hollywood filmmaking without compromises, beholden only to love.

The chapters in this collection explore in various ways Nicholas Ray's own place in the history of the Hollywood institution and in the larger institution of cinema. Few American filmmakers of the 1950s invested genre conventions and familiar narrative frameworks with as much idiosyncrasy as Ray; and few imagined, with equal passion, that such normative tropes could be harnessed to create an alternative vision of things. Ray made films that fall in well-traveled generic territories, including the "lovers on the lam" film (*They Live by Night*), the morally ambiguous shadings of *film noir* and the crime picture (*In a Lonely*

Place, On Dangerous Ground, Party Girl), the landscapes of the American West (*The Lusty Men, Johnny Guitar, Run for Cover, The True Story of Jesse James*), the frontlines of World War II (*Flying Leathernecks, Bitter Victory*), the domestic angst of American suburbia (*Rebel Without a Cause, Bigger Than Life*), an almost ethnographic fascination with exotic cultures (*Hot Blood, Wind Across the Everglades, The Savage Innocents*), the spectacular period epic (*King of Kings, 55 Days at Peking*), and even early-career ventures into the “women’s picture” (*A Woman’s Secret, Born to Be Bad*), and the social problem film (*Knock on Any Door*). Yet Ray’s best films ultimately exemplify his ability to capture that idiosyncratic (and sometimes entirely accidental) gesture, glance, or movement that threw the trajectory of the conventional Hollywood film off course—or at least inflected that trajectory with a sensibility that, for as long as the film itself was on the screen, fundamentally refigured it.

The philosophy behind this collection is that Ray’s films continue to possess this vital power, and that as experiences they continue to possess the ability to intervene in the histories we write, in the criticism we craft, and the society we critique. Indeed, Ray’s films might be more vital today than they ever were given that appreciation of initially neglected works, such as *Johnny Guitar* and *Bigger Than Life*, has only intensified with time. Thus, this collection demonstrates the value of Ray’s work to our present-day cinema culture. Even if Ray’s films were a crucial part of this culture in the United States and France in the 1950s and 1960s, the relative dearth of academic scholarship on Ray (compared to other directors at work in Hollywood at the time) suggests contemporary film studies has forgotten some of the pleasures and insights from which it was born. However, Ray’s films are not simply a part of an already articulated film history; nor do they formally “cue” us to discover a meaning already hidden within. Instead, they invite us to become collaborators (much as Ray did with his actors), revealing meaning as viewers bring their own passions to the screen. His films are not simply a part of our culture, then; they have much to teach us about what the phrase “cinema culture” means—what the potential of such a culture might *still* mean to us. What does it mean to have an encounter with cinema, with its history, with its most personal visions and tumultuous collaborations? What was possible in the Classical Hollywood cinema during its transition (still ongoing) to the contemporary? How do Ray’s films—and their pleasures—teach us to write about history, theory, and genre? The authors in this book probe how intimate engagements with Ray’s films reveal the ongoing, dynamic potential of cinema culture to a contemporary academic audience. In this respect,

Ray's films, like their director (a teacher near the end of his life), have much to show us about what a cultivated cinema culture in and beyond academia might still achieve, indeed what it might *be*.

The collection begins with Jonathan Rosenbaum's revision of his 1981 essay, "Looking for Nicholas Ray," on the myths and legends that surround Ray's career and his post-Hollywood sojourns into independent and experimental filmmaking. Rosenbaum's essay shares priceless anecdotes from his contact with Ray in the 1970s, and reflects on the director's body of work as a whole. Next, in chapter 2, "Nicholas Ray: The Breadth of Modern Gesture," Joe McElhaney takes both a wide and focused look at several Ray films, finding both concrete and figurative gestures in Ray's films that relate to a specific postwar American film context in which the human figure must increasingly bear the weight of the contradictory social forces being enacted in the films.

The next several chapters bring new critical perspectives to Ray's earliest, and in some cases his most critically neglected, films. In chapter 3, "Economies of Desire: Reimagining *Noir* in *They Live by Night*," Ria Banerjee explains how Ray's young lovers in his first film reconceptualize what it means to live in a *noir* world, developing an alternative way of negotiating the geography of *noir* and defining its parameters. Meanwhile, in chapter 4, "*Knock on Any Door*: Realist Form and Popularized Social Science," Chris Cagle points to Ray's early intervention into the social problem genre as a pivotal text in the analysis of popularized social science in social realist cinema. Rather than reading through genre to locate the "real" Nicholas Ray, Cagle studies Ray's relationship to the social problem genre in its own right. And in chapter 5, "'I've Got the Queerest Feeling' about *A Woman's Secret* and *Born to Be Bad*," Alexander Doty claims that two of Ray's most forgotten films, often framed as mere genre efforts in a career of more distinctive masterpieces, are in fact examples of Ray's ability to queer the traditional American studio film, opening spaces for some degree of nondemonized representation of different gendered and sexual identities.

