

George Cukor's People: A new study of the remarkable Hollywood film director

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George Cukor's *People—Acting for a Master Director*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2025

American film historian, critic, academic and biographer Joseph McBride has produced a new and remarkable study, this time of longtime Hollywood filmmaker George Cukor. *George Cukor's People—Acting for a Master Director* comes rapidly on the heels of McBride's invaluable studies of Billy Wilder (2021) and Ernst Lubitsch (2018). It is a welcome addition, contributing considerably to our understanding of Cukor as a figure and American film production as an institution.

In addition to his studies of Wilder and Lubitsch, McBride is the author of biographies of Frank Capra, John Ford, and Steven Spielberg and three books on Orson Welles. A longtime journalist in Hollywood, McBride recently retired from his position as a professor in the School of Cinema at San Francisco State University. A two-part conversation with McBride accompanies this comment.

George Cukor entered feature filmmaking, first as an assistant working with the actors, during the dawn of the sound era in 1929 and persisted with dozens of works, many of them immensely popular, for half a century. His life was consumed to a large extent by the complex aspects of discussing, preparing, organizing and shooting films. He died of a heart attack in January 1983, only 16 months after his final effort, *Rich and Famous*, a commercial failure, was released in September 1981.

Critic Andrew Sarris once observed that “George Cukor’s filmography is his most eloquent defense.” Indeed, his body of work is remarkable. Taking only the most prominent films decade by decade:

The 1930s

What Price Hollywood? (1932)
Dinner at Eight (1933)
Little Women (1933)
David Copperfield (1935)
Romeo and Juliet (1936)
Camille (1936)
Holiday (1938)
The Women (1939)

The 1940s

The Philadelphia Story (1940)
A Woman's Face (1941)
Keeper of the Flame (1942)
Gaslight (1944)
A Double Life (1947)
Edward, My Son (1949)
Adam's Rib (1949)

The 1950s

Born Yesterday (1950)
The Model and the Marriage Broker (1951)
The Marrying Kind (1952)
Pat and Mike (1952)
The Actress (1953)

It Should Happen to You (1954)

A Star is Born (1954)

The 1960s

Heller in Pink Tights (1960)
Let's Make Love (1960)
My Fair Lady (1964)
Justine (1969)

The 1970s

Travels with My Aunt (1972)
Love Among the Ruins (1975)

The 1980s

Rich and Famous (1981)

Cukor was known during his lifetime reductively, and with the intention to demean, as a “woman’s director.” Being sensitive to more than half the human race doesn’t seem on the face of it a mark against an artist, and McBride points out that

Cukor often placed equal or more prominence on the viewpoint of his female protagonist. ... This is as strikingly evident in his Katharine Hepburn–Spencer Tracy romantic comedy *Adam's Rib* (1949) and the Judy Holliday–Aldo Ray domestic drama *The Marrying Kind* (1952) as it is in more obviously female-centered stories such as the Hepburn version of *Little Women* (1933) and the Ingrid Bergman version of *Gaslight* (1944). Among the many other female stars Cukor guided to major performances included Greta Garbo, Jean Harlow, Rosalind Russell, Joan Crawford, Norma Shearer, Deborah Kerr, Thelma Ritter, Judy Garland, Ava Gardner, Kay Kendall, Claire Bloom, Jane Fonda, Audrey Hepburn, and Anna Karina.

In any case, as McBride argues, the claim was largely misleading. Cukor, the new book asserts, is “generally regarded as one of the finest actors’ directors in the cinema.”

Cukor further belied the “woman’s director” label by demonstrating his versatility over a wide range of film material. Part of what distinguishes his body of work is his habitual blurring of genre boundaries, making his films difficult to categorize, just as he himself was because of his navigation of complex social roles. Cukor’s unusual position in the Hollywood hierarchy made him both an outsider and a quintessential insider.

In an important passage, McBride insists that

Cukor was a master of subtext. His own “double life,” as his biographer Patrick McGilligan has called the partially closeted queer director’s lifestyle in Hollywood while he carefully navigated the different strata of society, helped him probe beneath the surface and see behind people’s social masks and disguises. That tendency came naturally to a man who was difficult to categorize because he led his unconventional life on the margins of society as a gay man, a Jew, and the son of Hungarian immigrants to New York. His “double life” and family background made him adept at recognizing and bringing out the subterranean levels of meaning in the screenplays he directed and knowing how to help his actors bring out the various layers in the text they were performing in oblique and often subversive ways. Having outsider status compels people to engage in masquerading, literally and figuratively, and to play roles as they navigate the tricky rules of mainstream social games.

