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Exploring the Auteur Elia Kazan

by Savannah Hink

(Motion Picture Television 1113)

Who is Elia Kazan?

Elia Kazan was a prominent film director active between the 1940's through the 1970's. Along with directing, Elia Kazan was an actor, a playwright, Broadway director, and writer. Kazan was born to Greek parents living in Turkey on September 7, 1909. His family immigrated to New York City when he was just four years old. To the dismay of his father, who wanted him to work in the family rug trade business, Kazan majored in English literature at Williams College, where he discovered an interest in theatre. He proceeded onto the Yale School of Drama, before leaving graduate school to join The Group Theatre. When the Group Theatre disbanded in 1941, Kazan shifted his career from acting to directing. As a director, Kazan emerged as the leading exponent of psychological realism via his film and stage productions throughout the forties and fifties. His works mainly reflected both social struggle and personal pain. Over his career, Kazan received three Tony Awards and two Academy Awards for his directorial work. He was often seen as a controversial figure, mainly when he "named names" of former Communist Party associates in a 1952 government investigation. He made his last film in 1976, in which he followed his true passion to become a writer. Kazan died in New York City in 2003 at the age of 94.

Why is the Elia Kazan important in the history of film?

Elia Kazan is usually regarded as an "actor's director" due to the nature of how he worked with them. He gave his cast freedom and even encouraged improvisation. Kazan pioneered the adoption of Russian actor, director, and teacher Konstantin Stanislavski's "Method" style of acting to the screen. Film historian Foster Hirsch explains that "he virtually created a new acting style in films, which was the style of the Method ... [that] allowed for the actors to create great depth of psychological realism." (King, Susan. *Elia Kazan, an actor's director*. Los Angeles Times, 2010.) Although Kazan did not invent the style of acting (rather he obtained it from his colleague in The Group Theatre, Lee Strasberg), he was the first director to implement the technique in films. Strasberg's version of the "Method" trained actors through a series of exercises that focused on relaxation, concentration, sense, and emotional memory (Jacques, Geoffrey. *The Art of Elia Kazan*. Simon Fraser University, 2016.) "I've never seen a director who became as deeply and emotionally involved in a scene," Marlon Brando wrote in his autobiography, "Songs My Mother Taught Me." "Kazan was the best actors' director by far of any I've worked for. [He] got into a part with me and virtually acted it with me." (Lahr, John. *Method Man*. The New Yorker, 2017). Brando is often associated with being a model exemplar of this technique, as well as modern days actors such as Robert De Niro, Leonardo DiCaprio, and Christian Bale. Without Kazan's implementation of Method acting, performances would lack a sense of realism. He also founded the Actor's Studio in 1947 which to this day allows actors a space to work together in and develop their skills (Manolikakis, Andreas. *A History of The Actors Studio*. The Official Site of The Actors Studio, 2014).

Cinematically, Kazan's films helped shape the stylistic, thematic, and ethical concerns of the drama genre. Most of his films implement some type of personal and social realism. He insisted for

his film, *On the Waterfront* to be shot on location during the coldest New Jersey winter during that time, he used real apartments and saloons, and even casted non-actors to mingle with his professional actors. Up until this film, most American directors were shooting on sound stages. His strive for realism inspired up and coming directors. Director Martin Scorsese admits in a documentary titled “A Letter To Elia” that *On the Waterfront* was the first time he had seen a movie with familiar people and settings. “It was if the world I came from, the world I knew, mattered.” (Scorsese, Martin. *A Letter to Elia*. PBS, 2010.)

Why is Elia Kazan considered an auteur? What signature traits in the body of work personalize him?

Elia Kazan’s films were usually very personal. Characters storylines and beliefs related to his own experiences, whether it be from his career or private life. In an interview, Kazan admitted, “In some subtle or not-so-subtle way, every film is autobiographical. A thing in my life is expressed by the essence of the film. Then I know it experientially, not just mentally. I’ve got to feel that it’s in some way about me, some way about my struggles, some way about my pain, my hopes.” (Tresgot, Annie. *Elia Kazan: An Outsider*. Argos Films, 1982). As for the protagonist, each film’s central character is usually an outsider, which Kazan often classified himself as. The films follow the outsider character as he or she fights for inclusion into their family or society.

