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FILM 4260

Honors Paper Assignment: Ray as Auteur

The *Cahiers du Cinema*, founded in 1951 by a group of critics who would shortly go on to become the New Wave filmmakers, lauded auteurist directors who they felt expressed an individual worldview through the style they injected into each of their films. Although Nicholas Ray was a director working within the Hollywood studio system, who neither wrote nor produced his own films, the *Cahiers* critics nonetheless wrote about him as one of their celebrated auteurs. Through an analysis of the critics' reviews of several of Ray's films, as well as a case study on his film *Bigger Than Life*, it can be argued that Ray's focus on developing his characteristic range of themes through mise-en-scene – especially within the restrictions of studio production enforced on his craftsmanship – justifies for the *Cahiers* critics his qualification as an auteur.

In Francois Truffaut's heralding article, "A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema", he criticizes France's cinematic Tradition of Quality, a swath of prestige films supposedly tastefully adapted from respectable literary sources featuring popular stars and polished production values. In particular, Truffaut targets filmmakers Aurenche and Bost, who he argues are truly unfaithful even to the spirit of the works they set out to adapt, insert unnecessary profanity and vulgarism, and only prolong the use of a dishonest "psychological realism"; "Each one of these scenarists," Truffaut argues, "has but one story to tell" (Truffaut 232-4). Truffaut's most significant point against the Tradition of Quality, and one which guides the wholistic criticism of the *Cahiers du Cinema*, is that the screenwriters for these films had been regarded as the premiere creative figures. The *Cahiers* critics themselves held up the director as the most important creator on a

film, forming their *politique des auteurs* guiding philosophy around valuing films in which a director expresses a distinctly original visual style and therefore earns the title of auteur.

Although many of these celebrated directors worked in the realm of art cinema, the *Cahiers* critics also wrote about Nicholas Ray during the 1950s, even though he worked within the parameters of the Hollywood studio system. Although the critics' arguments in justification of Ray's auteur status are not as comprehensive or coherent an ensemble as they could be, their individual reviews emphasize most strongly Ray's attention to mise-en-scene and several key themes that express his own worldview through films, regardless of how much initial creative control he has over them. These justifications, then, can be cross-compared with the case study of Ray's *Bigger Than Life*.

Aside from his most personal themes, the quality of Ray's cinema which most interests the *Cahiers* critics as a mark of his auteurship is his manipulation of mise-en-scene. In his review of *Johnny Guitar*, for example, Francois Truffaut comments that the film features "deplorable" editing, but that the true interest lies elsewhere, "for instance in the very beautiful positioning of figures within the frame." "It is obvious", Truffaut argues, "that Ray is aiming less for the traditional and all-around success of a film than at giving each shot a certain emotional quality" (Truffaut 108). This emphasis on expressionism through visuals is a sentiment that to many of the *Cahier* critics seems to override fallacies or even strict offenses in the realms of editing and pure plot. Their praise of Ray's compositional direction, then, aligns with the *politique des auteur* canon of visual style taking the greatest critical precedent in film. Eric Rohmer contributes to this focus on Ray's mise-en-scene when he states that Ray is "one of the few to possess his own style, his own vision of the world, his own poetry... constraints exercised by the production companies are such [that the presence of a leitmotiv is an auspicious sign]" (Rohmer

111). In essence then, the rationalization laid out by Rohmer and echoed by several of the other critics for Ray's qualification is that, because the restrictions and predeterminations set out for a film are so heavily enforced upon Ray by the Hollywood studio system under which he operates, that the fact that a consistent mark of his style manages to appear throughout the course of his directed films makes that individualist style even more significant than had it more leisurely emerged under an art cinema milieu. Ray's artistry 'fights the power' and emerges regardless of institutional oppression, then, proving its worth in terms of executing his authorship particularly *because* it is evident to these critics coming from the Hollywood studio system.