McBride, in correspondence with what he sees as Cukor’s greatest strengths, focuses on actors and their performances in the new study. He asserts that the work is “an experiment in film criticism ... an experiment in how to study a director primarily through his work with his actors. That approach gets to the heart of Cukor’s craft and should enable us to understand his artistic personality more precisely.”

The book is full of insights, information and opinions. It is not necessary to agree with every one of McBride’s arguments or polemics, and how would that even be possible? The reader may reject politely but firmly certain of the author’s contentions about individual works and individuals. (Why is McBride so harsh on poor Fredric March, complaining about “the pretentious lugubriousness that often mars his film roles”? Can he really find Howard Hawks’ *Bringing Up Baby* (1938) “acutely and painfully unfunny”? *My Fair Lady* (1964) is not only “disparaged by snobs,” but by others too who find its watered-down George Bernard Shaw, with a few meager, tuneful bones thrown in the direction of class conflict, rather “stodgy”—Sarris’ word—and all a bit dull.)

However, McBride writes (and talks) in such an open and disarming manner that the reader can take what he or she likes from the banquet table and leave the rest. The author brings to his work the instincts of a hard-nosed, genuinely radical investigative reporter combined with a sometimes touching romanticism.

McBride is better than almost any other contemporary writer at recreating film scenes, especially pivotal dramatic moments. One early example of that strength in *George Cukor’s People* is his treatment of the “suicide sequence” in *What Price Hollywood?* Director Max Carey (Lowell Sherman) has helped launch the career of actress Mary Evans (Constance Bennett), but as her star has climbed, his has fallen, into a dark pool of drunkenness and self-pity. The film conveys the opportunism, casual, careless brutality and tragedy involved in American fame and failure and in movie production as a cut-throat business.

McBride’s extended, seven-paragraph account of the climactic scene, at the end of which Carey shoots himself, is highly effective and worth citing at some length. At a critical point, Carey catches sight of a photograph of himself at an earlier time, “suave and assured.”

His eyes wander down from the mirror to the photograph, and we see it in close-up. He looks back up at the mirror, the camera shooting over his shoulder toward his anguished reflection, the photograph out of the shot. The cigarette falls from his mouth, and he pushes the photograph away, Cukor cutting back to the wider shot. Again and again, this insistence on critically distancing us

from an emotion, rather than just building an effect of hysteria: Carey has never been so sober in his life. No longer a stumbling buffoon, he is now dignified and deliberate, moving toward death almost ceremoniously, almost as if he were directing someone else in the scene, analyzing the actions with a calm, critical eye.

With the last trace of his old self (the photograph) gone, Carey is left with nothing but his twisted alcoholic image, and Cukor cuts, for the first time, to a shot framed completely within the mirror, the face fuzzy and distorted as Carey regards it in horror. What follows is a bravura special-effects sequence by the montage expert Slavko Vorkapich (with Lloyd Knechtel), conveying with images and sound Carey’s subjective feeling of frenetic inner torment. Low-angled images of his earlier days as a poised director and debonair social drinker dissolve over his face as the soundtrack resonates with a deafening throbbing noise. Jail bars swim over his face, his eyebrows arching grotesquely. He has no willpower now—there is a cut to a close-up of Carey’s feet as they move mechanically into the other room. As if disembodied, his hand, in close-up, raises the gun to his chest and pulls the trigger. Several more images of the past flash by in a subliminal montage before Carey, seen from a low angle, sinks toward the camera in slow motion. When Mary finds his body, she echoes her reaction in the first scene she acted in for Carey, which ended with her discovering a shocking sight below her eyes.

The new book overall is a fascinating account of a career and a period in US cultural history. American capitalism had within it during the middle of the 20th century sufficient resources and reserves not only to provide a New Deal, of course under intense duress, but also to permit and even encourage film production that looked sharply and compassionately—and self-critically to a point—at various aspects of social life.

Popular culture did not denote debasement and degradation as it tends to do now in the era of malignant social inequality and oligarchic rule. There was room for entertainment that genuinely entertained, and moved, and enlightened. This was no golden age, but Cukor and his filmmaking contemporaries created comedies and romances and historical dramas, within the limitations of their own outlooks and studio dictates, that shed light on multifaceted human behavior. Like many important cultural chapters, this one included the “high” and the “low,” the refined and the vulgar, the sophisticated and the naïve.

