Lyrical and left-wing film

Nicholas Ray's *They Live by Night* (1948): "They're thieves, just like us"

Joanne Laurier
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There is very little at the movie theater at present to see or review. The current film world is largely dominated by bombast, trivia and social indifference. Or, if "broader" questions are raised, they are almost always seen in racial or gender terms. There seems to be no limit to the foul effort in the US in particular to deny, at a time of the most intense social polarization, that the primary division in contemporary society is social class. The greater the gap grows between the elite and everyone else, the more unbalanced becomes the screaming about race and gender.

A viewing of Nicholas Ray's iconic drama, *They Live by Night* (released in 1948), is a refreshing antidote. Ray's work is based on Edward Anderson's *Thieves Like Us*, a 1937 novel set in the harshest conditions of the Great Depression. (Filmmaker Robert Altman used Anderson's original title in his 1974 version of the story.)

Ray's movie is a scathing critique of American society. It is a work saturated with empathy for the youthful victims of a social machinery that grinds them to pulp, denying them the most elementary conditions of human existence.

The filmmaker successfully captures much of the spirit of Anderson's book, an explicit indictment of a "Social System," in the novelist's words, that permits "the acquisition of extreme riches" and in which the "great criminals," the "real enemies of man's welfare and peace and happiness, never go near a prison," a system in which a person condemned to poverty "is forced to be a criminal."

They Live by Night, filmed in 1947, belongs to the period of the most socially critical Hollywood filmmaking. As opposed to the films of the 1930s, which "mostly exuded a general air of long-term optimism and a sense that wrongs were superficial and could be righted" (*The Oxford History of World Cinema*), films like Ray's presented a grim view of a social order. When a minor character tells Bowie, one of the film's protagonists, toward the end that he and his young wife have no hope in life ("No chance?" "None at all." "No place for her and me?" "I don't know of any, son."), more than an individual tragedy is involved.

The opening of Ray's film features an image of two young lovers. Credits explain: "This boy...and this girl...were never properly introduced to the world we live in. ... To tell their story. ... They Live by Night."

A remarkable sequence, filmed from a helicopter, shows three fugitives from prison in a car on the run. It serves to emphasize the tension right out of the gate. The escapees are Arthur "Bowie" Bowers (Farley Granger), Chicamaw "One-Eye" Mobley (Howard Da Silva, who would be subpoenaed to appear before the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1951) and Henry "T-Dub" Mansfield (Jay C. Flippen).

The three men first hide out in a dilapidated gas station owned by Chicamaw's alcoholic brother Mobley (Will Wright), located in the poor, rural Southwest. The seedy environment has a bright spot—Mobley's teenage daughter Keechie (Cathy O'Donnell). Bowie and Keechie feel an immediate attraction. But their budding relationship is interrupted when the three runaways plan another bank robbery. After the successful heist, Bowie is injured in a car crash, and left in Keechie's tender care. He is 23 years old and has been behind bars for seven years, unjustly convicted of a murder and sentenced to life in prison at age 16.

Now with his share of the proceeds from the robbery and a plan to hire a lawyer and appeal his conviction, Bowie invites Keechie to join him in his flight, mostly of fancy, and mostly at night. (Bowie: "I don't wanna get you in trouble, Keechie. I tell you, I'm just a black sheep. There's no getting away from it." Keechie: "The only thing black about you is your eyelashes." Bowie: "When a man has them laws after him, they shoot first and ask questions later. They're just as likely to shoot a woman down with him as not.")

Along the way, they marry—a cut-rate, roadside affair officiated by Hawkins (Ian Wolfe), who is not impervious to the young couple's yearnings.

(In fact, in the novel, Hawkins is the character who most clearly articulates Anderson's anti-establishment views. For example: "Money interests fix the punishment for crime in this country, Hawkins said, and consequently there is no moral justice. A bum steals a pair of shoes from another and that is a great crime, but what will happen to the complaining bum at

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the police station? If that same thief pilfers fifteen cents from the telephone box of a big utility company, he can receive fifteen years, but if he snatches that amount from the cup of a blind beggar, he may get a twenty-dollar fine. …")

Mention should also be made of T-Dub's embittered sister-in-law, Mattie Mansfield (Helen Craig), whose main concern is using some of the robbery money to obtain the release of her incarcerated husband. After that stratagem fails, she informs on Bowie and Keechie, to the disgust of her husband.

