

Cult of the Outlaw

Cinephilia, Film Criticism, and Mass Cultural Modernism

I think the reason you film buffs annoy me is that you ask so damn many questions, and I'm always afraid I won't have the answers. And I resent it if I don't have the answers. But hell, I don't have any answers.

—Nicholas Ray, *I Was Interrupted:
Nicholas Ray on Making Movies*



Sites of Modernism in Ray's Biographical Legend

THE EVENTS OF AMERICAN modernity made an undeniable impact on Ray before he even began his career as a filmmaker. A student at the University of Chicago in 1931, he studied under Pulitzer Prize-winning author Thornton Wilder. An apprentice of Frank Lloyd Wright, he joined the renowned architect at his Taliesin Fellowship in Green Springs, Wisconsin from 1933 to 1934. A lover of jazz, during the early 1940s he was known to frequent America's first interracial nightclub, the Café Society in Greenwich Village (a hangout for Paul

Robeson, Langston Hughes, and Richard Wright), where he mingled with its jazz, blues, and folk musicians. An avid reader of literature, he held a special admiration for Thomas Wolfe, whose novel *You Can't Go Home Again* (1940) gave him the title for one of his final films.¹ Bernard Eisenschitz and Patrick McGilligan's biographies have detailed these and other events in Ray's life before he moved to Hollywood, as well as the various cultural influences on his career.

This chapter does not rehearse Ray's biographical details in the context of 1930s and early 1940s American modernity, but instead focuses on how his biographical legend and the critical reception of his films give his career a particular modernist import. Ray's modernism lies not on the purportedly high or low ends of the cultural spectrum, but can be found somewhere between them, as ideas about modernism were codified in terms of mass culture and sold to mainstream, middle-class consumers. We will see how his reputation in France as an auteur played a role in the modernization of French film culture after the Occupation, reviving a relationship between modernism and Hollywood cinema that began in the 1930s. Following different evaluative criteria, Anglo-American film culture then disciplined his auteurism through scholarly rereadings that paralleled the institutionalization of cinema studies in academic journals and university settings.

Ray's canonization is best understood as a result of what I call *mass cultural modernism*, a discursive practice by which cultural producers and consumers appropriate mass cultural forms and artifacts through a highbrow reading formation as a presumed weapon against hegemonic ideological and aesthetic systems. In order to nuance the historical generalizations about Ray as a "rebel," we need to undertake a precise investigation into the critical reception of his films, the conditions of their reception, and the ways in which different taste cultures broadly imagined him as a rebel according to their political and artistic investments.

To be clear, Ray was not a filmmaker who stood above or outside the culture industry, and critics did not canonize Ray in spite of his place within it. Rather, his appeal to the popular represented a late modernism constructed *by* mass culture at midcentury, wherein artists could express modernist ideas through popular idioms, thus rejuvenating (and also reinforcing) the traditions of high culture rather than contaminating them. In his book *Modernist America*, historian Richard Pells goes as far as to argue that "American culture is central to the modernist experience," the site of modern trends in art, music, and cinema, and that it always called the separation between high and low culture into question (xi). American culture imported international styles and techniques, while also exporting a modernity that made Americana legible in a global lexicon.

Despite the contempt that traditional European intellectuals held for its mass-produced commodities, Pells reminds us that “modernists abroad were always fascinated with American culture—with its novels, its movies, its jazz, its Broadway musicals, its cities and skyscrapers, and (after World War II) its Abstract Expressionist paintings” (xi).² The technical flaws or imperfections in Ray’s films were not evidence of an incompetent artist, but the markers of modernism.³ As Geoff Andrew muses in *The Films of Nicholas Ray*, “classical notions of balance, restraint, and tastefulness were neither Ray’s forte nor, probably, his concern” (169). What French critics saw in Ray was not simply another commercial director of crime films, Westerns, and family melodramas, but an iconoclast with a distinctive style working to reinvent those forms through experimentation within the system, giving audiences a vehicle for cultural critique: popular entertainment as rebellion.

While Ray may not have been a Rossellini or Bresson (although French critics made those comparisons), he also did not operate in the most derided regions of the culture industry that produced the “vulgar modernism” famously identified by film critic J. Hoberman in 1982. Hoberman cites animation director Tex Avery, cartoonist-turned-director Frank Tashlin (best known for his comedies with Jerry Lewis), *Mad* magazine, and the early morning television programs of comedian Ernie Kovacs among the detritus of American mass culture from 1940 to 1960 that comprised “the vulgar equivalent of modernism itself” (72). These media artists and texts demonstrated what Hoberman describes as “a popular, ironic, somewhat dehumanized mode reflexively concerned with the specific properties of its medium or the conditions of its making” (72). Ray’s modernism, while certainly a product of mass culture, was always mainstream in its projected audience of middle-class consumers and lacked this formal reflexivity.

Another way to put this is that Ray was the missing link between Tashlin and Rossellini. With films such as *The True Story of Jesse James* and *Hot Blood*, Ray rivaled Tashlin for colorful, widescreen spectacles and youthful, comic-strip subjects (e.g., Western outlaws and torrid gypsy lovers). Other films such as *Johnny Guitar* raised the moral, ethical, and spiritual questions of a brooding European art film, its social conscience concerned with a violent drifter who learns to love and renounce his past even in a world where violence is all he knows. If one reads Jean-Luc Godard, they are likely to see Ray for his delirious pop style, but reading François Truffaut illuminates his liberal humanism and poetic regard for dispossessed members of society. The line, however, is arbitrary, as Ray often proves both of these directorial tendencies at once. Classical Hollywood allowed for these sorts of slippages, and that was precisely

what made directors such as Ray adaptable to the modernisms in which this book approaches him.