Jean-Luc Godard adds to the evidence of Ray's auteurist mise-en-scene by adding that each shot of his film *Hot Blood* proves that, although the plot itself was apparently "badly handled", the visual effect of the film "carries Ray's stamp." "No reservations are necessary," states Godard, "in praising the deliberate and systematic use of the gaudiest colours to be seen in the cinema... violent tones" (Godard 117). The praise for Ray's visual mark continues with Fereydoun Hoveyda's review of *Party Girl*: Hoveyda, who determines that the film has an "idiotic story", simply follows with "so what?" It is the mise en scene that transforms a screenplay "written by someone else and imposed on the director into something which is truly an author's film – How can one describe in words what mise en scene can convey in a few seconds? (Hoveyda 123-7). In addition to the fact that Ray manages to execute a unique praise-worthy style of mise-en-scene despite his institutional corral, then, the critics of *Cahiers du Cinema* write about his auteurship through mise-en-scene because of this factors' ability to delineate a stimulating film regardless of whether a plot is up to the critics' standards. This justification falls in line with the *politique des auteurs*, in that the mise-en-scene – as the production factor most under the director's control – is therefore the metric by which to judge

candidacy of an auteur, in addition to the fact that, as the product of the screenwriter, importance given to a film's script runs in the vein of the Tradition of Quality, contrary to the goals of *Cahiers du Cinema* and subsequently a factor of the film's 'success' which can be, if not discarded, overlooked in favor of Ray's distinctive color use and shot composition.

The *Cahiers* critics also justify writing about Ray as an auteur because of the handful of subtle personal themes that they argue consistently crop up in his films, particularly themes of violence, and an anxious or futile search for some fatalistic quality of life. Jacques Rivette, writing about Ray's *The Lusty Men*, comments that Ray searches for a "breadth of modern gesture and an anxiety about life, a perpetual disquiet that is paralleled in the characters" (Rivette 105). Hoveyda adds to this search-like thematic quality, commenting that there "is always in Ray's heroes a feeling of inferiority compensated for by a frenetic search for superiority and the domination of others", in that Ray's own personal worldview is emerging through his films in the way in which he "questions this world and imitates life" (Hoveyda 127-30). Godard, reviewing *Bitter Victory*, adds that the film is "not a reflection of life, it is life itself turned into film, seen from behind the mirror where the cinema intercepts it" (Godard 119), and in writing about *Hot Blood* comments that in "a Ray film, the leading character returns to something he once abandoned or scorned" (Godard 117). This existential disquiet that permeates Ray's films then, taking the form of a refracted image of life pursued with some form of anxiety for a personally-perceived lack, and executed in a search for something out of others or oneself, is a major theme held up by the *Cahiers* critics in defense of Ray's auteurism, in that it is a metaphorical theme reprised throughout his filmography, a token of an author's strident touch.

The critics also identify and repeat the theme of violence that ties Ray's films together. Truffaut argues that all of Ray's films "tell the same story, the story of a violent man who wants

to stop being violent, and his relationship with a woman who has more moral strength than himself” (Truffaut 107). Similarly, Rohmer dubs Ray the “poet of violence”, remarking on his heroes’ consistent “stubborn intensity” and “futile heroism” (Rohmer 112). The critics’ arguments in favor of recognizing and upholding this theme, among Ray’s armful of them, is as equally persuasive as their previous cases for fatalistic themes and Ray’s mise-en-scene, but flawed with slight inconsistency and contradiction. For example, Truffaut’s praise for the same story told through the course of Ray’s films – which clearly classifies him as an auteur for a distinctly persistent style – seems to run counter to Truffaut’s use of the same determination (same stories being told) as a *complaint* against the films of the Tradition of Quality. In addition to the great wealth of themes that the *Cahiers* critics also tend to list for Ray, unable to succinctly and specifically parse out a set concise trademarks from a list that even they admit is diverse, this consistent thematic quality running through a set of films seems to be a point of contention in that the *Cahiers* critics almost cannot decide with certainty upon a complaint or a praise that remains so one-hundred percent of the time. Perhaps Truffaut means to qualify his determination in that a ‘same-ness’ among films is a fallacy when it occurs within plot and among directors who express no auteurist vision, while ‘same-ness’ is a praise specifically in a thematic sense and as part of a director’s personal expression. Regardless, this theme of violence is echoed along with an *anxiété du vie* and emotion-laden mise-en-scene in Ray’s film *Bigger Than Life*, reviewed by Eric Rohmer.