Several of the authors investigate Ray's complex work with genres. In chapter 6, "Something More than *Noir*," Steven Sanders looks at the multigeneric nature of *In a Lonely Place*, arguing that Ray's celebrated collaboration with Humphrey Bogart and Gloria Grahame is both a representative example of the *noir* genre and a film whose rich implications go well beyond *noir*. R. Barton Palmer, in chapter 7, "*On Dangerous Ground*: Of Outsiders," turns his attention to another of Ray's acclaimed *noir* films. Palmer, following Jacques Rivette's praise of the "mistakes" in *On Dangerous Ground*, locates in the film's roughness an

oppositional, against-the-grain quality that represents Ray's own "force of personality." If *In a Lonely Place* and *On Dangerous Ground* are two of Ray's most highly regarded genre films (and two of his most personal works), *Flying Leathernecks*, by contrast, has been both poorly received by Ray *auteurists* and generally neglected in scholarship on the director. Tony Williams redresses this situation in chapter 8, "*Flying Leathernecks*: Color and Characterization," reading Ray's intuitive use of color in this World War II film and the relationship of the director's choices in color to the ideological positions carved out by the film's two central characters, played by John Wayne and Robert Ryan.

The next two authors interpret how Ray's films mirror, shape, and were shaped by myths and experiences in rural America. In chapter 9, "*The Lusty Men* and the Post-Western," Neil Campbell frames Ray's film about rodeo cowboys as a key forerunner of what he defines as the "post-Western," a type of modern film of the New West, symptomatic of the nation's postwar desire for stability and consensus and a renewal of family values (epitomized in the American Dream of homeownership). *The Lusty Men* reinvigorates old myths by helping to develop a new narrative form for a new age, but Ray's work on this and other films also reflects his pre-Hollywood experience of America. In chapter 10, "Citizen Nick: Civic Engagement and Folk Culture in the Life and Work of Nicholas Ray," James I. Deutsch and Lauren R. Shaw examine Ray's various jobs with the U. S. government in the late 1930s and early 1940s, work that brought Ray into contact with many important currents in American folklore, music, and theater. Examining archival documents and primary sources, the chapter tracks how Ray's federal service influenced his subsequent career in film.

No collection on Ray is complete without an analysis of Ray's work with actors, and two chapters address performance and the cinematic context of performance in Ray's work. In chapter 11, "A Teacup and a Kiss: Staging Action in *Johnny Guitar*," Murray Pomerance argues that Ray's vibrant Western is an example of the director's facility, in tune with his actors, with filmic orchestration and symphonic form. Looking at key gestures, expressions, colors, and other motifs, Pomerance discusses how Ray worked out lines of complex action and resolution with his actors to form not one more familiar genre film but rather a distinctive, unforgettable cinematic melody. In chapter 12, "'You Can't Be a Rebel If You Grin': Masculinity, Performance, and Anxiety in 1950s Rock-and-Roll and the Films of Nicholas Ray," Paul Anthony Johnson approaches Ray's work with actors, informed by the director's interpretation of the Method, echoed by performative currents at play in rock-and-roll. In turn, as Johnson points out, rock-and-roll embodied the ethos of revolution and

rebellions of several of Ray's leading men, including James Dean, Farley Granger, Robert Ryan, and Sterling Hayden.

Ray's sense of place and space provides a stirring filmic world in which his actors shape actions. In chapter 13, "Places and Spaces in *Rebel Without a Cause*," Robin A. Larsen uses phenomenological film theory to explore how the representation of American institutions (such as the school, the home, and the police) expose not only the values of the 1950s but also existing structures that continue to demand conformity and inspire rebellion. In chapter 14, Susan White's essay, "Nicholas Ray's Wilderness Films: Word, Law, and Landscape," the spaces and places in question are the deserts, jungles, swamps, and landscapes of films such as *Bitter Victory*, *The Savage Innocents*, and *Wind Across the Everglades*. Importantly, White also turns her critical analysis of wilderness to a short film Ray directed for the *General Electric Theater* television series in 1955, "High Green Wall."