Before plumbing the reception history of Ray's films, where we will see how French critics such as Godard and Truffaut redeemed them by ascribing a subversive, anti-middlebrow aesthetic, we first need to understand exactly why a Hollywood filmmaker would matter for modernism. In his book *The Cultural Front*, historian Michael Denning explicates the American activities during the 1930s that allowed possibilities for American avant-garde work in a plebeian, leftist vein. Ray's pre-Hollywood activities in the 1930s contributed to this "cultural front," which was the result of a convergence of the Popular Front, a democratic social movement, and the culture industries of mass entertainment and federal education projects (xviii). A new technological apparatus of mass culture (motion pictures, recorded sound, and broadcasting) put industries of leisure and entertainment into motion, while a new bureaucratic apparatus of the state collected, subsidized, and distributed information, education, and the arts through networks of schools and agencies (38–39).

Denning argues that the left, or "the tradition of radical democratic movements for social transformation," did not make a significant impact on American culture until the era of the Popular Front (3). As he defines it, the Popular Front was "a radical historical bloc uniting industrial unionists, Communists, independent socialists, community activists, and émigré anti-fascists around laborist social democracy, anti-fascism, and anti-lynching" (4). The culture of the Popular Front was not a historical phenomenon demarcated by the periodicity of decades, but according to Denning, "a cultural charter for a generation," and thus lasted through the postwar years. For example, we can see continuity between Clifford Odets's play staged by the Group Theatre about a labor strike among cab drivers, *Waiting for Lefty* (1935), in which Elia Kazan had a minor acting role, and Kazan's Hollywood film about battles with union corruption among longshoremen, *On the Waterfront* (1954). Kazan was a member of the American Communist Party (CPUSA) when he appeared in *Lefty*, but even though he directed *Waterfront* after he broke from Communism, he was still working in the proletariat vernacular of the Popular Front (26).

This social movement did not speak for all of American culture, and it never became a dominant culture, but it cultivated a new working-class culture on the left whose stories were retold and preserved by American institutions. The remarkable influence of the Popular Front can be found in everything from Hollywood films and broadcast media to literature

and system of higher education. Dance, popular music, vaudeville, musical comedy, radio, comic strips, and cinema were all mass arts that young American modernists used to combat the genteel European traditions of the classical arts, which had been the domain of the private sphere and the educated leisure class (Gilbert Seldes's 1924 book *The Seven Lively Arts* was practically a "declaration of principles" for this school of thought) (38–39).

What was once locally produced gained national exposure, what was once "classical" could be accessible and inexpensive, and what was once entertainment for the working class became available for "cultured" audiences. Denning brings up how the cultural front "was built on this 'popularization' of high culture and diffusion of 'proletarian' and 'folk' culture" (42). Yet, he also attributes the leftist political thrust of the cultural front to the emergence of the *émigrés* and the *plebeians*. The American modernists before them tied formal experimentation to what Denning calls "a new social and historical vision" (59–60). Émigré artists and intellectuals who fled fascism may have been Marxists, left-wing activists, or members of the cultural front in Europe, and they reconstructed that project of American modernism in areas such as New York and Southern California. Plebeians such as Odets and Kazan were second-generation immigrants from working-class families whose futures as artists and intellectuals were enabled by the cultural front (60–61). While technically neither an *émigré* nor a plebeian, Ray shares affinities with both groups.



A native of the Midwest, Ray was born Raymond Nicholas Kienzle, Jr. in 1911 to middle-class parents Raymond and Olene "Lena" Kienzle in Galesville, Wisconsin, and he grew up about twenty-five miles south in the town of La Crosse, where he and his family moved in 1919. On his father's side, his grandparents emigrated from Germany, and on his mother's side, from Norway (Lena's maiden name was Toppen). Raymond Kienzle began his career in theater, and in 1935 he moved to New York City, changed his name to Nicholas Ray, and joined the agitprop group the Theatre of Action. Adapted from the theatrical practices of postrevolutionary Russia, American agitprop theater ("agitation-propaganda") sought to educate the workforce of the 1930s in contemporary political issues, particularly regarding labor and class struggles, to create solidarity and critique bourgeois aesthetics of dramatic realism. The Theatre of Action was formed in 1929, and originally called the Workers' Laboratory Theater. Emphasizing the study of acting, community living, collaborative production, and proletarian mobility, it performed on

the streets, at docks, factories, churches, and assembly halls, and before trade unions, strike committees, and political organizations. The socialist acting company took inspiration for its stage performance techniques from the film aesthetics of Soviet montage, and it was here where Ray also joined the CPUSA.

Through the company's association with the Group Theatre, Ray met Kazan and under his tutelage learned "the Method." Kazan and Theatre of Action cofounder Alfred Saxe directed a commissioned play titled *The Young Go First*, the company's first production on a legitimate stage, marking Ray's first appearance in mainstream theater. The play dealt with experiences in a Civilian Conservation Corps camp, a public work relief program that gave unskilled manual labor jobs to unemployed, unmarried young men, who worked on conservation and the development of natural resources in government-owned land during the Depression. With its unusual improvisation techniques, the play introduced themes about the exploitation of youth that Ray would return to in his films. In October of 1936, Ray accepted a job teaching theater for eight months at the socialist Brookwood Labor College in Katonah, New York, and while in New York he put on a production of "The Body of an American" from Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* trilogy at Madison Square Garden.

