



John Ford Jesse

‘John Ford doesn’t make pictures about good guys or bad guys; he makes stories about people’. Discuss, with close reference to three John Ford films.

John Ford is mostly known as an incredibly unique director who redefined and gave a specific form to the Western Genre. He made over two hundred films of which fifty were westerns. Just as Western films started to go out of fashion he retouched the genre and brought it to a new level making it popular once again but this time worldwide. Ever since, the image of the Wild West remained as portrayed by Ford: beautiful, colourful and untamed landscapes with cowboys, Indians, stagecoaches, fast horses, ranches with cattle and long, desolated dusty roads. He is widely considered the greatest director who ever lived and the greatest artist of the Wild West. Ford narrates stories about people, about their journeys and dreams, about reality and both past and present. John Ford has many trademarks and touches various themes throughout his films. For example the use of light and dark, the framing of people or things to highlight their state or importance, the language is almost poetic and the shots are artistic - the camera isn’t just pointed anywhere but it’s set up carefully to transmit specific ideas. I think that the main themes or ideas he expresses in his films are the American dream, the struggle between good and evil and people’s lives and situations. I think that he believes that in life there is no good or bad, everything is a mix between the two, even himself.

Ford used filmmaking as a refuge from reality. In his chair of director he was able to create a safe and mythical world that functioned according to his own private rules and he could be the undoubted boss of a family - the crew. This way he was able to get away from his own life for a while and enter the world of perfection. He wasn’t a very good family guy and his relationships with people could become quite puzzling: like the people he portrayed in his films, he had a contrasting character. On the outside he was rough and tough and on the inside he was amazingly gentle. He came from a family of Irish immigrants and was strong and tough. At school he was called “Bull” for he used toughness to gain respect he might not have had because of ethnic differences. He always wore dark glasses to hide the sensitivity in his blue eyes, as he was ashamed of it. This highlights the fact that both traits were present in his character: “good” and “bad”. He was a very good observer. He observed life around him, people and situations and replicated them in that safe world of his films. I think that is why he was so good at making stories about people.

Stagecoach is a western made by Ford in 1939 about a group of strangers riding on a stagecoach through apache territory. This film is about the journey of nine people, about the confrontation of the external dangers they are exposed to during the journey, meaning the environment or the setting of the journey, including the apaches and the harshness and wildness of nature, and the internal dangers, such as the Plummer boys and deeper internal threats or dangers: Ringo, the outlaw passenger and, the banker who robbed his clients, Gatewood both riding in the stagecoach. It is also about each character’s private search for prosperity and reasons for why they initiated it, their development throughout the film and their significance in the representation of American society.

Being a story about people’s lives it includes various elements or themes that could be found in American society. The passengers of the stagecoach overcome their fear and cling to their courage when they decide to continue the journey once they have been warned about the impending dangers. The first thing that makes the passengers realize that the journey is filled with dangers is when Ringo is arrested and is to proceed on the journey along with them - they are afraid of him because he is a widely known outlaw who is well known for his astuteness and cold blood in case of threat. This is an example of what law does to eliminate dangers and create a safer environment; arrest outlaws. Another example of law working to relieve the pioneers from danger is when the apaches attack the stagecoach and when all hope seems lost, the troops come in, kill many apaches and scare the rest away saving the travellers. The one thing that Ford silently suggests with this film is that law during that time didn’t eliminate all dangers. Dangers also existed within the town walls: the drunks and the gamblers broke the law and risked harming other people, outlaws that lived in the towns did not hesitate shooting whoever opposed them and some people that were thought to be respectable such as bankers often stole people’s money. As I have mentioned before, in this film, John Ford represents the American society in great detail by creating a microcosm of American society with the characters. Each character represents a social class or a group of people: Dallas a prostitute, Lucy Mallory a young bride, Gatewood a banker, Hatfield a gambler, Ringo Kid an outlaw, Peacock a whiskey salesman,

Doc Boone a doctor, Buck the stagecoach driver and Curley a marshal. Another thing that John Ford did that is very much like the social stereotypes of those times is he split up the group of people in two: the supposedly respectable and disrespectable. This also is part of the theme of good and bad, it therefore also shows that one is never completely one or another: Dallas, Ringo and Doc Boone are thought to be the disrespectable people of the group but are the ones who end up being heroes, not by their own will but by chance and because of their great hearts. No matter what their social status, deep down they are pure and generous.