If Ray was an important figure in Hollywood genre filmmaking, he nevertheless also made crucial contributions to other aesthetic forms crucial to 1950s Hollywood cinema. Will Scheibel examines Ray's deployment of "male melodrama" in chapter 15, "*Bigger Than Life*: Melodrama, Masculinity, and the American Dream." Scheibel argues that *Bigger Than Life*, Ray's critically maligned collaboration with James Mason, tackles the subject of prescription drug abuse as a way to diagnose much deeper masculine insecurities running through popular discourses of the 1950s. In chapter 16, "Ray, Widescreen, and Genre: *The True Story of Jesse James*," Harper Cossar studies Ray's use of new widescreen technology. Ray's *Jesse James* film, his fourth foray into the Western genre and his fifth widescreen film, is for Cossar an example of how Ray served the tropes and strictures of the Western genre in the newly widened Cinema-Scope frame, adapting his approach to close-ups and camera movement to the new format.

Ray's final films in the mainstream industry are examined in a pair of essays. In chapter 17, Adrian Martin grasps Nicholas Ray as a transitional figure in his piece "Disequilibrium, or: Love Interest (On *Party Girl*)." As Martin states, Ray's work, and *Party Girl* in particular, offered "fugitive glimpses" of the modern cinema to come, a crucial part of Ray's appeal to French New Wave filmmakers such as Godard and Truffaut. *Party Girl* is, for Martin, representative of the way Ray's most special works give cinephiles, critics, and especially budding filmmakers intuitions of what the future of their art is to become. If *Party Girl* offers glimpses of the future, Jason McKahan's chapter 18 tells us how Ray films were also firmly grounded in the present. In "*King of Kings* and the

Politics of Masculinity in the cold war Biblical Epic,” McKahan sheds light on how the critical reception of the film was framed by discourses of film authorship (through a likening of the film’s Jesus figure to an earlier Ray rebel, James Dean) and cold war masculinity. McKahan’s essay also underscores how the filmic appeal of *King of Kings* was increased by engaging the gospel text from a contemporary worldview.

Although he was a Hollywood director for most of his career, Ray’s “late works” were produced not in Hollywood, but in other, alternative modes, many of them only in a state of unrealized potential. In chapter 19, “As Surely as a Criminal Would Die: Nicholas Ray’s *The Doctor and the Devils*,” Larysa Smirnova and Chris Fujiwara investigate draft scripts of Ray’s adaptation of Dylan Thomas’s *The Doctor and the Devils*, written in collaboration with Gore Vidal. They posit this unrealized adaptation functions as a kind of “ghost film” in Ray’s *oeuvre*, haunting the films that were actually realized and expressing Ray’s ambivalence about his own position as an artist in exile. A work that Ray did realize in his years of exile as a college teacher is examined by Steven Rybin in chapter 20, “The Pedagogical Aesthetics of *We Can’t Go Home Again*.” Rybin shows how the film participates in the relationship forged between experimental cinema and film studies pedagogy on college campuses in the 1960s and 1970s, offering Ray’s students an artistic frame through which to realize their own potential as artists and human beings. The collection closes with a Postscript, a generous contribution by Bill Krohn, “The Class: Interview with Nicholas Ray.” One of the final interviews with Nicholas Ray, and never before published in its entirety in English, this collection’s postscript is a frank document of Ray’s final years. Joining Ray on the set of his final film as director, the short *Marco*, Krohn observes the director working with a new set of students at the Strasberg Institute in New York.

Rather than “applying” conceptual paradigms from critical theory and cultural studies to Ray’s films, the authors of the diverse chapters collected in this volume aim to rediscover Ray through close analysis of his films in their various contexts, as works of art, as industrial products, and as cultural artifacts. Together, the authors consider what this rediscovery means for contemporary cinema studies, ranging from studies of film authorship, style, genre, and history, to technology, performance, and politics, to studies of gender and sexualities, film as social document, popular music, and cinephilia. Ray has yet to receive the sustained scholarly attention he deserves. We hope to have corrected that mistake and show how Nick Ray might help academic film studies “go home” to reimagine its culture.

Note

1. Because Ray's films receive copious citation in this volume, we have made the editorial choice not to cite release years inside the chapters but instead to provide a full filmography at the book's end.