

Bigger Than Life is now generally regarded as one of the more important films of its time. Martin Scorsese included it in his documentary *A Personal Journey Through American Movies* and cites it as one of the most expressive films of the entire US cinema.

Nicholas Ray did a lot of living before he ever got around to filmmaking. After writing and producing radio programs in his teens, Nicholas Ray was invited by Frank Lloyd Wright (whom he had met at an event organized by New York's Columbia University) to join the first class of his newly created Taliesin Fellowship in 1931 -- an encounter that only lasted less than a year (1932-1933) but yielded in Ray a respect for the horizontal line that was central to Ray's subsequent affinity with CinemaScope (and this is evident in *Bigger Than Life*). In Taliesin Ray also developed a feeling for architectural balance in the *mise-en-scène* (but also in character construction) that became fundamental in his work.

Contrary to many claims and by his own account, Ray spent almost an entire year under Wright's tutelage. The concept of the Fellowship was that Wright felt only by living and working with apprentices around the clock could he understand his concepts and ideas. As a social experiment, it was quite interesting. Members of the Fellowship not only actively executed ideas on Taliesin itself (the buildings there were in a state of constant change), but worked as draughtsmen, farmhands, and domestics on the property. Living was for the most part communal. Many have commented that a political rift between Wright, a strong believer in the power of democracy, and his more radical-leaning protege was the cause of the latter's return to New York, which would eventually lead him to Hollywood and the world of film-making.

Ray's widow, Susan, has recently declared in an interview: "If I had to choose the experience that affected Nick the most, I would probably choose Wright for a number of reasons. As I'm learning more about Nick, not as someone I was involved with but as a subject....what I see are certain threads that go all the way through his life. One is the creation of a close almost familial group of collaborators, which certainly a film troupe becomes, but he was looking for that and that was something Wright created as well at Taliesin. To the day he died, [he] always referred to Frank Lloyd Wright as Mr. Wright. He was always the master in relation to Nick as an apprentice, although Nick left him because he didn't want to

be another Frank Lloyd Wright, but the imprint of Wright on Nick's thinking was very, very strong. It brought out certain sort of innate interests that already existed in Nick and gave him a framework. The horizontal line was certainly part of it. So was the way Wright spoke about architecture, I can't remember the exact quote, but as being the framework for the rest of the arts. Nick spoke about film as being the cathedral of the arts, so it was the same kind of metaphor, but he upped it. He upped the ante".

Jonathan Lethem is one of America's finest contemporary writers. His obsessions with pop culture, especially cinema, are familiar to anyone who has sampled his short stories and novels. A master of "speculative fiction" (particularly evidenced in his novels The Fortress of Solitude and his spare and fascinating As She Climbed Across the Table), Lethem's work shares one great affinity with Bigger Than Life: the imposition of a scientific abnormality onto the everyday lives of his characters. Lethem has been a longtime admirer of Ray's film, and in February 2008 he visited George Eastman House, International Museum of Photography and Film in Rochester, NY to present Bigger Than Life and participate in a post-film discussion. What precedes are excerpts from the discussion.

"Bigger Than Life is a movie that excites me a lot. It borders on a lot of things I've pursued in my own work. I advertised this film to a friend of mine as "Douglas Sirk meets Oliver Sacks" and I suppose that if you had to do a Madison Avenue tagline for the movie that really might be a fair one.

What I love about the film is the way Ray, in preparing us for this intrusion into daily life, is so scrupulous about creating a real world. For instance, financial pressures are very much a part of the film. It's a film about class shame, amongst other things; the tension in Ed's life as a taxi cab dispatcher, for instance—and though we only glimpse the world of the taxi drivers, it's a rich social milieu. This family dwells in a very normal town, and they're a perfect nuclear family, and yet there are so many pressure points, so many fault lines. Another example is the undercurrent of gender discomfort with Mason being a school teacher, as well as the

fact that it is obviously not completely comfortable for the male teachers working alongside a beautiful single female teacher. The opening of the film could easily turn into four or five different kinds of melodrama in the Douglas Sirk fashion. The characters rest uneasily on their bed of normality to begin with—and then you lay on top the fantastic intrusion of the medical crisis.

In the film there's no critique of the American reality from the outside, only pressure on it from within. There are moments where Ray uses shadows and the score to make you wonder if this is a horror movie about a guy who forgot to take his slippers to the hospital. It's very Hitchcockian in those gestures, making certain everyday objects seem so problematic.

Bigger Than Life also offers an assembly kit for making Kubrick's *The Shining*, at that moment when suddenly Rush gets locked in the closet and the film becomes just a pure thriller for a second.

Speaking about architectural features, I was thinking about how the staircase is so important in so many great American films, from Cassavetes' *Faces* (1968) to the way Hitchcock places staircases in the centre of so many of his problematic homes. In this symbolic structure the downstairs is the social world, the institutional world, and upstairs is a more intimate, separate zone. It seems to me there are two levels at which James Mason and his wife and his kid have to function. One is just among themselves, and that's why that ending is so beautiful, and terrifying too. The doctors leave that room and the room becomes like a bedroom all of a sudden, and it's the three of them trying to be this intimate, above-the-stairs bedroom version of American life.

There's also a question of where success is going to be negotiated—in Ray this question is partly architectural, it's a design question. What room is a sanctum? I think the word "sanctum" is even used in the film at one point. The way the parents sit down in those chairs when he's lecturing them is satirical, but it's very disturbing too, because it's as though they're suddenly eligible to be totally reformatted like "oh wait maybe we're all patients or maybe we're all a congregation, maybe we're all your students. Maybe this furniture is going to tell us who we are and what we're supposed to do."