



Ray, Nicholas (1911-1979)

by Richard G. Mann

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Nicholas Ray was one of the most significant and influential American movie directors of the twentieth century. In films such as *Johnny Guitar* (1954) and *Rebel without a Cause* (1955), he created characters and situations that continue to resonate with queer viewers.

In his films, Ray explored the lives of lonely outsiders who refuse to conform to the demands of mainstream society. Although many of his protagonists fall victim to social pressures, he avoided simplistic "good versus evil" plot lines.

Preferring a collaborative style of direction, Ray worked intimately with actors, fostering complex, subtly nuanced characterizations. While he typically incorporated naturalistic details into his movies, he also endowed scenes with symbolic meanings through highly stylized handling of such diverse elements as color, camera angles, and architectural settings. In his films, form and content are intertwined.

Often as rebellious as the characters in his films, Ray frequently was at odds with movie executives. Increasingly regarded as unreliable, he effectively was ostracized from major American studios after 1958. Although Ray's career in the American film industry was cut short in that year, the eighteen motion pictures that he directed between 1947 and 1958 constitute a very impressive legacy. Between 1959 and 1977, Ray directed only three full-length films intended for mainstream distribution, one of which was completed by another director.

Coinciding with the decline of his commercial fortunes, Ray's critical reputation plummeted in the United States. However, avant-garde European critics and filmmakers discovered and honored his work. In particular, François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, and others involved in the *Nouvelle Vague* movement in France during the 1950s and 1960s hailed Ray as an inspiration to their own creative endeavors.

Ray's Significance for Queer Cultural History

Ray also deserves to be acknowledged as an important figure in queer cultural history, partly because of his own bisexuality but primarily because of the queer perspectives in his films.

Although the case for Ray's bisexuality is overwhelming, some friends and family members have attempted to deny it. Ray's mentor, director Elia Kazan; his fourth wife, Susan Ray; and other close friends and family members are among those who have insisted upon Ray's heterosexuality.

However, another close personal friend and professional collaborator, John Houseman, noted Ray's sexual interest in other men. In his memoirs, Houseman described Ray as "a potential homosexual with a deep, passionate and constant need for female love." In his recent book on gay men and lesbians in Hollywood, William J. Mann also characterized Ray as a deeply closeted homosexual.

Because homosexuality was strictly illegal in the United States during the early and mid-twentieth century,

it is difficult to find definitive proof of homosexual behavior by prominent Americans of the era. Nevertheless, throughout Ray's adult life, there were widespread rumors concerning his bisexuality. For example, many of his associates, including actor Farley Granger and writer Gore Vidal, who resided at the Chateau Marmont in Hollywood while Ray lived there during the mid-1950s, claimed that he simultaneously conducted affairs with Sal Mineo, James Dean, and Natalie Wood during the filming of *Rebel without a Cause*. Furthermore, acquaintances reported seeing Ray dancing with other men at the Chateau.

The fullest published documentation of Ray's bisexuality is provided by Gavin Lambert in *Mainly about Lindsay Anderson* (2000). Lambert met Ray in February 1956, while he was in England, publicizing *Rebel without a Cause*. In the midst of seducing Lambert the night that they met, Ray declared to him that he was not really homosexual or even bisexual because he had slept with more women than men. Nevertheless, Lambert was literally swept off his feet by Ray's passion and accepted his invitation to follow him back to the United States.

Ray secured employment for Lambert at Twentieth Century-Fox as a screenwriter and production assistant, and he also used his influence to expedite the processing of a visa and work permit. Arriving in Hollywood in March 1956, Lambert lived with Ray at the Chateau Marmont until November.

Lambert characterized Ray as an erratic but very possessive lover. In November, Lambert ended their affair because he had wearied of Ray's alcoholism and his tendency to ignore him for extended periods while entertaining a seemingly endless stream of starlets. Despite this break, Lambert remained a friend and strong professional supporter.

In remarks made in Roy Connolly's television documentary *James Dean: The First American Teenager* (1975), Ray may have provided the clearest public indication of his own sexuality. In response to questions about Dean's bisexuality, Ray asserted, "He was normal, which may mean bisexual." In contrast to this view of bisexuality as normative, Ray often represented exclusively heterosexual relationships as unstable and repressive.

Although Ray avoided explicit depictions of homosexuality in his films, which would in any case have been impossible for most of his career because of the industry's production code, he, nevertheless, eloquently conveyed the power of same-sex love and desire and envisioned alternative family structures, most notably in *Rebel without a Cause* but in several others as well.

Furthermore, he opposed restrictive gender stereotypes by representing women with the strength and independence typically associated with male characters in films of the 1950s. Conversely, he often endowed his male protagonists with supposedly feminine qualities of tenderness and vulnerability.

In addition, Ray challenged the highly gendered conception of film subjects by fusing sentimental romance, normally intended for female audiences, with masculine genres such as film noir and westerns. Thus, such films as *In a Lonely Place* (1950) defy generic classification.

