Ford, John (February 1, 1895–August 31, 1973)

The film director John Ford (February 1, 1895–August 31, 1973) has been celebrated both for his mythification of the American experience and for his signature approach to cinema. Born Sean O’Feeney to Irish immigrants in Maine, Ford followed his brother Francis into the film industry and began directing in 1917. Many of his early films were Westerns, often starring Harry Carey. This attention to the genre would first culminate in *The Iron Horse* (1924), one of many of Ford’s films that seemed to glorify the march of American progress.

Ford often identified himself with the Western, although less than half (56) of his 125 works were from the genre, and he did not direct any westerns between 1926 and 1939. Ford also made folksy comedies, often starring Will Rogers (*Judge Priest*, 1934); historical biopics (*Young Mr. Lincoln*, 1939); contemporary war movies (*They Were Expendable*, 1945); social problem films (*The Grapes of Wrath*, 1939); and a number of works exploring his Irish heritage (such as *The Informer* [1935], *How Green Was My Valley* [1941], and *The Quiet Man* [1952]). Many of these films shared the same concerns as his Westerns: the tensions between the individual and the group, the rituals that bond society, and the personal actions that come to represent larger historical, if not mythic, forces. For Ford, the landscape of the American West, particularly Monument Valley (beginning with *Stagecoach* in 1939), seemed best to represent those issues cinematically. The image of John Wayne as Ringo first emerging out of the rugged terrain in *Stagecoach* not only confirms the liminality of the Western hero, while drawing upon a long narrative and visual tradition about the West (via Owen Wister and Frederic Remington); it also renders, in cinematically dynamic terms, the tensions between wilderness and civilization, the individual and society. Ford could often seem conservative, creating a masculinist vision of militarized elites who bring order against civilization’s others.

Ford effectively created a stock company of actors, employing them to create celebrated moments, as when Wyatt Earp (Henry Fonda) goes to the dance in *My Darling Clementine* (1947). Here, a community unites through action, music, and down-home ritual — and through the exclusion of others. Yet, as Earp’s earlier balancing act on a porch chair exemplifies, Ford was equally interested in the precariousness and contradictions of these communities. The director often focused on misfits. He depicted many heroes, from Ringo in *Stagecoach* to Ethan Edwards in *The Searchers* (1956), who could never fit into American society, even as they supposedly represented it. *The Searchers*, frequently selected as one of the best films of all time, was one of several works in his later years that further foregrounded these tensions. That film explores racism; *Two Rode Together* (1961) shows the suffering of those excluded from a community’s rituals; and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962) questions the mythmaking process to which Ford was apparently central. It is these tensions, expressed dynamically both in narrative and cinematic technique, that helped make John Ford an influential filmmaker, inspiring artists from the French New Wave directors to the new American cinema of the 1970s.

References and further reading:

Bogdonavich, P. (1978) *John Ford*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Davis, R. L. (1995) *John Ford: Hollywood's Old Master*, Norman: University of Oklahoma.

Gallagher, T. (1986) *John Ford: The Man and His Films*. Berkeley: University of California Press. (Gallagher has this up on his website: http://home.sprynet.com/~tag/tag/)

Stowell, P. (1986) *John Ford*, Boston: Twayne Publishers.

List of works:

The Iron Horse (1924)

Judge Priest (1934)

The Informer (1935)

*Stagecoach* (1939),

Young Mr. Lincoln (1939)

The Grapes of Wrath (1939)

How Green Was My Valley (1941)

They Were Expendable (1945)

My Darling Clementine (1947)

She Wore a Yellow Ribbon (1949)

The Quiet Man (1952)

*The Searchers* (1956)

Two Rode Together (1961)

The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance (1962)

Paratextual material:

I have clips of that Ringo shot and of the Clementine dance, plus a frame grab of Earp on the porch.

The John Ford Papers

<http://www.indiana.edu/~liblilly/guides/ford/ford.shtml>

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