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The Films of John Ford in the Golden Age of Westerns (1946-1960)

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Abstract

The article is dedicated to the famous western films of the greatest American filmmaker John Ford. It is well known that after the World War Second the Western as the film genre had the period of its renaissance during approximately fifteen years. There were appeared many interesting westerns in this period made by original style Hollywood film directors and among them was John Ford exactly one of the pure stylists of world cinema. His films always were noted by critics and audience, always had the great impressions on the minds of the new and new generations, etc. Indeed Ford made other genre films too (and not bad) but as he liked to underline he was the master of westerns. Most of these works were the brilliant screen adaptations of American classical literature about mythical Wild West and the US Army history.

Keywords: Adaptation, cinema, filmmaker, film stars, Golden Age, popular genre, Wild West

Introduction

The re-birth of the Western film began after World War II. It has passed the whole series of experiments and became as one of the most popular genres of cinema. The famous French film critic Andre Bazin fairly pointed that it was the period when the Super western appeared. It tried to justify its existence by additional factors – aesthetic, sociological, moral, psychological, or political, in short, by any new dignity, what will assist it for more enrichment and generalization (Bazin, 1972, p. 243).

My Darling Clementine

The most interesting model of the Super western is John Ford's extraordinary film My Darling Clementine (1946) based on Stewart Lake's novel Wyatt Earp: Frontier Marshal (screenplay by Samuel Engel and Winston Miller). Outwardly, the plot of this film tells only about revenge, but after the first episodes it becomes clear that "here is implied a more global problem – the historical theme of the conquest of The West" (Screen Education, 1967, p. 31), which is the Western's alphabet and for cinematographers - a constant research subject.

"Ford's Wyatt Earp is more than a lonely man or national hero. He is the symbol of idealism and sacrifice, the genuine hero, who is chosen by fate and circumstances as the rescuer of Tombstone" – writes critic Nicholas Anez (Films in Review, 1990, p. 330).

Earp, played by Henry Fonda, is more progressive than any other characters of this film or other actors, who played this historical person in other movies. The director of the film wonderfully shows the symbol of this progress in the episode that takes place at the barber's, where the barber shaves Earp (who got used to nomadic life), sprinkles him with Eau-de-Cologne and gives him a civilized man's face. Afterwards Wyatt is invited to the celebration of the foundation of a new church, where Clementine dances with him and invisible threads of love stretches between them.

John Ford by beautiful sketches and details of everyday reality describes the life of Tombstone – the most popular town of the Wild West.

One interesting episodes is a scene in the saloon, where, held captive by the Clanton sons and their followers, a Shakespearean actor is humiliated and forced to perform Hamlet's soliloquy atop on the saloon table. The director points out in what situation is his main hero, who "is enjoying full rights, but awkward member of civil society and is sent to the West for calming Indians and for destroying villains" (Avant Scene, 1985, p. 11).

Ford was acquainted with the well-known westerners: Wyatt Earp, Pardner Jones, All Jennings, and William Frederic Cody ("Buffalo Bill"). They were frequent guests of film studios and especially were interested in the Westerns. As Ford proved Earp was a solemn man and the gun didn't suit him. His wife was a very religious woman. Sometimes she'd go away on religious conventions, and Wyatt would sneak into town and get drunk with Ford's cowboys. At this period Wyatt told to Ford the story of the fight at the O.K. Corral. But it is necessary to underline that the final scene was made by Fonda's persistent request and "Doc" was killed (In reality "Doc" died later, by natural death).

J. A. Place wrote that "the story and characters in My Darling Clementine might seem limited and restrictive, but Ford uses the viewer's already established awareness of the legend to enhance the myth he is creating"

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(Place, 1974, p. 60). The historical reality in that time didn't mean anything to Ford – film was the fiction world with real persons.

My Darling Clementine is beautifully shot (black/white work, made by cameraman Josef McDonald). There are finest interiors and Monument Valley views in the excellent traditions of the Westerns. John Ford's reputation was raised perceptibly. Since after STAGECOACH he had made no Westerns for seven years. His new masterpiece had a great impact with a moral message compared to a Bible story by the film critic Jon Tuska (Tuska, 1988, p. 193).