Humble people often end up being the saviours in John Ford's films: Dallas saves Lucy Mallory and her baby, Ringo saves the pioneers in different parts of the story; for example he is the one that helps the most when they are attacked by apaches and Doc Boone also helps Mallory and her baby. Each character has his/her own reasons to go on this journey. Each character's situation and reasons to initiate this journey also represents aspects of people's lives and describes the situations of various people who lived during those times. Dallas, the prostitute, was forced to leave town. She also hoped for a fresh start, a new life where she could leave her past behind, get a new reputation and maybe change social group (shame). Ringo, the outlaw, broke out of jail and is in this journey to revenge his family on the Plummer boys (revenge). Gatewood, the embezzling banker, just stole a lot of money and is undertaking this journey to escape (greed). Mallory, the pregnant young wife is going to look for her husband, an army officer and is running away from shame (childbirth). Doc Boone, a disgraced frontier army doctor is in search for a new job to get money to buy more alcohol. His judgment is affected greatly by alcohol and he doesn't seem to have any great reason for his participation on the journey (alcoholism). Hatfield and Curley both want to save someone. Hatfield wants to help Mallory on the journey and almost kills her to save her. Curley wants to save Ringo from the Plummer Boys by bringing him back to jail (salvation). Peacock and Buck are on a journey back home, to go back to their family (family). The issues in the brackets are issues that emerge in this story as they do still in society today.

This film is about the spirit of the people and their search for civilization. It tells about pioneers that are searching for prosperity and are looking for a place in the world where they can feel safe and where their children can too. They are starting to bring civilization to the Wild West. They are somehow taming the land and slowly trying to erase the problems, the obstacles, the dangers. At the end of the film, the birth of the baby and the promise of marriage between Ringo and Dallas bring hope and new life; a fresh start and a step forward in the realization of the American Dream.

My Darling Clementine is a 1946 western, a John Ford version of what happened at the O.K. Corral Gunfight. Ford, being an idealizer and a romanticist turned the adventure of the legendary Wyatt Earp into a grandly romantic western myth. The story is about a man (Wyatt Earp) who was herding cattle with his brothers and bringing it to California. Passing close to the town of Tombstone they encounter an old man and his oldest son (the Clantons) who suggest they stay a couple of days in the town to restore their energy. When the Earps come back to the cattle, they find it gone and their brother James who was left to look over it, dead. At that point Wyatt realizes that the town is not safe and is contaminated by evil. He accepts the offer and becomes a marshal for he thinks that that is the best way he can contribute to the fulfilment of the American Dream: he, like most people, wants the world to be safe for the young ones and for future generations and believes that saving this town from corruption, degradation and evil he is going to help take a step towards civilization.

This film's main theme is the coming of civilization to the west. Civilization is one of the great ideas of the American Dream: to have a safe environment for the young ones to grow up in, to be able to feel safe, leaving all the dangers and threats of living in an uncivilized environment behind. A civilized place is also a good, safe and tamed place while an uncivilized place is a bad, dangerous and wild place. John Ford compares the uncivilized world with the approaching civilized world through the characters and the setting. The landscape has very vivid colours and gives an idea of vastness, wildness and greatness that cannot be tamed. In fact, at the beginning of the film, Wyatt says: "this land is untamed", bringing our attention to the landscape and making us realize that they are surrounded by a wild place, and foreshadows that something has to be done and therefore will be done.