Early Years

Ray was born on August 7, 1911 in Galesville, Wisconsin, a village 24 miles from the city of La Crosse, where his family moved in 1919. Initially named Raymond Nicholas Kienzle, Jr. after his father, a locally prominent builder, he legally changed his name in 1931 to Nicholas Ray, which he considered sophisticated and distinctly American.

Both his grandfather and father were heavy drinkers, and Ray claimed that he began drinking alcohol at the age of ten. When his father did not come home on the night of November 10, 1927, Ray found him passed

out in a hotel room, where he had been left by his mistress. Ray carried his father home, but despite his tender care for him, he died the next day. Throughout the rest of his life, Ray referred to this incident as a devastating experience.

While in high school, Ray revealed his theatrical interests through participation in the drama society. Between 1926 and 1927, he wrote and produced various programs for a local radio station, including a version of George Bernard Shaw's *Candida*. Submitting the latter play to an interstate radio competition, he won a scholarship, which he used to attend La Crosse State Teachers College (now University of Wisconsin at La Crosse) from 1929 to 1931, while he worked as a radio announcer.

In the fall of 1931, Ray moved to Chicago and enrolled in classes at the University of Chicago, but he dropped out after only one semester. He wandered around the United States and Mexico until 1933. During 1933, Ray spent six to eight months at Frank Lloyd Wright's Taliesin Fellowship in Green Springs, Wisconsin, but he left abruptly after quarreling violently with Wright. The causes of their dispute remain uncertain, but, according to Jean Evans, Ray's first wife, the moralistic Wright expelled Ray because of his involvement in homosexual activities.

In spite of this quarrel, Ray was profoundly influenced by Wright's artistic theories. More specifically, the director's use of architectural settings to enhance narrative and his preference for emphatically horizontal compositions are significant indicators of Wright's strong impact on his films.

New York City, 1930s

By the fall of 1933, Ray settled in New York City, where he soon met Jean Abrams, a lively young writer, usually known by her pen name, Jean Evans. They quickly became lovers and moved in together. They married in 1936. A son, Anthony, was born on November 24, 1937. By the late 1930s, Ray's behavior became increasingly unpredictable because of his alcoholism, and he occasionally acted violently towards Evans. She separated from him in April 1940 and divorced him in December 1941. As Lambert did, Evans remained a close friend until his death.

By 1934, Ray joined the Workers Lab, later renamed Theatre of Action, a radical theatrical group that gave performances on picket lines and at factories and union halls. In keeping with its socialist goals, the Lab expected members to pool all resources and to live communally. As committed to artistic excellence as to leftist political ideals, members adhered to a rigorous schedule of training and attended daily classes, given by established theatrical professionals. Through the Theatre of Action, Ray established friendships that would endure throughout the rest of his life, including with Elia Kazan, who inspired his commitment to improvisation, and playwright Clifford Odets, who later wrote several screenplays for Ray.

Determined to perform in "legitimate" theaters as well as factories, the group commissioned in 1935 a full-length play *The Young Go First*, which criticized Roosevelt's Civilian Conservation Corps as excessively militaristic. In May 1935, Ray acted in this play, which was directed by Kazan, at the Park Theatre, his first appearance in a mainstream venue. Because of its increasing financial problems, Ray and many other members abandoned the Theatre of Action in 1936 and joined the Federal Theatre Project of the Works Project Administration (WPA).

Promoting Grass-roots Culture

In 1937, Ray was hired by the Resettlement Administration (later Farm Security Administration) to promote a grass-roots cultural revival. Working for that bureau from 1937 to 1938, and subsequently for the Recreation Division of the WPA from 1938 to 1940, he established theatrical and musical programs throughout the United States. Through his involvement in community arts programs, he became a nationally

recognized expert on American folk music. In *On Dangerous Ground* (1952) and other films, he drew on his experiences in the WPA, realistically expressing the harshness of life in rural America.

In July 1940, due to retrenchment of government programs in the arts, Ray lost his position in the WPA. Shortly thereafter, Alan Lomax, formerly one of his supervisors at the WPA, hired him as director of the news and entertainment programs at CBS Radio. In programs for CBS, Ray introduced national audiences to Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, "Blind Lemon" Jefferson, and other folk and jazz musicians from the South and the Midwest.

In 1941, FBI agents opened a file on Ray, noting that he owned socialist literature and that he associated with numerous African Americans.

Voice of America

A few days after the invasion of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, Ray applied for military service, but he was declared unfit due to rheumatoid arthritis and other medical problems. Shortly thereafter, he was hired to work for the recently established Voice of America by John Houseman, Head of Overseas Programming, who knew Ray from the Theatre of Action. Convinced that the Voice of America needed entertainment to attract viewers, Houseman entrusted Ray with developing international folk music programs.

On Voice of America, Ray presented American musicians whom he had featured on CBS as well as displaced foreign entertainers, including the Czech comic team of Jiri Voskovec and Jan Werich, who synthesized European Dadaism and American vaudeville in their routines. The pro-labor slant of Ray's programs appealed to anti-fascist listeners overseas but disconcerted administrators in Washington, D.C. In January 1944, Ray was forced to resign on the basis of FBI reports, which reportedly documented leftist political sympathies and homosexual liaisons.