Fort Apache

In the same year John Ford shot the first film of his "Cavalry Trilogy" – Fort Apache, based on James Warner Bellah's short story "Massacre". For Ford the lifestyle of the soldiers and their sense of honor, duty and pride, hold enduring interest and appeal, and he found one of his most inspiring sources of film material in the role of the military in conquering the West.

Dan Ford, a grandson of John Ford, recorded that "from the first time John read "Massacre" he was drawn to it. Beyond its vigorous prose and its spirit of aristocratic militarism, it seemed to articulate all his wartime emotions, his fascination with the American military tradition and the special nobility he was born of combat" (Ford, 1979, p. 214). In the film less attention is paid to the political side of this event and more to the dramatic conflict in the US cavalry society.

By this work John Ford prepared the ground for transformation the Western from the positive into the critical genre.

The Indians in Fort Apache are given no tribal designation and they function only to dramatize a conflict between men. Ford's love for the rituals of military life, permeates the film's leisurely first reel. The director made an opposition between Colonel Owen Thursday (Henry Fonda) and Captain Kirby York (John Wayne) and justified actions of each of them. At the end of the film, in a powerful endorsement of Ford's belief in the glory of defeat, York tells newspaper reporters that Thursday's example was such as to "make them better men". Thursday does not commit suicide. His death, quite unnecessary and result of stupidity, is still heroic, his memory is sanctified because of how, not why, he died. "We've had a lot of people who were supposed to be great heroes, and you know damn well they weren't." said Ford to Peter Bogdanovich,"But it's good for the country to have heroes to look up to" (Bogdanovich, 1978, p. 86).

Fort Apache was shot in Monument Valley and has a different version of a stagecoach race across the salt flats, much family sentiment, and several songs. An English researcher Andrew Sarris thinks, that from this film begins the transformation of Ford into a great master (Sarris, 1976, p. 104).

The Three Godfathers

The Ford's next film The Three Godfathers (1948) was the allegory of the Nativity in Western dress, the three bank robbers bury the woman they found dying in the desert, having promised to take care of her baby.

The original short novel titled The Three Godfathers was written by Peter Kyne in 1911. The first time it was filmed as The Three Godfathers (1916) directed by Edward LeSaint. Harry Carey was the star, the leader of an outlaw trio. The novel was filmed again as Marked Man (1919) directed by John Ford, again with Carey in the leading role. There were three more versions of the film and after Harry Carey's death in 1947 Ford decided to remake this story again in 1948 and dedicated it to him.

Perhaps the summit of sympathetic outlaws was reached in this film. The Western town to which the outlaws are headed is called New Jerusalem. The three outlaws try to deliver the child they rescued to the town at the cost of their freedom, and there is much pointed quoting from the Bible. Ford's pictorial sense, Winston Hoch's superb color photography and lean performances by John Wayne, Ward Bond, Pedro Armendariz, Harry Carrey, Jr. and other familiar Ford players can't compensate for the prevailing mawkishness. Ford put forward many philosophical questions and answers to them he passed to the audience.

"After The Second World War the Western inspired in the hands of such filmmakers as Ford, Hawks and Vidor, who tried it to avoid studio control and to kindle tendency of shooting in nature" (Finler, 1977, p. 85). The process of destroying myths and showing reality gradually begun. That period the Western film heroes were not the same as William Hart or Tom Mix characters, but they nonetheless immortalized those customs already engrained in the genre. The force of Western's iconography revealed that "the conceptual answer on human action demands in social situations" (Wright, 1975, p. 17).

She Wore a Yellow Ribbon

Ford continued cavalry Westerns by another film – She Wore a Yellow Ribbon (1949) based on the story of James Warner Bellah "War Party". Frank Nugent and Laurence Stallings wrote the script. In the character of Captain Nathan Britles was cast John Wayne. There were other popular actors as well – Joanne Dru, Ben Johnson, John Agar, Victor McLaglen, George O'Brien, Harrey Carey, Jr.