Soon we see the town of Tombstone, which is in the middle of nowhere, in the middle of an uncivilized place and looks like the first sign of civilization, although within this town there are both civilized and uncivilized things. Wyatt's first act is to send away a drunk Indian- it's his first act in supporting civilization. The drunken Indian is not the only representation of wildness; the Clantons represent wildness as well. As the film goes on, more and more things that have to do with civilization are brought up: when they enter the town, Wyatt goes to the barber and gets a shave, this shows that he has become more civilized, and when at the end of the film, before the dance he cuts his hair and puts perfume he looks like a completely civilized man of the east. The fact that in the barber shop there is a just-arrived new chair shows that civilization is a brand new idea. When Wyatt meets Doc. Holiday for the first time, they drink champagne instead of cheap whisky. This is also a sign of civilization. The law (the marshalling system), the medicine (Doc. Holiday) both reflect a developing civilization. When Wyatt goes to the theatre, the actor is missing. He finds the actor in the bar, on a table acting out a monologue from Hamlet. The theatre and the Shakespearian actor indicate the new customs and ideas brought by civilization. Finally, very close to the end of the film, Tombstone's first church is built and to inaugurate it, Tombstone's first official dance starts. At his departure, Wyatt is told by Clementine that a school has been set in Tombstone as well. The church, the dance and the school are clear symbols of civilization coming to the west.

In Stagecoach, each character represents a group of people or idea. Similarly, in My Darling Clementine the characters are split up into two groups, civilized and uncivilized. The Clantons are the bad, wild and uncivilized men who have extremely crude ways. "When ya pull a gun, kill a man." This is what Old Man Clanton tells his sons after they shoot but miss Wyatt. This shows that they have neither mercy nor compassion and have been brought up in a wild way - by fear. On the other hand, the Earps are the good and civilized ones. They are united and have care and respect for each other. They live in a much more civilized way, not by robbery or murder but by doing legal work (marshalling and herding cattle). They are the ones who encourage civilization and in the end fight off the Clantons and leave Tombstone as a civilized town. Chihuahua is native prostitute who is dark and wild. Clementine on the other hand is educated, had a profession as a nurse and becomes the Tombstone schoolmarm. She is white and is a fine lady from the east. The savage lady, Chihuahua insists for the civilized lady to leave Tombstone, in these scenes of confrontation Ford juxtaposes civilization and wildness. The only thing that links the two women is their common love for Doc. Holiday. The final confirmation that civilization has prevailed over wildness is that the Clantons, who represented savageness and wildness are all dead and the Earps are alive. Having completed their job, they leave and head for California.

John Ford tells us about people's lives when the wild west was wild. He tells us about their uncivilized way of living and customs - that wasn't necessarily negative for them, but was negative for those who came later on. Then he also tells us about the shift from uncivilized life to civilized. By going into depth on the theme of civilization he is able to give us an insight into how people lived, their struggles and necessities.

The Searchers is another Western made by John Ford in 1956 and based on a novel by Alan Le May. It's the story about Ethan Edwards who spends years searching for his niece Debbie with his adoptive nephew Martin Pawley. It is considered a true American masterpiece that was named the Greatest Western of all time by the American Film Institute and is 12th on the list of the 100 greatest films of all time.

John Ford confronts very deep themes that still exists in our society. He discusses social prejudice, racism and natural mixing directly through the characters. Other themes are present very often throughout the film and are fundamental to the story such as the dangers, revenge, the dream of family and unity. He deals with the strength that propels one forward although hope seems lost and again juxtaposes civilization with wildness. He also discusses good and bad and clearly demonstrates that one is not either good or bad, one is in-between. Ethan, for example is a hero, who saves Debbie and has the courage to undertake the journey that leads him to it, so on one side he is incredibly good, a hero, but on the other side he has purist ideas and is racist. He loathes the Indians and considers them almost worse than animals. He considers them to be wild, savage and filthy with crude ways. He loathes them to a point that when he sees Scar lying on the ground dead, he doesn't just leave him there as he was but he scalps him to release his own hatred and to revenge himself - he has no thought towards their beliefs - if their body is mutated they cannot move on to the afterlife. He also has a reason to be like this - apaches killed his parents and therefore he is seeking revenge.

