BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Bigger than Life

A favourite of Truffaut, Godard and Rohmer, Ray repeatedly examined the failings of the American Dream; this searing account of a mild-mannered teacher (Mason) turning egomaniacal after becoming addicted to the cortisone he needs for a heart condition is arguably his masterpiece. Direction, script, camerawork and performance combine to produce a film of enormous anguish; Truffaut applauded its accuracy, honesty and precise intelligence.

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Nicholas Ray's *Bigger Than Life* is among the most radical examples of what may be the most radical genre in American cinema: the small-town melodrama. Though long considered unworthy of serious attention – aimed as it was at the despised female audience – this genre is single-mindedly concerned with the nightmare world of compulsory heterosexuality. The fact that alternatives to heterosexuality couldn't conceivably be depicted in an American film of the 1940s or 1950s was, far from a limitation, one of the factors that enabled Sam Wood's *Kings Row*, Douglas Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows*, Vincente Minnelli's *Some Came Running* and Max Ophuls' *The Reckless Moment* to pursue their projects without compromise. Indeed, as soon as it became possible for such alternatives to be openly portrayed, the small-town melodrama effectively vanished, playing itself out via a series of films (none of them in fact set in small American towns) about the nightmare world of homosexuality (Donen's *Staircase*, Friedkin's *The Boys in the Band*, Aldrich's *The Killing of Sister George*), and now existing only as postmodern pastiche (Haynes' *Far from Heaven*).

Bigger than Life occupies an ambiguous position in relation to the small-town melodrama, since it somewhat tentatively defines itself as a social problem film. The 'problem' in question is a wonder drug, cortisone, which alters the personality of mild-mannered schoolteacher Ed Avery (James Mason), causing him to demonstrate megalomaniac tendencies and eventually attempt to kill his wife Lou (Barbara Rush) and son Richie (Christopher Olsen). When I first saw *Bigger than Life*, at the National Film Theatre in 1988, an embarrassed BFI employee stood up after the screening and assured us that cortisone was now considered completely safe. This announcement was greeted with laughter of the slightly nervous kind – I think we were all, at some level, aware that though cortisone may have been safe, the American nuclear family (Ray's real concern) was as dangerous as ever.

For Ray, cortisone is simply a way of bringing to the surface tendencies that already exist within both Ed and the world he inhabits. Seldom has the idea of the bourgeois home as prison been pursued with such remorseless logic. Lou, though literally free to walk out her front door, must eventually confront the fact that, in a society which sees wives as having no autonomous existence, she is, for all intents and purposes, held captive within a house ruled by her husband. Ed follows a similar trajectory, gradually realising that, as an adult male in a patriarchy, he has the power of life and death over his wife and child. Yet both Ed and Lou express subconscious resentment of the

constrictions their middle-class lifestyle imposes on them: as in Vincente Minnelli's films, this resentment is manifested through the destruction of decor: Ed 'accidentally' destroying a vase while playing football; Lou smashing the bathroom mirror.

Though less widely recognised than the melodramas of Douglas Sirk, *Bigger than Life* casts a long shadow over America's cinema. The scene in which Ed takes Lou to buy a dress strikingly anticipates a similar dress-buying sequence in Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958), and Ray's film was essentially remade by Stanley Kubrick as *The Shining* (1980), with a haunted hotel replacing the wonder drug as the device that brings out hitherto suppressed homicidal tendencies. At another extreme, Steven Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) provides a right-wing variation on this material, with the central character's maniacal behaviour seen as an entirely reasonable response to an objectively verifiable phenomenon.

Brad Stevens, *Sight and Sound*, September 2007

Bigger than Life, which concerns the effects of cortisone on a schoolteacher (James Mason) who has contracted a painful, incurable inflammation of the arteries – an objective correlative, perhaps, for Ray's own vision? – is obviously less 'personal' [than *In a Lonely* Place] in any autobiographical sense, but its implications are more universal. Its real subject is not the drug itself but what it reveals about Ed Avery; and beyond that, what Ed Avery reveals about the society he inhabits and – to a greater and lesser extent – emulates.

Bigger than Life is a profoundly upsetting exposure of middle-class aspirations because it virtually defines madness – Avery's drug-induced psychosis – as taking these values seriously. Each emblem of the American Dream implicitly honoured by Avery in the opening scenes (his ideals about education, his respect for class and social status, his desire for his son 'to improve himself') is systematically turned on its head, converted from dream to nightmare, by becoming only more explicit in his behaviour. The dramatic function of his incurable disease and his taking of cortisone, carrying the respective promises of death and superlife, is to act on the slick magazine ads that he and his family try to inhabit in much the same way that the doctor's X-ray of his torso illuminates his terminal condition: an appearance of normality is subverted before our eyes, bit by bit, until it achieves the Gothic dimensions of a horror story that has always existed beneath the surface of his life.