When police officials try to console her by telling her that she has saved "a lot of people a lot of grief," she replies, "I don't think that's going to help me sleep nights." Ray extends and underscores the moment. One is inescapably drawn to the conclusion that the director is referring to the nascent Hollywood witch-hunts, especially since no scene like this exists in the book. Ironically, Ray, a former Communist Party member, would "name names" in the early 1950s before a secret congressional hearing.

Ray employs sound and physical framing to great effect. The car, for example, is an indispensable plot device, both as a means of flight and as a means of pursuing an elusive safe haven. The robbery planners take pains in choosing an escape car. (Bowie says: "That's $1500 for a car. Whoever sells them for that?" To which T-Dub replies: "They're thieves like us.") Doorways, windows and car interiors, even lattices and bed frames, lend an architectural element that suggests entrapment. Spontaneous sound organically combines with traditional music to amplify the drama. In one scene, African American chanteuse Marie Bryant performs a sultry number in a nightclub as Bowie is accosted by a gangster.

They Live by Night is relatively rare in American film history for its combination of left-wing views and intense lyricism. Virtually all of the scenes of the couple are moving and painful. The situation is one of the most heart-breaking imaginable: two young people in love whose possibility of having a life together is obliterated by an unfeeling, uncaring social set-up.

Ray is clearly determined to show that some of the most oppressed and naïve people, maligned as "trash" or even, in the case of Bowie, as "a ruthless, cunning criminal" (the novel), are full of hope and purity and innocence. There is hardly any movie that compares with *They Live by Night* on that score.

Nicholas Ray is one of the most highly thought of American filmmakers of the postwar period. Born Raymond Nicholas Kienzle, Jr. in Galesville, Wisconsin, he grew up in nearby La Crosse and spent a good deal of his adolescence in Chicago. After two years at the University of Chicago, he cultivated the acquaintance of playwright Thornton Wilder and architect Frank Lloyd Wright.

By 1934, Ray (who had now changed his name) was a member of a radical theater company in New York City, the Theatre of Action. Around this time presumably, Ray also joined the Communist Party. He later recalled this about the company, which was heavily influenced by Soviet theater: "We invented dramatic montage; we'd go to a picket line or a factory or just perform on a subway, with one five-hundred-watt lamp and a chair."

Ray worked closely in the New York theater with Joseph Losey, John Houseman and Elia Kazan, among others. The Harvard Film Archive notes as well: "During this time Ray's interest in rural America and American folk culture were deepened by his friendship with the pioneering folklorist Alan Lomax, with whom Ray traveled into the nation's heartland, gathering important field recordings of American vernacular songs for the Library of Congress. Together with Lomax, Ray also co-produced a pioneering folk music radio program featuring such luminary guests as Leadbelly, Woody Guthrie, Burl Ives and Pete Seeger."

Richard Mann points out in a brief biography: "In 1941, FBI agents opened a file on Ray, noting that he owned socialist literature and that he associated with numerous African Americans."

Ray's first major job in Hollywood was as assistant director to Kazan on *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (1945).

In regard to his directorial debut on *They Live by Night*, Mann writes: "By August 1946, Ray had completed a screen adaptation of *Thieves Like Us*. … 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."

Nicholas Ray had a checkered career, above all because of the anti-Communist purges and their devastating impact on the intellectual and moral quality of American filmmaking and cultural life. He was clearly tortured by the period, and perhaps by his own role in it. His films are uneven, some of them more or less standard studio fare, others poetically and socially inspired. *Johnny Guitar* (1954), his delirious "Western," with Joan Crawford and Sterling Hayden, is often seen as a film metaphor for America in the McCarthy period.

French filmmaker François Truffaut observed that the hallmark of Ray's "great talent resides in his absolute sincerity, his acute sensitivity. He is not of great stature as a technician. All his films are very disjointed, but it is obvious Ray is aiming less for the tradition and all-round success of a film than at giving each shot a certain emotional quality."

His other important films include *In a Lonely Place* (1950), *Born to Be Bad* (1950), *On Dangerous Ground* (1951), *The Lusty Men* (1952), *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), *Bigger Than Life* (1956), *Bitter Victory* (1957) and *Wind Across the Ever* glades (1958).

After many career and personal difficulties, Ray died in 1979.

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