After Kazan’s testimony to HUAC in 1952, almost all of his films explored the theme of ambivalence. These included characters facing uncertainty about choices and distinctions between the good and bad. In an interview with Michel Ciment, Kazan stated that after his testimony, he “realized the ambivalence of things. Things on both sides were valuable. You have to lose one thing to get another.” He claims his view of humanity became complex after suffering a lot of pain. (Tresgot, Annie. *Elia Kazan: An Outsider*. Argos Films, 1982). Themes of betrayal explored in his films are also a direct result of HUAC testimony and there is often a critique of puritanism. Kazan was also a fan of using visual symbolism, especially implementing the color white to exhibit purity. Kazan believed that the pictures themselves should tell the story, not the dialogue. He even uses symbolism subconsciously, as he admitted in an interview that water is a common character in his films. He theorizes this is in part due to the fact he was born in water and lived by the bay in his formative years (Tresgot, Annie. *Elia Kazan: An Outsider*. Argos Films, 1982).

What are some of his films that implement these traits?

On the Waterfront (1954), *East of Eden* (1955), and *Splendor in the Grass* (1961) are three films that I believe highlight these central themes and styles nicely. All these films include a central outsider character, a personal connection to Kazan, themes of ambivalence and betrayal, and visual symbolism. It is also important to note that each of these films came out after Kazan’s testimony to HUAC.

How does “On The Waterfront” use these traits?

On The Waterfront was the first film to come out after Kazan’s testimony, released on July 28, 1954. The screenplay was written by Budd Schulberg, but Kazan worked closely with him during the process. The main character Terry Malloy, portrayed by Marlon Brando, decides to testify against the mob and stand his ground for honesty and truth. Together with screenwriter Budd Schulberg, Kazan’s own life coincides with the thought that honesty is the best policy. Terry is an outsider struggling for inclusion into the mob because he has a difficult time deciding between right and wrong. This is directly connected with the difficult choice Kazan had to make when he informed on

former friends and associates during his HUAC trials. In regard to the trial, Kazan said “I don’t think there is anything in my life towards which I have more ambivalence.” He compared himself to his filmic counterpart: “Terry Malloy felt as I did. He felt ashamed and proud of himself at the same time. He wavered between the two.... He felt like a fool, but proud of himself.... That kind of ambivalence.” (Hey, Kenneth. *Ambivalence as a Theme in On the Waterfront*. American Quarterly, 1979).

The theme of betrayal is explored in a monologue between the two brothers, Charley, portrayed by Rod Steiger, and Terry. Because of Charley’s ties to the mob, Terry felt betrayed by his brother, who should’ve looked out for him. “You don’t understand, I could have had class, I could’ve been a contender, I could’ve been somebody,” says Terry, realizing the extent of his brother’s betrayal. Terry also acts in betrayal of the local mob bosses when he testifies against them.

Kazan, being the “actor’s director” he was, often let the actor be free to express their own ideas. In an iconic scene, Brando picks up a glove dropped by Edie. Other directors might’ve called cut since it didn’t reflect their own vision, but in this scenario, Kazan loved it. Terry tries on her glove, almost as if he were about to “try out” her moral values. He had worn boxing gloves for the mobsters, and he will now try to fit into the white glove of virtue. The symbolism in this scene is connected to the theme of ambivalence. That white glove demonstrates that Terry is trying on her perspective of life, where “everybody [should] care about everyone else.” As soon as Terry puts on Edie’s glove, he tells her he remembers her when she was a child. This is important because Terry is acknowledging her innocence, and this contrast himself, for he was “always getting in trouble”. (Biskind, Peter. *The Politics of Power in ‘On the Waterfront’*. Film Quarterly, 1975). There’s a clear distinction between good and bad, and Terry begins his journey to seek a good, honest life.

How are the traits portrayed in “East of Eden”?

