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iQué verde era mi valle!



Abstracts

FORD UNTIL 1947

Tag Gallagher

Ford was introduced to the world of cinema by his brother Francis, for whom he always had enormous admiration and who ended up working as an actor in his films. His first movie as a director (**The Tornado**) dates from 1917, the year in which he also started working with the actor Harry Carey, with whom he shot 25 westerns featuring the hero Cheyenne Harry. Made with more or less the same team on every film, Ford shot 39 movies for Universal studios until 1921, although his first big hit made it onto the screens in 1924 in the shape of **The Iron Horse**, a success which he was to repeat to an even greater extent two years later with **Three Bad Men**. Ford started to use what the author calls the "cameo" technique, according to which an actor directly identifies with an attitude, a way of dressing, etc. But Ford didn't mature properly until 1928, the year he shot **Four Sons**, notably influenced by Murnau's **Sunrise**. Following his period of "training", the author divides Ford's career until 1947 into two periods: the "period of introspection" (1927-1935) and the "time of idealism" (1935-1947). The prevalent hero of the former of the two, marked by the motto "*duty and tradition*", is a complex, confirmed bachelor, who is driven to take action against this duty and tradition which he previously defended in order to unite or save a family or a community. Between the years of 1931 and 1935 (years marked by the Great Depression), Ford directed a number of movies poking fun at the moral sordidness then responsible for the corruption of social bonds, where duty is portrayed as contradictory and the heroes turn into ridiculous and destructive, increasingly introspective beings (**Arrowsmith**, **Pilgrimage**, **Judge Priest**). The latter was dominated by an idealism not lacking in complexity. The first great masterpiece of this period is **Steamboat 'Round the River**, in which Ford uses a tragicomical tone to uncover the intolerance concealed by the mythical pillars of society. Later came works like **Wee Willie Winkie**, **Mary of Scotland** or **The Hurricane**, which took place in environments far removed from Ford's America (India, Scotland, of Mary Stewart, the South Seas). From 1939 to 1941, Ford consolidated his prestige, garnering his first Academy Awards and moving the story line towards the subject of survival. The first great work during this period is the mythical **Stagecoach**, a sort of initiatic voyage in pursuit of the self-discovery of stagecoach passengers, which also introduces the landscapes of Monument Valley to cinema images. **Young Mr. Lincoln** returns to the obvious vision of the Fordian hero: solitary, single, a stranger arriving from the outside to fight against intolerance and reunite the family. Later came mythical titles based on socially-oriented subjects: **The Grapes of Wrath**, **Tobacco Road** or **How Green Was My Valley**: particularly in the latter of these, Ford contrasted tradition with survival: Huw, the narrator of the film, takes refuge in tradition in his refusal to accept the hard reality that this valley had never been green, but black. During the years of WWII, Ford served as head of the OSS Photography Platoon (later to become the CIA), shooting a number of documentaries, including the outstanding **The Battle of Midway**. This period came to a close with two very different films: **My Darling Clementine** and **The Fugitive**. The former is a harsh western which can be read as an allegory of the situation in the USA, while the latter, the first movie by his production company Argosy, was a huge box office flop, despite the fact that Ford always defended it as one of his favourites.

THE DAWN OF THE WESTERN: FORD AND OTHER PIONEERS

Quim Casas

Despite John Ford's fame as a "director of westerns" (to which he himself contributed in his famous appearance against Cecil B. De Mille during the "witch hunt"), less than 40% of the movies on his filmography until 1947 belong to this genre, to the extent that from 1927 to 1947, he only made two films of this kind: **Stagecoach** and **My Darling Clementine**. The former of the two created an authentic upheaval in the genre, due not only to its production (a B-movie at a time of superproductions), the way it was shot and edited (the Indian chase for example) and its elaborate and unusual characters, but above all to the inclusion of a new iconography as far as landscape is concerned: Monument Valley. Only four of Ford's silent westerns have survived: two episodes from the series starring Cheyenne Harry (Harry Carey): **Straight Shooting** and **Hell Bent**, and two of his biggest successes: **The Iron Horse** and **Three Bad Men**. The stars of the former two westerns have little in common with standard models, embodied by Tom Mix, Buck Jones or William S. Hart. The image of Cheyenne Harry, more often than not drunk, a troublemaker, gambler and bank robber, is far removed from the lithe, swift and morally irreproachable heroes of directors like Cecil B. De Mille. Ford's rough antiheroes of these early stages saw their continuation in the Ringo Kid and Dallas (not to mention Hatfield) of **Stagecoach**, in the Doc Holliday of **My Darling Clementine**, and in most of the heroes appearing in his westerns of post-1947. The other two of Ford's silent westerns still surviving today, **The Iron Horse** and **Three Bad Men** are of more ambitious production (Fox, instead of Universal), although they hadn't lost the sense of humour so typical of his earlier movies, hence keeping them well away from the epic tone. These two films had their continuity in other films by different directors, which came nowhere near Ford's successes, such as Cecil B. De Mille's **Union Pacific**, or Ron Howard's **Far and Away**. Ford also distanced himself from his contemporaries by not taking recourse to the half-historic, half-legendary characters (General Custer, Jesse James, Billy the Kid, etc.) so popular with the directors of the period. Only in 1946 was he to turn – in his own particular way – to the real characters of Sheriff Wyatt Earp and the consumptive Doc Holliday, in a movie which has more in common with the primitive western than with the new superwesterns then blasting their way onto the screen.