This beautiful film "consists by scenes, what testify on Fordian narrative magic instinct" (Films and Filming, p. 53). This is one of Ford's finest films and one that richly embodied his principal themes and attitudes. She Wore a Yellow Ribbon leaves no doubt of its overriding intention of paying tribute to the US Cavalry in the days when the West was being settled.

The film was shot in color (Winton Hoch's Academy Award winning photography) and several early scenes, especially the one where Captain Brittles sits at his de-

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ceased wife's grave, are aglow in the hues of late sunset. Monument Valley never looked more breathtaking than bathed in W. Hoch's Technicolor hues and once again Ford staged the major action scenes, especially the climactic battle with Indians, with the skill of an assured veteran.

The film can also serve as an anthology of Fordian sequences: a makeshift operation on a wounded man, conducted in the midst of an awesome thunderstorm; the funeral of a beloved officer: the stirring march of the troops to the title song.

While working on this film Ford was rather old-fashioned – he gave his due to supremacy of law, but was uncertain between it and free initiative. That is why with dynamic action scenes in the film there are amusing moments too. By this the filmmaker made an ideal structure for specific poetic images, for picturesque style, what, once again indicated on his rich, principal opinions (Wood, 1970p. 120).

Except for the tiresome romantic triangle involving two troopers and the girl they both love the movie concentrates on Brittles as Ford's definitive man of valor and honor. He is not above shedding a tear when his troops present him with a watch; he shows concern and respect for the Indians. Playing a role older than his actual age, Wayne invested the character with a matchless strength and authority. Famous British filmmaker Lindsay Anderson emphasized that John Wayne in this film is the generalized model of American grandeur. This performance is the best role in whole Western genre (Anderson, 1981, p. 120).

At the end of the film a voice intones "The fifty-cents-a-day professionals, riding the outposts of a nation… Wherever they rode and whatever they fought for, that place became the United States". This exciting moment filled every American's heart with sense of pride. Ford showed the Cavalry, as the ideal society, built on the traditions of discipline, manhood, and faithfulness, to what everyone, indiscriminately of profession or sex, must obey. The character of Joan Dru is potential threat of this statutes, therefore in the film is raised a question about severity's degree of military order.

Audience and film critics liked this movie. It was Ford's next masterpiece. In the course of a long and distinguished career he directed more than fifty Western films and most of them were masterpieces.

Such human senses as duty and honor was not any uncertain abstraction for Ford, but "inspired theme of national progress and its surprising spectacle" (Franklin, 1976, p. 56). Fixed American values distinctly opposed to wilderness in his creative work. "Whereas Hawk's stories were of strong-willed men imposing their wills on weaker ones, Fords were of virtuous men bringing moral light to spiritual darkness" (Mast, 1973, p. 269). He was interested in the civilization of the Wild West and could never resist turning the Western into moral allegory; he united visually clear and stirring action successions, rich comical interludes and sharp problems of everyday life.

Wagonmaster

In the next year John Ford shot two Westerns. First of them was Wagonmaster based on an original story written by Ford himself. While many other movies had used the wagon trains as a symbol of pioneer hardiness and determination, this film went one step further, adding a touch of poetry to the symbol with its repeated views of the wagons against the awesome background of the Western sky. Drawing on a screenplay by his son Patrick and Frank Nugent, Ford gave the film an uncommon luster with the glowing black-and-white photography of Bert Glennon, as well as adding resonance with the use of traditional Western folk songs and hymns performed by Roy Rogers' band – "The Sons of the Pioneers".

The movie tells of two young cattle hands that are recruited, partially against their wishes, to guide a Mormon wagon train through the desert and mountains. Ford depicts the Mormons as a rugged, fiercely resilient bunch. They aren't a band of religious outcasts but a clan who can survive only by their loyalty and ministrations to one another. In his biography of John Ford Andrew Sinclair wrote aptly that this film was "a tribute to the abiding values of courage and endurance, loyalty and faith in troubled times" (Sinclair, 1984, p. 155).