The various agitprop groups of the time such as the Theatre of Action were replaced by the Federal Theatre Project (FTP), the subsidized theater program of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) created in 1935 to employ actors and other theater workers, which appealed both to avant-garde sensibilities and popular tastes. Director Joseph Losey, who also hailed from La Crosse, hired Ray in 1936 as a stage manager on a controversial Living Newspapers play about the history of the American Labor movement, *Injunction Granted*, which opened in 1939 and became one of the most successful productions of the FTP.⁴ Borrowing from mime, dance, cabaret, and cinema, the radically experimental play was, in Losey's words, "[a]n attempt to break with traditional theater practice, to establish a new relationship between the play and the public" (qtd. in Eisenschitz 36). Losey went on to earn a cult following for modest Hollywood films such as *The Boy with the Green Hair* (1948) and *The Prowler* (1951), but after he was blacklisted he spent the rest of his career in Europe.

In addition to his service for the FTP, Ray joined musicologist Charles Seeger (father of folk music icon Pete Seeger), singer Margaret Valiant, and artists Ben Shahn and Jackson and Charles Pollock in the Special Skills Division of the Department of Agriculture's Resettlement Administration (RA). Ray was the head of the division's Theatre Section and was responsible for organizing community theater groups and per-

formances among the local residents of government-planned communities, where families across America were forced to relocate as a result of famine or eviction. During 1937, when the Farm Security Administration (FSA) absorbed the RA, he traveled along the Appalachians and through the South with his first wife, journalist Jean Evans, recording American stories and folk songs on the recommendation of his friend folklorist and ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax (son of the pioneering folklorist and ethnomusicologist John Lomax). After funds dried up at the FSA, the WPA Recreation Division employed Ray as a drama consultant in 1938, where his duties were similar to those with the RA. Again, he roamed the country, recording audio tracks for the Library of Congress collection.

When Ray returned to New York, frustrated by the WPA's bureaucracy and budget cuts, his knowledge of folk music and the rural America led to a brief career in radio. The WPA projects did not compete with the culture industry and would not serve as a model for government support of the arts, and as the WPA projects were eliminated during World War II, artists found new homes in information agencies (Denning 45–46). Ray reunited with Lomax in 1941 for CBS Radio's folk music program *Back Where I Come From*, which showcased performances by Woody Guthrie, Burl Ives, Lead Belly, and others, some of whom visited Ray and Evans in the house they shared with Lomax and his wife Elizabeth in Arlington, Virginia during Ray's tenure with the RA.

Taking Ray under his wing once more, Kazan brought Ray to Hollywood as his assistant on his directorial debut, the Twentieth Century-Fox film *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (1945), an adaptation of Betty Smith's novel about an Irish-American family and their tenement life in Brooklyn at the turn-of-the-century. The films that made Kazan's name were yet to come, chiefly *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951) and *On the Waterfront* starring Marlon Brando, as well as *East of Eden* (1955) starring James Dean. Before Ray moved into the director's chair himself, he joined the Hollywood Writers' Mobilization Group in 1944, a war propaganda and information organization established by the Screen Writers Guild, which had already been investigated by the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals, a conservative pressure group that claimed to defend Hollywood from Communist infiltration. Ray's only screenplay work at this time was uncredited; he served as dialogue director on the B thriller *The Caribbean Mystery* (1945) at Fox and sold the original story of the musical comedy *Swing Parade of 1946* (1946) to Monogram Pictures.

Opportunities outside of Hollywood eventually secured Ray's career as a film director. Émigré producer John Houseman knew Ray from the FTP and was a fan of *Back Where I Came From*. When Houseman

was named head of the Overseas Programming Bureau, he recruited Ray to assist him on Voice of America, the national radio program of the Office of War Information (OWI), from 1941 to 1944. Ray assisted Houseman on a variety of other media projects: an OWI short titled *Tuesday in November* (1945), a propaganda film about the American electoral college; a CBS television version of the radio thriller *Sorry, Wrong Number* (1946); and the 1946 Broadway musicals *Lute Song*, starring Yul Brynner and Mary Martin, and *Beggar's Holiday*, featuring the music of Duke Ellington.⁵

Ray's involvement with New Deal agencies and American folk culture made him an ideal choice to direct *They Live by Night*, a film Houseman was producing for RKO based on *Thieves Like Us*, Edward Anderson's 1937 crime novel of the Depression era South (Eisenschitz 90). In fact, close listeners may recognize Woody Guthrie's "Going Down the Road Feeling Bad" playing on the radio of the getaway car after the Zelton bank robbery. Transitioning from theater and radio to cinema was the logical next step for Ray, given that "[h]is interest seemed to be in new methods of communication, in neglected means of expression, rather than in artistic forms," as Eisenschitz reports in his biography. "Of course he dreamed, like those who preceded him, Kazan and Losey, of becoming a director" (73).



