

## John Ford Essay

**A man on a horse riding against a background against harshness and beauty, that's Ford's trademark. He doesn't just tell a story, he writes a poem about it. He doesn't just point the camera he paints a picture with it. What do you find to be the distinguishing trademarks of a John Ford film?**

These three films, Stagecoach, My Darling Clementine and The Searchers are the best western films I've ever seen. Maybe because Ford used three important approaches to create the films; he based his films on old stories, his own memory and he studied paintings of the period which inspired him for the setting of various films.

The first point is evident in most of the films. My Darling Clementine is taken from the song "Oh my Darling Clementine", Stagecoach is an adaptation of "The Stage to Lordsburg" by Earnest Haycox and The Searchers is based on a novel of Alan Le May. All three films have a mysterious, natural background, taken from some old paintings typical of the western area. In Stagecoach we see in the opening scene, a man riding a horse against a harsh background. What catches the observer's eye is the enormity and beauty of nature, which makes us reflect on how civilized and advanced we have become. In My Darling Clementine, at the beginning of the film, we see an uncivilized looking, unkempt man, Wyatt Earp, who totally contrasts the image of the man at the end of the film, when he has become a civilized and educated man. We see the juxtaposition of a man from the initial part of the film, to the end, where he becomes a gentleman. I suppose that what makes Ford's films interesting is that he always makes people mature, in other words, change throughout the film. For example the juxtaposition of Wyatt Earp in My Darling Clementine and the protagonist of The Searchers, Ethan Edwards who wanted to kill his niece because she had been adopted by the Indians, but at the end he doesn't.

Another characteristic I found very interesting was the framing of the characters especially in the Searchers, where the opening scene and the closing one both have this trade mark. I think this technique is very interesting because it catches the observer's eye and makes him concentrate on the image in the frame. Ford also introduces the characters at the beginning of the film. This is especially present in the Searchers, where Ford introduces the two families at the beginning of the film, in their ranches which are isolated and exposed to danger.

Ford's characters are very simple, Doctor Holiday and Chiuwawa in My Darling Clementine, and his heroes are people who are mostly uncivilized, and react with action rather than words. Ethan is a good example of this kind of hero. We see that many of Ford's heroes are men. This is because women were considered as more innocent people. But there are women who are shown to be heroic, such as Dallas, Chiuwawa and there are others.

As the film The Searchers starts, it tells us a great deal of information, in a short time even before any words are spoken. Ethan is in love with Martha, the wife of his

brother, who adopted an Indian boy whom he despised. All this is revealed skillfully and subtly.

Another evident characteristic of John Ford's filming is the shading, which made the black and white in the two films very effective in creating mood.

In many Ford's films, the music plays a bigger role than words, and tries to show the force and value of a group as in the family in *The Searchers*. Emotions are very much evoked through the use of music in Ford's films.

Ford didn't have the technology we have today so he rarely repeated shooting scenes with horses or the Indian attacks. Nearly always, the first take was the only one. Some scenes were also improvised such as the Henry Fonda monologue at the graveside. Ford was also very lucky in many scenes for the climatic conditions which by chance perfectly fitted his plans. One example is the scene in *My Darling Clementine*, where the Indians attack and kill James, the youngest Earp. In that scene, when they arrive and see he tried to escape but got caught, it was pouring rain, and this was entirely natural and added to the effect.

Ford sketched the film in his head rather than drawing graphics or sketches. He didn't use so many close ups and preferred filming everyone in the scene. In fact, I saw this last point especially in *The Searchers*, where the whole room is most of the times filmed with the characters and we see all that is going on inside and around the central character.

I feel that Ford's films are unique. His style or ability to capture the period and the stories with simplicity is striking. Ford's trademarks serve to catch the observer's eye and entertain until the end.

Vittoria 8C