Returning to school after his release from the hospital, Ed tells his wife Lou that he feels 'ten feet tall', and a grotesque low-angle shot of him as he turns towards the school building echoes and parodies this notion; but as he walks away from the camera, his body becomes progressively dwarfed by the building – which, for all its apparent mediocrity, is a lot taller than ten feet. Similarly, a scene where Ed, playing the big shot, forces Lou to purchase gaudy clothes which they can't afford, undermines the Hollywood images that inspire such a gesture to the point where they become loathsome – deranged and obscene. And Ed's monomaniacal concern for his son's 'improvement', a direct consequence of his unadmitted despair, reaches its apex when, after hearing a church sermon, he decides to 'sacrifice' his son to his ideals by killing him with a pair of scissors. When Lou reminds him that God told Abraham to spare Isaac, he can only reply with the reductio ad absurdum of his outsized egotism: 'God was wrong.'

A general sense that, insofar as He exists at all, 'God was wrong,' infuses the world of Ray's films, from the nervous instability of his compositions to the unrelieved torment of his heroes. In a rare and unprecedented moment of rebellion against Ed's demands, Lou slams the door of a medicine cabinet and the mirror cracks. Ed sees himself fragmented and duplicated in the broken surface – a crowd of images alienated from one another that gives the lie to his fantasy that he maintains a consistent, logical and continuous identity.

Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Sight and Sound*, Autumn 1973

BIGGER THAN LIFE
Directed by: Nicholas Ray
©: Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation
Production Company: Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corporation
Produced by: James Mason
Assistant Director: Eli Dunn
Story and Screenplay by: Cyril Hume, Richard Maibaum
Based on an article in The New Yorker *by:* Berton Roueche
Director of Photography: Joe MacDonald
Colour Consultant: Leonard Doss
Special Photographic Effects: Ray Kellogg
Film Editor: Louis Loeffler
Art Direction: Lyle R. Wheeler, Jack Martin Smith
Set Decorations: Walter M. Scott, Stuart A. Reiss
Costumes Designed by: Mary Wills
Executive Wardrobe Designer: Charles Lemaire
Makeup by: Ben Nye
Hair Styles by: Helen Turpin
CinemaScope Lenses by: Bausch & Lomb
Music: David Raksin
Conducted by: Lionel Newman
Orchestration: Edward B. Powell
Sound: W.D. Flick, Harry M. Leonard

uncredited
Personal Assistant to Nicholas Ray: Gavin Lambert
Screenplay Rewrites: Gavin Lambert, Clifford Odets

Cast
James Mason *(Ed Avery)*
Barbara Rush *(Lou Avery)*
Walter Matthau *(Wally Gibbs)*
Robert Simon *(Dr Norton)*
Christopher Olsen *(Richie Avery)*
Roland Winters *(Dr Rurie)*
Rusty Lane *(La Porte)*
Rachel Stephens *(nurse)*
Kipp Hamilton *(Pat Wade)*

uncredited
Betty Caulfield *(Mrs La Porte)*
Virginia Carroll *(Mrs Jones)*
Renny McEvoy *(Mr Jones)*
Bill Jones *(Mr Byron)*
Lee Aaker *(Joe)*
Jerry Mathers *(Freddie)*
Portland Mason *(Nancy)*
Natalie Masters *(Mrs Tyndal)*
Richard Collier *(Andy, the milkman)*
Lewis Charles *(Dr MacLennan)*
William Schallert *(pharmacist)*
John Monoghan *(cabby)*
Gus Schilling *(druggist)*
Alex Frazer *(clergyman)*
Mary Mcadoo *(Mrs Edwards)*
Eugenia Paul *(saleslady)*
Gladys Richards *(lab nurse)*
David Bedell *(X-ray doctor)*
Ann Spencer *(nurse)*
Nan Dolan *(Dr Norton's nurse)*
Mary Carver

USA 1956©
95 mins

BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Bigger Than Life
Mon 10 Jan 14:30, Wed 19 Jan 18:05 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large), Wed 26 Jan 20:50
La Grande Illusion
Tue 11 Jan 18:15, Sun 16 Jan 12:40
Citizen Kane
Tue 11 Jan 17:50, Thu 27 Jan 18:00
Casque d'or
Wed 12 Jan 17:50 (+ pre-recorded intro by film critic and historian Pamela Hutchinson), Sun 23 Jan 13:10
Gentlemen Prefer Blondes
Sat Thu 13 Jan 18:10, Mon 17 Jan 18:20
Twelve Angry Men
Fri 14 Jan 14:40, Mon 24 Jan 18:20, Fri 28 Jan 18:20
Letter from an Unknown Woman
Sat 15 Jan 15:40, Mon 31 Jan 20:45
Ordet (The Word)
Tue 18 Jan 20:30
Smiles of a Summer Night
Thu 20 Jan 20:50, Tue 25 Jan 18:10
Shadow of a Doubt
Sat 22 Jan 12:10, Tue 25 Jan 14:30
Rome, Open City (Roma, città aperta)
Wed 26 Jan 18:00 (+ intro by lecturer and writer Dr Julia Wagner), Sat 29 Jan 13:00
Les Enfants terribles
Sun 30 Jan 15:15

Programme notes and credits compiled by the BFI Documentation Unit
Notes may be edited or abridged. Questions/comments? Email prognotes@bfi.org.uk