The liberalism of Ray's films is most acutely felt through what might be called the "aesthetics of social significance" that characterized the cultural front. Ray was not alone in these efforts and some of his fellow social filmmakers were eventually blacklisted. Between the private industries and foundations that manufactured and subsidized culture, respectively, and the rising unionism in news and entertainment outlets, a climate of both "multi-national" or "corporate" liberalism and a plebeian workforce facilitated left-wing cultural production (Denning 83). Among the liberal voices in postwar Hollywood included: Ray, Losey, and Odets; independent producers Mark Hellinger and Walter Wanger; radical writers Bertolt Brecht, John Howard Lawson, Howard Koch, and John Wexley; social conscience filmmakers John Huston, Jules Dassin, and Stanley Kramer; émigré directors William Dieterle, Fred Zinnemann, Michael Curtiz, Anatole Litvak, Ernst Lubitsch, F. W. Murnau, and Jean Renoir; and two resolute independents who would soon be recognized as auteurs in France, Charles Chaplin and Orson Welles. Former members of the CPUSA in the 1930s, Kazan and his *On the Waterfront* scribe Budd Schulberg testified as friendly witnesses before the House Un-American

Activities Committee (HUAC) in order to clear their names (Schulberg in 1951 and Kazan in 1952).

Hollywood studios were factories for films and genres stamped with the ideologies of the cultural front. Twentieth Century-Fox produced an earnest cycle of “problem” or “message” pictures under Darryl F. Zanuck, while Warner Bros. made populist crime films and antifascist action-adventures under Jerry Wald and Hal B. Wallis (vehicles for contract stars Humphrey Bogart, James Cagney, and Bette Davis). Émigrés such as Billy Wilder and Robert Siodmak, and plebeians such as Abraham Polonsky and Edward Dmytryk, directed films that would qualify as film noir. Blacklistees such as producer Adrian Scott and writers Albert Maltz, Robert Rossen, and Dalton Trumbo also worked on now classic examples of the genre. Over the first years of the Cold War, RKO intervened with urban thrillers and gritty melodramas under Dore Schary that have since been categorized as *film gris*, or “gray film.” Los Angeles-based filmmaker, scholar, and educator Thom Andersen coined this term in 1985, referring to “a new genre of Hollywood films in the late 1940s, between the first HUAC hearings of October 1947 and the second of May 1951” that were created by the Hollywood Ten—the first group of blacklisted writers and directors—and “their artistic fellow travelers” (257). Of the thirteen films Anderson cites, Ray directed two: *They Live by Night* and *Knock on Any Door*.⁶

Anderson configures film gris as an outgrowth of film noir, embodied by the plebeian screen presence of blacklisted Method actor John Garfield, and distinguished by its “greater psychological and social realism.” “The term seems appropriate because we have been taught to associate Communism with drabness and grayness,” he remarks, “and these films are often drab and depressing and almost always photographed in black-and-white” (257). Humphrey Bogart chose Ray to direct *Knock on Any Door* for his independent company Santana Productions on the basis of the social realist tone he admired in *They Live by Night* (Eisenschitz 116). A courtroom drama about a Chicago defense attorney (Bogart) who tries to save an Italian-American juvenile delinquent (John Derek) from the electric chair, the film recalls Weegee’s photographs of the Bowery in its shots of gray Skid Row streets (Eisenschitz 116).⁷ The cinematographer Burnett Guffey specialized in what would be later termed *film noir*, and made Hollywood itself a shadowy, monochromatic landscape of deferred dreams in Ray’s next teaming with Bogart, *In a Lonely Place*.

The “aesthetics of social significance” to which these names contributed reflects the prevailing “social realism” of documentary expression during the Depression (Denning 118–119). One need to look no further than the photographs for the FSA, a collectivizing agriculture program

in charge of rehabilitating impoverished landowning farmers, sharecroppers, and tenants by resettling them on large plots of government-owned land to farm in groups. Journalist and poet James Agee (later an author, screenwriter, and film critic) and photographer Walker Evans published one of the most noteworthy examples of the form in 1941, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, which documents the lives of three “Dust Bowl” families. Years after *They Live by Night* and *Knock on Any Door*, Ray’s semi-ethnographic fascination with regional histories and indigenous peoples became more pronounced with *Wind across the Everglades*, a film about bird poachers in the early twentieth-century Florida Everglades, starring Burl Ives, and *The Savage Innocents*, a film about Eskimos based on archival research.⁸

We need not think of these aesthetic practices as approaches to realist representation and verisimilitude that are antithetical to the avant-garde innovation and experimentation in modernism. Denning insists that “the documentary aesthetic was actually a central modernist innovation” (118). What documentary projects such as the FSA photographs and Agee and Evans’s book lay bare are the formal and political issues that this very mode of expression raises. Depression era cultural history and criticism reoriented its objects of study and terms of debate to pursue, as Denning describes, “the problematics of capturing the ‘real,’ the desire for the objectivity and immediacy of ‘experience,’ the dangers of manipulation and propaganda.” Thus, the documentary of the Depression can be read as “a witness to Depression America’s desire to see the ‘real’ and a cautionary tale of [its own] tragic superficiality” (119).

When viewed at the intersections of an American modernism in the 1930s and a French modernism of the 1950s, Ray is illuminated by a transatlantic dual-focus of modernism before and after World War II that makes the “use value” of American mass culture visible in a late modernist enterprise. The fusion between the Popular Front and the culture industries equipped American cultural producers to realize the socially democratic potential of mass arts, aligning them with a laborist avant-garde as opposed to elitist bourgeois traditions. However, for legions of young people in postwar France, the American pop of Hollywood cinema empowered them with the raw material for an antifascist revolution in the arts against the European *haute bourgeoisie*, whereby consumers could become producers of culture.



