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Party Girl (1958)

Party Girl marked Nick Ray's tenth year as a filmmaker. Considered successful in Hollywood, an *auteur* in France, Ray had yet to make a second film which would become as much of a household word as *Rebel*. *Party Girl* should have been that film, but it wasn't. Yet *Party Girl* deserves to be looked at as carefully as if it were an instant classic because it represents the mature yet untired Ray before Hollywood's depredations on him made themselves finally felt. And of course, because *Party Girl* is an optimistic extension beyond all his other films, an ever-so-slight but noticeable change away from the bitterness of Ray's never-so-happy endings. After the rebellion of *Rebel*, the desperation of *Bigger Than Life*, the hatred in *Bitter Victory*, and the revenge of *The True Story of Jesse James*, we see fused in *Party Girl* a simultaneous mastery of the color and widescreen form and an ever so slight hope for middle-aged America.

Set in Chicago in 1933, the film rapidly informs that it is not an authentic period piece or gangster film. F. Hoyveda wrote in 1960 that Ray evidently did not think it important in *Party Girl* to re-create the Chicago of the past, because Ray merely indicated with a title that the setting was "Chicago in the early 30's."[6] The film opens with a localizing shot without bothering with any skyline-establishing shot. We see a neon light, screen left, and the camera moves in and pans toward the light, like a firefly seeking entrance to a brighter spot. A long travelling shot soon takes us inside the club, "The Golden Rooster." The shot vocabulary of a film (the type of shot, montage of shots, whom the shot favors, the length of shot, the length of the first few sequences, the way the sequences are connected) establishes how a film will inform, by what rhythm it will inform, and how it will not inform. The vocabulary established in roughly the first fifteen minutes of this film soon informs us that

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The following eight illustrations are 16mm frame enlargements from the first encounter between Vickie Gay, played by Cyd Charisse, and Tommy Farrell, played by Robert Taylor, from *Party Girl* (1958).

1. Louis Cannetto played by John Ireland, wants to take Vickie home and looks toward where she is standing off screen.

2. Ray cuts to a moderate telephoto shot which gives Vickie an apparition-like look. She is seen from the point of view of Tommy who is sitting in a chair facing her. This remarkable sequence shows how Ray informs a female-male encounter entirely through mise-en-scène motion and cutting with lens changes. The cuts are set up so we always see, via sight-lines, the characters not shown in the frame. We now *anticipate* seeing Tommy.

3. Unexpected cut to a medium shot as Vickie eyes Tommy, whom she has never met but whom she wants to escort her out of the club so she can excape Cannetto.

4. Same shot. The mise-en-scène reveals itself through the micromimetics

Party Girl is only (or primarily) interested in underscoring—in a non-sociological way—what Hoyveda quite rightly called "the melody of the look." (The critic is here quoting Ray's response to an earlier review in *Cahiers du Cinema* No. 27.)

Specifically, *Party Girl* is about a man and a party girl. It is a five-character film, about *the* intimate group as well as *an* intimate group, about an "artificial family," a nocturnal, nightclub *Welt*. Farrell, a gangland lawyer played by Robert Taylor; his boss, Rico Angelo (Lee J. Cobb); Canetto, another gangster (John Ireland); Cookie LaMotte, a petty gangster (Corey Allen); and Vickie Gaye, a dancer, but more than a dancer (Cyd Charisse). Note not only the types, but the previous history of the actors. We know how important casting was to Ray, as casting presupposed some skill related to certain kinds of mise-en-scène the director wished to construct. The casting always related to an internal logic in Ray's mind. Then there was playing with or against Hollywood type casting. Cyd Charisse,

5. Vickie asks Tommy if he wants to dance.

6. He says, "no"; she does not know he is crippled. Note the reverse cut to him is back to a normal lens; the telephoto effect is reserved by Ray only for his view of her.

7. Cut to a medium-close, moderate telephoto shot. Vickie is one of Ray's foreward-thinking women; she does not let the rejection destroy her honest interest in him. She looks at Tommy sympathetically . . .

8. . . . and then, sexily . . . and, as the shot ends, we see what Ray wanted to have revealed on her face: her candid desire. This theme of the healthy woman "curing" the neurotic man ran through many 1950s and most Ray films, but *Party Girl* transcends the banality of the convention through Ray's fine cinematic rendering.

one recalls, did not, as the public knew her, belong in the gangster film genre. *Singing in the Rain* and *Silk Stockings* were what the public equated with Cyd Charisse. Ray, by taking a musical star, and putting her in a gangster film, played Charisse against type. Or did he? Isn't *Party Girl* as much a musical as a "gangster film"? It is obvious here that Ray did not pay any attention to genre convention. All he tries to do with Charisse is to *authenticate* her as a singer/dancer (yes, Cyd dances) named Vicki Gaye in the film, someone who dances and sings like Cyd Charisse but is romantic like a Ray woman. Robert Taylor, more leading man than villain, near the time this film was set, looked like a gigolo and had starred in *Camille* with Garbo. Taylor was not an illogical choice, for Ray sensed a tentative screen quality in Taylor that we can see if we carefully scrutinize his early films: he was not too sure of himself. And Corey Allen, after teen roles on TV and hot rod films is restored to the role of an intense, interesting villain simply because he looked well in a black pin-striped suit. John Ireland, like Arthur Kennedy, could play weak men well, and Lee J. Cobb had heavy experience as a gangster heavy. The least congruous factor in the casting was the couple: Taylor and Charisse. But they work well together visually (both dark, the same height) and are a convincing couple.