In various passages in his biography, *George Cukor: A Double Life: A Biography of the Gentleman Director* (1991), Patrick McGilligan describes something about the filmmaker’s culturally fertile upbringing that helps account for his trajectory:

East Sixty-eighth Street was not a particularly Jewish neighborhood, nor was Cukor raised in devout religious fashion. Although many non-Jewish New Yorkers—James Cagney, among Hollywood personalities, for one—could speak fluent Yiddish, the common tongue of most European Jews, it was never spoken among the Cukors. ... Jewish holidays were principally an excuse to get out of school. ...

The eager youth was able to sample the spectrum of public entertainment in New York City in the pre-World War I era of peak vaudeville, vaunted classical performances, and Broadway shows. ...

In his career, Cukor would borrow elements equally from the well-made plays and the more commonplace musical revues that he loved so much as a child. And as a screen director, he was to marry both influences—a kind of blending of the vulgar and the

sublime, an approach that, at its best, could be artistic as well as entertaining. Cukor wanted both, artistry and entertainment, without one drowning the other.

Cukor directed a version of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* on stage and, later, in California, at his house, writes McGilligan, "would be gathered literary titans, such as Sinclair Lewis, Theodore Dreiser, Aldous Huxley. There were foreign film personalities, passing through Hollywood. British ladies of vague royal derivation seemed to be abundant."

One derives from Cukor's films, in the end, a greater humanity, a greater tolerance for and understanding of human foibles and failings. McBride suggests he was drawn

to socially adventurous, subversively rule-breaking, audacious dreamers who are often sexually transgressive and gender fluid in ways that seem far ahead of their time and strikingly modern today.

Sarris asserted in his *American Cinema* that the "director's theme is imagination, with the focus on the imaginer rather than on the thing imagined. ... Cukor is committed to the dreamer, if not to the content of the dream."

While McGilligan indicates that for Cukor

show business is a sanctuary for the misfit, bathing all in a beautiful and forgiving light. His deep feeling for all show people was one that complemented his own interior psychodrama—as someone who (like an actor playing a role) was to live one life onstage and another behind the curtain.

There are evident artistic-sociological boundaries to his work. Cukor felt most at home with groups of witty, articulate, flexible personalities, society, in other words, as a great, enlarged, permanent theatrical company. Some of the greatest dramas and tragedies, and ecstasies, of the century do not find expression at all in his filmmaking. His "crowds" are not often working class crowds, and when he does picture such a grouping, for example, the postal workers in *The Marrying Kind*, the results are weak and condescending. Cukor functioned almost exclusively in the "mid-range" of human activity, but he was an invaluable expert in that realm.

Cukor did not publicly oppose the blacklist and the Red Scare in the late 1940s and early 1950s, aside from continuing to use the targeted Judy Holliday, an act of personal defiance, however he may have felt personally about the filthy McCarthyite operations.

McGilligan notes that for Cukor the blacklist meant the loss of his longtime collaborator Donald Ogden Stewart, who moved to England. "Not only Stewart but Mortimer Offner and Edward Eliscu—Cukor's friends from boyhood—were blacklisted," the biographer adds.

Mention of the word *blacklist* seemed to terrify Cukor, as if he was worried about being tinged with guilt by association. And though Cukor visited London often, his contacts with Stewart were superficial during the next decade and a half when the writer was living under a cloud and struggling to keep up his livelihood.

At the same time, Cukor had no qualms about attacking the "blacklisting" of Ingrid Bergman (*Gaslight*) after she left her husband and went to Italy to live "in sin" with Italian neorealist filmmaker Robert Rossellini. Cukor described what was done to Bergman by the press as "morally reprehensible."

"Bergman's situation was a moral issue, however, and that was different from a political one that did not concern Cukor," McGilligan writes.

Taken all in all, Cukor was a "genuine artist" with many of the weaknesses and complexities of his field and social milieu. His best films, and a good number of his lesser ones, are dramatically rich and urgent, psychologically intense and illuminating, and, generally, worth viewing one or more times.

McBride has done something significant in concentrating attention on this remarkable, often undervalued filmmaker. He writes:

I am setting out to evolve a vocabulary that fully comprehends Cukor's viewpoint, his relationship to his material, and his approach to style; that puts his films and collaborators into realistic working contexts; and that pinpoints precisely what it is that makes him a great director. And in so doing, I hope to elucidate more clearly what film directing is all about.

He has accomplished that in *George Cukor's People*. The book is strongly recommended.



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