Postwar France was the primary context in which Ray’s reputation first developed, and his American modernism was part and parcel of the

modernization of their own national film culture by critics and cinephiles. During the war, the Axis powers had prohibited the exhibition of American films in Occupied countries, but after the collapse of the Vichy government, Hollywood was able to take advantage of reopened international markets as European countries attempted to rebuild their economic infrastructures. The American government supported the Motion Picture Export Association, which was created in 1945 to stimulate overseas business while exporting capitalism and democracy, and Hollywood's economic downturn from 1947 into the 1950s required the industry to look to foreign sales as compensation for domestic losses.⁹ As a result of the influx of American consumer goods, and at a time when the country's economy prospered, European nations feared the spread of American imperialism and sought to preserve their own national identity in the face of competition with, among other things, Hollywood movies.

French culture was ambivalent in its response to this crisis of art and politics, and the import of American products engendered divisive stances within the nation. In his book *Seducing the French*, historian Richard F. Kuisel argues that the anti-American sentiments that characterized France transformed into "an assumption that the New World is a social model for the future" (ix). Kuisel shows how in the postwar years, "France became modern or 'Americanized' and yet remained French" through a process of "resistance, selective imitation, adaptation, and acceptance" (x). For example, as the country secured its standing within Europe's new geopolitical map and wage earners began to enjoy greater income, a rising consumer society in the 1950s fostered an alliance with American technology and mass culture that could potentially enhance its middle-class lifestyle.

The French intellectual establishment, however, debated concerns surrounding the Americanization of France: the homogenizing effects of consumerism; the social pressures to conform; the anti-intellectual privileging of leisure entertainments over art; and a sense of optimism employed for conservative ideological control. Kuisel finds that resisting the American way for the French intelligentsia meant preserving "a revolutionary posture or, at least, a critical social stance," as well as "a defense of national identity against a modern barbarism" (126). On the other hand, he adds, "America in the 1950s represented counterrevolution and mass culture" (127).

Pells has also probed French-American relations after World War II in his book *Not Like Us*. Unlike the older, more conservative generation, the youth of postwar France consumed mass culture in what they perceived as liberating acts of defiance against authority, which included their parents, especially if they had been pro-Nazi during the war.

Fashion statements were also rebellious personal statements, articulating an ethos of both freedom and fashionable alienation. In repurposing products of Fordist consumerism into works of modernist art, the young people incited a countertradition in France. As Pells explains, “For the young, American culture was attractive precisely because its pleasures were unauthorized—because of its vulgarity, its primitivism, its indifference to the pretensions of art and philosophy. From the 1940s on, youthful Europeans identified with those elements in American society that appeared marginal, alienated, and definitely not middle-class” (241). No wonder that a generation inspired by Beat poetry, jazz, and rock and roll would identify with a juvenile delinquent played by James Dean in *Rebel without a Cause*—as Godard taught us, these were the children of Marx and Coca-Cola. John Derek’s catchphrase from *Knock on Any Door*, “Live fast, die young, and have a good looking corpse,” could have been the mantra for French moviegoers of a certain age.

Hollywood movies were a particular source of inspiration for an emerging group of young French cinephiles. Under the leadership of Henri Langlois, the Cinémathèque Française was cofounded with Paul-Auguste Harle, Georges Franju, and Jean Mitry in 1936, and introduced French audiences to America’s genre films and the populist directors of the 1940s and 1950s who would shape *la politique des auteurs*. By the outbreak of World War II, Langlois had acquired one of the largest collections of films and related materials in the world, and when the Nazis threatened to destroy his collection, he and his colleagues hid caches in unoccupied areas of France, where they remained protected until the end of the war. The Cinémathèque would therefore be remembered as a testament to the antifascist, revolutionary spirit of cinephilia, and it became an international nonprofit center for film exhibition, preservation, and education.



During World War II, French intellectuals had also been enthusiasts of modernist American literature and praised its tough male authors such as Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, John Dos Passos, and Dashiell Hammett. A generation of American modernists had also crossed over into Hollywood (both Faulkner and Dos Passos, as well as F. Scott Fitzgerald, Nathanael West, and Raymond Chandler), although they had limited success in the film industry. Pells notes that while some French intellectuals “read American novels surreptitiously as a ‘symbol of resistance’ to the Nazi occupation,” others related to “the depiction of desperate human beings caught in extreme situations” (*Not* 248).

This fascination with proletariat writing—a rejection of stale French literary traditions, European gentility, and elitist bourgeois culture—was also reflected in their discovery of American films as a hip antidote to “official” French cinema. Critics Nino Frank and Jean-Pierre Chartier (writing in *L'Ecran Francais* and *Revue du Cinéma*, respectively) were so impressed by the existential and surrealist worldview of the dark, urban melodramas, mysteries, and crime thrillers coming out of Hollywood, that in 1946 they grouped these films under the term *film noir* in homage to the Poetic Realist cinema and the *Roman Noir* from their own national heritage.¹⁰

In her book on horror cinema and the avant-garde, *Cutting Edge*, Joan Hawkins refers to a homoerotic romance with American machismo at Pierre Rissient's Cinema MacMahon in Paris, where Ray's films found a home. Swooning over the violent action films of Joseph Losey, Budd Boetticher, and Raoul Walsh, members of the theater and its journal *Présence du cinéma* waxed rhapsodic over Hollywood's masculinist orientation and, as Hawkins observes, an aesthetic that “drew equally from high and low culture” (18). Among other things, the misogynistic phenomenon of MacMahonism launched a Charlton Heston cult led by *Présence* coeditor Michel Mourlet, who published a tribute to the star in *Cahiers du cinéma*, France's most influential film magazine. It would become the most important international site for the propagation of Ray's directorial reputation in the 1950s.

