On Dangerous Ground: An Exemplary Noir Protagonist, Reformed

*On Dangerous Ground* is Nicholas Ray’s seventh film and his second *film noir*. While the film was not well-received by critics of the time and went over budget with the re-writes that were necessary for censorship, it is well loved by the *Cashiers du cinema* critics, who often cite this film as one of the staples of Ray’s auteur status.¹ This film is an excellent display of Ray’s ability as a director and a unique take on the noir genre.

Nicholas Ray was born in Wisconsin in 1911 and had a normal upbringing. In university he studied architecture, which some film scholars believed inspired his acclimation for contemporary sets.² In the 1930’s Ray moved to NYC to perform on stage with The Theater of Action. While there, he met the director Elia Kazan and was invited to be his assistant for the 1945 film *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*.³

From there, he began to direct genre spanning across romance, *noir*, westerns, war films, and more. At RKO he directed his first film, *They Live by Night* (1948), then *A Woman’s Secret* (1949) which starred Gloria Grahame who would become second wife. He went on to make *Knock on Any Door* (1949) and *In a Lonely Place* (1950) at Humphrey Bogart’s production company, Santana. Again with RKO he made *Born to be Bad* (1950), *Flying Leathernecks*

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³ Ibid.
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During the production of his final widely-released film, *55 Days at Peking* (1963), he collapsed on set due to his overwhelming insecurity, gambling, and drug and alcohol use. 5 He lived in Paris for the rest of the decade then returned in 1970 to teach at the State University of New York, where he collaborated with his students on the experimental film *We Can’t Go Home Again* (1973). He died after a ten-year battle with cancer in 1979. 6

In all of Ray’s films, George Morris argues, “there can be no doubt that he shaped every moment in the film with his own personal expression.” 7 In his article in Film Comment, he said:

In the films he directed from 1949 to 1963, Nicholas Ray achieved the distinction of becoming the cinema's most expressive poet of modern anguish and anxiety…Ray utilizes every formal element at his disposal in the cinema to render a uniquely personal vision of the contemporary malaise euphemistically known as the human condition in the twentieth century. 8

Ray’s films were received overall well in the United states, but he was truly appreciated by the French New Wave. Jean-Luc Gudard, a highly esteemed contributor to *Cashiers du Cinema*, said that “cinema is Nicholas Ray.” 9

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5 Kozloff, pp. 90.
6 Barson.
8 Ibid.
9 Barson.
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On Dangerous Ground’s script is based on the English novel “Mad With Much Heart” by Gerald Butler. Ray did not have much trouble adapting it to an American setting since it had themes of disillusionment, like many films noir of the time.\textsuperscript{10} Ray worked with the writer A. I. Bezzerides to make dramatic changes to the story, which included the entire first thirty minutes that constitute the noir section of the film. The film scholar Sarah Kozloff speculates that he was inspired to add in the lonely cityscape by the play Detective Story, which he saw while developing the script.\textsuperscript{11} When they sent the script to the PCA, they wrote in the preface that the film is split into three parts: first, in the city where Wilson is at his breaking point, then to the countryside where he would have his life-changing experience, then back to the city where he makes a realization about where his life is headed.\textsuperscript{12}

The first half hour is marked by “expressive realism present in noir dingy tenements, crowded streets, and sleazy bars is enforced by the protagonist’s experience of them in cramped, obscured, and oblique compositions, and a moving camera alert to the swerving of a steering wheel, the swing of a fist, or the beat of a heart.”\textsuperscript{13} In this dark and lonely city, the audience is introduced to the three main cops. Two of them say goodbye to their wives and families before heading to work. Then the audience sees Jim Wilson, who is sitting alone in his apartment looking at wanted criminals while eating breakfast. This is the first moment where the difference is established between men who are able to separate their home life from their work and Wilson, who is obsessed with his work and alone because of it.\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{10} Palmer, pp. 78.
\textsuperscript{11} Kozloff, pp. 83.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
While Wilson fits in very well as a typical *noir* protagonist, he goes too far and seems to push aside a moral code. In a controversial scene he brutally beats a suspect, yelling “Why do you make me do this?”, asking on behalf of his own fear, rage, and self-loathing.\(^\text{15}\) Wilson is sickened with the people he deals with, calling them “garbage”. After he beats the suspect he washes his hands with a disgusted look on his face. Robert Ryan’s performance as Jim Wilson is entrancing, the suppressed violence and inner torment in his acting is subtle, but almost overwhelming.\(^\text{16,17}\)