Hollywood and New York, Mid-1940s

In March 1944, Ray went to Hollywood to serve as Kazan's assistant on *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. Ray contributed to many aspects of the film, including script and architectural setting, and he also helped composer Alfred Newman coordinate his score with the film.

In March 1945, Ray returned to New York, where he worked as director on the television version of *Sorry, Wrong Number*, produced by Houseman for CBS, and as Houseman's assistant on two Broadway musicals, *Lute Song* and *The Beggar's Opera*.

They Live By Night (Thieves Like Us)

Houseman again hired Ray as his assistant when he returned to Hollywood in 1946 to work for RKO. By August 1946, Ray had completed a screen adaptation of *Thieves Like Us*, a novel by Edward Anderson, concerning an adolescent couple, Bowie and Keechie, who become fugitives from justice in Depression-era America. Disconcerted by the anti-capitalist slant of the script, RKO executives initially shelved the project, but in February 1947, Dore Schary, recently appointed head of production, assigned Ray to direct the film. At this time, Ray was given a one-year contract with options for renewal at the studio's discretion.

For a beginning director, Ray showed exceptional boldness. Instead of utilizing established stars, Ray cast virtually unknown contract players, Farley Granger and Cathy O'Donnell, as the lead characters. This film served to establish Granger's reputation as an important actor; he still regards Ray as one of the most inspiring directors that he worked with during his long career.

Furthermore, Ray insisted that the opening sequence be filmed entirely from a helicopter, at the time an

innovative and technically difficult process. Drawing upon his experience as a musical programmer, he organized the film around various sounds, including not only the components of the score, composed by Leigh Harline, but also popular songs and everyday noises, such as train whistles. These sounds are skillfully employed in counterpoint to the primary incidents of the narrative.

Through his sensitive direction, Ray infused *Thieves Like Us* with a tender mood that differentiates it from other film noir, and he enhanced its lyrical romanticism by filming many scenes at night and utilizing soft-lit close ups. However, he also emphasized the social message, for example, through subtitles explaining the oppression of the couple. By depicting actors through latticework, bed frames, and other architectural elements, Ray created the impression that they are imprisoned.

In October 1947, the completed film was previewed and received very favorable reviews in trade journals. However, because the film did not conform to any established genres, the studio was uncertain how to market it. Finally, in November 1949, the film was distributed with a new title, *They Live By Night*, determined by an audience poll. The publicity campaign, emphasizing the theme of juvenile violence, did not succeed in attracting audiences; the film lost over \$445,000.

Although delaying the release of his first film, the studio was impressed by Ray's talent and renewed his contract. Howard Hughes, who took over RKO in 1948, often clashed with Ray, who resented his involvement in all phases of films produced at the studio. Yet, despite their disputes, Hughes provided Ray with strong protection by utilizing his considerable influence to prevent Ray from being called as a witness by the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC). Given Ray's history of leftist activities and sexual "deviance," an appearance before HUAC would certainly have harmed his career.

On June 1, 1948, Ray married sultry actress Gloria Grahame in Las Vegas. Foreshadowing the problems that would plague their brief marriage, he gambled away virtually all his existing financial resources in the days leading up to the wedding. Their son Tim was born on November 12--four months earlier than expected, according to studio publicity.

In a Lonely Place

Following the completion of *They Live By Night*, Hughes initially assigned Ray to comparatively routine films, including *A Woman's Secret* (1949) and *Born to Be Bad* (1950). Although under great pressure to do so, Ray managed to avoid directing *I Married a Communist*, a right-wing thriller that Hughes was committed to making as a demonstration of his studio's patriotism. (It was eventually directed by Robert Stevenson and released in 1951.)

Discontented with his assignments at RKO, Ray was delighted when Hughes decided to loan him out to Santana, an independent film company founded by Humphrey Bogart. For Santana, Ray created *Knock on Any Door* (1949), a naturalistic juvenile crime film, largely planned before he was hired, and *In a Lonely Place* (1950), which starred Bogart himself and which is recognized as one of his masterpieces.

The title not only reflects the situation of the protagonists, but it also expresses Ray's view of Hollywood. Like *They Live By Night*, *In a Lonely Place* synthesizes romance and film noir. Because the lead characters are mature adults, their despair and anxieties seem even more poignant and intense than those of the adolescents in the earlier film.

The story concerns screenwriter Dixon Steele (played by Bogart), accused of killing Mildred Atkinson, a hat check girl, whom he had invited to his apartment to narrate the story of a best-selling novel. While under suspicion for the crime, he becomes involved in an affair with Laurel Grey (Gloria Grahame), a neighbor who provides an alibi for him. Their relationship is quickly destabilized by Steele's propensity for violence.

Because his manliness is explicitly noted both by himself and other characters, his violent acts signify the inherent problems of conventional masculinity.

Suspicious and fearful, Grey plans to leave the city. Furious when he discovers her intentions, Steele starts to strangle her, but, ironically, he is interrupted by a police call that informs him of evidence that clears him of Atkinson's murder. This news comes too late to save his relationship with Grey, and he walks off into the night.

