FILM

A Century of John Ford (1995)

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THIS YEAR sees the centenary of two births: that of the cinema and of John Ford. Twenty-two years after his death, Ford clearly stands out as the best movie director ever. His movies are so much more alive than those of his colleagues, being at once simple and complex, epic and lyrical, full of humor, gravity, and emotion, yet never sentimental; sometimes hard and cruel, like *The Searchers* and *Two Rode Together*, sometimes heartbreaking, like *The Wings of Eagles* or *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, or melancholic, like *My Darling Clementine*, or jolly, like *The Quiet Man*. He touched every register, and not a single one of his movies can be dismissed as negligible, not even his less personal works. Initially, it might be hard to see much connection between his movies and those of Orson Welles—another genius, but one who suffered a far sadder fate—and yet when Welles was asked to name his three favorite directors, he said: "John Ford, John Ford, and John Ford." Nowadays, Ford is viewed more and more as a kind of Shakespeare of the cinema, for the breadth and variety of his work, for the way he mixes tragedy with irony and, occasionally, downright vulgarity, for the depth of his characters and his immense but unostentatious visual talent, his poetic landscapes full of brio, and his ability to move you, the viewer, without making you feel ashamed of that lump in your throat, as if you were thinking: "I'm quite right to be moved by this, because this man is a truly fine director and isn't just playing fast and loose with my emotions."

And yet, for many years, Stalinist European critics—with the Spanish taking the lead—accused him and his movies of being fascistic and militaristic. This seems quite simply incredible now, but for a long time he had to be defended tooth and nail against those "political" attacks that denied his work any cinematographic merit at all. Part of the blame for this lay with the times themselves, the 1960s and 1970s, when everything in our country was politicized, precisely because politics didn't exist. What we have now may be pretty deplorable, but we've perhaps forgotten that it's infinitely worse to have no politics at all—for politics to be banned—because, among other reasons, when deprived of its rightful place in Parliament and in the press, politics ends up impregnating, invading, and contaminating everything. During those years, bullfighting and football belonged to the Right, as did whiskey, whereas wine (red wine) was seen as belonging to the Left. Nothing escaped these ridiculous labels; nothing was innocent, neither clothes nor food nor hobbies nor, of course, art. We lived in a state of hyper-vigilance, and to the very real vigilance of the Franco regime and its penitentiary mentality was added the more theoretical but no less censorious vigilance of the Left's simple-minded orthodoxy.

Ford was condemned out of hand, without anyone even taking the trouble to consider what his movies were really like, what they were about, or what they were saying. It was enough that they featured the army and that Indians were killed, and based on this flimsy evidence he was dubbed "reactionary." Anyone who has seen the two hard, cruel films I mentioned earlier, or *Cheyenne Autumn*, or *Fort Apache*, will realize that the way he views Indians is, in fact, full of respect and even imbued with a sense of guilt, and that the way the soldiers are treated is always ambiguous and basically tragic; that there is, above all, a desire to understand everything, to understand both sides; that Ford's perspective is never Manichean, but all-embracing; that, above all, he views any conflict through a conciliatory lens.

One of his least-mentioned movies is the twenty-minute episode, "The Civil War," that formed part of the epic production *How the West Was Won*, a movie largely directed by other people. This short movie contains one of the most persuasive and sober indictments of war in the entire history of the cinema. After the bloody battle of Shiloh, two privates, one a Yankee, the other a Confederate (George Peppard and Russ Tamblyn), meet by the banks of a river running with blood-red water. They discuss the possibility of deserting, of leaving the war to those who can understand what it's about. As the narrator says: "By nightfall, no one cared to use the words 'win' or 'lose.'" Unexpectedly, the Yankee finds himself having to bayonet the same Confederate with whom, just a few seconds before, he was planning to desert. "Why did you make me do that?" he screams when his fellow soldier can no longer hear him.

Now that the figure of John Ford is beginning to assume giant proportions, it's worth remembering that, in the eighteenth century, Shakespeare was also consigned to a kind of purgatory, when his work went unappreciated and was even deemed barbarous. Every age has its periods of blindness, including the century of the cinema, the art which, during those hundred years, has taught us how to look at the world, at its past and its future.□

(Translated from the Spanish by Margaret Jull Costa)