THE GHOST OF TOM JOAD

Carlos Losilla

The arrival to Hollywood of vast numbers of European filmmakers in the 20s and 30s gave rise to a thorny debate on their real influence on the road followed by the American cinema of the period. In the case of John Ford, this circumstance is usually solved by assigning him to an expressionist orbit which, in turn, served to sew the seeds of doubt regarding some of his most famous films of the time: **The Informer**, **The Lost Patrol** or **The Fugitive**, for example. This said, there is an American cultural tradition which could also justify the style of these movies, from Nathanael Hawthorne to Dashiell Hammett, passing through Edward Hopper and culminating in Bruce Springsteen. There is, above all, a continuity between this and the immediately subsequent period in Ford's work capable of underlining its most important subjects: nature and

civilisation, of course, but also sin and redemption, sacrifice and renunciation, motives perhaps also intimately related with Ford's own personality and with the events punctuating his life at that time.

THE SOCIAL SENSITIVITY OF A COUNTRY POET

Carlos F. Heredero

The first stage of Ford's talkie period (1931-1935) is characterised by the assignation of his films to the real America of the Depression, concentrating more on the corruption of social bonds than on the tragic sufferings of a third of the American population (remember films like *Flesh*, *Doctor Bull*, *Pilgrimage* or *The Whole Town's Talking*, films starring contradictory and introspective heroes). This period was followed by another characterised by a sort of exoticism (1935-1938), with films distant in space and/or time from the America of the era (*The Informer*, *Steamboat 'Round the Bend*, *Mary of Scotland*, *The Prisoner of Shark Island*, *The Hurricane*, etc.), in a thematic about-turn, the reasons for which have to be sought in the Hollywood "disembarkation" of the financial magnates (Morgan, Rockefeller), in the impositions of the Hays moral code and in the conservatism of the country's new leaders. Ford's heyday rode the heights from 1939 to 1941, during which his seven productions garnered 10 Academy Awards and 34 nominations. This period included the three films comprising his so-called "social trilogy": *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Tobacco Road* and *How Green Was My Valley*, produced at the Fox studios with Zanuck at its head, characterised by strong sentimental attachments to the land and by the fact that they dealt with one single subject from different angles: family break-ups in times of crisis, the collapse of established values and structures, their replacement by other, more modern versions. These films show a family in the process of disintegration, a state of crumbling situations, and a yearning for "days gone by", for tradition. But Ford's approach to this problem was not ideological, instead tending towards the fundamentally sentimental, the emotional. The people in these films move on emotional, visceral impulse, not rationally, and the way they respond doesn't correspond to the new times, but is closer to the familiar, to tradition, hence hindering their incorporation to the newly emerging world. That's what happens to Jeeter Lester and Ada, anchored to the rickety veranda of their home, or to Huw, who dreams (idealising) of the greenness of a valley that was never anything of the sort, but which has always been black, trapped as he is in an irrational and emotional adhesion to bygone values which block his awareness of the changes taking place around him. In other words, what Ford is ultimately questioning in these films is the high cost of turning to dreams and fantasy, conscious as he was that "out there" the real world was being decimated by the devastation of World War II, and that America could not but be affected by it.