The theme of the corrosive effects of suspicion was very relevant in the McCarthy era. Ray evokes a sense of pervasive surveillance through frequent close-ups of sharply lit eyes, including over the opening credits. Throughout, Ray filmed actors with camera angles that correspond with the viewpoints of other characters. The unusual arrangement of the apartment building enables Grey to watch all of Steele's activities, although he cannot see her.

Despite romantic interludes, in the film heterosexual interactions generally seem unstable and fraught with danger. For example, when Steele first asks Grey out on a date, his intense gaze and fidgeting hands indicate an exceptional nervousness, inappropriate to the situation. Once their affair has begun, Steele frightens Grey by the extraordinary haste and fervor with which he insists upon marriage.

Through his depiction of Grey's interactions with her masseuse, Martha (Ruth Gillette), Ray opens up the possibility that a lesbian relationship might provide greater satisfaction than her liaison with Steele. A heavysset, muscular woman, Gillette corresponded to the 1950s stereotype of the butch lesbian. Lining up Gillette/Martha directly behind and above Grahame/Grey, Ray visualized their unity. The exceptionally low camera angle in the massage scene helps to convey the protection that Martha could provide. Martha speaks in low, intimate tones as she encourages Grey to abandon Steele. Although Martha does not appear on screen again, she plays a significant role in the culminating stages of the film through her telephone conversations with Grey.

As Terry L. Moore has explained in her perceptive analysis, other elements of the film also reference same-sex relationships. Through his editing of the nightclub scene, Ray creates the impression that Grey and a beautiful singer are looking directly at one another. Although Steele often seems uncomfortable in the presence of women, he fully relaxes when he is alone with Mel, his close friend and agent. After Steele explains to Mel that he has proposed to Grey, Mel proclaims to her that the three of them will make a happy family.

While making *In a Lonely Place*, Ray was in the process of separating from Grahame, although they were not divorced until August 15, 1952. (In 1960, Grahame married Ray's twenty-three-year-old son from his first marriage, Anthony, an act that provoked an intense public scandal that ended her movie career. She had children by both father and son.)

On Dangerous Ground

While filming *In a Lonely Place*, Ray asked Houseman (still at RKO) if he would produce a film based on Gerald Butler's novel *Mad with Much Heart* about an urban cop, assigned to deal with a murder in a rural area. Ultimately entitled *On Dangerous Ground*, this movie is one of Ray's most important works.

Predisposed to violence, the protagonist, Jim Wilson (played by Robert Ryan), has much in common with Dixon Steele. Although Butler's narrative began after Wilson was transferred to the country, Ray and co-writer A. I. Bezzerides added several scenes revealing Wilson's aggressive behavior in the city. With Ray's claustrophobic architectural settings, the opening scenes recall German Expressionist films.

Viewed through the windows of Wilson's automobile as he travels to his new assignment, the panoramic mountain scenery provides psychological relief. Determined to achieve a sense of authenticity, Ray filmed most of the rural scenes on location in Colorado, often under difficult conditions in the winter. Although Ray emphasizes the splendor of the natural setting, he also reveals the harshness of rural life.

Upon his arrival in the rural community, Wilson confronts a man who is at least as aggressive as he is-- Walter Brent (played by Ward Bond), father of a recently murdered girl. Although Wilson planned to direct the hunt for the killer, he is compelled to work with Brent, who has already assembled a posse. Wilson's encounter with Brent makes him re-evaluate his own behavior.

Several elements contribute to the effectiveness of *On Dangerous Ground* as a film noir. The identity of the murderer is only gradually discovered, and the chase sequences are thrilling. Ray's dynamic camera movements and editing and Bernard Herrmann's harshly modernistic, often dissonant score also contribute to the excitement of the film.

Ultimately identified as the killer, Danny Walden (Summer Williams) is depicted as a sweet boy, who tenderly cares for his blind older sister, as well as for birds and animals. By associating murder with such a gentle figure, Ray reveals how complex and unexpected the origins of human violence are. Although Wilson tries to protect Danny, the youth falls to his death from a cliff as he attempts to flee.

Ironically, Wilson ultimately achieves redemption through his evolving relationship with Danny's sister, Mary (Ida Lupino). Although the character of Mary Walden could easily have become sentimental or pathetic, Lupino infuses her with great dignity. Wilson's involvement with Mary makes *On Dangerous Ground* as much romance as film noir.

The Lusty Men

Following completion of *On Dangerous Ground*, Hughes compelled Ray to direct *Flying Leathernecks* (1951), a story of pilots during World War II, often considered his most conventional and anonymous film. However, in 1952, Ray was given the chance to direct *The Lusty Men*, a film about modern cowboys that was ideally suited to his interests and talents.

As preparation for the film, Ray undertook extensive study of the lives and speech patterns of cowboys. After screenwriter Horace McCoy lost interest in the project, Ray decided to work in an improvisational way--focusing on the expression of character and mood, rather than plot. *Lusty Men* combines elements of romance, psychological drama, and poetic reverie. Moreover, some parts--especially the rodeo segments--have the feel of a documentary film.