Hoveyda proposes that the “violence which is so often a feature of Ray’s work revealed in [*Bigger Than Life*] the true extent of its significance, with mise en scene highlighting Mason’s outbursts of aggression” (Hoveyda 128). As Hoveyda points out, the value of Ray’s overarching cinema, residing in his creative expression of themes like violence and a reflective search of

life's anxieties through mise-en-scene, is represented and recognized by the *Cahiers* critics in *Bigger Than Life*. In terms of mise-en-scene, Rohmer justifies his praise in that Ray is "adept at the art of playing with the totality of the set, and although his frames are rather compact, he is able to avoid making them heavy"; he acclaims color's use as "more expressive than decorative" and as working in tandem with the pacing of the film's "most important shots" (Rohmer 143). These qualities, seconded as analyzed by the fellow *Cahiers* critics' focus on figure positioning and gaudy colors, are clearly seen in the film's color palettes, so close to over-the-top but so restrained by a wash of supplementary muting that they cannot be anything but carefully intentioned by the author. This sentiment is expressed, for example, in the blue/brown of the school interior and the instant pop of yellow taxis outside, the pale yellow/taupe of Ed's home and the shock of Richie's little red coat – even more telling when he's missing it in the fraught emotional scene of football practice with Ed. Shot composition builds into Ray's authorship as well, as Rohmer notes "how many close-ups are made possible by the very existence of the little bottle of cortisone", reasoning that a "purely psychological motive would not have afforded these finds" (Rohmer 144). Shedding the transient notions of 'psychological realism', then, Ray's craft uses the plot he is given to motivate his own décor and shots, building to his own characteristic themes through mise-en-scene. The horizontal and depth-based motions across the wide breadth of CinemaScope, for example, contribute to the momentum of Ed's unfortunate madness, and the towering shadow he casts while trying to teach Richie (compared to Lou's un-exaggerated shadow) dictate his unwarranted power to the audience more succinctly – and personally – than plain plot or dialogue could.

These combinations of mise-en-scene and theme, personal to Ray's brand of film, form the substance of what Rohmer argues to be *Bigger Than Life*'s underlying true subject. While the

ostensible subject of *Bigger Than Life* is Ed's struggle with his medicine and resulting madness, Rohmer claims, the true subject is "this uneventful life whose story can be told only by a story as extraordinary as this one", the "mediocrity of daily existence...in which we all participate more or less" (Rohmer 145). This disguising of the 'actual' subject within the surface subject functions similarly to Ray's auteurism within the Hollywood studio system, both situations as further evidence to the *Cahiers* critics of Ray's justification for filmic authorship. While his persistent stylistic vision is detectable in his films, regardless of the plot or restrictions of the studio system, his personal theme and vision of the world is more artistically expressed to the *Cahiers du Cinema* as a subcurrent driving the film's thin mantle of a subject. The ostensible 'scenario' of a film like *Bigger Than Life* serves as a playground through which to *reveal* the 'deep meaning' and value of Ray's cinema, using the emotion-focused relationship between his mise-en-scene and themes in a pattern through his filmography, and with which the *Cahiers* critics justify his auteur status.

"Ray shows us a woman in the kitchen, a man in the bathroom, a child in front of the television, all things that many others have done before him," Rohmer explains. "What counts is the tone he uses to show them... the ever-so-precise attention to small things and the refusal to enjoy only their picturesque qualities. There is too much kinship among his characters for him not to have something to say other than just the facts" (Rohmer 145). Just as Ray's colorful mise-en-scene and existentialist themes work together to convey his true subjects through the veil of his film's less-emphasized plots, Ray himself works through the studio system's challenges to prove and express his own cinematic value, justifying for the *Cahier* critics his auteur qualification.

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