Founded in 1951 by André Bazin, Jacques Doniol-Valcroze, Joseph-Marie Lo Duca, and Léonide Keigel, *Cahiers du cinéma* developed from a forerunner titled *Revue du cinéma* and drew members from the Parisian cine-clubs Objectif 49 and Ciné-Club du Quartier Latin, and the monthly *La Gazette du cinéma*. The first generation of contributors included Jean-Luc Godard, François Truffaut, Claude Chabrol, Jacques Rivette, and Éric Rohmer, some of whom were MacMahonists and all of whom became filmmakers of the *nouvelle vague*. If there was any orthodoxy to this heterogeneous, polemical, aphoristic, and passionately evaluative writing on film during the 1950s, it was *la politique des auteurs*, a “paradigm shift” that Peter Wollen describes as “the last of a series of twentieth-century critical revolutions in the name of ‘modernism’ and against the *ancien régime* of artistic values” (*Paris* 218).

The critical project at *Cahiers du cinéma*, both aesthetic and impressionistic in nature, was to celebrate cinema on separate but equal terms with the other arts as a unique form of creative expression. Truffaut published “A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema” in 1954, a manifesto that decried the pretentious psychological realism and “Tradition of Quality” dominating plot- and character-driven French cinema after

World War II. According to Truffaut, the stuffy, middlebrow literary adaptations of the era upheld bourgeois values and aesthetic philosophies, whereas Hollywood cinema (in addition to Italian Neo-Realism) offered a model for the future of filmmaking in the auteur, or a director with a personal vision and signature style. An auteur demonstrated consistency and progression over his body of work at the level of *mise-en-scène*. The *Cahiers du cinéma* axiom therefore advocated, above all else, the director as artist or author: the single, controlling force who organizes the entire film in its stylistic, thematic, and ideological structure. What the young cinephiles at the magazine did not take on were the social and political issues of the day, such as Indo-China and the Algerian War, as either contexts for or subjects of contemporary cinema. Despite accusations of conservatism, particularly when compared to the rival left-bank magazine *Positif* (Bickerton 27–28), this French critical writing of the 1950s in some ways inadvertently picked up where the American “cultural front” left off in its commitment to the avant-garde potential of American mass culture.

Authorial significance registers differently in these contexts of production and reception, but is still connected to progressive cultural work. For example, Dos Passos’s experimental “Newsreel” and “Camera Eye” sections in *The 42nd Parallel* (1930), *1919* (1932), and *The Big Money* (1936), which comprise his *U.S.A.* trilogy, are evidence of what might be called a “cinematic writing.” Read in light of the cultural front, he was a radical author whose social realism revealed the modernist crisis of the documentary impulse in the 1930s. The Dos Passos of postwar France, on the other hand, was a Sartrean existentialist who resonated with readers traumatized by years of Nazi Occupation, and who understood their reliance on individual action and consciousness to navigate a modern world of absurdity and meaninglessness.

Hollywood auteurs were in many ways extensions of the American modernists for French critics, and comparing literary authors with film directors was an effort to rescue cinema (or at least certain types of cinema) as serious art. At *Cahiers du cinéma*, Hollywood auteurs were also celebrated for their unabashed populism: their command of movie stars (e.g., Humphrey Bogart), their interpretation of genres (e.g., the Western), and, most of all, their deployment of cinematic technologies that emphasized the spectacle and sensory effects of the medium during Hollywood’s competition with television for audiences in the 1950s (e.g., color and widescreen).¹¹

The auteur was not necessarily the historical person who exercised complete autonomy in the making of a film (this attribution would be difficult to establish without empirical evidence of the film’s production,

to which the *Cahiers du cinéma* critics did not have access). More of an imaginary figure, the auteur was the director's "second self" fabricated in the creation of an oeuvre. As Cecilia Sayad remarks in her book *Performing Authorship*, this performative quality of authorship underscores the director's always already "conscious or involuntary impulse to masquerade" (4). Ray's "image" here was the organizing principle for his films, as well as a face for the rebellion acted out in and through them, long before he embodied the persona of the auteur in his public celebrity and film performances as himself. Partly constructed by the director, this image is also constructed by critics. Outlaws of "official" French cinema, the *Cahiers du cinéma* critics formed auteur cults that made-over Hollywood directors as authors/authenticators of cinematic outlawry, and thus "Nicholas Ray" guaranteed rebellion as a symbol of both modernism and mass culture.

Ray's Reception at *Cahiers du cinéma*, 1953–60

Saving cinema as an art form was not enough; *Cahiers du cinéma* was also committed to saving film criticism from pedantic, sanctimonious scholarship. The Hollywood directors most important to its critics at this time included the American-born Orson Welles, Anthony Mann, Robert Aldrich, Samuel Fuller, and Vincente Minnelli, along with émigrés such as Joseph von Sternberg, Fritz Lang, Otto Preminger, Douglas Sirk, Max Ophuls, and Edgar G. Ulmer. Alfred Hitchcock and Howard Hawks served as their Alpha and Omega, but Ray was their test case for *la politique des auteurs*. "Early contributions on Nicholas Ray bring out the distinctiveness of each critic," writes Emilie Bickerton in her book *A Short History of Cahiers du cinéma*, pointing out the eclecticism of the magazine (24). Whereas "Godard and Rivette celebrated the unprecedented in Ray," she continues, "Rohmer drew out timeless issues of morality and tragedy" (25), while "Truffaut was aggressive, prescriptive and darkly comical" (24). The following reception history will look closely at the particular ways in which each of these critics found validation of their aesthetic principles in Ray's films.