East of Eden, released on March 9, 1955, told the story of a father/son relationship based on the novel written by John Steinbeck. Kazan was drawn to the universality of the story and was intrigued by the characters’ ambivalence toward one another. Cal (James Dean) was the outsider both in his community and his family where he was pushed away by his father’s strict Puritan views and his brother Aron’s goodness. Cal rejected his father’s religious beliefs and considered himself “bad” because he took after his estranged mother. When his father’s invention fails, Cal tries to fight for inclusion into his family by earning back the money his father had lost.

Once again, *East of Eden* relates to aspects of Kazan’s own life. “*East of Eden* was for me a kind of self-defense,” Kazan said in one interview. “It was about people not understanding me. It was about my relationship with my father, how he disapproved of me all the time... It also proved to be prophetic because a few years later, shortly before my father died, for the first time in my life, I got friendly with him, just as Cal gets friendly with his father [at the end of the films]” (Lahr, John. *Method Man*. The New Yorker, 2017). Kazan also admitted that he “saw the Dean character as similar to myself. I loved my brother, but my father always preferred him.” (Silva, Michael Da. *East of Eden*. Senses of Cinema, 2014). Kazan’s father wanted him to inherit his rug business, but his mother helped him attend college instead. Kazan also often criticized the Puritanism ideology that “this is right, and this is wrong.” This feeling is essential to the ambivalence that resides in *East of Eden*’s plot and characters. Throughout the film, Cal frequently describes other characters as “good” or “bad”, but there’s ambivalence between the definitions. Kazan commonly noted that the film’s “bad boy” is actually “good”. In the beginning, Aron represents goodness, but his jealousy causes his descent. In the end, Cal is the one there for his father on his deathbed and the roles have been reversed. Similar to *On the Waterfront*, we also see a betrayal between brothers take place. This time, it involves a kiss between Cal and his brother’s fiancé, Abra. Abra’s outfits are often symbolic of her romantic interest towards Cal. She is usually dressed in vibrant, bright colors in scenes with Cal that

contrast scenes featuring Aron. Because Kazan liked to rely on visuals to convey meaning, most of the attraction between Cal and Abra is insinuated until they finally share the kiss that leads to Cal's betrayal.

Finally, how does “*Splendor in the Grass*” exemplify his traits?

Splendor in the Grass was released a few years after *On the Waterfront* and *East of Eden* on October 10, 1961. The film follows two teenage lovers, Bud (Warren Beatty) and Deanie (Natalie Wood), as they are put under extreme pressure by their parents—Bud to succeed and Deanie to remain a virgin. Once again, the central characters are outsiders. Deanie due to her conflicting sexual desires, and Bud due to his conflicting thoughts about his future. Her journey for inclusion into society and her family starts when she's placed in an institution after a failed suicide attempt due to the heartbreak caused by Bud. Interestingly, Bud's inclusion does not happen until his father succeeds in committing suicide, when he finally follows his dream of ranching on the family farm.

This film also dealt again with the abiding issues of Kazan's own life: sexual hypocrisy and a destructive father-son struggle. Kazan believed sex was always looked at as something that needs to be repressed and *Splendor in the Grass* is his critique against the Puritan views (like those expressed in *East of Eden*). In Kazan's mind, contemporary mores dictated by the so-called older generation were obsolete and deceitful. Kazan also said this film mimics the relationship he had with his father during the great depression, and he projected his own father's single-minded views and overweening materialism into Bud's father. (Kiick, Katy. *Exploring Material Culture in Four Films by Elia Kazan*. Smithsonian Libraries, 2011)

The theme of ambivalence is also present in this film, as both Deanie and Bud have difficulty deciding what's truly “good” or “bad”. Bud also seems to be betraying Deanie when he decides to break-up with her solely so he can have sexual relations with another girl. Ambivalence is also revealed through Kazan's use of symbolism. At the end of the film when Deanie visits Bud, Deanie is dressed in white, which suggests virginal purity, but her dress reveals more than it conceals, thus hinting the conflict she experiences concerning her sexual desire. Interestingly, all three of the films discussed offer symbolism in the form of clothing. It's a simple trait that lends nicely to understanding the main characters.

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