In one of the film's best sequences, Ford suggests just how much this people have going for them by intercutting a Mormon campfire dance "Chuckaswanna swing" as bandits approach. Many of the images are no more than shadows on wagon tarps, yet it becomes apparent that these are people that Ford admires.

The framing, lighting, and composition of Wagonmaster gave the film a beauty rare even for Ford. It is a slow, reflective movie, one in which the camera lingers and in which mesas and sunrises become more important than simply settings against which the action takes place. The film is about people discovering the land. In the concluding sequence, the wagons must cross a dangerous rocky hillside to enter the valley that the settlers have sought. Ford places a camera in one of the wagons and its precipitous journey down the hill becomes ours. But its reward – that rich fertile valley so evocative to Ford and to us – becomes our reward as well.

Wagonmaster gives the viewer a sense of Ford at his best. It is a stirring movie and a deeply beautiful one. Outwardly the film looks like The Covered Wagon, but inside here is more than simply moving to the West – here the wandering, is not only physical but also a spiritual attempt to find a desirable place for settling.

During this period some new plots emerged for Westerns. As classified dramatist Frank Gruber these include:

1. Struggle against Indians;
2. Fight against nature (often to build railroads and towns);
3. Conflict between cowboys and pioneers;
4. The law against lawlessness;
5. A story of outcast or bandit;
6. A theme of revenge;
7. Adventure of builder whose creation must be de-

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stroyed (Gruber, 1967, p. 4).
In every Western film its director might use those one, two or three versions. It was counted as a peculiar legality and everyone had to reckon with it.

When a cinematographer begins to adapt any literary source, he can use it as raw material for paraphrase. In this case the subject of work reaches to mythic life (Bluestone, 1973, p. 63). Sometimes it comes to light that filmmaker doesn't read the literature source and leans on the rendering of scriptwriter or assistant, what damages the historical and artistic qualities of the work.

Rio Grande

Ford found himself in such a situation when he began work on another Western film Rio Grande (1950) - the third part of his cavalry trilogy based on Bellah's story "Mission with No Record". Ford brought back some of the elements of the latter film: John Wayne as a crusty officer, colonel named Yorke; boisterous comedy in the burly form of Victor McLaglen, reprising his RIBBON role of Sergeant Quincannon, and the sturdy presence of such actors as Ben Johnson and Harry Carey Jr. Yet Rio Grande has a dispirited, perfunctory air that no amount of music – "The Sons of the Pioneers" sing a number of bouncy tunes – could easily dispel. Although Bert Glennon's black-and-white photography caught the rugged beauty of the terrain and Ford staged the big scenes with his usual finesse, RIO GRANDE adds up to less of a summary of past endeavors than an intimation of the less vigorous Western work to come.

In the hastily-made film there were no innovations and on the contrary Ford quoted himself from STAGECOACH, what irritate the viewers, expecting more and more from him. Director as if "sealed up John Wayne's character" (Cahiers du Cinema, p. 18) and didn't give him a wide walk of life. Dramatically weak and ideologically disguised racism Rio Grande was criticized severely by film critics and for this Ford was compiled by several years (until 1956) "turned off" from the Western.

During this time many Westerns were shot – some of them were genuine movies (Winchester 73, Broken Arrow, The Gunfighter, High Noon, The Big Sky, Shane, Johnny Guitar, The Man from Laramie, etc.), but most of them could not reach the classical summits. Many filmmakers often were repeated in their works and could not give any new, various subjects to audience.

Generally the Western films of fifties by one view were entertainments, but in reality they had a tight relation with problems of contemporary life, "added them definite forms… and decorated too" (Wood, 1968, p. 19). So, they had a great importance in the spectrum of decision of social problems.

