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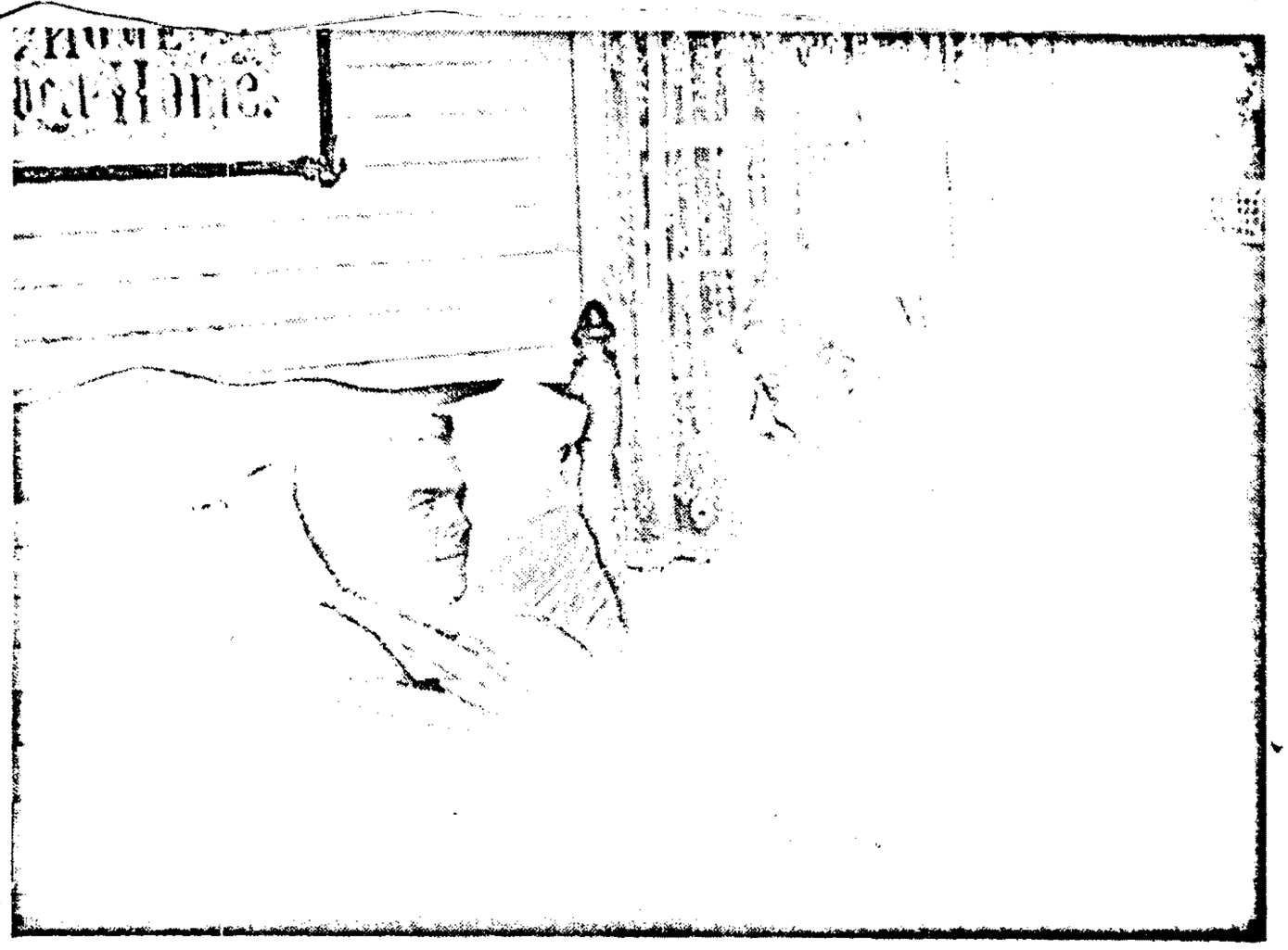
NICHOLAS RAY



ADDING UP THE DETAILS

"King of Kings" could have been so much more. The whole is much less than the sum of the parts. However, it is one of the few big films that is just as interesting on a second viewing. And it makes a fascinating study for anyone concerned with the old struggle between Hollywood and the creative artist.

writes CHARLES BARR

THE WHOLE is much less than the sum of its parts. I must confess to being a bit hazy about what this means in the context of *King Of Kings* or indeed of any film. The concept is one very frequently used and seems to relate to a classical view of the artist as someone who gives significant form to a number of details which in themselves have little or no significance. The mosaic is produced by arranging coloured tesserae. If there is no pattern the whole is meaningless. The film, on this analogy, is put together from a jumble of long-shots, medium-shots and close-ups, and the effect of the whole depends on the inter-relationship of the parts. There is also the film that has a succession of good scenes which don't add up to anything.