There are very few close-ups in *Party Girl*. Most of the film is shot in Hollywood shot (medium shot) with the characters shown from their heads to their knees. (Ray continued to favor this kind of shot when using CinemaScope; starting in *Rebel Without a Cause*, when groups of people are shown and intercut—unless there is a *reaction* shot to emphasize something—they are predominantly in Hollywood shot. Kazan's *East of Eden*, by contrast, did not maintain a predominantly medium-shot scale.) There is also, as Hoyveda points out in Bazinian fashion, "nearly a total absence of montage." The film is "told" in shot sequences ("scenes") rather than through a complex rhythm of editing. *Party Girl*, in rhythm, is more placid than *Rebel*. But this is good, because the tempo of the story is not as frenetic as *Rebel* et al. It shows Ray's ability to modify the pace to suit the theme. But within the shot, there is still the Nick Ray variance of tempo, which is his signature, the mark by which we recognize *Party Girl* as a Ray film.

The greatest attention is paid to mise-en-scène. This is the heart of most Ray films, but in *Party Girl* it goes beyond being part of the

narrative component of the film: it informs this film, for, as Hoyveda notes, "decor, color, and framing, constitute the most important elements of mise-en-scène, where the actors live."

From the mise-en-scène more than the merely reinforcing dialogue, we learn who Farrell and Vickie Gaye are. Yet Ray is too commercial to dispense with dialogue's use to rally audience sympathy, to do what Antonioni was soon to do in his *L'Avventura* trilogy. *Party Girl* has no omissions of story line.

In the sense that the film is about Farrell's distrust of Vickie Gaye and his growing attraction to her, we would expect a series of scenes when their relationship develops, where they put each other to the test, and where Farrell's growl grows to a smile. If we are to believe Farrell's loss of self-doubt, an important Ray theme, the formal elements of the film must work to this end. They do. (See frame enlargements.)

As is usual in a Ray film, there is a father figure. This is the gangster, Rico. If the overall narratology strives to underscore Farrell's ongoing relationship with Vickie (whose red dresses show her to be the rebel demanding attention), the plain theme or plot of the film is that Farrell must detach from Rico to attach to Vickie. In the closing shot, we have long ago left the plot behind, and the ending uses purely cinematic means to tell us that Farrell's and Vickie's themes are resolved together. A final shot shows a compact being made between Farrell and his new self-confidence—like the "compact" (cosmetic container with mirror) that passed from Judy to Jim and back in the middle of *Rebel Without a Cause*—in the form of Farrell giving the trick watchband he used to tell sob stories to the jury with to his new friend and former antagonist, the prosecutor, a gesture far more subtle than the hero laying down his gun at the end of a Western.

The only point I disagree with in Hoyveda's brilliant essay on *Party Girl* is his statement that the French title for the film, *Fraquenard* (The Tracked Down One) is nonsense. On the contrary, it says perfectly what the film is about. Farrell is tracking down his past while he is tracking down Vickie—who is at the same time tracking him down. The tracking ends when they find themselves and each other and the tentative becomes the possible for both of them.

Does *Party Girl* differ from, improve upon, or show a pulling away from Ray's previous films? *Party Girl*, after all, was made the year the "New Wave" began.

Hoyveda is right again, I feel, in calling *Party Girl* "pushing aesthetic inquiry and contempt for the exaggeration of technique." Like *Johnny Guitar*, it is an "anti-technique" film. *Party Girl* inspires, says Hoyveda; and to its critics he says, "Long live the kind of idiocy that dazzles my eyes, fascinates my heart, and lets me find myself in the skies." On viewing *Party Girl*, one feels the kind of triumph felt at the end of a successful romantic comedy; only here the subject matter has been updated from Howard Hawks—the theme is no longer the attraction of romantic comedy, but the aversion of romantic tragedy. The step from *Party Girl* to *Jules et Jim* is a tiny one.

Epic Years in Hollywood

After *Party Girl*, Ray remained in Hollywood four more years. His projects became larger and larger epics. Why? What were Ray's reasons for making *King of Kings* and *55 Days at Peking*. Money? Unlike *Wind in the Everglades* and *The Savage Innocents*, obvious "outsider" films, which he also made during this period, the former two films were out-and-out Hollywood production numbers: the former, once having been made by Cecil B. DeMille, the latter, also a very DeMillean concept, similar to the Settlers-and-Indians epic DeMille produced, called *Unconquered* (1946).

Ray suggested that he had hoped to make money, save it, and then become independent of Hollywood. He later called this strategy "a mistake."[7]

When asked, years later, why he made *King of Kings* (1961), Ray answered that he was in Europe at the time and was approached by a friend of producer Sam Bronston, to help Sam out with the film, which was to be made in Spain. Ray said he recruited the "toughest Jew screenwriter in the States, top Hebrew musicologists, people from the Vatican, a Dean from Christ Church College (Oxford), and met with the hierarchy of the Spanish Orthodox Church. They asked me how I was going to show Jesus, and I answered: 'Well, if he is walking down a dirt road with his disciples, and he has to take a piss, dust will rise from the road.' Then I showed them the first shot in the film, which was a tilt from the gentiles to the money lenders