The Searchers

In 1951-1955 John Ford shot his 9 non-western films and in 1956 he returned to the Western and made another masterpiece The Searchers, where he carried out a habitual ritual of narrative punctuality. Here a combination of revenge, shattered family ties and a hatred born of bigotry drives Ethan Edwards (John Wayne) to find the nieces who have been kidnapped by Indians. In Frank Nugent's adaptation of Alan LeMay's story, Ethan returns to his brother's family after a long absence. When marauding Indians savagely murder his brother, sister-in-law, and their son and daughters are abducted, Ethan begins a five-year search for the girls…

The film contains sequences that remain models of the screen's collaborative art: a brilliant fusing of editing, camerawork and performance as filtered through a master director's eyes and "gives a chance to push forward the wide bonds of critical methods and possible questions for cinematographic analyze" (Ellis, 1981, p. 64). This story is a clear example of Hollywood traditional opposites: "Savagery-Civilization". By original structural complexes Ford formulated contradictions between main heroes.

The Searchers abounds in so many virtues that one tends to overlook its undeniable faults: stretches of tedium, mostly involving the triangular relationship of Marty, Laurie Jorgenson, his longtime sweetheart and Charlie McCorry; the characterization of Indians as savages or clowns; the patently fake scenery for some of the outdoor scenes.

This richly textured and varied film draws much of its power from John Wayne's central performance, which may well be his finest. His Ethan is a complex man: stubborn, fiercely independent, and relentless in pursuit of his goal. There is something hidden and unspoken in his face: the suggestion of a dark past we can never really fathom. As he spends the years searching for his kidnapped niece, Ethan undergoes his own voyage of self-discovery – his own search for inner peace – that turns him from a driven bigot who shoots out the eyes of a dead Indian so that his soul will wander forever into a man who lifts his niece high in the air and asks her to go home.

Wayne succeeds in capturing every nuance of Ethan's character, whether how he looks at his brother's family, reacting with sick horror to the discovery of one of the niece's body, or destroying a herd of buffalo with a frenzy that almost rages out of control. Those who would question Wayne's acting ability might watch the expression of loathing, sorrow and pain that passes across his face when he finds the young girls who have been turned into Indian maidens.

By appraisal of J. A. Place, "Ethan Edwards is perhaps Ford's most ambiguous character. In him are all the qualities that make a Western hero – strength, individualism, self-sufficiency, leadership, authority" (Place, 1974, p. 162), but if go deep into his nature, we discover that he is more fanatic than brave, is monoman not individualist, is outcast not communicational, is maniac not a leader, is dogmatic not authoritative.
Ford offered his favorite actor to make an imitation of Harry Carey's characteristic gesticulation, performed by Wayne excellently. He expressed a true sense of isola-

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tion, a fear toward approaching menace.

In The Searchers the director developed his burning, balance between sentimentalism and "screen rowdyism" (Gaw, 1971, p. 95). Despite of all above-mentioned insignificant lacks in general outline this movie is one of the best work of Ford's Westerns (and of all westerns too).

Neither LeMay nor Ford took into consideration some historical realities. For example, Ernest Wallace and E. Adamson Hoebel made the point that "captive white children were generally initiated into the tribe by a series of terrifying experiences in which the Indians tried their courage by brutal treatment and threats of destruction", it was equally true that "some of the most hardened warriors are known to have wept because a captive of whom they had become fond returned to his own people" (Wallace and Hoebel, 1952, p. 264). Such a perspective tends to humanize the Comanches, but LeMay, and Ford after him, would have no part of it.

It is important to note that later Ford confessed to Peter Bogdanovich about his unjust attitude towards the Indian problems in his films. "I've killed more Indians than Custer, Beecher, Chivington put together", he said, "and people in Europe always want to know about the Indians. There are two sides to every story, but I wanted to show their point of view for a change. Let's face it, we've treated them very badly – it's a blot on our shield; we've cheated and robbed, killed, murdered, massacred and everything else, but they kill one white man and God, outcome the troops" (Bogdanovich, 1978, p. 104).

Meanwhile the Western continued its triumphant march on world screens. The Western heroes became mythological knights in America's public self-awareness. Thus was founded a new advertisement of the Wild West, a new kind of fulfillment of American Dream.