One is tempted to wish that all films were like *Oliver Twist*. Lean's adaptation is a beautiful, craftsmanlike job. Scenes are built up economically and smoothly, the narrative is nicely paced and leads up to a satisfactory climax. The construction is faultless. The whole is more than the sum of its parts. To ask whether one wants to see the film a second time, or whether it approaches the power of the novel, is irrelevant. It is a well-made film.

The critic's task becomes increasingly complex as directors take more and more advantage of the flexibility of the medium. I don't want to draw a strict line between ancient and modern cinema. *Vixere fortes ante Antonioni.* But the director today can achieve unprecedented density of expression when he has at his disposal sound, colour, wide screen and almost perfect definition. Also — partly as a result of this — the old obsession with continuity, with meticulous construction, has disappeared. Directors feel free to reproduce the disconnected, spontaneous pattern of life or of thought and to leave the spectator to work out a synthesis for himself. Resnais has said that he would like people to look at *L'Année Dernière* as they look at a sculpture: lingering, interpreting, looking from different angles. Other films of a superficially very different style require the same imaginative participation from the audience. Not least, Nicholas Ray's.

There is a scene in Ray's *The James Brothers* where Jesse and his wife Zee, newly married, are shown the house they will live in. At this stage Jesse is torn between leading his gang and retiring, incognito, to family life and security. The couple sit in the window, imagining the years of happiness they will have: it is a game of make-believe like the deserted-house idyll in *Rebel without a Cause*. Then they walk back

Centre photo: **The James Brothers**

Left: **Nicholas Ray** (and on page 25)

across the room (filled with over-ornate, respectable furniture, mellow-toned), to the stairs, talking of how they'll spend Christmas with the children . . . and then go up to bed . . . As Zee starts to go on up the stairs Jesse catches hold of her urgently: "I have to go now"; she looks back and meets his face. This last shot starts as a smooth track across the room, begins to follow Zee upstairs, then jerks back slightly to hold Jesse standing by the door. It is one of those shots that have the precision and density of a painting extended in time as well as space. Jesse and Zee are definitively cut off from the prospect of carefree home life symbolised by 'upstairs'.

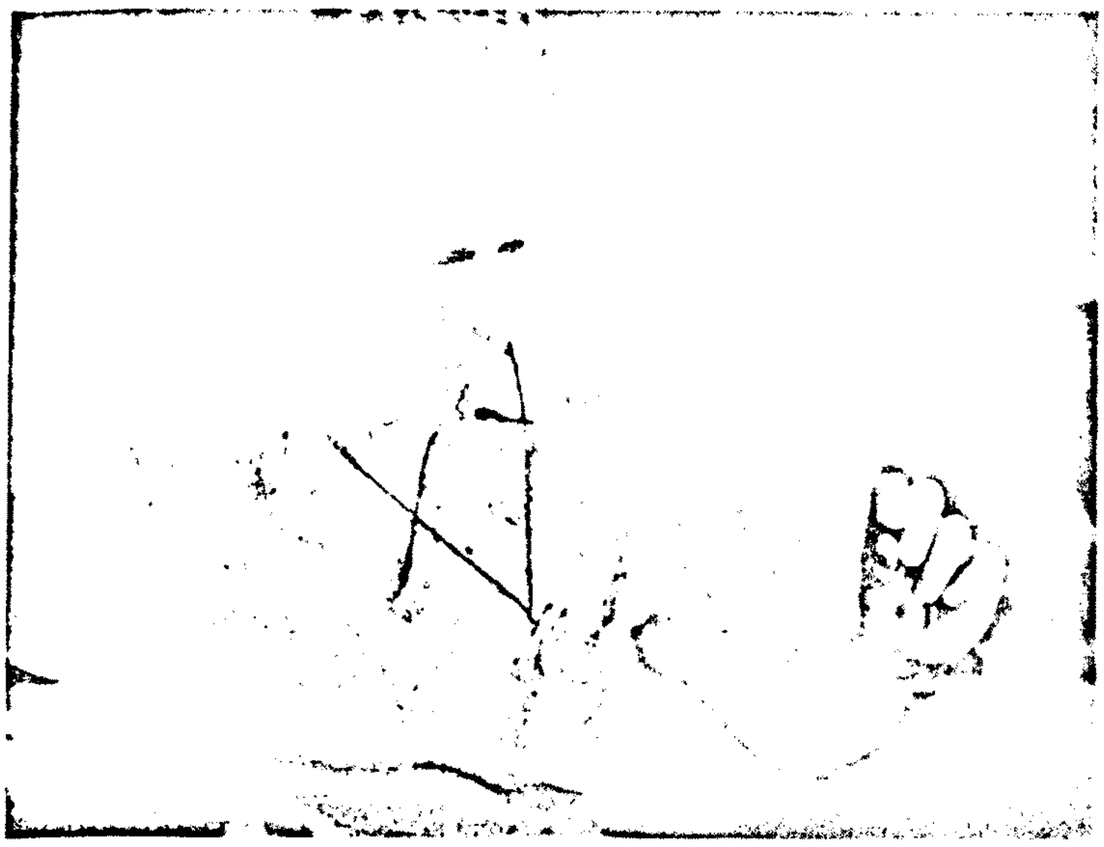
At the end Jesse returns home, having escaped from the law, and determines to settle down with his family. He is about to be betrayed. He goes into the garden with his two children (a beautiful scene, all in green and white). They come inside and the children are sent upstairs; a slight track follows them as they go up. Jesse turns away from them and moves across the room, leaving the frame bottom left, the camera still on the children. At this moment we know that Jesse will be killed.