In *Lusty Men*, Ray suggests that the American Dream, as exemplified in the rodeo, is built on false values. The film opens with a prolonged shot of a billboard celebrating the heroism involved in the sport. However, Ray emphasizes the repetitive character of the events and the personal and economic hardships of the riders.

In the lead role of disillusioned veteran rodeo-rider Jeff McCloud, Robert Mitchum eloquently reveals vulnerability and sensitivity beneath his reserved, archetypal masculine exterior. The film concerns his relationship with a struggling young married couple, Wes and Louise Merritt (Arthur Kennedy, Susan Hayward).

A longtime rodeo fan, Wes adores Jeff and is happy to help him get a job at the ranch at which he works. In exchange, Jeff trains Wes and subsequently acts as his manager on the rodeo circuit. Wes's decision to abandon his settled life distresses Louise and contributes to the growing tension among the characters.

The interactions between Jeff and Wes have subtle homoerotic undertones, but their love is sublimated into mutual (and competitive) affection for Louise. However, same-sex desire is signified more overtly by the flirtatious manner of a lanky female rodeo rider (Maria Hart), who tells Louise about her torrid affair with Jeff. In both *In a Lonely Place* and *Lusty Men*, female characters are empowered to convey feelings that might have seemed too provocative if expressed by male figures.

Johnny Guitar

After completing *Lusty Men*, Ray was assigned to add finishing touches to four films, largely completed by others. Disheartened, he bought out his contract and left RKO in February 1953, intending to establish his own production company. Lacking financial resources to achieve that goal, he signed on with MCA, an entertainment agency that originated story concepts, hired cast and production teams, and then arranged for movies to be produced at various studios on its behalf.

Filmed in 1953 and released in 1954, *Johnny Guitar* originated as a typical MCA project, utilizing four of the agency's leading clients: star Joan Crawford; director Nicholas Ray; novelist Roy Chanslor, who wrote the book on which the film is based and the original script; and writer Philip Yourdan, who extensively revised Chanslor's initial script in collaboration with Ray. Under contract (through MCA) to Republic Pictures on a single film basis, Ray was flattered to be given the dual functions of director and producer.

However, his control of production was significantly undermined by conflicts with Joan Crawford, who sought to exert authority commensurate with her lavish salary. Although Ray planned to exploit the hostility between Crawford and supporting actress Mercedes McCambridge, he was unprepared for the consequences of their intense dislike of each other. Crawford insisted that Ray eliminate several of McCambridge's scenes that he had already filmed, and she demanded that her own role be expanded to fill the gaps left by these proposed cuts. To emphasize the seriousness of her demands, Crawford destroyed McCambridge's costumes and made arrangements to leave Sedona, Arizona where the film was being shot.

Worried executives from Republic forced Ray to implement all of the changes requested by Crawford. Although the modifications necessitated significant additional costs, Republic also insisted that Ray adhere to the original budget and schedule, thus he had to make even more cuts.

Despite the significant problems involved in the production, the film turned out brilliantly, and Ray realized his stated goal of creating a new kind of western. By filming *Johnny Guitar* almost entirely on location in Arizona, he established an authentic background for the narrative. Yet, lavish, intensely saturated colors; highly stylized, sometimes deliberately wooden, performances; direct addresses to the audience by actors stepping outside the confines of their characters; and several other elements emphasize that the film is an artificial construct.

Most often, the film has been interpreted as a political allegory of America in the McCarthy era. The actions and statements of Emma Small (McCambridge) directly invoke the witch-hunts conducted by HUAC. Although no evidence indicates their involvement, Emma is resolutely determined that Vienna (Crawford) and her friends should be executed for the murder of her brother. On numerous occasions, Emma seeks to encourage testimony against Vienna by offering potential witnesses amnesty if they will tell her what she wants to hear, and she repeatedly tries to convince the sheriff that there is no need to be constrained by the law. Furthermore, Emma describes Vienna's admitted sexual indulgences as a sure indication of propensity to crime.

In his statements about the film, Ray emphasized that he wanted to reconfigure the usual gender stereotypes of the western by focusing upon the interactions of the two primary female characters, Vienna (Crawford) and Emma Small (McCambridge). Wearing a severe black costume, Emma projects a very masculine aura throughout the movie. At no point does Emma reveal any softness, and she insists on leading

the posse trying to track down Vienna.

As Pamela Robertson has pointed out, Emma has many of the distinctive qualities of the butch women in lesbian pulp novels of the 1950s. Emma's lack of interest in men is emphasized at several points, as she repeatedly indicates that she has never been involved with a man. When the Kid insists upon dancing with her, she flails her arms and tries to push him away.

In contrast to Emma, Vienna exhibits an extraordinary degree of gender fluidity. While Emma might be the archetypal butch lesbian, Vienna switches freely between butch and femme roles. Lesbian viewers have long recognized the iconic stature of Crawford's performance as Vienna.