The auteur was conceived at *Cahiers du cinéma* as a point of conjunction between modernism and mass culture, but also among modernism, romanticism, and the avant-garde. James Naremore sees an "old-fashioned enthusiasm" about movies in Godard and his cohort that went out of vogue in 1960s cultural criticism (think of Andy Warhol's cool detachment and Leslie Fielder or Susan Sontag's condescension toward the medium) ("Authorship" 18). The cinephilia of the magazine's critics opposed both heavy-handed traditions of quality and the binary between

modernism and mass culture. If *la politique des auteurs* resounds with a nostalgia for a preindustrial conception of authorship and high art, it also looks to the media technologies of modern machine culture as potentially liberating, and therefore straddled the line between romantic aestheticism and surrealism (“Authorship” 16).¹²

Godard defended even Ray’s most disparaged films—especially those films, in fact—such as *Hot Blood*, which stars Jane Russell and Cornel Wilde as feuding newlyweds from two gypsy tribes in Los Angeles (former Group Theatre member Luther Adler plays the gypsy king) (see fig. 1.1). Ray’s medium-specificity was the chief attribute Godard cited in his review, a modernist idea that was typically conceived in terms of painting or literature, but Ray’s mastery of Technicolor and the CinemaScope frame put him in the category of cinema’s greatest artists. “If the cinema no longer existed,” Godard proclaimed, “Nicholas Ray alone gives the impression of being capable of reinventing it, and what is more, of wanting to” (“Nothing” 116). What brought his films to life for Godard was Ray’s “innate sense of cinema,” much like the automatic manner of the early surrealists (“Nothing” 117). This comparison runs contrary to the ways in which auteurs would be conceived in later contexts as controlled technicians.

Comparing him to Kees van Dongen, an early twentieth-century modern painter known for his portraits that accentuated garish colors over realist representation, Godard praised Ray’s “deliberate and systematic use of the gaudiest colors to be seen in the cinema: barley-sugar orange shirts, acid-green dresses, violet cars, blue and pink carpets.” *Hot*



Figure 1.1. *Hot Blood* (1956): Jean-Luc Godard defended even Ray’s most disparaged films—especially those films, in fact—such as *Hot Blood*, which stars Jane Russell and Cornel Wilde as feuding newlyweds from two gypsy tribes in Los Angeles. (Warner Home Video, 2010; digital frame enlargement)

Blood was Ray's third Technicolor film, following *Flying Leathernecks* and *Run for Cover*. Godard also acknowledged his use of contrast to create depth of focus, given the short focal length of the CinemaScope lens ("Nothing" 117). The medium-specificity Godard valued was central to the *Cahiers du cinéma* critics' investment in Ray and also to his long-term appeal with cinephiles.

Ray's films represented cinema itself, the exciting power and potential unique to the medium as a modern art form. "After seeing *Johnny Guitar* and *Rebel without a Cause*," Godard professed, "one cannot but feel that here is something which exists only in the cinema, which would be nothing in a novel, the stage or anywhere else, but which becomes fantastically beautiful on the screen" ("Nothing" 116). Auteurs such as Ray achieved what was known as "pure cinema," in which films made aesthetic meaning through the essentials of the medium: editing, sound, camerawork, movement, and elements of *mise-en-scène*. In other words, his films were "nothing but cinema," as the title of Godard's review announced.

Indeed, *Hot Blood* is just the sort of hyperkinetic, candy-colored piece of American popular culture that would have delighted Godard with its audacity and excesses, and could have only been possible in the medium of cinema. Behind the color and contrast that he attributed to Ray's "innate sense of cinema," the film also evinces Ray's preoccupation with folk culture from his days with the cultural front. The original idea for the film was based on ethnographic research Jean Evans conducted over weeks in New York City interviewing store-front gypsies on First, Second, and Third Avenues on the Lower East Side in 1951 (Eisenschitz 258). Ray had wanted to take advantage of this material and make an on-location film about urban gypsy life in contemporary America, collaborating with screenwriter Walter Newman on a first draft of the script while under contract at RKO.

Although it never moved into production at his old studio, it attracted attention from Russell (Eisenschitz 186). Independent producer Howard Welsch and Columbia Pictures gave the film a green light in the mid-1950s, when Ray abandoned the original script and began improvised research for a new script by Jesse Lasky, Jr. (Evans had lost interest by this point). Ex-boxer Roger Donoghue, Ray's assistant and consultant on *Rebel without a Cause*, helped with the research and writing (Eisenschitz 257–58).¹³ No longer shot on location, but in Columbia's soundstages, *Hot Blood* plays less like an ethnographic film than a sexy melodrama with colorful musical overtones. Russell and Wilde perform an S&M style "whip dance," and Russell delivers an inner monologue in the form of a song written specifically for the film, "I Could Learn

to Love You,” which she sings in voice-over while miming the sequence with Wilde (Wagner 163). Ray had always aspired to direct a musical (Andrew 20). Although he never achieved his goal, one can find traces in the set pieces here, and later in the dance sequences of *Party Girl* with Cyd Charisse and *King of Kings* with Brigid Bazlen.

The color Western *The True Story of Jesse James*, produced by Twentieth Century-Fox, directly contributed to Ray’s outlaw persona by turning to a legendary American outlaw and folk hero as the subject (the role of Jesse went to the young contract player Robert Wagner, who was about to marry Natalie Wood, one of Ray’s recent discoveries).¹⁴ Godard’s review deemphasized the importance of traditional storytelling, social message, and fidelity to source material in evaluating the film’s direction. Calling Ray “the most peculiarly modern of filmmakers,” he went on to commend his framing of actors and his rendering of abstract ideas through widescreen compositions, attention to décor, and the editing of dialogue scenes in his films. Rather than faithfully adapting James D. Horan’s 1949 novel of the James Gang, *The Desperate Men*, which itself was based on archival sources, Ray made, in Godard’s words, “a more detailed *Rebel without a Cause*” (Godard 60).