Unfortunately we can't isolate scenes from a film and hang them up on the wall. The problem is how much weight can be attached to visual poetry of this kind in the context of a narrative film which is going to be judged after one viewing. It is a very thin line that separates poetry from technical cleverness (Ray from Kazan). Poetry is very rare in the cinema because nine times out of ten a director is simply filming narrative and does not have any particularly personal feeling about his characters, or if he does he lacks the skill to express his vision satisfactorily. His characters do not have the extra dimension that Ray's do. Jesse has points in common with other Ray heroes and Zee's place in his life is familiar from other Ray films. In his portrayal of them Ray is not only advancing the plot, he is expressing his own ideas about idealism, security, love . . . this is simply to say that his characters (without ever becoming Carné-type symbols) transcend the particular, as all memorable characters in drama or literature must do.

There are undertones of deep disillusion and nostalgia about the Jesse-Zee relationship. For Ray, happiness can be found in love, but only impermanently, or at great cost (e.g. the death of another). The clearest illustration I can give of this tone is from the script of *Bitter Victory*. Ruth Roman once loved Richard Burton, but is married to Curd Jurgens. Both men are setting off on a dangerous mission in the desert. She asks Burton what to say to her husband — "Tell him what women always say to their husbands when they go to war. Tell him he's a hero. Tell him he's a brave man. Tell him you'll be waiting for him when he comes back. Tell him he'll be making history." The same bitter nostalgia is sustained throughout the action and its force lifts the relationships right out of the triangular-love-interest convention. The characters are seen *sub specie æternitatis*. Richard Burton carrying a dying soldier across the baking sand is, on another level, a symbol of man's suffering. Although the intention of thus transcending the particular is nothing new it is seldom so beautifully achieved in the cinema because it needs such exact control, otherwise it will seem either feeble or pretentious. There are no short cuts to Significance. Because of the cinema's bias towards realism a character will always, first of all, have a *particular* existence: he cannot be used to illustrate truths about the human situations unless he is not merely presented but realised, cinematically; given solid expression.

Ray was not interested in the True Story of Jesse James (the film's American title) and he had to fight against the script's prosaic conception of Jesse, Frank and Zee. His genius lies in his ability to present characters and events in the way he wants to, by his control over the texture of film. His direction of Robert Wagner (Jesse) and Jeffrey Hunter (Frank) is as meticulous as a portraitist's portrayal of his subject, expressing visually, in bearing or in background, the essence of a character. Compare the two men as they ride into Northfield to rob the bank, at the head of their column. Their bearing betrays their respective temperaments. It is the way they handle the reins, the way they jog in the saddle, the look in their eyes, the set of their mouths. Almost every shot reinforces our knowledge of the characters. This is something that goes far beyond actors' performances. It is also bound up with colour, movement, lighting, grouping, angles — with what the editor of MOTION has termed "the whole mysterious business of mise-en-scène".

Similarly with the theme of inevitability. The idealistic purpose of the reprisals led by Jesse is bound to be distorted. Jesse will not be able to renounce violence. The final bank raid is bound to fail. Jesse will be betrayed; his vision of happiness with Zee cannot be more than an illusion. Normally thoughts like these are conveyed by dialogue and by the structure of the script. Here Ray reinforces the script by showing us, by the manner in which he shoots certain scenes, how inevitable the outcome is, and it doesn't so much matter that the structure has been changed by Fox and some of the material put into flashback, with particularly hideous



pink cloud effects. You still get the accumulation of details: the way Robbie, the eventual betrayer, looks and moves, and materialises at the edge of certain shots; the hypnotic way we are shown, almost in slow motion, Jesse's revenge killing of a farmer, which destroys his last chance of an amnesty; and in fatalistic scenes like the ones in Jesse's home that I have described.

