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Riding Time

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Riding Time

Javier Mariás

CRITICS, AS THOSE of the literary variety have been demonstrating for centuries now, have a limitless ability to get things wrong; among the literary critics' horrendous gaffes—to give just one out of thousands of possible examples, examples that are ever on the increase—was the almost unanimous drubbing they gave to Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* when it was first published. Movie critics have only had a little over a hundred years to prove their ignorance and bad taste and general dimwittedness, but in that brief space of time they have already succeeded in reaching the depths plumbed by their literary colleagues. (Of course there are always exceptions, but they are just that, exceptions.) Critics have the advantage that, after a few decades, when a work they praised to the skies has been completely forgotten and one they denigrated is alive and well and deemed to be a classic, almost no one remembers what they said about it; and since they never lack for cheek, they're more than capable of pretending that they didn't say what they said and leaping aboard whichever bandwagon hap-

pens to be fashionable at the time.

Nowadays, everyone—apart from the occasional conceited Spanish director—considers *The Searchers* (1956) to be not only one of John Ford's greatest masterpieces, but one of the best movies in the history of the cinema. That wasn't always the case. Initially, it was judged to be weak and flawed, then it was relegated to a prolonged spell in oblivion, and then it was dismissed as "racist" (yes, there are still people who confuse a movie or book with what its characters do and say). Only relatively recently, thanks to a handful of stubborn critics and a far larger number of fans who had been right all along, has this marvelous movie found its rightful place in the canon.

The same has not yet happened, however, with another John Ford movie made only five years later and closely related to *The Searchers*: *Two Rode Together*, which is still considered by many to be weak and flawed and, of course, a lesser work in comparison with its predecessor. Well, it's true that it is fourteen minutes shorter,

that the plot is rather simpler and the script less daring, that the action takes place over a period of a few weeks instead of five years or more, and that, for all those reasons, it is perhaps less epic. I suppose it's actually a sourer, sadder, more cynical, and more pessimistic version of the story told in *The Searchers* and it does leave a somewhat bitter taste in the mouth. In *The Searchers*, Ethan Edwards (John Wayne) sets off in search of his nieces immediately after they have been abducted by the Comanches. He soon learns that the older girl has been raped and murdered, but this knowledge only drives him on in his search for the younger niece, Debbie (Natalie Wood), with even more determination and with a growing feeling of hatred for the Indians. Accompanied by the girls' adopted brother, the much younger and kinder Martin Pawley (Jeffrey Hunter), Wayne spends the movie hoping to find the girl, from the point when he knows that she will still be a little girl right up to when he realizes that she'll already be an adolescent and the wife of a Comanche. There's a scene in which Wayne goes to see some white girls who have been rescued by the army and who have probably lived with the Comanches for as long as his lost niece. It's hard to tell if the girls are in a state of arrested development or have been driven mad, but one thing is clear: despite their fair hair and blue eyes, they have become completely Indianized. The look Wayne gives them before leaving the barrack hut where

they're being held is perhaps the most chilling in the history of cinema, and it comes from an extraordinary actor with a remarkably wide range, an actor who, incredibly enough, a great many fools still caricature and damn with faint praise; in that one brief look there is hatred, grief, despair, sadness, pity, and a desire for vengeance—all mixed up together. Wayne knows then that if he ever does find his niece, he will find someone not very different from these anomalous, alienated, half-mad girls with no place in the world, someone irrecoverable and incomplete. Each day that passes, therefore, counts against him, but he tracks and pursues her day after day, from the moment Debbie was taken and her parents murdered. And time, while it passes and we ride along on it, never ends. Not today or yesterday, but perhaps tomorrow.

When *Two Rode Together* opens, the time that Wayne experiences in *The Searchers*—the time on which he rides and against which he continues to fight with growing bitterness and with ever more sinister aims—is already over for the person doing the searching. Nine, twelve, or even fifteen years have passed since the abduction of the white children and women whom a group of settlers now want to recover, encouraged by the vain and frivolous promises made by a congressman in Washington eager for publicity. The person charged with recovering the disappeared—or, rather, with haggling over them with the Indians and buying them back—has no blood ties with any of them. Unlike



Walker Evans, *Houses and Billboards in Atlanta*, 1936

Wayne, Guthrie McCabe (James Stewart) is in no hurry and isn't filled with hatred or a desire for vengeance, nor does he have any personal interest in the matter. He is a mercenary who is prepared—most reluctantly—to carry out this mission and has no qualms about taking the life-savings of the poor, confused settlers who initially welcome him as a Messiah who will restore to them their lost children and stolen womenfolk. But time has passed, and Stewart knows there's nothing to be done, that the process of uprooting and transformation will already be complete.