For Wilson, the city is a maze where he is violently struggling to find his way through life. In the chase scene where Wilson and his partners pursue gangsters in the alleys of the city, the constant switching between handheld and still cameras make for a fast-paced and anxious tone.\(^\text{18}\) The cinematography in the city, executed by the director of photography George E. Diskant, is forward moving and has the camera following violent action, going in line with Wilson’s fall into the nightmare of the noir city.\(^\text{19}\)

This crazed, jaded, and overtly violent anti-hero is not a protagonist that is new to Ray’s films. In *In a Lonely Place*, which was made just one year prior, the Hollywood writer Dix Steele is very similar. Donna O’Donoghue, a writer for Cineaste magazine, points out that “Like Dix, Wilson has a brutal temper, lashing out physically at any lowlife that obstructs his pursuit of “justice,” or verbally at father figures who try to help him.”\(^\text{20}\)


\(^{18}\) Henderson, pp. 88.

\(^{19}\) Mayer, pp. 319.

\(^{20}\) O’Donoghue.
After an outburst that landed the victim in a hospital, Wilson’s chief sends him to the country to help with a case there in the hopes of letting him relax before he goes off the edge. This next part of the film takes place in a completely different setting - a rural snow scape (shot on-location)\textsuperscript{21} where people are far and few in-between, yet still emotionally closer to each other than in the city - the place where Wilson has a complete change in character and is given his redemption.\textsuperscript{22} Ray marks this change in scenery with a slow montage of Wilson driving down the road, as the Toronto Film Society puts it, “each shot dissolving into the next to give a cumulative effect of remoteness and placidity in marked contrast to the previous scenes in the city.”\textsuperscript{23}

Wilson meets the father whose daughter had been killed, played by Ward Bond, who is in a blind rage to find the man. This character serves as a foil to Wilson, he is just as unruly and violent when it comes to the murderer as Wilson is to city criminals.\textsuperscript{24} Shorty after their meeting, another chase scene begins. This chase is a huge contrast to the one in the city – instead of being lost in a dark maze, Wilson is lost in the vast wilderness. The score by Bernard Herrmann (which he reports to be his own favorite)\textsuperscript{25} sets the contrast even further, as film scholar Jeff Mayer puts it, he captures “seething violence of urban sequences, the pulsating excitement of the chase across the snow, and the lyrical, tender moments between the blind woman and the big city policeman.”\textsuperscript{26}

The “blind woman” is Mary Malden, played by Ida Lupino. She serves as the redemption for Wilson, as she sees nothing and he sees too much – but they are both lonely. She is just like

\textsuperscript{21} Kozloff, pp. 85.  
\textsuperscript{22} Mayer, pp. 318.  
\textsuperscript{23} Toronto Film Society.  
\textsuperscript{24} Morris.  
\textsuperscript{25} Henderson, pp. 85.  
\textsuperscript{26} Mayer, pp. 320.
the other criminals that Wilson would have beat in the city, as she is lying to hide her brother Danny, the murderer, but Wilson’s change in character has him help her instead of go back to his city ways.\footnote{O'Donoghue.} Mary is unlike any other women in film noir we have observed so far. She is not evil or dumb, and she has moments that suggest she has her own deep and complex thoughts.\footnote{Ibid.}\footnote{Hirsch, pp. 156.} She does not seduce Wilson into helping her, she simply asks for help and he complies.