MEMORIES, RITES AND LEARNING ABOUT LIFE

José M^a Latorre

How Green Was My Valley is a film about memory and learning about life, that of Huw Morgan, but filtered by the nostalgic memory of a hard but idealised time. Based on a work by the writer Richard Lewellyn, with a screenplay by Philip Dunne and photography by Arthur C. Miller, *How Green Was My Valley* has a great deal in common with the

subsequent *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, particularly regarding the melancholic evocation of a world which disappears with the advent of a new way of life. Thus, both the patriarch of the Huw family and the gun-toter who finally does away with the mythical bandit Valance, have only one possible way out: their disappearance. In the former, the Welsh mines grind to a halt with the upthrust of new capitalist methods, while in the second, the "gun law" of the Far West has to give way to the legalist values of the new American democracy. This process of change is expressed in *How Green Was My Valley* through the description of the rituals that structured the old society, rituals which gradually lost their reason to be and ended up fading away: the miners no longer sing on returning to their everyday work. Like in many other movies by Ford (*The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, *Seven Women*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Tobacco Road*...), the real hero is a closed society with no other way out than disappearance.

SAFEGUARD AND ESCAPEMENT

Miguel Marías

In addition to making his work easier, training a team which functioned like a sort of "Praetorian guard" made it possible for Ford (and other directors) to fight against the attempts of the all-powerful producers or stars of the day to control the film. Ford therefore surrounded himself with the friends and relations of the technicians who worked at the studio, finally putting together a sort of "stable company" which eventually acquired the name of "Ford Stock Company", formed not only by the supporting actors so easily recognisable in Ford's films, but by a whole pleiad of technicians and artists. This wasn't always a uniform group: there were desertions, expulsions, exiles... Having worked for Universal studios during his early years, Ford was to jealously defend his independence ever after. His first lasting and meaningful association was born in 1917, with the star of the Cheyenne Harry series, the actor Harry Carey. Ford's perfectly identifiable style was already taking shape even then, as was his penchant for always working with the same team: Molly Malone, Vester Pegg, Hoot Gibson, Duke Lee (actors), George Hively (screenwriter), John W. Brown, Ben Reynolds (photographers) reappear time and again on the credits of Ford's first movies. Other names were later added to the list, such as those of the photographers George Schneiderman, Joseph H. August, Bert Glennon, Arthur C. Miller, Archie Stout or Gregg Toland; those of the actors J. Farrell MacDonald, George O'Brien, Frank Baker, Robert Parrish, Jack Pennick, Marion Morrison (who later changed his name to John Wayne), Charley Grapewin, Stepin Fetchit, Victor McLaglen, Olive Borden, Charley Grapewin, Stepin Fetchit, Una O'Connor, Eugene Pallette, Henry Fonda, Maureen O'Hara, and a long list of others. The most outstanding names as far as screenwriters are concerned are those of Dudley Nichols, Sonya Levien, Frank Fenton, Willis Goldbeck, James E. Grant, Frank S. Nugent, etc. The list could also include the assistants (among whom a mention should be made of his brother, Edward O'Fearn), set decorators, dialogue writers, electricians, make-up artists, film editors, etc., who participated on several of Ford's movies. But one fact which cannot be ignored is this director's ability to associate with himself faces with whom he had only worked on occasions (sometimes, only once), and who have been related to John Ford's cinema ever since.

DOES JOHN FORD DISGUST US?

Antxon Ezeiza

In 1962, the author of this article published a review of the movie **Rio Grande**, which ended with the words lending this article its title. This *boutade* expressed the position of a group of people related to cinema, with social and political preoccupations akin to critical realism. It wasn't a pure and simply anti-Yankee position; these were the fervent admirers of numerous works coming out of the said country, and their reasons were not only of ethical or aesthetic nature. In fact, the author is of the opinion that this division makes no sense: the two concepts are connected by a "symbiotic" relationship, the style draws sustenance from the ethical conception of the author's world, but in a symbiotic rather than a subordinate relationship. Nor was the review ideological, it insisted on the artistic aspects of Ford's work.

On the other hand, most of Ford's panegyrists and staunch defenders took exclusive recourse to the use of ethical and ideological reasons, and rarely to those which were aesthetic or artistic; his work has therefore been defended for its "epic" style, when the epic is but a genre of poetry, and authors like Eisenstein or Griffith have been just as epic as Ford. It is moreover a question of epic based on negation of the enemy, which, on having no presence, can be suppressed with neither cost nor bad conscience, given that, in the hands of Ford's epigons, they reach the most intolerable heights of American autism, denying history, creations, reality and the existence of others. The author is therefore of the opinion that John Ford is nothing more than a good (an excellent) craftsman, who failed to reach the summit of artistic creation: never a genius. Summing up, the author has decided to reconsider the construction of his sentence, changing it to: "*I am disgusted by the John Ford of the Fordians*".