He knows that the five-year-old boy taken by the Comanches—frozen as a child in the memory of his family, who are in a similar position to Wayne, but lack his clear-sightedness—will now be a young warrior with stiff, stinking

braids, that his chest will be covered with the scars inflicted on all Indian boys as part of their initiation into manhood, that he will have killed and scalped white folks and would rape his own fair-haired sister if he captured her. He knows that the rosy-cheeked seven-year-old girl will be sixteen now and will have borne a couple of mixed-race children to some Indian brave, and that the mother lost by her good-for-nothing sons will have spent so long as the wife of an Indian that—as happens in Stewart's moving encounter with the woman who was once Mrs. Clegg—she will not even consider going back to her erstwhile husband and her now grown-up offspring ("Oh, no, no, don't tell them about me, they must never find me," she says to Stewart). In *The Searchers*, John Wayne, for all his hardness and anger and cruelty, still has

some hope. In *Two Rode Together*, Stewart knows that there is no hope for the settlers. For him, they are people who are willingly deceiving themselves and who have equally willingly allowed themselves to be deceived by some congressman from Washington who has never even seen a real-life Indian. He therefore has no scruples about taking their money; he considers them dreamers who will not learn until they see with their own eyes what their longed-for children and wives have become. Lieutenant Jim Gary (Richard Widmark), who accompanies him and urges him on, to some extent shares the settlers' good faith and hopes, but realizes when he sees the captives that Stewart has been quite right to oppose the whole impossible, propaganda-

driven mission. He understands that they cannot force Mrs. Clegg to come back with them; she's an old woman whom they must not and cannot expose to what, for her, would be terrible shame. The same is true of young Frieda Knudsen, who has had two children by a Comanche; they are her present and her future; and the past with her white parents is literally and irrevocably just that, the past. *The Searchers* and *Two Rode Together* complete each other and in a sense take their place as a pair of movies that rank among the high points of the Western and of the history of cinema as a whole. The difference is that, in one of these movies, time is still passing and, in the other, time has stopped. It's not hard to imagine which is the more bitter. □

(Translated from the Spanish by Margaret Jull Costa)

Being and Non-Being

When they question me it will be easy to
say I do not know anything.

I walked across the bridge shortly after
dawn. There was only

the kind of light you associate with
manufactured films, light

coming from an artificial source, a movie
with, say, Steven

McNally, 1948 or so, grim, grim, and although
I will remain silent as to

the matter at hand I could tell them quite a
bit about the musical

background in that movie, slurring its
way into my mind like

syrup hardening over the years and not quite
dying, deep-sliding into

some place unreachable and completely
sad, having to do as

it does with my then young mother at
the "end of her rope" and wanting

to *get out of this goddamned house for
once* but of course those were

not her words. I could go on but I will
be asked about another death and

as I say I cannot tell them anything. It was
cold and my walk over

the bridge was taken impulsively, I know that, and
I did not have the correct

shoes on and there is a chance no one saw
me, can give an alibi except

for the poor hanging from girders under
the bridge, they are always good for

alibis and I'm sure they heard me, would
have recognized my

tread mellow as a daisy's soft refusal to
shine, they'll know what

I mean, and as for the girl dying in the patrol
car I am truly mystified if

not grief-stricken, she seemed so young and
so well taken care

of, unlike the refugees I have read about huddled
in their dim squalor hungry

beyond talking about it. The questioners will
probably have a smooth

table, will offer me soft drinks and coffee, there
will be two of them, I know

how it goes. The pang will not come from my
silence, my customary

inadequacy familiar as metal pots I employ for
cooking in my lovely

house, it will come from
my memory of the bridge at an hour

so early even the trains were as dead as frozen
snakes, the bland bay silent as a coat.

—Nancy Aldrich