In the opening scenes, Vienna walks in a rather stiff, masculine fashion, and she wears a tailored shirt (with shoulder pads), pants, and gun holster. Only her vivid red lipstick identifies her as female. Describing her as more of a man than anyone he has known, one of her employees also indicates that she challenges his own manliness.

Throughout the middle scenes, Vienna wears conventionally feminine clothing, a sexy red negligee during a romantic interlude with Johnny and an ornate white lace gown while awaiting the arrival of Emma's posse. When dressed in these costumes, Vienna speaks in a relatively soft tone and moves in a more sensual way.

In the final scenes, Vienna's costume and manner combine masculine and feminine elements. While she again wears a shirt and pants, these are made of a shimmering fabric, and they have a slightly feminine cut. Further, while still conveying strength and authority, her gestures and speech pattern are infused with a distinct undertone of gentleness.

In comparison with the book, Ray reduced the role of the title character, but Johnny remains an essential signifier of his gender-bending intentions. Under Ray's direction, Hayden eloquently reveals his vulnerability and tenderness. As played by the deep-voiced, muscular Hayden, Johnny never loses his masculine authority. Although Johnny's gentle demeanor occasionally suffices to diffuse tension, he takes forceful action when necessary.

Although many commentators have noted the relevance of Emma and Vienna to lesbian viewers, the potential significance of Johnny/Hayden for gay male viewers has been overlooked. Nevertheless, this gender-bending figure must have appealed to queer men in the 1950s.

At the time of its initial release, most American critics mocked Ray's bold revision of the western. However, the general movie-going public was enthusiastic and made it one of Ray's most popular and financially successful films. His baroque reinterpretation of the western has influenced numerous later filmmakers, including Sergio Leone and Martin Scorsese.

Despite this commercial success, the pattern of Ray's career did not change significantly from what it had been at RKO. His next picture *Run for Cover* (1954) adhered to the western conventions that he challenged in *Johnny Guitar*.

Rebel without a Cause

Ray spent much of 1954 developing *Rebel without a Cause*, which was filmed and released in 1955. Executives at Warner Brothers encouraged this treatment of juvenile delinquency because of the popularity of Richard Brooks's *Blackboard Jungle* (1955) and other current films involving teenage crime. In contrast to these, however, *Rebel* focused on juvenile delinquency in prosperous suburbs rather than in inner cities. Ray structured the film around several pivotal violent events, including a knife fight, a "chickie run" (a car

race toward the edge of a cliff), and a climactic shoot-out.

Like Johnny Guitar, teenager Jim Stark (James Dean) disdains violence, but he is under pressure from both parents and peers to behave in an assertive "masculine" fashion. His family has repeatedly moved from one community to another in an attempt to find a place where he can fit in. When mocked as a chicken because of his gentleness, he has lashed out violently at those taunting him.

As several commentators have emphasized, Jim has difficulty developing a stable masculine persona because his weak-willed father (Jim Backus) is a poor role model. In one crucial encounter with his son, Mr. Stark wears a frilly woman's apron. Yet, queer viewers may wonder if the problematic aspects of Jim's home environment suffice to explain his anguish. As Marie Cartier has observed, Jim seems to be speaking for all troubled queer youth when he declares to the police detective (not coincidentally named Ray) that he would be happy if he could have one day when he did not feel confused and ashamed.

As Jim Stark, Dean defied prevalent hetero/homosexual stereotypes of the 1950s. Commentators still have difficulty classifying his performance in terms of binary sexual and gender categories. While Dean often conveys a gentleness and grace that challenged dominant conceptions of masculinity in the 1950s, he also manifests the strength expected of men of the period. In her provocative analysis of the movie, Cartier proposes that Dean modeled his performance on the butch lesbians that he knew. Although controversial, this suggestion is of interest because it attests to Dean's ability to reach outside masculine conventions of his era.

The emotional core of the film is provided by the evolving triangular relationship of Jim with two other students at his new high school: Plato (Sal Mineo) and Judy (Natalie Wood). Jim first encounters them at the police station in the opening scene of the film, and, from the start, he behaves very protectively towards both of them, trying to put his jacket around Plato, who is shivering, and picking up the compact that Judy drops.

In befriending Plato, Jim reveals bravery and sensitivity, as Judy emphasizes in conversation with Jim. Stigmatized as different, Plato is harassed by most of his fellow students. Although never explicitly stated, it is apparent that Plato is homosexual, particularly since Mineo as Plato manifests many of the distinctive features of the sissy stereotype, which was popularly associated with homosexual men in the 1950s.

According to Lawrence Frascella and Al Weisel, memos from worried Warner executives indicate that Ray wanted to show Plato kissing Jim. Although Ray did not film this scene, he included many clues to Plato's sexuality, including the picture of Tyrone Power in his locker and his nickname after the ancient Greek philosopher (queerly resonant because of the historic association of homosexuality with Classical culture).