In the climax of the film, Wilson tries to convince Danny to come with him to an institution and he is confronted by confusion and rage in this boy that he had felt himself in the city.\footnote{Toronto Film Society.} The scene is a parallel to the one where Wilson is about to beat a suspect – his back and hand which dominate the foreground with the cowering gangster awaiting the attack is replaced with Danny’s knife pointing at the calm and cautious Wilson. Ray shows a complete change in Wilson’s character, as he goes from the one about to inflict violence to seeing violence in another man and trying to save him.\footnote{Morris.}

The father character is also changed when Danny falls to his death after he chases him, ready to kill. Brent, who shares Wilson’s past rage, says in a touching moment, “he’s just a kid…that’s all he is.” The two men, both who were once filled with rage and violence have sympathy for the sick boy and carry him to his grieving sister.\footnote{Ibid.}

As Wilson is driving home to the city, he turns back after hearing the voices of his partners in his head telling him that he is going down the wrong path in life. In a controversial ending, he returns to Mary and reaches out for her – the first time he shows the need for help. She reaches back, just like she reached to help Danny, and they both have a purpose again.\footnote{Toronto Film Society.}
This ending was not what the producer, John Houseman, wanted at all. He called this film “a shallow and uneven affair” because of this change, but Ray stood by it to make the film more hopeful about the possibility of Wilson’s regeneration. This ending was also disliked by critics, most notably Bosley Crowther, who said:

The cause of the cop's sadism is only superficially explained, and certainly his happy redemption is easily and romantically achieved. And while a most galling performance of the farmer is given by Ward Bond, Ida Lupino is mawkishly stagey as the blind girl who melts the cop's heart. For all the sincere and shrewd direction and the striking outdoor photography, this R. K. O. melodrama fails to traverse its chosen ground.

Nicholas Ray is known for trusting his actors to show deep emotion without much direction, but for this film he said that he actually let Ryan and Lupino overplay at times. Ray had wanted to film the second portion of the film in color to show the stark emotional contrast, but because he was not able to he felt as if the aesthetics of the film were not enough to properly control the emotion.

Despite the disagreements with the producer and the criticism of the film, *On Dangerous Ground* is proof that he is an auteur, at least for those who are willing to understand his work at a deeper level. As Steven Rybin and Will Scheibel say in their introduction to their anthology on writings about Ray’s filmography, his films “invite us to become collaborators (much as Ray did with his actors), revealing meaning as viewers bring their own passions to the screen.”

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34 Palmer, pp. 81.
35 Kozloff, pp. 88.
37 Kozloff, pp. 88.
38 Henderson, pp. 86.
Works Cited


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Henderson, Kevin. “‘Why Do You Make Me Do This?’: Spectator Empathy, Self-Loathing Lawmen and Nicholas Ray’s Noir Vision in On Dangerous Ground.” Interdisciplinary Humanities, vol. 33, no. 1, Spring 2016, pp. 84–97. EBSCOhost,


https://www.cineaste.com/winter2016/on-dangerous-ground


A Tree Grows in Brooklyn is a 1945 American romantic drama film that marked the debut of Elia Kazan as a dramatic film director. Adapted by Tess Slesinger and Frank Davis from the 1943 novel by Betty Smith, the film focuses on an impoverished, but aspirational, second-generation Irish-American family living in the Williamsburg neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York, in the early 20th century. Peggy Ann Garner received the Academy Juvenile Award for her performance as Francie Nolan, the adolescent girl at the center. While there, some boys who know Neeley come by their table. One teenager in particular is very interested in Francie, and asks her to a movie the next day, her first date. One the Nolans return home, they find Officer McShane baby-sitting along with Sissy's husband. The film ends as Francie sees the courtyard tree begin to grow again, just as her father said it would. Cast.