Twentieth Century-Fox had successfully brought Horan’s *The Desperate Men* to the screen in 1939 with *Jesse James*, directed by Henry King, and *True Story* was conceived as a straight remake for the studio that could reuse footage from the earlier color film in CinemaScope.¹⁵ *True Story* also returned Ray to his cultural front roots with Benjamin A. Botkin’s 1944 volume, *A Treasury of American Folklore*, produced from Botkin’s work with the Federal Writers Project, from which Ray drew as a source (Eisenschitz 290). From 1942 to 1945, Botkin was assistant director of the Archive of American Folk Song at the Library of Congress (eventually succeeding John and Alan Lomax as director), where he and Ray first met.

After scrapping the first draft of the script by Russell S. Hughes, Ray brought in *Hot Blood*’s original screenwriter, Walter Newman, to write a new version with a flashback structure (Eisenschitz 284–85), which reached a kind of modernist fragmentation in the narrative. British writer Gavin Lambert, Ray’s assistant and lover at the time, worked with Ray on revisions, as well as on the development and improvisation of new scenes, but studio-imposed changes continued during filming (Eisenschitz 285). At Fox’s behest during postproduction, old scenes were cut, others were reshot, and new scenes altogether were added, in addition to colored, misty inserts to transition between past and present. That Ray ultimately “lost control” over the production, forced to relinquish it to studio head Buddy Adler and producer Herbert B. Swope, Jr., makes it especially apt

for close readings by cinephiles such as Godard, in search of a textual unconscious, those fleeting or incomplete moments that bear the hallmarks of an auteur. Godard's review demonstrates the way Ray's "second self," or the *idea* of Ray as auteur, often surpassed Ray as a historical person in the *Cahiers du cinéma* discourse on authorship.

Thus, Ray earned his status as an auteur not simply through his modern techniques, but in his image as an antiestablishment employee of the studio system, rebelling against studio traditions in order to champion a personal artistic vision. Godard wrote:

Where the crafty businessman saw in *The True Story* a means to attract spectators tired of a story which had already been dished up in every conceivable manner, the filmmaker on the other hand saw the legend already taking shape behind the true facts, and behind the existence, the essence. Which explains the constant battles between producer and director. Like Orson Welles before him, Nicholas Ray left Hollywood before shooting ended, defeated, slamming the door behind him (*Godard* 58).

Ray left Hollywood to shoot *Bitter Victory* for Paul Graetz's French-based company Transcontinental Films. This World War II film follows two men in the British Army—a cowardly German captain, David Brand (Curd Jürgens), and a South African major, James Leith (Richard Burton)—sent on a mission to Libya to seize secret documents from the German headquarters.¹⁶

Godard named *Bitter Victory* the best film of 1957, and in his review heralded "[t]he world of modern cinema," a cinema that transcends the power of individual stills, objects in a frame, and even the medium itself ("Stars" 118). "For *Bitter Victory* is not a reflection of life," wrote Godard, "it is life itself turned into film, seen from behind the mirror where the cinema intercepts it. It is at once the most direct and the most secret of films, the most subtle and the crudest" ("Stars" 119). Former French Resistance member René Hardy wrote the script with Ray and Lambert, adapting his own 1956 novel, *Amère victoire*, and Graetz later asked American author and sports writer Paul Gallico to join the team as a script doctor. The film was censored to downplay its antiwar themes, eliminating the cynical ending for its release in most countries (in which the lying and murderous Brand is awarded the Distinguished Service Order by his commanding officer after Leith sacrifices his life for him). Running 102 minutes, it was edited down to 90 minutes for Britain, 87 minutes for the French-dubbed version, and 82 minutes for American

audiences (Eisenschitz 308). Although it was completed in 1957, and played internationally (competing for the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival), it did not receive an American release until Columbia Pictures distributed it in 1958.

The “blinding” truth Godard witnessed in the film, though, comes not from the screenplay or its critique of military bureaucracy (“Stars” 119), but from the editing, from Jurgens and Burton’s performances (“Stars” 118), and from Ray’s discovery of a cosmic aesthetic beyond fiction and reality: “The stars, maybe, and men who look at them and dream” (“Stars” 119). Only the heavens, for Godard, seem to do justice to the film, with its stark black-and-white location shooting and lateral framings of the desert moonscape within the CinemaScope aspect ratio (see fig. 1.2).¹⁷ It is as if to say the film’s otherworldly images belong exclusively to the dreamlike experience of cinema, but also require a new kind of language with which to talk about cinema. By declaring that “the cinema is Nicholas Ray,” Godard reiterated the medium-specific thesis of his review of *Hot Blood*: a great film must be personally authored according to cinematic form, and that meaning is produced from the union of form and content.



François Truffaut’s writing on Ray was less hyperbolic and more humanistic than Godard’s. Attracted to Ray as a young, outsider artist, Truffaut took to him as a director of misunderstood films about characters on the



Figure 1.2. *Bitter Victory* (1957): Only the heavens, for Godard, seem to do justice to the film, with its stark black-and-white location shooting and lateral framings of the desert moonscape within the CinemaScope aspect ratio. (Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2005; digital frame enlargement)