Although mainstream critics continue to describe Jim's relation to Plato as being simply that of father to son, this interpretation is undercut by the sensual longing with which Plato/Mineo gazes at Jim/Dean. The homoerotic basis of Plato's attraction to Jim is evident, for example, as he intently follows Jim's movement in the reflection in the mirror placed above Power's photo. Eagerly leaning toward Jim during the lecture at the planetarium, Plato touches his shoulder tenderly. Although Jim's feelings for Plato are more ambiguous, he always responds to him with gentleness and warmth, even when he declines Plato's invitation to spend the night at his house. The soft focus and gentle music marks Plato's invitation to Jim as romantic.

Although Plato and Judy are often characterized as competitors for Jim's affections, they do not treat each other with hostility and, in fact, they seem to take pleasure in their shared feelings for him, as is particularly evident in their conversation preceding the chickie run. The possibility of an alternate family structure is evoked in a powerfully romantic interlude, set in a dilapidated mansion, where all three have taken refuge from gang members seeking vengeance for the death of their leader, Buzz, in the chickie run.

In the gazebo, Plato lies against Jim's shoulder as Judy supports Jim's head in her lap.

Plato's death at the end of the movie is often interpreted as the triumph of heterosexuality over homosexuality. Yet, Jim conveys the impression that he will continue to cherish Plato's memory as he sorrowfully and tenderly bends towards his dead body and zips up the red jacket that he gave him earlier.

Perhaps because of the publicity surrounding Dean's starring role in the film, which was released shortly after his death, *Rebel* was one of the highest grossing films of the decade, and it was also the most commercially successful film of Ray's entire career.

Rebel is also arguably Ray's artistic masterpiece. In addition to powerful performances by all members of the cast, the film is distinguished by the director's dynamic exploitation of the new color Cinemascope technology and the modernistic jazz score by Leonard Rosenman, among other elements.

Films of the Later 1950s

After achieving an exceptional degree of success with *Rebel*, Ray certainly had good reason to expect that he would be able to attain the artistic independence he had long sought. However, his ambitions continued to be limited by budgetary constraints, the unwelcome involvement of executives in his films, and other factors. Ray's own destructive behavior also interfered with his professional effectiveness. During the later 1950s, he began to drink even more heavily, and he squandered much of his money through gambling.

Despite these difficulties, Ray directed six commercial films between 1955 and 1958. Ray intended the first of these, *Hot Blood* (filmed 1955, released 1956), as a fulfillment of his long-standing interest in gypsy culture. However, this project was marred by his conflicts with the lead actors, Jane Russell and Cornel Wilde, who gave ineffective performances. Although Ray intended the same combination of stylization and naturalism that he achieved in *Johnny Guitar*, budget restraints compelled him to make the picture entirely in the studio. The result is a highly artificial production that does not convey the character of gypsy life.

Although now recognized as an important film, *Bigger than Life* (1956), a provocative exploration of materialism and addiction in America, was a critical failure and commercial disaster, despite a compelling performance by James Mason. Under duress, Ray next undertook the western *The True Story of Jesse James* (1956). Although forced to abandon his own highly original conception for the narrative, he introduced several elements that indicate the impossibility of knowing the true history of the folk hero.

Believing that he would obtain more favorable working conditions in Europe, Ray arranged to direct *Bitter Victory* (filmed 1956-57, released 1957) for Columbia European. However, he had even more conflicts with producer Paul Graetz than he had had with Howard Hughes. Against Ray's wishes, Graetz insisted that the film should star the popular German actor Curd Jürgens, even though he was not well suited to the lead role of a psychologically tormented British officer. Worried by Ray's heavy drinking and gambling, Graetz rigorously limited his access to funds and tried to persuade Gavin Lambert to serve as an informant. Refusing to betray his friend, Lambert was dismissed from his positions as scriptwriter and production assistant.

Despite the difficulties encountered in the production, largely shot on location in the Libyan desert, *Bitter Victory* is a moving exploration of rivalry and emotional conflicts between two officers (Jürgens and Richard Burton) as they struggle to display heroism. Despite--or perhaps because of --their involvement with the same woman, there are subtle homoerotic undertones to their interactions.

Returning to America, Ray next directed *Wind Against the Everglades* (filmed 1957-58, released 1958), produced by Budd and Stuart Schulberg. From the beginning, Budd Schulberg, who wrote the script, made

it clear that he intended to control every facet of the film. During the course of production, Ray quarreled violently with him and other members of the cast and crew. The production was also troubled by severe weather that delayed location work in the Everglades, illnesses of several cast members, and financial problems. The heavy media coverage of the production woes, which blamed Ray for everything that went wrong, significantly damaged Ray's reputation.

Following two contentious productions, *Party Girl* (1958), Ray's last commercial film in America, was notably free of strife. Although a relatively conventional film noir, it is distinguished by Ray's bold settings and camerawork. Unfortunately, the efficient production of *Party Girl* did not suffice to improve Ray's reputation in the film industry.

Aware of his growing regard in Europe, Ray decided to move there, where he hoped to find more opportunities. Before leaving the United States, he married Betty Utey on October 13, 1958 in the midst of the woods near Grangley, Maine. Ray and Utey had two children: Julie Christina, born January 10, 1960, and Nikka, born October 1, 1961. By January 1964, Utey and Ray had moved thirteen times. Unable to endure this nomadic existence, Utey separated permanently from Ray at this point.