At first, Ethan wanted to find Debbie to kill her because he didn't consider her white anymore. Having lived with Indians for so long, he considered her contaminated. He is also an outlaw who kills without mercy and backstabs. On the other hand, Scar the chief of an apache tribe is the bad guy. He kills white men without a second thought. He burns families' houses down, kills the men, abuses the women and kills them as well and adopts the small children. He is also good in a way. He doesn't just do all this for nothing; he has a reason: revenge. His sons were all killed by white men therefore he takes various other lives to revenge his sons. Deep down he isn't bad, if it weren't for the fact that his sons were killed, he wouldn't behave this way. So both are a mix of bad and good, none is either one or the other.

During this journey there are scenes of the landscape and of nature that suggest wildness and greatness but also scenes of settlements, houses, bars that represent the struggle of civilization in such desolate places. People settled in the Wild West in hope of a new life. They hoped to settle down with the family and waited for civilization to reach them. It is the dream of family and unity that gives Martin the strength to go on the journey with Ethan. That is why Ethan didn't kill Debbie in the end, Debbie is Martha's daughter and loving Martha he knows that if he will kill Debbie it will tear her apart. The pioneers that live so isolated from everything else also have to face great dangers. For example, Aaron's family knows the dangers of living in such a place and are eventually attacked by the Indians and massacred. The music, the colours, the signals made by the Indians, the animals and the fact that the adults are closing everything they can of the house and their voices are trembling suggest impending danger. The horror of the realization of what is happening is shocking. The adults know that by living there they would be under constant threat of being attacked and therefore had shown Debbie a secret way to where Ethan's mother's grave is, a little distant from the house. The adults tell Debbie to go there and as she is sitting on Ethan's mother's gravestone, Scar sees her. That is when Debbie is taken and raised by the Indians. This shows that they were prepared in case of danger and had a plan that could at least save Debbie. There are three examples of natural racial mixing in this film. Debbie who has been raised by the Indians, Martin who is partially white and partially Indian and Scar who also is partially Indian and partially white - in fact his eyes are blue. Ethan despises all three as much as he despises other Indians because he thinks that they are not pure, they are contaminated.

The Searchers also is about the search for prosperity, trying to survive in wild places and stay united. Ethan and Martin search for a loved one but Ethan also searches for himself. Is he going to find himself? We don't know but the fact that he is not really part of the family and didn't enter the house at the end of the film but stayed at the doorway instead and walked away might give us a clue.

The Searchers Theme song: What makes a man to wander? By Stan Jones

What makes a man to wander?
What makes a man to roam?
What makes a man leave bed and board
And turn his back on home?
Ride away, ride away, ride away

A man will search his heart and soul
Go searchin' way out there
His peace of mind he knows he'll find
But where, oh Lord, Lord where?
Ride away, ride away, ride away

What makes a man to wander
What makes a man to roam?
What makes a man leave bed and board
And turn his back on home?
Ride away (Ride away), ride away (ride away), ride away

Now, a man will search for fortune
Of silver and of gold
The silver he finds in his hair
While a weary heart grows old

Ride away , ride away , ride away

The snow is deep and oh, so white
The winds they howl and moan
Fire cooks a man his buffalo meat
But his lonely heart won't warm
Ride away, ride away, ride away

John Ford makes films about people by adding all the elements that are present in society. By doing this he gives life to the characters and gives reality to the story. By being an observer in his films he is able to put an incredible amount of detail in the background that makes it so realistic. He doesn't limit himself to what the audience is going to look at, but he creates a whole detailed and complex world behind each scene. I think that Ford replicates life situations he sees and weaves it into the plot or story. This way, when people watch his films, they are able to [connect](#) with the characters and see parts of their lives expressed in there too.

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