

Chimes, Wind, a Ghost, and the Dead

Javier Marías

FAVORITE MOVIES vary depending on the day and the hour and, above all, on what else you've seen recently. I realize, though, that some remain firm favorites regardless of the day and almost regardless of the year, and with those favorites there's no room for error or caprice. If I had to choose just one, it would be Joseph L. Mankiewicz's *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir*, but since I've already written about that at length elsewhere, I will say only that, in my view, it is both the saddest and the happiest movie in the history of cinema. Enough said, I think.

But there are many, many others, some of which have a special place in my memory because I feel indebted to them as a novelist. Not simply because they influenced me or because I've made clear or surreptitious reference to them in one of my novels: they are an explicit or implicit presence precisely

because certain striking images or a movie's very essence never cease circling my mind and have come to form part of my inner life or my own past. This is the case with two rather similar movies: John Ford's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* and Orson Welles's *Chimes at Midnight*. The connection may not, at first, seem obvious, but it's always worth remembering that when Welles was asked to name his three favorite movie directors, he replied: "Ford, Ford, and Ford." Like all great movies, both deal with a multitude of things, but one of those things is the pain caused by disaffection and loss and, more especially, the acceptance of that pain, which in both movies is only truly resolved in death. I love nearly all of Ford's movies, and certain looks by John Wayne are engraved on my retina (him gazing into the fire in *The Quiet Man*, or the bitter, sorrowful look in his eyes throughout *The*

Searchers) and they make him the best "looker" ever.

I have a soft spot for Jean Renoir's *The River* and for certain British movies: *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* by Powell and Pressburger and *The Third Man* by Welles and Carol Reed. All three—in their very different ways—are extraordinarily lyrical, which makes me think that, as a cinema-goer, I have quite a sentimental streak, the same streak that makes me still love Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, which lately it's become fashionable to disdain, or Billy Wilder's *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes*, one of his less highly thought of movies, but which is just as melancholy in tone as *The Apartment*. On the other hand, I also have a humorous streak, which means that I adore *North by Northwest* and *Kiss Me, Stupid* by those same two directors, respectively.

A handful of my other favorites are perhaps not that obvious either: *A High Wind in Jamaica* by Alexander Mackendrick, and here there is definitely a literary factor in my choice, for the movie is an adaptation of Richard Hughes's novel, one of the best novels of the twentieth century, but sadly too little known and appreciated; Chaplin's *Monsieur Verdoux* is one of the funniest and most brutal movies I've seen, as is the now-famous *Pulp Fiction*; then there are two very elegant semi-

comedies by Mankiewicz, *People Will Talk* and *The Late George Apley*. But I'd best not go on, because the list would be endless. As, indeed, would any list—for example, the list of comedies (Cukor's *The Philadelphia Story*, Donen's *Charade*), or musicals (Cukor's *My Fair Lady*, Donen and Kelly's *Singing in the Rain*), or fantasies (Arnold's *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, Siegel's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*), or Westerns (Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch*, Anthony Mann's *El Cid*—and yes, I did say *El Cid*). It's no coincidence that cinema should have produced the greatest number of masterpieces in the twentieth century. And I must just mention a few other inescapable favorites: Max Ophüls's *La Ronde*, with the incomparable Anton Walbrook singing and spinning, and John Huston's *The Dead*, which—like my favorite *par excellence*, *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir*—is the movie that delves deepest into the relationship between the living and the dead, abolishing past, future, and present, and revealing more clearly than any other the simultaneously serene and passionate desire to cease to be one of the living in order, finally, to join the dead and thus no longer have to fear and suffer time. □

(Translated from the Spanish by Margaret Jull Costa)