I think that in *The James Brothers* these details do 'add up' — the whole is more than the sum of the parts — because there is unity of style and unity of inspiration. We can read the whole story in what Ray shows us. We can trace the pattern of events however rough the arrangement of them. Of course it would be marvellous to see *The James Brothers* and *Bitter Victory* and *Wind Across the Everglades* in the form Ray intended. *Bitter Victory* has an entire epilogue of seven minutes missing, which undoubtedly weakens it, and at times *Everglades* looks like a rough-cut, but Ray's films, like Stroheim's, are weakened comparatively little, because of this control over texture.

So there was no reason to assume, a priori, that *King of Kings* would be a mess. Ray has occasionally achieved a perfectly controlled scene like the temptation of Christ by Herod, or the death of Herod's father. He has worked desperately hard with colour, placing characters against significant backgrounds: Judas against brown, Pontius repeatedly against deep red and gold. Black and a darker red predominate in the procession to Calvary, green and white in the Resurrection. All this is done with a keen sense of the associative powers of colour and it helps give an intermittent life to the characters. But there is too much that is uncontrolled or irrelevant. The battles are well organised, but early on, when the screen is filled alternately with slingers and then with Roman shields repelling them, one begins to ask just what relevance this has. There is a long and distracting fight between Lucius and Barabbas. It is all very silly. And the director's touches I mentioned cannot add up to anything really meaningful unless there is unity of inspiration. Belief here is too easily suspended. And as a result of this unevenness Ray fails to achieve the insight which literature can only describe but which the cinema could suggest directly: "she saw the crucifix upon the wall ... she looked at it and as she looked she saw it for the first time in her life as a man hanging most painfully from his hands. How strange, she thought, that I never saw it in this way before" (from *Flight from the Enchanter* by Iris Murdoch).

The good scenes of *King of Kings,* then, are less effective than the ones described from *The James Brothers,* for they are isolated compositions instead of an *expression* of the forces running through the film. The whole is less than the sum of the parts.

The beautiful close-up in *Everglades* of Christopher Plummer (the idealistic bird-warden risking his life in defying poachers) against a shimmering blue-green background is a poetic expression of a character and a way of life that have been implicit in almost every image, and is therefore much more telling than any single shot in *King of Kings.*

All the same I prefer *King of Kings* to *El Cid,* though the latter's faults are less obvious. Anthony Mann seems not to have been frustrated, Rozsa's music is comparatively innocuous, there are a lot of virtuoso sequences, and no absurdities. Mann repeatedly uses the familiar device whereby a director can get his own point of view into a big production, viz. the association of things in the same shot. He tracks along behind Frank Thring, the leader of the decadent side, to the window of his palace, and shows, over his shoulder, the restless crowd below. When Thring is killed he has him thrown from the walls (long-shot) then moves the camera to focus on a goblet (foreground), a symbol of his decadence. Weapons are always materialising in close-up, linked dramatically with the unsuspecting enemy, who are passing by in the background. But these devices seem to me, in the context, perfunctory. The famous duel between El Cid and the rival champion is brilliantly done; I defy anyone not to be stirred by the climax — but how memorable does it seem five minutes later? El Cid riding out after three hours from history into legend left me cold, like

the chariot race in *Ben-Hur*. As Peter John Dyer says, "one neither cheers nor jeers".

I cannot feel that Mann was excited by El Cid, or moved by the love between him and Chimene; it doesn't seem that the story means much to him except as a technical challenge, however similar on paper El Cid may be to the classic Mann hero. I never sense the grip or the passion that I do in *Duel in the Sun* or at times in *Spartacus* and *King of Kings*.

Mann and Ray are, it seems, going to continue working with Bronston in Spain. Yordan will continue writing for him. One has a terrible vision of the cream of the industry being set to work in the Bronston Creative Artists Department, a clean, well-lighted place, with limitless facilities, complete security, a sensible editing team, a score by Dr Miklos Rozsa for every film, Oscars for everyone guaranteed... And scenes like the following being enacted: "At the studio, shooting began with an intimate scene between El Cid and Chimene played in the presence of 38 international press representatives. They hailed the teaming of Charlton Heston and Sophia Loren." A perfect case-history for Professor Parkinson.

When Nicholas Ray was in London recently he said he had left Hollywood because he felt the need to travel, to change his home and his place of work; otherwise the creative springs would dry up. Perhaps *King of Kings* was a special case, with its inevitable pressures and vested interests. Perhaps, in his projected films on the Boxer Revolution, the French Revolution, and the circus ("the biggest yet"), Ray will fight to impose his own vision as successfully as he did in *The James Brothers*. But at present Madrid doesn't seem the best place for keeping the inspiration fresh.

We understand that **THE JAMES BROTHERS** will be showing March 4th (4 days) at Classic Stockwell; April 1st (5 days) at Vogue Tooting; April 30th (6 days) at Classic Swindon; and June 3rd (7 days) at Classic Southampton. It has made a few appearances recently on the Granada circuit; there may be more.