European Interlude

Before leaving the United States, Ray had already begun developing plans for *The Savage Innocents*, an Italian-British co-production (1959), concerning the impact of Western traders and missionaries on Eskimo culture and on the natural environment in Arctic regions of North America. Ray did extensive filming in the northernmost reaches of Canada despite the difficulties imposed by severe winter conditions.

Unfortunately, a substantial portion of the film shot in Canada was destroyed in a plane crash, and Ray was obligated to recreate several important scenes at Pinewood Studio, London. The resulting gap between natural and artificial settings mars the film.

The film marks a notable shift in Ray's style of direction, as he sought to encourage a less stylized method of acting. More concerned with authenticity than professional polish, he insisted that a significant part of the cast be Native Canadians without formal training as actors. Expecting an Arctic version of *Johnny Guitar*, European critics were disappointed and largely dismissed the film.

In 1960, Ray directed *King of Kings* (released 1961), an epic film of the life of Christ, for Samuel Bronston, whose film operations were based in Spain. Despite his reputation as unreliable, Ray demonstrated notable resourcefulness in coping with the numerous problems caused by a chronic shortage of funds, although he ended up quarreling with many of Bronston's agents in the process.

At the time of its release, critics dismissed *King of Kings* as just another biblical epic, but film historians now recognize its significant reinterpretation of the genre. Ray's emphasis upon the political and social conflicts in the Holy Land makes the film seem even more relevant today than when it was filmed. Moreover, Ray emphasized the humanity of Christ and depended primarily on the radiant beauty of Jeffrey Hunter in the lead role to evoke his divinity.

Despite the significant difficulties involved in *King of Kings*, in 1962 Ray agreed to direct another film for Bronston, *55 Days at Peking*. From the start of the production, Ray became embroiled in disputes with star Charlton Heston and other members of the cast and crew. Ray's hospitalization following a heart attack in July 1962 was used by the Bronston organization as an excuse to terminate his involvement in the film.

In 1963, Ray opened the restaurant Nikka's in Madrid. Although it became a popular meeting place for young filmmakers, Nikka's lost a substantial amount of money. Until 1969, Ray moved from one European country

to another, unsuccessfully promoting a variety of film projects.

Final years

Excited by the American youth movement of the 1960s, Ray decided to return to the United States in 1969. After making a short documentary on an anti-war rally in Washington D.C. on November 15, 1969, he moved to Chicago where he began a full-length movie on the trial of the "Chicago Seven," alleged leaders of the protest at the Democratic National Convention in 1968. Ray's loss of sight in his right eye in 1970 has been attributed to stress caused by his intensive work on this film, which he never completed.

While in Chicago, Ray got to know Susan Schwartz, then a student at the University of Chicago. Ray's partner for the rest of his life, Schwartz unofficially became his fourth wife.

Between 1971 and 1973, Ray taught film at Harpur College of the State University of New York at Binghamton. In the later 1970s, he taught classes in acting and film at the New York School of Arts and the Lee Strasberg Theatre Institute in New York City. According to all accounts, he was a dedicated and inspiring teacher, who encouraged his students to realize their own independent visions in film.

Between 1971 and 1973, in collaboration with students at Harpur, Ray began *We Can't Go Home Again*, a very loosely structured, partly autobiographical exploration of the plight of young people in America. After leaving Harpur in 1973, Ray independently continued this project, constantly editing and revising it. Technically complex and innovative, *We Can't Go Home Again* is composed of several components that are supposed to be shown on several screens simultaneously. Film historians debate whether a definitive version, corresponding with Ray's intentions, exists.

In 1976, Ray began treatment for alcoholism, but it was too late to overcome the devastating impact of many decades of abuse.

In 1977, the director was diagnosed with cancer, and he began painful medical treatments that lasted until his death in New York City on June 16, 1979.

Despite his illness, Ray collaborated in 1978 and 1979 with German filmmaker Wim Wenders on *Lightning over Water*, intended as a tribute both to Ray's achievements and to their friendship. Completed in 1980 by Wenders, the film provoked controversy because of its blunt depiction of Ray's mental and physical deterioration. However, given his long commitment to truth, Ray probably would have approved of this aspect of the film.

Conclusion

Since the 1990s, Ray has posthumously regained his favorable critical reputation in America, and he is now regarded as a prototype of the independent filmmakers who increasingly have dominated serious movie production in the United States. Within the past few years, there have been major retrospectives of his films at the Museum of Modern Art, New York City (2003), as well as at other prominent cultural institutions.

Undoubtedly, the most famous line from any film by Ray is Johnny Guitar's declaration: "I am a stranger here myself." That line describes Ray's own attitude to the world, as well as the situation of the protagonists in his films. In movies such as *Johnny Guitar* and *Rebel without a Cause*, he depicted outsiders who challenged dominant social and gender conventions and who continue to inspire queer viewers in the early twenty-first century.

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