The most interesting of the films sought to take at least an implicit stand against racial prejudice by dramatizing its consequences in the Western setting was John Ford's drama Sergeant Rutledge (1960) based on James Warner Bellah's same novel (screenplay by James Warner Bellah and Willis Goldbeck). For many years, Ford had resented his reputation as a racist, and he wanted to express his true feelings in this film. Dealing with a black cavalryman (Woody Strode) on trial for raping and murdering a major's daughter, the movie took on a restricted, almost claustrophobic feeling, most unusual for a Ford Western, as it depicted the virulent hatred of Rutledge that permeates his trial. He finally rebels and tries to escape, only to return to save his comrades from an Apache attack. The film achieves a powerful moment when Rutledge explains why he gave up his liberty and returned to prison.

In a brief foreword to his fictionalization of "Sergeant Rutledge", James Warner Bellah told how he and Willis Goldbeck had come up with the story idea and managed to interest Ford in filming a picture. Bellah also recorded how "toward the end of shooting when Mr. Ford was shaping his terminal dramatic scenes, one projectionist had tears in his eyes after running one of them in daily rushes…" and how one of the script clerks "turned around to me with goose pimples on her arms and her mouth stuck half open – after Mr. Ford shot another one" (Bellah, 1960, p. viii).

This film is only a reversal of a principal theme in The Birth of a Nation (1915), the only time in which a black is shown attempting to rape a white woman. Ford borrowed Orson Welles' techniques from Citizen Kane (1941), where a character begins to narrate the past and is plunged into shadow as he or she is speaking; but the film is badly structured insofar as the witnesses at Rutledge's trial narrate episodes where they were not present and of which they could not know of their own experience. One of the ways in which the audience sympathy is gained for Rutledge is by showing how, while he is under close military arrest, he helps to kill Indians rather than attempts to escape.

Sergeant Rutledge is even more stage bound than The Searchers; most of the exteriors were shot on indoor sets. This movie sums up the director's views on life of US army of the past century. He remade some details of the screenplay not for cinematographic, but for ideological purposes, by his high professional style improved the plot, in what "contained most widely human qualities - love, friendship, family, death, founding of law and order and morals" (Manwell, 1968, p. 42).

Ford's creative work underwent significant modification: unlike his early westerns here his position toward the "America's national minorities" is more liberal, by what he underlined to realizing the traditional meanings of American Dream for all (Wollen, 1969, p. 74). His main hero is a simple ordinary American for whom the state ideology is acceptable.

Conclusion

During the period of its Golden Age (1946-1960) the Westerns reached the highest levels of development and claimed a particular place in the gigantic panorama of the American culture. If Hollywood comedies, melodramas or gangster films were often changed, the Western genre "never grew old" (Bazin, 1972, p. 232). It rose from two relative originals: from the traditions of cowboy-pioneer's real life and from its simple formula. The romantic hero of the Wild West became the legend, all aspects of which, without any changes and anachronisms, were studied by specialists and so were brought to the wide masses of cinema admirers. John Ford's Westerns made great contributions to the genre.

Orson Welles was once asked which American directors impressed him most. He answered,"…the old masters. By which I mean John Ford, John Ford, and John Ford. …With Ford at his best, you feel that the movie has lived and breathed in a real world" (Kuhns, 1975, p. 170).

One of the America's finest directors John Ford was "The greatest poet of western sagas" (Robinson, 1968, p. 139). He found the ideal framework for the expression of his vision of America's West. A new nation carved out

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of a savage land at great cost, a price - Ford suggests in his works - too high for what America actually becomes.

The meaning of his films (especially the Westerns) is so considerable in the history and culture of the USA, that as Peter Bogdanovich noted "it would be instructive (in fact schools might do well making it a regular course) to run Ford's films about the United States in historical chronology - because he has told the American saga in human terms and made it come alive" (Bogdanovich, 1978, p. 22). It is difficult to disagree with such wording.

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